

INTERVIEW

THE ROLE and FUNCTION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION WORLD FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE:

An interview with Dr. Kalpana GUPTE for WOJDE

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int.WOJDE: Dear Dr Kalpana, Welcome to International Women Online Journal of Distance Education. Pl tell us who is Dr Kalpana?



Kalpana GUPTE: I have a Ph.D in Political Socialization from the University of Pune and experience of teaching Political Science in several colleges at the Undergraduate and Post graduate level in Pune, Thane, Warora (Chandrapur District) in Maharashtra for about 10 years. I have also worked as a Research Associate in the Centre for Development Studies and Activities and as an Associate Coordinator in the State Resource Centre for Non-Formal Education for about 3 years before I joined the Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1997 in the capacity of Assistant Regional Director and later Deputy Director at its Regional Centre

in Pune, Maharashtra.

int.WOJDE: What are your views about distance education? How does distance education support the education system of your country?

Kalpana GUPTE: Distance Education is an excellent system especially suited to those learners who are unable to seek education in the Conventional system due to various kinds of reasons. As there is no bar on age or place and there is an inbuilt flexibility in the system, it is beneficial to those aspiring adult learners who are interested in seeking to study further and enhance their knowledge and skills. The use of technology helps widen the reach of distance education.

In a country like India which is very diverse and has many disparities, it helps to democratize education and provide access to students who are unreachable. It helps to widen the base of higher education and provides easy access to all learners who are desirous of completing their education.

There are many learners who are compelled to drop out of school or college and earn a living due to their social and economic conditions. Distance education gives them an opportunity to have access to quality education at affordable cost and with the added flexibility of time and space. Hence it helps to enhance the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of the country.

Many young people aspire for better jobs or to enter the Civil Services or seek jobs with the Government. Distance education programmes help them to prepare for the Civil Service and other competitive examinations. They are enabled to upgrade themselves by studying in the Distance Education mode.

Besides, there are also several learners who are past their prime youth and have retired from active service or domestic and household responsibilities. Many of them aspire to study further for the sake of knowledge and seek to enroll in Academic Programmes of their choice, which they were unable to pursue during their active working life. It helps to keep the senior citizens active and alert.

int.WOJDE: What has been your experience at your current workplace for distance education/learning?

Kalpana GUPTA: Everyday is a different experience for me at my current place of work and I have never tired of it. This is because it enables me to sit at my desk and yet interact with so many different people from so many different strata, ages, temperament.



I seem to learn a lot about human relations and interactions on a daily basis and this learning never seems to cease. Every single day brings something new and as I am working in the Regional Centre which is the middle tier between the University Headquarters and the Study Centres which are located in all the district places in well reputed and established Colleges, I get to interact with teachers and faculty from various streams and students who may be facing difficulties or are initially very nervous of commencing studies after a long gap, or there may be some underlying issues which are hampering their studies and during our interactions in person, on telephone or on the e-mail, I am able to interact with them, motivate them and assist them in crossing obstacles or hurdles that they may be facing. There are many who do not face any problems and their studies are quite smooth sailing and it is always a pleasure to meet such learners during the Convocation when they come in person to receive their degree and diploma certificates. I have the good fortune of having collected a store house of experiences and incidents which I have been witness to and it may well turn out into an excellent narrative book.

int.WOJDE: What are the advantages of distance education model of learning over traditional model of learning?

Kalpana GUPTA: Distance education model scores over the traditional model of learning in that it has an inbuilt flexibility allowing the learner to study at his own pace and place. At

the same time, quality aspect can be well monitored and providing excellent learning materials which have been designed and produced by the best brains in the field is a very big asset. There is uniformity in the sense that the same material is studied by a learner who is in the Capital City or the Financial Capital of the country or in the remotest location where access to good libraries and institutions of learning is difficult. The multi-media method of learning makes the courses very interesting for learners.



