

# একুশের ডেউ EKUSHER DHEU

ISSN: 2454-7182

IMPACT FACTOR: 8.158

An International Online Indexed Research Journal of Language, Literature and Culture covering Arts & Humanities as a broad area (Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal, Quarterly)

## A Study on Historical Growth and Institutional Development of Distance Education in West Bengal (1985–2015)



**Name of the Author:** Dr. Mirza Md. Sabbir

**Affiliation:** SACT Category 1, Department of History,

Purnidevi Chowdhury Girls' College, Bolpur, Birbhum,  
West Bengal, India,

**Abstract:** Distance education has emerged as a significant alternative to conventional higher education systems, particularly in developing regions where socio-economic barriers limit access to universities. In West Bengal, the expansion of Distance and Open Learning (DOL) after 1985 marked a major transformation in the educational landscape. The establishment of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and the gradual expansion of dual-mode universities created new opportunities for learners previously excluded from formal higher education. This paper analyzes the historical evolution, institutional expansion, enrolment trends, infrastructural development, and socio-economic foundations of distance education in West Bengal between 1985 and 2015. Drawing upon institutional data, enrolment statistics, and relevant literature, the study argues that distance education expanded largely due to economic pressures, structural limitations in conventional higher education, and growing demand for flexible learning opportunities. Although the system has significantly widened access, persistent challenges—such as uneven institutional growth, technological gaps, rural–urban disparities, and dependence on traditional degree programs—continue to affect its development. The paper concludes that the long-term sustainability of distance education depends on effective policy integration, technological modernization, and stronger alignment between academic programs and employment needs.

**Keywords:** Distance Education, West Bengal, IGNOU, Open and Distance Learning, Dual-Mode Universities, Higher Education

# A Study on Historical Growth and Institutional Development of Distance Education in West Bengal (1985–2015)

Dr. Mirza Md. Sabbir,

**Introduction:** The transformation of higher education in India during the late twentieth century generated an urgent need for alternative learning systems. Conventional universities, constrained by limited infrastructure, faculty shortages, and financial restrictions, were unable to meet the growing demand from an expanding population. Distance education emerged as a practical alternative designed to democratize access, extend institutional reach, and provide flexible learning opportunities for economically, socially, and geographically disadvantaged groups.

In West Bengal, formal distance education activities began in 1986 with the establishment of IGNOU's regional presence in Kolkata. This development signaled the beginning of a new phase in the state's higher education system. Over the following three decades, open universities and dual-mode institutions gradually created a parallel structure that operated alongside traditional universities. The period from 1985 to 2015 represents the formative phase of this expansion, marked by substantial growth in institutions, programs, and enrolment.

The importance of studying this historical period lies in understanding how distance education evolved from a supplementary educational service into a significant institutional system. This paper aims to critically examine the emergence, expansion, and institutionalization of distance education in West Bengal, highlighting the socio-economic conditions that shaped its growth, the structural developments within institutions, and the enrolment patterns that reflect learner behavior.

## Conceptual Background of Distance Education

Distance education refers to a mode of learning in which instructors and learners are separated by space—and often by time—with instruction delivered through print, electronic, or digital media. Unlike traditional classroom-based education, distance learning emphasizes learner autonomy, flexible scheduling, and mediated communication.

Saba (2000) argued that distance education research has evolved from comparative experimental studies to more complex analyses of learner engagement, transactional distance, and institutional processes. Sadeghi (2018) emphasized that technological advancement has reshaped distance education, transforming it from correspondence courses into interactive digital learning systems. Panigrahi et al. (2011) highlighted that well-designed distance education platforms have the potential to increase Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and widen access to higher education, particularly in regions like West Bengal.

In the Indian context, distance education gained formal recognition through the establishment of national and state open universities, followed by the development of distance education

directorates within conventional universities. This structural diversification enabled distance education to integrate deeply into regional higher education systems.

