

PERCEPTION OF ODL STUDENTS TOWARDS RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT 2005: A CASE OF IGNOU, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Right to Information Act in India was enacted on June 15, 2005 and came into effect on October 12, 2005 replacing the Freedom of Information Act 2002. The Act heralded a new beginning by giving citizens an opportunity to participate in the democratic processes leading to transparent and open governance. In Indian context, the Right to Information (RTI) Act is being seen as a grievance redressal tool rather than an information retrieval tool. The Act has been used by different citizens and non-governmental organisations to unearth cases of financial misappropriation and corruption at different occasions. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is a premier institution of distance higher education in India funded by the federal government. Consequently, IGNOU comes under the purview of the Act. The awareness and perception of the citizens towards the different provisions of the Right to Information Act play important role in making judicious use of the Act. The current study tries to study the perception of IGNOU students towards the Right to Information Act 2005. The analysis of data revealed that IGNOU students considered the Act as an important tool in seeking information from government departments. The respondents had a fair idea of the provisions of the RTI Act. They perceived that the users make judicious use of the Act. It was perceived that the users sought only the required information from the public authority except a few who misused the Act. The respondents agreed that the practice of multiple applications from the same applicant and multiple hearings on the same subject lead to wastage of precious time of government machinery. Lack of infrastructure, information management system and training of the public information officers were considered as few of the constraints in effective implementation of the Act. The study highlighted the need of improving the support services by IGNOU for its students. Opening up of alternative channels for information dissemination was also considered important in study.

Keywords: Perception, Right to Information Act, ODL Students, IGNOU, INDIA

INTRODUCTION

The concept of extending right to the citizens to seek information from government bodies is not new. The nations globally have acknowledged the right to information (RTI) at different times through promulgation of laws to this effect. The right to information law at international level was first enacted by Sweden in 1776. This enabled her parliament to access relevant information held by the King at that point of time. Subsequently, Finland (1951), United States of America (1966) and Norway (1970) enacted similar laws to open the threshold of information held by government departments to the citizens (Karim, 2013). Slowly it became a global trend and different countries enacted such laws for benefit of their citizens. In Indian context, the access to potential information held by government departments was restricted through Official Secrets Act, 1923. The prevailing Right to Information Act which relaxed and replaced the Freedom of Information Act 2002 was enacted on June 15, 2005 and consequently, came into effect on October 12, 2005.

The RTI Act 2005 was expected to herald a new beginning leading to transparent and open governance, and participatory democracy. The Act gives the citizens an opportunity to actually participate in the governance that is essential for inclusive growth at national level. The implementation of the RTI Act is one of the important initiatives for making the functioning of the public institutions accountable and transparent thereby empowering the citizens. The right to information for the citizens is increasingly been seen as a way to “*promote openness, transparency and accountability in public administration*” (Singh & Verma, 2009). The centre, state and local government authorities

are expected to be more accountable to common citizens of the nation. At the same time, it is to encourage the citizens to be vigilant and become informed citizens as also actively participate in democratic process by way of accessing information and records available with the public authorities in different forms. It has also helped in changing the attitude of the people at the global level towards flow, exchange, and use of information. The Act is even popular among the students who make use of it in getting their grievances resolved (Business Today, 2013).

The promulgation of RTI Act 2005 is perceived as the advent of “*RTI Movement*” in Indian context (World Bank, 2012). Added to this, eGovernance and ICT tools have become potential empowering tools in the hands of the government and citizens alike (Singh, 2010). Making the information and knowledge accessible to all is perceived to be crucial for creating equal opportunities of development for all. This is where the RTI Act facilitates the process for free flow of information that forms the basis for a healthy debate on issues of vital importance to every section of the society. The access to right kind of information and an understanding of how to make use of that information empowers people and proves to be their real strength (Ansari, 2008).

