

# Open and Distance Learning Mode in Nepal: Practice and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

*Open and distance learning (ODL) is accepted as an alternative mode of education which is defined as a new trend in instruction wherein the learner is geographically separate from the source can involve in learning process. This study presents a clear figure of the current practice and challenges of ODL for ensuring access to higher education in the context of Nepal. As qualitative study, narrative inquiry research design was exercised and four participants were selected purposively to extract their experiences, understanding and perception on ODL through semi structured interview. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed developing two global themes in relating to literature. The findings of the study suggested that the practice of open and distance learning mode in Nepal is not so developed and people are not satisfied with its provision. It is not adequately managed and also not in the access to the target groups because of highly prioritized formal education system. The lack of physical facilities, electricity supply, Information Communication Technology (ICT) devises, unavailability of capable expert, lacking strong commitment of the concerned agencies to provide quality assurance are its challenges.*

**Key words:** ODL, Nepal, ICT, practice, challenges

## Introduction

The beginning of ODL is assigned back to 18th Century due to the phenomenal advancement and innovation in transportation and communication heralded by industrial revolution (Chauhan, 2014, p.463). The term 'open and distance learning' is used as an umbrella term to cover educational approaches of distance education and open learning that reach teachers in their schools, provide learning resources for them, or enable them to qualify without attending college in person,

or open up new opportunities for keeping up to date no matter where or when they want to study (UNICEF, 2009, p.xii).

Koirala (2011) said that open and distance learning provides an opportunity to interested learners to learn from community. Today, learners want to learn and earn together. It provides sufficient learning opportunities at once. ODL is a flexible concept that benefits people who do not have time for traditional on-campus courses. The learners can enroll according to their interest as there are no rigid rules and

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regulations in open and distance learning. It is an alternative approach of imparting education because it aims to address those learners who have been deprived from learning opportunities from formal education system. The students can learn contents at their own pace in ODL. They are usually required to submit assignments at regular intervals the course provider specifies and take exams that test their mastery of the subject.

Different modes such as print, audio/video broadcasting, audio/video teleconferencing, computer aided instruction, e-learning/ online learning, computer broadcasting can be used in ODL. Yet the radio remains a very viable form, especially in the developing nations, because of its reach. In Taylor's (2012) words, "Started with correspondence mode, ODL is now agreed to have undergone notably four other stages namely multimedia model, tele-learning model, flexible learning model and interactive flexible learning model". Distance learning delivery methods assist the modes of delivery of the courses depending on the nature and demand of the subjects. Introduction of Technologies in Literacy Programme (1999, as cited in Chauhan, 2014, p.464) mentioned such methods as:

Study materials in print, electronic, videos, audio cassette, TV programs, contact sessions, part time tutorial sessions, telephone tutoring, assignment marking with comments and, questions, special seminars on a certain subject, study centers with the facility of libraries and laboratories.

In the beginning ODL was implemented through correspondence. Gradually it was conducted through radio, interactive radio, television and finally with computer and smart phones. Open and

distance education is not like a formal education where controlled environment is managed. Pokharel (2009) mentioned that it gives full freedom to all learners with free environment. ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of internet-based information technologies, and in particular the world wide web (www).

Open and distance learning mode is an alternative approach of education which can address the huge numbers of learner in higher education in limited resources. The world has become a narrower place because of the impact of the development of science and technology. Using internet, email and other technological means, open and distance learning can be made effective. Today, computer /internet have become a major part of classroom instruction both formal and open and distance mode.

With the advancement of information technology, open and distance learning have the potential to play a significant role in the development of reliable and realistic learning opportunities for the populations of Nepal. Studies have not been conducted to date that test the technical aspects of offering online education in Nepal nor the linguistic, regional or geographic challenges that might exist. This study stands as an initial discussion about the practice and challenges of open and distance learning in Nepal. On the one hand there are sufficient possibilities of open and distance learning; on the other hand, there are several challenges and barriers to implement it properly. This study has tried to explore the exciting situation of open and distance learning along with its challenges in the context of Nepal.

