

Deciphering the Distance between Distance Education and Working Professionals in Difficult Geographies

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This study investigates the factors that draw working professionals towards distance education programs, and the factors that sustain their distance education experience. The study is conducted in difficult terrains of Uttarakhand, a hilly state in India which helps us investigate the phenomenon in difficult geographies. Through interviews of ten working professionals in this difficult geography these factors are deduced and a conceptual model is then developed. We also tried to find theoretical linkages to the factors identified. The findings are of value to distance educators and students alike. Keywords: Interview, Distance Education, Working Professional, Difficult Geographies

The question of why a working professional would invest her/his time and energy in pursuing a course through distance education had been of interest to us. Though the phenomena is universal what made it special was the setting in which it was taking place. This phenomena was observed in Uttarakhand, a hilly state in central Himalayan region of India. The complex terrain of the land is composed of hills and plains and is susceptible to natural calamities (Justice, 2013; Pandey & Joshi, 2011). A geography of Uttarakhand hills combined with low access and visibility can be classified as a difficult geography. Studies have brought forth the asymmetries in resource distribution in difficult geographies in Uttarakhand (Ghanshala, Pant, & Pandey, 2013). A public sector organization was chosen for this study to compound the complexity of the phenomenon as studies have indicated that public sector do not work efficiently (Nandeoliyar, 1996, p. 59; Sathye, 2005) and bureaucracy is seen as a major factor for this state (Gupta, 2012). An important question became: What then drove them to put in effort to pursue higher education? To find the reasons, we set out to interview ten people from Uttarakhand state in a public sector organization. We found different factors that emerged as response to our engagement with the respondents and transcribed transcripts. These factors were found to have groundings in existing constructs, which are discussed later in this paper. The research attempts to add to the understanding of distance education companies who wish to attract working professionals into their fold and students of difficult geographies who wish to pursue distance education along with jobs. The results would thus be extremely useful for both nonprofit and for-profit distance education institutions. It will also entice scholars to take a view from post structuralism towards emancipatory research for marginalized difficult geographies.

Educational Needs for Modern Times

Dynamic environment has posited dynamic challenges for managers and non-managers alike. These dynamic challenges need updated skills and knowledge on the part of employees of present organization. Educational interventions act as savior in such situation and revitalize the organizational human assets. Continuous improvement is the norm to compete in cutthroat competition and improvement of education methods and techniques can provide any organization a strategic and competitive advantage. The organizational intangible assets (Employees) become more valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable as they continuously evolve (Barney, 1991).

Distance Education as Training Mechanism

Evolution of distance education can be seen because many people could not participate in face to face training programs (Beldarrain, 2006). Distance education thus helped working professionals to stay up to date in their academic endeavors while working and without leaving job. Training or education through distance mode is on the rise with the progression of technology. The advantage of distance education is its convenience and flexibility with respect to time and place. The distance in distance education paradigm has been bridged by technology. Present times need people to be equipped with new skills and knowledge effectively and technology is acting as a substratum to support personalized, flexible, portable, and on-demand delivery of learning (Zhang & Zhao, 2004). Nature of distance is such that it requires students to engage in self-regulation because physical absence of instructor to regulate students' behavior (Tuckman, 2007). However there are potential weaknesses of distance education like the physical absence of classroom and one to one interaction. Lack of interaction, feedback and social support in distance education leads to lesser engagement in learning activities (Tuckman, 2007). Less involvement in distance education has resulted in high frequency of students, withdrawing of distance education as compared to that of standard education (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010).

Distance education in reality bridges the distance between learner and teacher. The flexibility provided by this pedagogy can be used to harness effects of training without wasting organizational time. Positive link of motivation and learning factors like self-regulation, interest and self-efficacy to levels of student engagement have been observed (Bates & Khasawneh, 2007).

Outcomes of Distance Education

Distance education, distance learning, dlearning, or D-Learning is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Distance learning provides "access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both" (Miller & Honeyman, 1993). Distance education like other form of education is aiding in intellectual development of an individual. Researchers have brought forth differing views with respect to comparative outcomes of distance education and traditional education. Some are of the view that distance education has barriers like lack of face to face contact and motivation (Galusha, 1998) which make it worse than traditional education whereas others are of the view that distance education can be just as good as traditional face-to-face education (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002; Merisotis & Phipps, 1999; Tucker, 2001) there are also others that believe distance education to better; a meta-analysis of 86 experimental and quasi-experimental studies show that in two thirds of the cases, students who took courses through distance education showed between performance than their student counterparts enrolled in traditionally instructed courses (Shachar & Neumann, 2003). The rapid growth in technology is decreasing the rift between traditional and distance education outcomes.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Authors being in the area of higher education are interested in the phenomena of dissemination of education through alternative means especially in a country like India with high geographical diversity. This situation is made more critical by shortage of faculty for higher education and low interest of these faculty members to move to difficult geographies to impart education (4 lakh faculty shortage in India: NAAC director, 2012; India facing acute

