



Critical evaluation of learner perspectives on open and distance learning in accordance with NEP 2020

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Abstract

In the wake of the modern era, characterized by rapid technological advancements and evolving educational landscapes, the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 stands as a guiding beacon, shaping the trajectory of open and distance learning (ODL). This research delves into the nuanced perspectives of learners within the scope of ODL, seeking to shed light on their experiences, difficulties, and ambitions in line with the ambitious objectives of the NEP 2020. The primary aim of this research is to assess the learner perspectives on ODL in the context of the NEP 2020, unraveling insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of accessibility, pedagogical effectiveness, technological integration, and policy alignment. The study follows a quantitative design utilizing a survey method to collect data. Convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling was used to collect data from the sample. A researcher-administered questionnaire was constructed through focus group discussion and validation from three external experts. Statistical analysis techniques were used on for the analysis of data. Key dimensions of equity and quality are examined, including access to resources, support mechanisms, instructional effectiveness, and overall satisfaction with the learning environment. The major findings of this research offer valuable empirical evidence regarding the current landscape of ODL within the purview of the NEP 2020 of accessible learning materials, responsive support services, effective communication channels, and technological infrastructure in promoting equitable and high-quality learning experiences in ODL. Additionally, the study underscores the significance of learner engagement and empowerment in enhancing educational outcomes and fostering a sense of inclusivity within ODL environments. In conclusion, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on equity and quality in ODL by providing empirical evidence and actionable recommendations derived from quantitative analysis of learner perspectives.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, equity, quality, learner perspectives, national education policy 2020, educational technology

Introduction

The landscape of education is undergoing a profound transformation in the modern era, fuelled by rapid technological advancements, evolving pedagogical paradigms, and shifting societal demands. Traditional educational paradigms are experiencing challenge in this changing environment, which is resulting in the emergence of creative solutions that are not limited by time or location. Open and distance learning (ODL) is one such strategy that has gained popularity recently. ODL uses digital technology to distribute educational information and facilitate learning experiences outside of traditional classrooms.

The basic concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is accessibility, which gives students the freedom to continue their education at their own convenience and pace regardless of time or location restrictions. In a nation as diverse and different as India, where millions of students are denied access to formal education because of a range of socioeconomic issues, this flexibility is especially important. Recognizing the potential of ODL to address these challenges and democratize access to education, the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 has articulated a vision for the integration and expansion of ODL across the educational spectrum.

The NEP 2020 serves as a guiding beacon, charting the course for the future of education in India and laying the foundation for a holistic and inclusive learning ecosystem. Within this context, understanding learner perspectives on ODL becomes imperative, as it provides valuable insights into the effectiveness, relevance, and impact of ODL

initiatives Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can better grasp the complexity of ODL and design interventions to suit the different needs of learners by learning about the experiences, goals, and difficulties faced by students participating in ODL programs. In addition, NEP 2020 emphasizes the necessity of addressing fairness, quality, and relevance in ODL to guarantee that all students have access to exceptional learning opportunities that will equip them for success in a world emerging more interconnected by each passing day.

This research aims to contribute to this evolving discourse by examining learner perspectives on ODL in the context of NEP 2020. By unravelling insights into accessibility, pedagogical effectiveness, technological integration, and policy alignment, this study seeks to inform policy, practice, and future research in the field of ODL. Though the research endeavours to capture the voices of learners and amplify their experiences, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

Through this research, we hope to illuminate the road from policy formation to concrete impact on the education system, offering suggestions that have the potential to elevate Online Distance Learning in our education System.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness, accessibility, inclusivity, and alignment with educational principles, including NEP 2020, of the online distance learning (ODL) program through multifaceted data collection encompassing course material

accessibility, academic support, instructional methods, technology integration, assessment accommodation, transferability assessment, support for diverse backgrounds and abilities, promotion of cultural competency, peer support opportunities, progress tracking, and achievement of intended learning outcomes and competencies.

Review of related literature

Amriullah (2023) [2] examined the transformative impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the COVID-19 pandemic on education, emphasizing the New National Education Policy-2020. Highlighted are its provisions for inclusive learning, language accessibility, and enhanced education management. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and ICT are lauded for promoting equity, access, and quality in education, enabling anytime, anywhere learning. The study underscores the NEP-2020's role in fostering an Aatmanirbhar Bharat through robust ICT integration, promising a brighter future for students.

