Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies
Online ISSN 2278-8808, SJIF 2026 = 8.727
https://www.srjis.com/issues_data/304
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal, SEPT-OCT 2026, Vol- 15/97

FUTURE OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN INDIA: PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS

Ms. Diksha Verma

Research Scholar, Department of Education, H. P. University,

E-Mail-verma.diksha1992@gmail.com

Prof. Kuldeep Singh Katoch

Department of Education (CDOE), Himachal Pradesh Universit,

E-Mail-kuldeepkatoch@gmail.com

Paper Received On: 1 OCT 2026
Peer Reviewed On: 16 OCT 2026
Published On: 01 NOV 2026

Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has played a crucial role in expanding access to higher education in India, particularly for learners who are unable to participate in conventional face-to-face education due to geographical, professional, or socio-economic constraints. With the increasing integration of digital technologies and policy initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, ODL institutions are undergoing significant transformation. This study explores the perspectives of teachers regarding the future of ODL in India, with specific reference to the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE), Himachal Pradesh University. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nineteen faculty members associated with ODL programmes. The responses were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to opportunities and challenges shaping the future of ODL. The findings reveal that teachers widely perceive ODL as an increasingly important mode of higher education, particularly in terms of promoting inclusivity and access for diverse learners. However, respondents also highlighted several challenges including digital infrastructure limitations, weak student support systems, regulatory complexities, and increasing competition from online education providers. The study concludes that while ODL has strong potential to expand and evolve in India, its sustainability depends on strategic institutional adaptation, improved digital integration, strengthened learner support mechanisms, and effective policy implementation.

Keywords: *Open and Distance Learning, Teacher Perspectives, Digital Education, Higher Education, NEP 2020*

Copyright © 2026, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

1. Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as an important mechanism for expanding access to higher education across the world. In countries such as India, where geographical diversity, socio-economic disparities, and large population size often limit access to conventional higher education institutions, ODL provides an alternative pathway for learners to pursue academic qualifications while balancing professional and personal commitments. Over the past few decades, the expansion of distance education institutions, the development of digital learning technologies, and the growth of online educational platforms have significantly transformed the landscape of higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this transformation by compelling institutions to adopt technology-mediated teaching and learning practices. As a result, distance education is increasingly being integrated with online and blended learning approaches. In India, policy initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have further emphasized the role of technology-enabled education and flexible learning pathways in expanding access to higher education. The policy highlights the importance of digital learning platforms, open educational resources, and innovative delivery models in strengthening the reach and effectiveness of higher education systems. Despite these developments, the future trajectory of ODL institutions remains a subject of ongoing debate. Questions related to technological readiness, institutional capacity, regulatory frameworks, and learner support mechanisms continue to influence how distance education systems evolve. In this context, the perspectives of teachers become particularly important, as they are directly involved in designing curricula, facilitating learning processes, and supporting students within ODL programmes.

The present study seeks to examine how teachers perceive the future of ODL in India, with specific reference to the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE), Himachal Pradesh University. Understanding these perceptions can provide valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges that may shape the future development of ODL systems in India.

2. Review of Literature

Open and Distance Learning has long been recognized as an important strategy for widening participation in higher education. Scholars have emphasized that distance education provides flexible learning opportunities for individuals who are unable to pursue conventional education due to employment responsibilities, family commitments, or geographical barriers (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

With the integration of digital technologies, ODL systems have evolved from traditional correspondence-based models to more interactive online learning environments. Research suggests that the use of digital platforms, learning management systems, and online assessment tools can enhance learner engagement and support more flexible educational delivery (Anderson, 2008).

In the Indian context, ODL institutions such as the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and state open universities have played a major role in expanding access to higher education. Studies indicate that distance education programmes have been particularly beneficial for working professionals, women learners, and students from rural and remote areas (Panda, 2016).

However, several challenges continue to affect the effectiveness of ODL systems. Infrastructure limitations, inadequate technological support, and weak student support services have often been identified as major barriers to the successful implementation of distance education programmes (Latchem & Jung, 2010). In addition, regulatory frameworks governing distance education have undergone significant changes in recent years, requiring institutions to adapt to evolving quality assurance standards.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has further highlighted the importance of integrating technology into education systems and promoting flexible learning opportunities. While the policy recognizes the potential of digital education, researchers have noted that effective implementation requires strong institutional capacity and adequate technological infrastructure (Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020).