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### **Purpose and Research Questions of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to bring out the ground reality about practice and challenges of open and distance learning in Nepal. The research questions of the study were as:

- How do people perceive the practice of open and distance learning in Nepal
- How do instructors, teachers, administrators and students regard the challenges of ODL in Nepal?

### **Literature Review**

Open and distance learning is highly dubious subject in the present context. Very limited studies have been launched to open and distance learning in Nepal although several researches have been done globally about it. Some scholars have been advocating about the open and distance learning. Danaher and Umar (2010, p.12), in their book *Open and distance learning*, pointed out that this field has been variously named *distance learning*, *open learning*, *flexible learning*, *online learning* and *blended learning*. They further added:

As with teacher education, open and distance learning is a multifaceted phenomenon that eludes easy classification and ready analysis. It is also a domain characterized at times by excessive optimism and unrealistic claims on its behalf, as a panacea and a substitute for wholesale engagement with the kinds of local, national and global inequities. (p. 35).

Okai, Musa and Obeng (n.d., p.1) in their paper stated "Open distance learning has been used effectively in India and Pakistan to train several artisans including the marginalized in the society. Our study

also indicates that artisans and students in Ghana are willing to upgrade their professional competencies through ODL". ODL has been used to support teachers' career development both through structured programs, designed for specific groups of teacher, and by providing opportunities for individual teachers to raise the level of their own qualifications. Watkins & Kaufman (2003) stated, "The history and evolution of ODL is well documented, but the planning process of an ODL unit within a university and how to ensure quality education to students in the ODL mode are vague". However, Won and Timothy (2003, p.36) stated, "With advances in multimedia and communication technologies, distance education is being adopted by corporations as well as universities". Likewise, Pradhan (2012, p.70) uttered, "distance education was a method of imparting education in which there was no face to face contact between the learner and the teacher...Now face to face interaction is becoming popular even in distance mode".

UNESCO (2002, p.20) stressed that open and distance learning offers the possibility of organizing learning and professional development in the workplace itself, which is often more flexible and saves costs of travel, subsistence. Minnaar (2013) claimed that the implementation of ODL needs careful and systematic planning to ensure success. In the same vein, Yilfashewa (2008) stated that, for smooth and efficient delivery of distance education programs, a good administrative and financial setup, and support to learners, facilities are very important. Volery and Lord (2000) offered four different benefits to education providers as enabling access to students; alleviating capacity constraints; capitalizing on emerging market

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opportunities; and serving as a catalyst in institutional transformation.

It is said that ODL is an alternative education system to benefit all the possible opportunities for the citizens belonging to those who are deprived from the national educational opportunities, especially women and marginalized community, army, police and other working class people through distance mode of education. It is a delivery of learning to learners who are ousted from the continuous study due to the lack of resources and geological difficulties as well. After completion of all the course requirements offered in distance mode, students will be awarded certificate which will be equivalent to the same degree received through face to face program.

Religious and historical literatures show that distance education was there in Nepal in two forms: through telepathy, and through pigeons and dogs to deliver the message. The first was made possible through yoga and the second was made possible with the help of birds and animal. But the machine based distance education program was started in Nepal when College of Education launched Radio Education Program for teacher training and promoting adult education in 1957 (Pradhan, 2012). Another important initiative was the launching of radio education teacher training project in 1978 by the Ministry of Education (MoE) focusing on enhancing the professional capabilities of in service primary teachers. Likewise, as provisioned in National Education Commission 1993, Distance Education

Centre (DEC) was established under MoE in 1994 (Pageni, 2016). The centre conducted teacher training and education awareness programs through radio broadcasting. **Talking about the expansion**

**of ODL in Nepal** Pradhan (2012, p.71) asserted, "Tribhuvan University, Faculty of Education had run B. Ed program through distance mode. Nine centers in TU constituent campuses were established for this purpose". Recently, TU has been conducting M. Ed. program in different subjects through open and distance learning center as one of the unit under faculty of education.

