Reaching the unreached through open and distance learning in India
With special reference to Kumaun region of Uttarakhand

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Abstract

Purpose – Education is the most important tool for the development of different types of faculties in human beings. It plays an important role in the overall development of the human beings, and it is generally considered as a catalyst of social change. Education always remains a territory of significance and worry for the policymakers, social researchers and the academicians. In the complex society like India, which is multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious and pervaded with incalculable issues, the issues of ignorance are a major test in transit of its advancement. In this direction, open and distance learning (ODL) plays an important role in providing quality education to the learners who are unable to be a part of the formal system of education. Open and distance learning serves as a source of education for the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of the society. Open and distance learning goes for the spread of learning and securing information through distance mode including the utilization of any correspondence innovation to give chances to advanced education. Regardless of caste, creed and religion, it provides uniform education to different sections of the society. The purpose of this paper is to assess the attitude and satisfaction level of the learners towards open and distance learning.

Design/methodology/approach – For this study, explorative research methodology has been used, and analysis has been done on the basis of data extracted from the primary and secondary sources of information. The respondents were personally interviewed through structured interviewed schedule for the collection of primary data. In fact, the interview is an act of verbal communication for the purpose of eliciting information. In addition to intensive field work, secondary sources like records, manuscripts, survey reports and many other related studies and their findings have been used as the source of secondary information collected through respective sources.

Findings – ODL has been successful in realizing its objective, reaching to the unreached by spreading education in the remote and far-flung areas through its study centers located in various locations. However, there is more need of creating awareness among the people in the far-flung areas by opening more study centers as per the need and geographical location of the area. In the present era of science, technology and innovation, no major shift has been seen among the parents towards the girl child: and providing education to the girl child is not the top priority in the villages, marriage gets the first preference instead of education. However, girls are coming forward to continue their education but the problem is that of money as in the case of boy respondents. So there is a need to review the fee structure of the ODL program as per the economic conditions of the student's family, and some provisions should be made, especially for the girl students, to motivate them to come forward to continue their education, as it will spread message among other girls who did not complete their schooling.

Social implications – Through this paper, it could be realized that ODL provides opportunities to those who have no access to normal schooling but want to continue their education to compete in the changing world. ODL plays an important role in the hilly regions where most of the children left or dropped out their studies, especially the girls students, due to various reasons: it may be the long distance of the school from home or poor economic condition of the family. ODL emerged as a tool in solving all the problems and reaching the unreached through its learner-friendly approach.

Originality/value – Open and distance learning gives uniform stage to the individuals who need to upgrade their education and also skill development. This paper finds out that majority of the learners were satisfied

with the performance of the open schooling. A positive attitude towards open schooling was found among the learners. They were of the view that because of open schooling, they gained self-confidence and better status in the society. They were of the opinion that they were no longer considered as a loser and they were in a position to get something new, which may be helpful for them and their family.

Introduction
Open and distance learning (ODL) emerged as an alternative and important tool to reach to the unreached and to combat with the problem of Illiteracy. The open and distance learning is the need of the hour, especially at the secondary and senior secondary school level along with the formal educational system.

Open and distance learning is a tool for those who have no access to normal schooling but want to continue their education to compete in the changing world. It gives easy access to education to various segments of society, particularly to the individuals who are living in inaccessible territories. Open learning serves as a source of education for the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of the society. Open and distance learning aims to advance and disseminate education through diverse means. It conducts various programmes for the benefit of the learners and caters the needs of the different sections of the people. Open schooling, in reality, has an idea that has the capability of revolutionizing society everywhere, thus drawing out the best in individuals. ODL helps and encourages learners to take up education through distance mode who due to some reasons could not able to continue education in the past.

