

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME OFFERED THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING- A STUDY OF LEARNERS PERCEPTION (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO UTTARAKHAND OPEN UNIVERSITY, UTTARAKHAND, INDIA)

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PURPOSE

In the wake of the new COVID-19 outbreak and resultant lockdowns, education across India has been severely influenced with a huge number of students left out education. During this period, ODL has proved to be very efficient and useful in providing quality education throughout the country and different parts of the globe when people got confined in their homes. It has helped in reaching to the learners with the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and through different means and mode so that learners' time is not spoiled.. This is also reflected in the enrollment ratio which is clearly seen to receive a hike in open and distance learning institution in India during these two years. The main objectives of the paper is to assess learners' views towards effectiveness of social work programme offered by the Uttarakhand Open University, India in the past 10 years and in CoVID times.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Explorative research methodology has been used in the present study. The sample size consists of 200 learners enrolled in the MSW (Master of Social Work) programme of the Uttarakhand Open University, India. The analysis and interpretation of the data has been done on the basis of data collected from the primary and secondary sources.

Findings

It is clearly shown from the current study that learners were satisfied with all the parameters of the social work programme offered by the Uttarakhand Open University. Satisfaction level was high with respect to quality study material, assignments, as well as field work guide book which provide complete information on methodology and description of the field work. Therefore, ODL mode of education has proved to be quite useful and successful in meeting the objectives of social works programme where learners got quality education and opportunities to the learners to attain a professional degree along with their job or other responsibilities.

Keywords: Social Work, Open and Distance learning, Perception, Effectiveness

Introduction

Distance Education a term synonymously used with Open and Distance Learning (ODL), has gained significance over the last few decades in India particularly during the late Twentieth century when first Open University named Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, was established in 1983 following the establishment of another National University i.e., Indira Gandhi National Open University, in 1985. As far as popularity and acceptability of ODL is concerned, it is increasing continuously. That is why there are fifteen (15) Government Open Universities are already in existence in India. Students of all age groups, even younger generation are getting enrolled in various programmes offered in ODL mode. Programmes are not only of traditional kinds but also new emerging areas are also getting place in ODL. It seems that ODL has immense possibilities and is a powerful means of educating people. The importance of ODL was well realized worldwide during COVID times when the lockdown situations compelled the regular mode based institutions to adopt the various tools, techniques and procedures of ODL system. According to NEP 2020, the GER of our country is still quite low when compared with the developed nations like USA, UK, Germany and target of 50 % GER has been set by 2035. If we want to meet the 50% GER by the year 2035, then in Indian conditions it is possible

only if ODL system is used judiciously without compromising the quality of the programme. Continuing, open and distance education was late to pick up speed in India largely due to the initial hesitation to accept these modes of education at par with the traditional classroom-based programmes (K.M. Bahrul Islam, 2021). Both the systems of education in India i.e., regular mode and ODL mode, have been declared at par, yet a lot needs to be done to bring them practically at par particularly on quality grounds although UGC-DEB has framed regulations specific to ODL from time to time in process to enhance the standard of education through ODL.

About the Uttarakhand Open University

Keeping in mind the tuff geographical terrain and needs of the society, The first Open University of the state i.e Uttarakhand Open University was established in the year 2005 as per the in tune with the philosophy of ODL system and with the aim of providing education and vocational skills through distance learning, using the learners’ friendly methods of education to ensure flexible and learning by doing. Various new tools and techniques and innovative methods has been used by the University to make Open and distabce learning more attractive and learner’s friendly and effective. The main vision and mission of the University is to cater to the educational needs of the target groups to create skilled and knowledge based human resource for speedy upliftment and development of the State. The University aims to impart quality education by maintaining high academic standards. For this purpose, it has radically reoriented itself in view of the rapid changes in the sphere of professional and technical education and has developed a number of new and innovative self-employment/ employment-oriented courses of study. Uttarakhand Open University is especially focusing on the educational needs of women, the tribals and other marginalized sections. It has extended its reach to unreached places and has made its presence felt even in the remotest corners of the state.

