

## FROM SUPPORT TO SUCCESS: THE ROLE OF LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS IN ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT :

This paper reflects the findings of an empirical study conducted in three selected ODL institutions of Assam, namely KKHSOU, IGNOU, and DODL, Dibrugarh. The study aimed at exploring the existing provisions of LSS and its impact upon the academic achievements of the learners. The size of the sample comprised of 300 learners (100 each) from the three ODL institutions which was determined with help of random sample technique. Descriptive survey method was used to gather pertinent information concerning the current status of phenomena and to draw valid conclusion from the facts discovered. It was found from the study that there does not exist any significant difference in LSS provisions between male and female learners, suggesting equitable distribution across genders. However, a notable urban-rural disparity exists, highlighting the need for policy interventions to bridge this gap. The study also reveals that effective LSS provisions positively correlate with academic achievements.

**Key words :** Support Services, Resources, Academic Achievements, Open and Distance Learning.

### INTRODUCTION :

#### Learner Support Services :

Learner support services (LSS) are the life-blood of the distance education system, providing indispensable resources that empower learners on their educational journey. Garrison and Baynton (1987) define LSS as the array of resources accessible to learners to facilitate their learning processes. Garrison (1989) elaborates that in the realm of distance education, support encompasses a broad spectrum of human and non-human resources designed to guide and ease the educational transaction. These resources can be as varied as library facilities, media and software programs, community leaders, and socio-economic factors such as financial self-sufficiency and the capacity to juggle family and community roles.

Simpson (2000) underscores that LSS involves all activities beyond the mere production and delivery of course materials, focusing on assisting learners throughout their studies. Craft (2002) stresses the importance of LSS in mitigating the isolating nature of distance education by offering counseling and tutoring services. These services are crucial in addressing issues such as feelings of alienation, lack of adequate study spaces, limited access to libraries, inconvenient work hours, and personal challenges. By tackling these obstacles, LSS creates a nurturing environment that enhances the distance learning experience.

Craft (1991) further refines the concept of LSS, defining it as any service provided by the institution other than the course materials, aimed at helping students achieve the instructional objectives of their courses. This definition highlights the distinct nature of LSS from course content delivery, encompassing facilities, administrative support, supplementary readings, human interactions, advice, and moral support.

In essence, learner support services are the backbone of distance education, ensuring that students receive the comprehensive support they need. By addressing both academic and administrative issues, LSS empowers learners to overcome challenges and successfully complete their courses, transforming the educational experience into a fulfilling and accessible journey.

#### NEED OF LSS :

Learners in distance education have diverse needs that must be met to ensure a quality educational experience. According to Nabi Bux Jumani, Abdul Jabbar Bhatti, and Samina Malik (2013), these needs can be categorized into four key areas: learning needs, survival needs, advisory needs, and recreational needs. Satisfying all these needs is crucial for delivering a comprehensive and effective educational experience.

To achieve this, both academic and non-academic support services play a vital role. Morgan (2012) emphasizes that these support services are essential in helping learners overcome barriers to their success. Academic support services might include tutoring, access to supplementary readings, and effective use of media and technology. Non-academic support services could encompass counseling, administrative assistance, financial advice, and the provision of recreational activities to ensure a well-rounded educational environment.

By addressing these diverse needs through robust learner support services, educational institutions can create a supportive and enriching environment that empowers learners to thrive and succeed in their studies. However, the

following factors call for additional support services for the learners, in addition to the support needed for an ordinary individual:

- 1) To ensure increase in enrolment
- 2) To ensure students' retention
- 3) To meet the psychological needs of the learners
- 4) To satisfy diverse social needs of the learners
- 5) To encourage the students with special needs.

**METHODS :**

Considering the nature of the problem, descriptive survey method was used to obtain pertinent and precise information concerning the current status of phenomena and to draw valid general conclusions from the facts discovered. Descriptive survey was designed to collect primary data regarding different aspects of LSS at the three ODL institutions of Assam, namely Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), and Directorate of Distance Learning(DODL), Dibrugarh University. For this purpose, questionnaires were constructed besides taking face-to-face interview with the tutors and coordinators.