In the hilly region like that of Uttarakhand, the ODL mode is very effective and important to reach to the unreached residing in the tough geographical terrains and to the marginalized sections of the society. The open schooling can play an important role in the hilly regions, as most of the children left or dropped out from school, especially girl students in the rural areas, due to various reasons such as the long distance of the school from home or poor economic conditions of the family. There are various reasons for it. Due to the money order economy and water scarcity, males migrate from their native place to the urban areas for the livelihood. The whole responsibility is taken up by the women who have to take care of everything, as the schools are located in the far-flung areas, due to which it becomes very difficult for the mothers to leave their children alone .The girl child in the hilly regions has to support her mother in household chores, from collecting fodder and water for the animals and for themselves. The open schooling with its learner-friendly characteristics like flexibility of place as per the learners need, SLM, ICT support, PCP and students support services helps to resolve the problems of the learners. So keeping all these facts in mind, the study was done to know the role and importance of the open schooling and the view of the learners towards it in hilly regions of Uttarakhand state.

Objectives of study
The objectives of the study were as follows:

- to assess the view of the learners towards open and distance learning; and
- to evaluate the role of ODL in providing quality education to the learner.

Review of literature
There are various studies related to education and open schooling, which are explained below.

Wickramaratne (2001) in his study focussed on the relevance of counseling services in relation to the nature of the needs of the students. The study shows that because of the

attributes of the establishment as a distance learning body, for the learners and the learning process, there is a requirement for advising mediation to be accentuated to meet both individual and concentration-related necessities of the students. Counseling services act as an icebreaker, as it provides an opportunity to the learners to be familiar with various facets of ODL(Trivedi and Gupta). Although many studies have been done on the impact of counseling sessions, there is a need to assess the problems faced by the learners in the counseling sessions. The present research paper tries to fill the above gap.

Ngumi and Mwaniki (2009), in their study, revealed that there is a need to create awareness among aspiring students and to provide better information dissemination avenues on the part of the universities. The study proposed that an extensive pre-program introduction practice is to be incorporated into the coursework through which students can realize what is normal in their course of study.

Trivedi and Gupta (2010) termed the first induction meeting as a counseling session as an "icebreaker," as the learner is made familiar with the study center setup, library, multimedia facilities, staff and academic counselors, thus helping in the clarification of doubts and queries, boosting confidence. Tips are also offered how to study as an independent learner in the distance learning mode.

Sharma (2012), in his study, concluded that the Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) play an important role in distance education. The study reveals that PCPs are an effective tool for the overall development of the learners. The findings of the examinations uncover that amid the PCPs, the serious issues ought to be taken up and talked about by including the learners. The learners are advice to come up at PCP with the tough questions to be sort out during PCP. The students ought to be urged to pursue the examination material altogether before they come to PCPs.

Omito and Kembo (2016), in their study, investigated e-Learning access and infrastructure for the final-year Bachelor of Education (Arts) students who were learning through distance mode at the School of Continuing and Distance Education of the University of Nairobi. The study was set to address one goal: to explore accessibility and access of e-Learning foundation for separation learning at the University of Nairobi. Overview configuration utilizing polls and a meeting plan was used to assemble information. An example size of 217 understudies was drawn from 500 Bachelor of Education (Arts) understudies. Both unwavering quality and substance legitimacy were tried, dependent on a pilot template. The findings were as per the following: both PC equipment and programming were costly, and subsequently, a larger part of the understudies could not bear. A dominant part of the respondents additionally discovered learning at the digital bistros not reasonable. The findings uncovered that University of Nairobi had insufficient PC research centers, due to which a decent number of understudies were not able to access them whenever the timing was ideal. Finally, a lion's share of the respondents confronted impediments examining on the web due to the absence of help from the college's e-Learning staff. It was presumed that the University of Nairobi needed satisfactory access and foundation for e-Learning, particularly for separation training.

Duggal (2016), in his study, tried to find out the reasons of learners dropout in nonprofesssional undergraduate degree program of the IGNOU. The findings of the study shows that the major reason of their dropout was ignorance about the system of IGNOU. It is reflected that the dropped-out students could have been retained by orienting them about the flexibility and facilities provided to them in terms of re-registration, maximum duration, readmission, change of regional center, change of study center, change of courses, facility of repeatedly appearing in examination, so on and so forth, and also by giving them guidance, on a constant basis, to enable them to plan their studies effectively and complete their programmes successfully.

