



A Matter of Choices and Satisfaction: A Case Study of Distance Learners of Himachal Pradesh University

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Abstract

Himachal Pradesh University is the only dual-mode institution to offer distance education in Himachal Pradesh. Therefore, in this paper an attempt has been made to understand the expectations and satisfaction levels of learners related to distance education programmes. In this paper diverse motivation underlying the choice of distance education over traditional methods, focusing on a teacher education program has been explored. To achieve the objectives of this paper a questionnaire was prepared by the researcher. The data collected from 122 respondents was analyzed. The analysis of data revealed that themes such as convenience, family responsibilities, financial considerations, and time-related considerations for choosing distance education over traditional education were the motivating factors for opting the distance education course. Further, lower level of satisfaction is mainly due to network problems during classes, less interaction, study material related issues and tutor's non-cooperativeness. The administrators of university should reassess their approaches, ensuring a balance between academic requirements and holistic development of distance learners. Policymakers, educators, and institutions must consider these insights to enhance the quality of distance education programs, aligning them with the evolving needs of learners.

Keywords: Distance Education, Distance Learners, Dual-Mode institution, Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE)

Introduction

To offer high-quality education, Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) must consider the requirements and aspirations of their students. HEI' should find suitable strategies and approaches for engaging and motivating the youth towards the benefits of distance education. Croft (1991) reported that in universities offering both in-person and distance learning, distance student's needs tend to be overlooked. Support services are given low priority, and the system is not tailored to adult learners. Communication between departments is limited, and decision-making is decentralized, leading to poor coordination and few services available for distance learners. It is important to recognize the unique needs of distance learners and provide them with the necessary support to succeed. It would be a mistake to assume that a uniform set of expectations characterizes all distance learners. One should be ready to expect a range of expectations and beliefs among novice distance learners. We should be ready to counter any assumption that distance learners form a homogeneous group. Holmberg (1989) observed that "It is diversity, rather than uniformity that characterizes distance education".

As per the latest AISHE Report(2021-22) published by Ministry of Higher Education of India, around 47.30% of the total University enrolment is through distance mode whereas this percentage was 50.46% in 2020-21 (AISHE 2020-21). This decrease in enrolments may be a result of first time consideration given to enrolment through private mode. No other survey than AISHE(2021-22) ever registered data for enrolments in private

mode. If we combine the percentage of distance mode and private mode then around 54% of learners have some reasons for not choosing regular mode of education. Learners' interest in distance and open mode of education can be seen growing for varied reasons among various age groups. So, to provide these learners a good learning experience, higher educators and program coordinators must understand more about the needs of students in online distance education courses.

Distance learners encompass a diverse range of ages and needs, with adult learners in higher education often juggling multiple roles and commitments. Balancing education with work and family life presents numerous challenges unique to this demographic. Unlike traditional college students, adult learners frequently face additional responsibilities, including family care, full-time employment, and logistical issues such as transportation and financial obligations. Furthermore, psychological and emotional challenges can adversely affect their motivation and achievement in distance learning environments. The flexibility offered by online courses and distance learning programs is crucial for these learners to manage their multiple responsibilities (White, 1997). Hentea et al. (2003) highlighted that distance education provides flexibility, enhanced multimedia delivery, and personalized learning experiences. However, the success of distance learning programs can be undermined by factors such as inadequate staff training, poor course design, and insufficient assessment and understanding of learners' needs. To address these issues, it is imperative for educational institutions to develop systematic methods for identifying and analyzing the needs of distance learners. Such measures will facilitate the implementation of improved student support services.

Given the varied needs of distance learners, instructional strategies should be tailored to meet the specific requirements of adult learners. It is essential to acknowledge their expectations from the distance education program prior to the commencement of instruction, a practice currently lacking in many distance education settings. Comprehensive student support services are vital to the success of these programs.

At Himachal Pradesh University, recent growth has been experienced in enrolling learners of various age groups in the Centre for Distance and Online Education (formally known as the International Centre for Distance and Open Education), Himachal Pradesh University. It is the only Dual-mode University in Himachal Pradesh that runs various distance education programs. It has a rich history in the field of distance education since its establishment. So, to meet the needs of growing enrollments it is essential to study the basic need of learners for joining distance education in this university which hasn't been done in any previous year. According to researcher, present distance learners are not only choosing this mode due to employment and financial issues. There are other factors as well. The researcher was interested to know why distance learners of Himachal Pradesh are choosing CDOE, Himachal Pradesh University and what is their satisfaction level.