They are able to view videos on Television or on the YouTube, they attend practical at the Study Centres, do Project work, Field Work, Hands on skill training at work place or home or the Study Centre as per the individual requirements of the particular Programme that they are pursuing. Thus we have produced excellent students in Nursing, Continuing Medicine, like Maternal and Child Health; Geriatric Medicine; Hospital and Health Management; Hospital

Waste Management; Nutrition and Health Education, Early Childhood Care and Education; Social Work; Education; Library Science; Psychology; Food Safety and Quality Management; Organic Farming; Dairy Technology; Bee keeping; Water Harvest Management; Watershed Management; Computer Science, Management; and so many more.

All this is possible while the learner has other commitments and is not on campus all the time. Yet, the Programmes are equivalent to the Programmes of the traditional or conventional universities. They are on par and equivalent to the regular programmes. Hence learners do not suffer on any count and the sky is the limit for their own progress.

There is an example of a Diploma Engineer who completed his B.Tech in Construction Management from IGNOU in the initial days and then completed M.Tech from a Conventional University in regular mode, started working again, completed his Ph.D and was the General Manager of a renowned Construction Company when I had last interacted with him several years ago. Then there is another young girl who had to drop out of college due to an illness, agoraphobia. She enrolled for a Bachelor in Tourism Studies in IGNOU, underwent treatment at a mental illness institution/hospital in Bangalore and has successfully completed her Graduation in Tourism.

This would not have been possible through the traditional system and hence she had dropped out of college, but was very unhappy and fearful when I first met her and her mother. Today, she is confident and had overcome her fears to a large extent.

int.WOJDE: What are your suggestions for distance education instructors?

Kalpna GUPTA: Distance education instructors/academic counselors must understand the distance learner first as an individual with feelings and emotions.



If the learners are motivated and facilitated to learn they turn out to become excellent independent and self-learners.

Use of technology is important in teaching. Technology helps to reduce the distance and bridge the gaps.

More interaction on an individual and personal level will also help beside the regular counseling sessions or contact classes which are conducted on Sundays and holidays at the study centres.

int.WOJDE: What are your suggestions for education administrators?

Kalpna GUPTA: Main suggestion is to think about the impact that any policy decision or



deviation from the previous system would have on the last person in the remotest corner. Development and use of technology and designing online courses are essential and they must be well designed and tested first before implementation. Systems must be transparent and time bound and a sound grievance resolution mechanism must be developed. The distance learner is at a great distance from the main Campus of the University and those near to the Head Quarters are more easily able to resolve or sort out any problems that they may face. The ones who are far off find it difficult and may quit half way through. An endeavor should be made to ensure that there are no push outs out of the system.

int.WOJDE: Which areas of distance education have you been involved so far, and what are some of the lessons you have learned from them?

Kalpna GUPTA: Distance education is like the story of the huge elephant and the blind men who are touching the elephant at different parts and describing its shape. Likewise I have been posted at one of the Regional Centres of IGNOU and have been involved with admissions, pre-admission counseling, post admission counseling, handling e-mail and personal queries and resolving grievances, study centre interactions and monitoring, especially at the time of induction meetings, conduct of practical sessions, examinations etc. Implementation of Programmes developed by the 21 Academic Schools which are at Head Quarters is another area.

I can state with some pride that a former Dean of a Medical College thought that I was a medical doctor, others have thought that I was a Library Science professional, a Nursing teacher and also very recently that I was a Psychologist. This I think is my greatest learning that I am able to put my heart and soul into my work and speak with an air of authority with the people and students that I interact with. I have learnt that there is no end to learning and learning is indeed Life Long. I have become a Generalist and am no longer a specialist, but I truly think that my life has been enriched over the years that I have been involved in working with a Distance Education University.

int.WOJDE: Did you have supportive practices/programs for the education of women and girls through your work at University?

Kalpana GUPTE: Women were never thought of or treated differently. Although IGNOU does have a scheme for special study centre for women, the need was not felt in a place like Pune which has historically seen great women reformers in the field of education like Savitribai Phule, after whom the University of Pune has been renamed. The SNDT Womens' University and the Karve Stree Shikshan Sanstha are other historic institutions in Pune and Maharashtra as compared to other parts of the country. Pune is known as the Oxford of the East and is quite progressive and liberal in its socio-cultural outlook. Today, men and women are treated almost equally in Maharashtra. Hence although I had approached several institutions when the scheme for special study centre for women was launched, we did not receive any response. Some of our current study centres are located in minority institutions and they attract a large number of women from the deprived sections and communities and they are encouraged to enroll and complete their chosen Programmes of study.

int.WOJDE: As a woman, what do you think should be done for a more effective distance education of women?

