

THE NEW AGE DISTANCE EDUCATION LEARNERS – EMERGING TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

In a Higher Education Institution, Student Affairs department plays an integral role for the smooth functioning of the institute. A student when in need of any information or for any of his queries or for grievance redressal, first approaches this Student Support Service department. The efficiency and the effectiveness of this unit in addressing the student's queries and their requirements, facilitate in harnessing the student's effort towards the core academic activity. The paper attempts to unravel the different needs of the students at different stages of the student life cycle, the student services which are to be made available by the higher education institution at those appropriate times, the relevant information which are to be shared with the students prior and assess its impact on their learning progress. This study was conducted in a higher education institution which offered distance education program. A distance education student for any of their requirements first approaches the student service department only then if needed he connects with his academic department. It is seen that an immediate query redressal by the department facilitates in enhancing the learner experience. And this greater level of engagement has resulted in an improved student retention.

INTRODUCTION

Academics, Examination, Administration and Student Affairs form the four pillars in any Higher Education Institution–University setup. For Universities offering 'Open and Distance' Education mode, the Student Affairs department form the backbone of the entire system. It is the first and the foremost department to which the student connects to get the queries addressed. A student's first interaction with the University is through this department. Only then a student steps into his core department. Especially in distance education mode, throughout the student life-cycle, the student support service department facilitates them in their academic pursuit. This department shares the University updates related to counselling session, record submission, and exam registration and also at time nudging them to complete their academic record submissions before appearing for the Term End Exams.

In Indian Higher Education space there are two predominant modes for formal education that are Campus mode and Open and Distance Education Learning (ODL). In the recent past Indian Government has formulated policies for the third alternate mode, namely the Online Education. Once the Institutions/ Universities are identified, approvals get extended to them, thereon this third mode of education come into existence. In the very recent past, UGC has Institutions for offering Online Education in India. The Open and Distance Education mode (ODL) is a model wherein the learning takes place using a wide range of student–teacher engagement tools both through offline and online. In this model, the Student–Teacher are separated both by space and time, and they get connected through a limited Face-to-Face interactions and in online through Audio-Video conferencing and an LMS.

This mode of education is chosen by learners who are already employed and want to enhance their education credentials or by those who could not attend full-time classes in campus education because of some personal reasons and prior engagements.

India's Higher Education, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) as per All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2018-19 is at 26.3%. Target set for 2020-21 is 30%. As per the same report, distance education mode makes up 10.62% of the current GER. The total distance education enrollment is at 3.97 million, of which 44.15% are female.

In the earlier ODL framework, the academic delivery modelled was in line with the Campus education. The student and the teacher had to connect at one common place for the stipulated duration. During this period the student gets all their academic doubts clarified by the teacher. The only difference had been the duration of the teacher–student contact. For a one credit course in campus education, the teacher–student contact is for a minimum of 15 hours,

whereas in the distance mode it is 3 hrs. Besides these contact hours, a student is advised to spend additional time on reading and learning the 'Self Learning' printed study material, the supplementary online study material and also on the preparation and writing the Assignments.

In 2017, the Indian Higher Education regulator, the University Grants Commission (UGC) came out with new and revised distance education policy framework, the Open and Distance Education 2017 (ODL 2017) regulations. It recognizes a blended academic delivery framework. As per this new policy, counselling sessions, teacher-student contact is now possible using an Online Learning Management System. The policy permits the use of webinar, discussion boards, and live chat tools for academic delivery.

This change in the Indian distance education policy is seen as an outcome of the Indian Internet revolution, its penetration, improved speed and its adoption rate. As per the latest Kantar IMRB's report, the Internet Users in India stand at 560million in 2018 and projected to increase by 11% to 627 million in 2019 as against 240 million in 2014. In the same period, the monthly Internet data consumption has increased from 86MB to 8320MB. The number of smartphone users had increased from 5.4 to 26.2 per 100 people. The Mobile Internet and Fixed broadband speed recorded in June 2019 stands at 10.87Mb and 29.06MB respectively as against the average internet speed of 1.7Mbps in 2014.

In today's technology advancement and its adoption, this paper discusses the importance of the student support service and the role played by it in facilitating the new age learners in their academic journey in distance education mode. The paper highlights the student preferred communication medium to connect with the Student Support Service, the issues for which they connect the most. The paper also discusses the impact of this function has on the Student's academic progress.