### **Emergence of Distance Education in West Bengal**

The growth of distance education in West Bengal was shaped by interconnected economic, institutional, and social factors.

#### **Economic Pressures and Expanding Demand**

During the late 1980s and 1990s, public expenditure on higher education faced increasing strain. Expanding traditional universities required substantial investment in infrastructure and faculty recruitment. Simultaneously, the number of aspiring students rose rapidly. Distance education emerged as a cost-efficient model capable of accommodating large numbers of learners with comparatively lower operational costs.

Post-1990 economic liberalization further intensified the demand for skilled manpower. Distance education institutions responded by offering flexible programs that allowed learners to combine employment with academic pursuits, thereby linking education with livelihood opportunities.

#### **Crisis in Conventional Higher Education**

Traditional universities in West Bengal were unable to accommodate the growing learner population due to limited seats, urban concentration, and rigid academic schedules. This crisis created a space for distance education as an alternative system. Distance learning directorates were established in several conventional universities, including Burdwan, Jadavpur, Kalyani, Vidyasagar, and North Bengal Universities.

The foundation of Netaji Subhas Open University strengthened the open learning framework, while IGNOU's regional centers expanded outreach and standardized distance education practices.

#### **Institutional Expansion**

The institutional network of distance education expanded steadily. IGNOU's regional centers, study centers, and learner support units created a widespread academic infrastructure. Dual-mode universities also began offering distance programs, particularly in arts, commerce, management, and law. By the early 2000s, West Bengal had developed a multi-institutional distance education environment that catered to diverse academic needs.

#### **Institutional Growth and Program Development**

One of the most visible indicators of distance education growth in West Bengal was the expansion of academic programs. IGNOU's Kolkata Regional Centre increased the number of programs from a small initial offering to nearly sixty by 2011. These programs included Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, diplomas, certificates, and vocational courses.

#### **Growth in enrolment under IGNOU (1985-2015)**

Sl. No.	Year	Enrolment number
1.	1985	NA
2.	1987	480

3.	1990	NA
4.	1993	NA
5.	1996	2061
6.	1999	4187
7.	2002	4520
8.	2005	3841
9.	2008	5257
10.	2011	5897
11.	2015	6607

The enrolment growth under IGNOU is referenced in the table given. Since its beginning in 1987 in Kolkata, the enrolment under IGNOU has shown an odd example of development over many years.

In 1988, there were 480 under-studies for the Kolkata Center, considering the fact that the Kolkata was a regional center for the entire Indian country. In 2005, the enrolment fell to 3841 in 2005 from 4520 in 2002. Information about the founding of the State Open University in the State and the collapse of the inquiry centers can be credited to the fall.

Despite the IGNOU's enrolment strength, it has not diminished over the years owing to its long existence in the state of more than more than a decade, and its confidence as an Accessible University at the public level has continued to boost its brand reputation and as a specialist in distance education<sup>1</sup>.

**Table 6.2: Growth of programmes under IGNOU (1985-2015)**

Sl. No.	Year	No. of Programme
1	1985	NA
2	1987	7
3	1990	NA
4	1993	NA
5	1996	35

6	1999	48
7	2002	58
8	2005	69
9	2008	57
10	2011	59
11	2015	NA

The table above indicates that the number of programs under the IGNOU Kolkata Regional Center was raised to 59 in 1987 and in 2011. However, the 59 programs provided in 2011 is a gigantic tumult from the 69 programs offered in 2005<sup>2</sup>.

The programs offered were: Bachelor's Preparatory Program additionally called Bachelor's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Credential, Advance Certificate, Certification, Advance Diploma and Post Graduate Diploma. Courses that were both customary and vocational have been presented.

Over time, IGNOU tried to present new courses and programs for learners in West Bengal, but there were not many students. Much of the learners sacrificed their midway premium, which meant that IGNOU needed to cancel a variety of programmes. IGNOU introduced a variety of innovative courses designed to open up new possibilities for learners, but the learners remained enthralled with traditional courses and programmes.

