Difficulties in Open and Distance Learning Mode of Education: Students' Perspectives

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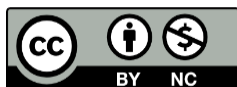Mahendra Ratna Campus, Tahachal, Kathmandu
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Abstract

This study examines the difficulties perceived by students engaged in synchronous open and distance learning (ODL). Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University, has embraced ODL to expand educational access, but this mode poses difficulties that require attention. A cross-sectional survey design has been applied to the investigation of the difficulties faced by ODL students. The data were collected using a Google Form survey in the form of a Likert scale. The research covers both individual-related and instructional-related difficulties. Individual-related difficulties include time management difficulties resultant from other commitments, financial constraints, lack of support from peers and family, unfavorable home learning environments, struggles with learning complex material remotely, isolation, and limited technological proficiency among the students. The instructional-related difficulties include teacher feedback delays, inadequate academic support, poor course material design, and confusion between the core text and supplementary materials. These difficulties underscore the importance of an effective instructional design, timely feedback, and instructor-student interaction. The findings suggest towards the need for targeted interventions to address individual difficulties, such as time management support, financial assistance, and improved learning environments. On the instructional side, optimizing course materials, providing timely feedback, and fostering strong instructor-student relationships are crucial. Technical and financial support and training for instructors and students to optimize course materials and increase instructor-student interaction environments are suggested for overcoming the difficulties.

Keywords: difficulties, open and distance learning, perception, quantitative methods

Introduction

Digital technology, information availability, globalization, equity, and accountability are the major five trends that significantly impact education in the 21st century (Kilbane & Milman, 2014). These factors influence K–12 education and 21st-century teaching as they go about daily, encouraging ideas, initiatives, and reforms. Teachers will better know what is needed to prepare 21st-century learners for the future if they are aware of these trends and how they affect education. In higher education, digital technology has transformed teaching and learning. Digital skills are increasingly relevant in every context, especially in the workplace. As a result, one of the key purposes of universities has shifted to preparing future managers to solve problems and find solutions, including information literacy as an essential skill (Akour & Alenezi, 2022). In this context, open and distance learning (ODL) has revolutionized the educational landscape in many developing countries, including Nepal. It provides a flexible and accessible alternative to traditional classroom teaching and learning. Distance education is "the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, including all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance" (USDLA, 2006, cited inFrank, 2008). In distance education, teachers and students can communicate asynchronously (in their choosen time) by sharing written or digital materials or synchronously (in real-time) using technology (Frank, 2008).

Open and distance learning (ODL) has developed into a dynamic and adaptable educational approach that caters education to a wide range of students seeking education outside the traditional classroom environment (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2013; Simango, 2016). The academic environment has substantially transformed with ODL techniques (Bordoloi, 2018; Bozkurt, 2019). Many students can now access education through its alternative learning technique, which transcends geographical and temporal limitations (Dadigamuwa & Senanayake, 2012; Neupane, 2021; Vu et al., 2014). ODL offers flexibility, enabling students to study quickly and manage their education with other duties, claims various studies (David et al., 2006; Dzakiria et al., 2013; Hussin et al., 2020; Ojo & Olakulehin, 2006; Sallehuddin et al., 2023). It enables people who are employed, in college, or live in rural places to further their education without uprooting their lives (Griffiths & Barnes, 2008; Rupande & Nyenya, 2014). ODL also makes education more affordable by opening doors for individuals who could not afford conventional education options (Ajaz & Women, 2014; David et al., 2006; Hjeltnes & Hansson, 2005. Technology has created new options for education, and institutions like the Faculty of Education at Tribhuvan University have implemented ODL, which combines the advantages of online learning with face-to-face interactions (Gautam, 2021; Kandel & Kaphle, 2021). While synchronous ODL has great potential, it also

poses a special set of educational and institutional obstacles that demand careful consideration.

In the study of Fabriz et al. (2021), students reported better levels of support for their basic psychological requirements for relatedness and competence support and higher levels of overall satisfaction with the online term in mostly asynchronous and predominantly synchronous environments, respectively. All students had better outcomes when their psychological needs were more fully met, and their acceptance of technology was higher. Teachers did, however, observe fewer differences between synchronous and asynchronous learning settings, particularly with feedback activities.

