

Role of Distance Education in Promoting Higher Education in Meghalaya

Dr. Mary R. Marak¹, Ms. Silme Mary Ch Momin²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Tura Christian College, Tura

²M.A. Education Student, Indira Gandhi National Open University

Abstract

The study titled “Role of Distance Education in Promoting Higher Education in Meghalaya” examines how distance education expands access to higher education, particularly for students in rural and remote areas. It aims to assess the status, effectiveness, challenges, and students’ perceptions of distance education in the state. The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design, involving 100 respondents from NEHU and NIT Meghalaya, selected through purposive and simple random sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that distance education provides flexible learning opportunities and supports academic development and skill enhancement. However, challenges such as poor internet connectivity, inadequate digital infrastructure, and limited teacher-student interaction remain. The study recommends strengthening digital facilities and institutional support to improve the effectiveness and inclusiveness of distance education in Meghalaya.

Keywords: Distance Education, Higher Education, Meghalaya, Accessibility, Rural Education, Online Learning, Educational Development.

Introduction

Higher education is widely recognized as a key driver of socio-economic development, as it equips individuals with advanced knowledge, critical thinking abilities, and professional competencies necessary for participation in a rapidly changing global economy. It also plays an essential role in nation-building by producing skilled human resources, fostering innovation, and promoting social mobility. In India, the expansion of higher education has been a major policy focus, yet significant regional disparities persist, particularly in geographically challenging states such as Meghalaya. Despite improvements in literacy rates and educational awareness, access to higher education in Meghalaya continues to face structural and infrastructural constraints that limit opportunities for a large section of the population, especially those residing in rural and remote areas.

Meghalaya, located in the north-eastern region of India, is characterized by hilly terrain, scattered settlements, and a predominantly rural population. These geographical conditions pose significant challenges to the establishment and accessibility of higher education institutions. While urban centres such as Shillong host universities and colleges, students from distant villages often face difficulties in commuting regularly due to inadequate transportation networks, long travel distances, and financial constraints. Additionally, the limited number of higher education institutions in rural districts further restricts access, resulting in lower enrolment rates and educational inequality. Many students are

compelled to discontinue their studies after school education or migrate to urban areas, which is not always economically feasible for all families.

Distance education has emerged as an effective alternative to conventional classroom learning by offering flexible and accessible educational opportunities through printed materials, online platforms, and digital resources. It is particularly beneficial for learners facing geographical, financial, or personal constraints. The integration of information and communication technology (ICT) has further improved its reach and effectiveness. In India, institutions such as IGNOU and NEHU have contributed to expanding access to higher education, including for learners in remote areas like Meghalaya. Thus, distance education promotes inclusive learning and provides opportunities for individuals who may otherwise face barriers to higher education.

Distance education promotes social inclusion in Meghalaya by providing opportunities for women, economically disadvantaged students, and rural learners to pursue higher education. It supports lifelong learning by enabling individuals to balance education with employment and household responsibilities. It also contributes to skill development and human resource enhancement through courses in arts, commerce, management, computer applications, and vocational studies. These opportunities can improve employability, encourage self-employment and entrepreneurship, and contribute to the socio-economic development of the state.

Despite these advantages, the implementation of distance education in Meghalaya is not without challenges. Issues such as limited digital infrastructure, poor internet connectivity in rural areas, lack of awareness about available programs, and insufficient learner support systems can hinder its effectiveness. Many students also face difficulties in self-directed learning due to the absence of regular face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers. These challenges highlight the need for continuous improvement in infrastructure, policy support, and institutional mechanisms to ensure the success of distance education initiatives.

Given these considerations, it becomes important to critically examine the role of distance education in promoting higher education in Meghalaya. This study aims to explore how distance education contributes to improving access, equity, and quality in higher education within the state. It also seeks to understand students' experiences, institutional strategies, and the challenges faced in the implementation of distance learning programs. By analysing these aspects, the study will provide insights into the effectiveness of distance education as an alternative mode of learning in a geographically diverse and socio-economically varied context like Meghalaya. This study, therefore, seeks to critically analyse the role of distance education in promoting higher education in Meghalaya and to suggest measures for strengthening its impact in the future.