Likewise, Kathmandu University has been conducting the program like, M. Ed. (2 years and 1 year) and Post Graduate Diploma (PGD) in school management through distance education. In the same way, Purwanchal University has been conducting educational program like one year B. Ed. through open and distance learning. Similarly, Nepalese government has been conducting open school program for the students who have passed class 8 and have spent two years for taking SEE exam via open and distance learning. Recently, the Nepalese government has established Nepal Open University (NOU) which is conducting masters and M. Phil. program in various areas through distance mode using different modes of Information Communication Technology (ICT).

Reviewing articles, papers and dissertations about open and distance learning I found only few researches have been carried out in this area in Nepal. All the researches focus only on the problems and the opportunities of ODL in the context of other countries of the world except Nepal. Thus, this study contributes to fill the gap of the study of open and distance learning in the context of Nepal exploring the exciting condition of ODL with challenges of proper management of it including physical, geographical, social, technical complexities.

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### **Methodology**

I espoused narrative inquiry of qualitative study in this study which believes on multiple realities since it follows interpretive inquisition. Creswell (2003, p.18) stated "a qualitative approach is one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perceptive or advocacy/participatory perspectives or both". Likewise, he further stated that narrative research is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. Clandinin (2007, p. 633) asserted that the narrative captures the ætemporal development of lives and the unique histories of peopleÆ. In the same vein, Moen (2006) notes that narratives make it possible to study teachers in their environment and within their cultural and institutional settings. Narratives make possible the telling of teachers' lives by teachers themselves.

This study had been done in Sindhuli which is one of the districts and is situated in the mid-eastern part of Nepal. Administrative personal, instructor, teacher and student of the education sector related to open and distance learning is the participants of this study. Four participants were selected using non-random purposive sampling procedure on the basis of the judgment of my personal experiences from different institutions of Sindhuli to find out their live experiences regarding my research problems. I have given pseudo name to each participant for anonymity of their ideas as Participant A, B, C, and D.

As the unstructured and semi-structured interview is a flexible tool of data collection I used it to collect the different perspective of the participants. Conducting

in-depth interviews and involving in informal conversations with participants, I tried to generate information through my participants' stories. I kept record of informational conversation of participants in audio cassette maintaining field notes and data processing like editing, coding and developing global themes were done for data analysis and interpretation. I tried internalized the abstract ideas of the participants comparing and integrating with related literature.

### **Results and Discussions**

#### **Practice of ODL in Higher Education**

The globalization of distance education provides many opportunities for developing countries for the realisation of their education system-wide goals. (UNESCO, 2002) stated, "Two main factors have led to an explosion of interest in distance learning: the growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining; and the technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subjects at a distance". Many universities of the world including Nepal have been implementing this mode of education in their countries. Regarding the significance of ODL one of my participant Participant A said, "ODL is useful for the students who can't attend the class regularly. They can study at home by contacting their own teacher. It is an alternative way of education through which job holders and busy people can get benefit". In this context, Morpeth, Creed, Charlotte, Page and Raynor (2009) asserted that ODL enables the students to qualify without attending school or college in person, or open up new opportunities for keeping up to date no matter where or when they want to study. Explaining the practice of open learning in Sindhuli Participant A further stated:

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There is an open learning center in Sindhuli for the students who have passed class 8 and have spent 2 years, for involving in SEE examination. Mainly married and adult women take their admission in this program. Neither the students get in touch with the teachers nor do they attend the contact class regularly.