ODL has gained adhesive friction due to its ability to provide structured guidance, immediate feedback, and the sense of community often associated with conventional on-campus education. However, Students are facing several individual and instructional-related difficulties(Alivo et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). In this context, this study aims to examine the individual and instructional difficulties perceived by ODL students.

Methods and Materials

This paper is based on a cross-sectional survey research design for collecting data from a specific group of respondents. Data were collected from a structured Google Form survey (GFS). This methodology provided a convenient and user-friendly platform to select participants from various locations while covering ODL students. Self-constructed, 5-point Likert scale was used to measure participants' difficulties and attitudes concerning "strongly disagree," "disagree," "neutral," "agree," and "strongly agree." Data were collected through Google form from. The sample size was 145 respondents selected from all students enrolled in ODL mode education in the Mahendra Ratna Campus, Tahachal, and the Central Department of Education, Kirtipur.

This article, "Open and distance education students" at Tribhuvan University's Faculty of Education, refers to the entire population. A census method was utilized to compile the responses of all eligible respondents to acquire data (Cochran & William, 1977; Nayak & Singh, 2021). This strategy represents the views of a wider target population. The internal consistency and reliability of the Likert scale questionnaire were assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. An alpha value of 0.896 indicated high internal consistency, implying that the items in the questionnaire measured the same underlying construct consistently(Heale & Twycross, 2015). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for data analysis. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and

inferential statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used in descriptive statistics, and one sample t-test in inferential statistics.

Results and Discussion

Status of ODL Education at Tribhuvan University

Tribhuvan University has recognized the need for distance education and established the Open and Distance Education Center (ODEC) in 2015. The center was established primarily to cater to the educational needs of working professionals and learners from remote areas. The establishment of the Open and Distance Education Center (ODEC) at Tribhuvan University is considered an important milestone in the development of ODL.

The Faculty of Education (FOE) plays an important role in conducting the ODL programs at Tribhuvan University in a systematic manner. FOE has been trying to make the ODL mode a flexible educational program available to students across the country at various levels. The faculty is working with national and international partners to improve ODL educational programs. This collaboration sees Tribhuvan University sharing best practices, knowledge, and assets in online education, which is seen to be helping to improve student-learning outcomes. Based on this, Tribhuvan University created digital learning platforms because of the expansion of Internet services and the rapid development of information and communication technology. The instructors and students can communicate in real-time regardless of distance by using these platforms in live lectures, online discussions, and virtual classes.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the importance of ODL education at Tribhuvan University. Since all the campuses were closed at that time, teachers and students couldn't be physically present. In such situation, the university continued its educational programs online, which seems to have created an environment conducive to the rapid development of ODL. However, the Faculty of Education had successfully conducted ODL mode of education in a two-semester M. Ed. program in science education and a two-semester PGD program in social studies education even before COVID-19. This success encouraged the Faculty of Education to expand its programs. Currently, the Faculty of Education runs ODL mode education in a 6-semester integrated program in master's in social studies education (MSSED) and three-semester Post Graduate Diploma programs in various subjects. Mahendra Ratna Campus and the Central Department of Education have been offering ODL modes of instruction for master's and bachelor's students.

Open and distance learning (ODL) has provided students with several opportunities. Flexibility, enhanced student access to education in off-campus

settings and at the workplace, etc. are some advantages of ODL education. However, it also poses particular difficulties for students and faculties. For ODL to be successful, teachers and students need to be aware of these difficulties. Thus, the difficulties met by open and distance learning (ODL) students in the Faculty of Education at Tribhuvan University are presented here. The examination of these issues uses as references mean scores, standard deviations, t-values, and p-values.

Individual Related Difficulties

Technology, such as chat platforms, video conferencing systems, and collaboration software, is crucial to ODL (Gnawali et al., 2022; McClure & Williams, 2021; Yang, 2021). These resources increase engagement, but they also expose students to technical difficulties. The learning process might be hampered, and poor internet access, software compatibility problems, and technological difficulties can impede the teaching flow (Gnawali et al., 2022; Othman et al., 2022). Digital literacy and self-directed learning abilities at a particular degree are prerequisites for participation in ODL (Alivo et al., 2022; Maphosa & Bhebhe, 2019; Zaki, 2022). Students must be adept at utilizing online resources, navigating virtual environments, and overseeing their learning processes. Those who lack these abilities may have trouble keeping up with the curriculum and participating successfully in virtual learning settings. A distinct set of strategies is needed to engage students in synchronous learning preferences; teachers must use innovative and engaging teaching approaches to keep students' attention, promote active involvement, and facilitate meaningful dialogues (Halim et al., 2009).

