



360⁰ Support in ODL for Augmenting Learner Engagement

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ABSTRACT: This write-up examines the institutions of open and distance learning (ODL) extending 360 degree support and making use of technology - enabled resources required for increasingly accessible, open, and flexible education for all. Due to exponential revolution in ICTs, the institutions of ODL offer rather enhanced avenues of learner engagement and interactivity embedded with both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Besides, it attempts to explore the 360⁰ support in open, distance and flexible learning, and examines the possible benefits and likely challenges in the avenues of support to ensure a robust and vibrant ODL institution. This paper offers a kind of context of a more open, distance and flexible learning and proposes further reflections in extending learners' support services in ODL. In the context, 360⁰ support is a reform movement challenging the traditional text based course content delivery and support services. It is hoped that the ODL institutions implement with required interest technologies to not only sustain but also as a mission to promote learner engagement in ODL suited to a largely growing heterogeneous target learning groups.

Keywords: 360⁰ Support; ICT; Learner Engagement; Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

Overview

The new trends in open and distance learning such as web-based learning, app - based learning, blended learning, collaborative learning, virtual learning etc. has brought about an ocean of change in the way we look at teaching and learning more particularly at a distance. Organizing and managing leaning based on innovative approaches requires to create a relatively more open and flexible learning situations. In the context, 360⁰ support is a reform movement challenging the traditional text based course content delivery and support services. "Educational support for students in the field of open and distance education is a multifaceted and decisive parameter for enhancing and promoting student engagement and academic progress"(Lionarakis, A. et al., 2018, p. 38). And with robust and viable support mechanisms under various ODL institutions the idea of augmenting learner engagement may sooner or later get currency.

360⁰ support here refers to the idea that ODL institutions offer the complete package of course contents along with the vibrant support mechanisms in varied formats that a learner may use to pursue and accelerate learning effectively, efficiently and expeditiously. "Open and distance learning, as part of commitment to make the

learning possible, offers certain support systems and mechanisms inclined to bring together a rich blend of expertise for instruction, motivation, counseling and things of those kinds for learners especially with regard to academics”(Ahmad, S., 2010, p.36). The roots of learner support services in ODL are most often traced back to Pitmanship, the British teacher of English language and shorthand course provider (Sir Isaac Pitman) in 1840s. This paper offers a kind of context of a more open, distance and flexible learning and proposes further reflections in extending learners’ support services in ODL with a view to augment learning engagement.

360⁰ Support in ODL

More recent attention has focused on the provision of ICT and due to exponential revolution in ICTs, the institutions of ODL offer rather enhanced avenues of interactivity embedded with both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Far from undermining the significance of regular teacher, these trends demand that the teacher, instructor or distance learning facilitator be more innovative and creative. Wherein the distance learning facilitator in the role of communicator, moderator, content developer, web designer, presenter etc. largely organizes and presents the contents in a more flexible manner. “Technology is, by definition, a means to an end, not an end in itself”(Bates, A.W., 2000, p. 45). In the context, 360⁰ support in ODL has to be augmented using a variety of approaches.

In this paper, 360⁰ support to ODL learners with major areas has been underlined. These areas of support play decisive role in a variety of settings, as a few of them are outlined below:

- assessing specific support needs of the ODL learners,
- analyzing institutional and instructional opportunities for learner support,
- devising feedback mechanism to encourage learners and strengthen institution,
- examining the examination related stress and conducting counseling and guidance,
- prioritizing the issues of learners and learning
- supplementing the learners support both by synchronous and asynchronous modes,
- ensuring accessibility to high quality learning resources,
- using a variety of approaches to ensure learner engagement etc.

This academic investigation provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of 360⁰ learner support which is being offered to both inspire and augment learner engagement in ODL system all over by addressing the ways diversity – in all its forms – is affected by conventional education system. “In the context, there is global support and interest across the whole education sector for the development and integration of ICT into education policy, curriculum and practice”(Shah, A. & Godiyal, S. 2009, p.105).

The central question in the paper revolves around ODL institutions that have to bring in the technology - based robust support mechanisms through innovative content creation and transaction technologies in the twenty first century learning environment.



Figure 1: 360° Support in Open and Distance Learning

Figure 1 shows the distinguished features of 360° support to the learners pursuing their programmes of studies in open and distance learning for ensured quality education which is the need of the hour. Within this context, the 360° support in ODL offers the learners with enhanced accessibility to learner and learning resources, greater flexibility to academic, informative, library and administrative support. It uses innovative technologies to empower and enrich learning community along with the quick access and instant delivery of learning resources. Utilizing user friendly ICT tools and applications for immediate feedback, it becomes available anytime, anywhere; augmenting learner engagement, making arrangements of learning resource sharing opportunities, institutional monitoring of learners' learning progress, offering links to the web - based learning resources while focusing on constant interactivity.

Rationale

In ODL system, the nature and conditions of learning are usually different from that of the traditional - conventional - regular system of education. The clientele pursuing various academic and professional courses in open and distance learning are also different from the formal and regular students. “In developing internal capacity in the use of ICT in teaching, learning and research, teachers need to be involved in designing particular ICT initiatives to ensure their relevance and effectiveness”(COL, 2009, pp.24).