Review of Related Literature

The review of literature is a critical analysis of existing (published or unpublished) works related to a particular topic. It gives the information pertaining to the current knowledge and helps to identify the methods and gaps in the existing research. This in turn supports the researcher to conduct the further research about the topic. For finding out the past and present viewpoints of various researchers, following literature were reviewed.

In 1990, Brew and Wright conducted interviews with eleven resource persons at the Open University who were involved in distance education. They found a lack of understanding among these individuals regarding the students' perspectives about the processes of distance education. Peytcheva-Forsyth et al. (2018) also align with the result of this study. The study with objective to find out various factors affecting students' attitudes towards online learning emphasized the need to increase the understanding of tutors, administrators, and others about the position and viewpoints of distance learners. In 1997, White further discussed this issue.

White (1997) provided preliminary insight into the needs of distance learners. After analyzing responses from 18 prospective distance learners, 23 Novel distance learners, and 26 Experienced distance learners first categorized and then interviewed sample on those important factors relating to conceptions of distance learners. Key points in finding include learners viewing open and distance study as flexible.

Needs and expectations of Distance Learners emerged as 5 broad categories in a study conducted by Ragusa(2009) of Charles State University. After qualitatively analyzing distance learners' expectations from various aspects of their program, Ragusa(2009) highlighted structural consistency, organization and assessment, learning material, communication, and subjective agreement in ability and effort as key dimensions of needs and expectations. Maximum expectations in this study are centered around the tutor as well. Results of a few studies also highlighted the expectations related to learning environments in online and distance education settings. Distance learners desire for effective online learning environment with integrated technologies for providing online communication between participants, educators, and participants, online assignment submission, and online support by the teacher. Learners desire flexibility in a learning environment where they can have quality interactions with their tutors (Peytcheva-Forsyth et al. (2018), Kara and Can (2019)). Apart from this, Kara and Can (2019) also reported that students expected a motivating, stimulating, and resourceful experience in classes. They prioritized well-experienced and competent teachers who are good at using technology and can provide manifold guidance to them promptly.

Dhiman et al. (2014) analyzed attitudes of students towards e-learning. Results analyzed by triangulating the data provide sound evidence that distance learners have varied needs and expectations influenced by demographic factors that must be well communicated to others in the educational settings for their increased satisfaction and program quality.

Objective: In this paper following objectives were framed.

1. To study the motive behind choosing distance education.
2. To study the overall satisfaction level of distance learners.
3. To study the reasons for low satisfaction among distance learners.

Methodology:

A qualitative research design was used in this study. Study is based on primary data collected from distance learners of Bachelor of Education Program enrolled in the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE), Himachal Pradesh University.

Population and Sampling

The population of this study consisted of Distance Learners enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) Programme for the session 2022-2024. The study was conducted over the period of October-November 2023. To ensure a diverse range of responses, an open-ended questionnaire was administered.

Data Collection

The open-ended questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms, shared in the respective WhatsApp student groups dedicated to the B.Ed distance learners. To ensure the authenticity of responses, participation was voluntary, and respondents were asked to share their email IDs.

Out of a total of 246 learners, 122 Distance Learners (49.6% response rate) responded to the questionnaire. The demographic breakdown of these respondents is as follows:

- Gender: 44% were male and 56% were female.
- Age Distribution:
 - 12% were below 25 years of age
 - 70% were between 25-30 years of age
 - 13% were between 30-35 years of age
 - 6% were above 35 years of age
- Marital Status: 45% were married and 55% were unmarried.
- Employment Status: 70% of learners were not employed.

Instrument:

The instrument used was a self-prepared questionnaire administered digitally via Google Forms.

Structure of the Questionnaire: The questionnaire was divided into two main parts:

- **Part 1: Question 1:** An open-ended question aimed at understanding the motivations and expectations behind choosing distance education over traditional education. This allows for qualitative data collection, enabling participants to freely express their reasons.
 - Question 2:** A satisfaction level question where participants rated their satisfaction with their respective programs at Himachal Pradesh University on a scale of 1-5. This provides quantitative data on overall satisfaction.
- **Part 2: Questions 3, 4, 5, and 6:** These questions were designed to further analyze the experiences of participants who reported moderate to slightly moderate satisfaction levels. The focus here is on identifying specific factors contributing to lower satisfaction.