Statement of the problem

The study focuses on the role of distance education in promoting higher education in Meghalaya, particularly among students in rural, remote, and marginalized areas. It examines how distance education helps overcome geographical barriers and improves access to educational opportunities. The study is significant for identifying ways to improve educational policies, infrastructure, and program delivery. Key concepts include distance education, higher education, accessibility, promotion of higher education, and students residing in remote areas. These definitions provide a clear understanding of the major terms and establish the scope of the study.

Objectives of the study

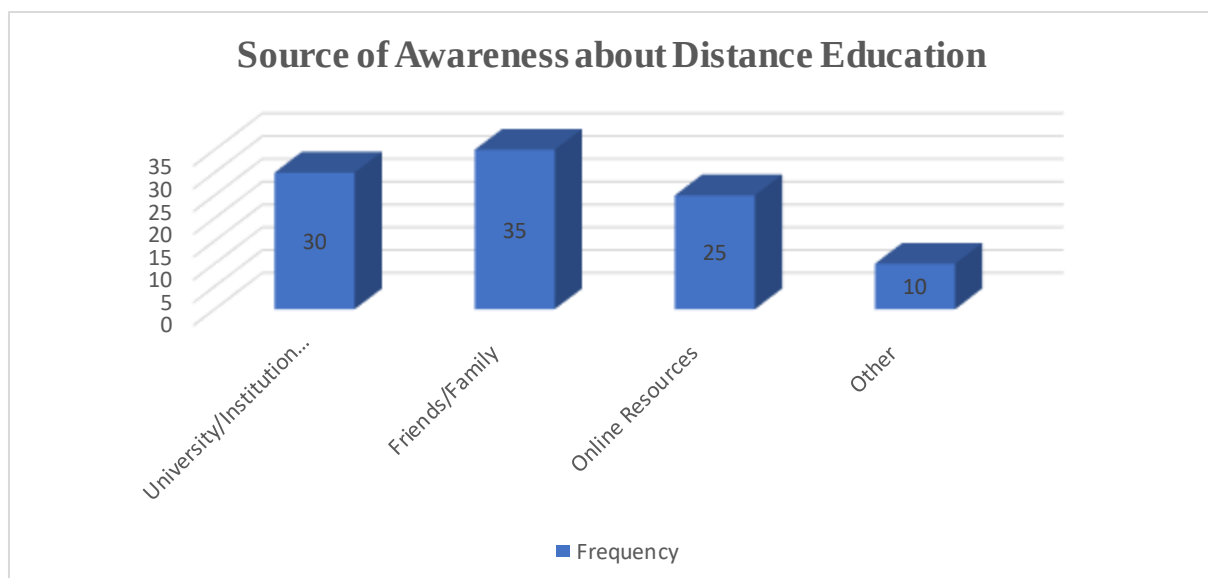
- To examine the current status and availability of distance education programs in Meghalaya.
- To analyse the role of distance education in improving access to higher education for students in remote and rural areas.
- To identify challenges faced by students and institutions in implementing and pursuing distance education.
- To assess students' perceptions regarding the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of distance education programs.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the role of distance education in promoting higher education in Meghalaya. It covered students, faculty members, and administrative staff from North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and NIT Meghalaya, with special attention to learners from rural and remote areas. A total of 100 respondents were selected using purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and secondary sources, including reports and publications from NEHU, NIT Meghalaya, UGC, and government education departments. The study focused on accessibility, student satisfaction, institutional support, and the challenges associated with distance education.

Table 1: Source of Awareness about Distance Education

Source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
University/Institution Advertisement	30	30%
Friends/Family	35	35%
Online Resources	25	25%
Other	10	10%
Total	100	100%



The table shows that the majority of respondents (35%) learned about distance education through friends and family, indicating strong informal communication networks in Meghalaya. Institutional advertisements (30%) and online sources (25%) also played a significant role. This suggests that awareness is spread through both formal and informal channels, with interpersonal communication being the most influential.

Table 2: Distance Education Provides Better Access than Regular Colleges

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	40	40%
Agree	35	35%
Neutral	15	15%
Disagree	7	7%
Strongly Disagree	3	3%
Mean	4.02	
SD	0.92	

The mean score of 4.02 indicates a high level of agreement that distance education improves access to higher education. The low standard deviation (0.92) suggests that responses are relatively consistent. This confirms that most students in Meghalaya view distance education as a strong alternative to traditional college education.