Mythili (2017), in her study, assessed the statisfaction and performance of the academic counselors in an online training program. To study the relation between the level of satisfaction and improvement in performances, four sub-groups were identified on the basis of the level of improvement of performances shown after the training. The findings of the study show that the sub-group with lowest improvement in scores displayed the lowest satisfaction rate, whereas the sub-group with the highest improvement in scores showed the highest level of satisfaction.

Bordoloi (2018), in her study, found that ODL raised an elective path for making education accessible and for providing scope for skill-based education at minimum cost and engaging the energetic grown-up population of a nation like India.

Husni, in his study, explored the contribution of student support in increasing student persistence by employing mixed methods approach. The study utilized 13 consecutive informative plan by gathering the quantitative information from 14 looking over 153 students. The study shows that student support had a 15 significant role in imparting student steadiness. The study also suggested the 16 improvement of student support at the level of effective, cognitive, and systemic 17 in order to enhance learner's persistence.

It is clear from the above studies/review of literature that as far as the open schooling in hilly areas is concerned, no study of this sort has been done by any social scientist. Therefore, the need of the hour is to make an extensive and intensive study of the open schooling in hilly areas. The present study aims at evaluating the reach and responsiveness of open schooling in the hilly areas with special reference to Kumaun region of Uttarakhand state.

Research methodology
In the present paper, the exploratory research methodology has been used, and analysis and interpretation is done on the basis of the data collected from both the primary and secondary sources of information. The interview schedule and tools were constructed to get the first-hand information of the learners and to assess the attitude and awareness level of the learners towards the distance education and the study centers and the problems faced by the learners therein.

Universe of the study
All the NIOS centers located in the Kumaun region of the Uttarakhand constitute the Universe of the study. Table I shows the details of the NIOS center located in the Kumaun region of Uttarakhand.

Sampling procedure and the samples of the study
All the NIOS centers located in the Kumaun region of the Uttarakhand constitute the Universe of the study. Underlying the stated objectives, all the 32 centers established in the Kumaun

S. No.	District	No. of NIOS centers	No. of students enrolled	20% of students enrolled in selected centers
1.	Nainital	09	592	118
2.	Udham Singh Nagar	07	302	62
3.	Almora	05	82	16
4.	Bageshwar	01	67	13
5.	Champawat	05	264	52
6.	Pithoragarh	05	186	37
	Total	32	1,493	298

Table I.
Details of NIOS centers located in Kumaun region of Uttarakhand

region of Uttarakhand were selected for the study. At the second stage, from all the selected study centers, 20 percent (i.e. 298 or 290) of the enrolled students were the respondents of the present study (whether they are male or female or they are enrolled in 10th or 12th class).

Tools and technique of data collection

In the present study, following tools/scales were constructed or used to get the first-hand information from the respondents:

(1) role and performance scale (to know the role and performance of the NIOS centers); and

(2) satisfaction scale (to know the satisfaction level of the students enrolled in NIOS centers).

The above tools were constructed with the help of the expert according to the objective of the study. The tools were constructed by the researcher and expert to measure the role and performance of the NIOS, to measure the satisfaction level of students enrolled in NIOS and to study the problems faced by the students enrolled in NIOS. The review of relevant literature related to the above-mentioned variables led to the conclusion that questionnaires and scales available were not sufficient and suitable to measure all the above areas. Thus, there was a need to develop a new scale to cover all the aspects of the study, so keeping all these facts in mind, the above scales were constructed. The present scales were developed on an empirical basis.

The respondents were personally interviewed through structured interviewed schedule for the collection of primary data. In addition to the intensive field work, secondary sources like records, manuscripts, survey reports and many other related studies and their findings have been used as the source of secondary information collected through respective sources.

Analysis and interpretation of data

Performance of the NIOS center

Through this scale, the researcher tried to find out the changes that occurred in the learners and tried to know the attitude of the learners towards NIOS. The five-point scale was used to know the view of the learners towards the statement "while learning through NIOS." Students were asked to tick the right option out of five options.

