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DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES AT HIMACHAL PRADESH UNIVERSITY: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PRESENT SCENARIO

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Abstract

Distance education has played an important role in expanding access to higher education by providing flexible learning opportunities to individuals who cannot pursue conventional classroom-based programmes. Himachal Pradesh University (HPU), Shimla, initiated distance education through the establishment of the Directorate of Correspondence Courses (DCC) in 1971. The Directorate was renamed the International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL) in 1995 and subsequently became the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE). The present study examines the historical development of distance education at HPU, and major institutional and regulatory developments up to the academic session 2025–26. The study follows a descriptive documentary research design and is based on university prospectuses, programme records, academic proceedings, government notifications and UGC-DEB documents. Programme data for the period 2014–15 to 2023–24 are classified into Post Graduate (PG) Degree, Under Graduate (UG) Degree and diploma categories. The findings indicate that the academic portfolio has experienced both diversification and reduction. Important developments include the changes in territorial jurisdiction, revision of programme nomenclature, discontinuation of selected programmes and the introduction of regulatory eligibility requirements. The present study provides an institutional account of the development of distance education within a dual-mode state university.

Keywords: *Distance Education, Open and Distance Learning, Himachal Pradesh University, ICDEOL, CDOE, Programme Development, Learner Support Centres.*

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.1. Introduction

Higher education plays an important role in individual development and social progress. However, conventional institutions have not always been able to meet the educational needs of all sections of society. Geographical isolation, financial limitations, employment responsibilities and family commitments often restrict individuals from pursuing regular higher education. Distance education has emerged as an alternative mode of educational delivery by providing opportunities to learners who cannot attend conventional classroom-based programmes. In India, the development of distance education has been associated with the initiatives of open universities as well as dual mode universities. Initially, correspondence education relied mainly on printed study materials and limited academic interaction. Gradually, the system incorporated self-learning materials, personal contact programmes, academic counselling and information and communication technologies. These developments contributed to the expansion of distance education as an organised system of higher education.

Distance education took its formal form in India during 1962, after the establishment of School of Correspondence courses and Continuing Education. This School started with first batch of 900 distance learners. Delhi University's School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education was started as a pilot project for testing viability of correspondence courses in India. It provided improved results in the field and motivated other institutions to offer correspondence courses in India. After 1962, University of Rajasthan and Punjabi University started correspondence courses in 1968. Meerut University and Mysore University started in 1969 followed by Punjab University and Himachal Pradesh University (1971). India has 34 institutions offering correspondence courses during 1960-1986. At present higher education institutions offering distance education has increased 81 HEIs and 15 category-I HEIs for the session 2023-24 (UGC Annual Report, 2023-24) with the learners enrolment of 44.0 lakh through distance mode and 6.5 lakh in private mode and 2.8 lakh in online mode in Higher Education at different levels through Universities (AISHE, 2023-24).

Himachal Pradesh University (HPU), Shimla, has been an important contributor to this development. Established in 1970, the University initiated distance education by setting up the Directorate of Correspondence Courses (DCC) in 1971. The initiative was particularly significant for Himachal Pradesh, where mountainous terrain and geographically dispersed settlements create challenges for accessing higher education. The DCC was one of the prominent institutions to offer UG programmes in Arts and Humanities (Sahoo, 1985). During the initial years of 1982-83 among northern region states comprising Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh tops the list with about 42 per cent of total enrollment being accounted for by distance education (Mullick, 1987). In the following years The Directorate was subsequently renamed the International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL) in 1995 (Himachal Pradesh University, n.d). However, certain shortcomings were also reported in learner support services, physical infrastructure and institutional autonomy in academic and administrative matters (Sharma, 1999).

In recent years, with changing regulatory scenarios, ICDEOL rechristened to the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE).