Increase/ decrease in the enrolment of learners in the Institution year wise over the last five years

Table-01

2020-21	2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17
55974	50757	42813	37108	28273

Source; SSR Uttarakhand Open University,2021

The data clearly reveals the increased in the enrollment ratio, this shows that the faith and believe towards Open and Distance learning is increasing among the learners. It is clear from the data that Open and Distance learning follow the practices in accordance with the notion of ‘reaching the unreached’, ‘education at the door-step of the learners’, ‘life-long learning’ and education for those who could not pursue their education through the formal system of education (Table-01). The flexibility and quality of Self-Instructional Learning Material (SILM), skill enhancement courses increase the viability of the Open and Distance learning. ODL emerged as a tool for those who are living in far flung areas but want to continue their education and also for the girl’s child who are now able to manage their household chores along with their education. Thus, it is clear that ODL fulfilling the needs of various sections of the societies by providing education at their door step and reaching to the unreached.

Number of learners enrolled from rural areas year-wise over the last five years

Table-02

2020-21	2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17
74344	69554	55998	68142	41656

Source; SSR Uttarakhand Open University,2021

The Uttarakhand Open University is continuously working in the direction to build an inclusive society through inclusive education and it is working hard to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by reaching to the unreached areas of Uttarakhand and by offering various skill development programmes along with the traditional programmes in the remotest areas of hilly terrains of the State of Uttarakhand. The data in table-02 clearly depicts that enrollment numbers from rural areas is increasing day by day, this shows that ODL working in accordance to their motto of reaching to the unreached and providing quality education through various means and modes of education to enhance the overall development of the rural population.

Details of Learners Enrolled From different gender

Table-03

Year	Number of learners enrolled from different genders			Total number of learners enrolled		
	Number of Male learners	Number of female learners	Number of transgender learners			
16-17	20786	20870	0	41656		
17-18	32841	35301	0	68142		
18-19	25897	30101	0	55998		
19-20	31043	38508	3	69554		
20-21	33522	40817	5	74344		

Source; SSR Uttarakhand Open University,2021

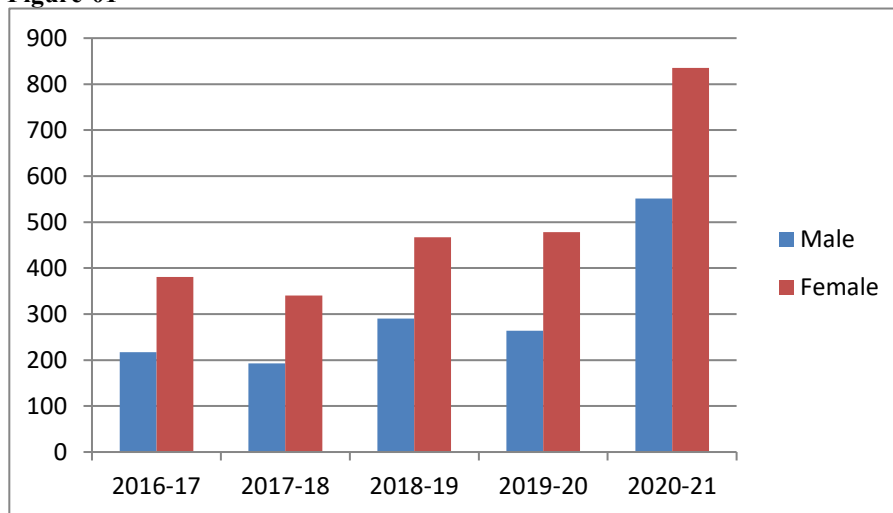
The data reveals a very interesting finding that the enrollment ratio of the female is increasing year wise in comparison to male counterpart (Table-03). This shows that's ODL has provided a platform to the female learners to continue their education who left education in between due to various house hold responsibilities and to perform the household chores. This is the first step towards gender equality which is a positive step in the overall development of the female learners. The female learners are also coming forward to take admission in the Master of Social Work programme(MSW) in comparison to male counter(Table-04,Graph-01) . The main objectives of the MSW programme is to provide in hand training to learners in different areas of domain like Medical, HR management, Labour Laws and NGO management so that windows of job opportunities available to them after completing the programme. The study reveals that ODL has provided the platform to the learners at their door step to enrolled in different professional programme because of which female are coming forward to fulfilled their dreams by completing the professional course (Table-04,Graph-01). ODL emerged as platform which provides them the wings to fly. Transgender also coming forward to be part of this mission although the enrollment number is very less however ODL has open the ways to everyone to continue their education irrespective of caste, gender and religion.