Being physically separated from the teachers and institution, the learners in ODL need support system to address the specific nature and conditions of learning like:

ODL Support Services	academic support to augment learner engagement
	administrative support
	tutorials and academic counseling
	library and laboratory support
	career oriented guidance
	academic advising
	encouraging to help to achieve educational goals
	monitoring academic progress
	providing immediate feedback
	coordinating between the stakeholders etc

Figure 2: ODL Support Services

Recognizing that the ultimate responsibility for success in ODL lies with the learning community whereby learner support services help them achieve their educational goals in true spirit and sense. “Teachers need to be able to help the students become collaborative, problem-solving, creative learners through using ICT so they will be effective citizens and members of the workforce”(UNESCO, 2016, p.01). Besides, it attempts to explore the 360⁰ support in open, distance and flexible learning, and examines the opportunities and challenges in the avenues of support to ensure a robust and vibrant ODL institution.

Possible Benefits

Consequent upon systemic research, ODL system is evolving day by day as it focuses on creation, dissemination and application of knowledge learning resources using the new technology and its many ramifications. There is a scope for greater flexibility to academic, informative, library and administrative support designed, developed and more importantly delivered to the learners at a distance. It uses possible innovative technologies to empower and enrich learning community along with the quick access and instant delivery of learning resources. In order to ensure immediate feedback, learner support is made available anytime, anywhere, ensuring learners' participation adequately, making arrangements of learning resources, institutional monitoring, and offering links to the web - based learning resources while focusing on enhanced interactivity.

The ODL institutions play a crucial role in enhancing learning enabling the learners to seek, and use support services available. “Aiming towards gaining more from technology for optimum results needs to be our immediate focus”(D’Souza, M.J.S., 2012, p. 11). Within this context, the 360⁰ support has to offer a numerous possible benefits through the open, distance and flexible learning.

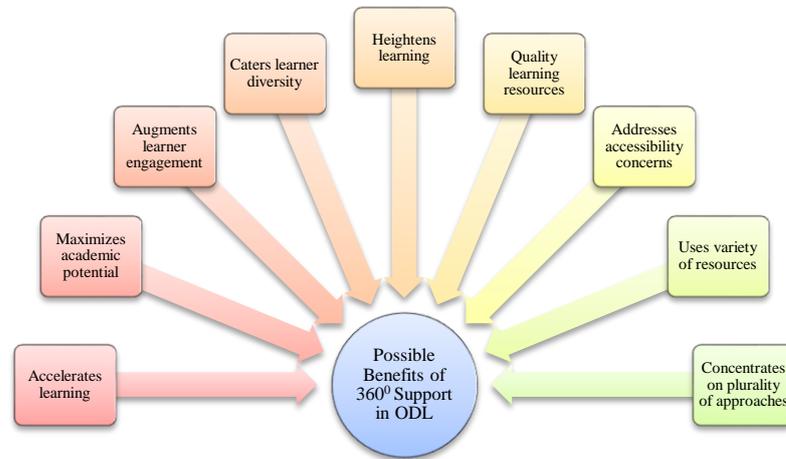


Figure 3: Possible Benefits of 360⁰ Support in ODL

Figure 3 above, reveals the possible advantages of 360⁰ support to the learners enrolled in open and distance learning, a few of them are highlighted below as it:

- accelerates learning of varied nature,
- maximizes academic potential among the learners,
- augments learner engagement through virtual inputs as well,
- caters learner diversity and backgrounds,
- heightens learning through constant interactivity,
- quality learning resources and resources sharing opportunities,
- addresses accessibility concerns by offering specific support as and when required,
- uses a variety of resources in varied learning conditions,
- concentrates on plurality of approaches for fulfillment of the educational goals etc.

Thus, ODL makes use of a wide spectrum of technological support as well as communicational media to connect the both clientele and distance learning facilitators to address academic and related issues. It also helps to resolve the problems of clientele in order to realize the independent and self - paced learning.

Likely Challenges

From ODL perspective, the role of a teacher has become a relatively more complex and challenging as he has to perform multiple roles as content developer, web designer, communicator, presenter, virtual learning facilitator etc.

There are many challenges in the pursuit of a vibrant open and distance learning system especially when it comes to technology integrated learner support initiatives; a few of them are as follows:

Likely Challenges	identifying specific support needs of the distance learners
	devising support mechanisms in varied formats
	adopting variety of approaches to instruction
	applying instructional strategies suitable to the diverse target learning groups
	prioritizing institutional policies for technology based support
	recording learners' performance and other details
	providing feedback on learners' activities, projects and assignments
	integrating feasible technologies in day to day instructional practices
	maximizing instructional variation with the help of appropriate support, and
	technology - based robust learning resources in multiple formats etc.

Figure 4: Likely Challenges

Given the current ODL scenario, there are many more challenges which need to be addressed on priority basis. This may require well - tried support strategies such as technology driven policies, infrastructure, monitoring and other administrative inputs. With the adequate technology driven strategies and relevant support mechanisms, the movement of open, distance and flexible learning needs to be accelerated.

Concluding Remarks

The issue of 360⁰ support assumes significance when institutions of ODL take into account not only the technological imperatives but quality perspective to enhance instruction, advance pedagogies and augment learning commensurate with the global outlook. In this backdrop, these institutions through technology driven creation, dissemination and application of knowledge and learning resources with adequately designed and developed support mechanisms have to cater to the target learning groups and addressing diversity and heterogeneity in the context shall be praiseworthy and commendable. It is hoped that the ODL institutions implement with required interest technologies to not only sustain but also as a mission to promote ODL suited to a largely growing heterogeneous groups. With robust and viable support mechanisms under various ODL institutions the idea of augmenting learner engagement may sooner or later get currency.

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