Table 3: Ease of Access to Study Materials

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very Easy	20	20%
Easy	30	30%
Neutral	25	25%
Difficult	15	15%
Very Difficult	10	10%
Mean	3.45	
SD	1.12	

The mean score of 3.45 indicates moderate ease in accessing study materials. However, the relatively higher SD (1.12) shows variation in student experiences. While some students find access easy, others—especially from rural areas—face difficulties due to connectivity and infrastructure issues.

Table 4: Technological Challenges Faced

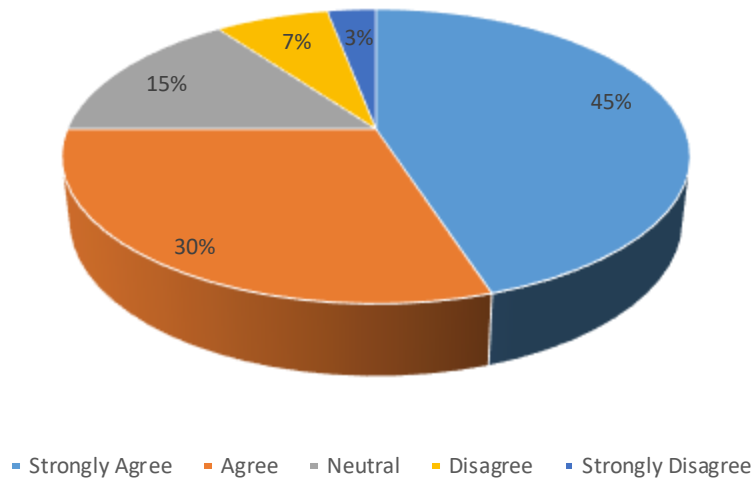
Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	65	65%
No	35	35%
Mean	1.65	
SD	0.48	

The majority of respondents reported facing technological challenges, reflected in a low mean score. This indicates that ICT barriers such as poor internet connectivity and lack of devices are significant issues affecting distance education effectiveness in Meghalaya.

Table 5: Distance Education Helps Without Relocation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	45	45%
Agree	30	30%
Neutral	15	15%
Disagree	7	7%
Strongly Disagree	3	3%
Mean	4.07	
SD	0.89	

Distance Education Helps Without Relocation



A high mean score (4.07) shows strong agreement that distance education allows students to study without relocating. This highlights one of the most important advantages of distance education in a geographically challenging state like Meghalaya.

Table 6: Improvement in Knowledge and Skills

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	38	38%
Agree	34	34%
Neutral	18	18%
Disagree	7	7%
Strongly Disagree	3	3%
Mean	3.97	

SD	0.94	
----	------	--

The mean score indicates that most respondents feel distance education improves their knowledge and skills. The relatively low SD shows consistent positive perception among learners regarding academic benefits.

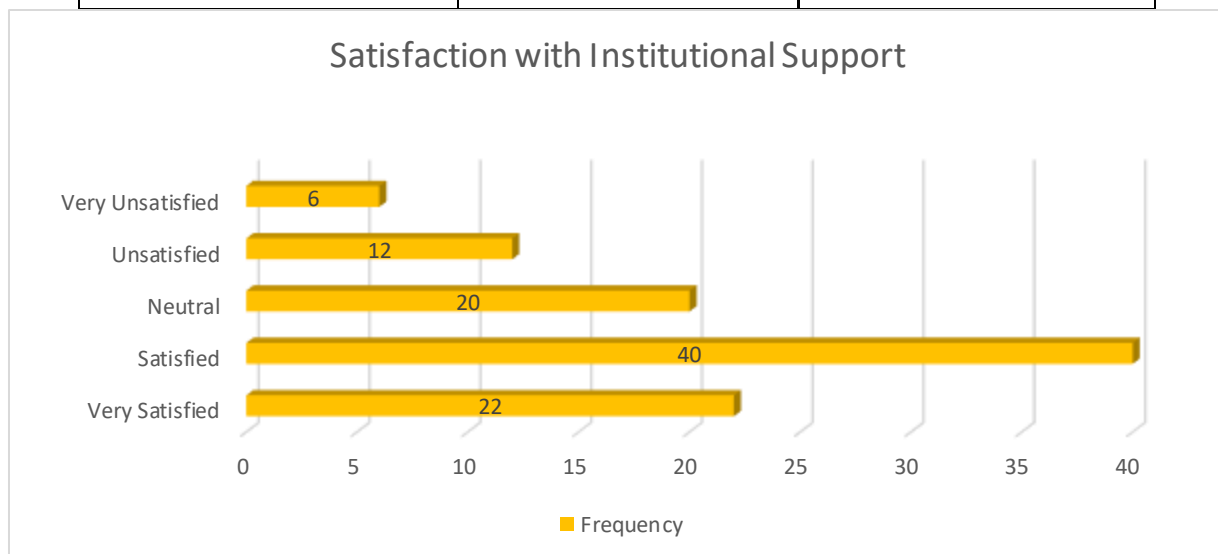
Table 71: Curriculum Relevance to Career Goals

