

Learner support services at distance higher education institutions in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents the features and relevance of open distance learning in the context of the socio-economic conditions of people living in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in India. Although the primary purpose of the present study was to ascertain the effectiveness of the learner support services (LSSs) and different facilities offered by the open distance learning (ODL) institutions in that specific region. On the basis of these findings, few suggestions are made for the improvement in the support services, in order to make the ODL system more responsive to the area-specific needs of the learners, especially those residing in inaccessible areas such as J&K.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey-based descriptive methodology was applied to conduct this study. The data extracted from primary and secondary sources were analysed to reach certain conclusions. In total, 1,200 distance learners constituted the sample of the research. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed and distributed amongst learners and academics in the region to obtain their feedback and opinion on different aspects of support services and facilities offered to ODL learners.

Findings – Results of the study revealed that overall, the LSSs were satisfactory on different parameters, although they slightly varied from institution to institution. However, there was still scope for improvement in certain areas, where institutions further need to make serious efforts to address the identified gaps for improving the LSS and make teaching-learning more learner-centric in view of their specific requirements and local circumstances of J&K.

Research limitations/implications – The present study focusses on presenting an overview of the only major components of LSS offered by ODL institutions and covers six distance education institutions (DEIs) located in different geographical locations within the limited jurisdiction of J&K. There is still scope to make focused (institution-wise) studies in a more specific situation and context to ascertain the problems in a more realistic way.

Practical implications – Although the study has been conducted in a specific territory of J&K, the findings reported in the paper may be equally useful for the other ODL institutions with similar characteristics or located in similar geographical locations, as support services are essential common components of institutions offering distance education programmes or courses.

Originality/value – The study is original research work conducted in the specific context of J&K, and its findings are based on the primary and secondary data collected from learners and other stakeholders of the selected ODL institutions. This work may be significant for the DEIs of J&K to get familiar with the essential



components of LSS and develop a mechanism to further improve the academic and administrative support services for distance learners.

Keywords Open distance learning, Learner support services, Jammu and Kashmir, J&K, ODL learners, Distance higher education

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

1.1 Distance higher education: challenges and initiatives

Making higher education more accessible and equitable has always been a matter of concern for the state and union governments and policymakers in India. Besides this, inculcation of required skills and levels of competencies according to the needs and demands of 21st-century society has been another challenge. The open distance learning (ODL) system has contributed significantly to this direction by providing learner-centric education and skills and, most importantly, serving the marginalised sections through different instructional media like print, audio-visual, teleconferencing, interactive radio counselling and different online platforms. This evolving system of educational transactions is playing a very crucial role in the discourse on knowledge construction and dissemination by designing and utilising innovative and cost-effective delivery strategies across the globe, including India, where the higher education system is the third largest in the world next to the USA and China. [Mittal \(2023\)](#) pointed out the challenges that a large chunk of Indian students prefer to study abroad due to the limited infrastructural facilities, lack of new courses and poor student support services. Although there have been lots of challenges, equally lots of opportunities exist to overcome these problems and make the higher education system much better ([Sheikh, 2017](#)). Challenges before the authorities included ensuring accessibility to quality education and creating productive and skilled human resources. Therefore, central, state and union territory governments, with the passage of time have been taking various initiatives, like setting up new universities, colleges, skill enhancement centres and training institutes, to strengthen the educational system for providing seamless education and developing productive human resources. However, as of now, neither India has reached the expected target of the literacy rate nor the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) as envisaged in policy documents. In [NEP \(2020\)](#), the target of GER in higher education has been fixed at 50% by the year 2035, which is currently 27% ([NEP, 2020](#); [Asgar, 2022](#)).

1.2 Higher education and open distance learning in UT of J&K

In Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the present literacy rate is still 67.16%, which is far lower than the national literacy rate of 74.04% ([Census, 2011](#)). Further, the literacy rate in the territory is also lower than the two neighbouring northern hilly states, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, where the literacy rate is 82.80 and 78.82%, respectively. Though there are various factors like poverty, unemployment, growing population and lesser penetration of schools and higher educational institutions in remote areas, etc. Behind the low literacy rate in J&K, no doubt, the conventional system of education has contributed towards making the people literate and developing of human resources; however, due to limitations of the face-to-face education system, like limited seats, inadequate infrastructure and high cost, F2F education has not yielded the desired results. Moreover, a huge chunk of the population is living in the difficult hilly terrain of the union, and it may not be practical to bring those populations under the umbrella of the conventional education system. In this situation, the ODL system brings a ray of hope for mass education, as this is the system that has the great potential to accommodate mass learners and address the challenges or shortcomings of the face-to-face (F2F) or classroom education system due to its inbuilt features of flexibility and