These statements make clear that the condition of ODL in SEE level is not tolerable because there is not regularity of the students in the contact class. Addressing this issue Chauhan (2012,p.4) affirmed, "many learners tend to carry no responsibility in pedagogic assumptions in ODL. In turn, the tendency might culminate in using ODL as mere formality for awarding and getting certificate". However, Rumble (2000) added that ODL can effectively reach those learners who have been denied access to higher education, for example, women who are unable to attend traditional educational programmes because of household responsibilities or cultural constraints, economically marginalized groups, and the imprisoned. Making discussion on the same issue my next Participant B announced:

The students learn through radio, TV, internet in ODL. It is the best way which ensures the right to get education without attending in formal education. The condition of the ODL in Nepal is not satisfactory since it is not well managed and there is no access of rural people in it.

This expression reveals that there is not access of general people in ODL and the government is not serious to manage ODL. Talking on this situation of ODL in Nepal, Bajracharya (2014,p.1093) concluded, "there are not a sufficient number of higher educational institutions with in all around the country... the quality of ODL

components in higher education in Nepal has not been assessed for public accountability and self-improvement". Concerning on the practice of ODL my third participant, a student of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Participant C articulated:

I am studying computer education in International Academy center, Kathmandu. The facilitators give the assignments to us and we should submit it every week. The students working in office or business firm can study in ODL without leaving their own jobs. The condition of the ODL in IGNOU is endurable as many students are attracted towards this program thinking it is useful to obtain higher education.

This remark asserts that the system of the ODL in IGNOU is systematic and well arranged. IGNOU is making distance learning available in Nepal because of which many people are completing their higher study. My next Participant D added his opinion on the practice of ODL in higher education in Nepal as,

The busy people can easily achieve education by living in their own place through ODL. TU, KU and PU have been running the programs like 2 years and 1 year M. Ed. and B. Ed. The Nepalese government has been running 84 learning center for ODL all over the country for school level. Nepal Open University has launched its program throughout the country through which a number of students have been participating in higher study. But the study center of NOU is not enough for the students.

The statement made by him illustrates that formal education is not only enough in Nepal; ODL should be managed and conducted effectively by universities including Open University in Nepal. Pagani

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(2016, P.36) explained that the limited flexibility of higher studies are being expanded because every year new courses and programs are offered by TU and KU through ODL. Exploring this condition Rashid and Rashid (2012, p.23) stated:

Distance education institution/ university have one main campus in its jurisdiction, while its learners are spread in all over the country. It is impossible to build own study centres in all of the towns and cities of the country. ..there may be no visit by the university management and due to the lack of proper visits, interaction and coordination may create various types of problems in this regard.

#### **Challenges of ODL in Higher Education**

The learners not only catch benefits from ODL but also they should tolerate many kinds of the challenges or problems. The main problem faced by the open universities in all over the world relates to the maintenance of standards. Talking about challenges of ODL Participant A expressed his ideas as, "There is the lack of sufficient library, technical materials such as internet facility, computers, telephone, Multi Media Projector (MMP), wifi and learning materials like text book, self-learning documents in learning center of ODL in Nepalese context". The description discloses that it is difficult to provide each and every means of information communication technology in Nepal. In this context, talking about Malawi, Chimpololo (2010, pp. 621-22) said:

The centres face enormous challenges pertaining to distance education study materials, curriculum guides, science equipment and face-to-face supervision which is hampered by inadequate staffing levels... Furthermore, the service centres do not have adequate book resources to satisfy

demand. Most of them are under-resourced and possess a large of quantity of old and out-dated editions.

In the issue of the challenges and the problems of open and distance learning, Participant B put his own opinion as, "There is not ample access of internet facility, use of ICT and qualified human resource for ODL in Nepal. There is problem of electricity rural area of Nepal and power cut is another challenge to regularize the class of ODL". This observation stresses that there is the problem of internet service and expertise in ICT along with irregularity in electricity supply in rural area of Nepal. To support this opinion, Chauhan (2014, p.465) stated that distance education relies heavily on advancement and proliferated use of media and communication through the internet, e-mail, telephone and video-conferencing. Internet access is improving rapidly, but is still generally too weak and inconsistent to allow any reliance on net-based learning solutions. All these devices need uninterrupted supply of electricity but power cut occurs unknowingly in Nepal. The Participant C talks in the same issue as:

The materials which are provided to the students are not abundance. The students are given the list of references and they should collect them from different sources which is difficult task. The teachers are not providing sufficient guidance to the students. So the students are feeling difficulty in their study because of the lack of face to face interaction with their teachers time to time.