Kumar (2022) [7] delved into the emergence of digital education, tracing its roots to recent decades. As digitalization permeates educational systems, significant transformations are underway, offering resilience against pandemics like Covid-19. Enabled by internet and electronic media, online learning platforms including MOOCs, YouTube, and social media are proliferating. Kumar's paper examines digital education in India, exploring its objectives, perspectives, and challenges, particularly in alignment with NEP-2020, highlighting paradigm shifts and ensuing issues.

Aisha & Ratra (2020) [1] examined into the evolution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in India, particularly its integration of technology and shift towards blended learning. They emphasize the significance of technology in enhancing educational quality and outreach, especially in the context of the country's National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020. Through document analysis, the study explores how ODL has progressed, identifying blended learning as a vital mode for teaching in the 21st century. The paper also examines the impact of various factors, including technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic, on promoting blended learning in Indian higher education institutions.

Rao & Lakshmi (2023) [9] proposed that the Higher education is pivotal for human development and self-actualization. However, many, particularly those with disabilities, face barriers due to limited capacity. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims for inclusive access, with Open and Distance Learning (ODL) emerging as a solution. ODL accommodates millions, fostering accessibility and quality. It fosters manpower development and literacy, offering learners flexibility. Yet, despite its benefits, individuals with disabilities remain marginalized. Integrating them into ODL requires tailored facilities and curriculum, ensuring equitable education in India.

Karmakar (2021) [6] observed that the NEP 2020 emphasizes interdisciplinary research and innovation in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), aligning with India's transition to a digitally empowered society through initiatives like the 'Digital India Campaign'. It stresses the bidirectional relationship between technology and education, advocating for the professionalization and global competitiveness of sectors like agriculture, law, and healthcare. With pillars of access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability, NEP 2020 targets a 50% higher education enrollment ratio by 2035. This paper

reviews NEP 2020's emphasis on professional education opportunities and the feasibility of digital education, highlighting clarity on goals but uncertainty on implementation and timeline.

Farley & Burbules (2022) [3] highlighted the potential of educational technologies to broaden access to quality education. However, this potential remains largely unfulfilled, as evidenced by Protopsaltis and Baum (2019). While technology can mitigate certain barriers, it can also exacerbate inequalities. This meta-synthesis reviews current research, identifying structural and instructional obstacles. It suggests research-backed best practices for online course design and instruction to enhance student satisfaction and success.

Gosh *et al.* (2012) [4] explored the evolution and impact of open learning and distance education. Emphasizing freedom from temporal and spatial constraints, the authors noted its rapid growth, driven by internet technologies like the World Wide Web. They traced the historical roots of distance education back to the late 1800s and highlighted its modern adaptation in radio, television, and teleconferencing. The paper aimed to engage diverse stakeholders—governments, NGOs, corporations—in addressing contemporary educational needs through flexible learning approaches. The comprehensive review outlined current trends, challenges, and policy considerations, offering insights into the dynamic landscape of open and distance learning.

Methodology

The study follows a quantitative design utilizing a survey method to collect data from Undergraduates and postgraduates from diversified geographical regions and college types. Convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling was used to collect data from the sample. Internet survey was used to collect data, researcher-administered questionnaire was constructed through focus group discussion and validation from three external experts. Descriptive analysis techniques were used on collected data and reflected in tabular and graphical forms.

Results and discussion

The total number of responses received from the survey was 67, the demographic details of the sample can be seen in Table 1 encompassing their geographical region (Urban/Rural), gender (Female/Male), institution type (Government/Private).

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Sample

	Government	Private	Grand Total
Rural	18	12	30
Female	10	4	14
Male	8	8	16
Urban	20	17	37
Female	10	10	20
Male	10	7	17
Grand Total	38	29	67

Table 1 depicts the analysis and inter-categorical distribution of the sample's demographic details, in which there were 38 (56.71%), and 29 (43.29%) responses received from students in government and private institutions respectively. Similarly, 30 (44.77%) and 37 (55.22%) responses were received from Rural and Urban geographical regions respectively. Followed by, 34 (50.7%) were females and 33 (49.3%) were males.

