Staff Training and Development in Open and Distance Learning: A Trainers’ Perspective

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ABSTRACT
The training and development is an important activity in open and distance learning (ODL) for capacity building of the staff working in this exclusive educational environment. IGNOU being a premier institution of open and distance learning in the country at the national level, has developed a dedicated system of training and development which not only helps the University in professional development and capacity building of its own functionaries but also provides guidance and support to other ODL institutions in different areas of ODL training and development. The current study focuses on different aspects of training and development in ODL system such as training needs analysis, types and duration of training programmes, training environment, evaluation process and effectiveness of training with special reference to IGNOU from trainers’ perspective. It further highlights the trainers’ viewpoint over the constraints and challenges faced in implementation of training programmes while suggesting ways of enhancing their effectiveness by overcoming the challenges and constraints.

Keywords: Training and development in ODL, ODL institutions, IGNOU, Trainers’ Perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION
The training and development of staff is an important activity for an organization in order to optimally utilize the services of the staff and make them contribute to the overall organizational goals. The open and distance learning (ODL) system is not the exception to this demand of organisational capacity building in educational environment. It is crucial to enhance the delivering capacity of the people working in the institution by providing them appropriate training in the area of their work. The training and development activities in open and distance learning gain specific impetus due to its peculiar pedagogical system of imparting education and delivering knowledge to the masses unlike the face to face conventional institutions. The structure, instructional methodology and philosophy of ODL system that aptly suit the prospective distance learners and their requirements, do not match with the conventional system of education.

It is usually seen that the people, be it academic or non-academic staff, from conventional system of education join the open and distance learning system. By the time they join the ODL system leaving the conventional system, they are already groomed with the sub-systems, structures and culture of the conventional system. Even their mindset gets tuned as per their existing environment. When they join the ODL system, their perception about the new system is not very clear and, therefore, develop a confused perception towards the system. At times, they even find it difficult to assimilate themselves and be sensitive to the requirements of the new system more so the distance learners. Their rigid attitude and inability to unlearn come to their way of performing for the ODL system. In order to meet the capacity building requirements of such staff, the training and development system of the ODL institution has to be customized and tuned in such a way that it is able to help the newly recruited staff and the existing ones in empowering them with the required knowledge, skills and attitude. A healthy training and development system for ODL functionaries will make them contribute optimally for the institutions.
The article focuses on the different components of a training and development system in ODL setting and tries to study the system through the perspective of a trainer with special reference to IGNOU, a mega open university at the national level.

2. BACKDROP

Training and staff development is an attempt to harness the potential of an employee for his/her current and future performance by enhancing ability to perform. It is a continuous process that aims at improving the levels of attitude, knowledge and skills of the employees through continuous learning. Dickinson et al\(^1\) reported that induction of newly recruited staff in ODL system is important. It helps them to appreciate the requirements of open and distance learning system. Similarly, Clark\(^2\) observed that the attitude of the staff working for the ODL system was not always positive. Therefore, their training in ODL was crucial for improving their perceptions towards the system. The negative attitude of such functionaries towards the system affects the quality of distance learning programmes adversely. Chakanyuka and Chiome\(^3\) noticed that training and staff development is essential for achieving excellence within the sub-systems in an open university system. However, the researchers found that supporting the ODL functionaries in their professional development with financial and material resources was a challenge before the ODL institution.

The crucial areas of training for the ODL functionaries as reported by Perraton and Creed\(^4\) are: orientation in ODL, distance learning pedagogy, development of self-learning material and good lesson writing practices among others. The training events were organised by the authors for one to five days. However, the potential constrains for organising the training programmes for the teachers were: high cost of training programmes, their inappropriateness, heavy teacher-workload and resistance due to switching over to print-based instruction in ODL system from face-to-face teaching.

The open and distance learning as a methodology, has been at the core of training and development activities in the organizations. Even the ODL interventions have been widely recommended and used extensively at times for professional development of teachers and other conventional education functionaries. However, the emphasis has been either on the training needs analysis or the post-training evaluation seeking immediate feedback from the trainees. The training needs assessment is the mechanism to firmly arrive at a decision as to whether the training in the specific area will improve the job performance of that employee, while the post-training evaluation helps the organisations to know about the level of learning of the trainees that has actually taken place, though in order to know the real impact follow-up of training programmes has to be undertaken. But study of training and development system itself in ODL institutions has probably not caught enough attention. This is perhaps why the researcher could not come across a study which investigates and analyses the system of training and development itself in the ODL setting. Similarly, in IGNOU also the training needs analysis of the ODL functionaries has been the focus of research more than often since it is required to plan a customized training programme.