It is clear for Table II that majority of the respondents, 63 (33.9 percent), agreed with the view that there is a possibility of studying and working together through open schooling, and a minimum number of the respondents, 11 (5.9 percent), were neutral towards the view. Thus, it shows that open schooling plays an important role by providing platform to the learner to continue their education with their work together.

It is clear for Table III that the views of the boy respondents were similar to that of girls students: majority of the respondents, 32 (30.8 percent), agreed with the view that there is a possibility of studying and working together through open schooling, and a minimum

| | Possibility of studying and doing domestic works together (Boys) | |
Responses	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	33	17.7
Disagree	16	8.6
Neutral	11	5.9
Agree	63	33.9
Completely agree	63	33.9
Total	186	100.0

Table II.
Statement: is there any possibility of studying and doing domestic work together through ODL

number of the respondents, 11 (5.9 percent), were neutral towards the view. Thus, it shows that open schooling plays an important role by providing platform to the learner to continue their education with their work together. In the hilly areas, the majority of the household works were performed by the girl child, from grazing of animals to collection of water for domestic purposes. A positive sign was seen among the girls respondents, as they were of the view that open and distance learning provided an alternative to continue their education in such a systematic and flexibile manner, due to which they were able to manage the domestic chores and study together.

Table IV clearly depicts that out of 186 boys respondents, majority of the respondents, 68 (36.6 percent), agreed with the statement, and a minimum number of the respondents, 10 (5.4 percent), completely disagreed with the view. The students enrolled in the open school are mostly either working in private sector, army or engaged in other activities, so through open school, it becomes possible for them to upgrade their qualification while working, as there is no compulsion of regular attendance and there is a flexibility to give exam to continue the education.

Table V clearly depicts that majority of the respondents, 29 (27.9 percent), agreed with the statement, and a minimum number of the respondents, 5 (4.8 percent), completely

Responses	Possibility of studying and doing domestic works together (Girls)	
	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	16	15.4
Disagree	21	20.2
Neutral	4	3.8
Agree	31	29.8
Completely agree	32	30.8
Total	104	100.0

Table III.
Statement-possibility of studying and doing domestic works together (Girls)

Responses	Possibility of working and studying together (Boys)	
	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	10	5.4
Disagree	33	17.7
Neutral	32	17.2
Agree	68	36.6
Completely agree	43	23.1
Total	186	100.0

Table IV.
Statement: ODL provides an opportunity to do work and study together

Responses	Possibility of working and studying together (Girls)	
	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	5	4.8
Disagree	24	23.1
Neutral	20	19.2
Agree	29	27.9
Completely agree	26	25.0
Total	104	100.0

Table V.
Statement-possibility of work and study together (Girls)

disagreed with the view. The girl respondents were of the view that because of NIOS they were able to continue their education while performing their routine work together.

It is clear from Table VI that the majority of the respondents, 65 (34.9 percent), said that open school spread awareness about education among rural women, and a minimum number of the respondents, 15 (8.1 percent), were of the view that no awareness was created among the rural women through open school system. The women in the hill areas are married mostly in the age group of 15–18 years, and due to this, they dropout from the school to take up the household responsibility.

Hence, they do not complete their schooling, but now the NIOS has emerged as a new alternative for the women to carry on their education with their domestic chores. The flexibility of the NIOS program has developed or created awareness among the rural women.

Table VII depicts that the majority of the respondents, 32 (30.8 percent), said that open school spread awareness about education among rural women, and a minimum number of the respondents, 9 (8.7 percent), were of the view that no awareness was created among the rural women through open school system. NIOS emerged as a new alternative for the women to carry on their education with their domestic chores. The flexibility of the NIOS program has developed or created awareness among the rural women.