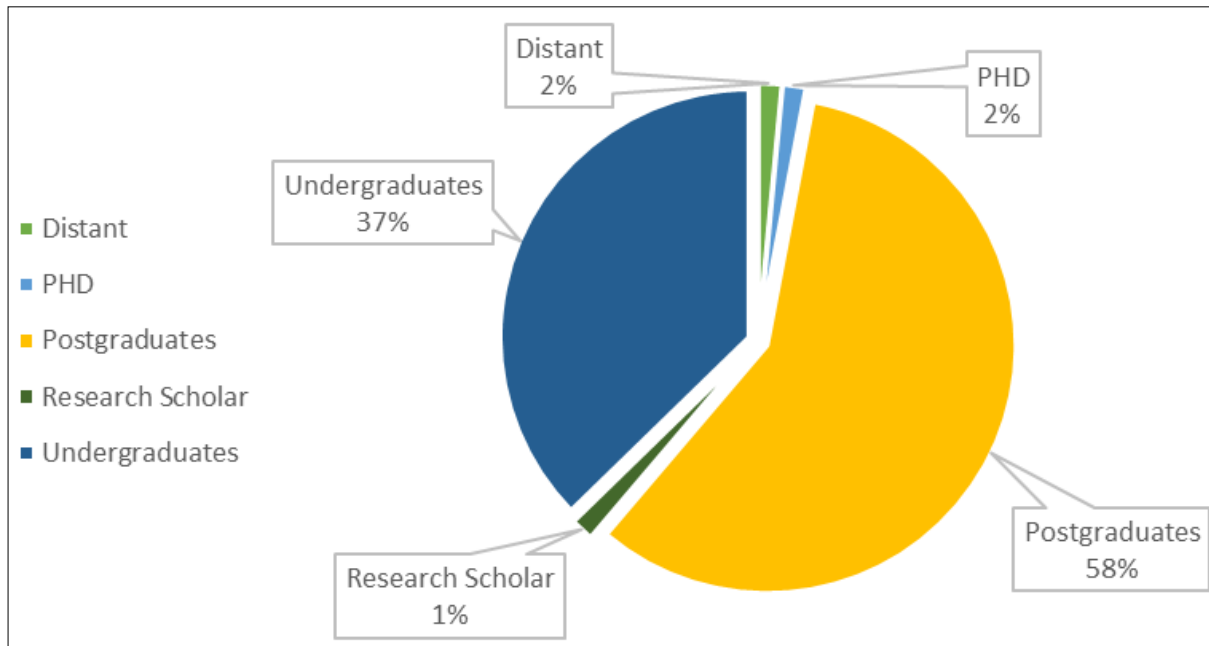


Fig 1: Type of Programs of the sample

As can be seen in Figure 1, it indicates the type of programs of the sample, 58% responses were from Postgraduates, 37% from undergraduates, 2% each from PhD and distant and remaining 1% response of research scholar.

Table 2: Samples’ reflections upon ODL components

SN	Components	Percentage		
		Yes	No	Maybe
1	Instructional Method Support Effectiveness Assessment	85%	13%	2%
2	Academic Support Accessibility Inquiry	72%	25%	3%
3	Technology Comfort Evaluation	94%	6%	-
4	Technical Difficulty Experience	46%	54%	-
5	Diverse Learner Needs Evaluation	76%	13%	11%
6	Assessment Method Diversity Review	67%	18%	15%
7	Accessibility for Disabled Learners Inquiry	66%	27%	7%
8	Cultural Competency Promotion Review	81%	15%	4%

Table 2 depicts the samples’ reflection upon ODL components, in which that 85% of Learners claimed that in ODL instructional methods support effectively in assessment of their learning goals and objectives. Followed by 13 % of learners claimed that instructional method does not effectively support in their learning. And the rest 2% sample were not sure regarding this. Furthermore, 72% of Learners believe that academic support resources such as libraries, databases, and research assistance are accessible in their ODL program. Followed by 25% of learners believe that No support were provided in their ODL program and the rest 3% sample were not sure regarding this.