The study carried in this paper is solely uses the student connect details at the support service helpdesk number. The entire call history including the student information detail which includes their personal profile-age & gender, academic participation and the academic progress were gathered. These details are then analyzed in formulating a student intervention framework to further enhance their learning experience. To collaborate the findings of this study there was no exploratory research done. The students were not subjected with any questionnaire to get their feedback on the student support service operation, their specific needs and intervals at which they would need any kind of support for learning. Such a survey would help in reiterating the experimental findings that have been discussed in this paper. The study highlighted in this paper has helped in improving the student retention and their success rates.

Research focused on distance education institution which had its own campus offering regular education-dual mode Institution. This study does not validate with a pure distance education institution.

The study did not focus on the faculty support extended to a student in his learning progression. The study focused only on the student's queries or complaints landing at the helpdesk, nature of the query, the resolution provided to it by the helpdesk and their impact on the students' progress. The study did not test the quality of resolutions provided by the helpdesk and the turnaround time taken in addressing the student query especially for student queries received through Email.

This paper is structured as follows: Section II provides an insight on the related work carried out in Student Support Service and its impact in the Higher Education space especially in distance mode, Section III details the profile of the students used for this study, Section IV highlights the communication medium preference of the students in interacting with the University's Student Support Team and its impact on the student's academic progress, Section V addresses the future scope of this study and Section VI concludes the paper.

RELATED WORK

Studied the role of Student Support Service and its impact in the learning experience in a University setup offering different modes of education be it Campus, Distance or Online.

Alan Tait (2014), in his paper argues how the Student Support has to be an integral part of the curriculum design, the learning and teaching system in the distance education mode. The paper discusses the benefits of this integration and the ways the advances in the ICT space mainly in the Internet and the Internet enabled application are to be used in

improving the learner experiences. The author has also envisaged a role of an online academic mentoring as part of the student support service. This is to be in addition to then the optional face-to-face meeting which exists. The paper discusses that drop-out of student from studies is merely not on the mode of education—full-time or distance but with the lives of the students dependent on social, cultural and financial status of a student.

The 2014 THE World University Rankings of Sep. 2014 report discusses the importance of an early positive response for an Undergraduate student to reduce the dropout rates. The report states that a University has to make special efforts to ensure that a newly joined student receives an instant and supportive details when in need. And how the student support can play an active role in this initiative.

Tom Inkelaar & Ormond Simpson (2015), in their paper, shows that how a motivational Email can help to improve the student retention in the program. Author at the same time argues that retention of a student in distance education always depends more on the personal human support and less on the technology enabled learning tools. The paper compares the online MOOC courses and distance education to show the similarities in these two modes of program delivery and how the student drop-out rate is almost similar in both forms of program delivery. In this background author uses an inexpensive tool, namely the Email, to send inspirational quotes to motivate the students to continue with their program and found a higher success rate as against not using this method for a group of students. The subject of these motivational emails ranged from tips to self-organize to find time for studies, how to manage procrastination, improve concentration on learning, to how to prepare for exams.

Manzoor Babu (2012), in his paper shows why is it important to strengthen the support system which plays a role right from the pre-enrolment guidance, induction to the time of the graduation. He argues that if sufficient steps not taken in this direction, then one could see a deterioration in the standard of education. The author had conduct his study across three Indian Universities which are not dual mode University—a University which offers program both through campus and distance rather are pure distance mode Universities. The paper discusses how the student study centers were unequipped to give proper direction to the queries which they had.

William W. Arnold (2018), highlights the use of student support counsellors to defuse the compartmental nature of different support departments of a University system. The author shows how a program design with interweaving of student support services can produce a relevant and timely student transition to pursue a career. The paper discusses the need to prioritize and implement policies, program delivery and student support services to deliver a higher success rate. The paper highlights how institutions are transitioning to adopt the newer and efficient technologies which support in a better operation and communications. These newer technologies enable to produce tons of data, be it on different interactions and communication of the students with the institution. These data on analysis will help in getting newer insights into a student needs and the effectiveness of the program.

Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor (2017), in his paper, discusses how and why the students are unwilling or factors restraining them from using the support services the institution offers. A questionnaire was used to get the student feedbacks along with the problem nature which they faced in utilizing the support services. They were also asked to rate the student services offered in terms of their importance for them and did they access it in the recent past. The survey outcome showed personal counselling as their most preferred requirement, followed by it was the need for a single point of contact to get their concerns addressed. For this, the author in this paper suggests how an online technology tool can monitor and test the student experiences of the support system offered by the University continuously. Such system should get the factors supporting and hindering the learner's learning outcomes, the factors which help in improving the learner engagements, and in their overall satisfaction. These outcomes could then evaluate the programs offered, and the staff associated with it at periodic intervals, and bring in a continuous improvement of the system.

Saba Mirja & Shireesh Pal Singh (2014), in their paper argue on how the efficiency of the Student Support Service largely decides the effectiveness of the instructions in the distance mode of education. Author studied the student support service of one of the India's largest distance education University based on the gender and demographical effectiveness. The study showed how students with a strong ICT background could use the student support services of the University better, and also how an online student support service facilitates to reach a large section of student population. The results also brought the need for a good coordination among different University departments for a successful implementation of the Student Support System.

Sahin, I., & Shelley (2008), in their paper show how the availability of four motivating factors—the computer knowledge, flexibility of distance education, usefulness of distance education, and distance education satisfaction will lead to higher levels of student engagement, learning and success in distance education. The results of the study conducted in this paper show the importance of Student's ICT awareness and their attitude factor in predicting the student satisfaction. The more the student believes in the usefulness of distance education, the more likely they will enjoy attending the distance education classes. Once a student perceives satisfaction from the distance education learning, the online mode of communication through email, use of the discussion boards and the online submission of assignments, would lead to a higher level of engagement, learning and success.

Cletus Kolog Ngaaso & Anthony Abbam (2016), in their paper show how the readiness of the helpdesk staff and instructor demonstration of knowledge in the subject area are influencing the level of satisfaction of a student in distance education mode of program delivery. The paper recommends that Universities offering distance education should make all efforts to do an in-depth study of learner support service even with the peculiar learner's requirement and expectations. Such a study will help in improving the student experience. Also, there should be a continuous assessment of the quality metrics as against the peculiar distance learners need and satisfaction.

B K Somayajulu, and Tata Ramakrishna (2008), through their survey have found that getting admissions in distance mode is very easy process. However, students do not have sufficient and correct information on their queries. Most of the learners do not have clarity on processes and the support service available through which they can get their queries addressed. Interestingly, most of the learners would like to have ICT-based support service system. The paper also suggests that personnel working in student support service team should be with requisite qualification with good coordination skills, clear with the role and responsibility, provided with adequate training to perform the role with commitment. The paper also suggests that timely feedback would increase the retention and completion ratio.

Madeleine Borschlegla and D. Cashmanb (2019), had used the Joseph pine and Gilmore (1998), experience economy model to understand the correlation between the satisfaction and the intention of a student to pursue the program esp. in distance education. This study is an attempt to find solutions to an existing problem of lower success rate of students in distance education. The results show that program factors and distance education experience should be considered while designing a program.

Rendani Siphonetanda, Joel Mamabolo and Mahlapahlapana Themane (2017), carried out a survey to identify the significance of the student support function in distance education to reduce the student's attrition, increase retention and to create a competitive advantage. Results pointed out that students rated student support only next to financial support, as the most important factor in continuing with the education. The support intervention provided during their course of study motivated them to continue and complete the program successfully. Students with age over 35 years showed greater requirement of technical support in using the online technologies to have greater academic experience. New students enrolling to the distance education program rated academic support as their top priority need. Author in the paper suggests that it should provide students with periodic feedbacks by their academic instructor, as increasing their interventions be it through face-to-face meeting or call or email has a greater impact in retaining the student in the program.

Harry Barton Essel, Akosua Tachie-Menson, Michael Owusu (2018), in their paper reinforce the need of student support service in distance education mode of delivery. A timely delivery of academic calendar, study materials, face-to-face meetings, and online support facilitates a greater convenience and flexibility for students in smooth progression to complete their program successfully. Deprived of this support esp. in distance mode will discourage and frustrate a student in completing the program with ease.