As observed by Dharanisha (2015), RTI Act is perceived to be an important tool in the hands of the citizens to fight against corruption, irregularities, misappropriation of funds, and misuse of power among others. It is expected to promote good governance and pave the way for inclusive development. Under the provisions of the RTI Act, the citizens can access the information hitherto not available and accessible to them from a public authority. The important conditions in seeking the information are: the applicant is an Indian Citizen; the information is held by that public authority; and the information is not exempted by the Act under any of the provisions.

The current study examines the perception of the Open and Distance Learning students towards the Right to Information Act 2005 with special reference to Student Evaluation Division of Indira Gandhi National Open University.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As per the clause 2(j) of the RTI Act 2005 (GoI, 2005), right to information “*means the right to information accessible under this Act which is held by or under the control of any public authority and includes the right to (i) inspection of work, documents, records; (ii) taking notes, extracts, or certified copies of documents or records; (iii) taking certified samples of material; and (iv) obtaining information in the form of diskettes, floppies, tapes, video cassettes or in any other electronic mode or through printouts where such information is stored in a computer or in any other device*”.

The UN General Assembly in 1949 declared under Resolution 59(I) that “*Freedom of information is a fundamental human right*” (Mendel, 2008). In Indian context, the statutory provisions of the RTI Act extend the citizens the right to “*query, examine, audit and review*’ government activities and decisions”. However, Dharanisha (2015) while studying the perception of the citizens towards RTI Act, has sighted an important aspect of implementation of the Act in Indian context. He claims that the citizens are not aware of the scope of the Act and therefore, seek questions which do not fall under the purview of the Act such as ‘why’ and ‘how’ among others. He further claims that the non-response of such questions invites dissatisfaction of the applicants and further leads to complaints to CIC.

Implementation of RTI Act

As perceived by Singh (2016), “*RTI and e-Governance are twins and are inseparable. E-Governance will never be complete unless the RTI Act is fully implemented neither will RTI work if there isn’t a full-fledged system of computerization and administration*”. With a view to creating an independent mechanism for management of applications under the RTI Act, the central government has created Online RTI MIS portal that facilitates the citizens to file RTI applications Online. It is a single window system for receipt of requests and appeals from the Indian citizens. The portal facilitates online maintenance of the RTI application records. The portal provides for names of different public authorities to whom the application is forwarded by the system. The Public Information

Officers (PIOs) are required to provide information online through the system. It facilitates generation of different types of reports by the RTI functionaries. The recent circular from the DoPT mandates PIOs to upload all RTI applications received offline along with their responses on the online portal for tracking online and maintenance of central database.

In case an applicant seeks information that pertains to some other person and impinges upon privacy of the latter, this invokes the provision of the third party information as per the RTI Act. In such a situation, the relevant provisions of the Act need to be followed keeping in view the privacy of the individual concerned before such information is released. The Act also provides that the adequate information be put in public domain as part of self-disclosure for providing easy access. However, the study by Shashi (2011) revealed that as many as 53% of the public authorities did not follow the self-disclosure mechanism for sharing the information.

Uses of the RTI Act

The studies have shown that the citizens have used different provisions of the RTI Act for getting information on potential schemes launched by the government from time to time and redressing their grievances on account of denial of basic entitled services (World Bank, 2012). They have been successful at times in exposing illegal acts leading to corruption as well. Sharma (2015) has reported that the RTI has helped people in resolving their grievances pending with public authorities for long due to various concocted reasons. However, there is still an issue of lack of awareness of different enabling provisions of the Act among the common man. PWC (2009) reported that awareness level of people towards RTI was minimal since only 13% of the rural and 33% of the urban population was aware of the provisions of the Act. Lack of general awareness about RTI Act among public has also been highlighted as a constraint by the researchers. PRIYA (2006) claimed that over 90% of the people were not found aware of the provisions of the RTI Act. In case of Haryana, as many as 70% applicants belonged to government service and all were from urban areas. However, the studies have shown that the common people are now responding to the Act quite enthusiastically and coming forward to know more about a range of activities of the public authorities (World Bank, 2012).

