

RESEARCH TRENDS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Reported is the review study of research trends in open and distance education. After the discovery of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and its use in education, the people are looking forward for further new scope of higher education in a cost effective way with limited access. Open and distance learning (ODL) system therefore started in different countries and in different names. This new field of education demands regular in-depth research work. First trend study on ODL started in America in 2001 by Berge and Mrozowski considering 890 research articles since then Lee et. al. (2004), Zawacki-Richter (2009), Zawacki-Richter et. al. (2009), Bozkurt et. al. (2015), Berge and Mrozowski (2001) and others since then studied research trend in ODL. In India first systematic study on Open and Distance Education (ODE) was done by Koul (1997). The present paper is a trend study on the basis of previous research works. Further in-depth study is prescribed.

Keywords: Research trends, ODL, ODE

INTRODUCTION

According to UNESCO (2002), the terms ‘open learning’ and ‘distance education’ represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individual and groups of learners. Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing field of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web.

According to Wikipedia distance education or distance learning is the education of students who are not physically present at a school (Bozkurt et. al., 2015).

The rapid development of information and communication technologies and the move towards more knowledge intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies create new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of education (UNESCO, 2002, p.8). ICT opens up new horizons for progress and the exchange of creativity and intercultural dialogue. The result is

that the disadvantaged group, rural communities, illiterate populations and even entire countries are looking forward for further new scope of higher education with the application of ICTs. The people are looking forward for increased access and flexibility in education so that works and education can walk parallel. They are waiting for more and more learner centric, enriched high quality and cost effective facilities in education. Employers also demands a new horizon in education through which employees' quality and skill development can be possible in a cost effective way and their productivity can be increased without hampering their regular production. The governments also were in search of that system of training which will increase the capacity of the target group within a low cost and with limited access. The answers of all these queries are open and distance learning.

Therefore, the open and distance learning system occurs in different context and in different countries in different names viz. open education, distance education, correspondence education, external study, off campus study etc. Its importance increased throughout the world and particularly in the third world countries including India because of its cost-effectiveness high productivity, utility, greater flexibility and innovative approach.

RESEARCH STUDIES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

For development of open and distance education regular research work is essential. As this field of study is still evolving and orienting itself to fulfill the demands of nations, a regular and in-depth research is essential. For the last two decades, its study emerges as a separate field of research. But since late 70s, the study in this field got momentum in India in the name of 'Educational Technology', 'Teacher Education', 'Non-formal education' and higher education etc.

First trend study in distance education published in 2001 by Berge and Mrozowski. They studied published research work and article for a period of 10 years since 1990 to 1999 mainly in America. A total 890 research articles were studied by them which they categorized into 10 research issues on the basis of Sherry's (1996) study. The issues were,

1. Redefining the roles of key participants,
2. Technology selection and adoption,
3. Design issues,
4. Strategies to increase interactivity and active learning,
5. Learners characteristics,
6. Learners support,
7. Operational issues,
8. Policy and management issues,

9. Equity and accessibility,
10. Cost / benefit trade-offs.

They also noticed that the main areas of research in this field were pedagogical issues. Most of the researchers used survey method in their study.

Another literature review was done by three Researchers - Lee, Driscoll and Nelson (2004). They reviewed 383 research articles from 4 different research journals, published from America. Lee et. al. (2004) classified research into 6 themes-

1. design related
2. development related
3. management related
4. evaluation related
5. institutional and operational related
6. theory and research related

Lee et. al. (2004) have written papers which were published between 1997 to 2002. They used thematic analysis method in their survey study.

Zawacki-Richter (2009) explores the distance education research domain by using Delphi technique. Zawacki-Richter Backer and Vogt (2009) studied 695 research articles on distance education published in 5 important distance education journals. The papers reviewed in this study were published between 2000 to 2008. Zawacki-Richter (2009) identified 15 research areas which were categorized under 3 broad categories—

1. Distance education systems and theories,
2. Management organisation and teaching,
3. Teaching and learning in distance education.

In the Delphi technique, they collected data from editorial board experts (of major DE journals from September to December, 2008) having an average of 27 years of professional experience in distance education study. The data were collected from experts from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Fiji, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, USA and UK.