The table 2 also presents that, 94% of Learners claimed that they were comfortable with using technology tools and platform provided in their ODL program. Followed by 6% of learners claimed that they were not comfortable with using technology tools and platform provided in their ODL program. Additionally, 54% of Learners believe that they face technical difficulties while engaging in online learning activities. Followed by 46% of learners claimed that they does not face any technical difficulties while engaging in online learning activities.

As can be seen from table 2 that 76% of Learners believes

that ODL program caters to the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds and their abilities. Followed by 14% of learners believe that ODL program does not caters to the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds, and their abilities. Rest 10% were not sure regarding this. Furthermore, 67% of Learners claimed that the assessment methods used in their ODL program accommodate the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of learners. Followed by 18 % of learners does not believe in this and the rest sample were not sure regarding this.

Table 2 also depicts that 66% of Learners believes that the learning materials and resources accessible for learners with visual impairments or other disabilities. Followed by 27% of learners believe that learning materials and resources are not accessible for learners with visual impairments or other disabilities. Rest 7% were not sure regarding this. Additionally, 81% of Learners claimed ODL program effectively promote cultural competency and awareness among learners and instructors. Followed by 15% of learners claimed that ODL program does not effectively promote cultural competency and awareness among learners and instructors and the rest 4% sample were not sure regarding this.

Table 3: ODL access and assessment

Code	Elements	Percentage
E1: Course Material Accessibility Tracking		
A	Gather feedback from learners regarding accessibility	65.7%
B	Analyze usage statistics of course materials across different devices	35.8%
C	Review compliance reports or certifications related to accessibility	32.8%
D	Collaborate with accessibility experts or consultants for assessment	40.3%
E	Conduct accessibility audits or evaluations	7.5%
E2: Access Challenge Coping Strategies		
A	Seek additional resources	50.7%
B	Collaborate with colleagues	59.7%
C	Modify teaching methods	41.8%
D	Seek administrative support	23.9%
E	Other reason if any	1.5%
E3: NEP 2020 Reflection Assessment		
A	Regular self-assessment/reflection	64.2%
B	Refers to Peer feedback and discussion	55.2%
C	Direct evaluation by instructors/tutors	25.4%
D	Use of assessment rubrics	38.8%
E	Refers Review of course materials and activities for alignment with NEP 2020 principles	41.8%

As can be seen from Table 3, E1: Course Material Accessibility Tracking, in which A refers to Gather feedback from learners regarding accessibility, B refers to Analyze usage statistics of course materials across different devices, C refers to Review compliance reports or certifications related to accessibility, D refers to Collaborate with accessibility experts or consultants for assessment and E refers to the Conduct accessibility audits or evaluations. 65% of learners track their accessibility of course material through gathering feedback from learners, 40.3% shows that they prefer to Collaborate with accessibility experts or consultants for assessment, 35.8%, 32.8%, 7.5% respectively shows Analyze usage statistics of course materials across different devices, Review compliance reports or certifications related to accessibility, Conduct accessibility audits or evaluations.

For E2: Access Challenge Coping Strategies, A refers to Seek additional resources, B refers to - Collaborate with colleagues, C refers to Modify teaching methods, D refers to Seek administrative support and E refers to the other reason if any. The table presents the possible ways to overcome the challenges and hurdles faced by learners in accessing, in which majority 59.7% believe that by collaborating with colleagues will help in coping with these challenges, 50.7%

believe that by seeking to additional resource can assist in overcoming these challenges, 41.8% believe that by modifying teaching material will help them in overcoming these challenges, 23.9% claim that by seeking administrative support they can cope with these challenges. Rest 1.5 % choose other option without specifying any reason.

Lastly for E3: NEP 2020 Reflection Assessment, A- refers to Regular self-assessment/reflection, B- refers to Peer feedback and discussion, C- refers to Direct evaluation by instructors/tutors, D- refers to Use of assessment rubrics or criteria provided by the program and E- refers Review of course materials and activities for alignment with NEP 2020 principles. It indicates the 64.2% learners believe in regular self-assessment/reflection for assessing the NEP 2020 principles, such as flexible learning pathways and educational innovation, are reflected in your ODL experience, 55.2% believe that peer feedback and discussion helps in assessing the NEP 2020 principles, 41.8% believe that by Review of course materials and activities for alignment with NEP 2020 principles it could be assessed regularly, 38.8% claim that by Use of assessment rubrics or criteria provided by the program can help in measuring, and Rest 25.4 % chose direct evaluation by instructors.