In spite of all odds the RTI Act has made an indelible impact on the lives of the people. As has been perceived, this Act has proved to be a tool for redressal of grievances of the people related to government departments that is way more than the Act being an instrument of empowering people with information and administrative transparency. People from different strata of society including the *“disabled, old and young below the poverty line”* have taken utmost benefit of the Act (Dharanasha, 2015). Similarly, Chauhan (2018) perceived that in spite of all constraints, the working of the government has changed and the transparency and accountability in functioning has enhanced due to implementation of RTI Act 2005. The impact of the Act on the functioning of the government departments has been such that it has improved the efficiency of the system in delivering benevolent policies and administrative decisions. The quality of services provided by the government departments has improved a lot since they have become receptive to the public opinion and sentiments (Dharanasha, 2015).

In his study, Sharma (2015) held that the implementation of RTI has improved the daily life of people. In the past, the RTI applicants have used the RTI Act for appointment of teachers, getting implemented the ban on smoking in Chandigarh as per the relevant Act, identification of ponds that were never dug in a village in the State of Orissa, and getting scholarship, dress, and books for the students who never got it in a village in Telangana (Singh, 2010). A similar case was resolved in a government school in Chitrakoot in Uttar Pradesh. In another instance, as reported by Murkute (2008) an applicant could know his right PF account number only as part of a response to an RTI application from provident fund office.

The NGOs like Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), National Alliance of People's Movement, Rural Workers' Campaign, Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), Sabar Ekta Manch, Pardarshita, Satark Nagarik Sangathan (SNS), JOSH, Parivartan, Housing and Land Rights Network

(HLRN) among others have also been found taking recourse to RTI Act to extract information from public authorities, and helped people in realizing their legitimate rights. Some other organisations including individual RTI activities have made use of RTI Act in unearthing cases of corruption and financial misappropriation on the part of the public authorities. The NGO SNS working for social upliftment has successfully made use of the RTI Act in improving *“the quality of public services including water, sanitation, and the public distribution system”* as reported by Surie (2011).

Misuse of the Act

The RTI Act has both positive and negative influence on working of the government departments (Dharanisha, 2015). Quite a few clever people try to misuse the provisions of the Act. Scholars such as Paul (2018) (as cited in Chauhan, 2018) also have perceived misuse of the provisions of the RTI Act in the hands of opportunists and politically influential people. Asking baseless information for no reason or public interest, may lead to wastage of precious time and energy of public authorities as the time so spent could have been utilized by them for some other productive work. Paul (2018) (as cited in Chauhan, 2018) claimed that 2-3% applicants make misuse of provisions of RTI Act unreasonably. Though, he reported that the applicants have been benefited by the Act in as many as 60-70% cases and the provisions have helped the government to enhance transparency in its working.

Dharanisha (2015) reported that more than 50% applications filed under RTI Act were related to simple information pertaining to one of the government departments. Quoting an example of silly questions asked by RTI applications, Dharanisha (2015) reports that an applicant asked a PIO that *“are you born to your parents properly, if you are born to only your parents please give me a certified copy and DNA certificate in this regard”*. He points out that the users should develop some ethics not to consume precious time of the government officers in providing futile information that is of no literal use for the applicant. The awareness and consciousness among the people should prevail and genuine motive should be considered while seeking the information on any issue.

There is no limitation for submission of applications and number of questions in a single application as per the RTI Act, 2005. As quoted by Dharanisha (2015), taking advantage of the openness of the Act, an individual submitted as many as 265 applications in a single day in Gulbargha district. He further pointed out that some of the RTI activists file 50-100 questions on an average, and attending them by PIOs adversely affects their office work. This type of irresponsible action on the part of the RTI applicants not only disrupts the functioning of government office but also makes a mockery of the provisions enacted for empowerment of the citizens. Consequently, this flexibility and openness of the Act has given birth to a special class of people ‘RTI Activists’ who misuse the Act not for valid reasons or benefit to them or society at large but for reasons best known to them.