openness in providing education anytime, anywhere, at any age, with any eligibility and feature of learner-centeredness. In addition to these, traditional education demands huge infrastructure and other allied spheres, which sometimes turn a bit challenging for the states and UTs to manage; hence, distance education has turned into a realistic solution to meet the universal demand for education (Rocha *et al.*, 2000). This we can observe in J&K, where the ODL system has turned into a major tool for developing and educationally empowering common people and bringing them at par with mainstream society. Therefore, a large number of learners trust and depend on the ODL, which has a huge potential to enrol a large population and educate them in a cost-effective manner.

In this territory, two state universities, namely the University of Kashmir (UoK) and the University of Jammu (UoJ) offer distance education programmes through their respective directorates. Two central universities, namely Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), also have their regional centres (RCs). The major objectives of these higher distance education institutions (DEIs) are to reach the unreached population living in hilly and remote terrains, where access to conventional education is a big challenge. The use of information communication tools (ICTs) has given further impetus to DEIs operating in the area to make efforts to reach the doorstep of learners to contribute towards educating, skilling and training the local people so that they can grab employment opportunities in the government and private sectors.

2. Significance of the study

The contributions of DEIs have been enormous towards the educational upliftment of people living in this northern hilly area of India. However, despite these contributions, some researchers and practitioners raise doubts over the teaching-learning quality and especially the learner support services (LSSs) in the ODL system. "Support services are probably the weakest component of ODL in India as over 50% of the DEIs do not have any learner support service (LSS) network", Katoch (2014). Furthermore, there is a dearth of research studies on LSS in J&K in comparison to other areas of distance education. In this context, the present study was conceptualised and conducted to examine LSS, which is a very essential component of a distance education system. Special attention is paid to reviewing the effectiveness of some selected LSS components, which are considered extremely necessary whilst delivering educational programmes through the distance mode. The findings of this work may be useful not only for the DEIs in J&K, but these findings may be equally helpful for the other institutions based in similar geographical terrain and socio-cultural backgrounds in offering quality support services.

3. Objectives

The major objectives of this study are:

- (1) To discuss the major features of ODL and the importance of LSS in the context of the Union Territory of J&K.
- (2) To overall examine the select aspects of support services provided by the ODL institutions in the Union Territory of J&K.
- (3) To study the select aspects of LSS offered by DEIs in the Jammu Division and Kashmir Division of the Union Territory of J&K and make a comparison of support services offered by DEIs of these two divisions.
- (4) To ascertain gaps in LSS, if any, and suggest measures to improve support services in the Union Territory of J&K.

4. Relevant studies

4.1 *Open distance education and support services*

According to [Kulandaiswamy \(2002\)](#), distance education is neither a supplement nor a complement to the conventional system. It is a new mode in its own right, meets new demands and caters to emerging target groups. It has a very high potential for transcending all barriers – economic, social, cultural and geographical – towards reaching to its clients. This system is gaining popularity, and the use of emerging technologies has further added to the scope of this mode of teaching-learning ([Tsarapkina et al., 2021](#)). Inbuilt openness and flexibilities have made ODL popular and globally acceptable. Furthermore, teaching-learning process altogether is a two-way interaction between a teacher and a student, and according to ([Aggarwal, 2010](#)), education is the influence exerted by a mature person (teacher) upon an immature person (learner). Therefore, the effective role of a teacher and the necessary support system become essential components of effective educational transactions. Even the conventional mode of education, which is considered a teacher-centric education system, shall be a bit challenging to operate without a certain support to students. In ODL, the mode of teaching-learning, an effective support system becomes more crucial, as teachers and students remain at distant. Open distance education or online digital education is meant to provide unique educational opportunities for varied learner groups, including learners with special needs; therefore, it has to maintain the promise of flexibility, accessibility and enjoyable learning experiences by offering effective learner support ([Kocdar and Bozkurt, 2022](#)). Thus, LSS has a very large scope in distance online education, covering different kinds of activities and services.