Since the population of the study is large, therefore random sampling technique was adopted to determine the size of the sample. The sample comprises of 300 learners.

The questionnaire (LSSQ) framed for this purpose, consisted of nine parts, namely – admission related services, regional centre/campus services, tutorial services, counseling services, assignment related services, and media support services, library services, course material services and examination related services. The forms of questions in the questionnaires were closed ended having 'Yes' and 'No' response. Besides framing questionnaires, the investigator conducted face-to-face interview with the tutors and the coordinators in order to gather in-depth information about the LSS provided at IGNOU, KKHSOU, and DODL (DU). Interview schedule was also used for the same.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:**

The findings of the study reveal about the types of provisions of LSS provided among male-female and rural-urban learners in the select ODL institutions of Assam, namely, IGNOU, KKHSOU, and DODL. The findings also indicate the impact of LSS upon the academic achievements of the learners. The results have been presented through subsections as explained below :

**Provisions of LSS across the ODL institutions :** The following table (Table 1) and Fig.1 describe about number and percentages of responses concerning different provisions of LSS in the three ODL institutions of Assam :

**Table 1: Numbers and percentages of responses of the learners regarding provisions of LSS**

Sl.No	Provisions of LSS	Responses	KKHSOU		IGNOU		DODL		TOTAL	
			Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%
1	Availability of Admission forms, Prospectus, etc.	No	10	10.0	12	12.0	9	9.0	31	10.4
		Yes	90	90.0	88	88.0	91	91.0	269	89.6
2	Information and guidance regarding academic programmes	No	36	36.0	44	44.0	55	55.0	135	45.0
		Yes	64	64.0	56	56.0	45	45.0	165	55.0
3	Fee Concession/ installment	No	38	38.0	33	33.0	23	23.0	94	31.3
		Yes	62	62.0	67	67.0	77	77.0	206	68.7
4	Provision of Scholarship	No	83	83.0	99	99.0	97	97.0	279	93.0
		Yes	17	17.0	1	1.0	3	3.0	21	7.0
5	Arrangement of Induction meeting	No	10	10.0	8	8.0	9	9.0	27	9.0
		Yes	90	90.0	92	92.0	91	91.0	273	91.0
6	Help of RCs/MCs concerning examination	No	47	47.0	54	47.0	41	39.0	142	47.3
		Yes	53	53.0	46	53.0	59	61.0	158	52.7
7	Additional help from RC/Main Campus	No	58	58.0	64	18.0	40	40.0	162	54.0
		Yes	42	42.0	36	82.0	60	60.0	138	46.0
8	Easy access to Study Centre	No	1	1.0	54	54.0	36	36.0	91	30.3
		Yes	99	99.0	46	46.0	64	64.0	209	69.7
9	Help of the Tutors in solving	No	16	11.0	22	18.0	24	19.0	62	20.7