Constraints

The journey so far in implementation of the RTI Act has not been easy for the government departments. There have been challenges and constraints of different types before the government departments as also beyond the control of the PIOs who have a pivotal role to play in effective implementation of the Act. The studies have reported not only constraints related to awareness about different provisions of the RTI Act among common man but also lack of availability of infrastructure, and training and capacity building opportunities to the government officers designated as public information officers in different departments. As reported by PWC (2009), approximately 45% of the PIOs had no training to handle RTI matters. However, the centre and state governments are now providing training to the PIOs and first appellate authorities in order to enable them handle the applications in an efficient manner (PWC, 2009).

Sahu and Dwivedi (2009) reported that PIOs were often given additional responsibility and, consequently, they were not able to devote their full time in responding to the queries of the applicants. As reported by PWC (2009), as many as 89% of the PIOs were facing scarcity of staff to handle RTI matters. As a result, the motivation level of the PIOs was found to be very low and they were reluctant to handle RTI matters (PWC, 2009). PRIYA (2006) also observed

that the person designated as PIO did not have access to the desired information at times that made his/her task tougher. In other cases the PIO had been a junior officer and did not get due attention from his/her seniors for responding to RTI applications. Sahu and Dwivedi (2009) also perceived the difficulty faced by the PIOs in extracting information from their departments as one of the constraints.

The lack of infrastructure with PIOs has been observed as one of the prime constraints by PCW (2009). This has affected the process of timely disposal of the RTI applications by PIOs adversely. Poor record management was highlighted as another constraint in implementing the RTI Act and providing the required information in reasonable time to the applicants (World Bank, 2012). PWC (2009) reported that 38% of the PIOs blamed inappropriate record management system for delay in providing the responses, and handling the influx of the applications, and thus, providing information was one of the constraints in effective implementation of the Act. Sahu and Dwivedi (2009) also revealed that the organisations with lesser or medium use of ICT were facing constraints in implementation of the Act. Such institutions faced difficulty in providing information in a stipulated time.

The scarcity of staff at Information Commission level has been highlighted by some of the studies. A survey by CHRI (2018) (as cited in Chauhan, 2018) reported that over 33% of the positions of Information Commissioners were lying vacant. The state information commissions faced similar staff crunch where over 25% posts were lying vacant for long. Consequently, *“over two lakh appeals and complaints were pending till November 2017”* (Chauhan, 2018). The scarcity of staff has not only led to increase in number of pending cases with CIC but also lowering of quality of orders depicting decisions of the Commissions (Chauhan, 2018). PWC (2009) reported lack of software at Information Commission and PIO levels as one of the constraints.

OBJECTIVES

The Indira Gandhi National Open University is a public institution of distance higher education and, consequently, is covered under the RTI Act 2005. A number of applications seeking information under RTI Act are received from IGNOU students and general public. The current study is an attempt to know the perception of IGNOU students towards the RTI Act 2005. The specific objective of the study was to understand and analyse the perception of open and distance learning students towards Right to Information Act with special reference to IGNOU.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A descriptive study research design has been chosen for the current study. Likert scale has been used to study the perception of the students. The RTI applicants who submitted their applications through the *“RTI Request and Appeal Management Information System”* – An Online Portal being maintained by National Informatics Centre under the aegis of Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, Government of India for managing applications under RTI Act, 2005 during the last two years, to receive information on examination matters from Student Evaluation Division of IGNOU were considered for the study. The applicants who submitted their applications offline were not considered since it was observed that the email IDs were not provided by them invariably, and that could limit the opportunity to administer the survey tool online. The perception scale was designed especially for the current study to seek data from the sample. The scale was administered on 10 applicants on pilot basis to check the content and format validity. The Cronbach’s Alpha Score was also calculated in order to know the internal consistency of the items. The value of the score was found to be .80 that showed a high level of internal consistency among the items of the scale (Cronbach, 1951).