The plans of IGNOU to set up learners for various stages of education and administration have been set in motion. However, IGNOU has chosen various methods to render distance learning equally effective by sending programs to India.

The Forensic Group occupies a place of considerable significance in the area of Transparent and Distance Learning owing to the manner in which the learners cooperate with their fellow students and counsellors. The examination group is where socialization takes place in the restricted learning expression of distance learners.

**Table 6.3: Growth of Study Centre (1985-2015)**

Sl. No.	Year	Number of Study Centres
1	1985	NA
2	1987	4
3	1990	NA

4	1993	NA
5	1996	7
6	1999	9
7	2002	24
8	2005	33
9	2008	51
10	2011	44
11	2015	NA

Examination habitats under IGNOU have been spread over the long term and it can be remembered that the inquiry populations are usually clustered in industrial sites and metropolitan cities.

Irrespective of whether the examination societies remain, the services available are small and there are not many enrolments inferable from the societal upheaval that wins in certain regions and which are a hindrance to their learners.

The amount of emphasis of the research declined in the later era, which may be attributed to less enrolment in certain examination sites. Inclusive curriculum may be visualized only as education is dispersed in the same manner as anyone else.

**Table 6.4: Programme wise enrolment under IGNOU (1985-2015)**

Year	Highest Enrolment (Rank 1)	Highest Enrolment (Rank 2)	Highest Enrolment (Rank 3)
1985	NA	NA	NA
1987	BDP (60.4%)	DIM (30.4%)	DE (5.6%)
1990	NA	NA	NA
1993	NA	NA	NA
1996	BA (17.3%)	BPP (11.4%)	CIC (6.2%)
1999	BA (13.2%)	CIC (9.7%)	BPP (6.2%)
2002	BPP (11.08%)	BA (10.7%)	MEG (6.2%)
2005	BA (24.0%)	BPP (14.1%)	MP (4.3%)
2008	BA (27.1%)	BPP (17.3%)	B.Com (8.0%)
2015	BA (46.2%)	BPP (8.7%)	B.Com (6.3%)

Institutional expansion was accompanied by diversification of academic programs. Open universities gradually expanded their offerings to include a wide range of Bachelor's, Master's, diploma, certificate, and vocational courses. Despite diversification, enrolment patterns indicate

a strong preference for traditional degree programs, particularly the Bachelor of Arts (BA), reflecting socio-cultural perceptions regarding employment and social mobility<sup>3</sup>.

Dual-mode universities, though offering fewer programs, sometimes recorded higher enrolment figures in specific years. This suggests that institutional reputation, geographical accessibility, and localized marketing significantly influence learner choices.

#### Area wise enrolment (%) under IGNOU (1985-2015)

Sl. No.	Year	Rural	Urban
1	1985	NA	NA
2	1987	NA	NA
3	1990	NA	NA
4	1993	NA	NA
5	1996	34.4	65.1
6	1999	39.2	60.4
7	2002	38.2	61.2
8	2005	32.8	67.1
9	2008	41.4	58.6
10	2011	44.0%	55.9
11	2015	43.7%	56.2

The distribution of enrolment in rural and urban areas is seen in the figure above. The enrolment in metropolitan areas has been sharply compared with rural areas.

However, it cannot be said that IGNOU has not made an effort at equal schooling open to us. This has contributed to a disparity in trend with the expansion of enrolment in rural areas<sup>4</sup>. Enrolment of rural regions was 34.4 per cent in 1996, up to 43.7 per cent in 201. In comparison, metropolitan enrolment also seems to have fallen from 65.1 per cent in 1996 to 56.2 per cent in 2015.

It should also be remembered that enrolment in rural areas has been found along with low female enrolment, conceivably owing to socio-cultural and economic barriers. At first, the rural enrolment figure showed an incredible enrolment of the OBC and the SC/ST, but even the general group of learners began to overtake the seats in rural areas. The propensity of rural learners is likewise towards the Under Graduate Path as opposed to the Testament or the Diploma Course. A substantial proportion of rural learners under IGNOU are unemployed.