4.2 *Definition and components of support services*

According to [Croft \(1999\)](#), anything other than the actual course material that an institution provides to its students becomes support services. [Rumble \(1992\)](#) emphasised that the ODL system stands on two sub-systems, namely the materials sub-system and the student services sub-system. Student admission, induction, counselling and tutoring services, conducting interactive radio counselling and teleconferencing, assignment handling, evaluation and commenting on assignments, delivery of learning resources, addressing different types of academic and non-academic problems, declaration of results and dispatch of grade cards to learners are major components of the student services sub-system ([Sharma, 2010](#)). Thorpe (2000) further widened the scope of support services and said that the range of services provided before, during and after the learning process falls under the LSS. [Rao \(2017\)](#) summarised that student support services, therefore, cover a wide range of services and activities that cover all pervasive areas of the educational and learning process and are aimed to meet a wide variety of learner needs at different stages of their academic pursuit. Highlighting the importance of LSS in ODL, [Tait \(2003\)](#) argued that support services help in reinforcing confidence and self-esteem amongst learners, making academic progress smoother, reducing dropouts and ensuring timely and successful completion of academic programmes.

4.3 *Changing teaching-learning scenario and support to students*

Distance education HEIs have been implementing components of LSS according to their strength and capacities amid changing teaching-learning situations, delivery methods and learners' requirements. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of the distance education system and the importance of support services were tremendously realised globally, as the pandemic outbreak was sudden and educational institutions were unprepared to face such a situation. According to [Veerasamy and Ammigan \(2022\)](#), the worldwide pandemic left educational institutions unprepared, and numerous HEIs were

found struggling to meet the demands of their students whilst overcoming the obstacles that have never been seen before. Even [Moscaritolo et al. \(2022\)](#) pointed out that during the pandemic, learners suffered from the difficulties with mental health, including being unable to go home, financial issues, dread and academic uncertainties. [Nadaf and Ahanger \(2023\)](#) reported that, similar to other parts of India, teaching-learning processes were chaotic in J&K as well during the shutdown. Besides these, the inadequate number of HEIs, the poor standard of teaching-learning (TL) and the unavailability of timely support services to learners have been another problems in the area. To help the learners in the period of distress and crisis, [Rotar \(2022\)](#) suggested immediate support to learners through social networking sites, the use of personal mailings and online collaboration with peer groups to encourage distance learners who may be carrying the burdens of family and workplace. [Raaper et al. \(2022\)](#) advocated for awareness programmes on available institutional support and mentoring programmes besides making provision for mental health services. During the health crisis, distant learning and LSSs ultimately paved the way for a major transition from a traditional in-person service model to emergency remote teaching (ERT) and virtual style of support for learners to continue the process of teaching-learning.

4.4 Improving support services in J&K

As far as J&K is concerned, a few studies have been conducted on ODL and related areas, including major components of LSS. According to [Suri \(2013\)](#), distance learning is the mantra of the future having more opportunities than formal systems due to the inbuilt system of support services and people living in remote and militancy-affected areas of J&K could benefit significantly from it. But to meet the challenges of a knowledge society by ensuring mass education, ODL institutions need to expand their operations and services through collaborations and resource pooling ([Rocha et al., 2000](#)). A study was conducted on IGNOU RC in Jammu Division by ([Kales, 2014](#)) and the findings indicated that the enrolment of learners is increasing day by day. 35% of learners selected the ODL system to be self-reliant and 90% of learners opted it to improve their knowledge base and upgrade their qualifications. It was also reported that the majority of the learners were satisfied with this system; however, [Asgar and Wani \(2019\)](#) suggested revisions in learning resources and incorporation of innovative ideas in programme delivery and LSS. Similarly, [Shazia \(2013\)](#) in a study on the perception of learners from Kashmir about self-learning materials (SLMs) found a great scope for improvement in the content and format of learning resources and suggested a frequent revision in SLMs. She further suggested that SLMs should be prepared as per the understanding level of learners, content should be simple and logical with different activities to remove the isolation of a learner. However, she emphasised upon timely delivery of SLMs to achieve the main objective of making resources easily accessible to learners and reaching at their doorsteps. [Nanda \(2003\)](#) highlighted the scope of improvement in study materials, counselling service and assignment evaluation, although a large number of IGNOU learners in J&K were satisfied with the learner support as a whole.