faculty famine, 2013; Neelakantan, 2007). The institutes like ours are proactively exploring the possibility of disseminating education through distance education and conduct many programs for working professionals on campus. Such experiments in the past had been moderately successful, more successful for fields where lecture based method were effective but faced challenges while imparting education through case based methodology. The question on why working professionals chose education and distance education in particular was central to this research. This question was posed to people residing in difficult geographies with resource constraints in terms of faculty and infrastructure. We also chose to investigate what factors made them to successfully pursue their distance education program. In this changing times where professional have dearth of time and resources it was important to find what attracts and sustains them to distance education. We wish to provide direction to educational planning for difficult geographies and assess the impact of distance education as a medium to reach these places.

Method

We approached working professionals in a public sector organization in Uttarakhand who had pursued or were pursuing distance education courses. We chose public sector organization for our research, as there is a high degree of job security in these jobs and it is not dictated by the organization to pursue higher education, hence it is more self-driven whereas in private sector organization enhancing one's education and skill is critical to job security.

Interview was the best approach in order to know their personal experiences about distance education, it allowed researchers to listen to the answers and ask probing questions (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2010). Before interviewing they were informed about the objectives of the study and explicit verbal permission was obtained with regard to the conduction of interview. These interviews allowed the participants to reveal their emotional cognitive and gut feelings (Pandey & Roberts, 2012). All these working professionals belonged to different divisions of the same public sector organization. Their demographic characters are presented in Table 1. The male dominant sample represents the population characteristic where majority of organization's employees were males. To ensure ethical research practice to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality respondents were assured that their responses would be treated as confidential and their personal information like names and phone numbers would not be disclosed.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Respondent Number	Designation	Years into service	Age	Gender
1	Junior Telecom Officer	5	32	M
2	Junior Telecom Officer	4	29	M
3	Accounts	9	34	M
4	Sub Divisional Engineer	17	42	M
5	Sub Divisional Engineer	10	40	M
6	Junior Telecom Officer	5	30	M
7	HR	3	29	F
8	Assistant General Manage	36	57	M
9	Marketing	4	28	M
10	Accounts	30	50	F

After the interviews were over and transcribed the respondents were contacted through telephone randomly to interview for short intervals to serve twin purposes of clarifying the

meaning of some of their responses and checking if they gave same responses to the previously asked questions thus ensuring trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004).

The sampling method used was snowball sampling method as the sample was formed through referrals of one employee to other. This sampling is common in social science research where the study is targeting a relatively small and homogeneous population (Lu & Gatua, 2014), like working professionals in this study, this would not be an issue, and snowball sampling is recommended. Since the data on which employees are pursuing education through distance mode was not available on organization's records, employees' referrals to their peers who were pursuing distance education was an important mechanism for gathering data thus snowball sampling was used. There is a possibility of respondent driven sampling bias that may affect the generalizability of the results.

Instrumentation

The questions were initially tested with 3 working professionals for unclear questions and biases, which insured reliability. Primary data collection method in this study were the questions which were open-ended to ensure interview validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interview questions can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview Questions

Q1. As a working professional why did you choose to go for a higher education/ degree?
Q2. Why in particular did you choose distance education as your mode of study?
Q3. What benefits did you find with the distance education system?
Q4. What were the shortcomings of distance education system?
Q5. What special attributes you need to have in order to pursue distance education?
Q6. How did you came to know about your particular university from which you are pursuing distance education program?
Q7. What changes do you see in distance education system?
Q8. How has technology helped your distance education experience?
Q9. How applicable is what you learnt through distance education in your workplace?
Q10. How has distance education benefitted your 1.Learning 2.Job 3.Career?

These questions only acted as navigators to the process of interview, there were many sub questions and at times some questions were skipped.

Data Analysis

ATLAS.ti was used to code the transcripts shortly after the interviews. The interviews were coded separately as a form of triangulation. After coding the themes were analyzed and grouped to gain meaningful and relational inferences. The codes and themes developed by both authors were same/similar or synonymous. The analysis was done by treating individual transcripts as a unit instead of analyzing question and their answers from different respondents. This was done because we wanted to have an overall analysis of the individual and many times the answers too many questions pointed to single factor e.g. the question on why one chose distance education had its offshoots in answers to the question on benefits of distance education.