Geographical barriers are overcome via ODL, but time zone in online sessions create problems. Considering students' various disparities creates a new problem. It may be difficult for students from different locations to join live sessions planned at specified times, which might cause difficulties with attendance and equal participation. Flexibility, which enables students to balance their studies with other responsibilities, is one of ODL's main draws. In ODL, however, finding a balance between flexibility and organized learning becomes crucial. Scheduling rigidity may be harmful, while too much flexibility might result in missed deadlines and unfinished assignments.

The current section presents the results and subsequent discussion regarding the individual-related difficulties encountered by synchronous Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students at Tribhuvan University's Faculty of Education. The study examined several factors contributing to students' learning experiences in the ODL educational setup.

Table 1

Status of Individual-Related Difficulties

Statements	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Lack of sufficient time for study	3.79	.83	11.34	0.00*
Financial constraints	3.42	.80	6.36	0.00*
Lack of support from peers- family	3.11	.94	1.41	0.16
Unfavorable home learning environment, e.g., absence of studying space, lack of electricity, etc.	3.56	.95	7.09	0.00*
Difficulties in learning complex and or technically demanding material by distance.	3.57	.94	7.33	0.00*
Absence/low interaction with other students, i.e., isolation.	3.50	0.95	6.37	0.00*
Lack of experience and training with instructional technology, e.g., computer illiterate.	3.26	1.06	2.97	0.00*
Conflicts between family and study schedule.	3.11	1.11	1.19	0.23
Conflicts between work and study schedule.	3.06	1.10	0.68	0.50
Issues with the internet, Wi-Fi, or other gadgets (laptop, computer)	3.79	1.00	9.45	0.00*

*Significant at 5% level of Significance (P-value < 0.05),   Source: Field survey, 2080

Table 1 shows the status of individual-related difficulties at the faculty of education. This study used mean, standard deviations, t-values, and p-values to analyze the data. The computed mean score for the challenge was 3.79 (SD = 0.83). This indicates that ODL students often struggle with time management in their learning. It is mainly due to being involved in work or family responsibilities. This challenge was highly significant (t = 11.34, p < 0.05) in their learning experience. This result aligns with previous research (Smith & Smith, 2019), highlighting the delicate balance ODL students must maintain between their studies and other obligations. The mean score of financial constraint is 3.42 (SD = 0.80). The significance level of this challenge was also high (t = 6.36, p < 0.05), emphasizing its impact on the accessibility and affordability of distance education. Thus, financial limitations were a notable concern among ODL students. This finding is similar to the study of Peters (2019) and Wilson et al. (2020), whose studies pointed to the need for financial support for the effectiveness of ODL programs.

The mean score of a lack of support from peers and family was 3.11 (SD = 0.94) in the difficulties of synchronous ODL perceived by students. However, the computed p-value t = 1.41, p > 0.05, was not supported to be statistically significant. However, the study by Allen and Seaman (2017) revealed the importance of social support for enhancing students' ODL education. The mean score of 3.56 (SD = 0.95)

indicates that the lack of an ideal study environment hindered ODL students' learning experiences. The statistical significance was high (t = 7.09, p < 0.05), emphasizing the adverse effect of this challenge. Research by Salmon (2017) and Shah et al. (2021) pointed out the significance of a conducive learning space for effective ODL engagement.

ODL students reported a mean score of 3.57 (SD = 0.94) for difficulties in learning complex material. The p-value was highly significant (t = 7.33, p < 0.05), suggesting that the challenge of comprehending intricate topics remotely significantly impacts their learning journey. This aligns with the findings of Palloff and Pratt (2017) regarding the difficulties of grasping complex concepts without immediate instructor guidance. The mean score for isolation was 3.50 (SD = 0.95), suggesting that many ODL students experienced low interaction with peers. This challenge was highly significant (t = 6.37, p < 0.05). Anderson et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of interaction, emphasizing its role in combating feelings of isolation and promoting engagement. Participants reported a mean score of 3.26 (SD = 1.06) for this challenge, indicating a struggle with technology proficiency. The significance level was noteworthy (t = 2.97, p < 0.05), emphasizing the impact of limited digital literacy on their learning experience. This result concurs with research by Ertmer et al. (2019), stressing the necessity of providing technical support to ODL students.