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	36	36%
Agree	38	38%
Neutral	16	16%
Disagree	7	7%
Strongly Disagree	3	3%
Mean	3.97	
SD	0.91	

The results show that students generally find the curriculum relevant to their career or personal goals. This indicates that distance education programs are aligned with learner needs and employability requirements.

Table 8: Satisfaction with Institutional Support

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very Satisfied	22	22%
Satisfied	40	40%
Neutral	20	20%
Unsatisfied	12	12%
Very Unsatisfied	6	6%
Mean	3.60	
SD	1.05	



The mean score indicates moderate satisfaction with institutional support. However, the relatively higher SD shows mixed responses. Some students are satisfied, while others feel that improvements in guidance and academic support are required.

Table 9: Frequency of Interaction with Teachers

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Frequently	20	20%
Occasionally	35	35%
Rarely	30	30%
Never	15	15%
Mean	2.60	
SD	0.98	

The low mean score indicates limited interaction between students and teachers. Most students interact only occasionally or rarely. This highlights a major limitation of distance education related to lack of continuous academic engagement.

Table 10: Overall Impact of Distance Education

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	42	42%
Agree	36	36%
Neutral	12	12%
Disagree	7	7%
Strongly Disagree	3	3%
Mean	4.01	
SD	0.90	

The high mean score indicates that distance education has a positive impact on students' academic and professional development. The low SD suggests consistent agreement among respondents, confirming its effectiveness in promoting higher education in Meghalaya.

Results

The present study on the role of distance education in promoting higher education in Meghalaya revealed significant findings based on both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The results clearly indicate that distance education plays an important role in improving access, flexibility, and inclusivity in higher education, particularly for students from rural and geographically isolated regions.

The quantitative findings showed that a large majority of respondents (75%) either agreed or strongly agreed that distance education provides better access to higher education compared to regular colleges, with a mean score of 4.02 and a standard deviation of 0.92. This indicates a high level of positive perception among learners. Similarly, 75% of respondents also agreed that distance education helped them continue their studies without relocating (Mean = 4.07, SD = 0.89), highlighting its importance in a hilly and dispersed region like Meghalaya. In terms of academic improvement, 72% of respondents reported

that distance education improved their knowledge and skills (Mean = 3.97, SD = 0.94), suggesting that learners generally find the system academically beneficial.

However, the results also highlighted certain challenges. A significant 65% of respondents reported facing technological difficulties, including poor internet connectivity and lack of access to digital devices. The mean score of 1.65 indicates that technological barriers are a serious concern affecting learning continuity. In addition, only 62% of respondents expressed satisfaction with institutional support (Mean = 3.60, SD = 1.05), indicating moderate satisfaction levels with scope for improvement. Furthermore, interaction with teachers was found to be limited, with a mean score of 2.60, showing that most students interacted only occasionally or rarely with instructors.

Qualitative findings supported these results by revealing that students enrolled in distance education programs chose this mode mainly due to financial constraints, geographical barriers, and the need for flexibility. Many respondents expressed that distance education helped them continue higher education while managing family responsibilities or work commitments. However, they also reported challenges such as lack of face-to-face interaction, difficulty in understanding self-learning materials, and limited academic guidance.