According to [Sharma \(2019\)](#), mobile technology has a greater scope in J&K, which improves communication and enriches learning experiences. He also suggested that there should be the maximum use of digital technologies and social media platforms like WhatsApp, blogs and Facebook for quick communication and timely feedback to learners. [Srivastava \(2002\)](#) in her study also reported that there is a need for quality upgradation in support services through extensive use of IT. [Kocdar and Bozkurt \(2022\)](#) argued that the ODL system needs to further focus on implementing empathy and care-oriented pedagogies providing accessibility to assistive technologies, adapting friendly pedagogical principles and academic, managerial, administrative, social, personal and technical support to ensure equity, equality and justice for all learners. Highlighting the need for quality education loaded with effective support services in areas like J&K, [Mistri and Sardar \(2022\)](#) advocated for an

increasing number of HEIs, starting need-based courses and providing effective academic support services for the students residing in hilly terrain of India so that they can continue their studies without complaint or compromise. Amid changing TL methods, the use of technology and innovative pedagogic approaches, researchers also pressed upon the professional development of teachers and academics to improve LSS. [Asgar and Rampelli \(2021\)](#) highlighted upon organising more number of workshops to train and orient the faculty and support staff for timely and effective services to learners.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research method

A survey-based descriptive methodology was used for this study. Primary and secondary sources were utilised to get the relevant data.

5.2 Sample

1,200 learners belonging to all the 06 ODL institutions of J&K constituted the sample. Out of 1200 samples, 600 learners (300 learners from 03 DEIs of Jammu and 300 learners from 03 DEIs of Kashmir) participated in the survey and responded to the questionnaire.

5.3 Design of tool

The survey questionnaires were designed and developed after conducting a thorough review of literature on LSS and different components associated with it, and a detailed discussion with the experts of distance education helped in the identification of items and design of semi-structured questionnaires distributed amongst learners and academics for the collection of data. The tool delivered to learners was based on five-point Likert scale; however, to make the findings more explicit and precise, the data was analysed in three-point Likert scale by merging two-point Strongly Agree with Agree and a 2-point Disagree with Strongly Disagree.

5.4 Reliability and validity

To check the reliability and validity of the tool, it was distributed amongst a select number of learners and ODL teachers for their feedback. Few suggestions provided by ODL experts were found to be very constructive and those were incorporated into the tools to make them more reliable.

5.5 Data collection and analysis

Primary data collected from learners and directors of DDE and RCs related to institutional profile, ODL programmes, available facilities and support services. Relevant secondary data were also extracted from policy documents, institutions' websites and annual reports. A simple statistical tool like MS Excel was used to categorise, tabulate and analyse the data, and the results of primary data were reflected in frequency and percentage forms.

6. Findings and discussion

According to [UNESCO \(2002\)](#) "distance education is an educational process in which all or most of the teaching-learning is conducted through an artificial medium, either electronic or print". Taking cues from the advantages of ODL in terms of flexibility in admission criteria, mode of instruction or methods, a number of ODL institutions have been established in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. However, extreme weather conditions, hilly terrain, disturbances in communication and decades-long socio-political crisis have affected the lives of common people and the conventional educational ecosystem; as a result, there has been a huge scope

for the virtual/distance teaching-learning in the area (Wani *et al.*, 2022).– MANUU and IGNOU are working as a dual-mode university and open university, respectively. These two universities play their respective roles through RCs and providing education through various learner support centres LSCs or programme study centres (PSCs) spread across the territory. Besides the engagement of these two central universities in distance teaching-learning, there are two state universities (UoK and UoJ) working as dual-mode institutions/universities, offering academic programmes through their respective DDE. Therefore, within a short-span of time, the distance education gained huge popularity and acceptance amongst knowledge seekers.

As we can see in Table 1, presently, six ODL institutions are operating in the territory, and amongst them, IGNOU RCs are offering more programmes compared to other DDEs and RCs of other universities. This may be on two grounds: first, IGNOU has national stature and second, directorates of UoJ and UoK admit a limited number of students in some courses offered by them. The highest number of study centres was associated with IGNOU RC Srinagar (45), whilst the lowest number of LSCs was associated with DDE University of Jammu (07). Secondary data revealed that IGNOU has the privilege of having study centres in jails as well to impart free education and skills to the prisoners. During the study, it was also observed that the learner centres of the majority of institutions are spread across the length and breadth of the entire Jammu and Kashmir Divisions. However, academics of DEIs were of the view that there was a need to focus more on difficult terrain and some institutions need to extend their reach by opening study centres in the districts like Udhampur, Samba, Kathua, Ganderbal, Ramband, Reasi, Vailo Larnoo, Uri, Gurez, Drass, Kargil and Leh, etc. for the benefit of defence personnel and people from Scheduled Tribe (ST), etc. Moreover, stakeholder opinions also indicated the need for starting a toll-free number for learners, TV and radio broadcasts, and setting up placement cells at the local level by institutions that do not offer these facilities, besides the implementation of vital facilities like, pre- and post-admission counselling, induction programmes and grievance redressal mechanisms in a more professional and effective manner.