Table-04

Enrollment Number in Master of Social Work Programme

Session	Male	Female	Total
2016-17	217	381	598
2017-18	193	340	533
2018-19	290	467	757
2019-20	264	478	742
2020-21	551	835	1386

Figure-01



Objectives of study

Covid-19 pandemic has forced the learning process to be conducted online. Hence, the rapidly changing environment encourages the governments, universities, lecturers, and students to adapt the new learning system. Research has consistently shown that one of the most important factors contributing to a student's success is the quality of teaching he or she receives.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- to assess the learners' view towards the effectiveness of the Master of Social Work programme
- to assess the role of ODL in providing quality education

Review of Literature

Bishnu Mohan Das (2019) in his study found that most of the students of were unaware of the social work programme and its effectiveness. The main objectives of the MSW programme are to trained learners in field work component but in his study, he found that field work component is missing and the supervision is not up to mark. Volery & Lord (2000) found that the beginning of online classes led to various problems for both the communities from teaching and learning, though, the internet is a major technological advancement reshaping society and universities worldwide. The online learning environment varies profoundly from the traditional classroom situation when it comes to learner's motivation, satisfaction, and interaction, as stated in a study in which 385 college students of various disciplines in Nepal were asked about their opinions regarding online classes implemented during COVID-19 lockdown (Aditya and Jha, 2020).

Studies have revealed that Open and Distance Learning provides platform to those who have no access to school / colleges but have zeal to be part of education system keeping in mind their future stake (Paliwal 2019). Paliwal concludes that in the mountain regions where children left the studies in between, the girls child suffers a most in the hilly regions as due to enormous household responsibilities they left their schooling in between. Distance learning evolved as a new way in providing solutions and giving an opportunity to those who want to continue their education through its learner's friendly approach. Distance education apart from formal education also provides opportunities to educators to enhanced their educational capability. (Woodford et al.,2001).

Saumya and Singh (2020) in their study found that majority of the learners enrolled in MSW programme preferred to read printed self-learning materials anyway in country regions however with expanding admittance to Web, students are step by step choosing on the web materials while topping off the confirmation structure. Larger part of understudies tracked down the quality and standard of study materials to be generally excellent. However maximum respondents gave positive criticism about the student support administrations and their growth opportunities, a portion of the students' dealt with issues like no help from the staff, issue in regards to determination of hands-on work boss, late conveyance of study materials, absence of staff individuals at concentrate on focus, far distance of study Center from home. Ongoing technological advances have set out fundamentally more open doors for social work projects to convey training to people who, for various reasons, can't finish a full timetable of grounds-based courses (Coe & Elliot, 1999).

Gagne and Shepherd (2001) in their study found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning versus conventional classroom settings. The study shows that students taking distance learning courses perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods. Thus, the study confirms that distance education is not less in any points in compare to traditional method of teaching. Distance education, as the name itself indicates, is providing education to the unreached and marginalized sections of the society. The education is offered using various means and modes of social media like print, audio and video components with flexibility for the learners to learn at their own pace. It provides education to all segment of society irrespective of caste, age, gender and religion. It aims to train people in various disciplines and to develop professional skills in different jobs using a multimedia approach to teaching a distance learner. It is gaining prominence because it reaches a broader student audience, addresses student needs, saves money, and uses principles of modern learning pedagogy (Zarghami and Hausafus, 2002).

