

# Open and distance learning in social work programme: a study of MSW learners of India

Open and  
distance  
learning of  
MSW learners

Saumya and Tushar Singh

*School of Social Work, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India*

371

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper reports the feedback collected from students of the Master of Social Work (MSW) Programme of the School of Social Work (SOSW), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), through open and distance learning (ODL), in India. The paper discusses findings related to learner profile, student support services, assignments, academic counselling, fieldwork, audio/video/teleconferencing facilities, Internet access and challenges faced by the learners. The findings will be useful for researchers and practitioners, will help in improving the overall quality of the programme, in designing the delivery mechanism as per the needs of MSW learners and in preparing them to be trained professionals to work in social development sector in India.

**Design/methodology/approach** – For data collection, a questionnaire was prepared and sent to all the students of the MSW programme along with assignment, across India. Responses from 290 students were voluntarily received.

**Findings** – The research findings are that MSW (ODL) students are older, mostly married with the average male learners age being 35 years and that of female learners being 30 years, there are more female learners than male learners, majority of the learners are Hindu from general category, tend to be employed, mostly full-time and some part-time, with work experience. They are from urban, semi-urban, rural and tribal areas with Internet access. Most of the students preferred to read printed self-learning materials than digitally available on eGyanKosh or IGNOU mobile app especially in rural areas though with increasing access to Internet, students are gradually opting for online materials while filling up the admission form. Majority of students found the quality and standard of study materials to be very good. Though maximum respondents gave positive feedback about the student support services and their learning experiences, some of the learners faced challenges like unco-operative staff members, administrative delays, non-allotment of academic counsellor/fieldwork supervisor, irregularity, late reception of study materials, lack of staff members at study centre, far distance of regional centre/study centre from residence, etc.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings will help in designing and delivering the MSW programme in a more effective way. Based on the feedback received, the next revision of the programme will take into consideration the concerns of the learner. The limitation of the study is that not all learners responded to all the questions. Not all potential MSW learners filled the questionnaire and submitted it at the school. And those who responded had left some questions unanswered. Those who did not submit response may differ in their responses from what is received.

**Originality/value** – It is an original work and will be valuable in understanding the distance learner of MSW programme in India, programme delivery and challenges.

**Keywords** MSW, Social work, Fieldwork, Open and distance learning (ODL), IGNOU

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Open and distance learning (ODL) is an amalgamation of the concepts of “open learning” and “distance learning” that are instituted in the philosophy of a system of democratic education.



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Both the terms are often conflated with distance learning/education. However, open learning is not the same as distance learning. Open education as a term has a wide variety of meanings. The “openness” of education, here, refers to democracy in its orientation where it opens up classrooms and access to educational facilities. It also increases learners’ access to learning opportunities, enhances curriculum content in quality and quantity, its technique of consumption, and thereby effectively develops skilled, autonomous learners as a result (Caliskan, 2012). Distance learning/education, on the other hand, can be said to be a subcategory of open learning. It can be described as an institution-based, self-paced instruction, taking place via the use of audio/video, print or online media or any combination of the same. The important point to note is that in distance learning/education, the educator(s) and the learner(s) are usually separated by geographic location, and occasionally by time too.

Though distance education was dispelled earlier owing to the rigidity of the conventional methods of instruction, it has now become an important asset of education delivery and has greatly expanded the traditional student-base. Every so often, distance learning takes precedence over traditional, face-to-face education where matters like student, agency and flexibility; unfeasible distance and finances; teaching of the disenfranchised and those with special needs are concerned (Blakely, 1992; Dumont, 1992; Gunawardena and McIsaac, 2004). Thus, ODL enables the removal of barriers and participation of all. It can be said that distance education has carved a new niche for itself and that it no longer stands in the shadow of traditional, face-to-face education.

Distance education, which has its roots in correspondence learning, has been in existence since the 1800s. It has expanded its base, with nothing but print-based materials in the past now allowing for non-traditional and information and communication technology (ICT)-based media. Novel and innovative concepts such as e-learning, hybrid learning and blended learning are encouraging the development of new courses and programmes that adhere to the requirements of these models. It signals a further proliferation of open and distance education (ODE) through (as yet) unexplored platforms and in ways that focus more on continuous education and lifelong learning.

In India, as in other countries, ODL is a way to provide access, equity and reach to a larger population especially those marginalized and disadvantaged. Distance learning is only expected to continue to grow in areas like sub-Saharan Africa and India (Trines, 2018). Between 1991 and 2011, the population in the age group 15–59 years increased from 57.7 to 62.5% (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2011). With this demographic dividend, the demand for higher education is increasing. Also, the lack of availability of an adequate number of conventional, face-to-face universities offering higher education reinforces the demand for ODL platforms. ODL is playing an important role in India in achieving the objective of higher education, increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), democratization of education and making people employable.

Around the 1950s, the government realised the increasing need for higher education as elementary and secondary education base was expanding. Due to lack of infrastructure and financial constraints to meet the needs of conventional universities, policymakers came up with the idea of distance education to expand the base of higher education. The University Grants Commission (UGC), a statutory body established to regulate higher education, in its report for the period 1956–1960, proposed evening colleges, correspondence courses and award of external degrees (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2013). Gradually, the country saw the growth in distance education universities and students enrolling for distance education programmes. There are single-mode open universities and dual-mode universities offering programmes through the distance mode.

The University of Delhi, through its School of Correspondence Courses (now known as School of Open Learning), in the year 1962, was the first university to offer education through correspondence. From then on, there has been an extensive expansion in the number of ODL

institutions in the country. Presently, around 250 ODL institutions impart higher education, which includes central universities, state universities, “deemed” universities and private universities that have been approved by the UGC along with many stand-alone institutions. Dr BR Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad was the first State Open University to be established in the year 1982, followed by the establishment of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at national level, in 1985. Subsequently, many other states established their open universities to offer programmes from certificate level to the doctoral degree through distance mode. Presently, there are 15 open universities which have a wide network of study centres and academic counsellors to support the teaching–learning process (Panda and Garg, 2019).

Open universities offer academic programmes through the ODL mode. They have been established by Acts of the Parliament (Central or State Legislature). The government of India’s target is to achieve 30% GER by the end of 2021. The GER in higher education was 23.6% in 2014–2015 and 25.2% in 2017–2018 (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2019). ODL institutions in the country led by IGNOU have an important contribution to improving the GER in the country. The All India Survey on Higher Education Report for 2018–2019 cited 3,972,068 individuals enrolled in various ODL courses in universities and institutes across the country, constituting 10.62% of the total number of enrolments in higher education in India. Out of these, 1,752,504 or 44.12% students are female. The ODL enrolments are mainly in IGNOU, the only national open university and the 14 state open universities. These initiatives have to be increased. The programmes and courses presently offered by distance education universities in India range from awareness and appreciation programmes to research degrees, and from informal to vocational and professional degrees. Distance education universities have made a significant contribution to the areas of higher education, community education, extension activities and continual professional development in the last three decades. It is not surprising that ODL platforms are witness to a year-on-year surge in the absolute number of enrolments, with more growth in developing countries.

## Review of literature

Research on the effectiveness of social work through distance education has been conducted globally since few decades; though, when compared to other disciplines, it falls well below of providing any conclusive evidence that supports (Shorkey and Uebel, 2014; Stocks and Freddolino, 2000) or rejects (Thyer *et al.*, 1998) the adoption of distance learning in social work. Review of literature of studies in other countries points to numerous studies that have been undertaken to measure the effectiveness of distance learning in social work education.

Petracchi (2000), in her study to comprehend the remote learning experiences of 142 students from the Schools of Social Work at the Universities of Pittsburgh and Wisconsin–Madison, found 110 students pleased with their learning experiences (on interactive television and videotapes, respectively) and indicating their willingness to enrol in distance learning courses again. The various reasons cited by the students ranged from re-watching recorded sessions to watching them when the schedules allowed and when feeling “motivated enough” to learn. In a similar vein, Pardasani *et al.* (2012), interviewed students of two blended learning-based distance education courses to gain an understanding of their educational experience and cited *autonomy* (in course selection, mode of teaching, and the skills and proficiency of the teacher undertaking the course) as one of the vital reasons that affected appreciably the students’ experience in the two distance education courses. The other factors that came out as a result of the study were “emotional connectedness; technological challenges; and knowledge acquisition” (p. 413). And though the students mentioned blended learning-based distance education courses were not their first choice, they were, nonetheless, pleased and reported that their learning needs had been fulfilled.