Whilst discussing institutions, their operational ambit and features, one should clearly understand that a robust learner support system, learner-centred facilities and services are the essential features of ODL (Asgar, 2021), which determine the strengths and weaknesses of this system. LSS becomes more important in areas that face problems of accessibility and

S. No.	ODL institutions	Year of establishment	No. Of UG, PG, diploma and certificate prog./ courses	No. Of regular study centres (RSCs), prog. Study centres (PSCs), special study centres (SSCs)
1	Directorate of Distance Education, University of Kashmir	1976	20	15
2	Directorate of Distance Education, University of Jammu	1976	11	07
3	IGNOU RC Srinagar	1999	82	45
4	IGNOU RC Jammu	1989	82	35
5	MANUU RC Srinagar	2005	17	17
6	MANUU Sub-RC Jammu	2006	17	12

Table 1.
Distance education
institutions in J&K

Source(s): UoK Prospectus (2022–23), UoJ (2023), IGNOU RC Srinagar (2023), MANUU Prospectus (2023–24), IGNOU RC Jammu (2023) and DDE MANUU (2023a, b)

connectivity to achieve the philosophy of reaching to the unreached and making education accessible to all. The ODL system has a unique teaching-learning methodology, student support mechanism and different facilities focused on learners' needs and expectations. In the ODL system, where there is limited face-to-face contact between the learners and the teachers, there is a strong need to provide necessary facilities and help to learners for quality education. Keeping this in view, perceptions of distance learners from the above institutions (Table 1) were collected to ascertain the availability of some key facilities at the institutional level and effectiveness of select LSS components.

Starting with the first item, conducting an induction programme is an important component of LSS as it is the first step to induct learners into the distance education and make them familiar with the ODL system. Most of the learners join distance education after getting education through the conventional or face-to-face mode of education; therefore, induction should be organised in a systematic and professional way so that learners feel welcomed into the new system and take most of the benefits. Analysis of the results on this component revealed that 69% of the learners found the induction programme useful; however, 16% reported disagreement (DA + SDA) and 15% remained neutral (N). If we combine figures of disagreement and neutrality, it comes to about 31%, which cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is suggested, that the induction programme should be conducted regularly for all the new learners to win their confidence in the system. Moreover, their participation in such programmes will help them in interacting and getting familiar with the peer-groups, counsellors and functionaries of the study centres and RCs. This also becomes essential because a big chunk of distance learners are unaware about their role in the systemic requirements; hence, they need to be professionally guided in the transition phase of their studies.

SLMs are another important component of TL at distance, which are a medium of simulated two-way communication between an invisible teacher and a learner. The use of quick response (QR) codes and open educational resources (OERs), 3D animations, pictures, graphs and charts have enriched the scope and usefulness of SLMs (Asgar and Wani, 2019). These self-learning resources should be based on specific instructional design and presented in a learner-centric format, keeping in view the unique features and requirements of distance learners. But features aside, timely delivery of learning resources to learners is equally important. Shazia (2013) also pressed upon timely delivery of SLMs to achieve one of the LSS objectives of making resources easily available and accessible to learners. In this context, results of the present study show that on average 55% learners were satisfied (SA + A) with the time taken for the delivery of SLMs but 23% learners were in disagreement (DA + SDA) with the delivery time, whilst 22% remained neutral.

Similarly, timely evaluation of assignments is necessary, as tutor comments and feedback provided on them motivate learners and prepare them for the term-end examination. Findings of the study showed that 71% (SA + A) of learners reported that the evaluation of assignment was done on time. Results also indicate that 58% of respondents were satisfied with the feedback on the assignment, whilst 20% showed a neutral response. However, if we see the results of DA + SDA, 22% of learners were dissatisfied and need the attention of support services officials. Tutor comments on assignments promote two-way communication between the teacher and the learners, and it has major pedagogic significance, i.e. feedback from teachers encourages and motivates learners to improve their learning skills and also guides to prepare for the term-end examinations.