Ojo, Olugbenga & Olakulehin, Felix Kayode(2006) in their study, 'Attitudes and Perceptions of Students to Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria' assesses the attitudes and perceptions of distance teaching and learning by students enrolled in the NOUN(National Open University of Nigeria) and of the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) compared to their experiences at conventional universities. One hundred and twenty (n = 120) randomly selected NOUN and NTI students of NOUN were the subjects of the study. The study reveals that that students generally have a positive perception and attitude towards ODL, compared to traditional forms of higher education.

It is clear from the above studies/review of literature that as far as effectiveness of the programmes offered by the Uttarakhand Open University is concern, no study of this sort has been done by any social scientist. Therefore, the need of the hour is to make an extensive and intensive study of the perception of the learners and the effectiveness of the programme as offered by Uttarakhand Open University. This study critically assesses the perception of the learners towards the effectiveness of the social work programme offered by the Uttarakhand Open University, India. Data was collected on participant demographics, attitudes about social work, and levels of knowledge about the profession and reasons for enrolling in the programme.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Explorative research methodology has been used in the present study. The sample size consists of 200 learners enrolled in the MSW programme offered by the Uttarakhand Open University, India. The data collected and analysis on the basis of data collected from the primary and secondary sources. The research paper is based on the feedback received from MSW learners of the Department of Social Work, School of Social Sciences at Uttarakhand Open University, India. For data collection, a Google form was prepared and sent to all the learners of MSW through email, WhatsApp, Telegram, and other messaging and social media platforms. The Google form consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions relating to their profiles, assignments, reasons for enrolling in social work programme, quality of the self-instructional learning material and challenges faced by them while pursuing the MSW programme. Responses were received from 200 MSW learners. All the responses were collected in an excel sheet and visualized as charts wherever applicable. The findings are exclusively based on the experiences of learners while pursuing the MSW programme through ODL mode from Uttarakhand Open University,India.

Data interpretation

The responses were analyzed as two groups, firstly the male learners and secondly the female learners. These two groups are further divided into four groups according to their age class i.e. 18-25, 26-30, 31-40 and 41-50. The after effects of the relative multitude of inquiries were contemplated and different assessments and issues raised by the respondents were aggregated, analyzed, and deciphered. The understanding incorporates the underlining reason for the got result, the impacts it raises, and the future expectations and suggestions. The outcomes were contrasted and existing writing and all around talked about.

Result

The observations and discussions start from learners' perception view. These results were then expressed in the form of a discussion focusing on the major aspects of i) preliminary information ii) level of assignments iv) quality of study material and assessment methods and vi) future aspects.

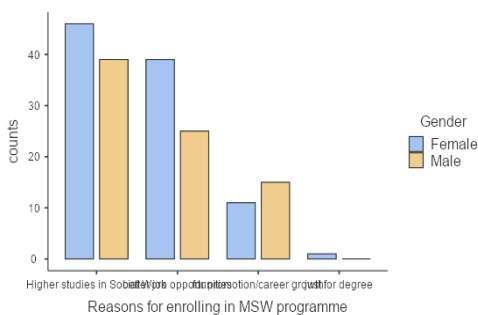
The course modules, structure of the MSW programme offered by the Open Universities was unique, as per the different geographical locations and structures. For example, the Philippines Open University offered the programme to enhanced the skills of BSW students. It is a component of ongoing instruction for career

advancement. The goal of the United Kingdom Open University is to give people who work in social care organisations the chance to earn a professional degree without leaving their jobs. (Thomas and Varghese, 2011).

One of the drawbacks of regular mode of education is its accessibility particularly to those who have comparatively disadvantaged position either due to their economic background or due to geographically remote and difficult location. Social work programme offered through ODL mode has greater reach and access due to its flexibility the ability to transmit quality training. Other than this, it provides opportunities to the learners to fulfill their dreams of getting degree while working.