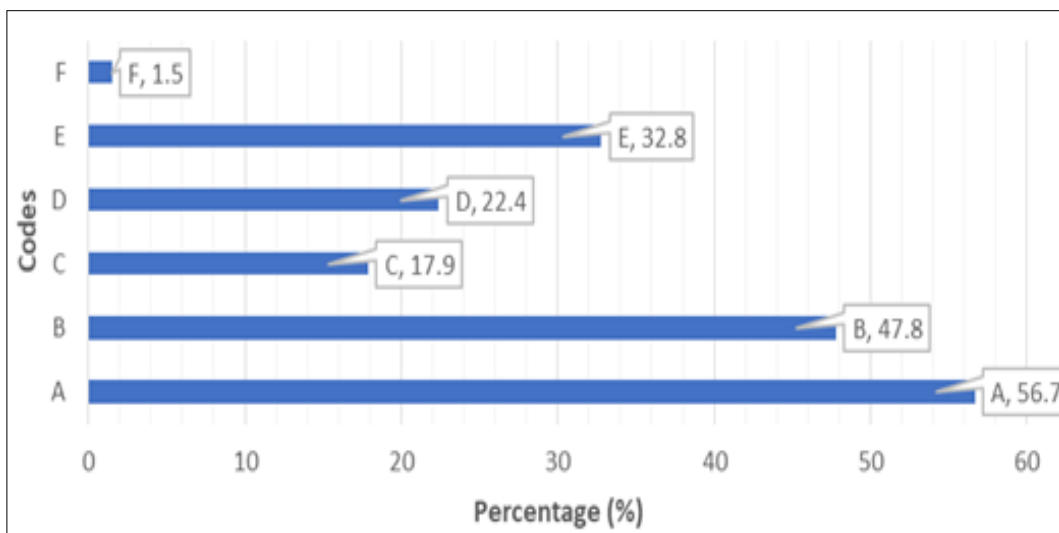


Fig 2: Transferability assessment methods

Figure 2 Presents that assessing the transferability of the knowledge and skills gained through your ODL courses to real-world contexts or professional settings in which A- refers to Regular self-assessment/reflection, B- refers to Participation in practical projects or internships related to course content, C- refers to Seeking feedback from supervisors or mentors in professional settings, D- refers to Utilizing acquired skills in work-related tasks or projects, E- refers to Engaging in discussions or collaborations with professionals in the field and F- refers to Not actively assessing transferability.

The figure indicates that 56% learners believe in regular self-assessment/reflection for assessing the transferability of the knowledge and skills gained through your ODL courses

to real-world contexts or professional settings, Followed by 47.8% learners believe that Participation in practical projects or internships related to course content could assess the transferability of the knowledge and skills gained through your ODL courses to real-world contexts or professional settings, 32.8% believe that by Engaging in discussions or collaborations with professionals in the field it could be achieved, 22.4% claimed that by Utilizing acquired skills in work-related tasks or projects help in measuring the transferability and skill gained through ODL ,followed by 17.9% learners claimed that Seeking feedback from supervisors or mentors in professional settings could help in achieving intended progress and rest 1.5% chose Not actively assessing transferability option.