	problems	Yes	84	89.0	78	82.0	76	81.0	238	79.3
10	Use of TLMs by the Tutors	No	15	15.0	36	36.0	11	11.0	62	20.7
		Yes	85	85.0	64	64.0	89	89.0	238	79.3
11	Assignments given by Tutors	No	46	46.0	62	62.0	52	52.0	160	53.3
		Yes	54	54.0	38	38.0	48	48.0	140	46.7
12	Facility of telephone/online counselling	No	43	57.0	45	11.0	71	71.0	159	53.0
		Yes	57	43.0	55	89.0	29	29.0	141	47.0
13	Facility of Career Guidance	No	79	79.0	98	98.0	87	87.0	264	88.0
		Yes	21	21.0	2	2.0	13	13.0	36	12.0
14	Appreciate by the tutors at the time of submission of assignments	No	37	37.0	42	32.0	54	27.0	133	44.3
		Yes	63	63.0	58	68.0	46	73.0	167	55.7
15	Media support (Radio/TV programme.)	No	0	0	18	18.0	18	18.0	36	12.0
		Yes	100	100.0	82	82.0	82	82.0	264	88.0
16	Library facility	No	0	0	18	18.0	9	9.0	27	9.0
		Yes	100	100.0	82	82.0	91	91.0	273	91.0
17	Xerox facility in library	No	14	14.0	17	1.0	22	22.0	53	17.7
		Yes	86	86.0	83	99.0	78	78.0	247	82.3
18	Separate Reading Room	No	9	9.0	15	15.0	30	30.0	54	18.0
		Yes	91	91.0	85	85.0	70	70.0	246	82.0
19	Receiving SLMs on time	No	28	12.0	41	1.0	37	4.0	106	35.3
		Yes	72	88.0	59	99.0	63	96.0	194	64.7
20	Availability of exam related materials like routine, admit card, etc	No	4	4.0	27	27.0	18	18.0	49	16.3
		Yes	96	96.0	73	73.0	82	82.0	251	83.7

Source : Field data (2020-21)

The analysis of the above table provides valuable insight into the availability of provisions of LSS across three ODL institutions and indicates about the following findings:

**i) High Availability Areas:** Provisions like admission forms/ prospectus, induction meetings, easy access, help of tutors and library facilities have high availability across all institutions. Effective use of media support and tutors' assistance is notable.

**ii) Areas of Concern:** Provision of scholarships and career guidance are notably low across all institutions. Facility of telephone/online counseling shows disparity among institutions, with IGNOU performing better. Information and guidance regarding academic programme, additional help of RCs/Main Campus, assignment and appreciation given by tutors are other areas of major concern.

Overall, while many provisions of LSS are well-received, key areas for improvement include the provision of scholarships, career guidance, timely distribution of SLMs, and additional help from regional/main campuses. Addressing these areas can enhance the overall student experience across these institutions. While there are strengths in certain learner support services like the availability of essential academic materials and facilities, areas such as scholarships and career guidance require significant improvement across all institutions. Each institution exhibits unique strengths and weaknesses that can inform targeted improvements in learner support.

**Provisions of LSS and Institutional Variations:** As the table 1 reveals, KKHSOU generally performs well in most areas, especially in media support, library facilities, and appreciation by tutors. While IGNOU has mixed results, with high ratings in areas like induction meetings and media support but lower in scholarships and career guidance. On the other hand, DODL shows strong performance in fee concessions, induction meetings, and tutor appreciation but needs improvement in areas like career guidance and additional help from the main campus.

Again, the mean and variability in provisions across the institutions can be analysed by the following table (Table2)

**Table 2 : Institutional Variations of Provisions of LSS and ANOVA Test**

Variable	Institutions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Provisions of LSS	KKHSOU	100	11.76	1.875
	IGNOU	100	10.95	1.402
	DODL	100	10.63	1.680
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>11.11</b>	<b>1.725</b>

	-	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squars	F	Sig.
Provisions of LSS	Between Groups	67.847	2	33.92	12.252	0.000
	Within Groups	822.300	297	2.769		
	Total	890.147	299	-	-	-

The above table (Table 2) shows that KKHSOU has the highest mean provision of LSS at 11.76. IGNOU follows with a mean of 10.95. DODL has the lowest mean at 10.63. The overall mean provision across all institutions is 11.11. The higher mean in KKHSOU suggests that it generally provides more LSS compared to IGNOU and DODL. The lower mean in DODL indicates fewer provisions of LSS compared to the other institutions. The overall mean of 11.11 indicates a moderate level of LSS provisions when considering all institutions together.