The questions of the questionnaire follow:

1.	Why did you choose distance education over traditional education	Open-ended
2.	How will you rate your overall satisfaction at CDOE, HPU on a scale of 1-5?	5-point rating scale
3.	What problems did you face before the Personal Contact Programme?	Open-ended
4.	What problems did you face during the Personal Contact Programme?	Open-ended
5.	What problems did you face after the Personal Contact Programme?	Open-ended
6.	What are your suggestions for improvement?	Open-ended

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze the responses of distance learners. Whole data was studied and then themes were developed. Initially, Coding was done for each response and then codes were analyzed for theme generations. Overall satisfaction level was measured at a 1-5 level scale. It was analyzed using the percentage method.

Result**Objective 1-To study the motive behind choosing distance education**

After analyzing the responses, the following themes emerged as key motives behind joining the distance learning programs at Himachal Pradesh University over traditional learning programs. These are shown in the following table 1:

Themes and sub-themes	Coding
1.Convenience and flexibility of time and location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenience • Personal choice • Living in the interior area • Flexible • Learning at home, • Learning at own pace, • Digital learning
2.In-profession Engagements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Busy working another job • Busy life schedule • Involvement in a part-time job • Government employee/full-time job

3.Family Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots of household work • Kids/family responsibility • Family problems • Married life
4.Financial Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheaper mode • Saves money • Cheaper than traditional education • Financial conditions
5.Time-related consideration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive exam preparations • Leisure time utilization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing for competitive exams • Preparation for government exams. • Time-saving • Gives more free time • Shortage of time
6. Previous Education Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already done D.El.Ed • Good option after JBT
7.Age-Related Consideration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Increasing age and responsibilities

Discussion

The extraction of following seven themes are discussed as follows:

1.Convenience and Flexibility of Time and Location:

was turn out to be an obvious reason for choosing distance education over traditional. Participants overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of flexibility in their educational journey. The ability to study at their own pace and from the comfort of their homes emerged as a key factor. As mentioned by one participant “While I'm currently not working, I find distance education appealing for its flexibility. It allows me to pursue studies at my own pace, manage other responsibilities, and have the convenience of learning from home”.

This aligns with the contemporary need for adaptable learning environments, allowing individuals to balance education with other responsibilities. One participant mentioned “Because I live in a very interior area. I have a lot of household work. So I choose this mode of study.” Flexibility and online nature of the course was also appealing to other participants as well. As someone also mentioned “I choose it because it's online “and “It can create a personal study plan”.

2. In-Profession Engagement:

The data reflects the challenges and benefits of juggling education with professional commitments. The choice of distance education resonates strongly with those engaged in part-time or full-time jobs. In words of one participant “I can't leave my job or my studies either. That's why I chose ICDEOL. so that I could study along with my job”. This aligns with the evolving nature of work and the demand for educational formats that accommodate professionals. One participant mentioned “I want to study with my job side by side so I choose distance education”.

3.Family Responsibilities:

Family responsibilities played a pivotal role in the decision-making process. 45% of these participants were married. Many Participants cited the flexibility of distance education as crucial in managing household and childcare duties. One participant resonates with this in simple response that goes like “As I was not able to continue my studies in regular mode due to my kids and family responsibilities.” Other elaborated on the question of choosing distance mode over traditional mode as “For the responsibility of the house and to support myself and for self-study, I thought it appropriate to take distance education so that I can also focus on my studies.”

This highlights the need for educational formats that align with familial obligations, making learning accessible to a diverse range of individuals.

4.Financial Considerations:

The affordability of distance education emerged as a decisive factor. The cost-effectiveness of this mode of education was often cited, emphasizing the importance of accessible and reasonably priced educational

options, especially for those facing financial constraints. This theme emerged in number of responses as some participants were very precise to respond like “because its cheap”, “fee structure is affordable” and “due to financial condition” while few other responses were having money and other themes combined like “It saves my time and money”, “I have already done D.El.Ed . And regular B.ed is costly so I choose distance education” and “because I have a Lack of time and money”.

5. Time-Related Considerations:

Time-saving was a recurrent theme, illustrating the significant role of efficient time management in participants' lives. The ability to save time with distance education was linked to pursuing competitive exam preparations and other personal goals, underlining its multifaceted impact. Responses like “To save regular time so that I can continue my preparation for competitive exams” and “I want to prepare for competitive tests that can't be done in regular college” clearly shows that Distance education was recognized as a facilitator for competitive exam preparations. Also response like “Because I wanted to prepare for competitive exams along with B.ed which was only possible in ICEDOL” shows the flexible study schedules provided by this mode were deemed instrumental in balancing academic pursuits with the rigorous demands of competitive exams, offering a unique advantage to participants. Along with competitive exam preparations, many participants thought this mode to be helpful in saving time that can be utilized in additional skill learning and personal development. As one participant responded “It gives us much more free time than traditional education we can learn other things those time”. This suggests that distance education not only fulfills academic requirements but also serves as a platform for continuous skill enhancement and knowledge acquisition during leisure moments.