Sampling, Tool and Data Collection

The preliminary data such as names and email IDs of the RTI applicants was taken from the RTI-MIS Online Portal maintained by DoPT. It was observed that 696 applicants in all had filed their applications online for seeking information on different activities performed by the Student Evaluation Division of IGNOU. Therefore, the questionnaire was administered on all of them.

The Likert Scale containing 13 items was used in the questionnaire to know the perception of the respondents on different aspects connected with RTI activities. In addition, 4 items were included in the questionnaire to know the profile of the applicants. In all 137 responses were received from the participants. The analysis revealed that as many as 106 applicants were IGNOU students and 31 applicants were other than IGNOU students who sought information on different aspects of the University. Since the study was focused on IGNOU students, keeping the objective of the study in view, 106 responses received from IGNOU students were taken for further analysis. The secondary data was collected through published reports and articles. The decisions of the statutory authorities also were consulted to understand the issues that led to mutual conflict between a public authority and an RTI applicant.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The response to the questionnaire was received from 106 IGNOU students who had filed their applications under RTI Act through the online system. The responses were subjected to statistical analysis. The findings are presented in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Profile of respondents

The analysis of the data revealed that majority of the respondents were male (79.25%) and only 20.75% respondents were female. It was observed that 41.51% respondents belonged to bachelor degree level programmes followed by another 37.74% who belonged to master degree level programmes of IGNOU. The trend of lesser number of responses from female participants was visible through the level of programme also. Majority of the respondents (75% and above) at all the programme levels belonged to male category. The gender-wise programme level-wise distribution of respondents is presented in Table-1.

Table-1: Gender-wise Programme level-wise distribution of respondents

Level of Programme	Female Freq. (%)	Male Freq. (%)	Grand Total Freq. (%)
Bachelor	8 (18.18)	36 (81.82)	44 (41.51)
Certificate	1 (11.11)	8 (88.89)	9 (8.49)
Diploma	3 (23.08)	10 (76.92)	13 (12.26)
Master	10 (25.00)	30 (75.00)	40 (37.74)
Grand Total	22 (20.75)	84 (79.25)	106 (100.00)

The analysis revealed that the information sought by the respondents through RTI application primarily belonged to examination system of IGNOU, non-receipt of grade card, copy of answer-script, non-receipt of provisional certificate, non-reflection of assignment grades, examination data, non-receipt of original degree, re-evaluation of answer-script, online payment of examination fee, and examination centres among others. It was further noticed that the information sought through the RTI application was important to 90% respondents. Some other (5.56%) respondents sought information in public interest. However, as many as 3.33% respondents (66.67% females and 33.33% males) reported that the information sought was not important to them, rather, they wanted to teach a lesson to the concerned staff of the University. This reaction from the respondents could be a part of previous grudge with the staff.

Perception

The Likert Scale on perception of participants towards the RTI Act contained 13 items in all. The scale points ranged from ‘*Strongly Disagreed*’ (1 point) to ‘*Strongly Agreed*’ (5 points). The midpoint of the scale i.e. ‘*Undecided*’ was given 3 points. The mean score of different items of the perception scale ranged from 3.34 to 4.22. A mean value above 3 showed a positive inclination of participants towards the statement and agreeing to it.

The analysis of the responses as presented in Table-2, revealed that the respondents liked the different provisions of the RTI Act since they could seek the information desired by them from the government offices (M=4.22, SD=1). However, they wanted that the provisions of the ACT should be made more strict (M=4.16, SD=1.055) so that the government departments do not avoid giving correct information. Though, the respondents liked the procedure being followed for seeking information under the RTI Act (M=4.12, SD=1.028). They believed that the government departments can be made to work with the implementation of RTI Act (M=4.07, SD=1.184). The participants were of the opinion that the Act needs suitable amendments so that government departments are made to provide the desired information quickly and the applicants are not put to any kind of harassment (M=4.04, SD=1.132).