Although several studies have examined the structural and technological aspects of distance education, relatively limited research has focused on the perspectives of teachers regarding the future development of ODL systems. Given their central role in programme delivery and learner support, faculty perceptions provide valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with the evolving landscape of distance education.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach in order to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the future of Open and Distance Learning in India. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for understanding participants' experiences, expectations, and interpretations of educational phenomena.

Data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews with nineteen faculty members associated with the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE), Himachal Pradesh University. The participants included teachers involved in various aspects of distance education, including course design, lesson writing, academic coordination, and student support activities.

The interviews included questions related to the perceived future of ODL in India, opportunities associated with digital education, and challenges faced by institutions offering distance learning programmes. The responses were recorded and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes that reflect common patterns in participants' perspectives.

4. Findings:

Table 1: Faculty Perceptions on the Future of ODL in India and at CDOE (N = 19)

Theme	Extracted Codes	Frequency (N=19)	Percentage
ODL as the future of higher education	ODL is the future; growing demand; post-COVID shift; global relevance	15	78.9
Inclusivity and access to diverse learners	Working professionals; married women; remote and hilly regions; lifelong learners	12	63.2
Need for transition towards online/blended models	Paradigm shift; online education; digital tools; interactive delivery	9	47.4
Infrastructure and connectivity challenges	Network issues; digital platforms; limited access in hilly areas	11	57.9
Weak student support and communication systems	Admission follow-up; assignment acknowledgment; feedback gaps	8	42.1
Policy and implementation challenges (NEP 2020 & UGC-DEB)	Curriculum revision; compliance; lesson writing; CBCS limitations	7	36.8
Competitive pressure and institutional redesign	Online universities; private institutions; restructuring	6	31.6

Perceptions of ODL as the Future of Higher Education

The analysis reveals a strong consensus among faculty members that ODL represents a significant component of the future of higher education in India. A substantial majority of respondents described ODL as "the future," particularly in the context of post-COVID educational transformations and increasing digitisation of learning systems. Faculty acknowledged that the growing acceptance of online and blended learning models—reinforced

by the policy direction of NEP 2020 has positioned ODL as a mainstream mode of education rather than merely an alternative pathway for learners unable to attend conventional institutions.

Respondents noted that the pandemic accelerated the normalization of digital learning environments, which has contributed to a broader societal acceptance of flexible and technology-mediated education. As a result, ODL is increasingly perceived as a viable and scalable approach to expanding access to higher education in India.

Inclusivity and Access to Diverse Learners

Another prominent theme emerging from the data relates to inclusivity and access, which faculty members identified as a defining strength of ODL. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that ODL effectively serves learners who are unable to participate in regular education due to employment commitments, family responsibilities, geographical constraints, or socio-economic factors.

Several respondents highlighted the importance of ODL for working professionals, married women, and learners residing in remote or mountainous regions such as those found in Himachal Pradesh. In this sense, ODL was seen as an important mechanism for promoting educational equity and supporting lifelong learning. Faculty perceptions therefore align closely with the broader policy vision of expanding access to higher education through flexible learning pathways.

Transition towards Online and Blended Learning

Despite their optimism regarding the future of ODL, many respondents emphasized the need for a paradigm shift from traditional distance education practices towards more robust online or blended learning models. Faculty members observed that existing ODL systems often rely heavily on printed study materials and written assignments, with limited integration of interactive digital tools.

Respondents argued that the future sustainability of ODL depends on adopting more engaging and technologically supported learning environments. Suggested innovations included the use of learning management systems, online quizzes, digital assignment submissions, and interactive teaching tools. Such measures were perceived as essential for improving learner engagement, ensuring continuous assessment, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of distance education programmes.

Infrastructure Challenges

While digital transformation was widely viewed as necessary, faculty members also expressed concerns regarding infrastructure and connectivity limitations. These concerns were particularly pronounced in the context of Himachal Pradesh, where geographical conditions often create barriers to stable internet connectivity.

Respondents reported that network instability, limited digital infrastructure, and restricted access to paid educational platforms pose significant challenges for both learners and institutions. In many rural and remote areas, unreliable internet access can limit students' ability to participate effectively in online learning activities. These challenges were therefore seen as important structural constraints that must be addressed before fully transitioning to digital or blended ODL models.