6. Previous Education Background:

The influence of prior educational experiences on the choice of distance education was evident from responses like “Distance mode is a good option after doing JBT” and “I have already done my D.El.Ed, so I choose distance education”. Participants saw distance education as a continuation of their academic journey, providing them with the flexibility to pursue further studies while accommodating their educational backgrounds. Though this is the mandatory requirement for opting this course in distance mode in this university. But many participants thought it as a motivation behind choosing distance education.

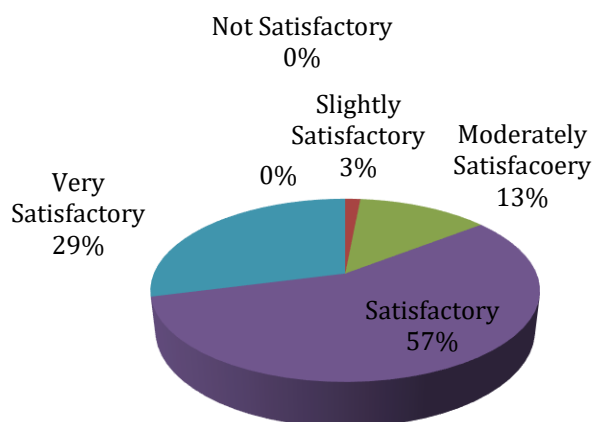
7. Age-Related Consideration:

The role of age in decision-making for distance education was explored As responded by a participant of age group 30-35 years “Traditional education was not possible because of my private job and my age.” Another one elaborated the reason to choose distance mode as “With increasing age, I chose distance education to participate in some of the responsibilities of the family and also to give importance to my education and to give special importance to self-teaching and studies”. Participants at varying stages of life highlighted how distance education accommodated the evolving responsibilities and priorities associated with different age groups, challenging the conventional notion of rigid educational timelines.

Objective-2: To study the overall satisfaction level of distance learners.

When asked to rate overall satisfaction on a scale of 1-5, almost all the participants seemed satisfied from the services provides to them. The satisfaction percentage is shown in the following chart. 29% were very much satisfied with their distance Education Program from Himachal Pradesh University. More than average i.e 56.6 % of participants rated their overall satisfaction level as satisfactory. 13% (7 participants) and 2 % (1 participant) rated the overall experience as slightly satisfactory. Overall satisfaction level of distance learners studying at CDOE, Himachal Pradesh University is shown in following figure 1.

Overall Satisfaction Level of Distance Learners Studying at CDOE, Himachal Pradesh University



Discussion:

The analysis of the satisfaction levels among Distance Learners in the Bachelor of Education Program at CDOE, Himachal Pradesh University reflects a predominantly positive sentiment, with a significant majority expressing very satisfactory (29%) and satisfactory (57%) experiences. These findings suggest that a substantial proportion of learners' expectations and needs were met, affirming the efficacy of the distance education program.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the presence of a smaller segment of learners who rated their satisfaction levels as moderately (13%) and slightly (2%) satisfactory. This minority signifies an essential aspect of the study, as their feedback unveils areas where the program may not have entirely aligned with their expectations or needs.

Addressing the concerns raised by this minority will not only enhance the overall satisfaction levels but also fortify the institution's commitment to continuous improvement. It underscores the institution's dedication to catering to the diverse needs of its learners, ensuring that every individual's educational journey is enriched and fulfilling.

Objective-3: To study the reasons for low satisfaction among distance learners.

After analyzing the content of responses of learners the following major themes are generated that are contributing to their lower satisfaction. The themes generated as factors for lower satisfaction are shown in following table 2.

Sr.no.	Themes	Coding
1	Technical Issues During PCP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connectivity Challenges Equipment Malfunctions
2	Communication and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited Interactivity Demand for Practical Learning Extended Offline Practical Sessions
3	Study material related concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Availability of study material in "English Language" only Need of Online study material

4	Time Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance Pressure • Time-Management Struggles
5	Health and Well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical strain • Post-PCP Mental Fatigue
6	Tutor-Related Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incomplete Syllabus • Non-Cooperative Nature

Discussion:

Theme 1: Technical Issues during PCP

The prevalence of connectivity challenges and equipment malfunctions during Physical Contact Programs (PCP) underscores the importance of a reliable technological infrastructure for successful hybrid learning. Institutions should invest in robust systems and support mechanisms to alleviate disruptions and enhance the overall learning experience during in-person sessions. As one participant mentioned “Something we could not answer the question. Network problem, storage problem, phone was hanging.”

