

**RHETORIC VERSUS REALITY OF PRACTICES IN INDIAN  
DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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**Abstract**

*Teaching is a profession and that requires the development of knowledge, competencies and skills. But, teaching at a distance is not the same as classroom teaching and this requires specialized professional development programmes. There are researches, experiences, practices and theories related to distance education and their successful application would enhance distance learning. But, there are mushrooming growth of distance education institutions in our country but whether they are powered with professional people. This study tried to analyse and describe the structure of the self-instructional materials developed by two renowned distance education institutions in our country and one of which was a dedicated or single mode Distance Education Institution (DEI) and another a dual mode DEI. This analysis was done with delimitation to only the structure of the contents at the course and block levels to know whether the DEIs were adhering to the principles related to self-instructional materials (SIM) construction. This enabled to come an inference that though trained man-power was available in both the DEIs, there found lapses in structuring the SIMs. Professional development programmes were initiated by the then Distance Education Council(DEC), but still they were found inadequate and all the DEIs in India would require constant professional update programmes, guidance, support and monitoring over the practices for the effective pursuit of distance education programmes.*

**Keywords:** DDE, DEB, DEC, DEI, IGNOU, M.A., MKU, STRIDE

In a democratic nation, every citizen should be given adequate opportunities not only to express his rights but also to live with human dignity. True education is that gives dignity to individuals at the giving and receiving end. Thus, life and education are the two sides of the same coin as one without the other is incomplete. Education is a tool for life and life itself. Thus, educational opportunity is a must for everyone in a welfare state and that is a quite challenging task in a highly populated developing country such as India. Since time immemorial, distance education in its different incarnations has been experimented with a lot of innovations to complement the educational need of the world community. When opportunities are open to agencies to provide quality distance education, there are unscrupulous, uncommitted or negligent institutions invading this sector and taking these opportunities as a pasture for their selfish ends. Their commitments decked in the policies and prospectuses, which were the sincere efforts of distance education thinkers, practitioners and policy makers, go unnoticed or unimplemented in reality. This paper investigates and compares some of the structural aspects of distance learning materials developed by two Indian distance educational institutions (DEI) at the macro level of self-instructional materials. Here, macro level is meant that without getting into the instructional contents of the instructional materials, this study is delimited to the course and block structure of the materials without going into details of the unit structure and design.

**Research Method**

This study analysed the contents of the distance learning materials developed for the Master's Degree in English by Indira Gandhi Open University and the Directorate of

Distance Education of Madurai Kamaraj University (hereinafter, referred as IGNOU and DDE-MKU), therefore using content analysis method. Being narrow in scope, the self-instructional materials developed for only one course from the first year M.A. English of each DEIs and that comprised of 25% of the total self-instructional materials provided for the first year M.A. English programme. For the first year of the two-year M.A. degree programme, both the DEIs offered four courses and one from each with the similar nature was taken for this study.

Contents are nothing but ‘what is contained’ Krippendorff(1980) defines content analysis as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. According to STRIDE (2014), “Content analysis is concerned with the classification, organisation and comparison of the content of the document or communication”(p.41). The contents may be letters, diaries, newspaper items, folk songs, short stories, messages of radio/television, documents,, texts or any symbols. In this present study, one of the approaches to content analysis, i.e., the form resulting from systematised organisation of contents was taken and not the substance of the contents or to say that ‘how is the message said?’ and not ‘what is the message?’.

The structure of self-instructional materials involved their various components or parts and the order of placing those components or parts. This structuring is a systematic process as it is based on some principles that found correlation between the structure and the learning process. Thus, the structures could be broadly analysed at three levels – the course level, the block level and the unit level. But, in this study, the analysis was limited the first two levels and not to the third level, i.e., unit level.

### **Findings**

**Block Size:** Self-instructional (print) materials are expected to be structured into blocks consisting of about 60-80 pages in volume with A4 size papers and analysing in the vein of this principle the SIM of IGNOU was made into 10 blocks with an average of 140 pages per block whereas, of DDE-MKU was made of only two blocks with an average of 250 pages per block which was approximately three times bulkier than the expected volume. Individually examining the size of the blocks, some of the IGNOU blocks and both the blocks of DDE-MKU had gone to the extent of book-form rather than called to be blocks. Though, the blocks of both exceeded the volumes of an ideal block, IGNOU blocks were comparatively well justified in following the principles of block development for every block includes the prescribed texts and supplementary texts and excluding those supplementary text materials, each block of IGNOU covered an average volume of 89 pages only. But, the DDE-MKU blocks were with an average of 250 pages without any prescribed or supplementary text materials and thus was not designed as a block but rather than a book providing classroom lectures. Thus, we could conclude saying that DDE-MKU did not design the blocks keeping the above principles into consideration. Also, when the number of blocks was taken into consideration, IGNOU was justified in providing the entire course materials and supplementary texts into 10 blocks unlike DDE-MKU’s into 2 blocks. Thus, DDE-MKU SIM is in the form of two books

**Comprehensiveness and Detailed Contents:** There were 52 units for a course of IGNOU that would indicate the comprehensive and detailed instruction given in the materials covering 1392 pages which was more than double the volume of DDE-MKU SIM for the course under study Whereas, the DDE-MKU blocks contained

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only 20 units only with an average of 25 pages per unit and that of IGNOU was of an average of 17 pages per unit. A more detailed description is tabulated below:

No	Components	IGNOU	DDE-MKU
1	Course Title (under study)	British Poetry	The Elizabethan & Augustan Ages
2	Course Code	MEG-01	S-205
3	Number of Blocks	10	2
4	Total number of Units	52	20
5	Total Number of Pages	1392	500
6	Number of Pages excluding Appendix	889	No appendix
7	Paper size	A4	A4
8	Number of Prescribed Works	43	Nil
9	Number of Supplementary Reading Texts	28	Nil

Self-Contained Materials: Analysing the materials on the principle of ‘self-contained nature’, since the IGNOU materials provided prescribed texts and additional or supplementary reading materials in all the blocks, they followed the above principle in spirit and practice for the distant adult learner, especially, need not look for other materials and lose his precious time and energy. This might also give an motivating impulse in learning without any frustration while searching the relevant materials in the library or elsewhere.