Student Support and Communication Systems

Another recurring theme in faculty responses was the perceived weakness of existing student support and communication systems. Respondents highlighted several administrative gaps, including inadequate admission follow-up, lack of assignment acknowledgment mechanisms, delayed feedback, and the absence of a centralized communication system for student queries.

Comparisons were frequently drawn with institutions such as Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), particularly regarding systematic acknowledgment of assignments and digital tracking of student progress. Faculty members indicated that strengthening student support services could significantly improve the credibility and effectiveness of ODL programmes.

Policy and Regulatory Challenges

Policy-related challenges also emerged as an important concern among faculty respondents. Several participants expressed apprehension regarding the implementation of NEP 2020 and UGC-DEB regulations, particularly in relation to curriculum revision, compliance requirements, plagiarism checks, and lesson writing timelines.

Respondents acknowledged the importance of maintaining quality standards in ODL programmes; however, they also emphasized that successful implementation of these reforms requires adequate institutional capacity, faculty support, and administrative coordination. Limited staff strength and restricted subject offerings were identified as additional constraints that could affect policy implementation.

Competitive Pressures and Institutional Adaptation

Finally, a smaller but significant group of respondents highlighted increasing competitive pressures arising from the proliferation of online programmes offered by both public and private institutions. The expansion of digital universities, ed-tech platforms, and private online programmes has intensified competition within the higher education landscape.

Rather than viewing this competition solely as a threat, some faculty members interpreted it as an opportunity for institutional renewal. Respondents suggested that such competitive pressures could motivate curriculum innovation, modernization of programme delivery, and strengthening of learner support mechanisms within ODL institutions.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that teachers perceive Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as an increasingly important component of higher education in India. A large proportion of respondents expressed optimism about the future of ODL, particularly in light of the growing acceptance of digital learning and flexible education systems following the COVID-19 pandemic. These perceptions align with earlier studies that highlight the expanding role of technology-mediated education in widening access to higher education (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). The rapid adoption of online learning during the pandemic demonstrated the potential of digital platforms to support large-scale educational delivery, thereby reinforcing the relevance of ODL systems.

Another key finding relates to the role of ODL in promoting inclusivity and educational access. Teachers emphasized that ODL programmes provide opportunities for diverse groups of learners, including working professionals, married women, and students from geographically remote regions. This finding is consistent with earlier research on distance education which suggests that ODL systems play a crucial role in expanding participation in higher education by overcoming barriers related to time, location, and socio-economic circumstances (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Panda, 2016). In the Indian context, distance education has historically served as an important mechanism for democratizing access to higher education, particularly for learners who cannot participate in conventional campus-based programmes.

The study also highlights the growing need for ODL institutions to transition toward online and blended learning models. Faculty members indicated that traditional correspondence-based approaches may no longer be sufficient in the current digital learning environment. These

observations correspond with previous studies which argue that the integration of digital technologies, learning management systems, and online assessment tools can enhance interaction and engagement in distance education (Anderson, 2008; Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020). As digital technologies continue to evolve, ODL institutions are increasingly expected to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches that combine flexibility with interactive learning experiences.

Despite these opportunities, the findings also reveal several structural challenges affecting the future development of ODL. Faculty members identified digital infrastructure and connectivity as major barriers, particularly in geographically challenging regions such as Himachal Pradesh. Similar concerns have been highlighted in earlier research on digital education in India, where uneven access to internet connectivity and technological resources has been identified as a major obstacle to effective online learning (Dhawan, 2020). These infrastructural disparities can significantly affect the ability of students from rural or remote areas to participate fully in technology-enabled distance education programmes.

Another important issue identified in the study relates to the effectiveness of student support systems in ODL institutions. Teachers pointed to challenges such as delayed feedback, weak communication channels, and insufficient administrative follow-up. Previous research has emphasized that learner support services are a critical component of successful distance education systems, as they help reduce learner isolation and improve student retention (Latchem & Jung, 2010). The concerns expressed by respondents therefore highlight the need for institutions to strengthen administrative processes and digital communication mechanisms in order to enhance the overall learning experience of distance learners.

Policy and regulatory challenges also emerged as an important theme in the findings. Faculty members noted that the implementation of regulatory guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission–Distance Education Bureau (UGC-DEB) and reforms proposed under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 require significant institutional adjustments. While these reforms aim to improve the quality and credibility of distance education programmes, successful implementation requires adequate institutional capacity and faculty support. Previous studies on higher education reforms have similarly emphasized that policy initiatives can only achieve their intended outcomes when institutions possess the resources and organizational structures necessary for effective implementation (Latchem & Jung, 2010).

