

Analyzing E-mail communication of prospective learners

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Today, computer has replaced all means of communication significantly. E-mail is the most popular means of communication through computers. It has vanished the boundaries between the cities, countries and continents. Earlier Studies that used this medium, had shown evidence of higher quality of responses and also significant cost savings feature of this method (mainly for convenience of dispatch) for research purposes. In this communication, an attempt has been made to utilize email responses of prospective learners in education discipline based programs offered through open learning system. The inception of this study is linked to the creation of website (<http://www.ignou.ac.in/>) and availability of information related to all activated and prospective programs of studies, various school of studies, faculty email addresses and faculty vis-à-vis program coordinator in the University.

The present study analyzed 65 email responses received from July 2002 to till date by the researcher on her email ID. These respondents got the email ID from the University website and due to their eagerness to attain qualifications in the field of education/guidance/educational management, sent an e-mail to the program coordinator(s). These email responses were analyzed in order to visualize the learner profiles and viability of the ongoing as well as prospective programs of studies. This paper tries to analyze the e-mail responses of the people who either by surfing IGNOU's website or from other sources came to know about the various programs of studies offered by the School of Education. The study validates that there is an amount of hidden information even in the curiosity of the learners.

Keywords: Communication, e-mail responses, Learner Profiles, Open Learning

INTRODUCTION

Computer surfing and communication are the most convenient skills acquired by any computer savvy individual. This consumer friendly attribute of computer has placed computer in a unique position today. Communication and information technologies have revolutionized the communication scenario dramatically. The postal or snail mails are the communication channels that suffered the most. Even users of telegraph and telephone communication modes have been reduced considerably. As we all are aware, this is due to the emergence of newer means of communication technologies. Today, computer has replaced all means of communication significantly. In the last decade only youth and young generations were playing with it but today it has been found that older people have accepted it willingly to communicate with others. E-mail is the most popular means of communication through computers. It has eradicated the boundaries between the cities, countries and continents. With its tremendous features like fast delivery, quick response,

ability to communicate in one's language, speed and style, it is indeed a popular means. This facility has also entered in the field of research, writing, publication, printing and even distribution.

Today, online research methods are gaining popularity over conventional research methods. These methods have been found to be cost-effective, time saving and eliciting better response rates than the conventional research methods. (Schaefer and Dillman 1998; Online Survey-FAQ 1999; Bauman and Airey 2000). The basic question bothers us why so much importance to this method? Is it possible to do researches using computer communication? Is this a feasible, speedy and effective research media? And so on.

ADVANTAGES OF COMMUNICATION THROUGH E-MAIL

We all have experienced the potentialities of communication through internet/email. It has certain advantages. They are:

- Effectively notifying potential participants of upcoming surveys;
- Sending reminders and thank you notes
- Advising participants how to receive incentives. (A Discussion of Web Surveys, 2001)

E-mail, with its cost and speed advantages, makes it ideal as a first contact (Schaefer and Dillman, 1998). Thus Internet has changed our lives to a great extent. It is growing and changing very fast. Accessibility, acceptability and usage of this method are increasing day by day.

In 1995, Mehta and Sivadas conducted a study that strengthened the fact that email could generate high response similar to the one done by postal surveys. They also found it to be significantly quicker and received all email questionnaires within 3 days compared with 3 weeks to receive comparable paid postal questionnaires. They found evidence of higher quality of responses and also significant cost savings of the method (mainly for convenience of dispatch). Similarly, Comely's (1996) work also strengthened the cost and time saving attributes of online research surveys. The result indicated by online studies in similar findings, have shown similar patterns.

METHODOLOGY

An attempt has been made to utilize email responses of prospective learners in education discipline based programs offered through open learning system. The present study is an attempt in this direction. The inception of this study is linked to (<http://www.ignou.ac.in>) the creation of website and availability of information related to all activated and prospective programs of studies, various schools of studies and faculty email addresses and faculty vis-à-vis program coordinator in the University. The coordinator of two programs under study (one already on offer and other to be developed), commonly receives student's queries. Divergent learner's need and profiles discussed in this study is a result of going through and then responding to the student queries. The present study analyzed 65 email responses received from July 2002 to till date by the researcher on her email ID. These respondents got the email ID from the University website and due to their eagerness to attain qualifications in the field of education/guidance/educational management, sent an e-mail to the program coordinator(s). Other faculty members of the University might be getting similar communication from prospective clientele. These email responses were analyzed in order to visualize the learner profiles and viability of the ongoing as well as prospective programs of studies. In some responses, respondents have not provides

information enough to develop a comprehensive enough picture of their profiles. Those respondents were requested to send the required information through emails.

ANALYSIS

The collected data was analyzed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The quantitatively analyzed data has been presented below. The data given in the above Table: 1 shows that about 2/5 of the respondents were interested in joining certificate in Guidance (CIG) program. CIG is an on going program therefore the e-mail responder's query was pertaining to admission procedure, eligibility and other program details.