Madeleine Borschlegla, David Cashman (2018), in their paper used the experience economy model of the Joseph pine and Gilmore (1998), to study the relationship between Student Experience and Satisfaction in their retention in online program and their likelihood of completing the program successfully. The results show that a student's intention to continue the program and the student's satisfaction are indirectly related. To address this author proposes to create opportunities for students to interact with faculty at a regular basis.

Nhlanhla Mpofu (2016), in his paper, suggests that the lack of academic support in distance education leads to higher attrition. In this context, the author studied the self-efficacy of teachers who had enrolled for the distance

education program. In his study the author states that till date there had been a sufficient focus on the institution role in how the student support service is provided. There has been no effort towards taking into account the self-efficacy of a student who is pursuing the distance education.

Richard Ouma (2019), in his paper elaborates the research carried out by him to address the challenges by a distance education institution in managing and running a student support service primarily for in-service teachers who had enrolled for a distance education program. The research outcome had been that the students lacked reading culture and because of this they lacked in reading the study material issued them as part of the program enrollment, and the other main factor hindering their course progress was the organization of unscheduled and unplanned counselling sessions conducted by untrained counsellors. The author in his paper emphasis that there needs to be well trained people who are manning the student support function.

Bundit Busaba , Suchai Tanawastien , Prinya Tantaswadi, (2019) in their paper suggested an information system which is managed centrally to address the student dropout concerns and improve the retention rate. The system proposed must be able to identify the student who has the concerns and schedule advisory and counselling support to address them. The student parameters which need to be captured to identify such students is to include the students learning outcomes and behaviours, their attendance and academic grades, fees payments details and their club participation details and also the student's social media activities. This system of student monitoring had a positive influence in student retention and in student graduation rate.

Zuhairi, A., Karthikeyan, N. and Priyadarshana, S.T. (2019) in their paper revealed the design, development and implementation of a student support service in two different Open and distance education Universities. ICT was used to address the student needs with a zero defect objective right from admissions to monitoring the progress of the student learning. It emphasised on students to get the right support by the right individual concerned.

Tatiana Markova, Irina Glazkova and Elena Zaborova, (2017) in their paper tested the student's interaction and collaboration in the academic delivery process, assessment and student support services. ICT solution along with faculty teaching practices and communications with students will strongly influence in providing a greater learning experience for the students. The survey rated the importance of both support services and technical services offered by an Institution in student lifecycle to improve their academic participation and to complete the program.

Asteria Nsaba, Mpine Makoe, (2017) in their paper emphasis on the importance of the student support service offered by an institution offering distance education. Study of the existing services will provide an insight on the student perceptions of this service and their expectations. The six parameters suggested by the authors to assess the quality of student support include, reliability of the service, its tangible outcomes, delivery, responsiveness and assurance provided by the student support services and the student participation. The study shows that students not only concerned with the outcome of the service but also how the service is.

Srivastava, M., Mishra, B., Rao, D.K., Abrol, N., Varma, V. and Bhushan, B. (2020) in their paper highlights the research trends in the Indian Open and Distance Education (ODE) space. The last 10 yrs. of publications showed that learner support and progression theme was next to the themes on teaching, learning and evaluation and curriculum design.

Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, A and Simpson, O. (2018), in their paper discusses the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) initiative which centred on the student support to empower students to lifelong, self-directed learning in the online and blended learning education space. The objective was to increase the student retention and enhance academic performance and satisfaction. It emphasised the need of quality metric of student support both at institution-level and at course-level.

Methodology

The student interaction with the University's centralized Student Support Service team were collected and analyzed for this study. This centralized facility was setup to cater only for the students who had enrolled for their distance education program. University under consideration for this study offered both undergraduate and graduate programs in Management and Information Technology streams. Students who reached the support service team were for different reasons which included Pre and Post Admission Counselling, Registration to next higher semester, details on print study materials, Access and Availability of Online Learning Resources, Faculty support, Examinations,

Degree Certificate dispatch, Degree Verification by the prospective Employer, Issue of Letters for the different purposes. This dataset which was considered for study included both the call and email interactions that took place between the student and the student support service over a semester duration of six months.