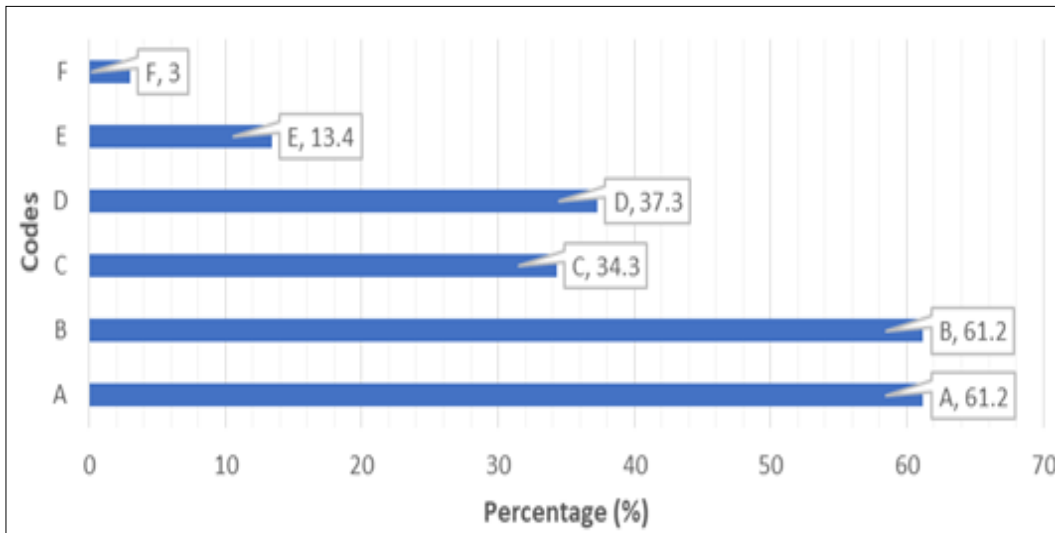


Fig 3: Learning outcome achievement evaluation

Figure 3 Presents that achievement of the intended learning outcomes and objectives of learners in which A- refers to Regular self-assessment/reflection, B- refers to Personal reflection and goal setting, C- refers to Tracking software/tools provided by the program, D- refers to Peer feedback and evaluation, E- refers to Instructor feedback and evaluation and F- refers to Not actively tracking.

The figure indicates that 61.2% learners believe in regular self-assessment/reflection achievement of the intended

learning outcomes and objectives,61.2% believe that Personal reflection and goal setting helpful in achieving the intended learning outcome, 37.3% believe that by Peer feedback and evaluation,34.3% claimed that by Use of Tracking software/tools provided by the program help in measuring, followed by 13.4% learners claimed that instructor feedback help in achieving intended learning outcome and rest 3% chose not actively tracking option.

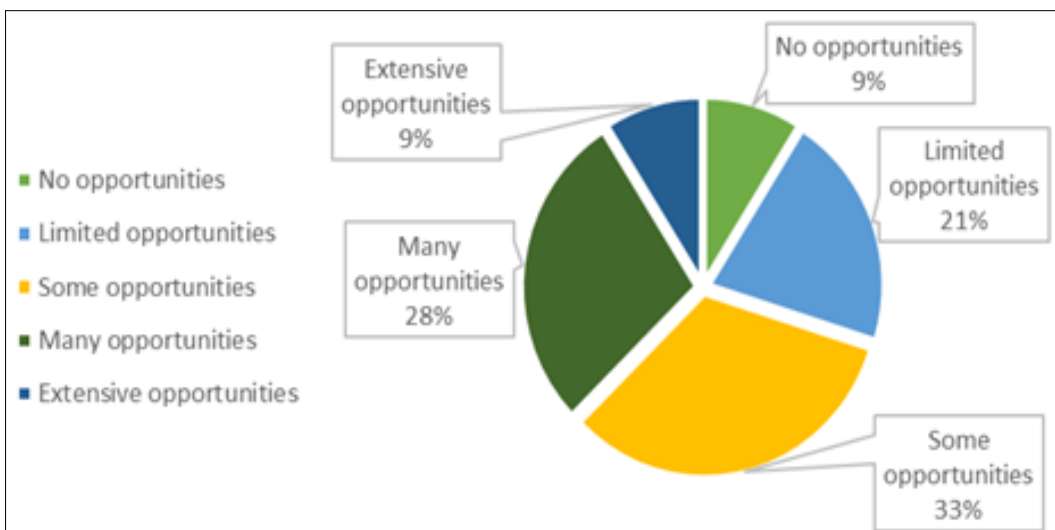


Fig 4: Peer support availability inquiry

Figure 4 depicts that for peer-to-peer support or study groups in their ODL program, 33% learners believe that there are some opportunities for peer-to-peer support or study groups in ODL program, 28% learners believe that there are many opportunities for peer-to-peer support or

study groups in ODL program, 21% believes that there are limited opportunities and 9% believe that there are extensive opportunities in this and 9% believe that there are no opportunities.