Kalpana GUPTE: Better access is needed, especially in the remote areas and more outreach and advertisement. We have opened study centres in all the districts, especially the backward areas of Marathwada (former Nizam State) and Khandesh (north) region of Maharashtra. There is one study centre which is opened at a taluka town/block level in Nandurbar district which has almost 100% tribal population and is neighboring the backward region of Gujarat State.

It is felt that these study centres and the colleges which host them will provide easy access and the right atmosphere for the women residing in these areas. The study centre in Ahmednagar is run by Christian minority institution which has a long history of service to the community and runs several Social Work Programmes. The Study Centre in Pune is run by another Muslim Minority institution and the women study in this campus and feel very safe here. It is open to all, but the women from minority communities and their families have a feeling of trust and can study well here. Creating the right kind of atmosphere is the key for effective distance education for women and will go a long way in achieving the purpose.

int.WOJDE: You must have had interesting experiences during your work in distance education. Could you please tell us about some of those?

Kalpana GUPTE: I have narrated several instances while responding to some of the questions above. A few more – A lady who is 74 years old has completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Gandhi and Peace Studies while shuttling between Pune and attending to her grand-daughter in Mumbai. She has now enrolled for an MA in History and also intends to enroll for a Certificate in International Humanitarian Law.

A 65 year old woman who is an author of Marathi books enrolled for MA in Psychology. She completed the Programme within the minimum duration with 65% marks. She had

worked in the Family Court during the internship and is now been appointed as a Counsellor at the Family Court. She has also recently authored a book on Marital Issues.

A young woman who was a Sarpanch in a village, Bhalgudi in Paud taluka is studying and struggling to complete her BSW along with her family, farm and village duties. She also works in the Chinmaya Mission, a spiritual organization, near her village.

Another former Cooperator (local municipal representative) enrolled for MSW and completed it. She recounted the time when she had visited the Collector's office along with a women's delegation against liquor and at that time some officer had derisively remarked, "What do you know? Are you a qualified Social Worker?" This not only annoyed and aggravated her, but spurred her on to achieve and she decided to enroll for the MSW Programme which she successfully completed.

Another young man had lost his job in a private B.Ed College as a lecturer. He was heartbroken and also quite depressed as he had a family to look after and aging parents too. He decided to study Library Science. He completed B.LISc, M.LISc, cleared the National Eligibility Test for Lecturers/Librarians. Despite having got a job in the Indian Institute of Information Technology, Pune, he decided to join a College near his home town in Kolhapur as he thought that he would have a better opportunity to develop the College Library. He is quite happy and enjoying his work in the relative peaceful and pleasant climes of the town and away from the hustle and bustle of the busy city life. This is what he chose after having excelled in his studies as he wished to pay back to his own soil.

There are innumerable other stories and experiences which bring joy to me of having tried to do a good job.

int.WOJDE: Our thanks go to Dr Kalpana GUPTA for sharing her invaluable distance education/learning experience as a female professional with the int.WOJDE readers.

BIODATA OF DR. KALPANA GUPTA:



Dr. **KALPANA GUPTA** is Deputy Director, IGNOU Regional Centre, Pune. She has been working in the field of Distance Education since 1997 starting as an Asst. Regional Director. Prior to joining IGNOU she was Associate Coordinator at the State Resource Centre for Non Formal Education, Indian Institute of Education, Pune, where she was involved in the Post Literacy phase and worked with women and out of school adolescent girls. She has over a decade of teaching and research experience in several colleges in Maharashtra at the Under Graduate and Post Graduate level. She has worked as a Research Associate at the Centre for Development Studies and Activities, Pune.

She has also translated several articles from Marathi to English for research work of Prof. Frank Conlon, University of Washington. Her extra-curricular activities and interests range from Civic issues, Ecological studies, practicing Yoga and Cancer Awareness and Peer Support.

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