The first training programme for professional development of teachers was conducted in IGNOU in the year 1986 when IGNOU was in its nascent stage having been established in 1985. Subsequently, training needs were identified for training of trainers in different areas dealing with ODL system and training programmes were conducted which has been reported by the scholars like Koul and Panda\(^5\), Koul and Murugan\(^6\), Mullick\(^7\), Manohar\(^8\), Koul\(^9\), Panda, Mishra, and Murthy\(^10\) and Mishra\(^11\). They have invariably emphasised the following three levels of training for the employees in the university:

- Induction and orientation programmes as short-term programmes focusing on single activity;
- Training programmes for full time functionaries of the system to meet the mid-term current needs; and
- Training programmes of longer duration for development of staff according to future needs of the individual and the organisation.

As a part of the mechanism to take care of the long term training and professional development requirements of the ODL functionaries, IGNOU launched two programmes in the area of distance education – one at diploma level i.e. Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education and the other at masters degree level i.e. Dr S K Pulist
Master of Arts in Distance Education. IGNOU has a well established training and development system where Administration Division, Academic Coordination Division and Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education collaborate with each other for training of teachers and academics, and non-academic staff of the university.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The study focuses on the perspective of trainers towards training and development in open and distance learning with special reference to IGNOU. Therefore, descriptive approach to the study has been adopted. The primary data has been collected with the help of a tool designed and developed specially for this study. However, the secondary data has been gathered from the published and unpublished articles, documents, reports in the relevant area of training and development in ODL system. The researcher also underwent series of informal discussions with the persons involved with the training of ODL functionaries to understand the system better before gathering the relevant data for the study.

A sample of 144 trainers was drawn from the teachers and academics, and non-academic staff functioning as trainers for training of the ODL functionaries in different areas of specialisation following the purposive sampling method. It is worth mentioning here that finding a large number of trainers from a single institution is very difficult. Even more difficult is to identify the trainers from non-academic staff. These trainers have been involved with the training activities at the headquarters and/or regional centres/study centres having worked as trainers/resource persons for orientation, induction, and refresher and/or specialised training programmes for employees including the coordinators and counsellors working at the study centres.

The questionnaire method was adopted to gather the primary data for the study. The questionnaire contained perception based questions and status questions to enable the sample to highlight the current status of different aspects of training and development activities in IGNOU. The same was got vetted from two experts for content and format validity. The irrelevant items were dropped and the questionnaires were modified as per their suggestions. Subsequently, the questionnaire was pilot-tested on 10 persons from the sample. The suggestions given by them were accommodated in the items and 4 items were re-phrased for clarity purpose. The final version of the questionnaire was uploaded on www.qualtrics.com and the link of the same was sent to the sample through email. The subjects were requested to submit the responses online only.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS
In all, 56 questionnaires were received out of which 12 were blank. Thus, the number of usable questionnaires from sample was 44. The number of responses was considered appropriate for analysis purpose. The data was analysed with the help of the online application provided by www.qualtrics.com itself and results were presented in absolute numbers and percentages. The participants were broadly categorised as ‘non-academics’ and ‘teachers and academics’. The designation-wise analysis of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Designation-wise analysis of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Academics (18%) (N=8)</th>
<th>Teachers and Academics (82%) (N=36)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Director</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Registrar</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engineer in Charge</td>
<td>Assistant Regional Director</td>
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<td>Director</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Regional Director</td>
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(N=44)
It is worth noting that in ODL system, teachers and academics usually act as trainers more than the non-academic staff does. The same trend is reflected in the number of responses received from these categories which is normal. Also it has been found that the designations of Assistant Director and Deputy Director are found in both the categories in IGNOU and therefore, the same is in order.

4.1 Involvement of trainers
The respondents were provided with a list of different types of training programmes and were asked to tick mark the relevant ones in their case in order to know about their involvement in different types of training programmes simultaneously in the university. The analysis of the responses received from the sample revealed that 68 per cent participants were involved with ‘Induction Programmes’, 46 per cent with ‘Refresher Programmes’ and 40 per cent with ‘Specialised Training Programmes’. As many as 60 per cent respondents were involved with ‘training of trainers’ with an equal number involved with ‘training programmes conducted by other institutions’.