Finally, the findings indicate that the expansion of online programmes offered by both public and private institutions has increased competition within the higher education sector. Faculty members suggested that this changing landscape may encourage ODL institutions to innovate and redesign their programmes in order to remain competitive. This observation reflects broader trends in global higher education, where digital learning platforms and online universities are increasingly reshaping the delivery of higher education (Anderson, 2008).

Overall, the discussion suggests that while teachers view the future of ODL in India with optimism, the sustainability of ODL institutions will depend on their ability to address infrastructural constraints, strengthen learner support mechanisms, integrate digital technologies effectively, and respond proactively to evolving policy frameworks.

6. **Implications for ODL Institutions and Policy**

The findings of this study have several important implications for the future development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in India. As teachers are directly involved in programme delivery and learner support, their perspectives provide valuable insights into the institutional reforms required to strengthen ODL systems in the evolving digital education landscape.

First, the strong optimism expressed by teachers regarding the future of ODL suggests that distance education will continue to play a significant role in expanding access to higher education in India. Institutions offering ODL programmes should therefore strengthen their strategic planning and infrastructure in order to accommodate the growing demand for flexible and technology-enabled learning opportunities.

Second, the findings highlight the need for greater integration of digital technologies in ODL systems. Teachers emphasized the importance of adopting online and blended learning models, digital assessment tools, and interactive learning platforms. ODL institutions should therefore invest in learning management systems, digital learning resources, and faculty training programmes to enhance the quality of teaching and learner engagement in distance education.

Third, the study points to the importance of strengthening student support services in ODL institutions. Effective learner support mechanisms, including timely feedback, transparent communication channels, and systematic tracking of assignments and academic progress, are essential for improving student satisfaction and retention. Institutions should therefore develop

more efficient administrative and technological systems to facilitate communication between students and faculty.

Fourth, the findings underline the need to address digital infrastructure challenges, particularly in geographically remote regions. Policymakers and institutions must consider strategies to improve internet connectivity, provide access to affordable digital platforms, and strengthen technological support at learner support centres in order to ensure equitable participation in online and distance learning.

Finally, the evolving regulatory framework for distance education, including the implementation of NEP 2020 and UGC-DEB guidelines, requires institutions to continuously update curricula, develop high-quality learning materials, and ensure compliance with academic standards. Institutional leadership should therefore focus on building organizational capacity and supporting faculty in adapting to these policy changes.

Overall, the study suggests that the future sustainability of ODL in India depends on a combination of technological innovation, strong learner support systems, responsive institutional leadership, and effective policy implementation.

7. Conclusion

Open and Distance Learning continues to play a vital role in expanding access to higher education in India. Teachers' perspectives indicate that ODL has strong potential to grow and evolve in response to digital transformation and policy reforms such as NEP 2020. At the same time, the sustainability of ODL institutions depends on their ability to address infrastructural limitations, strengthen student support mechanisms, and adapt to emerging technological and regulatory developments.

The study suggests that with appropriate institutional reforms and strategic planning, ODL can continue to serve as an important instrument for promoting inclusive and flexible higher education in India.

References

Anderson, T. (2008). The theory and practice of online learning *(2nd ed.). AU Press.*

Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2020). Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to CoronaVirus pandemic. Asian Journal of Distance Education, 15*(1), i–vi.*

Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. Journal of Educational Technology Systems, 49*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018*

Latchem, C., & Jung, I. (2010). Distance and blended learning in Asia. *Routledge.*

Mishra, L., Gupta, T., & Shree, A. (2020). Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic. International Journal of Educational Research Open, 1, *100012. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100012*

Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). Distance education: A systems view of online learning *(3rd ed.). Wadsworth.*

National Education Policy. (2020). National education policy 2020. *Ministry of Education, Government of India. https://www.education.gov.in*

Panda, S. (2016). Open and distance learning in India: Policy perspectives and practices. In S. Panda (Ed.), Planning and management in distance education *(pp. 45–60). Kogan Page.*

Perraton, H. (2010). Open and distance learning in the developing world *(2nd ed.). Routledge.*

Singh, G., O'Donoghue, J., & Worton, H. (2005). A study into the effects of e-learning on higher education. Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 2*(1), 13–24.*

UNESCO. (2020). Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action. *UNESCO.*