The main component of open schooling is its learners. Table VIII reveals that majority of the respondents, 65 (34.9 percent), agreed with the statement that focus is given on the

| Responses | ODL Spreads Education among rural women (Boys) | |
	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	15	8.1
Disagree	22	11.8
Neutral	25	13.4
Agree	59	31.7
Completely agree	65	34.9
Total	186	100.0

Table VI.
Statement: ODL
spreads education
among rural women

| Responses | ODL Spreads Education among rural women (Girls) | |
	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	9	8.7
Disagree	16	15.4
Neutral	17	16.3
Agree	30	28.8
Completely agree	32	30.8
Total	104	100.0

Table VII.
Statement: ODL
spreads education
among rural
women (Girls)

| Responses | Focus of education is on learners (Boys) | |
	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	7	3.8
Disagree	22	11.8
Neutral	35	18.8
Agree	65	34.9
Completely agree	57	30.6
Total	186	100.0

Table VIII.
Statement: focus of
ODL is on learners

learners' needs and education, and a minimum number of the respondents, 7 (3.8 percent), completely disgareed with the statement. Thus, it is clear from the above table that the main focus of the NIOS is on its learners and their needs.

Table IX reveals that majority of the respondents, 32 (30.8 percent), agreed with the statement that focus is given on the learners' needs and education, and a minimum number of the respondents, 4 (3.8 percent), completely disagreed with the statement. Thus, it is clear from the above table that the main focus of the ODL is on its learners and their needs.

Table X clearly shows that the majority of the respondents, 70 (37.6 percent), agreed with the statement that through NIOS, their confidence level has increased, and a minimum number of the respondents, 6 (3.2 percent), completely disagreed with the statement. ODL developed a positive attitude in the learners, as they are coming forward to continue their education and motivating others who have left the education in between to rejoin education through NIOS.

The response of the girls was same as that of boys: the majority of the girl respondents, 39 (37.5 percent), agreed with the statement that through ODL, their confidence level has increased, and a minimum number of the respondents, 3 (2.9 percent), completely disagreed with the statement. ODL developed a positive attitude among the learners, as they are coming forward to continue their education and motivating others who have left the education in between to rejoin education through NIOS (Table XI).

| | Focus of education is on learners (Girls) | |
Responses	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	4	3.8
Disagree	16	15.4
Neutral	26	25.0
Agree	32	30.8
Completely agree	26	25.0
Total	104	100.0

Table IX.
Statement: focus of education is on learners (Girls)

| | ODL increases confidence among learners (Boys) | |
Responses	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	6	3.2
Disagree	39	21.0
Neutral	27	14.5
Agree	70	37.6
Completely agree	44	23.7
Total	186	100.0

Table X.
Statement: ODL increases confidence among learners

| | ODL increases confidence among learners (Girls) | |
Responses	Frequency	Percent
Completely disagree	3	2.9
Disagree	25	24.0
Neutral	18	17.3
Agree	39	37.5
Completely agree	19	18.3
Total	104	100.0

Table XI.
Statement: ODL increases confidence among learners (Girls)

Table XII clearly depicts that maximum number of the respondents, 68 (36.56 percent), said that the distance of the center is little bit far away from their home, and a minimum number of respondents, 11 (5.9 percent), said that the distance of the center from their home is average. Thus, it is clear that the distance is not a big problem related to the study center. The center is mostly running in Government Inter Colleges (GICs) in the hilly regions, and they are located in the center to cover almost all the population of that area. Thus, it is confirmed that the distance of the centers from their home is not a big problem related to NIOS.

Table XIII reveals the same results as that of boy respondents: out of 104 girls respondents, majority of the respondents, 39 (30.8 percent), said there is little bit distance of NIOS centre from the home, and 8 (7.7 percent) said that there is a average distance of the center from their home. Normally in the hilly regions, people travel almost 5–10 km in a day. Thus, it is clear from the interpretation of the data that distance is not such a big problem for the learners.

Major findings

- The majority of the respondents said that through ODL, it is possible to continue their education and domestic work together. A positive attitude was seen among the learners towards learning through NIOS.