As many as 76 per cent respondents had acted as ‘Resource Person and/or Coordinator’ in the training programmes conducted for teachers and academics, and 57 per cent were involved with training programmes conducted for non-academic staff. As many as 57 percent respondents were involved with training of ‘functionaries of other ODL institutions’ also with 52 per cent who were involved with training of ‘study centre functionaries’ like academic counsellors, coordinators, etc.

4.2 Importance of training programmes
The respondents were asked about their perception on importance of different types of training programmes i.e. induction programme, refresher programme, special training in ODL system and use of ICT for different categories of employees working in an ODL institution such as IGNOU. The respondents opined that the induction programme is ‘very important’ in case of teachers and academics (70 per cent), non-Academics (50 per cent) and technical and professional staff (60 per cent) who have newly joined the ODL system. They viewed the refresher programme as ‘very important’ in case of Teachers and Academics (81 per cent), Non-Academics (56 per cent) and Technical and Professional staff (63 per cent) who are already in the ODL system.

The respondents considered that the training in ODL System is ‘very important’ in case of Teachers and Academics (82 per cent), Non-Academics (74 per cent) and Technical and Professional staff (80 per cent) who are working in ODL System. Similarly the respondents felt that the training in ICT skills is ‘very important’ in case of Teachers and Academics (91 per cent), Non-Academics (84 per cent) and Technical and Professional staff (75 per cent).

4.3 General behaviour of participants in IGNOU
Since the sample pertained to trainers, the respondents were asked about their perception towards the general behaviour of the participants attending the training programmes in IGNOU. They were provided with a check list to mark more than one statement in support of their argument. The respondents were of the opinion that the participants of training programmes in IGNOU ‘are aware of their level of knowledge and skills, and want to improve’ (76 per cent), ‘are usually serious about their training’ (57 per cent) and ‘are self-motivated to get new knowledge and skills’ (57 per cent).

4.4 Methods of training needs assessment (TNA)
The Training Needs Assessment (TNA) is crucial for design, development and implementation of a training programme for enhancing its effectiveness and outcomes optimally. It was interesting to know as to how the training needs of the employees were assessed in IGNOU and whether they were satisfied with the methods used for conducting TNA. A list of possible methods of TNA was provided to the participants and they were required to tick all the methods of TNA applicable in their case. Before, all this, the respondents were asked about the ideal ways of assessing the training needs of the employees in an institution. The analysis of the data revealed that majority of the respondents (78 per cent) was of the opinion that ‘everybody should be trained as part of the career development programme’. However, TNA should be conducted ‘through a questionnaire survey’ (70 per cent) followed by ‘through comments in the self-appraisal form’ (61 per cent) and ‘staff should be deputed for training on request/recommendation of superior’ (57 per cent).
In response to the question on method of TNA followed in IGNOU, the participants reported that the employees are nominated for training ‘on the request/recommendation of the superiors’ in majority of the cases (61 per cent). Other methods used for TNA were: ‘through questionnaire survey’ (48 per cent) and ‘staff is nominated at random without consent’ (44 per cent) followed by ‘training is imparted as part of the career development programme’ (35 per cent). The latter method of TNA is being followed more in case of the teachers and academics since participation in refresher and a subject-specific training programme is mandatory for them before their next upward movement in the career.

Majority of the respondents (70 per cent) were satisfied ‘to some extent’ with the methods used for TNA of the employees in IGNOU. However, 23 per cent respondents were ‘not at all’ satisfied with the methods of TNA used in their case. The reasons given by the participants for their dissatisfaction among others were ‘no scientific assessment for need of training is done’, ‘there is no planned training calendar’ and ‘no definite pattern is identified’ for assessment of training needs of the employees.

4.5 Training environment

The participants were asked to comment upon the training environment in IGNOU. However, before this, the trainers were asked as to how they perceived the role of training environment in enhancing the impact of a training programme. Majority of the respondents (70 per cent) ‘strongly agreed’ that training environment plays an important role in enhancing the effectiveness of a training programme whereas 26 per cent ‘agreed’ that comfortable and friendly training environment has a positive impact on the effectiveness of a training programme.