Over the years, the University's distance education system has experienced several institutional and academic changes. These changes also affected the availability of programmes and enrolment at the Centre. The present study attempts to document these developments and provide an overview of the historical growth and present programme structure of distance education at Himachal Pradesh University**.**

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the historical development of distance education at Himachal Pradesh University.
2. To study major institutional and regulatory developments influencing distance education at HPU.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive documentary research design, with Himachal Pradesh University as the institutional case. It is based on secondary documentary sources, including university prospectuses, annual reports, programme-wise records, Programme Project Reports (PPRs), university proceedings, administrative and government notifications, and UGC-DEB regulations and recognition documents. These sources were selected on the basis of their relevance to the historical development, institutional organisation and academic functioning of distance education at HPU. The documentary information was examined chronologically to identify major institutional developments, changes in nomenclature, territorial jurisdiction, programme introductions and discontinuations, and regulatory developments. Programme-wise information for the period 2014–15 to 2023–24 was classified into postgraduate, undergraduate and diploma categories to examine changes in the academic programme portfolio. Institutional and regulatory documents from subsequent academic sessions were also consulted to understand developments up to 2025–26.

The study is limited to documentary evidence and does not examine annual learner enrolment trends, learner perceptions or programme effectiveness. Its focus is restricted to the historical and institutional development of distance education at HPU and the regulatory context influencing its programme offerings. Prior permission was obtained from the Director, CDOE, HPU, to consult relevant official administrative records.

4. Findings of the study

4.1: Historical Development of Distance Education at Himachal Pradesh University

- Establishment of Directorate of Correspondence Courses (DCC), HPU: Himachal Pradesh University was established on 22nd July 1970 under the Himachal Pradesh University act, 1970. Soon after its establishment, the University took an important step towards expanding educational opportunities by setting up the Directorate of Correspondence Courses in 1971. The initiative provided an alternative for individuals who were unable to pursue higher education through regular classroom-based programmes. According to the University's institutional account, HPU played a pioneering role in providing postgraduate education

through distance education in areas such as social sciences, humanities, commerce and teacher education. The early system primarily relied on printed instructional materials and correspondence-based academic support. Over time, the Directorate expanded its academic activities and gradually adopted broader approaches to distance education (Himachal Pradesh University, n.d.).

- Transition from DCC to International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL): With the changing understanding of distance education, the traditional correspondence model gradually developed into a more comprehensive system of open and distance learning. In 1995, the Directorate of Correspondence Courses was renamed the International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL). The change in nomenclature reflected the wider philosophy of Open and Distance Learning, which emphasised flexibility, learner support and the use of different instructional approaches. ICDEOL continued to provide undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in different disciplines and gradually expanded its academic offerings. The institutional development of ICDEOL also involved the use of self-learning materials, personal contact programmes and academic counselling. These arrangements became important components of the University's distance education system. The findings further revealed that HP University was among the early universities in India to offer distance programmes in Humanities and Arts at the Master's level, with Spot Admission Centres and Learner Support Centres (study centres) extending its reach beyond the university campus.
- Transition from ICDEOL to Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE): The development of digital learning technologies and changes in the national regulatory environment brought further institutional changes in distance education. The UGC introduced the Open and Distance Learning Regulations in 2017 and subsequently notified the UGC (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations, 2020. In this context, HPU changed the institutional nomenclature from ICDEOL to the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE), in accordance with the evolving UGC framework. The University's official prospectus for 2024 identifies the centre as CDOE, formerly ICDEOL (HPU, 2024). The change in nomenclature reflects an institutional adaptation to the contemporary regulatory framework. However, the use of the term 'Online Education' in the centre's name should not be interpreted as evidence that all its distance education programmes have been converted into fully online programmes. Open and Distance Learning and online education remain distinct modes of delivery under the UGC regulatory framework.
- Regarding its vision, CDOE aims to provide inclusive, flexible, accessible, skill based and quality education particularly to learners from remote areas, while adapting to NEP 2020 and promoting lifelong learning as per the documents and respondents.