The analysis of data further revealed that the mean score of some of the statements was close to 3. And therefore, it was considered that the respondents either did not support that statement much or were not sure in that context. The respondents were not very sure whether RTI Act may lead to avoidable harassment of employees of the government departments in certain cases (M=3.34, SD=1.145) or the provisions of the RTI Act should be made more liberal to give leverage to the government departments in providing information (M=3.41, SD=1.206). They were also not much sure that with the help of RTI Act, one can take revenge from the government officials who delay the response deliberately (M=3.39, SD=1.164). However, the respondents favoured the statements that all RTI applicants make proper use of the provisions of the Act (M=3.90, SD=1.071) and they seek only the information that is important for them (M=3.90, SD=1.141). The respondents agreed to some extent that practice of multiple hearing leads to wastage of time of Information Commission and that of the government department concerned (M=3.75, SD=1.120); and multiple copies of the same RTI application lead to multiple hearings at CIC on the same subject that might have been addressed already (M=3.65, SD=0.996). In case of IGNOU, the respondents were not pretty sure that work in IGNOU can be done with the help of RTI application only.

Table-2: Perception of IGNOU students towards RTI Act

Sr No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not know	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Frequency	Mean	SD
a)	Provisions of RTI Act are very good since we can get relevant information from any government office	46	40	4	4	4	98	4.22	1.000
b)	The procedure being followed for seeking information under IRT Act is good	40	44	4	4	6	98	4.12	1.028
c)	All the RTI applicants make proper use of the provisions of RTI Act	30	41	15	5	5	96	3.90	1.071
d)	All the RTI applicants seek only that information which is important for them	35	36	11	4	11	97	3.90	1.141
e)	With the help of RTI Act, Govt. Department can be made to work	49	23	13	5	7	97	4.07	1.184
f)	Application under RTI Act is the only way of getting the work done at IGNOU	26	23	27	9	13	98	3.47	1.251

Sr No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not know	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Frequency	Mean	SD
g)	With the help of RTI, one can take revenge from the officials of the Govt. Department who delay the action deliberately	18	30	25	6	17	96	3.39	1.164
h)	In certain cases, RTI may lead to avoidable harassment of the employees of Government Department.	17	25	33	7	13	95	3.34	1.145
i)	RTI Act needs suitable amendments so that the applicants get quick response and Govt. Dept. is not put to harassment unnecessarily	42	28	12	4	7	93	4.04	1.132
j)	RTI Act provisions need to be made more strict	46	30	10	3	6	95	4.16	1.055
k)	Provisions of the RTI Act need to be made more liberal	22	22	25	5	18	92	3.41	1.206
l)	Multiple copies of the same RTI application lead to multiple hearings at CIC on the same subject	19	34	32	4	4	93	3.65	.996
m)	Practice of multiple hearing leads to wastage of time of Information Commission and Govt. Dept. concerned	28	30	24	5	6	93	3.75	1.120

DISCUSSION

The University has implemented the RTI Act through a well established system of providing information to its students and Indian citizens at large. The Student Support Service Centre acts as the nodal point for all types of RTI applications received by the University through offline and online modes. In addition, a senior officer in each of the Divisions, Schools of Studies, Regional Centres, and Regional Evaluation Centres has been designated as the Public Information Officer to facilitate smooth flow of information to the applicants under RTI Act. The heads of the concerned departments have been designated as first Appellate Authority as per provisions of the Act. In majority of cases, the RTI applicants happen to be the *bona fide* students of the University. Therefore, the University PIOs go extra mile in providing the desired information and helping the students. Taking a cue from the application filed by a student under the RTI Act, efforts are made to resolve other similar grievances in one go. The constraints such as lack of infrastructure and work overload on PIOs do affect the smooth implementation of different provisions of the RTI Act in IGNOU as well. However, the motivation and commitment of the officers towards its students help them in effectively implementing the RTI Act.