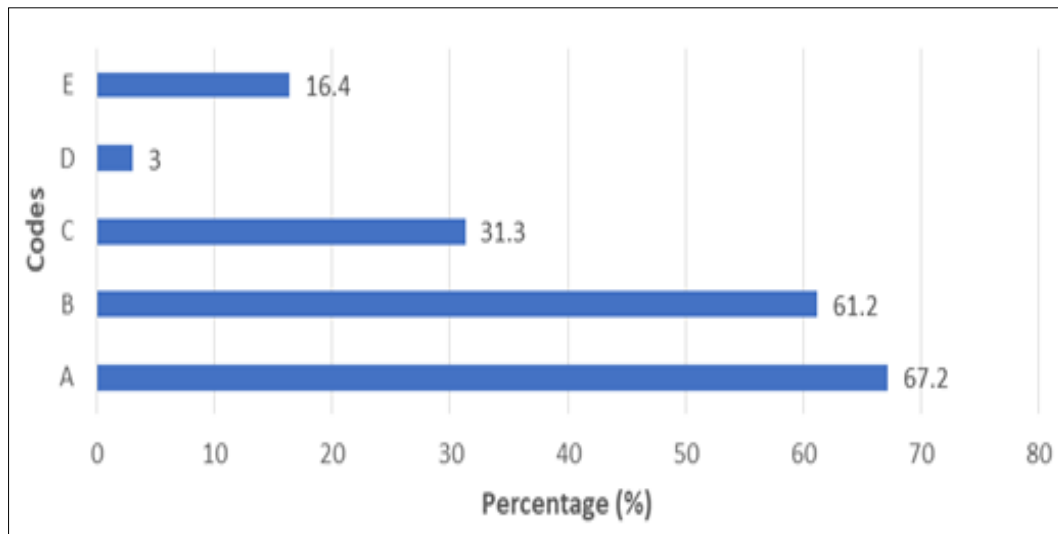


Fig 5: Progress tracking methods evaluation

Figure 5 depicts, that A- refers to Regular self-assessment/reflection, B- refers to Personal reflection and goal setting, C- refers to tracking software/tools provided by the program, D- refers to not actively tracking and E- refers to peer feedback and evaluation. The figure indicates that 67.2% learners believe in regular self-assessment/reflection for assessing their progress and development towards achieving the learning outcomes and competencies outlined in their ODL program ,61.2% believe that Personal reflection helps in assessing the progress, 31.3% believe that by Tracking software/tools provided by the program this could be achieved, 16.4% claimed that by peer feedbacks their progress and development towards achieving the learning outcomes and competencies outlined in their ODL program could be assessed, and Rest 3% chose not actively tracking option.

Conclusion

The findings of this research underscore the pivotal role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in shaping the landscape of education, particularly in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. As the educational domain witness significant transformations driven by technological advancements and changing societal needs, ODL emerges as a promising strategy to address challenges related to accessibility, inclusivity, and quality in education. One of the key insights revealed by the research is the widespread recognition among learners of the accessibility and effectiveness of ODL programs in meeting their educational needs. The flexibility offered by ODL, allowing learners to pursue education at their own pace and convenience, is particularly valued in a diverse country like India, where traditional barriers to education persist. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of aligning ODL practices with the principles outlined in NEP 2020, such as equity, inclusivity, and innovation. Learners perceive ODL programs as instrumental in promoting cultural competency, fostering peer support networks, and

providing opportunities for practical application of knowledge in real-world settings.

Despite the positive aspects identified, the research also brings attention to areas that require further attention and improvement. Challenges related to technological barriers, accessibility of resources for learners with disabilities, and the need for more extensive peer support opportunities are areas that warrant additional consideration and intervention. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on ODL by providing empirical evidence and insights into learner perspectives within the context of NEP 2020. By understanding the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of learners, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can better tailor ODL programs to meet the diverse needs of learners and ensure equitable access to quality education for all. Moving forward, it is imperative to continue refining and strengthening ODL initiatives to realize the vision of NEP 2020 and create a more inclusive and empowering educational ecosystem in India.

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