A. Reason for enrolling in MSW Programme

Out of 200 learners 55 % are female learners and 45 % are male learners. Out of which 33 % learners are of 26-30 years, 40% are of 31-40 years and 10% are of 41-50 years (Fig 2). This indicated that ODL courses covers all age groups. 46 female learners and 39 male learners enrolled in MSW programme for higher studies. 64 learners (46 female learners and 39 male) enrolled for better job opportunities and 26 learners enrolled for carer growth (Table 5, Fig. 3).



B. Satisfaction with study material:

Self-Learning Material is an important medium of imparting knowledge to the learners. Since there is no face-to-face interaction the quality and the content provided in the study material should help in providing a classroom like atmosphere. The material should be self-instructional in approach. The term self-instruction means a guide book which guide learners step by step and direct how to proceed with Self Instructional material and do the self assessment exercises available on the SLM. Maximum learners satisfy with the study material provided by the university. 90 % learners are fully satisfy with the SLM while only 3% are not satisfied (Fig. 4). This shows that University is working on the development of the quality of the status material.

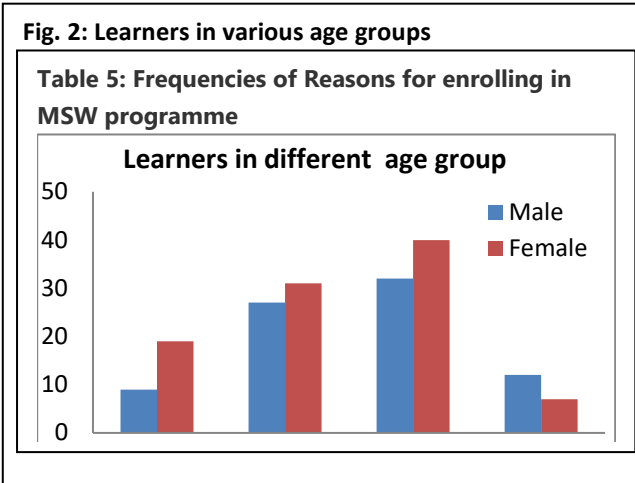
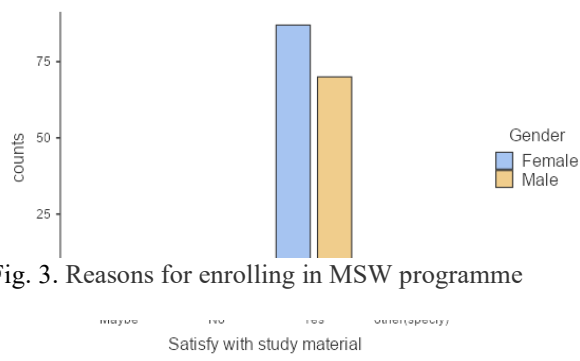


Fig. 3. Reasons for enrolling in MSW programme



C. Learners’ perception towards Assignments:

Assignment is task given to the learners to check the knowledge gain by the learners . Assignments can for instance be used to test higher cognitive abilities and the application of specific skills or knowledge. It can mirror the future professional practice. It can be used to assess the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes (competences). Assignments are given to the learners for their evaluation in ODL system. It is also a part of examination. Learners perception about the assignment shows that 48% learner feels, it’s hard for them and 44% indicated assignments are moderate and only 7 % says it’s easy for them (Table 6)

Table 6. Frequencies of Perception towards Assignments

Levels	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Easy	13	7.4 %	7.4 %
Hard	84	48.0 %	55.4 %
Moderate	78	44.6 %	100.0 %

D. Satisfaction with the Assessment Process:

Many sorts of assessment exist; subsequently assessment techniques should be modified by the thing is being assessed and the reason for the assessment. It is futile to try and determine how effective our program is? This is why process of assessment should be done prior to any other type of evaluation (Hawe et al. 1990). Our study indicated that 67% learners are Completely satisfied with the assignment and evaluation process, 26% learners are little bit satisfied with the assignment and evaluation process and only 5 % are not satisfied with the evaluation process (Fig. 5, Table 7.).

