

Attitudes Towards Distance Learning: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Distance Learning has grown more and more popular by the day. It has led to a far-reaching impact on the education scene, specifically by broadening the horizon of opportunities. It was envisaged to be a boon for the students of far-flung and difficult-to-reach areas of the country where it was very difficult for the government to provide basic educational facilities especially for the college level. But the utility of distance learning has surely outgrown itself. It has proved to be beneficial not only for the students hailing from the far off places, but also to the students within a better reach of educational facilities, though lacking in time to benefit from them. The tremendous impetus which the distance mode of learning has provided to the field of education has resulted in its wide acceptance by the learning community. But every mode of education has its flaws. People have held their respective opinions about the overall efficacy of distance learning ever since its inception. This difference in opinions gives rise to a wide variety of attitudes towards distance learning among the learners as well as the teachers. This difference in viewpoints and attitudes was assessed through the presented study. A sample of 30 students enrolled in distance learning education in two universities located in Delhi was taken. 15 of these students (called Group A) were enrolled in post-graduate courses, while the remaining 15 (called Group B) were enrolled in various undergraduate courses. Their attitudes towards distance learning were assessed using an open-ended questionnaire designed with express purpose of tapping into different viewpoints. Further, an assessment of gender differences was also made from among the selected sample. Results along with implications for society have been discussed.

Keyword: Distance learning; Attitude; Post-graduate; Under-graduate; Gender.

1. Introduction

Ever since our country became independent in 1947, education has been given primary focus by our leaders, as a result of which education has progressed with leaps and bounds. A huge amount of money has been invested in this sector by the government as well as private business owners. Tremendous amount of research and development has been carried out in this field with the prime intent of advancing it in every possible way. A plethora of modes and channels of education have since been devised with huge success in achieving the chief objectives, namely, the expansion and spread of education.

One of the forerunners in the domain of spreading education is the Distance Learning, or Distance Education. By “Distance Learning”, it is meant that learning is provided in a manner so as not to let the factor of distance hinder the course of action and process of learning. This mode of spreading and promoting education serves the interests of the learners across the barriers of time and space. On one hand, distance learning has defeated a number of barriers to free flow of knowledge; on the other hand, it has also lacked some of the most important features of a successful teaching-learning process. Distance learning has also been subjected to disapproval from different quarters of academicians and educationists. As a result, distance mode of learning has resulted in a highly diversified spectrum of responses from people of different backgrounds. People are becoming increasingly aware of this mode of education and those directly involved in it nurture different attitudes towards it. This paper tries to expound and grasp these very attitudes. It is important to comprehend these attitudes because it bears relevance to predict the extent to which the target individuals will choose to make use of this mode of learning as well as to understand the extent to which these people will engage in persuading others to use it. The following sections present the methodology and procedure of this study. The results as well as implications of the findings of this study for the society in general are discussed.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

For the present study, a total of 30 participants were chosen from Delhi and NCR. They were directly enrolled as students of distance learning in two universities located in Delhi, namely, University of Delhi and Indira Gandhi National Open University. The participants were grouped as Group A and Group B, each consisting of 15 participants. Group A included the students of various post-graduate courses from both the universities while Group B consisted of the participants who were enrolled in various undergraduate courses. The age range of the participants was 18 to 25 years. Care was taken to include equal number of participants from both genders. Group A consisted of 7 male participants and 8 female participants while Group B consisted of 8 male participants and 7 female participants. In other words, there were 15 participants each from both genders. In the second stage of research, the participants were reorganized based on their gender. All the male participants (7 from Group A and

8 from Group B) were now re-assigned to Group X whereas all the female participants (8 from Group A and 7 from Group B) were now re-assigned to Group Y. This way, both the groups, X and Y, included 15 participants each. The respondents chosen for the research were the ones who had at least some degree of exposure and understanding about distance learning owing to their enrolment in the said courses through distance learning mode, and hence capable of contributing as per the purpose of this research.

2.2 Instruments and Procedure

The present research aimed at assessing attitudes of the subjects towards distance learning with respect to its utility, accessibility, learning outcomes, future prospects offered and several other characteristics. For this purpose, an open-ended questionnaire of twenty-one items was prepared which included questions focussing on relevant characteristics of distance learning such as, its popularity, constraints with its use and possible disadvantages. Overall, the questionnaire was meant to identify the respondents' attitude towards distance learning and the factors which contributed to development of their respective attitudes. The questionnaire was specifically designed to elicit information relevant to the study.

The open-ended questionnaire was administered to the respondents with their consent. Each respondent took around 20-25 minutes to fill it out. After all the responses had been gathered, the data was analysed. A content analysis of the responses was undertaken to identify the common themes which emerged in both the responding groups in terms of positive, negative or neutral attitudes shown by the respondents.