Therefore, in the study of Zawacki-Richter (2009), sample were taken from English speaking countries and so show the result of this study may not be accepted in the people of non-English speaking countries. From their study through Delphi technique Zawacki-Richter (2009) concluded that “.... the priority of DE research areas have not changed drastically,...”. In the present era clients of DE study are not only thinking about research on technology innovations only, rather about management and change in DE institutions. Delphi experts viewed that in the present Era DE

research needs to focus in the areas of innovations and change in teaching and learning, quality assurance, faculty support, professional development, applications of mobile devices and synchronous tools for teaching, learning and assessment. Zawacki-Richter et. al. (2009), also noticed that most of the research in DE is by employing qualitative method and 44.2% study were done by single author between the period 2000 and 2008. Mishra observed that between 1991 to 1996 61.5% studies in DE were done by single author.

Bozkurt et. al. (February 2015) studied “Trends in Distance Education Research: A Content Analysis of journals 2009-2013” by using the classification system developed by Zawacki-Richter (2009), for distance education research areas. Bozkurt et. al. (2015) reviewed seven DE and educational technology journals published in the period of 2009 to 2013. They surveyed 1225 papers published in those seven journals in the time period 2009 to 2013. Out of 1225 articles, 861 were identified as research articles and 364 as others (viz. editorials, book reviews, interviews, concept papers, reflection papers, field notes, technical notes etc.). Only the research articles (N= 861) were considered for their study. Bozkurt et. al. (2015) for their study used content analysis (defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Berelson, 1952) and analyzing written verbal or visual communication messages which includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) to study empirical documentation. Following contents analysis method, they used descriptive analysis for reporting the findings and a social network analysis for analysing the “keywords used in the selected articles to achieve a deeper comprehension and distinguish the links between them” (Bozkurt, et. al., 2015, p, 4.). Findings of their study were as follows:

- 1) ‘Keywords indicated in the articles provide a holistic reflection of the research paper topics’ out of 4088 keywords 633 were field specific and 3455 where research related.
- 2) Keywords were ranked according to their frequency of appearance in the articles.
- 3) The study reveals that more researches are needed by the method of quantitative correlation and experimental methods.

Berge and Mrozowski (2001) studied the papers on DE published between 1990 to 1999. They found that most of the studies were done by using quantitative method (viz. descriptive, correlational experimental and less number of study were done by qualitative method. Now a days quantitative, qualitative and mixed studies (exploratory) were necessary in DE research. As an interdisciplinary field researches may use a variety of research methods. Mixed research design might help scientific development of the field.

DE research can be targeted on any age group or occupation based samples. It has its roots in lifelong learning philosophy. It covers formal, non-formal and informal learning.

In India distance education is effective and need based component of education. Research on Open and Distance education was seen since fifth survey of research in Education (1988-92) through the DE research gained momentum in the late seventies. Kaul (1997) classified DE research articles into seven broad areas viz.

1. Enrolment trends and courses,
2. Growth, development and social relevance of the DE system,
3. Needs and characteristics of distance learners,
4. Development and production of course materials,
5. Instructional strategies and methodology,
6. Economics of distance education,
7. Evaluative studies.

In India about 66 research studies were done in the areas of distance education (in the period from 1971 to 1992). Kaulin in his trend study observed that in the previous four surveys open and distance education researches were not reported under the umbrella of “Open and Distance education it was also found that in the earlier surveys, open and distance education research were reported under Educational Technology, Teacher Education, Non-formal Education, Higher Education etc. Open and Distance education in all the developed and developing countries are now essential and has no other alternatives.

In International scenario first trend study in DE were held considering the articles and papers published in the period of 1990-1999. In India, the first trend study was done by Kaul, considering the articles and papers published in 1971 to 1992. An America in first trend study, 890 research articles were considered but in India Kaul considered only 66 research studies. Like international scenario in India also most of the researchers adopted descriptive survey approach and quantitative analysis techniques. The other methods of research hardly find any place in the conduct of studies in DE. In India “impact and intervention studies for programme development and evaluation of distance education system are virtually non-existent (Kaul). Kaul also noticed that distance mode of education is more cost-effective and the same was established in his trend study. Student Support Services are virtually not existed in India. Faculty development/improvement programmes do not exist.

At last, it can be concluded in the words of Kaul (1997, p. 535) “Research in distance and open education in India is still in its infancy. Researchers select problems and topics which they feel are useful and conduct research on them without considering their utility in meaningful development of the distance/open education system. Hence, the research in this emerging area could not relate

itself effectively to the formulation of the theory and practices of distance education. It is, therefore, worthwhile to pinpoint certain priority areas for undertaking research in distance education....”

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