Online social work students when compared with students from traditional universities have statistically similar outcomes and it was revealed that technological innovations provides new opportunities to the discipline with proper utilization. This can also work to augment traditional, face-to-face delivery and practice of the discipline with passing time (Hamilton *et al.*, 2017). Cummings *et al.* (2015), in their study of 345 students of the University of Tennessee College of Social Work, compared skills, knowledge and satisfaction levels of the students of classroom-based and online courses, who were further divided into full-time, part-time and advanced standing. While there were no notable differences, online part-time students rated higher in competencies, online students with advanced standing were more satisfied, while traditional classroom students with advanced standing had only minimally higher grades. However, this study did allay the fear, to a certain extent, that online method of education in social work could be fruitful in skill development.

A survey conducted by Okech *et al.* (2014) at a university in Southeastern USA comparing the traditional and online experiences of 66 students engaged in a single social work course (on community practice) revealed no considerable difference whatever be the method of teaching (online or face-to-face). Online instruction proved to be a “significant factor to their learning” which the students were quite certain to “recommend . . . to other peers in the program” (p. 129). This was also directly affected by the teachers’ proficiency, their study environment and their availability for contact. Online teaching does add a factor of comfort to educational experience, provided that students’ as well as teachers’ anxieties are addressed. Vinton and Abell (2010) are of the view that students who attend classes in their domestic context and community are more likely to contribute to their communities. They also say that instructions focussed on the want, likes and dislikes of learners, what was proposed by Jean Piaget, can be achieved by distance learning and also falls within the ambit of the social work value of respect for a person’s individuality.

The findings of a national survey of universities and institutes offering undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes in the United States revealed growing use of distance learning, though there was a need for faculty training to let teachers adapt to the visual mode of instructions, and of adaptation of technological innovations in designing and deliverance of instructional material for programmes (Siegel *et al.*, 1998). Another study, using a systems theory approach to distance education in social work, focussed on four aspects – input factors, throughput factors, output factors and feedback – to be incorporated when making any alteration, from generation to functioning to getting responses, to the programme and its structure (Potts and Hagan, 2000).

Evaluation of undergraduate social work course offered through distance learning in four rural areas revealed that there are few differences in satisfaction and student outcomes between the on-campus and distance learners (Haga and Heitkamp, 2000). The study, conducted to compare three modes of delivery of social work programmes (traditional, Internet and hybrid), revealed that there were no differences in knowledge gain, course content, self-efficacy gain or student satisfaction; and thus suggesting that outcomes of online instruction and traditional instruction were comparable (York, 2008). No significant differences were found in the students’ overall perceptions in a study of a comparison of perceptions of MSW students of both classroom and distance learning sites (Freddolino and Sutherland, 2000).

In the present times, e-learning and blended learning have been gaining popularity all over the world. Studies have addressed questions concerning the efficiency and efficacy of e-learning which have been discussed and addressed, with the result that it is comparable, if not better, to the traditional methods of instruction. However, it must be remembered that e-learning was never meant to be a replacement or solution of classroom learning but has been meant to supplement it, to increase admission, opportunity and flexibility (Phelan, 2015). Comparing the conventional and distance education-based methods of instruction that

fundamentally deliver content online has also been called erroneous by [Kurzman \(2019\)](#), who identifies both as a “means” to the same end: a professional social work degree. He further acknowledges that both distance education and online learning in social work are “not temporary, passing, or ephemeral phenomena that [would] dissipate and decline” (p. 290) but would evolve in the future, with increasing flexibility and enrolments.

In India, however, distance education in social work is only a decade old and therefore, only few research has been done. There is no research done to ascertain whether the learning outcomes of students from conventional universities are any different from those of distance learners. The MSW Programme at IGNOU started in 2008 and was developed in response to requests from social service agencies across the country with the desire to reach the unreached towards an accessible and affordable graduate and postgraduate education ([Saumya, 2013](#)). School of Social Work (SOSW) at IGNOU is the first and the largest provider of Social Work education in the country with more than 30,000 students pursuing its programmes ([Thomas, 2013](#); [Saumya, 2013](#)). IGNOU has been effective in qualitatively training the students to work as social work practitioners at the grassroots levels ([Saumya, 2016, 2018](#)). The IGNOU model is one of the successful models of offering social work education through distance mode ([Dash and Botcha, 2018](#); [Thomas, 2015](#); [Saumya, 2018](#)).

[Dash \(2018\)](#), in his study of 150 ODL students in Delhi, pointed out the lack of competency in fieldwork in students pursuing the social work programme through distance learning. [Guin \(2019\)](#) highlighted some of the challenges of offering fieldwork through the ODL method, like the irregular student-supervisor meetings, the inability of students to meet supervisor due to remote location, poor economic background, lack of leave for employed learners, etc. [Dash \(2019\)](#) pointed out that though the students were satisfied with the support and guidance provided by the academic counsellors, they hardly attended academic counselling sessions, were unaware of the ODL system and faced problems related to fieldwork supervision.

Another study pointed out that though IGNOU had been successful in imparting inclusive education to all sections of the population and that participation of rural women was particularly encouraging in all the programmes, the dropout rate of these groups was rather high and the success rate comparatively low ([Chaudhury et al., 2016](#)). [Paliwal \(2019\)](#) noted that though the ODL mode had been successful in reaching far corners of the country by making education accessible in the remote locations, there was still a need for creating awareness, vis-à-vis the education of girl child. Also there is a need to review the fee structure of the ODL programme in order to make it accessible to people especially from low-income groups. ODL makes education accessible, and provides scope for skill-based, need-based education at a minimum cost transforming and empowering the adult population of India into productive human resources ([Bordoloi, 2018](#)).

## Methodology

The article is based on the feedback received from MSW learners of the SOSW at IGNOU. For data collection, a questionnaire was prepared and sent along with assignments to all learners of MSW throughout India. It was also uploaded along with assignments on the university website. The questionnaire consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions relating to their profiles, student support services, assignments, academic counselling, fieldwork, audio/video/teleconferencing facilities and challenges faced by them while pursuing the MSW programme.

Students were asked to fill the questionnaire before proceeding to write the assignments and post it to the Programme Coordinator of School Work at IGNOU, New Delhi. Responses were received from 290 MSW learners. The findings are exclusively based on the experiences of learners while pursuing the MSW programme through ODL mode from IGNOU.

## Findings

### *Part A. Profile of learners of MSW*

*Sex.* Of the 290 feedbacks received from MSW students, 176 were female while 114 were male students.

*Age.* The age of the respondents ranged between 20 and 70 years with maximum learners belonging to the age group of 24–40 years (57%); 43% of the learners belonged to the age group of 40–70 years. The average male learner was 35 years of age while the average age of female learners was 30 years.

*Religion.* Amongst the MSW learners, 0.68% belonged to Sikhism, 1.72% were Buddhists, 6.55% were Muslims, 21.72% were Christians and 69.31% were Hindus.

*Category.* As a part of reservation policy, the population of India is divided into four categories based on caste, social backwardness and educational backwardness – General (upper castes), Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs). In the research, more than half the learners were from the general category (53%). Learners belonging to the OBC category were 26% and learners from the SC and ST categories were 10 and 9%, respectively; 2% of the learners chose not to reveal their category.

*State/Union Territory.* MSW learners from 27 States and Union Territories (UT) took part in the survey. 252 respondents provided the name of the state/UT where they reside while 38 respondents did not answer this question (see [Figure 1](#)).

*Category of residence/geographical location.* MSW learners studying at IGNOU reside in urban, semi-urban, rural and tribal areas. 285 respondents provided answers, out of which 48.27% respondents said they lived in urban areas, 34.13% lived in rural areas, 13.79% lived in semi-urban areas and 2.06% said they lived in tribal areas; five respondents did not provide any answer (see [Figure 2](#)).