The explanations expressed piece makes it apparent that IGNO has given opportunity for them to acquire education through ODL but they are suffering from the problems for instance resource materials and gap between the teachers and the students.

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Concerning on this challenge of ODL, Yilfashewa (2008, p.143) argued that the most frequently identified barriers in ODL includes, lack of technical support, lack of software/adequate equipment, lack of faculty/administrative support, the amount of preparation time required to create assignments, and student resistance .In the same context Participant D said,

The challenges of the ODL in the context of Nepal are short of enough physical facility with economic, social and structural management leading towards strong commitment for quality assurance. Having physical facility is not enough; providing high-quality is another challenge of ODL which needs solid commitment.

The quotes account that quality assurance is the main challenge for ODL. Defining quality assurance (COL, 1997) affirmed that quality of philosophy covers such things as ODL vision, mission and policy statements, institutional culture, governance, corporate culture, and public image. Regarding the issue of quality in ODL, Ogunleye (2013, p.61) concluded as, "When quality assurance systems and procedures are clear and activities well defined, it is only then, that open and distance learning institutions will be able to meet high quality standards". Bajracharya (2014, p.1093) claimed, "ODL institutions in Nepal are using their own quality assurance framework to maintain the quality issues, which is proposed by their affiliated universities".

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The need of ODL in higher education is an essential factor at present time because many students who are admitted in formal educational institution cannot attend the class regularly because of their works and such people can get education staying at

home or involving in their own business through it. After studying the practice of ODL in the context of Nepal in some institutions it found that ODL class is running from secondary level to university level. The stipulation of ODL in higher education is not adequate because it is not well managed and it is also not in the access of the target groups of rural area because the government is only paying attention on formal education system rather than ODL.

The institutions which are providing education through ODL in Nepal have problems of irregularity of students, sufficient library, internet facility, computers, telephone, Multi Media Projector (MMP), Wi-Fi, text book, self-learning documents, unavailability of capable expert and electricity supply. ODL in school level is not effectively managed because evaluation system in not regularized, monitoring system in not updated, teachers as well as students is not responsible. The strong commitment of the concerned agencies to provide quality assurance in ODL is also the challenge of open and distance learning. Thus, they tend to be very much sensible, responsible and active to create a favorable situation for ODL to the learners.

From the discussion of the study it is clear that the implementation of ODL needs careful and systematic planning to ensure success. People are not practically familiar with ODL but they believed that it is a useful and important alternative means of education by utilizing current ICT. Beyond formal education the government needs to extend ODL to engage a large number of populations in higher study. To overcome the problems and challenges of ODL, the concerned agencies should pay attention on the proper management of physical facility, human resources, and provisions of ICT as

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well as the access of the learning centers to the people. Electronic as well as self learning materials are to be easily available to the students.

Due to time and financial constraints I could not cover big area rather realities and challenges of ODL in Nepal taking sample from Sindhuli district. As open and distance learning is really burning issue in the contemporary education system, the further researches are needed to carry out in pedagogical and practical aspects of ODL in Nepal.

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### **Appendix I**

#### **Guideline Questions for Un-Structured Interview**

1. How do you introduce open and distance learning?
  2. Could you share your opinion about the practice of ODL?
  3. How do you see the condition of ODL in Nepal?
  4. What problems are there to implement effectively ODL in Nepal?
  5. Do you feel any difficulties while learning through ODL? ( for students)
  6. What kinds of challenges are there while managing ODL in higher education?
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