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The Prevailing Library and Information Science Distance Education System in Northern Part of West Bengal, India: A SWOT Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The attributes and functional profile of the global education system have been changed a lot due to globalization. With the ever-increasing demands of higher education, the distance education system has emerged as a boon to the global academic system. This particular paper basically deals with the application of a strategic planning tool on the LIS distance learning system to evaluate the current situation of the system. This paper tries to represent the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of library and information science students who are pursuing their academic courses through distance mode. This situation analysis has been done through the SWOT analysis method. This particular study is confined to the northern region of West Bengal where more or less eight universities are conducting different Library and Information Science courses through distance mode. The paper elaborately discusses the positive and negative factors (internal and external) of the distance education system in North Bengal. By understanding the significance of those factors, decision-makers can build up a strategy to run the system effectively.

Keyword: North Bengal, Library and Information Science, Distance Learning System, SWOT analysis, Strategic Planning

1. Introduction:

Education of the mankind is the prime factor for the growth and development of any society. The extent of development between developing and developed countries varies because of difference in the degree of access to education (Mukherji and Tripathi, 2003). Now, in this recent time, the attributes and functional profile of global education system has been changed a lot due to the globalization and marketization of different educational services. The necessity for both traditional and non-traditional approach to education is largely felt in developing countries because these countries need to prepare their mammoth human resources and ensure their professional upliftment so that they could contribute to the overall development of the nation. In this situation, the distance education system has been emerged as a boon to global academic system. In all over the world, the distance education system has been accepted as a mode for providing lifelong education and independent and interactive educational access at all levels (Sacchanand, 1999).

In 2011, Library and Information Science or LIS education in India completed its centenary year. LIS education in India is currently passing through a turning point and has become a rapid developing subject with a multidisciplinary approach (Jain, Kaur & Babbar, 2007). On the other hand, the growth and expansion of distance education programmes have

generated huge interest among the students to pertain library and information education through distance mode. But, to get the optimum outcome from any particular system, the current situation of that particular system should be analysed (Chang, 2008). For this purpose, a strategic management tool, i.e. SWOT analysis method has been implemented to analyse the current situation of the Library and Information Science distance learning system.

2. SWOT analysis-a tool of strategic planning:

According to Steiner (1979) ‘the essence of formal strategic planning is the systematic identification of opportunities and threats that lie in the future, which in combination with other relevant data provide a basis for a system’s making better current decisions to exploit the opportunities and to avoid the threats’. Strategic planning became prominent in corporations during the 1960s and remains an important aspect of strategic management. Mintzberg and Quinn (1996) described a variety of analytical tools and techniques which are used in strategic planning. These were developed by companies and management consulting firms to help provide a framework for strategic planning. A strategic plan for any particular system gives us a scenario that where we are now, gives a framework for moving into the future and focus us on the key issues that will be faced by us in near future. Among these different tools SWOT analysis is certainly the most popular tool used in strategic planning. In the 1960’s and 70’s, Albert Humphrey have developed this strategic planning tool using data from the Fortune 500 companies at that time. This particular study basically identifies the **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats** of a system. Griffin (2008) defined SWOT analysis as “a careful evaluation of an organization’s internal strengths and weaknesses as well as its environmental opportunities and threats.” He also presented a basic outline of SWOT analysis (Figure 1).

Figure 1 also clearly shows the interdependence between each and every factor (i.e. strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of SWOT analysis. This interdependence helps any organization to achieve the end objectives. Harvard Business School (2006) defined these factors as:

- **Strengths** are capabilities that enable your company or unit to perform well.
- **Weaknesses** are characteristics that prohibit your company or unit from performing well.
- **Opportunities** are trends, forces, events, and ideas that your company or unit can capitalize on.
- **Threats** are possible events or forces outside of your control that your company or unit needs to plan for or decide how to mitigate.