4.2 Institutional and Regulatory Developments Influencing Distance Education at HPU.

- **Territorial Jurisdiction:** Territorial jurisdiction has been an important regulatory consideration in the organisation of distance education at Himachal Pradesh University. The

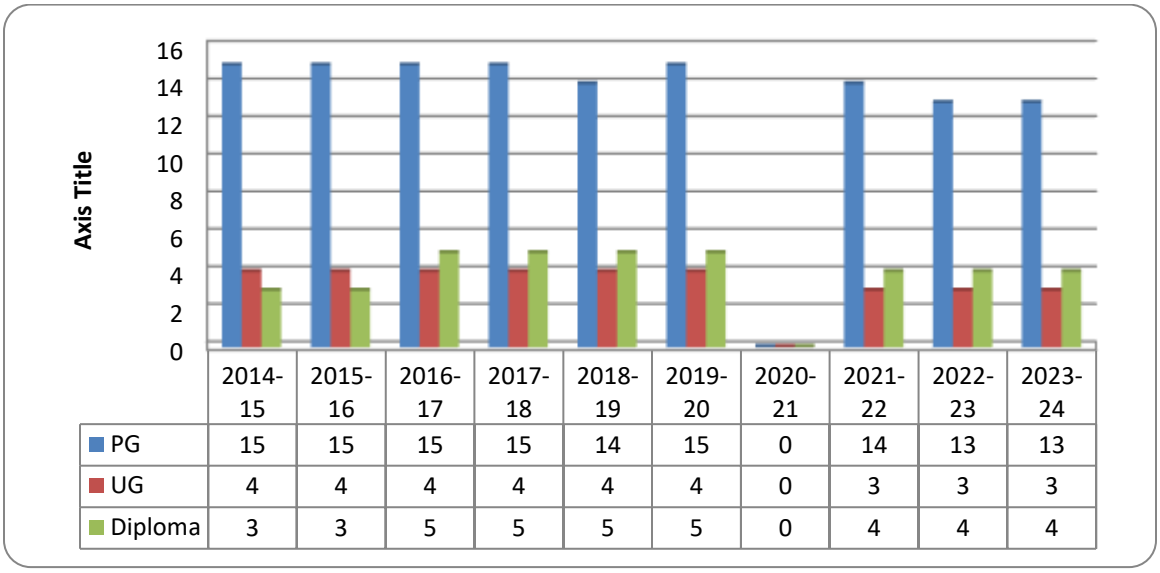
University Grants Commission issued a Public Notice dated 27 June 2013, outlining its policy on territorial jurisdiction, according to which a State University was required to operate within the territorial jurisdiction allotted to it under the respective State Act and could not operate beyond the boundaries of its state. Subsequently, the UGC issued directions in July 2016 reiterating the applicability of territorial jurisdiction norms to academic activities, including the establishment of examination centres for ODL programmes. The implementation of these directions at Himachal Pradesh University is reflected in the University's administrative decision during 2016 to conduct examination centres within the territorial limits of Himachal Pradesh. The matter was also considered by the Himachal Pradesh High Court in Rishav Sharma v. Himachal Pradesh University (2017), wherein the University's compliance with the UGC directions regarding examination centres was noted. The University's subsequent prospectuses also refer to the prescribed territorial jurisdiction for conducting Personal Contact Programmes and examinations. These developments indicate the increasing regulatory significance of territorial jurisdiction in the organisation of distance education activities at HPU.