*Marital status.* Of the 288 answers received, 47.24% said they were married, 49.31% were unmarried, 0.34% said they were separated. 1.37% respondents said they were widowed, 0.34% were widower and 0.68% were divorcees; two respondents did not provide any answer.

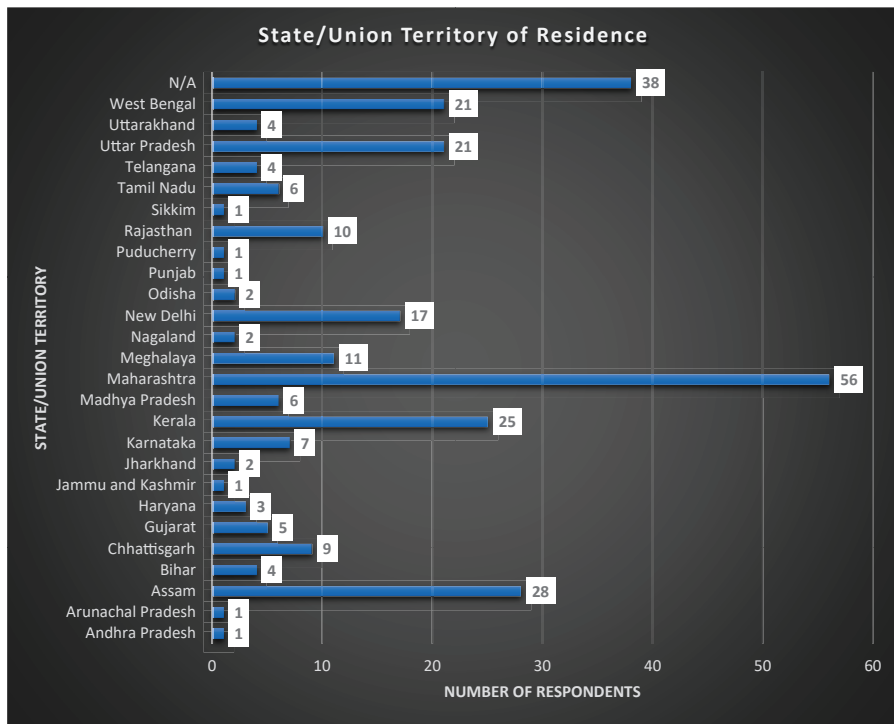
*Employment status.* 284 learners responded to this question while six did not provide any answer; 43.79% respondents were employed full-time while 14.82% respondents were part-time employees; 38.62% respondents were unemployed and 0.68% respondents were retired from active employment (see [Figure 3](#)).

*Internet access.* When the learners were asked if they had access to the Internet, the majority of respondents (268) claimed to have it, but some respondents (20) claimed they did not have any Internet access; two respondents did not provide any answer. With maximum learners having access to smartphones and affordable data-plans, access to the Internet has become easier than ever before and IGNOU's efforts towards digital innovations will help in making the student support services more effective and easily accessible (see [Figure 4](#)).

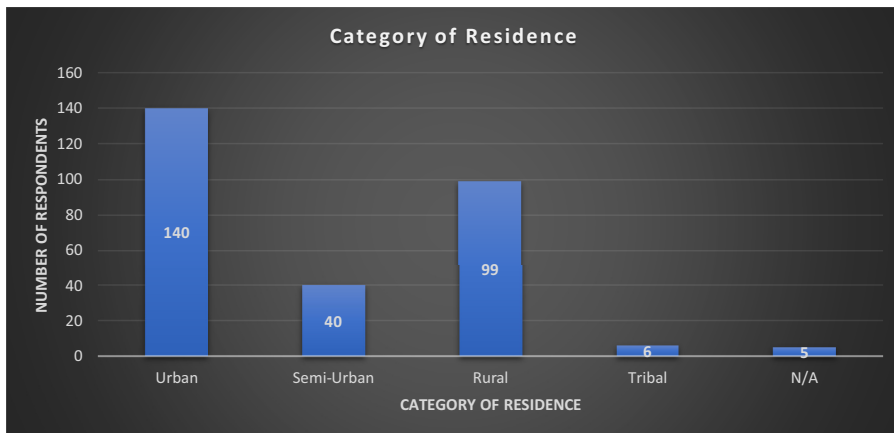
### *Part B. Student support services*

*Reception of SLMs.* The university sends self-learning materials (SLMs) and assignments to the MSW students by registered post. This question was responded by 285 respondents, a vast majority of which, 77.58%, received the study material at their residence by the postal service while 7.93% obtained their study material by visiting respective study centres. There were two respondents who received incomplete study materials. Rest of the respondents, either opted for online resources (eGyankosh – the digital repository), collected the study material by visiting the headquarters, the respective regional centres, or did not receive it till the time of data collection (see [Figure 5](#)).

*Medium of study.* The MSW programme at IGNOU is offered both in the English and Hindi (National language) medium. Most respondents (93%) received their SLMs in the medium



**Figure 1.**  
State/UT of residence  
of MSW students



**Figure 2.**  
Geographical location  
of MSW students

they had opted for. However, 18 respondents (6%) received SLMs in a different medium than they had opted for; three respondents (1%) received only a part of their SLM in the medium opted.

*Time of reception of SLM.* Of all the respondents, 276 answered this question and the responses ranged from “within one month after the session started” to “not yet received.”

Figure 3.  
Employment status

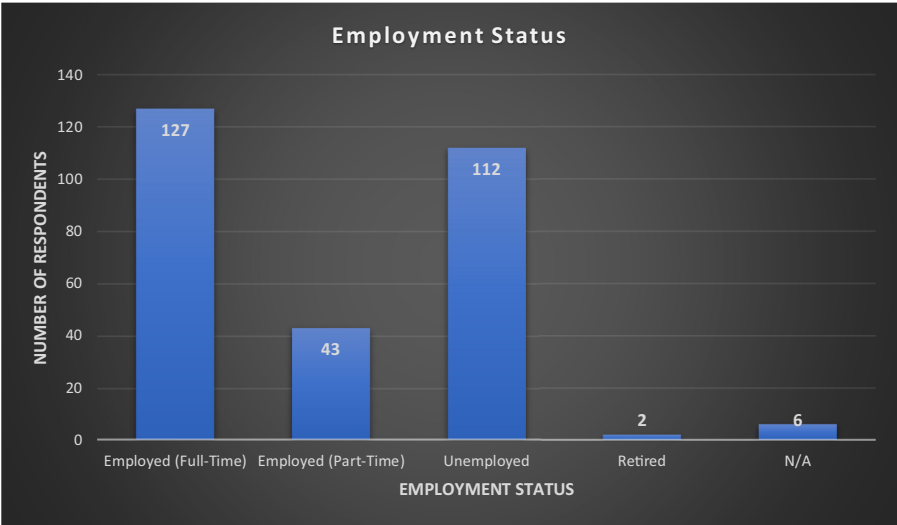
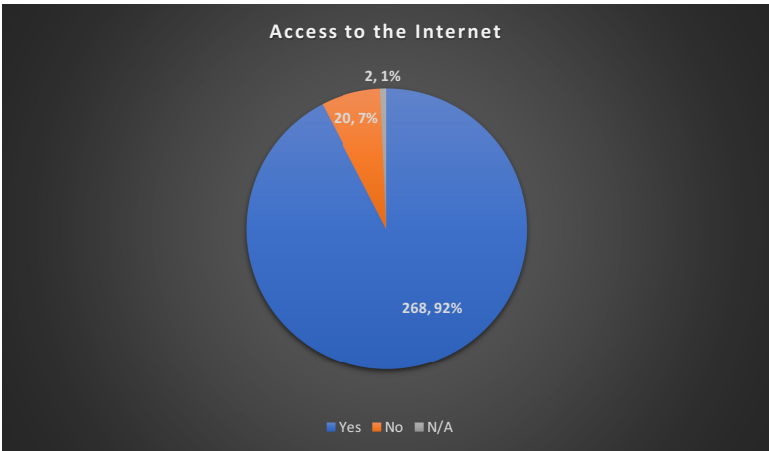