In this period 24730 students had availed the services of the student support of this University. A further analysis of this dataset revealed that students who had enrolled even up to 8 years back also had come back to the University and availed the services of the University. These students include those who have either completed their degree program and those who have are yet to complete a few of their courses for the award of their degree. This cohort of students formed 55% of the total student population who had availed the services of the University’s Student Support in the above mentioned semester duration. The remaining 45% were the students who have enrolled in the current semester and pursue the study for successful completion of their degree program.

The demography of these students included students pursuing both undergraduate and graduate program. Of the total population, 25% were students of the undergraduate program and the other 75% were graduate program students, with the mean age of 26 years, and that of undergraduate and graduate were 24.13 and 26.75 respectively.

The gender ratio of the student population was found to be skewed with more male students than the female students with 75% of them being male. The female gender ratio was found to be much lower than the 44.12% as reported in the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2018-19 report. The same report states that share of male students is higher than female except in graduate and certificate course. The experimental dataset, when segregate the into undergraduate and graduate program students, found to be in alignment with the AISHE 2018 -19 report regarding the female student percentage pursuing their higher education. In undergraduate program it is same as that of the dataset population ratio is at 26%, whereas for graduate program it is at 36%.

The mean age of female with that of male student shows that female gender chooses distance education as the mode for their higher education at a much younger age when compared to male students. This behavioral pattern of females could attribute to the socio-economic reasons wherein the females prefer to continue with their higher education post the schooling without a break. However, the male students wish to take a break on completion of schooling or after graduate program, join the workforce for a few years and then pursue their higher education. The age and gender distribution of the dataset is as shown in the Figure 1.

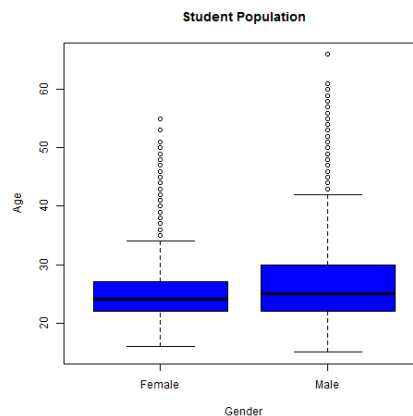


Figure 1: Dataset – Age and Gender distribution

RESULTS

Student Support Services availed by the students in the six of semester duration were predominantly through two communication channels, namely Telephone Call and Emails, were analyzed. The alternate communication channel supported by the University were through Social Media and Online Chat. A less than 2% of the student population used these alternate channels. These students were the ones who could not connect with the University’s Student Support Service through telephone call during the working hours but wanted to avail the University’s services during off-hours, seeking attention to their queries.

Students preferred calling at the University Helpdesk over emailing their concerns and waiting for support. Of the total touch points which happened between the student and the University’s Student Support Service, 62% was on call and the rest through email. 71% of the students preferred connecting to the University through a telephone and about 45% preferred for Email support. About 12% of the students did not avail any of the student support service during their semester period. On further analysis found that students who did not use the student support service were lagging in their academic progress. Gender wise analysis of the communication medium preferred also shows (Table—1) call as the most preferred mode.

Table 1: Communication Mode Preference

Support Service Availed	Female	Male	Total
Did both Call and Email	10%	18%	28%
Did only Call	15%	28%	43%
Did only Email	6%	11%	17%
Did Not Call or Emailed	3%	9%	12%

When looking at the communication preference of students vis-à-vis their age, there is a shift in the communication medium preference from call to email (Figure 2) with the age. Younger students prefer to use the call to connect with the University than email. Table—2, details the mean age and the standard deviation of it. This is noticed irrespective of the Gender. It is the same observation irrespective of a student pursuing a graduate or undergraduate program (Table—3).

Table 2: Age - Communication Mode Preference

Support Service Availed	Mean Age - Female	Mean Age - Male	SD - Female	SD - Male
Using Call	24.69	26.19	4.88	6.05
Using Email	25.02	27.06	5.40	6.34

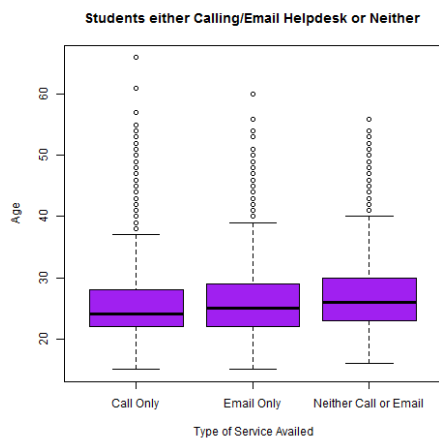


Figure 2: Age – Communication mode preference

Figure 2 also shows that as the age increases, students prefer to use email as the communication mode. Also, it shows that with increasing age, students prefer self-directed study guidelines/ videos to understand and complete the requirements.