Following Harding's (2013) approach to analyzing interview transcripts we identified initial categories based on reading of transcript, followed by coding in ATLAS.ti. The codes were then reviewed to decide which codes should appear in which category and finally themes and findings were developed.

Results and Discussions

Why Do Professionals Want to Study?

The major division of the reasons on the choice of pursuing education amidst their career journey can be done into factors within the learner and those in her/his environment. Distance education has been characterized as *on the go, customized, at my pace and place, and interesting*. Within the learner factors can be seen in following themes:

Willingness is the key. All of them were willing to learn and perceived pursuing education as a positive and dignified experience. The willingness to enhance one's knowledge, skills and abilities was seen as central to people pursuing distance education. The following quotes from the transcript reinforce this point *I believe in increasing my level of knowledge, I want to work better, there is nothing bad in learning, I keep on learning even in this age, and I think this can help me to climb higher in my career.*

They wanted to gain more knowledge and hence used distance education as a medium to build their knowledge base as can be seen from following response: *I already had a bachelor's degree in commerce I wanted to get a master's degree.* There were also cases where they wanted subject specific knowledge or skill for example one of them described his willingness to understand financial statements: *I want to understand balance sheet and stuff,* he said. Similarly, *I see, I have missed on a lot of things in my college, so I am trying to bridge in the gaps,* reflects the urge to complete the knowledge gaps in one's education. *This can help me to present better of me in my organization.*

Feelings of motivation and competition as driver. Some were dictated by their colleagues and friends who were pursuing higher degrees through distance education. The feelings of motivation and competition can be seen in some responses like *I saw how confident he was after getting his degree or he holds the same designation as mine but boss thinks of him as smarter.*

Competition in present times have increased the importance of getting up to date with educational qualification as seen in this response: *There exist a neck breaking competition in every field, I cannot afford to lose just because of my academic.*

Narrative of a participant revealed the perceived dominance that education provides to individuals, *my spouse thinks s/he can dominate just because s/he holds a higher degree so I thought of getting an M.Sc. So what if it (distance education) is not a regular course?* (Note: Sentence modified to mask identity of respondent), it was also seen as an option for middle aged learning *going to college is pretty uncomfortable at this age, so I opted for distance learning.* Outside learner factors can be seen by following themes:

Climbing career ladders. Promotional policies and appraisal mechanisms of organizations that have been tied to educational attainment have been instrumental in encouraging working professional to choose distance education as it does not compromise on their jobs. These linkages between appraisal and education are many times construed in the minds of the employees. The interaction with some senior officials revealed that educational attainment might not be a priority factor in appraisal rating; however employees perceived it as important. Following response brings it to light: *my increments are based on the skills I have, It's hard but true, I am just not eligible for the supervisor's post so I took this two year part time distance education course, My career has just started and I know I need this to climb higher, It's been three years I am on the same position, My friends got promoted but not me, I got to pursue this course.* It was seen that transfers were also based on the degree in some

organizations, *I have to do this, and it's a part of my job and I can get transferred to better location.*

Advertisements as the agents of distance education. Flashy advertisements in national and regional dailies as well as television has attracted many towards distance education. This effect was also observed in our study. These sources of advertisement included radio *I heard on radio about this and thought to give it a try*, television *I saw commercial of this course in a break on television*, hoardings *Hoardings and billboards were too loud, everyone seemed fascinated*, internet *I was searching for some professional course and this came to me through internet*, newspaper *Newspapers of course serve all the purpose, a big side of newspapers are always flashy with commercials like these, I got to know form newspapers*, and word of mouth *One of my friend had send me a link on FB which directed me to distance learning websites.*

The magic of degree. With proliferation of distance education in India. Distance education providers have started offering degree programs that are recognized by accrediting institutions and industry alike. This has indeed fuelled the desire to pursue these programs as evident in following: *He was brilliant to study 2 years MBA and then work, I am intelligent to work and study together, The SMU degree is very well recognized, I did my MBA but it's not UGC recognized, so I think this can help me out.*

A MBA degree from a distance education university is considered equal to that of a regular fulltime course, this has boosted the morale of individuals who could not get into regular MBA colleges. *I cannot afford to take a break for professional course, while this is equivalent to regular degree I am on it, At least I can face my colleagues in appraisal, well that's important.* It was also seen that there is a prestige associated with possession of a degree.