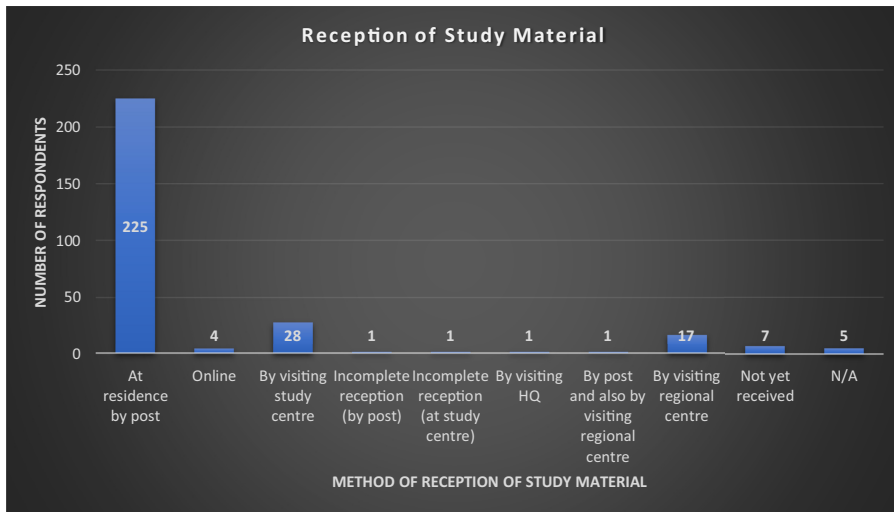
Figure 4.  
Access to the Internet



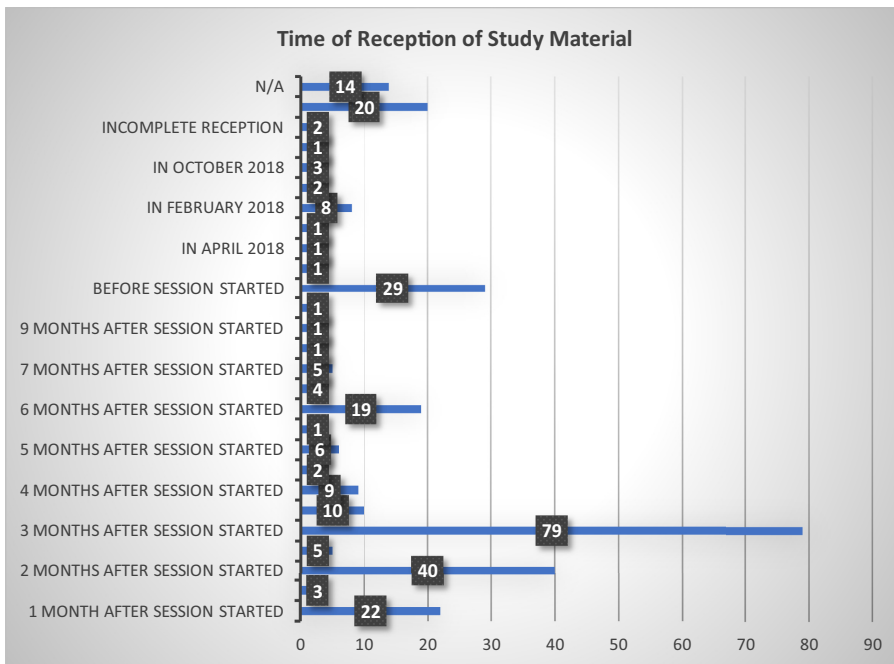
58% learners had received the SLM within three months after the session had begun. The details are provided in the figure below: (see [Figure 6](#)).

*Reception and reading of programme guide.* Programme guide is an important document and a student is expected to read it first before starting to read SLMs. It contains all the information related to the programme and the university. Students, on reading it, get to know the salient features of MSW programme, programme structure, scheme of study, fee structure, schedule of payment, medium of instruction, instructional system, evaluation, other useful information, some useful addresses, some forms for their use, etc.

While 39% of learners received and read the programme guide, 36% learners did not read the programme guide despite having received it. This has an implication on students' understanding of the ODL system, the available facilities and awareness about the delivery of



**Figure 5.**  
Reception of SLMs



**Figure 6.**  
Time of reception  
of SLMs

the programme. Rest of the learners either did not receive it or had misplaced it; 11 respondents did not answer this question.

*IGNOU website: awareness and browsing frequency.* On being asked whether the learners had seen the IGNOU website and how often did they browse it, majority of the learners responded that they were aware of the IGNOU website and browsed it (97%). Only 3%

learners were unaware of the website. Out of the 97%, 41% browsed the IGNOU website once a week, while 44% visited it once a month (see Figure 7).

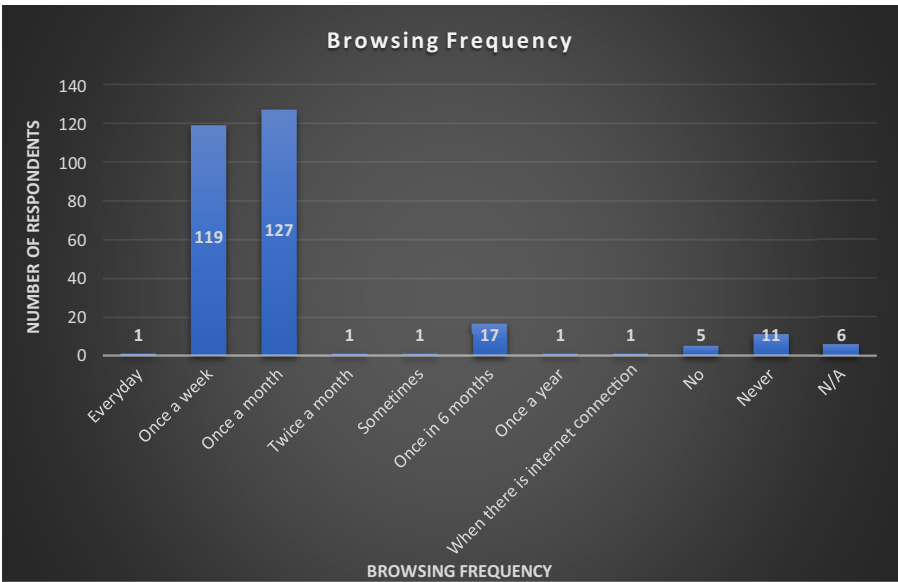
*Distance of the study centre from the place of residence.* India is a geographically vast country with difficult terrains and inaccessible areas in some parts of country. Quite often, a student has to travel long distances in order to reach the study centre especially in Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Northeastern states of India. Study centres spread across the country provide effective student support services like counselling, allotment of fieldwork supervisors (FWSs), evaluation of assignments, library facilities, information and counselling, audio–video and peer interaction facilities.

Students were asked about how far is their study centre from their place of residence, to which their answers ranged from 0.5 to 600 km, the details of which are provided in the figure below: (see Figure 8).

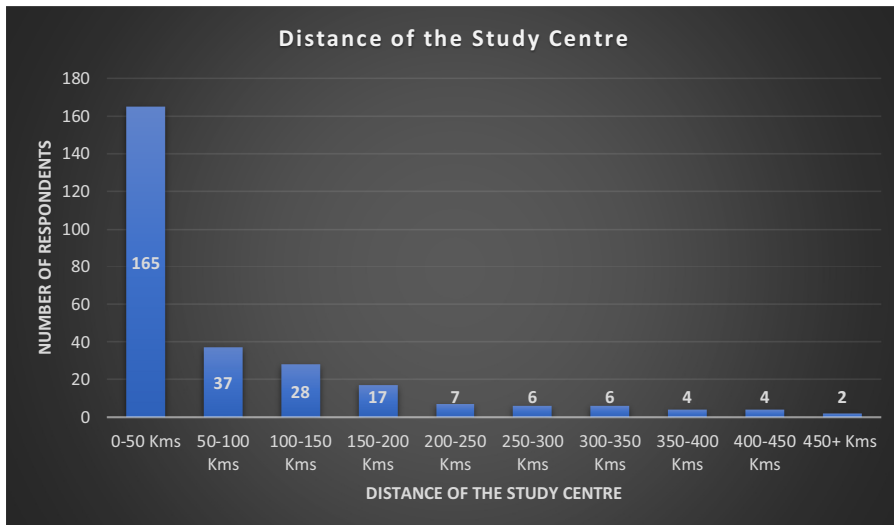
Almost 57% learners resided within a range of 50 km from the study centres, which enabled them to visit study centres regularly for their academic counselling sessions and fieldwork supervision.