3. Results

The content analysis of the responses enabled the researcher to infer the general attitude of the respondents. Since the purpose was to obtain the information about whether the respondents had a positive, negative or a neutral attitude towards distance learning, each of the response questionnaires was adjudged to fall into any one of the three categories based on the overall response tendency of the subjects. The positive attitude was characterised by a general favourability expressed by the respondents in terms of the advantages of distance learning as perceived by the respondents. A negative attitude was adjudged based on the negativity the respondent expressed towards the utility of distance learning. Those questionnaires which contained more or less equal responses of both valences were classified as neutral attitude. Obtained results have been tabulated below:

As depicted in Result Table 3, out of the total 30 respondents, 18 respondents (60%) demonstrated a positive attitude towards distance learning, 8 respondents (26.66%) demonstrated a negative attitude while the remaining 4 respondents (13.33%) showed a neutral attitude. Result Table 1 shows that out of 15 respondents in Group A (Post-graduate students), 11 subjects (73.33%) showed a positive attitude, 3 subjects (20%) showed a negative attitude, while the remaining 1 subject (6.66%) demonstrated a

neutral attitude towards distance learning. Out of 15 respondents in Group B, 7 subjects (46.66%) showed a positive attitude, 5 subjects (33.33%) have a negative attitude, and 3 subjects (20%) have a neutral attitude towards distance learning. In total, 53.33% males and 66.66% females showed a positive attitude, 40% males and 13.33% females showed a negative attitude, and finally, 6.66% males and 20% females demonstrated a neutral attitude as depicted in Result Table 2.

Result Table 1: Showing the number and percentage of participants expressing positive, negative, or neutral attitude in Group A & B.

| Group | Male/Female | Attitude Expressed | | | Total |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|
| | | Positive | Negative | Neutral | |
| A (Post-graduates) | M | 5 | 2 | 0 | 7 |
| | F | 6 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Total | | 11 | 3 | 1 | 15 |
| Percentage | | 73.33% | 20% | 6.66% | |
| | | | | | |
| B (Under-graduates) | M | 3 | 4 | 1 | 8 |
| | F | 4 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Total | | 7 | 5 | 3 | 15 |
| Percentage | | 46.66% | 33.33% | 20% | |

Result Table 2: Showing the number and percentage of participants expressing positive, negative, or neutral attitude in Group X & Y

| Group | Post-graduate/ Undergraduate | Attitude Expressed | | | Total |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|
| | | Positive | Negative | Neutral | |
| X (Males) | Post-graduate | 5 | 2 | 0 | 7 |
| | Undergraduate | 3 | 4 | 1 | 8 |
| Total | | 8 | 6 | 1 | 15 |
| Percentage | | 53.33% | 40% | 6.66% | |
| | | | | | |
| Y (Females) | Post-graduate | 6 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| | Undergraduate | 4 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Total | | 10 | 2 | 3 | 15 |
| Percentage | | 66.66% | 13.33% | 20% | |

Result Table 3: Showing the total number and percentage of respondents expressing positive, negative, or neutral attitude

| | Attitude Expressed | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------|---------|
| | Positive | Negative | Neutral |
| Total Number | 18 | 8 | 4 |
| Percentage | 60% | 26.66% | 13.33% |

4. Discussion

Results demonstrated a more positive attitude towards distance learning among females as compared to males. The female respondents attributed their positive attitude primarily to the ease with which they fulfil their educational aspirations through distance learning. The male respondents cited the lack of frequent interaction with their fellow learners as well as the absence of face-to-face interaction with teachers as the primary factors contributing to the negative attitude. The primary themes identified as contributing to developing a positive attitude included the capability of distance learning to eradicate the limitations of time and space, possibility of earning while learning (especially demonstrated by post-graduate students possibility owing to their maturity), simultaneous study options as well its feature of permitting the learners to carry on their respective speeds of learning. The themes identified as contributing to a negative attitude included the failure of distance learning to facilitate interactions between learners and teachers, or learners and learners, lack of feedback, low scores, and absence of professional skills training.

5. Implications

The findings of this study are strongly pitted in favour of distance learning. This indicates, in general, that there are far more people keeping a favourable outlook towards distance learning as compared to those who oppose it and are unwilling to be benefitted by this trend. These findings are strongly emerging from the wide range of advantages and benefits offered by distance learning as opposed to its few limitations. Although this study is limited by the small size of sample, but still such researches will go a long way in highlighting the massive contribution distance learning provides to the society in general, and the field of education in specific. A general positive attitude is an indicator of wider social acceptance and higher chances of this mode of learning to be promoted and encouraged in the greater interest of society.

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