Mission
An organization’s fundamental purpose

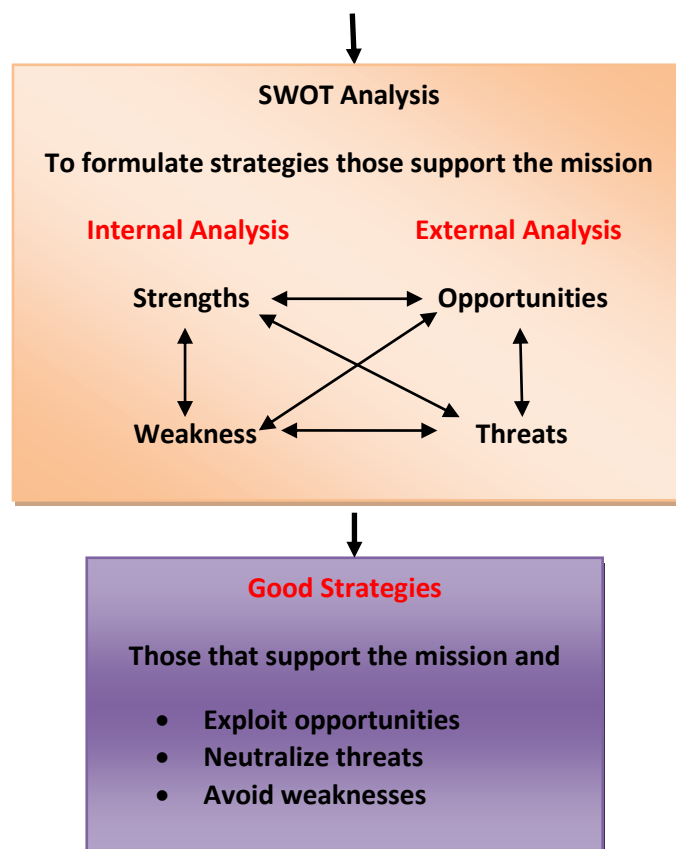


Figure 1. A framework of SWOT Analysis (Griffin, 2008, p. 67)

3. LIS distance education in North Bengal:

In the recent time, through the implementation of distance learning system, a classroom can reach to a wider audience to cater different educational programmes and services to off-campus sites, workplace, homes and remote villages. For developing countries, such as India, distance education, appears to be a promising approach in reducing educational divide. Also in the case of LIS distance education system, distance learning is the most useful and cost-effective means of enhancing or updating information and library skills and qualifications (Stoker, 1995). In India, the library and information science education through distance mode was introduced by University of Madras in 1982. Then, in the year 1985, Andhra Pradesh Open University (Now renamed as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University) initiated Bachelor in Library and Information (BLIS) course. In 1985, the inception of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) revolutionized the concept of distance learning system in India. It introduced BLIS programme in 1989 and later Master in Library and Information Science (MLIS), PGDLAN (Post-Graduate Diploma in Library Automation and Networking) and Ph.D. programmes. In West Bengal, Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) was established in the year 1997 and it also introduced BLIS and MLIS courses through distance mode.

Commonly the northern part of West Bengal is referred to as ‘North Bengal’. A report of the Planning Commission (2002) reflected that the North Bengal region is significantly lower than that rest of West Bengal in terms of proportion of relevant population age groups

attending educational institutions. So this report clearly shows that the distance learning system has a very significant role in context of the educational system of North Bengal. Another study by Yasmin (2011) showed that the very nature of the distance learning system that allows pursuing study without attending regular classes has helped it to become popular among students from remote places, employed individuals and among women students of North Bengal. Right now the LIS distance education students of this region are pursuing their academic courses (i.e. BLIS and MLIS) through eight universities. The list of those universities is presented through Table 1.

Table 1. Universities offering Distance Education in LIS in North Bengal

Sl. No.	STATE	NAME OF THE UNIVERSITY
1.	Karnataka	Karnataka State Open University
2.	Tamil Nadu	Annamalai University
3.	Tamil Nadu	Bharathidasan University
4.	Tamil Nadu	Madurai Kamraj University
5.	Tamil Nadu	Periyar University
6.	Tamil Nadu	Vinayaka Missions University
7.	New Delhi	Indira Gandhi National Open University
8.	West Bengal	Netaji Subhas Open University

4. Review of the literature:

Sacchanand (1995) carried out a study to understand the scenario of Library and Information Science distance education in Asia and the Pacific region. The study revealed that distance education in library and information science had grown rapidly to a wider audience in Asia and the Pacific region. Nimbalkar, Patil and Ingle (2004) applied the SWOT analysis method on the distance education system of Agriculture in India. The study showed that there were several micro and macro issues before distance education system in general and agriculture in particular in India, such as lack of adequate and qualified human resources, inadequate funds, poor incentives to hired faculty, poor interaction with students, quality of guidance etc. Mugadzaweta and Benza (1999) also implemented the SWOT analysis procedure to analysis the situation of distance learning system in Zimbabwe. The study showed that in spite of different limitations, distance education in Zimbabwe is poised for further and greater developments to meet the manpower needs. Another study by Komba (2009) applied the SWOT analysis method and the study indicated that the distance learning system of Tanzania had several opportunities and challenges. In the domain of LIS, Halder (2012) very efficiently applied the SWOT analysis method to identify the current situation of LIS distance education in India. His study basically covered the whole India. The study reported several strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the LIS distance learning system of India.