*Visits to the study centre.* A student can choose a study centre, which is usually a government institution, nearer to his/her place of residence or work. Every study centre has a co-ordinator to co-ordinate different administrative and academic activities at the centre. On being asked how often did they visit their respective study centre, 25% respondents pointed out that they did so every month, followed by 23% respondents who visited the study centres once in 15 days 22% of them visited once in two months. The details of the respondents' visits to their respective study centres are as follows: (see Figure 9).

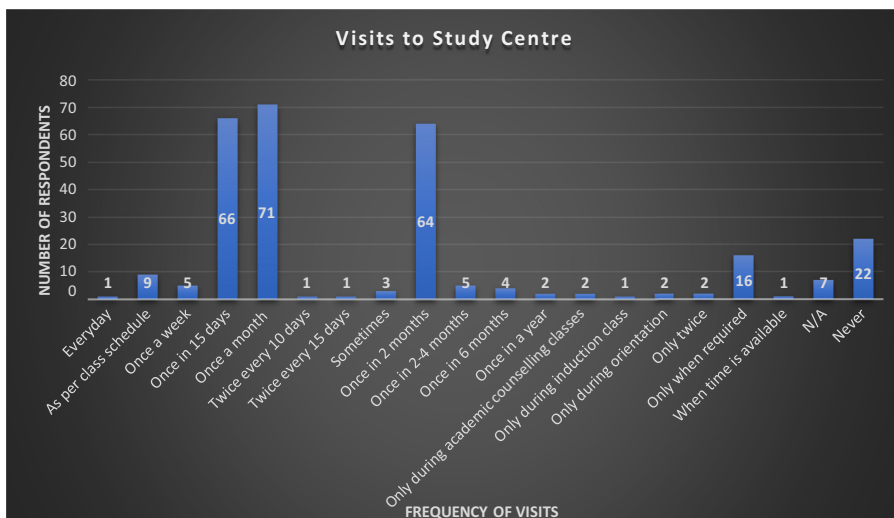
*Awareness about facilities at the study centre.* Students were asked if they were aware of the facilities available at the study centres, like audio and video programmes of the courses, library facility, academic counselling sessions (face-to-face sessions), FWS and acknowledgement receipt for submissions of assignments and fieldwork journals. Of all the respondents, 61% were not aware of audio programmes; the rest 39% were aware and



**Figure 7.**  
IGNOU website  
awareness and  
browsing



**Figure 8.**  
Distance of the study  
centre from the place of  
residence



**Figure 9.**  
Visits to the study  
centre

had used the facility too. 36% of the respondents were aware of the video programmes. However, the rest 64% were neither aware nor had they seen any video programmes till the time of the study. While 47% of the learners were unaware about the library facilities available at the study centre, 53% learners did know about it and made use of it for references in addition to the available study material.

Of all the learners, 64% were aware of academic counselling sessions and attended them while 36% of learners were unaware and had not attended any session. 67% of learners were aware of allotment of a FWS for guidance in completing various components of fieldwork; 33% were not aware of it and had not contacted the study centre for allotment of a FWS;

68% of the respondents were aware of the acknowledgement receipt to be taken after submission of assignments and fieldwork journals while 32% were not.

*Guidebooks by private authors.* The SLMs provided for the programmes is written in such a manner that the students can study it by themselves and whatever doubts or explanations is required can be discussed with academic counsellors at the study centres. In addition to SLMs, text books and reference books are available in the libraries attached to the study centres and regional centres. Therefore, there is no need for the students to purchase any subsidised or condensed guides. In fact these may harm them. Hence, the university strongly advises the students not to take recourse to such type of guides.

In response to the question whether learners bought guidebooks prepared and sold by private authors (that is, non-IGNOU study material), 86% respondents answered that they did not need or buy any such books and instead read the self-learning materials provided by the university and referred to other books mentioned in the reference list. However, 8% of learners did buy books from various bookshops and 6% of respondents chose not to answer the question.

### *Part C. Assignments*

For the MSW programme, students are expected to do one each Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) for all the theory papers. The TMAs are then submitted to the Coordinator of the Study Centre allotted, latest by March 31 each year, for those admitted to the July session, and September 30 each year, for those admitted to the January session. The assignments are open book examinations and are assigned 30% weightage while calculating the overall grade for each course of the programme. Students are encouraged to discuss the same with their peer-group and academic counsellors before writing the assignments.

*Receipt of assignments.* In case a student wants to have assignments, he/she can obtain a copy of the same from the study centre or regional centre or may download it from the IGNOU website – [www.ignou.ac.in](http://www.ignou.ac.in)

When the students were asked if they received assignments along with their study materials, they revealed that 47% of them received their assignments along with the study material while 48% did not; 1% of the learners downloaded it from the website; 13 respondents did not answer this question.

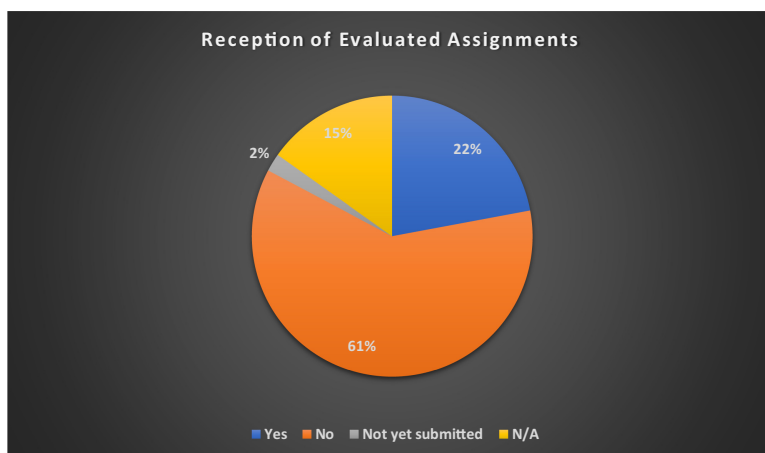
*Reception of evaluated assignments.* Out of a total of 246 answers where the respondents had provided an answer to this question, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (72%) answered they did not receive back their evaluated assignments. However, (26%) respondents did receive their assignments after they had been evaluated; six respondents (2%) did not submit their assignments for evaluation while 44 respondents did not provide any answer (see [Figure 10](#)).

*Acknowledgement receipt.* Acknowledgement receipts for assignments and/or fieldwork journals are important in tracing the documents especially when there is any loss or misplacement due to administrative lapses.

Out of the 242 responses received to this question, 189 respondents (78%) answered that they had received acknowledgement receipts from their respective study centre after submitting their assignments and/or fieldwork journals. However, 53 respondents (21.9%) did not receive any acknowledgement receipts while six respondents had not submitted their assignments until the time of data collection; 48 respondents did not provide any answers.

### *Part D. Academic counselling*

Academic counselling sessions or contact programmes at the study centres usually play an imperative role in providing academic inputs as well as motivating learners to continue with and complete their programmes of study in distance teaching all over the world. They also provide opportunities for interaction between the teacher and the learners as well as amongst peers.



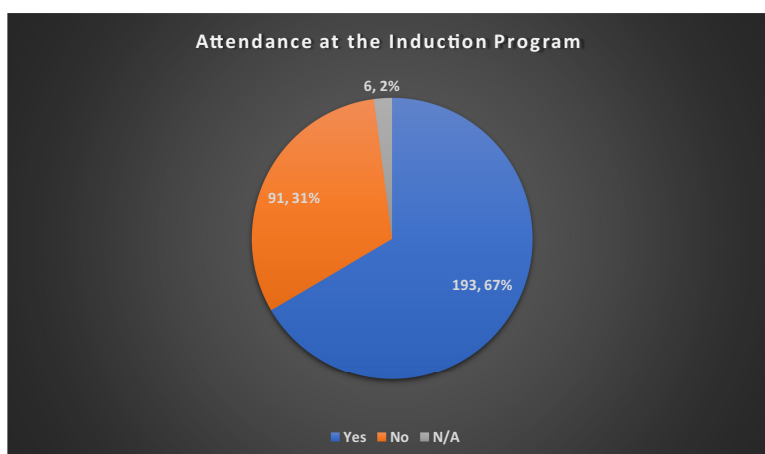
**Figure 10.**  
Reception of evaluated  
assignments

Besides offering academic benefits, the contact programmes establish a useful rapport between the distance teaching institutions and the distance students. This helps the students escape from or deal with their feelings of isolation which may otherwise prove detrimental to their studies.