KKHSOU again shows the highest variability in provisions with a standard deviation of 1.875. DODL has a standard deviation of 1.680, indicating moderate variability. IGNOU has the lowest variability with a standard deviation of 1.402. The total standard deviation is 1.725, suggesting that there is some variability in the provisions of LSS across all institutions. The higher standard deviation in KKHSOU indicates that the provisions of LSS in this institution are more spread out around the mean, suggesting inconsistency. The lower standard deviation in IGNOU suggests that its provisions are more consistent. The moderate standard deviation in DODL indicates a middle ground in terms of consistency. As a whole, the data shows that KKHSOU generally provides more LSS but with higher variability, whereas IGNOU provides slightly fewer services with the least variability. DODL has the lowest provision of LSS but shows moderate consistency. The overall analysis indicates that while there is some variability in the provision of LSS across these institutions, KKHSOU tends to offer the most LSS on average, and IGNOU offers the most consistent level of service. The following table (Table 3) reveals about the significant difference exists in mean provision of LSS in the institutions.

Again, ANOVA results (Table 2) show that there is a statistically significant difference in the means of provisions of LSS between the groups. The low p-value (0.000) strongly suggests that these differences are not due to random chance. This implies that the provisions of LSS vary significantly across the groups analyzed.

**Nature and degree of difference lies in between Provisions and Gender:** The t-value and p-value (Table 4) clearly reveal the statistical difference in Provisions and Gender.

**Table 3: Difference between provisions of LSS with Gender**

Provisions of LSS	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t	df	P-value
Provisions	Male	106	37.29	3.881	-0.00019	0.000	298	0.999
	Female	194	37.49	3.559	-	-	-	-

( $H_0$  is accepted at 5% level)

The above table (Table 3) indicates that the mean difference between males and females is  $-0.00019$ , which is extremely small and effectively zero. This suggests that there is no practical difference in the means of the two groups. The calculated value of t (0.0000) fails to exceed the tabulated t-value 1.968 (Approx.) with  $df=298$  at 0.05 level of significance (two-tailed). Hence, it is not significant at 0.05 levels. It provides enough evidence to accept the null hypothesis. Thus, there does not exist any significant difference in the means of the two groups of gender. The p-value of 0.999 is extremely high. A p-value greater than 0.050 typically indicates that the results are not statistically significant. In this case, a p-value of 0.999 suggests that there is no statistically significant difference between the provisions for males and females.

Based on the above data, we can conclude that there is no significant difference in the mean provisions between males and females. And almost zero mean difference, t-value of zero, and extremely high p-value all support the conclusion that the gender of the participants does not affect the mean provisions. Thus, the provisions seem to be distributed equally between males and females, with no statistically significant difference detected.

**Nature and degree of difference lies in between Provisions and Locality:** The t-value and p-value (Table 4) clearly indicate the significant difference exists in Provisions and Locality.

**Table 4: Difference between provisions of LSS with Locality**

Provisions of LSS	Locality (Area)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t	df	P-value
Provisions	Rural	212	10.665	1.642	-1.528	-7.622	298	0.000
	Urban	88	12.193	1.421				

( $H_0$  is rejected at 5% level)

The mean provision of LSS is significantly higher in urban areas (Mean = 12.193) compared to rural areas (Mean = 10.665). The standard deviation is slightly higher in rural areas (1.642) compared to urban areas (1.421), indicating a slightly greater variability in the provision of LSS in rural areas. The calculated t-value (-7.622 and -8.090) exceeds the value given in table (1.967) with df=298 at 0.05 level (two-tailed), hence it is highly significant. It provides evidence to reject the null hypothesis. So, there exists significant difference in the provisions of LSS between rural and urban areas.

Thus, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in the provisions of LSS between rural and urban localities. Urban areas have a higher mean provision of LSS compared to rural areas, and this difference is statistically significant as indicated by the p-values and t-values from the t-tests. This suggests a disparity in LSS provision that could warrant further investigation and possible policy interventions to address the lower provisions in rural areas.

**Mean rating and Variability of Marks and Provisions:** The following table (Table 5) reveals the means and variability of marks and provisions.