The analysis revealed that the respondents had a fair idea of different provisions of the RTI Act and they were making use of the Act for seeking information on different matters. However, males were found to be more active than the females in seeking information under the Act. It could mean that male students are more aware than the female students. The different provisions of the RTI Act have been liked by majority of the respondents but they were not sure whether some relaxation should be given to government departments in providing the information. The respondents sought only the information that was useful for them. However, a small number of respondents also sought the information that was not important to them. Similar to the studies conducted by PCW (2009), PRIYA (2006), Sahu and Dwivedi (2009), Sharma (2015), and (Dharanisha, 2015), the current study reported that the right

to information is perceived to be an important tool in the hands of Indian citizens. However, Bhalla (2010) has found that the RTI Act has impacted the life of people in the urban areas in the Indian context though it has failed to penetrate the life of the poor especially in rural areas.

Studies by RaaG and SNS (2016), and PWC (2009) have reported harassment of RTI activists by government officials at time. However, the current study revealed that some RTI activities made use of different provision of the Act to harass University officials and take revenge on one pretext or the other, and tried to drag them up to the Information Commission even though the information available was provide to them. They used RTI Act as a tool to teach a lesson to the concerned staff of the University. The major disagreement was expressed in cases where information sought belonged to third party. This finding is similar to that of Paul (2018) (as cited in Chauhan, 2018) who claimed that 2-3% applicants made misuse of provisions of RTI Act unreasonably. The respondents in the current study were of the opinion that filing of multiple applications on the same issue not only leads to wastage of productive time of the PIOs but also results in multiple hearing at Information Commission. Goel (2016) also held that some of the RTI applicants file multiple applications for seeking the same that had either been provided earlier or denied, in order to harass the public officer and take him/her to a ride.

Training and development of PIOs and first Appellate Authorities has been a concern for effective implementation of the RTI Act. PRIYA (2006) advocated that more training opportunities should be created for PIOs and first appellate authorities. PWC (2009) also propagated that there was a need for capacity enhancement of the PIOs. However, the current study revealed that ample training opportunities were provided to the PIOs in IGNOU and such programmes were organised in the university from time to time. Though, there is a need to strengthen the RTI Cells at Division and School level by providing adequate staff and IT infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The IGNOU is a premier institution of distance higher education at national level in India. As many as 7 to 10 lakh students seek admission to different academic programmes offered by the University each year in July and January cycles. The total number of active students on rolls of the University is over 30 lakh. The University has a national jurisdiction and makes all out efforts to reaching all nooks and corners of the country including the rural and remote areas with opportunities of quality education. It has a mandatory responsibility to serve its students well despite all odds The receipt of meager number of applications under RTI Act from IGNOU students signifies that the University is able to manage its services well almost to the satisfaction of its students. In order to ensure that proper support service is provided to IGNOU students, a dedicated Student Services Centre has been established at the Headquarters. In addition, the single window help desks are functioning at the Regional Centres located in different parts of the country. The departments concerned make all out effort to resolve the relevant queries of the students.

The current study has found that the IGNOU students have been aware of their rights under the RTI Act 2005. They have been making use of the Act at times for getting their grievances resolved. They perceive the different provisions of the Act to be useful and productive. However, the status of filing of RTI applications by the IGNOU students shows that there is a need for improving the support services further by the University in order to mitigate the hardship faced by the students. As part of their mobility due to change in job or otherwise, IGNOU students keep on changing their mailing address. If the mailing address is not updated in time, there is a likelihood that the documents sent by the University to the students would return undelivered. Though, the University has already launched online facility for updating of the mailing address by the students; it is likely that all the students might not be using this facility. It has also been observed at times that the task at the University level has been accomplished already yet information could not reach the student concerned in time and that forced him/her to file an application under the RTI Act. The University needs to work on creating more options for sharing of information with the students. The availability of adequate staff and infrastructure also would enhance the effectiveness of implementation of RTI Act in the University.

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