Table: 1
Program wise distribution of respondents

Program	Respondents
CIG	26
PGDEMA	19
Any other course	16
Not mentioned	4
Total	65

About 30% of the responders were interested to know about the launching time frame of it so that they enroll for it and then details on how they can join it. One of the interesting observation was responders were interested to join any teacher education program and therefore contacted School of Education faculty in the e-mail identity given in the University's web-site. About one-tenth of the responders have not specified the subject.

Table: 2
Gender wise distribution of respondents

Gender	Respondents
Male	16
Female	49
Total	65

The Table: 2 indicates that three fourth of the respondents were females. This supports the basic objective of ODL to cater to deprived and weaker groups including women.

Table: 3
Email Identity wise distribution of respondents

Category	Respondents
Self	55
Others	10
Total	65

The data presented in Table: 3 shows that 85% of the respondents were having their e-mail identities and only 15% were used others' Most of these users used their spouses identity for communication and in one case friend's e-mail identity was used as the respondent was working in the school located in the remote area.

The Table: 4 shows that one fourth of them were residing in metropolitan cities and one-fifth in cities. About one-tenth of them were outside the country and only one is from a rural area.

About forty percent of the respondents have not mentioned the place of residence-cum-work place.

Table: 4
State wise distribution of respondents

Place	Respondents
Metropolitan	17
Cities	12
Small town/Rural	1
Abroad (outside the country)	7
Not mentioned	28
Total	65

This observation indicates that ODL system has to adopt strategies to cater to the learners' residing/working in rural and backward regions. There were about two-third of them employed and only one-tenth was not working. About one-fourth of the respondents have not mentioned their employment status. As per the Table: 5, about 2/5 of them were in education as teachers (About 25%), lecturer (5%) and principal/vice-principal/educational trainer/trainer while one-fourth have not mentioned their type of employment. One-tenth of them were administrator/ professional category and only 2 were giving tuitions or running a play school.

Table: 5
Employment wise distribution of respondents

Category	Respondents
Employed*	40
Unemployed * *	8
Not responded	17
Total	65

* includes self-employment like giving tuitions

**includes full time students in higher education

The Table: 7 indicates that nearly four-fifth of the respondents were graduate and highly qualified (graduate (20%), PG (25%), B. Ed and other teacher training (20%), M. Phil /PhD (3%) only one respondent was with qualifications 10+2 while one-fifth of them had not mentioned their qualifications.

Table: 6
Type of Employment wise distribution of respondents

Type	Frequency
Teacher	15
Lecturer	4
Principal/Viceprincipal/educational trainer/trainer	6
Tuition/running a play school	2
Administrator/Professional	8
Not working	1
Not responded	29
Total	65

Note: teacher category includes teachers from pre-primary to senior-secondary and part time teachers also.

The e-mail responses were also analyzed qualitatively by content analysis. The open-ended responses were categorized and the responses were categorized under specific components based on the components commonly used in Open distance learning. The observations are:

Table: 7
Qualification wise distribution of respondents

Category	Respondents
High School & 10 +2	1
Graduation	14
Post Graduation	17
B.Ed/NTT/Dip.in Teaching **	12
M.Phil / PhD	2
Professional ***	6
Not mentioned	13
Total	65

** indicates the respondents with B.Ed. were graduates/ post-graduates also.

*** indicates the respondents were holding diploma, degree and even post-graduation in professional/ vocational areas, like B.Arch/B.Tech/ MS (IT), etc

Table: 8
Cross Tabulations of the Learner's responses

EMPLOYMENT TYPE							Total	EMPLOYMENT					Total
No Response	Industry	Professional	Teacher	Journalist	Housewife	No Response		Employed	Unemployed	Student	Self Employed		
14	-	1	5	-	-	20	13	6	-	-	1	20	
3	-	-	3	-	-	6	-	5	1	-	-	6	
1	2		9	1	1	14		11	2		1	14	
1	2	1	1	-	-	5	1	3	1	-	-	5	
1	-	-	1	-	-	2	1	1	-	-	-	2	
6		1	3	-	-	10	3	4	2	1	-	10	
1	1	1	-	-	-	3	-	2	1	-	-	3	
-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	
2	-	1	1	-	-	4	1	3	-	-	-	4	
29	5	5	24	1	1	65	19	36	7	1	2	65	

Table: 8 show that most of the queries were from those in the teaching profession. Programs of the school also generated interest from among persons from industry, persons having professional qualifications and even journalist also.

Most of the mailers were employed and having mail accounts of their own. However no relationship can be found between qualifications and email account.

But some pictures have evolved e.g. out of 14 postgraduate mailers 9 were teachers, 11 were employed and 10 were having their own mail id.

We have thus analyzed purpose of mail of the respondents. We collected data on 5 purposes of mail. Purpose of mail 4 & 5 were not presented in this case as they have 37 & 57 no-responses respectively.

Table: 9 shows that prospective learners mail the school for queries about Dates & Deadlines, Eligibility & Admission Procedures, Interest, Job Change, Recognition, Prospects, Counseling/Guidance, Better mode of Education/Good range of programs and Self Instructional Material. Most of these queries are pertaining to date and deadlines. But the important group of observations emerged from the other categories.

