

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

There is no alternative to lifelong learning to maintain the sustainability and protect our future generation. The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) gives the opportunity of lifelong learning. Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) is one of 14 State Open Universities in India and it was established by the West Bengal State government in the year 1997. The challenge was to provide education at every door step within the state with equity and quality. Within a very short span of 11 years, the University has become a people's University with more than 140,000 learners on its roll. The University is playing a pivotal role in capacity building and it gives a person a chance to earn the degree which (s)he could not get it earlier due to socio-economic reasons. The success of the University has come through effective implementation of support services. The strength of an open and distance learning institute depends on its services which are provided to the learners. On one hand, the learners of this system are adult; on the other hand, they belong to disadvantaged groups like drop-outs, scheduled cast, scheduled tribe, women, minorities, house wives etc. Again, they are separated from teacher as well as from the Institutes under open and distance learning system, so they desperately need support before, during and even after their study. The term 'Student Support Services' is not associated with the conventional system of education. We commonly use this term in ODL system of education. The Student Support Services in ODL not only include these non-academic services but also the academic services as provided by the Institute and faculty. NSOU uses both Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and non-ICT related Student Support Services. In this paper I have highlighted how NSOU has achieved the status of Mega University with the help of its Student Support Services.

Keywords: ICT, lifelong learning, student support services, sustainable development.

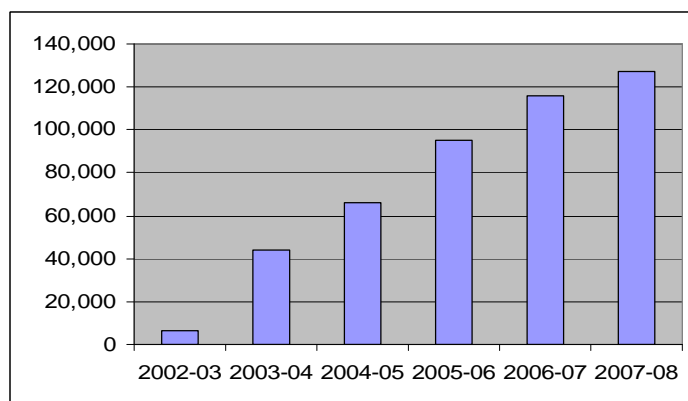
The United Nations has announced the year 2005-2014 as the World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Sustainable development is the combination of economic progress with social justice and conservation of the natural environment. So, to protect our future generations, it is necessary to educate people which will in turn create competency for sustainable development. And there is no alternative of lifelong learning to achieve these goals.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY

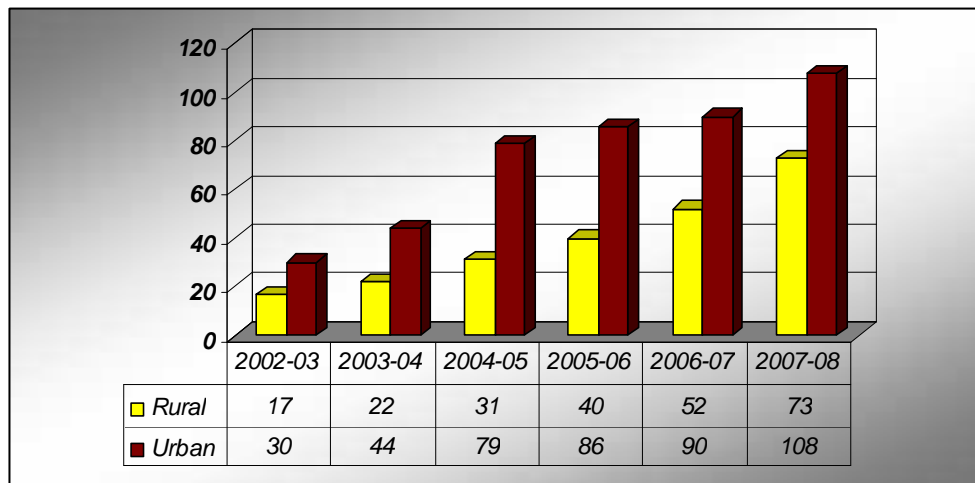
NSOU has emerged the status of the 1st Mega University in the Eastern India in its first 10 years of existence. It serves the educational aspirations of more than 135,000 learners through a network of 3 Regional centers and 181 Study centers spreading all over the State of West Bengal. The University offers 77 courses which include Certificate, Diploma, Post Graduate Diploma, Bachelors Degree, Post Graduate Degree, Doctoral programme and need based vocational and pioneering courses. Our challenge is to provide education at every door step within the State and we are able to reach the remotest areas of the State through our support services. The strength of the University lies in its support services by which we have bridged the gap between the teachers and the taught and between the taught and the University. It is necessary for a developing country like ours to ensure easier and greater access to its people and especially to those belonging to the disadvantaged groups. Open and distance learning have a major role in capacity building rather than just awarding degrees. But, the Open University gives the student a chance to earn the degree if he cannot afford to get it from the conventional one.