The respondents also offered their rating on the training environment in IGNOU. Majority of the respondents (61 per cent) considered the training environment in IGNOU as ‘satisfactory’. However, training environment in IGNOU was ‘very pleasant’ to 23 per cent of the respondents followed by 13 per cent trainers who considered it ‘pleasant’. The respondents also were asked to rate the training infrastructure and facilities available in IGNOU. As many as 41 per cent respondents were of the opinion that the training facilities in IGNOU are ‘good’ followed by ‘adequate’ (36 per cent), and ‘very good’ (9 per cent). However, to 14 per cent respondents, infrastructure and facilities available in IGNOU were ‘poor’ due to the reason that latest training equipment is not available.

4.6 Training material for the participants

Normally, theme specific reading/reference material is provided to the participants during a training programme so that they can use it as reference at a later stage once the training is over. Before the participants could express their perception about the training material provided in IGNOU, they were asked as to how they perceived the importance of such material for the participants in training programmes. The analysis of the data revealed that majority of the respondents (57 per cent) ‘strongly agreed’ that reading/reference material plays an important role in making a training programme effective for the participants and, therefore, should be provided as part of the training input. As many as 39 per cent participants ‘agreed’ to this aspect.

While giving their opinion on the input material provided in training programmes conducted by IGNOU, majority of the respondents (52 per cent) ‘agreed’ that the reference/reading material being provided in training programmes in IGNOU is usually sufficient in terms of content for the participants followed by 17 per cent who ‘strongly agreed’ to this statement. A significant number of respondents (30 per cent) was ‘neutral’ on this aspect. Perhaps they did not want to comment upon the work of their own fellow trainers.

4.7 Stages of evaluation of training

There are three important stages of a training programme at which evaluation can take place. However, different evaluation methods are adopted by the trainers for evaluation of training programmes. The evaluation framework developed by Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick[12] focusing on evaluation at reaction, learning, behaviour and result levels is also famous among the trainers. The participants were asked to identify the levels at which the evaluation of training takes place in IGNOU and tick mark all the relevant stages in their case. As many as 50 per cent of the trainers reported that evaluation at ‘pre-training level’ is conducted in IGNOU. Majority of participants (70 per cent) agreed that evaluation of training is conducted ‘during the training programme’ in IGNOU followed by 78 per cent respondents who agreed for evaluation of training.
being conducted at ‘post-training level’. It shows that evaluation of training at post-training level is more popular in IGNOU as perceived by the participants.

4.8 Methods for evaluation of training in IGNOU

The methods used for evaluation of training also play an important role in reinforcing different aspects of real learning that takes place in the training environment. Mere awareness of the fact that the evaluation of training would be conducted at a particular stage itself enhances the trainee participation and thus positively impacts the learning. The analysis of the responses received revealed that the following methods of evaluation are being used in IGNOU at different training levels:

4.8.1 Pre training:
- Through Questionnaire (35 per cent)
- Through presentation (18 per cent)

4.8.2 During training
- Through Questionnaire (35 per cent)
- Through Presentation (14 per cent)
- Through Observation (14 per cent)

4.8.3 Post-training
- Through Questionnaire (26 per cent)
- Through Presentation (21 per cent)
- Through a Test (15 per cent)
- Through Feedback obtained from superiors (15 per cent)
- Through Observation (12 per cent)

4.9 Follow-up of training programmes

The follow-up of a training programme with appropriate intervals makes the training programme more meaningful and rewarding not only for the individual but for the organisation as well. The scholars like Kirkpatrick have made “follow-up” as an integral part of their framework for evaluation of training. It was, therefore, appropriate to know about the follow-up practice for training programmes in vogue in IGNOU. To this, majority of the respondents (71 per cent) agreed that ‘No’ follow up of a training programme is done at IGNOU. However, 29 per cent trainers “agreed” that follow up of a training programme “is done” subsequent to conduct of the programme. The analysis shows that the trainers at IGNOU need to realise the importance of follow-up of a training programme in order to enhance the effectiveness of the programme and enable the trainees to transfer their skills and knowledge to the workplace more prominently.

4.10 Effectiveness of training programmes

A training programme can be considered effective if it broadens the working horizon of the employees and helps them in performing their job well. This effectiveness can be further enhanced if the employees are smoothly able to transfer their knowledge and skills learnt during the training programme to their workplace. The trainers were asked as to whether their trainees were able to transfer their learning to their workplaces and whether the training programmes proved helpful in the performance of their duties. The trainers in majority (77 per cent) were of the opinion that their trainees were able to transfer their skills and knowledge learnt during the training programme to their job places ‘to some extent’. However, 23 per cent respondents were of the opinion that their trainees were able to transfer their skills and knowledge ‘fully’ to their job places. They were of the opinion that the training programmes empower the staff for performing their duties well.