Table: 9
Cross Tabulations of the Learner's Purpose of mail and qualifications

	No Response	PG & B Ed.	PG	Graduation & B Ed.	Graduation & Diploma	Graduation	Diploma	Undergraduate	Profession	
of Mail 1	Dates & Deadlines	15	2	10	5	2	6	2	1	3
	Eligibility & Admission Procedures	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Interest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Job Change	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Recognition	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
	Prospects	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Counseling/ Guidance	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Better mode of Education / Good range of programs	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Self Instructional Material	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No Response	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	20	6	14	5	2	10	3	1	4	
of Mail 2	Dates & Deadlines	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Eligibility & Admission Procedures	12	3	8	5	2	5	1	1	3
	Interest	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	Job Change	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Recognition	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Prospects	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Counseling/ Guidance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Better mode of Education / Good range of programs	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	

	Self Instructional Material	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No Response	3	2	3	0	0	2	0	1
	Total	20	6	14	5	2	10	3	4
of Mail 3	Dates & Deadlines	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Eligibility & Admission Procedures	11	2	9	5	2	5	1	2
	Interest	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Job Change	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
	Recognition	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Prospects	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Counseling/ Guidance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Better mode of Education / Good range of programs	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
	Self Instructional Material	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No Response	7	2	4	0	0	4	1	1

An analysis depicts that the category "dates and deadlines" comprised of queries like administration dates and deadlines, when is the course going to start? , would like to know that when this course is going to start? etc. Category "eligibility and admission procedure" comprised of queries like eligibility criteria, admission procedure—where the forms are available, fees, etc., whether one can get the application at Regional Center through cash mode, Is on-line registration/studies possible or available?

Can I give both my University exams & IGNOU together, I am not in education profession, and will I be eligible for this course. Category "Interest" comprised of queries like keenness to study Child Development and more specifically the social-emotional development of children, Like to teach the primary section, Interested in this course, interested in the field of child/women's education, interested in the B. Ed course, but do not have the eligibility for B. Ed, Keen to do research in educational management. It generated interest from learners abroad also like "I am a psychologist & used to work in school in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Planning Programs for prevention of AIDS & Diseases to the students.

As a psychologist, I am interested in the Education area. I am interested in the PGDEMA course", "I hold a Teachers Diploma & a Bachelor in Educational studies from the University of Southern Queensland, Australia, also an HND in Computer Science from the British Computer society, UK. I have been working as a part-time teacher in an institution (taking management papers)" and "Presently Foreign expert teacher in a middle school in China". Category " job change" comprised of queries like due to personal problems on the home front could not continue practicing the nursing profession as it required me to work in shift duties, want to work as a counselor in a school, do not feel totally satisfied with the work I am doing at present and I have started thinking of making a career change, go into the field of education/training.

Category "recognition" comprised of queries like suggest me a government recognized correspondence course to allow me to continue job in government-aided schools as well as private schools and recognition status of the DE courses offered by IGNOU. Category "prospects" comprised of queries like how useful would this certificate course be for me, what is the future for me in this course after completion, not sure as to how I will make use of this course, never been employed in a government-aided school, Is CIG enough for me to get a job as a nursery teacher, plan to open a school, sure that this course will really help me

and being a teacher myself I can assure you that this step will contribute in a big way towards career educationists.

Category "counseling and guidance" comprised of queries like to establish as a counselor, please let me know if by doing CIG shall suffice for a school counselor or some other higher course is required, can you guide me as to how I can join a B.Ed or a Teachers Training Certificate or any other higher education program in the field of education, Can you suggest me some other course also that I can do through correspondence? Whether this course is also based on credit system and is there any following program help me to join B. Ed College. I can't understand the main objectives of these programs (PGDHE, MES, PGDET, PGDEMA).

Category "mode of education" comprised of queries like interested to appear in this examination as OU candidate, I find that my present work keeps me away from 8.00 am to 8.00 p. m. so wish to do the correspondence course, wish to go for higher studies through DE/up grade myself, to work in B. Ed college M. Ed is must so I am writing to join M. Ed or PhD program from IGNOU or any reputed university, Is IGNOU running any M. Ed or M.Ed equivalent program? And Am I eligible to join PhD Program (Ph-II) or PhD (Phase I) with my experience in education as computer lectures. Category "self instructional material" comprised of queries like is the material provided by IGNOU? And want to have some study material in Guidance counseling.

CONCLUSION

This paper tries to analyze the e-mail responses of the people who either by surfing IGNOU's website or from other sources came to know about the various programs of studies offered by the School of Education. As a coordinator of the two programs (i.e., Certificate in Guidance (CIG) and Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Management and Administration (PGDEMA), the researchers have analyzed these responses in the research perspectives, while replying to e-mail responses of prospective learners.

The study validates that there is an amount of hidden information even in the curiosity of the learners. The big question remains that whether we can derive many more models like this in order to learn lessons form the learners' data for the benefit of the learners.

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