*Attendance at the induction programme.* Students who attend the induction programme find it easier to complete the programme as they become well versed with the ODL system and the programme delivery mechanism. Also, induction programmes serve to build a foundation to create a rapport between the academic counsellors and the potential students.

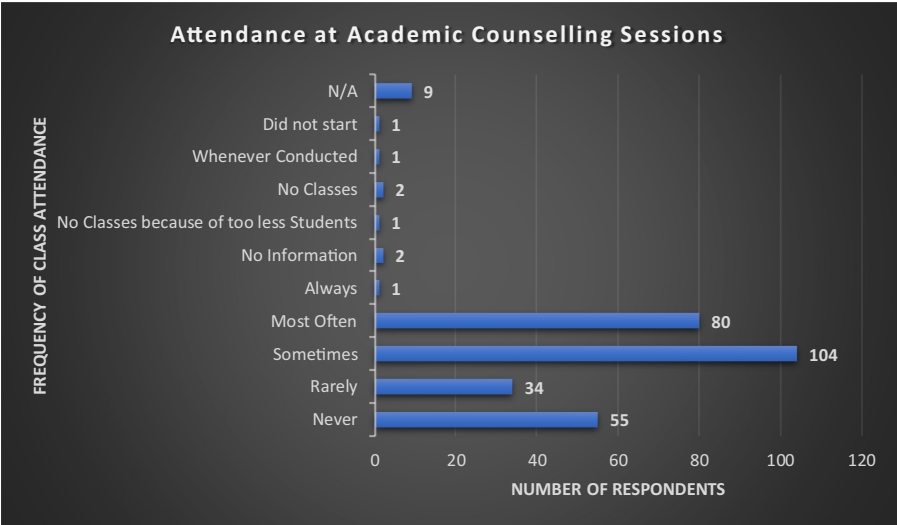
On being asked whether the learners attended the induction programmes held at their respective study centres, 284 respondents provided an answer to this question. 193 (67%) respondents acknowledged that they did attend the induction programme at their respective study centre, while 91 (31%) respondents did not (see Figure 11).

*Attendance at academic counselling sessions.* Academic counselling sessions at the study centre are not compulsory. Generally, there are 10 counselling sessions for an 8-credit course and five sessions for a 4-credit course. When the students were asked how often did they attend academic counselling sessions held at the study centres, a variety of answers were received, ranging from always to never, which are described in the figure below: (see Figure 12).



**Figure 11.**  
Attendance at the  
induction programme

**Figure 12.**  
Attendance at  
academic counselling  
sessions



*Teaching medium.* The MSW programme is offered both in the English and Hindi mediums. When the learners were asked if the sessions they attended were held in the same medium which they had opted for, 238 respondents (82%) answered that academic counselling sessions at their respective study centres were held in the language they had opted for, while 20 (7%) respondents said they were not. 32 (11%) respondents did not provide any answer.

*Part E. Fieldwork*

Social work is a practice-based profession. The curriculum of social work education includes theory courses and practical training. A student is expected to put in 1,200 h of fieldwork annually to successfully complete the MSW programme. Fieldwork is a closely guided and supervised experience of a professional social worker in the agency or a community setting. It is an integral part of the social work curriculum with the objective of developing amongst students, the ability to integrate theoretical learning with practical experiences to enable then to develop the core skills of social work practice and to facilitate the development of thinking, feeling, attitudes and ethics relevant to professional practice. Every learner of MSW programme is provided a FWS at the study centre who is MSW qualified – either a faculty member in some college/university or NGO personnel who supervises the students for completing various components in fieldwork journal (Saumya, 2016).

*Provision of fieldwork supervisor at the study centre.* Students were asked whether they were provided with a FWS at the study centre. Of the 268 answers received, 177 (61%) respondents replied that they had been provided with a FWS at their respective study centres, while 91 (31%) respondents said they had not been provided with a FWS. 22 respondents did not provide any answer to the question.

31% of the students who were not allotted a FWS either did fieldwork on their own (20%); someone in the agency helped them (8%), or had not started their fieldwork yet (3%).

*Frequency of individual conference (IC).* ICs help the learners to sort out their specific problems related to fieldwork as well as those related to studies. Before each IC, the supervisor has to go through the previous reports of conferences and field visits and write down his/her observations about each one of them for personal guidance to the students.

The major task is to understand the students in the local situation, help them to gain maximum benefits from the placement and to ensure that at least the minimum requirements mentioned in the fieldwork journal are fulfilled.

Students were asked how often did they meet their FWS for guidance. Of the 194 answers reported by the respondents, the frequency of individual conferences ranged from daily to never. All answers are detailed in the figure below: (see Figure 13).

*Academic counsellor's social work degree.* Each year, a learner is expected to successfully complete 16 credits of fieldwork under the guidance of a professionally qualified Social Work Supervisor. The Coordinator at the Study Centre has the list of approved (by IGNOU) Fieldwork Supervisors who have done MSW/MA (Social Work). An academic counsellor/FWS is usually a university teacher or social work practitioner. Each student is allotted a supervisor by the co-ordinator.

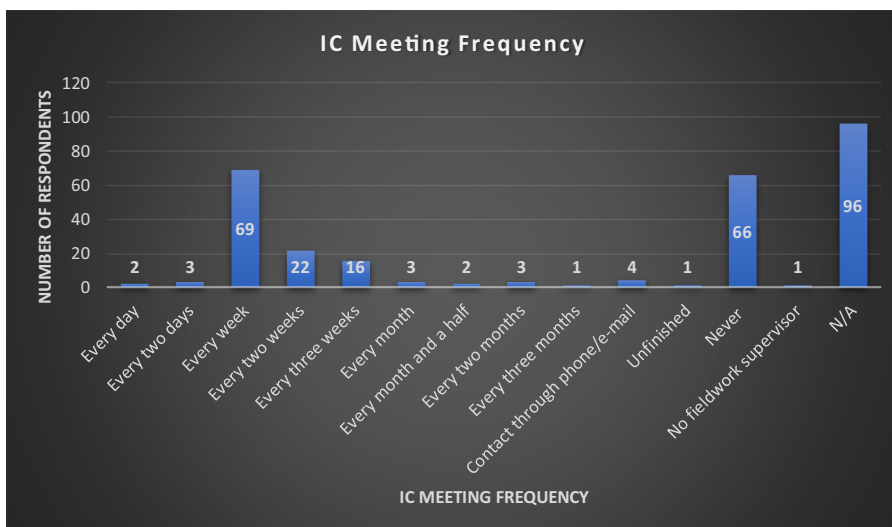
Learners were asked if they were aware of their academic counsellor's degree in social work. Out of the 273 answers received, 173 (60%) respondents answered that their academic counsellors had a degree in social work; 91 (31%) respondents did not know if their counsellors had a degree in social work; nine (3%) respondents also reported that their counsellors did not have a degree in social work; 17 (6%) respondents did not answer.

*Submission of fieldwork journals.* After completion of fieldwork, students submit their fieldwork journals to the supervisor for evaluation.

To know the ground reality, students were asked how did they submit their completed fieldwork journals. Out of 290 respondents, 214 provided an answer to this question. Out of those, 40% learners submitted their fieldwork journal to their supervisor, 51% submitted at the study centre to any administrative staff members, 8% submitted their journals at the headquarter directly, while 1% had not submitted their journals yet; 76 respondents did not answer the question.

#### Part F. Audio/video/ teleconferencing

In addition to the print materials, audio and videotapes are prepared for each course which act as supplementary methods to the printed materials. It is not compulsory for students to listen or attend these sessions as the examination is based on printed SLMs, students are located in



**Figure 13.**  
Frequency of  
individual  
conference (IC)

far-flung, remote areas and access, connectivity, distance to study centre, etc. act as impediments. The information about this is available at the regional centres, the study centres and IGNOU website. The schedule of transmission is communicated through the IGNOU Digi News (Digital News) newsletter and is also uploaded on the IGNOU website. Audio programmes are also broadcast through radio channels in some states where a particular FM station (Gyan Vani or the All India Radio (AIR)) is activated.