#### Enrolment Trends and Learner Profile

#### Growth of Enrolment

Between 1985 and 2015, enrolment in distance education institutions in West Bengal generally increased, reflecting growing public acceptance of this mode of learning. The steady expansion of study centers and regional offices further facilitated learner participation.

### **Rural–Urban Distribution**

Urban learners initially dominated enrolment due to better awareness and infrastructure, but rural participation gradually improved over time. However, disparities persist because of limited digital access, economic constraints, and information gaps in rural regions.

### **Gender Composition**

Female enrolment showed steady growth but remained lower than male enrolment. Distance education reduced mobility-related barriers, yet gender parity was not fully achieved. Participation of socially disadvantaged groups also improved gradually, although structural inequalities continue to influence access.

### **Social Representation**

Enrolment among SC/ST learners remained inconsistent. Although distance education institutions made efforts to expand outreach, socio-economic deprivation, digital illiteracy, and geographical isolation limited their participation. Nevertheless, the proportion of SC/ST learners in distance education gradually improved compared to their overall higher education participation.

### **Infrastructure and Learner Support Systems**

The effectiveness of distance education depends largely on institutional support mechanisms. Institutions developed regional and study centers, printed self-learning materials, audio-visual content, educational broadcasts, and digital platforms to enhance accessibility and learner engagement. Over time, technological tools strengthened interactivity and improved academic delivery.

IGNOU pioneered the use of GyanVani and GyanDarshan to broadcast educational content. IILS and other institutions established in-house studios and community radio initiatives. These technological interventions transformed distance education from correspondence-based learning into multimedia-supported education.

Dual-mode universities initially lagged behind in infrastructure development but gradually invested in learner support services. Libraries, counseling units, and computer facilities became increasingly common after 2005.

### **Discussion**

The historical trajectory of distance education in West Bengal demonstrates a dynamic interaction between social demand and institutional adaptation. Initially developed as a response to structural constraints in conventional education, it gradually evolved into an established educational subsystem.

However, growth remains uneven. Traditional academic programs continue to dominate enrolment, while vocational and skill-oriented courses attract comparatively fewer students.

Although technological integration has improved, digital disparities limit its full potential. Rural outreach and quality assurance mechanisms require further strengthening.

### Conclusion

Between 1985 and 2015, distance education in West Bengal evolved from a marginal initiative into a significant component of the state's higher education framework. It expanded access, diversified academic opportunities, and supported learners excluded from conventional institutions.

Nevertheless, structural challenges remain. Uneven infrastructural development, dependence on traditional degree programs, limited rural participation, and technological barriers continue to shape its trajectory. For distance education to achieve long-term sustainability, coordinated policy support, digital investment, and curriculum modernization are essential.

Distance education in West Bengal today functions not as a substitute for traditional education, but as a complementary pillar capable of fostering a more inclusive and flexible higher education system.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Agrawal, S. R., Sharma KananandGhosh, C.K. (2007). "Best Practices in Learner Support Services: A Case Study of IGNOU Regional Centers", in *Indian Journal of Learning*, Vol. 16, No. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Borgohain, ManashiGogoi (2009). *Distance Education under IGNOU in Assam: Its Functioning and Achievement*, Unpublished Thesis, Dibrugarh University, Assam.