Convenient time. Time is of utmost importance to working professionals and the activity of acquiring new knowledge would require a time convenient to them. Respondents preferred time that was after their working hours. This can be seen in following excerpts where some respondents tied reading the material to specific time *I usually read at night before going to sleep, I study at a stretch on Saturdays and Sundays*, whereas others were not time specific *The best part is lectures are available 24*7, which helps me to read as per my convenience, Job and college cannot be sustained together.*

The nature of their work also dictated the time of their usage. Some respondents utilized their free time at work to study as seen in these quotes: *Everything is accessible online, it eases to balance my work and studies, I have to be on site during my working hours, which can never let me to make to college in weekdays, I can study on weekends which is the best part while working.*

Convenient place. This can be seen in two ways one where the learning content is delivered to learner at her/his home/office and the other where the learning center are located near her/his home. The first part can be seen in following: *I study from my home, it gives plenty of time to relax as well, I can study while going home*, whereas the second part can be seen through following *they use ABC school as examination centers and it is just next to my house, The SMU learning center is near my home. I usually visit their weekend remedial classes, it's just 5 minutes by walk from home, and I study at home and visit their center if I can stretch.*

The portability of study material also brings in the on the go feature in distance education. *I take my study material on my business tours or I use downloaded study material in my free time.*

Convenient form. The learning material was available to learner through self-learning modules; also the digital availability of these materials was of great help to induce working professionals to opt distance education. The relevance of study material provided by these universities can be understood by the following *I carry my books with me, they are too the*

point, *The books are not too thick and they are well written, My university do not give reference books; my god they are too cumbersome; instead they give short notes.*

Technology the catalyst. Technology has fuelled the inflow of students to distance education. It has patched the shortcomings of traditional distance education model. The m education model has hit off with students as seen from the following codes *Now I can even see my notes on mobile, I use the Edunext app on my mobile, It is like a next generation of schooling, I love reading it on my gadgets, Mobile apps and quizzes helps a lot to understand with fun.*

The internet penetration in India through mobile and broadband has been a factor that has helped distance education in ways that are immeasurable (Srikantaiah & Xiaoying, 1998). Responses like, *I am Online 24*7, I get to get easy access to study material, I travel a lot and digital imprint helps me to utilize travelling time to go through content,* emphasize this point.

Affordable price. The distance education programs offer a good tradeoff between the cost associated with regular full time courses and the value added by the degree. Traditional full time degree costs were categorized as *too much, unaffordable, highly priced, Man, who's going to spend 6 lakhs of rupees.* On the other hand distance education was seen as affordable means to achieve a recognized degree as projected through following: *It's a good savings of my salary, I am loving it, it's worth your pocket, I would have not stepped for this course if I had to pay amount in lakhs, I think infrastructure, management, staff reduction led to cost reduction, it's a good substitute.*

What is needed for undergoing the distance education experience successfully is presented in following themes:

Self-discipline. To pursue distance education, respondents felt that a sense of self-discipline was needed as the faculty was not physically present to monitor the learner. It can be observed from the following excerpts that the absence of outside moderator made the learner to intrinsically moderate learning. The transcripts bring these forth like, *You need to have a time table, You require to study at fixed times else it's useless, If you need to pass with good marks you actually have to study, much depend on your effort, you need to put extra effort from your end.*

Belief in one self. The onus of learning in distance education is on the learner therefore she/he must believe that he will be able to understand and hence complete the course. Some relevant excerpts are as follows: *You must have faith in yourself, You can go haywire if you do not believe in yourself, I did MBA because I knew I can handle it, It was different as well as difficult initially but I wanted to show it to my husband that I can do it.*

Conceptual framework. The analysis of these themes gets us a framework where these themes can be grouped into factors that 1. Induced a working professional to choose distance education 2. Were needed to pursue distance education. The framework can be seen in figure 1 shows why distance education is chosen by working professional whereas the details of internal and external factors is given in figure 2 and 3. Figure 4 shows what is needed for distance education to continue for working professionals.