**Table 5 : Mean scores and Standard Deviations of Marks and Provisions of LSS**

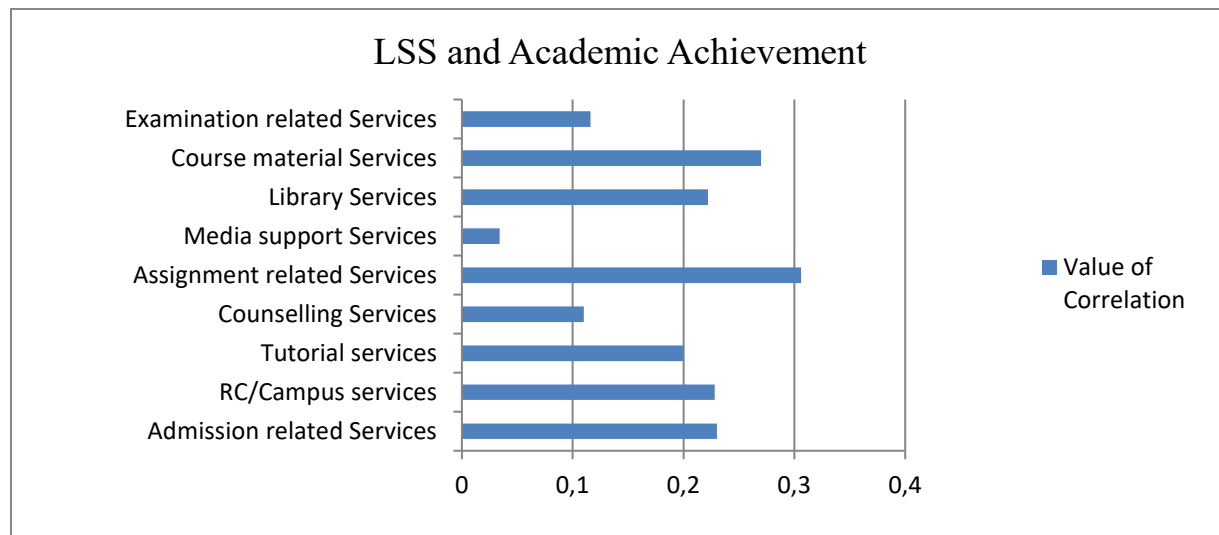
Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Marks	300	62.22	9.897
Admission related Services	300	4.83	0.990
Regional Centre/Campus Services	300	3.08	0.481
Tutorial Services	300	5.68	1.09
Counselling Services	300	2.61	1.665
Assignment related Services	300	4.77	0.762
Media support Services	300	2.97	0.171
Library Services	300	4.83	0.510
Course material services	300	3.81	0.655
Examination related Services	300	4.85	0.607
Provisions	300	11.113	1.725

The above table (Table 5) summarizes the sample sizes (N=300), means, and standard deviations for various variables related to services and marks. The marks obtained by the learners indicate that the average mark scored by the learners is 62.22, with a standard deviation of 9.897. This reveals that most learners' marks cluster around 62.22, with variability of about 9.897 points. The table indicates that the tutorial services, assignment related services, library services, and examination related services have higher mean ratings, indicating student satisfaction. On the other hand, counselling services and media support services have lower mean ratings, suggesting areas for improvement. Most services have moderate standard deviations, indicating that while some variability exists, many students have similar perceptions of these services.