The clientele of ODL is different from that of conventional system of education. The flexibility it offers, in terms of choice of courses and the period over which these can be pursued, make it attractive to those who are employed and cannot attend regular classes. Initially, the University (NSOU) started only formal degree courses like B.A, B.Sc. and B.Com, but the success in terms of students' enrolment did not come in true sense, and the dream of democratization of higher education did not come true. The objectives of meeting the needs of those living in rural areas and providing opportunities for higher education to the disadvantaged sector did not get due importance at that time. In this context, the university introduced diploma, PG diploma and certificate and need based vocational courses for those residing in rural areas and for people belonging to the disadvantaged group. In order to encourage increased access to persons from the disadvantaged groups, the University has

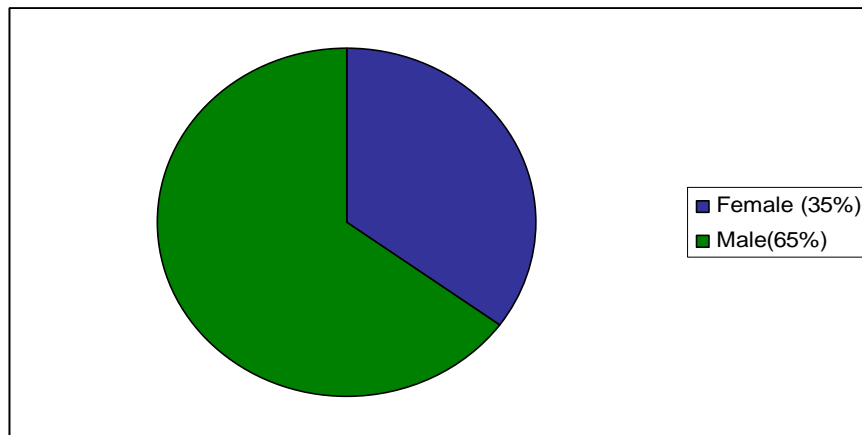
1. increased the number of study centers in rural and minority areas;
2. opened the study centre for prison-inmates;
3. designed various courses that would suit the needs of present day;
4. started need based in-service training.



Student enrolment



No. of study centers (urban & rural)



Male-Female ratio in the enrolment

The above bar diagrams show how the University has grown in terms of students' enrolment and study centers over the years. The pie chart also shows the ratio of male and female learners of the University. Currently, the University has 135,000 students on its roll at its 181 study centers all over the State. Without an effective support services it is not possible for the University to become a people's University.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Keegan (1996) identifies two distinct sub-systems within distance education: course development and student support services, which he characterizes as 'the essential feedback mechanisms that are characteristic of education'.

The main feature of the ODL is the distance between the teacher and taught and between the institute and taught. Again, the learners come from diverse background and they are detached from teaching-learning process for a long time. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the distant

educators to grow the study habits among the learners. So the learners desperately need support before, during, and even after the study.

Learners need support for:

- (a) institutional systems such as
 - [1] what is on offer
 - [2] selection of a course,
 - [3] when to apply,
 - [4] how to apply,
 - [5] how to make a payment etc. and
- (b) the course they are studying, such as
 - [1] how best to complete an assignment,
 - [2] how to contact and work with the peer groups,
 - [3] how to react on some topic of the course materials.