Academic counselling creates an opportunity of face-to-face interactions between teachers/counsellors and learners. It is necessary not only to remove the doubts of the learners about a specific topic of the subject but also to keep them active and motivated during the course of study. Findings unveiled that majority of (58%) respondents reported

that counselling sessions were well organised and these helped them in their studies, whilst 22% were dissatisfied. In total, 64% of learners also reported as mentioned in Table 2 that counselling sessions were taken by the qualified and expert tutor/counsellor, whilst 21% remained neutral, and if we examine the scale DA + SDA, 15% may be expecting more qualified and experienced academic counsellors. This also highlights the need to deploy trained academic counsellors who could work up to the expectations of the learners. In his study on LSS, Nanda (2003) also reported that although a large number of learners were satisfied with the support services, there was scope for improvement in academic counselling. This should also be noted that in distance education, learners merely get the immediate feedback and remain isolated from their peer group. In this scenario, it is academic counselling sessions that provide an opportunity for the interactions amongst learners and teachers. Therefore, the conduct of counselling sessions or contact classes must become a serious affair for the study centres to keep the learners engaged in lively and fruitful academic interactions.

Raising the queries is a normal phenomenon in any educational system, but immediate resolution of these should be the focus of the functionaries of the ODL system because ensuring quality support services and fulfilling learner satisfaction is a continuous process, and HEIs are the best evaluators to evaluate themselves (Wong and Chapman, 2023). In this context, a common questionnaire was put before the learners to register their reactions to the

S.No.	Parameters/Statement on components of LSS and its effectiveness	Strongly agree + agree (SA + A) J&K Frequency (%)	Neutral (N) J&K Frequency (%)	Disagree + Strongly disagree (DA + SDA) J&K Frequency (%)
1	Induction programme was useful	414(69)	88(15)	98(16)
2	SLM was delivered timely	329(55)	130(22)	141(23)
3	Evaluation of assignment done on time	424(71)	55(09)	121(20)
4	Feedback on assignment was useful	351(58)	118(20)	131(22)
5	Counselling sessions conducted regularly	350(58)	121(20)	129(22)
6	Counselling sessions conducted by qualified tutors	381(64)	128(21)	91(15)
7	Counselling sessions helped in grasping SLM contents	423(71)	92(15)	85(14)
8	Academic problems were solved by RCs/LSCs	348(58)	109(18)	143(24)
9	Administrative issues were resolved by RCs/LSCs	312(52)	137(23)	151(25)
10	Queries were addressed promptly by support staff	285(48)	152(25)	163(27)
11	Assessment and evaluation process was satisfactory	344(57)	172(29)	84(14)
12	Results were declared on time and course completed on time	368(61)	84(14)	148(25)
	Overall results (average of 12 components in %, figures rounded off)	60%	19%	21%
Source(s): Table by authors				

Table 2.
Overall perception of learners' about various components of LSS (n = 600)

solution of their problems. Results underline that 58% of the learners were in agreement (SA + A) that their academic queries were solved timely and effectively by the concerned RCs/directorates/learner support centres. However, 18% showed neutral response and 24% were dissatisfied (DA + SDA). In total, 52% respondents reported that their administrative problems were also resolved, whilst 25% disagreed (DA + SDA) with the statement on the resolution of non-academic problems. In total, 48% respondents reported that their general queries were addressed promptly (SA + A), whilst 27% of them reported otherwise (DA + SDA) and this is a big number. It is quite evident from the results that academic and administrative problems were solved by the concerned bodies; however, there is also scope for further improvement in these kinds of services, as more than 20% were unsatisfied. As far as promptness in addressing academic and administrative problems is concerned, 27% reported that they could not get prompt action; thus, LSCs/RCs must pay due attention to the learners' problems and quick resolution of the problems/queries raised by learners. This finding is corroborated by [Amin \(2018\)](#), who reported that DEIs need to improve LSS in J&K by addressing issues faced by learners in a time-bound manner. Apart from adapting friendly pedagogical principles, DEIs must ensure effective academic, administrative support to ensure equity, equality and justice for all learners ([Kocdar and Bozkurt, 2022](#)). [Mistri and Sardar \(2022\)](#) also argued for prompt academic support services for the students residing in the hilly terrain of India so that they can continue their studies without complaint or compromise.