Block Design: The instructional design process is a craft and science involving many features and structuring of materials based on some principles and theories. In the words of Elen and Clarebout 2001), “the field of instructional design is more like a craft while it claims to be a technology”. Every block of IGNOU in the present study was discernible with a structural pattern consisting of an introductory part, instructional part and the supplementary part. This structuring was done on the basis of some designing principles ensures unhindered and smooth learning process.

The introductory part of IGNOU blocks was with the cover pages- both outer and inner, the preliminary pages containing information on the course development team, list of units indicating page numbers, block introduction and one or more frontispieces. Though, the DDE-MKU blocks had attractive or aesthetic outer pages, their inner pages had very limited components such as course outline and list of units indicating page numbers and no block introduction nor any course guidance in any form.

The instructional parts of both the DEI blocks were designed with the number of instructional units ranging between 5 and 6 however, only IGNOU blocks contained the block title and unit title on every alternative pages. This could help the learner to know the current status and that recapitulates and making learning into a whole instead of fragments.

The DDE-MKU block contained 10 units in each block with an average of 25 pages per unit and this was quite longer in length to sustain the constancy and continuity of reading. Units with less number of pages were found to give a sense of completion, achievement and inducing for further learning.

The supplementary part of IGNOU blocks were loaded with supplementary texts, prescribed works, white pages for notes, model term-end exam question, learner feedback format, and guidelines to write session end essays/assignments. Therefore, the course design with the three distinctive parts, such as introductory, instructional and the supplementary part was not discernible. But the course outline was found in

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both the blocks of DDE-MKU and that was missing in IGNOU blocks that would help the learner in identifying the current status for motivating him/her

In distance education, course end- assignment or block end assignment is found to be one of the most useful aspects in many studies. Citation could be done to Biswal (1979) and Sahoo (1985) but for the course under the present study, no assignment submission was included for DDE-MKU and no internal marking was allotted to the same. The same could be corroborated from the study findings of Dutt (1976) and Khan (1982) that rate of submission of assignments was not at all done by 55% of the students by the learners of DDE-MKU. A more detailed illustration is given tabulated:

Design of the IGNOU and DDE-MKU Blocks			
A. Introductory Part			
		IGNOU BLOCK	DDE-MKU BLOCK
1	Cover Page (outer)	Available (hereinafter 'A')	A
2	Cover Page (inner)	A	A
3	Pages on Course Development Team	A	NotAvailable(hereinafter 'NA')
4	Course Welcome Page	A	NA
5	Course Outline in Each Block	NA	A
6	Block Introduction	A	A
7	List of Units Indicating Page Numbers	A	A
B. Instructional Part			
1	Block Division into Units	A	A
2	Block Title on Alternate Pages	A	NA
3	Unit Title on Alternate Pages	A	NA
C. Supplementary Part			
1	Prescribed Texts/Works	A	NA
2	Supplementary Texts	A	NA
3	Block End White Pages for Notes	A	NA
4	Feedback Format	NA	NA
5	Model Term-End Exam Question	A	NA
6	Guideline to Write Session Essays/Assignment	A	NA*
*There is no assignment for the internal assessment of learners in DDE-MKU			

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Though both the materials could not completely adhere to the principles of block structure and design principles that would promote distance learning and reduce hindrances in learner, IGNOU materials were found to be comparatively well structured and designed on valid distance learning principles. Being systematically started as a correspondence education by Delhi University in 1962 and an alternative to conventional education, distance education reached its glorious period when Dr. BR Ambedkhar Open University was started as the first single mode Open University in 1982 and ultimately, the DEIs catering to the needs of higher education learners rose to 25% in our country. But alongside of enrolment, the dropout rate in distance education was also substantially higher as indicated in several studies. For Balasubramaniam (1976), 57% learners became dropouts in DE at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad and in another study conducted by Koul (1982) reveals 63% dropout of distance learners. One of the reasons for the dropout found in Koul (1982) and Sahoo (1985) was difficulties faced in responding to the study materials. Fozdar et al. (2006) 58.82 % learners found insufficient academic support from study centres and 47.06% expressed insufficient

counselling sessions. This would imply us to provide the self-contained learning materials without any external support and that was considerably done by IGNOU.

Though, this investigation was delimited to certain aspects of the structure and design, the materials developed without keeping in mind the principles of course material designing and development impinges the purpose of distance education. Study material quality and the achievement of students were found positively correlated in Gomathi (1982).

As an apex body of Open and Distance Learning system, the Distance Education Council (DEC) that was created under Indira Gandhi National Open University Act (1985) for the promotion and coordination of the open university and distance education system and determination of its standards in India and being stationed at the premises of IGNOU, the SLMs developed by IGNOU might have been of superior in quality. But, since it is the body of for affiliation, promotion, coordination, training, development, monitoring, controlling, evaluation, etc., of only IGNOU but the entire the distance education system of country, the effectiveness of its functioning with respect to other distance education institutions is doubtful as on the face of the materials there are lapses in quality.

Though, DEC (presently DEB) had conducted training programmes for designing and development of learning material that was very meagre and does not suffice the need. The DEB need to revamp their system, man them with additional manpower and adequate number of regional centres to affiliate, observe, monitor, regulate and control the distance education institutions for the better quality of distance education in our country.

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