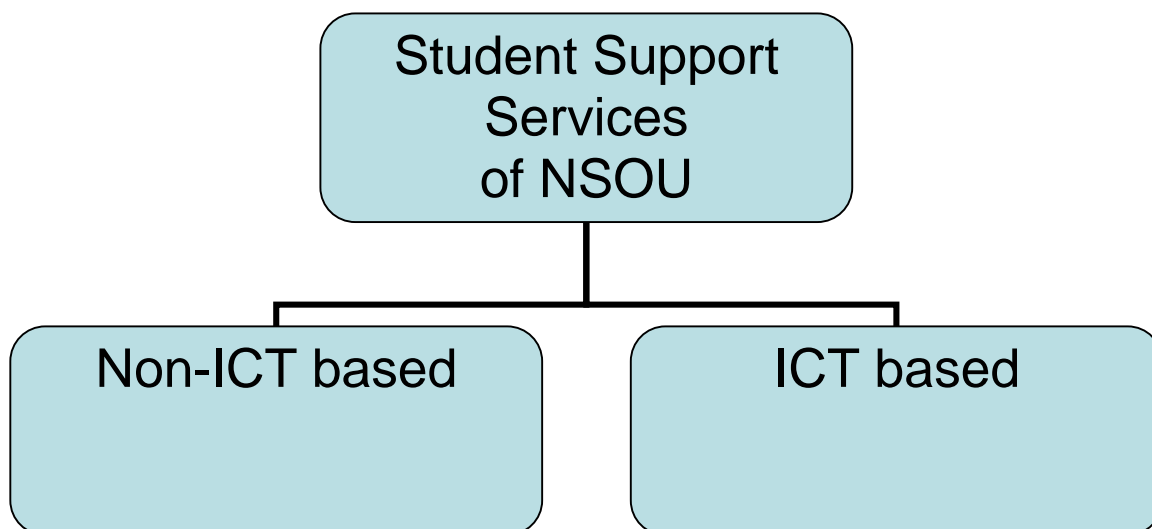
The term 'learner support' is not an associated term in conventional system of higher education. Learner support has developed as a technical term which is being used in ODL system of learning. The meaning of 'support', particularly the idea that all aspects of ODL, should facilitate learning. We can mean that all aspects of an institution's provision, from the enquiry desk through to the quality of the interface on the Self Learning Material (SLM), publication of result etc. should be supportive in the sense of fostering high quality learning.

According to Dirr (1999), learner services are a variety of non-academic interactions that the student has with a college or university, including: pre-enrolment services (recruiting, promotion, orientation), admissions and registration, technical assistance, library and logistics services, personal and career counseling, social support services, and financial planning and management. But here the actual teaching or academic and course related counseling support is explicitly excluded from the list. By contrast Thorpe from the British Open University defines learner services "... as all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process" (Thorpe, 1999, p. 4) and expressly includes the provision of academic support provided by tutors and teaching faculty.

As the learners are at distance from teachers and the institutions, we at the University use multi-media method to bridge this gap. The success of Netaji Subhas Open University has come through the effective implementation of student support services. The student support services are framed to meet the needs and expectations of students coming from diverse background – educational, social, economic and occupational. In the open and distance learning system, student support services play a vital role to popularize this system of education. The services include (i) Pre-admission Services and (ii) Post-admission Services.

SUPPORT SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY

Netaji Subhas Open University provides the following support services:



The University provides the following Non-ICT based support services:

- (a) Pre-admission counseling: To increase public awareness of the ODL system and especially of the varied programmes offered by the University, pre-admission counseling is arranged at selected Study Centers covering entire state during the admission session. We call it 'open day'. It is basically an interactive session. Senior counselors, coordinators and experts from the University are available to clarify the questions raised by the potential learners.
- (b) Induction meeting: After the admission is over, and at the beginning of each session, the study centers invite the learners for an induction meeting where they are familiarized with the aims, objectives and operative aspects of ODL. The faculty members of the University remain present on such days.
- (c) Study Materials and e-content: The study materials are handed over to the learners at the time of admission so that they can start their study immediately. At that time, the schedule of counseling sessions/PCP is also communicated. The e-content of some selected SLM is also available on the University's website.
- (d) Face to Face counseling & Personal Contact Programme (PCP): Both of them are class room teaching. Generally the study centers organize face to face counseling for undergraduate courses. Since the study centers are opened at undergraduate colleges, the college teachers take the classes of undergraduate courses. But in case of Post Graduate classes, we centrally organize the class room teaching at some selected study

centers which we call PCP. Since we do not compromise with quality, only the Post Graduate teachers are eligible to teach the post graduate courses.