Assessment and evaluation are another other important areas of LSS. In total, 57% of learners were satisfied (SA + A) with the evaluation process, 29% were neutral (N) and 14% disagreed (DA + SDA). Responding to the question on the timely declaration of results, the majority of them (61%) agreed that the results were declared on time, and they completed the programme on time, but still 25% of learners disagreed. Time taken for the evaluation of assignments, answer scripts and declaration of results can be reduced further by implementing emerging educational tools and online technologies. DEIs in J&K needed to work on this area, especially experiences faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was only technology which came to rescue the ODL institutions by facilitating ERT. [Srivastava \(2002\)](#) also emphasised the need for quality upgradation in LSS through extensive use of technology. In addition to these, distance education colleges/universities will have to develop and work rigorously on a tech-based mechanism that guarantees quality and speedy learner support, which will lead them towards satisfying the needs of learners and other stakeholders. [Kocdar and Bozkurt \(2022\)](#) suggest that DEIs need to further focus on tech-enabled support services and provide accessibility to assistive technologies for teaching-learning purposes. According to [Sharma \(2019\)](#), mobile technology has a greater scope in J&K for faster communication between institutions and learners and joyful and enriching TL experiences and support services.

If we take the holistic view of responses received from the learners of 6 ODL institutions of J&K on 12 different components of LSS, it is quite obvious from the results mentioned in [Table 2](#) that majority of respondents (60%) are in agreement or satisfied (SA + A) with the various services they received. In total, 20% of them remained neutral whilst 21% disagreed (DA + SDA) with the different statements. Even though the majority is satisfied, N and DA + SDA (19 + 21 = 40) is a big number and this makes a strong and valid argument that still DEIs will still have to go to extra miles to fulfil learners' requirements by strengthening specific support services like specific services like timely delivery of SLM, resolving academic and administrative problems, answering learners' queries promptly, speedy declaration of results, commenting on assignments and counselling services so that ODL system turns more learner-centric in J&K.

The Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir in the northern part of India is divided into two divisions, namely the Jammu Division and the Kashmir Division and 20 districts to streamline governance ([Govt. of J&K, 2023](#)). During the study, researchers tried to get feedback from learners of both the divisions separately on the effectiveness of 12 aspects of LSS.

It is quite evident from the results ([Table 3](#)) that the majority of respondents (between 50 and 71%) are in agreement on the effectiveness of the majority of support services components provided to them. The overall perception of learners from both the divisions about various support services components on the scale of Strongly Agree + Agree (SA + A) differs very slightly only by 2%, which may not be a significant difference. 1% variation is found on the neutral scale, whilst 3% variation was found on the scale of disagree and strongly disagree (DA + SDA). However, learner opinions on a few components such as quick solution to academic and non-academic problems hovered just below or just above the 50% on the scale of SA + A, which suggests that institutions need to work on these areas to augment the LSS further to satisfy learners needs.

In the light of the above discussion, the importance of effective support services remains intact. According to [Venkaiah \(1996\)](#), this is also because distance learners come from diverse educational, social, occupational and economic backgrounds, there is a lack of study skills amongst them and most of the time they are isolated from teachers/peer-groups. They have to balance their work, studies and family responsibilities and they may be in need of different kinds of support at any stage of their studies and its institutions responsibility to make the provision of LSS as per the learners' expectations and requirements. [Aggarwal \(2010\)](#) opined that the necessary support system is an essential component for DEIs for effective educational transactions. Therefore, J&K-based ODL institutions should work towards addressing the gaps discussed in the previous sections and take solid steps to make LSS more effective, which shall help in building confidence and self-esteem amongst learners and ultimately lead to reducing the dropout ratio and timely completion of the academic programmes ([Tait, 2003](#)). However, there may be challenges related to infrastructure, funds and human resources that should be taken care of by the centre and local government. Moreover, ODL institutions should also go for collaborations and resource pooling ([Rocha et al., 2000](#)) to create a robust support system. Another challenge may be the dearth of trained academic counsellors and other supporting staff, who are mostly from the convention colleges, universities and departments. They may be less familiar with the ODL system, its specific and unique instructional design and support service mechanism. Therefore, DEIs need to orient these employees and build their capacities to contribute effectively in this system. [Asgar and Rampelli \(2021\)](#) emphasised on conducting different kinds of workshops and capacity building programmes on different themes of open distance and online learning to train academic counsellors and different ODL functionaries so that institutions could ensure timely and effective support services to learners with the help of trained professionals posted at different RCs and study centres.