Conclusion

The study concludes that distance education plays a crucial and transformative role in promoting higher education in Meghalaya. Based on the findings, it is evident that distance education has significantly improved access to higher education, especially for students residing in rural, remote, and economically disadvantaged areas. The high level of agreement among respondents (above 70% in most indicators) clearly demonstrates its acceptance and usefulness.

One of the most important conclusions drawn from the study is that distance education enables learners to pursue higher education without relocation, thereby eliminating geographical and financial barriers. This makes education more inclusive and accessible, particularly in a state like Meghalaya where difficult terrain and scattered settlements often restrict access to traditional colleges.

The study also concludes that distance education positively contributes to students' academic development. Most respondents reported improvements in knowledge, skills, and career opportunities. This indicates that distance education is not only a substitute for traditional learning but also an effective mode of academic advancement.

However, the study also concludes that several challenges hinder its full effectiveness. Technological barriers, particularly poor internet connectivity and lack of digital infrastructure, remain major obstacles. Limited interaction between students and teachers further affects the learning experience and academic performance of students. Moderate satisfaction levels regarding institutional support also indicate the need for improvement in academic counselling and student engagement.

Despite these limitations, the overall findings confirm that distance education is an essential component of higher education development in Meghalaya. It plays a key role in promoting educational equity, lifelong learning, and social inclusion. Therefore, it can be concluded that strengthening infrastructure, improving digital access, and enhancing institutional support will significantly improve the effectiveness of distance education in the state.

References

1. Agrawal, S. R., & Ghosh, C. K. (2014). Inculcation of values for best practices in student support

- services in open and distance learning. *Indian Journal of Open Learning*.
2. Alrefaee, S., et al. (2024). A bibliometric analysis of online education research in India (2014–2024). *Discover Education*, 4(276).
 3. Ashuni, K. (2024). Digital divide in the digital age: A study of IGNOU learners. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 19(2), 168–186.
 4. Azhar, A., & Rashid, R. (2025). Flipped learning approach in India: A systematic literature review. SSRN.
 5. Chari, H., & Haughey, M. (2007). The introduction of online learning: A case study of Indian open universities. *Distance Education*, 27(1), 87–104.
 6. Choudhury, S., Khare, V., Gupta, P., & Garg, S. (2016). Towards inclusive education: A case study of IGNOU. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 3(3), 43–59.
 7. Darjee, D. K. (2024). IGNOU's regional contributions: Transforming education and skill development in Sikkim. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 5716–5726.
 8. Das, P., Sahoo, A., & Pati, S. (2021). Online learning challenges in rural and remote areas in India. *Journal of Educational Technology and Development*, 8(4), 50–65.
 9. Gaba, A. K., & Dash, N. K. (2004). Course evaluation in open and distance learning: A case study from IGNOU. *Open Learning*, 19(2), 213–221.
 10. Garrison, D. R. (2010). Learner autonomy in distance education. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*.
 11. Holmberg, B. (2010). *Theory and practice of distance education*. Routledge.
 12. Jena, P. K. (2025). Impact of open and distance learning system on marginalized learners. SSRN.
 13. Kanwar, A., et al. (2015). Open educational resources in higher education. *Open Praxis*.
 14. Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning*. Wadsworth.
 15. Peters, O. (2011). Distance education and industrialization of teaching. *Open Learning Journal*.
 16. Sahoo, A. C. (2023). Importance of distance education in India. *International Journal of Development Research*, 14(1), 101–110.
 17. Satyanarayana, B., & Mantha, R. (2018). Distance education in India: Growth, trends, and future prospects. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 13(2), 1–15.
 18. Sathiyamoorthy, R., Ramesh, V. L., Kamath, R., et al. (2023). Enablers and barriers to online education in India: A systematic review. *Journal of Education Technology*, 35(2).
 19. Simpson, O. (2012). *Supporting students in online, open and distance learning*. Routledge.
 20. Srivastava, M., & Reddy, V. (2007). Experiences of IGNOU graduates in distance learning. *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies*.
 21. Sundar, I. (2006). Information technology in distance education: Indian scenario. *Educational Technology Review*.