The training programmes are organised in IGNOU with different frequencies and durations. Even Perraton and Creed[4] advocated for the training programmes of one to five days duration. It was considered important to seek opinion of trainers in order to make a training programme more effective in terms of frequency and duration. The analysis of data revealed that around equal number of trainers wanted the training programmes to be conducted every year (27 per cent) and ‘every six months’ (23 per cent). As many as 23 per cent of the
respondents were of the opinion that training programmes should be conducted ‘whenever any new policy/ technology/ faculty (knowledge area) is introduced in the University’. As many as 50 per cent respondents were of the opinion that the duration of training programme on an average should be ‘3-5 days’ to make it more effective. However, 36 per cent respondents were of the opinion that the duration of a training programme should be ‘depending upon the topic(s) covered’ during the training programme.

4.11 Constraints
As part of the objectives of this study, the respondents were asked about the constraints and challenges faced by them at the institutional level in organizing effective training programmes for different categories of staff. The trainer respondents reported the following constraints and challenges in conducting effective training programmes:

- To create interest among disinterested employees for training,
- To motivate the employees for training by way of providing more facilities and incentive,
- To sustain the willingness and interest of trainees during the training programme,
- To arrange for adequate training resources, good resource persons and qualified trainers,
- To get the genuinely interested persons nominated for training,
- The ICT infrastructure is not available on the desk of all the trainees and they are not able to devote adequate time for training due to routine workload,
- To select appropriate training methodology keeping in view the topics to be dealt with during the training programme,
- Limited budget for training programmes,
- Willingness of management to conduct useful training programmes,
- Managing heterogeneity of participants in the training environment, and
- Constraints and challenges vary depending upon programme to programme.

4.12 Suggestions
The respondents were having varied experiences of conducting training programmes not only within the University but for other ODL institutions in the country as well. Therefore, they were requested to provide specific suggestions for making the training programmes more effective and meaningful keeping in view their experiences in the field. The analysis of the suggestions received from them is presented below:

- The assessment of training needs should be done in a scientific way. The areas of training and topics should be improvised in consultation with the trainees during the very first session of training programme and necessary changes and modifications in the schedule of training should be done accordingly.
- The training content should be more relevant to the needs of the trainees. This will enhance their involvement in the training programme. Interest of the trainees should also be kept in view while nominating them for training.
- Need-based training programmes should be organised with a mechanism to address doubts of the staff as and when arise.
- Training methodology and duration should match with objectives to be achieved and outcome expected from the trainees during the training programme.
- Training should be more practical-oriented leading to hands-on exposure and specifically relevant to the current job of the trainee.
- Updated training material should be provided during the training programme.
- Incentives for undergoing training should be explicitly mentioned, and training advantages in the individual as well as institutional context should be highlighted while initiating a training programme. The training programme should be linked to tangible rewards to the trainees.
- Small interesting activities should be planned during the training programme to sustain interest of the participants in the training.
- Training should be conducted in small homogeneous groups with adequate training infrastructure.
• Experienced resource persons and well recognised trainers should be involved with training programmes.
• Timely feedback and pre-scheduled follow up of training programme after a month and subsequently on specific intervals should be undertaken which helps the trainees to implement knowledge and skills to the job place.

5. CONCLUSION
The current study was comprehensive and efforts were made to cover different important aspects of the training and development system of the university. The study came up with many important findings. The induction programmes, refresher programmes, and specialized training programmes are considered very important for the functionaries in ODL institutions. The employees are aware of their level of knowledge and skills and are usually serious about these training programmes. Questionnaire method is used substantially for assessment of training needs of the staff. Training environment and quality reference material play important role in making a training programme effective. However, the duration of a training programme should be 3-5 days in normal cases with an interval of 6 months to one year. It can be based on the topics and area of specialisation to be covered during the training programme. Follow-up of training is crucial for the trainees to be able to transfer their knowledge and skills learnt during the training programme to their job places which empowers them for carrying out their duties well. It is recommended that more studies of this nature focusing on training and development system in ODL institutions should be conducted. This will not only sensitise the management, trainers and trainees about the training and development activities at the institutional level, but will also pave the way for enhancement of quality and effectiveness of such programmes. The study is expected to benefit the functionaries involved with training and development activities in ODL institutions.

REFERENCES