7. Conclusion and suggestions

Two state universities (UoK and UoJ) are functioning in the dual mode and providing distance education through their respective directorates. Besides these, the two central universities IGNOU and MANUU are offering ODL programmes and different kinds of academic and administrative support services to their learners through their respective RCs and study centres across J&K. Overall, these institutions have the penetration of LSCs/PSCs in almost all districts of their jurisdictions. However, some RCs and Sub-RCs may strive to set up more/new study centres and launch new courses and programmes in areas that are mostly unreached; this may not only help in increasing the enrolment but also make education

S.No.	Parameters/ Statement on components of LSS and its effectiveness	Strongly agree + agree (SA + A)		Neutral (N)		Disagree + Strongly disagree (DA + SDA)	
		Jammu division Frequency (%)	Kashmir division Frequency (%)	Jammu division Frequency (%)	Kashmir division Frequency (%)	Jammu division Frequency (%)	Kashmir division Frequency (%)
1	Induction programme was useful	197(65)	217(72)	49(16)	39(13)	54(18)	44(15)
2	SLM was delivered timely	164(55)	165(55)	61(20)	69(23)	75(25)	66(22)
3	Evaluation of assignment done on time	211(71)	213(71)	21(07)	34(12)	68(22)	53(17)
4	Feedback on assignment was useful	166(56)	185(62)	61(20)	57(19)	73(24)	58(19)
5	Counselling sessions conducted regularly	171(57)	179(60)	56(19)	65(22)	73(24)	56(18)
6	Counselling sessions conducted by qualified tutors	184(61)	197(66)	66(22)	62(21)	50(17)	41(13)
7	Counselling sessions helped in grasping SLM contents	212(71)	211(70)	40(13)	52(17)	48(16)	37(13)
8	Academic problems were solved by RCs/ LSCs	174(58)	174(58)	51(17)	58(19)	75(25)	68(23)
9	Administrative issues were resolved by RCs/ LSCs	154(51)	158(53)	64(22)	73(24)	82(27)	69(23)
10	Queries were addressed promptly by support staff	140(47)	145(48)	77(26)	75(25)	83(27)	80(27)
11	Assessment and evaluation process was satisfactory	164(55)	180(60)	92(31)	80(27)	44(14)	40(13)
12	Results were declared on time and course completed on time	186(62)	182(61)	37(12)	47(16)	77(26)	71(23)
Overall results (average of 12 components in %, figures rounded off)		59%	61%	19%	20%	22%	19%

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3.
Perception of learners
from Kashmir Division
and Jammu Division on
major components of
LSS (n = 300 from each
division)

accessible to all. Some institutions offer facilities like toll-free number for learners, TV and radio broadcasts; however, more DEIs may also take initiative in this direction and further also work for creating local placement cell, robust grievance redressal mechanism besides organising induction programmes and pre- and post-admission counselling in more frequently and in a complete professional way. Majority of respondents were found satisfied with the various services they received at RCs of LSCs, however, (21%) registered dissatisfaction, and this reflects that still there is scope for DEIs to take measures to improve specific services like timely delivery of SLM, immediate resolution of academic/administrative problems, speedy evaluation of assignments, sending tutor's comments on assignments to learners, declaration of results and ensuring quality academic counselling services or contact classes to fulfil learners' requirements and expectations. This shall greatly contribute towards making the ODL system more learner-centric, dynamic, demanding and offering quality support services in J&K.

On the basis of the findings of the present study as discussed in previous sections, followings are a few major suggestions:

- (1) DDEs of UoK and UoJand RCs of MANUU may launch new programmes/courses so that learners get the more choices, which will also help in achieving the GER target of NEP 2020 may be fulfilled.
- (2) The number of LSCs/PSCs in uncovered/far-flung areas/border areas of J&K where the facilities of the conventional system of education are not possible should be increased.
- (3) DEIs should strive for an effective mechanism to ensure timely delivery of SLMs to learners, which is vital to retain the interest of the learners and motivate them.
- (4) Results must be declared on time and grade cards dispatched immediately that will help the learners in getting employment without losing further time.
- (5) DDEs/RCs/LSCs/PSCs should utilise the technology at the optimum level for speedy, effective services and delivery of programmes.
- (6) DEIs should show promptness in addressing the academic and administrative problems of students. They must be provided with the necessary information on real-time basis through different media/tools.
- (7) DEIs may like to follow IGNOU practice to offer education to jail inmates free of cost, so that inmates get education, reform themselves and come out of jail as a literate and good human beings.
- (8) Institutions may arrange for training of academic counsellors and other staff handling LSS to sensitise them towards learners' specific needs, and how they can help them in resolving academic and administrative issues.

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Further reading

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Learner
support
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