Table 7: Frequencies of Satisfaction with the study material of MSW

Satisfy with the marks of Assignment and evaluation process	Gender	
	Female	Male
Completely	60	58
Little bit	31	15
not at all	5	5
other (specify)	1	0

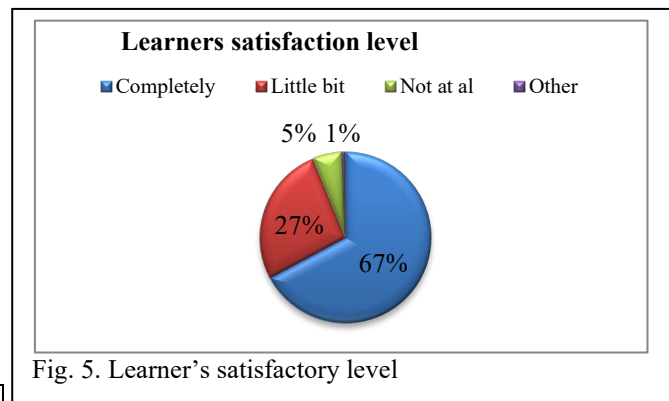


Fig. 5. Learner’s satisfactory level

3.4 % Learners found that the language could be in easier format then the provided one, 11% indicated that there is a need for an improvement, 2.3% are not satisfied with the study material of MSW and 81% learners found that the provided study material of MSW is very good, it fulfills their requirement and good enough for their learning. Comparison between male and female learners indicated that female learners are more satisfied then the male learners (Fig 6 & 7, Table 8).

Table 8: Frequencies of Satisfy with the study material of MSW

Levels	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Language could be in easy format	6	3.4 %	3.4 %
Need improvement	20	11.3 %	14.7 %
No	4	2.3 %	16.9 %
Yes	145	81.9 %	98.9 %
other (specify)	2	1.1 %	100.0 %

Table 8: Frequencies of Satisfy with the study material of MSW

Levels	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
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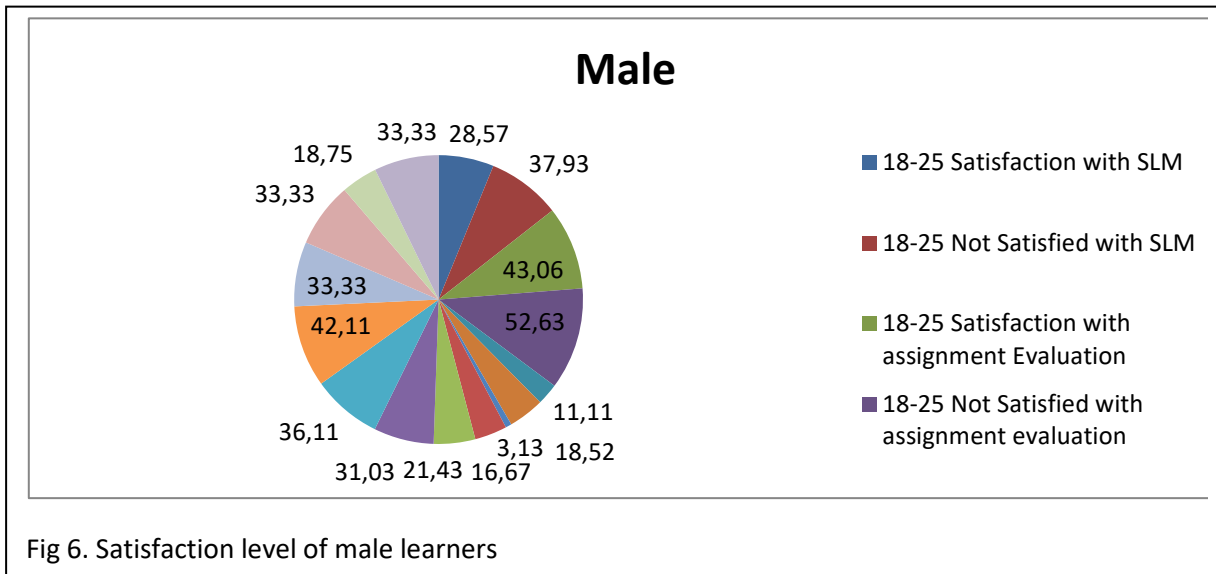