5. Methodology and Scope of the study:

The descriptive method is used in this study to determine the opinions of students and instructors in the distance education system. Descriptive research also takes into account the Description research, current events and conditions. From the students and the academic staffs, different types of relevant information were collected through informal interviews. The scope of the study was also confined to the LIS distance learning system of the northern region of West Bengal.

6. Result of SWOT Analysis:

According to Minnaar (2013) despite many good intentions, education institutions are still failing to recognise particular key planning and implementing steps which could make the difference in successful and sustainable distance education initiatives. For reducing this particular problem, a strategic plan should be prepared. SWOT analysis could be a prime tool to create a strategic plan. The analysis of the current situation of distance education system gives us the idea about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of the system. Both the internal (strength and weakness) and external factors (opportunity and threat) of the LIS distance learning system of North Bengal has been identified through the analysis. The results of the study are as followed:

6.1 Strengths:

The strengths of distance learning system of North Bengal are highlighted here:

- A large part of community is waiting for higher education, but they are not able to pursue the conventional courses due to different problems, such as person in-service, living in remote places, early marriage of the women community etc. Distance learning system gives them the opportunity to pursue their courses.
- Low course fee of the programmes enables the poor and tribal students to pursue their study.
- Decentralization of pre-admission counselling and also the admission procedure at regional centre and study centre level.
- Application of technology in providing online study materials, online admission and online result publication.
- Application of multimedia tools such as video technology to enhance the infrastructure of distance learning system.
- Essential study materials prepared by the renowned subject experts.
- Decentralization in conducting the examinations.
- Mandatory provision of assignment submission.
- Interaction with the mature students (employed and experienced) helps the beginners to acquire the knowledge of practical working field.
- Use of highly qualified and experienced employees as specialists tutor on part time basis.

6.2 Weaknesses:

The weaknesses of distance learning system of North Bengal are highlighted here:

- Financial problem is the major problem of distance learning system. The funding is very poor to build the infrastructure for professional subject like LIS.
- Online course material facility is only available by IGNOU. Others dispatch the study materials through post which sometimes leads to delay.
- The facility of teacher student interaction in distance learning system is inadequate.
- Contents of study materials are not revised and updated regularly.
- Lack of adequate infrastructure of practical based LIS education. Students rarely use or even do not able to see classification schemes, cataloguing manuals etc. during their course.
- Inadequate library resources, teaching equipment and Information Technology.
- Each course takes excessive time for completion.
- Poor communication for supplementary examination arrangements.
- No provision of taking feedback from the students regarding the course infrastructure.

6.3 Opportunities:

The opportunities of distance learning system of North Bengal are mentioned here:

- Distance learning system can mitigate the problem regarding increasing demand of skilled library professionals.
- Application of web technology in building learner friendly websites for giving online pre-admission counselling.
- Implementation of online system by all the universities for online admission, online study material, online assignment submission, online examination form, online deposit of course fee and examination fee, online publication of result etc.
- Interaction between the students and the core faculty members through online mode.
- Provision for the online feedback from the students.
- Opportunity to enrol the youth who are not absorbed in conventional LIS education system.
- Application of network technology for building a consortium, especially for the institutes of distance learning system.
- Introducing several new curricular on the backdrop of globalization.

6.4 Threats:

The threats of distance learning system of North Bengal are discussed here:

- No clear-cut demarcation of powers among the distance education controlling agencies in India.
- Most of the policies adopted by distance learning system are prepared by the people who do not have any background in this area.
- In academic decision making the participation of teachers from distance education is very negligible.
- Distance education is rarely projected as a full fledged branch of knowledge.
- Lack of hands-on practice threatens the future of the students of distance learning system.
- Due to the notification of UGC, except IGNOU, no other universities can run the research programmes like M.Phil or Ph.D.
- Large number of dropouts without completing their course.
- Establishment of non-grant LIS schools.

7. Conclusion:

Distance learning system is very valuable, accessible, low cost educational prospect for those, out of conventional learning system. There are a number of micro and macro issues before distance education system in LIS in India. We have to convert the threats to opportunities by formulating proper initiatives. Adequate and timely implementation of strategic management policy in distance learning system of LIS would help in taking the learning environment to the people and making them aware of the opportunities for overall sustainable intellectual escalation and expansion.

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