Table 3. Degree Pursued - Communication Mode Preference

Support Service Availed	UG Degree		PG Degree	
	Mean Age (yrs.)	SD	Mean Age (yrs.)	SD – Male
Call	23.56	6.21	26.59	5.58
Email	24.59	6.71	27.08	5.71

The dataset was first analyzed to find the preference of communication media, across Gender, Age and the level of education. The results tabulated are as shown above. Further analyzed the dataset to check the interaction volume generated across these media, its frequency and its correlation with the user profile. Figure 3, presents the results. The active 28% of the student population used both telephony call and email to connect with the University’s student support service for their query resolution generating 57% of the combined call and email transactions.

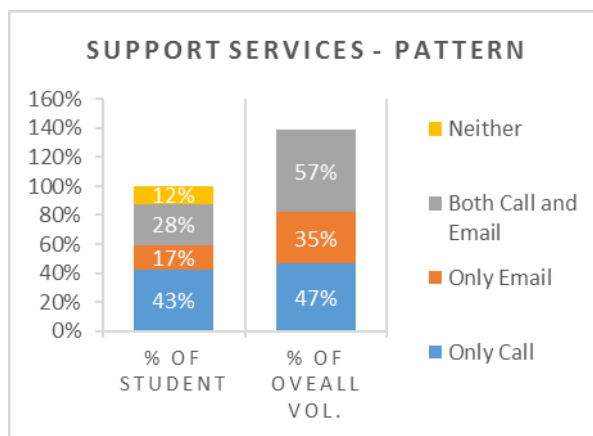


Figure 3. Student Support Service Transaction pattern

Additional information was revealed upon analyzing the profile of students who did not use the student support service. For this, looked into the ratio of students re-registering to the next higher semester immediately on completion of a semester without break vis-à-vis who availed the support services. Found this metric relating to the student satisfaction measure esp. in distance education which by design supports students to pursue their academic progression at their convenience. The analysis showed that students who actively used the support services for clarifications/ support did progress at a much higher rate when compared with the students who did not avail the services of the student support (Table—4).

Table 4: Students Progression

Student Support Service	Students Re-Registering to next higher semester
Availed	71 %
Not Availed	51 %

There is an increase of 20% in student re-registering to next higher semester who has taken the student support services when compared with students who did not avail the support. This correlates to the student’s confidence in the Institution and the program pursued. This determines the eagerness of the student in learning and graduating the program in time.

A good student support also gives an assurance of support available on demand and a confidence that it does not leave students on their own to find solutions which they would need especially more in the distance education mode.

FUTURE SCOPE

This study has helped in exploring the student profile who uses the University's Student Support service the most and the reason for it.

This study throws open future scope to devise a better and improved system to reduce the number of student interactions with the support service, focusing mainly on the students who actively used both the call and email communication media at the same time for the same cause. A new integrated system which would immediately inform the student of their concern about getting registered and direct the student to wait for the resolution irrespective of the communication media used first for the cause.

Future research can consider the dataset of other similar Universities which offer distance education to analyse the student profile and their connecting pattern with the student support service along with the areas where they need support.

The study to extend to include the use of online learning resources, attendance in counselling sessions to analyse the impact of student support in learning continuously.

A similar study extended to other domains such as Telecom, Online Healthcare and Travel industries for support services. This will help to identify and establish any pattern if found on the user profile and the media frequency of usage to get their queries/ concerns addressed.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this paper was to study the student profile of distance education, how they are using and taking the advantage of the Student Support Service. How it has been supporting in their academic pursuit and its impact in improving the student satisfaction, student retention and success rate of students completing their degree program.

The study shows that female take up distance education as an alternative at an early age when compared with the male.

The study also shows with higher the age, students use email as the preferred communication medium rather than the call. They wish to wait for their query resolution rather than an instant and immediate resolution as demanded by the younger students who prefer using telephony call to connect for their requirement with the University.

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