- **Establishment of another State University:** An important development occurred after the establishment of Sardar Patel University, Mandi, as another state university in Himachal Pradesh. The Government of Himachal Pradesh issued a notification dated 12th January 2023 concerning the territorial jurisdiction of HPU for courses offered through ICDEOL. The notification extended HPU's jurisdiction for distance education programmes throughout the state of Himachal Pradesh, including the Regional Centre at Dharamshala. The notification was significant for the organisation of distance education activities following the establishment of the second state university. It provided the administrative basis for HPU to conduct relevant academic activities, including personal contact programmes and learner support arrangements, throughout its prescribed jurisdiction (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2023).
- **NAAC Accreditation and UGC-DEB Eligibility:** Accreditation has become an important consideration in the recognition and delivery of programmes through Open and Distance Learning. Himachal Pradesh University received an A grade with a CGPA of 3.21 in its third NAAC assessment cycle in 2016. In its fourth assessment cycle in 2022, the University again received an A grade, with a CGPA of 3.07 (HPU, 2020–21; HPU, 2022). The UGC (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations, 2020 prescribe eligibility conditions for institutions offering ODL programmes. The regulations also specify additional conditions for science-based ODL programmes requiring hands-on experience and experimental facilities. Such programmes are subject to a NAAC score of 3.26 or above, or the alternative eligibility routes specified by UGC, including the relevant NIRF ranking provisions (UGC, 2020). The institutional programme records associate some programme discontinuations with regulatory eligibility requirements. Nevertheless, the exact application of these requirements to BCA, MCA and M.A. Mathematics needs to be understood

programme-wise. The available records do not justify attributing every discontinuation solely to the University's NAAC score.

4.3 Regulatory impact on offering of distance education programmes at CDOE, Himachal Pradesh University during 2014-2024:

Figure 4.1: Year -wise PG, UG and Diploma programmes offered by CDOE, Himachal Pradesh University (2014-15 to 2023-24)



	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
PG	15	15	15	15	14	15	0	14	13	13
UG	4	4	4	4	4	4	0	3	3	3
Diploma	3	3	5	5	5	5	0	4	4	4

It was found that CDOE (formerly known as ICDEOL), Himachal Pradesh University, offered variety of distance education programmes at PG, UG and Diploma level accounting to 20 programmes during 2014-14 to 2023-24. All these programmes follow the guidelines of UGC-DEB Regulations 2017, UGC-DEB Regulation 2020 and programme specific other regulatory bodies. Regarding the admission cycle in the programmes, it was found that CDOE (ICDEOL at that time) conducted the admissions twice a year as proposed by UGC-DEB since 2019-20 in January and July of each year. Further, as per the documents available on UGC and H.P University portal, the NAAC grade related requirement and regulatory changes led to de-affiliation of some programmes offered by CDOE at PG, UG and Diploma levels during the study period causing a decrease in the number of programmes offered at PG and UG levels. The documentary records of Himachal Pradesh University provide further details regarding the non-recognition of ODL programmes during the academic sessions 2016–17 and 2017–18. According to an explanatory note submitted by the Director, ICDEOL, the non-recognition was associated with territorial jurisdiction issues and the eligibility requirements under the UGC (Open and Distance Learning) Regulations, 2017. The note stated that the University's NAAC CGPA was 3.21, below the prescribed threshold of 3.26 applicable to the relevant science-based programmes. It further recorded that the UGC had declined to grant ex-post facto recognition for the academic session 2016–17. Subsequently, the Standing Committee of the Academic Council, in its meeting held on 26 August 2023, recommended ex-post-facto approval for validation of the undergraduate and postgraduate degrees/diplomas awarded by ICDEOL during 2016–17 and 2017–18 and forwarded the matter to the Executive Council for consideration and approval

(Himachal Pradesh University, 2023). This development highlights the institutional implications of regulatory non-recognition and the subsequent administrative efforts concerning the degrees awarded during the affected sessions. However, number of diploma programmes was increased towards the end of the study period in spite of de-affiliation of some programmes in 2020-21 due to UGC-DEB regulatory frameworks.