Figure 1. Factors Influencing Distance Education Choice

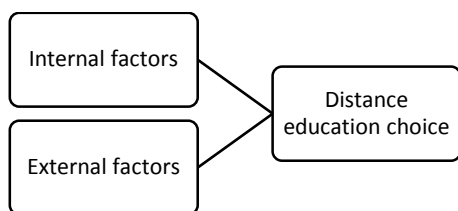
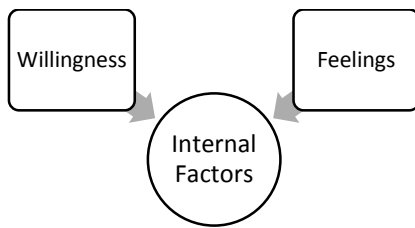
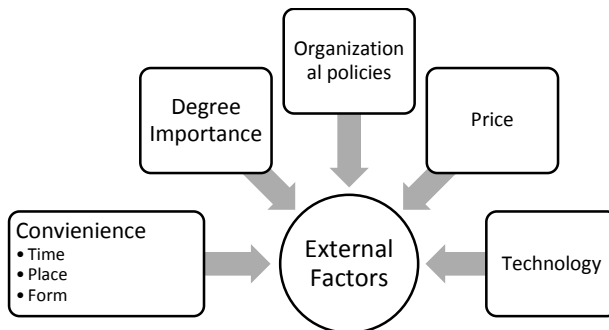
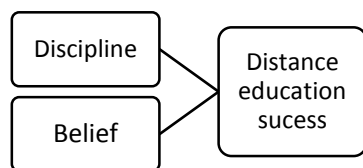


Figure 2. Internal Factors**Figure 3. External Factors****Figure 4. Determinates of Distance Education Success**

Theoretical Linkages

The analysis of themes and subsequent development of conceptual model can be seen to have groundings in some theoretical concepts and theories. We now take a look on these theoretical linkages. The benefits of employees undertaking distance education framework can be seen through the lens of the utility they derive from this mode of education and the value added.

Value

The value added by distance education can be seen as psychological (feeling of being at par with others) and material (the degree one gets after completion, increment etc.). Employees of today need these three utilities in order to embrace any additional education experience.

Time Utility

It draws from retailing concept of retail outlets being opened at times when needed by customers. "Logically if the marketing concept has meaning, consumers should be able to shop when they choose. This means retailers have a responsibility to be open when customers want to shop" (Mason & Mayer, 1990). It refers to the educational content being available to working professionals at a time convenient to them.

Place Utility

The four attributes of a retail center that influence the temporal convenience it offers are one-stop shopping, trading hours, enclosure and proximity to home/work (Clulow & Reimers, 2009). The availability of learning and exam centers of distance education offer such convenience.

Form Utility

The goods/services being available in a form that can be utilized and is acceptable to the customer (Bhatia, 2008). In the case of distance education these become the learning material and its availability online.

Internal Factors

The internal factors that we have identified above have rooting in the following concepts.

Self-efficacy. The belief in oneself is analogous to self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the power of one's belief in one's own ability to get task completed and reach destination. Self-efficacy has its foundation in the social cognitive theory that emphasizes on knowledge based upon rationales, socialism etc. in personality development. An individual's attitude, ability, and knowledge comprises of what is known as the self-system (Bandura, 2010). The self-system has a major role in how we tackle situation and how we react. Self-efficacy plays an essential part of this self-system. Students' engagement and learning is primarily supported by self-efficacy (Sun & Rueda, 2012). Motivation and learning of students is strongly associated with self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2000). Self-efficacy would decide if the learner in distance education thinks if she/he can complete the course.

Self-regulation. The theme of self-discipline is similar to self-regulation. Most human behavior, being purposive, is regulated by forethought and regulated by individual (Bandura, 1991). Interaction focused online activities like brainstorming, discussion boards and debates can catalyze online learners' social cognitive effects such as improved engagement and amplified self-regulation (Kanuka, 2005). The major self-regulative mechanism operates through three principal sub functions. These include self-monitoring of one's behavior, its determinants, and its effects; judgment of one's behavior in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances; and affective self-reaction. Self-regulation also encompasses the self-efficacy mechanism, which plays a central role in the exercise of personal agency by its strong impact on thought, affect, motivation, and action.

Self-regulation becomes critical in the case of distance education because there is no one to check the learner and her/his progress. Distance education being a student centric model thus need self-regulation on part of learner to gain out comes of learning. A theoretically grounded conceptual model parts can be seen in following figure 5 and 6.

Figure 5. Drivers of Utility

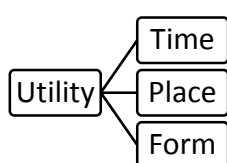
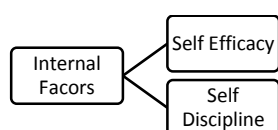


Figure 6. Internal Factors

Conclusion

Distance education should be seen as a value offered by university to students. This value is judged on the basis of utility provided by these universities. The utility that distance education has provided in terms of place, time and form in a cost effective way coupled by the catalytic effect of technology has boosted the choice of working professionals towards distance education. Self-regulation added with self-efficacy ensures success in a distance education program. This package of factors is applicable to difficult geography in particular and other geographies in general.

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