Fig 6. Satisfaction level of male learners

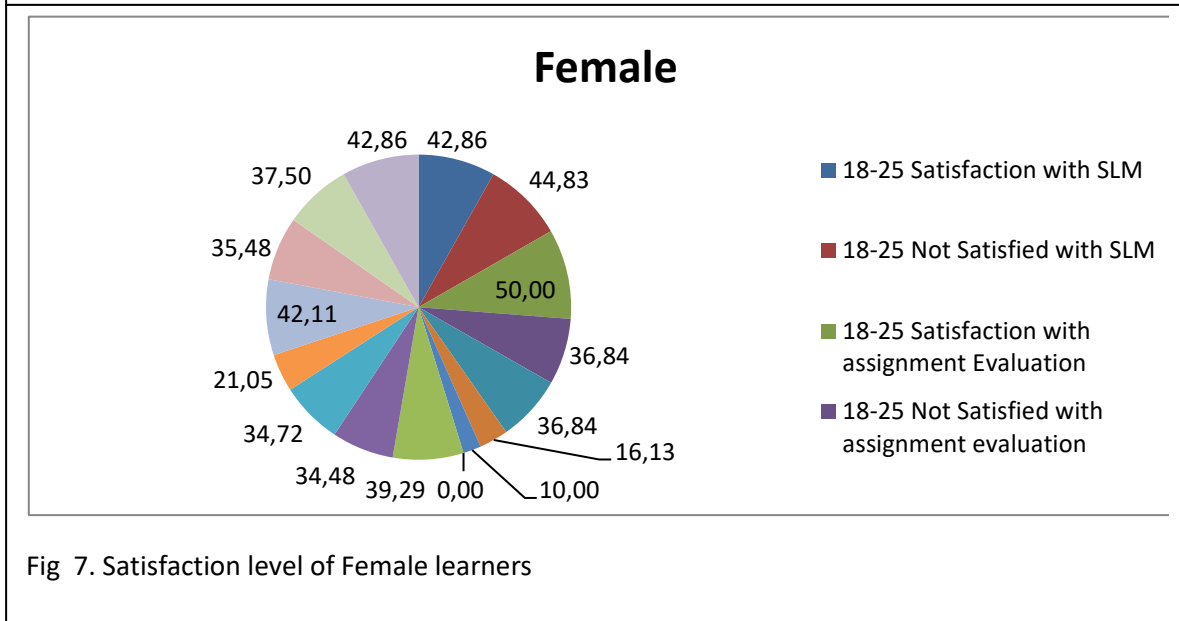


Fig 7. Satisfaction level of Female learners

The data clearly shows that learners were self-satisfied with the all the parameters of the social work programme as offered by the Uttarakhand Open University starting from the assignment to the quality of study material as well with guide book which provides complete description of the field work. Thus, it is clear that ODL provides quality education and opportunities to the learners to carry on their professional degree in pace with their job.

Discussion

Open and distance learning playing a significant role in providing quality and learners friendly education at the doorstep with quality study material to all the sections of the society. ODL provides all sort of facilities to their learners similarly as in the case of conventional method of teaching and learning through different modes of teaching and learning. OLD system of education is one of the effective ways of educating aspiring learners from every corner of world if the quality issues are adequately addressed. With the evolution of new ICT tools and techniques and their integration in ODL has solved the quality issues in ODL to a great extent. In COVID times, majority of the institutions including regular mode based institutions adopted ICT tools and delivered lectures or conducted counselling remotely with a great amount of success. If we could maintain the pace of learning

during COVID times, it was possible only because of ODL tools and ICT together. Further, adoption and promotion of ODL becomes more important in Indian scenario because of high population load and also because of cultural, economic and geographic diversity which is limiting for maintaining GER at par with world average. Target of 50% GER by 2035 (NEP 2020) is only possible judicious use of ODL in Indian conditions especially in programmes like MSW.

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