<sup>3</sup> Dikshit, Jyotsna, Gupta, Sanjay and Garg, Suresh (2012). "On Innovations and Leadership in Open and Distance Learning: IGNOU Experiences", in *University News*, Vol. 50 No. 30

<sup>4</sup> Medhi, Dulumoni (2005) *An Evaluative Study of the DE System with special reference to IGNOU and PGCS, Gauhati University*, Unpublished Thesis, Gauhati University, Assam

#### Special Reference Books

1. Aarti Bansal (2004). *Distance Education in the 21st Century*, Sublime Publications, Jaipur, India.
2. Abstract of Selected Educational Statistics, 2005-06, MHRD Government of India. Accessed from <http://www.educationforallinindia.com/SES2005-06.pdf> on 12-09-11
3. Afzaal Ali & Israr Ahmad (2011) "Key Factors for Determining Students' Satisfaction in Distance Learning Courses: A Study of Allama Iqbal Open University" *CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY*, 2011, 2(2), 118-134
4. Agrawal, S. R., Sharma KananandGhosh, C.K. (2007). "Best Practices in Learner Support Services: A Case Study of IGNOU Regional Centers", in *Indian Journal of Learning*, Vol. 16, No. 1.
5. Ahmmmod, S. M. Mirja (2004). "Management Style in the ODL Universities: A Comparative Study between BOU and BRAOU", in *Indian Journal of Learning*, Vol. 13, No. 1
6. Akande Joshua OLUSOLA, (2011), "Globalization, Information and Communication Technologies and Open/Distance Learning in Nigeria: Trends, Issues and Solution", *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education -TOJDE V12 N3 Article1 P66-77 July 2011*

7. Anderson, T., & Dron, J. (2011). Three generations of distance education pedagogy. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(3). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/890/1826>
8. Ansie Minnaar, (2013) “Challenges for Successful Planning of Open and Distance Learning (ODL): A Template Analysis “, *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, V13, N3, P81-108
9. Ashish Pant (2014)” Distance Learning: History, Problems and Solutions” *Advances in Computer Science and Information Technology (ACSIT)* Print ISSN: 2393-9907; Online ISSN: 2393-9915; Volume 1, Number 2; November, 2014 pp. 65-70
10. Bates, A.W. (Tony). (2005). *Technology, E-Learning and Distance Education*, 2nd edition, Routledge, London
11. Bazeley, Brinda. R. (2006). *Development and Problems of Higher Education in Barak Valley and Karbi Anglong Areas of Assam*, Regency Publications, New Delhi
12. Belawati, Tian and Baggaley, Jon (Eds.) (2010). *Policy and Practice in Asian Distance Education*, Sage Publication, New Delhi
13. Best, John W., and Kahn, James, V, *Research in Education*, Delhi: Pearson, 2006.
14. Bharat InderFozdar, Lalita S. Kumar, and S. Kannan (2006). “A Survey of Study on the Reasons Responsible for Student Dropout from the Bachelor of Science Programme at Indira Gandhi National Open University”, in *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol. 7, No.3. [Available Online]. Accessed from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/291/747> on 29-09-12
15. Bhatt, S.C. & Gopal K. Bharagava (2006). *Land and People: Of Indian States and Union Territories*, Kalpaz, Delhi
16. Black, L. M. (2007). A history of scholarship. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of distance education* (2nd ed., pp. 3–14). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
17. Borgohain, Manashi Gogoi (2009). *Distance Education under IGNOU in Assam: Its Functioning and Achievement*, Unpublished Thesis, Dibrugarh University, Assam.
18. Bown, Lalage (ed.) (2003) *Education in the Commonwealth: the first 40 years From Oxford to Halifax and Beyond*, The Commonwealth Secretariat, London
19. Bozkurt, Aras & Akgün Özbek, Ela & Yılmazel, Sibel & Erdoğan, Erdem & Ucar, Hasan & Guler, Emel & Sezgin, Sezan & Karadeniz, Abdulkadir & Sen-Ersoy, Nazife & Göksel, Nil & Dinçer, Gökhan Deniz & Ari, Suleyman & Aydin, Cengiz. (2015). Trends in Distance Education Research: A Content Analysis of Journals 2009-2013. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*. 16. 330-363. 10.19173/irrodl.v16i1.1953
20. Burge, E. J. (2008). ‘Crafting the future’: Pioneer lessons and concerns for today. *Distance Education*, 29(1), 5–17. doi: 10.1080/01587910802004811