*Listening to audio/video programmes at the study centre.* Students when asked if they had ever listened to the audio programmes at their study centres. Out of the 283 answers provided, 265 (91.37%) learners did not listen to audio programmes at the study centre.

Of the 283 answers provided by the respondents regarding the university's educational video programmes, 260 (89.65%) students had not seen video programmes at the study centre till the time this study was conducted.

*Listening to interactive radio counselling (IRC) through the radio (Gyan Vani/AIR).* Interactive radio counselling (IRC) is broadcast through AIR network. Student can participate in it by tuning in to their area's radio station. There are both internal and external experts who are involved in taking sessions which is scheduled discipline-wise. The listeners (usually students) can ask questions in the live sessions by dialling the telephone number provided at the beginning of the session. They can also post questions online which are taken up by experts during the session. This counselling is available every alternate Friday between 11 a.m. and 12 p.m. for the social work programmes.

281 respondents provided answers to this question, out of which only 42 learners listened to the IRC sessions while 239 did not; nine did not respond. The details are as follows: (see Table 1).

Lack of information, unawareness, suitability of time, forgot on that particular day, busy schedule, family responsibilities, other pressing priorities, far-flung remote location, connectivity issues to that particular radio frequency, etc. are the reasons given by students for not being able to listen to IRC sessions.

*Attendance at teleconferencing sessions.* India is a geographically vast country. Teleconferencing is used to reach students in different parts of the country. These sessions are conducted from the Electronic Media Production Centre, IGNOU, New Delhi. The students

| Answer | Frequency       | Number of respondents | Percentage |
|--------|-----------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Yes    | –               | 07                    | 2.41       |
|        | Multiple times  | 02                    | 0.68       |
|        | Occasionally    | 07                    | 2.41       |
|        | 2 (twice)       | 05                    | 1.72       |
|        | 3 (thrice)      | 03                    | 1.03       |
|        | 4 (four times)  | 01                    | 0.34       |
|        | 5 (five times)  | 02                    | 0.68       |
|        | 6 (six times)   | 02                    | 0.68       |
|        | 7 (seven times) | 01                    | 0.34       |
|        | 7–8 times       | 01                    | 0.34       |
|        | 10–12 times     | 01                    | 0.34       |
|        | 27 times        | 01                    | 0.34       |
|        | Weekly          | 04                    | 1.37       |
|        | Twice a week    | 01                    | 0.34       |
|        | Twice a month   | 01                    | 0.34       |
|        | Monthly         | 03                    | 1.03       |
| No     |                 | 239                   | 82.41      |
|        | N/A             | 09                    | 3.10       |
|        | Total           | 290                   | 100        |

**Table 1.**  
Listening to the IRC  
through the radio  
(Gyan Vani)

are invited on a scheduled day and time by regional centres or study centres (where such facility is available) of IGNOU. The session facilitates a one-way video and two-way audio facility. The facility is located at the university headquarters in New Delhi where other discipline experts, resource persons, administrative staff members, etc. conduct these sessions.

280 respondents answered this question, out of that only six learners attended teleconferencing sessions while 274 did not; 10 respondents did not answer the question. The distance of study centre from residence, lack of awareness about the schedule of programmes, other pre-occupations and responsibilities, etc. are reasons cited by students for not being able to attend these sessions.

*Watching IGNOU programmes on Doordarshan (TV).* IGNOU in collaboration with Doordarshan has an exclusive Educational TV Channel of India called Gyan Darshan for telecasting educational programmes throughout the day. Apart from the programmes of IGNOU, it has educational programmes produced by various national education institutions.

283 (out of 290) respondents answered this question, out of which 17 respondents regularly watched it either on TV or mobile, 45 watched it occasionally while 221 did not watch at all. The reasons cited are usually lack of time, unawareness about the time slot, connectivity issues, other responsibilities of work, family and household, or non-availability of adequate infrastructure.

*Access to e-GyanKosh material.* e-GyanKosh is a national digital repository where digital self-learning materials developed by IGNOU are available for learners. Of all the respondents, 20% accessed e-GyanKosh frequently, 27% accessed it sometimes and 53% did not access it, which essentially meant they studied only from the printed self-learning materials.

#### *Part G. Miscellaneous*

*Online admission.* When asked how did the respondents go through the online admission process, 73% respondents answered that they did it themselves while 27% respondents answered they took the help of a cyber-café as they did not have adequate infrastructural facility at home to take online admission.

*Opinion regarding self-learning materials (SLMs).* The university sends SLMs to the learners by registered post and it is also available online on e-GyanKosh (the university's educational repository) as well as on the IGNOU mobile app. 272 respondents answered this question, 63% of which found the quality and standard of SLMs to be very good while 29% said there was scope for improvements.

*Difficulties faced while pursuing the MSW programme.* The difficulties faced by learners were unco-operative staff members (7%), administrative delays (30%), non-allotment of academic counsellor/FWS (11%), irregularity (2%), late reception of study materials (20%), lack of staff members at study centre (5%), distant of regional centre/study centre from residence (8%); 17% respondents did not face any problem while pursuing the programme.

#### *Key findings and discussion*

The summary of research findings are presented below:

- (1) *Profile of learners of MSW:* MSW (ODL) students are older, mostly married with the average male learners age being 35 years and that of female learners being 30 years. There are more female learners than male learners pursuing MSW programme. Majority of the learners are Hindu from general category, tend to be employed, mostly full-time and some part-time, with work experience. They are from urban, semi-urban, rural and tribal areas with Internet access (mostly in urban areas, still limited in rural and tribal areas) and are located in all the 28 States and eight UT of India.
- (2) *Student Support Services:* Most of the students preferred to read printed SLMs than digitally available on eGyanKosh or IGNOU mobile app especially in rural areas

though with increasing access to Internet, students are gradually opting for online materials while filling up the online admission form. Majority of students found the quality and standard of SLMs to be very good. Though maximum respondents gave positive feedback about the student support services and their learning experiences, some of the learners faced challenges like unco-operative staff members, administrative delays, non-allotment of academic counsellor/FWS, irregularity, late reception of study materials, lack of staff members at study centre, far distance of regional centre/study centre from residence etc.

- (3) *Assignments:* The learners received assignments along with their study materials, at study centre or downloaded it from the website. Most of them did not receive back their evaluated assignments though they had received acknowledgement receipts from their respective study centre after submitting their assignments and/or fieldwork journals, which helps them to track their submitted work in case of any administrative lapses.
- (4) *Academic counselling:* The learners attended the induction programmes held at their respective study centres, however, they did not regularly attend all academic counselling sessions held at study centres. This co-relates with their unawareness of audio and video programmes available at the study centre. Academic counselling sessions at their respective study centres were held in the language they had opted for.
- (5) *Fieldwork:* Students were provided with a FWS holding a MSW qualification, and approved by IGNOU, at the study centre who supervised their fieldwork through holding Individual conferences. Sometimes, personnel at the agency helped some of them where they did their fieldwork placement. The learners submitted their fieldwork journal to their supervisor, or at the study centre to any administrative staff members, or at the headquarters directly.
- (6) *Audio/Video/Teleconferencing:* Lack of information, professional engagement, unawareness, suitability of time, forgetfulness on that particular day, busy schedule, family responsibilities, other pressing priorities, far-flung remote location, connectivity issues to that particular radio frequency, etc. are the reasons given by students for not being able to listen to IRC sessions, or audio programmes at the study centre. The students who were not regularly visiting study centres had not seen video programmes at the study centre till the time this study was conducted. Some students especially from rural areas benefitted by attending IRC session, teleconferencing sessions and regularly watched IGNOU programmes on Doordarshan either on TV or mobile.