Instructional Difficulties

In this section, we present the results and discuss the instructional-related difficulties faced by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students participating in synchronous programs at Tribhuvan University's Faculty of Education. The study focused on various factors affecting students' learning experiences in real-time online education.

Table 2

Status of Instructional-Related Difficulties

Statements	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Delayed/ineffective feedback from the instructors	3.26	0.96	3.27	0.00*
Lack of instructor contact and inadequate academic support	3.23	1.02	2.69	0.01*
Poor course material design/ inappropriate learning materials	3.24	1.02	2.86	0.00*
Confusion between text and supplemental material provided	3.42	0.84	6.04	0.00*

*Significant at 5% level of Significance (P-value < 0.05),   Source: Field survey, 2080

The results of this study provide insights into the difficulties faced by ODL students enrolled in synchronous programs at Tribhuvan University's Faculty of

Education. Both individual-related and instruction-related difficulties significantly impact students' learning experiences. Time constraints, unfavorable learning environments, delayed feedback, inadequate instructor contact, and poor course material design are key difficulties that must be addressed to enhance the quality and effectiveness of synchronous ODL programs. These findings underline the importance of comprehensive support systems, instructional design improvements, and strategies to mitigate individual difficulties to promote successful engagement and learning outcomes in synchronous ODL settings.

The analysis involved means, standard deviations, t-values, and p-values, and these findings were discussed with support from table 2.

The mean score for this challenge was 3.26 (SD = 0.96), indicating that students often perceived delays or ineffectiveness in teacher feedback. The significance level was high (t = 3.27, $p < 0.05$), signifying that this challenge significantly influenced their learning experiences. Previous research (Garrison & Kanuka, 2017) underscores the critical role of timely and constructive feedback in online learning environments. The mean score was 3.23 (SD = 1.02), reflecting that students lacked instructor contact and insufficient academic support. The p-value indicated statistical significance (t = 2.69, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that this challenge has a noteworthy impact. Literature by Swan (2019) and Moore et al. (2018) emphasizes the importance of effective instructor-student interaction in synchronous ODL settings.

Participants reported a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 1.02) for the 'Poor Course Material Design and Inappropriate Learning Materials' challenge, highlighting concerns about course material design and learning resources. The statistical significance was evident (t = 2.86, $p < 0.05$), indicating that suboptimal course material negatively affects learning. Similar findings were observed in research by Liaw (2018) and Jung et al. (2021), emphasizing the need for well-designed and relevant learning materials in synchronous ODL. The mean score for this challenge was 3.42 (SD = 0.84), indicating that students encountered confusion when navigating between the core text and supplemental learning materials. The p-value was highly significant (t = 6.04, $p < 0.05$), underlining the significant impact of this challenge. Anderson et al. (2020) and Picciano (2017) highlighted the importance of clear instructional design and seamless integration of materials.

The results of this study provide insights into the difficulties faced by ODL students enrolled in synchronous programs at Tribhuvan University's Faculty of Education. Both individual-related and instructional-related difficulties significantly impact students' learning experiences. Time constraints, financial limitations, unfavorable learning environments, delayed feedback, inadequate instructor contact, and poor course material design are key difficulties that must be

addressed to enhance the quality and effectiveness of synchronous ODL programs. These findings underline the importance of comprehensive support systems, instructional design improvements, and strategies to mitigate individual difficulties to promote successful engagement and learning outcomes in synchronous ODL settings.

Conclusion

This study explored and examined the difficulties faced by students engaged in synchronous open and distance learning (ODL) at Tribhuvan University in Nepal. ODL provides flexibility and accessibility in the learning environment for those students who live in a remote geographical location and are involved in the work. However, it presents a unique set of difficulties at both the individual and instructional levels. At the individual level, students reported grappling with time management as a major challenge as compared to other difficulties, such as commitments, financial constraints, unfavorable learning environments in the home, and limited technology proficiency. The instructional-related difficulties were delayed or ineffective feedback from instructors, a lack of instructor contact, poor course material design, and confusion between core text and supplemental materials. Thus, the findings show that the faculty of education has created favorable learning environment by addressing both individual and instructional difficulties to enhance the effectiveness of synchronous ODL in Nepal. It requires technical and financial support and training for instructors and students to optimize course materials and increase instructor-student interaction environments.

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