- (e) Home Assignment: The integral part of the ODL system is continuous assessment. This assessment is done through home assignment. It is pre-condition for every learner to submit answer to the home assignment. A weight (20% or 30%) is given for such assignment at the term-end examination.
- (f) Special Lecture Programme (SLP): In addition to the face to face counseling & Personal Contact Programme (PCP), we conduct Special Lecture Programme for the benefit of our learners. Eminent teachers, industrialists are generally involved in SLP. By SLP we are able to grow 'Industry-NSOU interface' in which our learners can interact with the representatives of industries.
- (g) Library facilities: Apart from the central library at Headquarters, mini libraries are available at all study centers. The central library remains open from Tuesday to Sunday.
- (h) Meet the students' programme: The learners come regularly to the headquarters for academic purposes and return with great satisfaction after meeting their teachers.
- (i) Financial Assistance: The University provides scholarships to needy and meritorious students for their study.

The ICT based support services are:

- (a) Video-conferencing: A state-of-art video-conferencing unit has been set up for the development of ODL through virtual mode. As a huge cost is involved, at the moment we are able to connect 12 study centers with this system.
- (b) Audio-video cassettes: We have taken initiative to prepare the audio-video cassettes by renowned teachers which covers the course content. These cassettes are distributed to the learners through the study centers in addition to the SLM.
- (c) Interactive radio counseling (Gyan-Vani FM) and All India Radio Broadcasting: We have our own transmission centre (105.4 M.Hz.). This is an educational channel from where various lectures are transmitted and also the learners can participate in the interactive session over telephone. The rickshaw Pullers, farmers, fisherman can take advantage of this media at their work place.
- (d) Teleconferencing: The learners are free to call at any time to our counselors to clarify their doubts. The counselors are very cordial in this respect.
- (e) E-mail: The core faculty regularly answers the queries of learners through E-mail.

- (f) EDUSAT: Satellite Interactive Terminals have been installed by ISRO at our Salt Lake Campus. These are Receive Only Terminals (ROT) which will transmit programmes delivered by ISRO at this end.

Online teaching and learning is generating new forms of support and challenging our existing view of ODL systems. The emergence of new technologies particularly Interactive Communication Technology or Information and Communication Technology (ICT) encompassing radio, TV, cellular phones, computer network, satellite system has opened up new methods of providing instruction and learner support. This educational technology is capable of taking education to people rather than people to education. ICT is being used to increase access to education. It will not only enhance the use of technology but shall also bring learning-teaching process as easily accessible and covering a large population living in the remotest areas. Technology enhanced distance education can accelerate the mass education easily. In the changed context we are adopting appropriate technological tools.

The study centers play a vital role behind success of the University. The study centers serve as a link between the learners and University. Without proper functioning of the study centers, an ODL institute cannot survive. Now we can take into account the role of a study centre. The study centers are the interface of the University. Our study centers are learner friendly, cordial to the general public, well versed in the rules of the university. Generally our study centers offer the following support services:

1. Information centre
2. Admission counter
3. Library facility
4. Engagement of counselors
5. Holding of contact programme
6. Examination centre

CONCLUSION

Apart from the study centers and Regional Centers, the University has signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with a number of reputed Institutes/ Organization for its different collaborative programmes. These Partner Institutions supplement the programme delivery system of the University. The University utilizes the existing infrastructural facilities of the Partner Institutes. Most of the cases these belong to the private sector. Some of the Partner Institutes are the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (for B.Com), Care Foundation (Health related course), Rabindranath Tagore Heart and Cardiac Research Centre (Health related course), Brainware Pvt. Ltd, CMC Ltd (IT related course), West Bengal Voluntary Blood Donors Association, West Bengal State Technical Education (vocational course), Bengal National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (management courses), Defense Department, GOI (Management courses) etc. These Partner Institutions widen access to University's programme, by their available resources for promoting distance education. Again to motivate the employees of the university, 'Staff Training and Development Programme' is regularly conducted for smooth functioning of the day to day activities and to acquaint with the system of ODL. There is no doubt that the training programme increases the potential of the employees and motivates them to produce good results.

Though, the University is adopting multi-channel support services, most of the learners depend on non-ICT services. The main reason is lack of ICT facilities. The University is trying to provide hassle free support services both in terms of ICT and non-ICT based support services. The faculties of the University are trying to promote education in such a way that the students sitting at distance do not feel that they are isolated from their peers and feel comfortable with the support services.

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