This study is first of its kind especially because social work through distance education is just a decade old in India. There have been very few studies conducted which can provide an informed discussion amongst the researchers, academic fraternity and practitioners. In India, social work through distance education is still not seen at par with face-to-face conventional social work teaching. Therefore, more research needs to be undertaken to compare the learning outcomes and competences gained, between distance learning and classroom teaching. Given the rapid growth of distance education in social work in India in the last five years, there is a need to evaluate how students enrolled in distance learning perceive their learning experiences. The findings will help in knowing our learners better, in designing and delivering the MSW programme in a more effective way. Based on the feedback received, the next revision of the programme will take into consideration the concerns of the learner. The limitation of the study is that not all learners responded to all the questions. Not all potential

MSW learners filled the questionnaire and submitted it at the school. And those who responded had left some questions unanswered. Those who did not submit response may differ in their responses from what is received.

The challenges that confront us include pedagogical issues, namely, students not being acquainted with the teaching methods of distance learning, especially because either they miss to attend induction programme held at the beginning of each session or they do not read the programme guide which explains every aspect of the teaching-learning process along with other useful information required for the successful completion of the programme. Many students also have other commitments related to job and family. Therefore, they are unable to devote enough time to the learning process.

When the learners are located in far-flung areas and the study centre is located in another city/town, coming regularly for individual or group conferences becomes a challenge. In such cases, students are encouraged to make use of social media like Skype and WhatsApp to interact with their peers and academic counsellors/FWSs regularly. This can save the time of travel, is more feasible and economical as well. It also enables peer education and encourages learners to keep a pace and to complete their courses on time.

The dependency of the learners on the academic counsellors and/or FWSs, who are otherwise employed as teachers either in conventional universities or as practitioners in the development sector and are only associated with IGNOU as part-timers, is another major challenge facing any social work programme. For them to take out the time and meet the learners in weekends, be available when there is a demand or need, to monitor the learners regularly, to encourage and motivate the learners – all this depends on their commitment to the discipline and on their efficiency. SOSW faculty members involve themselves in organising and conducting regular fieldwork practicum training workshops in collaboration with the regional centres for academic counsellors/FWSs and students to facilitate interaction, training and updating of their skills.

The other challenges are of administrative nature such as the lack of timely feedback on assignments or fieldwork journals, non-availability of study material, delay in getting a response for queries due to administrative incompetence, loss of documents during transition and so on. Apart from these, students from remote rural and tribal areas often fail to make use of technology like interactive radio/video counselling, eGyanKosh and video broadcasts that are offered by IGNOU, primarily due to isolated and often unfrequented geographical locations and lack of infrastructural facilities in their locality.

Despite some challenges, in India, the conventional social work institutions are concentrated mostly in urban areas, therefore IGNOU plays a significant role in reaching even the remote rural and the tribal areas by offering social work programmes through distance learning. It has reached all the 28 states and eight UT including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with its 67 regional centres and around 1,961 Learner Support Centres (LSCs)/Study Centres. It provides a viable option in providing opportunities, particularly to the disadvantaged groups such as those living in remote and rural areas, disabled, to working people and women, etc. not just for lifelong learning but also for bringing education to the forefront. It has gained wider acceptance in India as it is flexible and open in terms of potentially applicable methods and pace of learning, eligibility for enrolment, age of entry, the conduct of examinations, etc. In the area of contribution to knowledge base for learners of social work, IGNOU has developed various indigenous materials as part of curriculum for both BSW and MSW students.

Students after completing MSW from IGNOU have reported as employed in various United Nations bodies, in state and central universities, in foreign universities, NGOs, donor agencies, government organisations and many other places of esteem. Numerous MSW students after completing their programme from IGNOU are working in the UK, the US and Canada, amongst other places. Many are pursuing MPhil and PhD programmes in India and

abroad, which reflects the acceptance as well as the quality of the programme. NGO functionaries join the MSW programme for capacity building and continuing education which is aimed at improving the quality and standard of social services in the country.

The extensive teaching components are provided to the distance learners like academic counselling, guest lectures, fieldwork workshops, continuous assessment through assignments, teleconferencing, IRC, toll-free calls, Gyan Darshan I and II (An exclusive educational satellite to provide interactive education), online interaction, personal contacts and annual seminar on social work, to enable them to learn better. For wider outreach of its instructional materials in public, it is made available for open access on the e-GyanKosh platform, which has now become the largest open access repository of the National Resource Centre for Education – the Indian government's body for developing better teachers for higher education through research and resource-sharing.

### Conclusion

The popularity of the social work programmes through distance mode of education is increasing across the world since the number of seats available under regular mode are limited compared to the need. The MSW programme at IGNOU was launched in the year 2008. It has been running successfully since then and is also offered abroad in countries such as Nepal and as far as Ethiopia in East Africa. The programme is offered both in Hindi as well as in English. The findings of the survey reveal that the programme has been successful in reaching out to those left behind. SOSW at IGNOU, right now, presents itself as an alternate or second possible option for a large number of students opting for MSW programme, especially those who did not get the opportunity for pursuing this programme for various reasons. With this option available, they are able to maintain high self-esteem and dignity, gain employment, shape their future and enjoy a good quality of life. It is also an opportunity for working people from all sorts of professions like medicine, engineering, law, corporates, NGO functionaries, defence personnel, government employees, etc. who are pursuing MSW programme to acquire additional qualification for career growth, switch careers at a later stage in their life as well as lifelong, continuing education and learning. The advantages offered to the students who choose to pursue MSW programme through ODL over the traditional, are a flexible admission process, no age bar, flexibility in terms of time available for course completion, timings of class, geographical location and low costs.

Initiatives like ICT-enabled redressal mechanism for prompt redressal of students' grievances (IGNOU Grievance Redressal And Management or iGRAM) and queries under the Student Service Centre (SSC); social media channels; Digi News; faculty members support to students of low enrolment programmes through the web-enabled academic support system; the university mobile app "IGNOU e-Content"; eGyanKosh; usage of ICT (IGNOU, 2020) for the teaching-learning process, not only in India but also in the rest of Southeast Asia, will definitely help in ensuring quality along with keeping pace with technological innovations while also enabling the learners to successfully complete their programmes.

There is clear evidence that the demand for ODL is growing, with the Government of India estimating the GER to be 30% by 2020, which cannot be borne by traditional education universities alone. In addition to this, the ODL universities are also nudged to offer online education but the limitation has to be recognised vis-à-vis the socio-economically backward students from rural areas. Despite all the features on offer, distance education is yet to be mainstreamed in many countries, India included. The ODL universities have to ascertain that students do not face any challenge in getting the SLMs and understanding the contents with the help of a multimedia approach and personal contact support. In order to continuously address these issues and concerns in ODL, there should be a provision of on-going student feedback. It is imperative that they are involved in process of evaluation, offering suggestions

for course content, on how to effectively integrate the technology into the classroom, how to make effective student support services, in designing the delivery of the programme in the university and so on.

At IGNOU, MSW programme is revised with effect from January 2019, however, the present concern with other open universities in India is regarding regular and timely updation of SLMs from time to time as well as to maintain an uniform quality especially related to fieldwork. Fieldwork supervision should be given importance and the delivery system should ensure that the ethos of the profession are imparted to students. More and more involvement of social work educators and practitioners in implementation would ensure quality. There should be continuous learning by experience, identification of shortcomings, taking of corrective measures and undertaking revisions from time to time to ensure the quality of the programme. Other concerns are maintaining motivation of the students under distance mode towards timely completion of the programme, wider acceptance of courses under distance mode at par with conventional mode, equal opportunity in job selection and career growth in both the public and private sectors and to maintain the desired quality.

Social work through ODL in India is still new, the West started offering MSW programmes through ODL in 1969, which makes it older than 50 years. In India, it only began a decade ago. There is a need to regulate schools offering MSW through ODL. Universities are offering MSW programmes without a fieldwork practicum which needs the immediate attention of and regulation by the government as well as of the social work fraternity. It also needs to be ensured that a minimum of 1,200 h annually are assigned for fieldwork in any MSW programme.

Given the complexity of nature of dialogue around social work through ODL in a major part of the past two decades, continuous research regarding various aspects of the discipline in an ODL mode is necessary. It will only serve to address the implications it has on various individuals and service-users connected to the discipline and professional practice.

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### Corresponding author

Saumya can be contacted at: [saumya@ignou.ac.in](mailto:saumya@ignou.ac.in)

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