**Impact of LSS upon the academic achievements:** The table and diagram (Table 6, and Figure 1) given below, reveals clearly about Correlation between Provisions of LSS and Academic Achievements

**Table 6 : Correlation between Provisions of LSS and Academic Achievements**

Part	Provisions of LSS	Correlation	Academic Achievement
I	Admission related Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.230 0.000 300
II	Regional Centre/Campus Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.228 0.000 300
III	Tutorial Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.200 0.001 300
IV	Counselling Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.110 0.57 300
V	Assignment related Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.306 0.000 300
VI	Media support Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.034 0.563 300
VII	Library Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.222 0.000 300
VIII	Course material services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.270 0.000 300
IX	Examination related Services	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.116 0.044 300
Provisions		Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	0.311 0.000 300



**Fig.1: Correlation between Provisions of LSS and Academic Achievement**

The table 7 and Fig.1 given above, indicate the nature of correlation that exists between the provisions of LSS and academic achievements of the learners of the ODL institutions of Assam. In case of admission-related services, it is seen that there is a low but statistically significant positive correlation (0.230) with academic achievement. There is a low but statistically significant positive correlation (0.228) between regional centre/campus services and academic



achievement. Again, there is a low but statistically significant positive correlation (0.200) between tutorial services and academic achievement. But, in case of Counselling Services, there is a very low positive (0.110) and not statistically significant correlation ( $p=0.057$ ) with academic achievement.

Again, in case of assignment-related services, there is a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation (0.306) between assignment-related services and academic achievement. But, there is a very low (0.034) and not statistically significant correlation (0.563) between media support services and academic achievement. Again, the library services, there is a low but statistically significant positive correlation (0.222) between library services and academic achievement. There is also a low but statistically significant positive correlation (0.270) between course material services and academic achievement. There is a very low but statistically significant positive correlation between examination-related services and academic achievement. As a whole, there is a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation (0.364) between overall provisions of LSS and academic achievement.

Thus, the above data suggests that most LSS provisions have a positive correlation with academic achievement, although the strength of the correlations varies. The strongest correlations are observed with assignment-related services and overall provisions, while media support services and counselling services show negligible and statistically insignificant correlations. This analysis highlights the importance of specific learner support services in enhancing academic performance.

**Institutional Variations of Marks:** The table 7 given below, shows the Institutional Variations of Marks-

**Table 7: Institutional Variation of Marks and ANOVA Test**

Variable		Institutions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Marks		KKHSOU	100	63.80	11.455
		IGNOU	100	59.32	9.848
		DODL	100	63.53	7.408
		<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>62.22</b>	<b>9.897</b>
Marks	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	1262.247	2	831.123	6.689	0.001
Within Groups	28024.670	297	94.359		
<b>Total</b>	<b>29286.917</b>	<b>299</b>			

The above table reveals that among the institutions, KKHSOU has the highest mean marks (63.80), indicating that students from KKHSOU tend to score higher on average compared to students from IGNOU (59.32) and DODL (63.53). Again, KKHSOU has the highest standard deviation (11.45), indicating greater variability in marks among students. DODL has the lowest standard deviation (7.408), suggesting more consistency in students' marks. Overall, the standard deviation for the combined data (9.897) is within the range of individual institutions' standard deviations, indicating a moderate level of variability when all institutions are considered together. Thus, it can be summarized that the learners from KKHSOU tend to score the highest on average, while students from IGNOU score the lowest. There is more variability in marks among KKHSOU students and the least variability among DODL students. Again, the above table shows that F-value is 6.689 and p-value is 0.001. Since the p-value (0.001) is less than the significance level of 0.05. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences between the group means.

## CONCLUSION

The study on Learner Support Services (LSS) in the ODL institutions (KKHSOU, IGNOU, DODL) of Assam, reveals a mixed landscape. While services like induction meetings, library facilities, and tutor support are appreciated, there are significant gaps in scholarships and career guidance. Urban learners benefit more from LSS than their rural counterparts, indicating a disparity needing attention. Despite high availability of academic materials, timely distribution of SLMs and campus support require improvement. Gender analysis shows equitable LSS distribution, but the urban-rural divide persists. Effective LSS provisions, like tutorial and assignment support, enhance academic performance, while counseling and media support need development. To improve, institutions should enhance communication, technological infrastructure, and administrative support. Pilot programs,

collaboration with other institutions, and a culture of continuous improvement are crucial. These measures will boost academic success and satisfaction for ODL students in Assam.

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