5. Discussion

The historical development of distance education at Himachal Pradesh University reflects the gradual transformation of correspondence-based education into a more organised system of Open and Distance Learning. The establishment of the Directorate of Correspondence Courses in 1971 marked an important institutional initiative towards extending higher education opportunities beyond conventional classroom settings. Its subsequent development as the International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL) and later as the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE) indicates the changing institutional organisation of distance education in response to developments in the higher education sector. This transition also reflects the broader shift from traditional correspondence education towards a more structured approach involving self-learning materials, personal contact programmes and learner support arrangements. The findings further indicate that institutional development has been influenced by changes in the regulatory and administrative environment. Territorial jurisdiction emerged as an important consideration in the organisation of distance education activities at HPU. The UGC's territorial jurisdiction policy and its subsequent directions in 2016 required the University to organise academic activities, particularly personal contact programmes and examinations, within the prescribed territorial limits. The subsequent Government of Himachal Pradesh notification of January 2023 concerning HPU's jurisdiction throughout the state, including the Regional Centre at Dharamshala, represents another significant administrative development. These changes demonstrate that the functioning of distance education institutions is influenced not only by academic considerations but also by the legal and administrative framework within which they operate.

The analysis of programme offerings during 2014–15 to 2023–24 indicates that the academic portfolio of CDOE has experienced both diversification and reduction. The number of postgraduate and undergraduate programmes showed a declining trend towards the end of the study period, whereas diploma programmes continued to form part of the academic portfolio. This pattern suggests that the development of distance education at HPU has not been characterised by a continuous expansion in the number of programmes. Instead, changes in programme offerings reflect institutional adjustments and the influence of the regulatory environment. The temporary absence of recognised programme offerings during 2020–21, as reflected in the documentary records, further highlights the significance of regulatory recognition in determining the continuity of academic programmes. The regulatory developments concerning the academic sessions 2016–17 and 2017–18 also illustrate the institutional challenges associated with compliance with UGC-DEB requirements. The documentary records of HPU indicate that issues relating to territorial jurisdiction and institutional eligibility affected the recognition of

ODL programmes during these sessions. The subsequent consideration of degree and diploma validation by the University's academic authorities highlights the administrative implications of regulatory non-recognition for students as well as the institution. This situation underlines the importance of ensuring regulatory compliance before admitting learners to ODL programmes and maintaining appropriate institutional records regarding programme recognition and student enrolment. Another important aspect emerging from the analysis is the distinction between the University's academic programme portfolio and the programmes recognised for admission under the applicable regulatory framework. The inclusion of a programme in institutional academic records does not, by itself, establish its eligibility for offering admissions during a particular academic session. Therefore, programme development in a dual-mode university needs to be understood in relation to both institutional academic decisions and the recognition requirements prescribed by the regulatory authorities.

Overall, the findings suggest that the evolution of distance education at Himachal Pradesh University has involved institutional expansion, changes in organisational identity, administrative adjustments and responses to changing regulatory requirements. The experience of HPU illustrates the challenges faced by a dual-mode state university in maintaining its distance education activities while adapting to the evolving regulatory framework. The continued development of CDOE would consequently require attention not only to the academic range of programmes but also to regulatory compliance, institutional capacity and the effective organisation of learner support arrangements**.**

6. Conclusion

Distance education at Himachal Pradesh University has evolved over more than five decades, beginning with the establishment of the Directorate of Correspondence Courses in 1971. Its subsequent development as the International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL) and later as the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE) reflects the changing nature and institutional organisation of distance education within the University. The study highlights important developments in this journey, including changes in institutional nomenclature, territorial jurisdiction, regulatory arrangements and the academic programme portfolio. The analysis of programme offerings indicates that the academic development of CDOE has involved both diversification and reduction, rather than a continuous expansion of programmes. The changes observed in postgraduate, undergraduate and diploma offerings, together with the regulatory developments during the study period, demonstrate the influence of institutional and regulatory factors on programme continuity. The experiences relating to the academic sessions 2016–17 and 2017–18 further highlight the importance of regulatory recognition and institutional compliance in the delivery of distance education programmes. The study concludes that the development of distance education at HPU needs to be understood in the context of its institutional history as well as the changing regulatory environment governing Open and Distance Learning in India. As a dual-mode state university, HPU's experience provides an institutional perspective on the opportunities and administrative challenges associated with the continuation of distance education programmes. The future development of

CDOE would require sustained attention to regulatory compliance, academic relevance, institutional capacity and effective learner support mechanisms to ensure the continued provision of accessible and quality higher education through the distance mode.

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