- The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) is trying its best in developing the attitude and aptitude among the learners for education for those who cannot afford to go far.

- In the beginning of the study, segmentation on the basis of gender was taken into account, but while concluding the study, no difference was found towards the impact of NIOS in imparting the education to male and female learners.

- The NIOS has been successful in realizing its objective, reaching to the unreached by spreading education in the remote and far-flung areas through its study centers located in various locations. However, there is more need of creating awareness among the people in the far-flung areas by opening more centers as per the need and geographical location of the area.

	Distance of school from home (Boys)	
Responses	Frequency	Percent
Not at all	53	28.5
Little bit	68	36.6
Average	11	5.9
More	23	12.4
Very much	31	16.7
Total	186	100

Table XII.
statement: distance of
study centers from
home is very far

	Distance of school from home (Girls)	
Responses	Frequency	Percent
Not at all	32	30.8
Little bit	39	37.5
Average	8	7.7
More	11	10.6
Very much	14	13.5
Total	104	100

Table XIII.
Statement: distance of
study centre from
home is very
far (Girls)

- Counseling is an important component of open learning system, and it is such relationship between two persons in which one person endeavors to help another to understand and solve his/her adjustment problems. The study shows that the learners were fully satisfied with the counseling sessions and with the counselors of the centers. The majority of the centers are running in the GIC, where trained teachers are available to solve the problems of the learners every time whenever they visit the center.

- Distance of the center is not the problem as far as the learners are concerned, as most of the centers are located in the nearby GIC.

- The findings of the study show that majority of the learners were satisfied with the performance of the open schooling, and a positive attitude towards open schooling was found among the learners. They were of the view that because of open schooling, they gained self-confidence and a better status in the society. They were of the opinion that they were no longer considered as a loser, and they were in a position to get something new, which would be helpful for them and their family.

- Break occurs in the studies of the girl respondents, as the girls perform all the household chores and being at home, they hold other responsibilties like taking care of young ones, and in villages, they have to take care of the animals and have to bring water for household activity. Due to these factors, they miss the PCP and sometimes, they do not even submit TMA. So these are the basic problems the students suffer, but they are satisfied that the flexibilty of the program helps them to carry on their studies, as there is no barrier of time and years in ODL.

- Computers are available in the centers; however, in the hill regions, the centers have computers but not in adequate numbers, and the net connectivity in the centers is not up to mark. The main reasons are the electricity and internet connection problems in the hilly regions. The learners either visit cyber cafe or friends' house to download the admit card and other materials required.

- The large numbers of counselors are from the conventional system. They are not acquainted with the philosophy and communication methods of distance education, sometimes defeating the purpose and objectives of counseling sessions. Hence, it is suggested that the orientation program of at least 10–15 days should be organized for the counselors to upgrade their knowledge regarding various aspects of distance education.

- The paper will help policy planners and decison makers in evolving and strengthening the ODL philosophy in order to cater the needs of the large sections of the society, particularly residing in the far-flung and remote areas.

Conclusion

Open and distance learning provides opportunities to those who left the study in between and did not have access to learning. Through its different traditional, professional and functional courses, open and distance learning is assuming a vital job in the general advancement of the learners. There is no uncertainty that distance learning is assuming an essential job in granting school instruction/advanced education through distance mode. Yet, the need of the hour is that more accentuation must be given to distance learning so that the drop outs and the individuals who are unable to carry on their study through customary mode of education can get a chance of learning through distance mode of education, thus being a part of the scholarly society. In the recent years, a tremendous increase has been shown in the enrollment number in ODL institutions. However, there is a need to keep a check on the private universities or institutions offering the distance program without any

recognition from the concern authority. The distance education system provides opportunities not only to younger students but also to those from the older age groups. It shows the spirit and positive side of the ODL to provide opportunity to everyone, regardless of age, caste and sex. The papers clearly concludes that ODL emerged as an effective tool to educate the learners, particularly residing in the far-flung areas and who are not able to have access to education due to tough geographical conditions, social and cultural taboos and economic backwardness.

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