Theme 2: Communication and Collaboration

The dissatisfaction expressed regarding the limited face-to-face interaction signals a yearning for a more personalized learning experience. Incorporating offline practical sessions could address this need, fostering a balanced and comprehensive educational approach that combines theoretical knowledge with hands-on application. In words of one participant “The medium of teaching and learning should be offline or PCP must be offline mode”. One participant was bothered by communication scarcity and quoted a reason of dissatisfaction as “Lack of interaction between students and teachers”.

Theme 3: Subject-Related Challenges

The dissatisfaction with incomplete subject coverage and requests for study materials in Hindi highlight the importance of curriculum planning and inclusivity. Institutions should strive for comprehensive coverage of subjects and cater to diverse language preferences to create a more accessible and enriching learning environment.

Theme 4: Time Management

Participants feeling pressured due to mandatory attendance requirements. One wrote “As a fresher it's ok till now but may be sometimes we got pressure from ICDEOL and they want their attendance in any cost but sometimes we could be suffering or involve in more urgent work. So there is no freedom during class timing”. The pressure associated with mandatory attendance and the reported struggles with time management emphasize the need for flexible learning structures.

Theme 5: Health Issues During and well-being

The reported physical strain and post-PCP fatigue highlight the potential health implications of intensive in-person sessions. As one responded mentioned “I faces lots of problem in attending the online classes like signal problem, low video quality, audio error, the blue light of mobile screen weakened my eyesight and my specs number rise from -1 to -2 Within these 22 days”. When asked about the problems he faced after PCP, the response was “After this for some days I felt drained out just because of this intense online session of these 22 days”.

So, it is imperative for institutions to prioritize the well-being of students by implementing measures to reduce strain, such as breaks during sessions, ergonomic considerations, and proactive health support.

Theme 6: Tutor-Related Concerns

The dissatisfaction stemming from incomplete syllabi and non-cooperative tutor behavior emphasizes the critical role of educators in the online learning experience. Institutions should ensure adequate training and support for

tutors, fostering a collaborative and responsive teaching environment that enhances the overall quality of education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has provided valuable insights into the diverse motivations behind individuals choosing distance education over traditional modes. The identified themes, ranging from convenience and flexibility to considerations related to family, finances, and personal development, underscore the multifaceted nature of decision-making in educational pursuits.

The prevalence of time-related considerations, especially the inclination to join distance education programs for exam preparation, raises important questions about the broader implications for the educational landscape. While such motivations are understandable in the context of a competitive academic environment, it is crucial to reflect on the potential consequences for the holistic development of learners.

While the majority of learners express high levels of satisfaction, the voices of those who rated their experience moderately or slightly satisfactory are invaluable. Acknowledging and addressing their concerns will contribute significantly to the institution's mission of providing a quality and inclusive education to all learners. This iterative process of improvement aligns with the institution's commitment to fostering a supportive and enriching learning environment for all.

The findings highlight the need for educational institutions, policymakers, and educators to reassess their approaches in order to strike a balance between meeting academic requirements and nurturing well-rounded individuals.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, it becomes imperative to adapt strategies that align with the diverse needs and aspirations of learners. By acknowledging and responding to the motivations revealed in this study, we can contribute to the creation of educational environments that empower individuals not only academically but also holistically, preparing them for the complexities of the modern world.

Implications:

The findings of this research bear several implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and learners considering or already enrolled in distance education programs.

The identified themes collectively indicate the need for a holistic approach to online learning design and implementation. Institutions should consider acknowledging the needs of distance learners, technological investments, curriculum planning, flexible attendance policies, student well-being initiatives, and educator training to create an environment that addresses the multifaceted challenges reported by participants.

Limitations and Future Research

It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study, such as the specific context and demographics of participants. Future research could delve deeper into the nuanced experiences of diverse student populations to further refine strategies for improving satisfaction in online learning. Motivation to choose distance education can be studied in relation to age, gender, marital status and other demographic variables.

In essence, the implications point towards the necessity of a modified and balanced approach in the realm of distance education. Addressing these implications can contribute to the creation of educational environments that not only meet academic requirements but also nurture individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society.

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