

# LEARNING BEYOND BOUNDARY: THE QUEST OF A GLOBAL RESEARCHER

**Gomata Varanasi**

*Researcher, Bangalore, India*  
gvaranasi@ieee.org

## **Abstract**

Exploding information super highway is invigorating distance education internationally. Particularly, the advances in multimedia technologies are ameliorating the ambience of the classroom mode and also enhancing interactive surroundings for the global community. In the middle of this progress, the additional career demands of specific student sections springing up should be gratified. Although the scope of the education and the access to various institutions is improving, the options and opportunities to facilitate research studies are still very limited, particularly in the areas of science, engineering, medicine, etc. Added flexibility of courses, evolving a combinatory culture across various participating universities and increased infrastructure are crucial to boost the gamut. This will open possibilities to encourage the enthusiastic students to accomplish their dreams, irrespective of their age, gender or any unavoidable circumstances.

The author's invaluable association with the Stanford Center for Professional Development (SCPD) as a student and the experience gained thereby has been helpful to identify certain issues. This paper highlights the motivation for advanced distance education programs in order to overcome the challenges faced by certain research students, particularly women. In essence, it hopes for an elevated global learning environment rendered to quench the quest of a global research student.

## **Introduction**

### **Background**

Latest innovations in technology, along with the changing socio-economic-cultural scenario are propelling the panorama of **distance education (DE)** to new vistas all around the globe (Harshananda, 1998). Particularly, the advances in multimedia technologies are ameliorating the emulation of a classroom ambience (Verma, 2005). These are enhancing the interactive surroundings for the seekers. In the middle of this progress, the additional career demands of specific student communities pursuing research careers should also be gratified. To better their prospects, a careful review of the various influencing factors is articulated in the following sections.

### **Learning in Modern times**

In the modern times to pursue distance education in a supranational manner may be motivated by two prime reasons which are as follows:

#### **Expansion of the world**

Rapid changes are happening worldwide on various fronts including living style, economic growth, cultural mutations, technological advances etc.

#### ***Convergence of Technologies***

Various technologies are being integrated dawning a new era of science and technology. As an example, textiles engineering is being combined with computer engineering and health sciences to the enchanting field of "wearable computing" (Ross, 2005). The shift of paradigm and merger is posing additional demands on the skill set that is required by the professionals to cater to the

fields. From established traditional education systems it is welcoming the generations to a “renaissance of the present education system”, particularly the thrust is on distance education. .

### ***Renaissance Professionals***

The present avatar of the renaissance professional (Mahadevan, 2005) should be; bold and broad minded, open to inter continental travel (Albuquerque, 2001) if necessary even to space, with good interaction and communication skills to multicultural, multi-lingual co-workers, flexible to jobs and requirements, embracing more of a goal oriented objective approach to tasks in a spiritual manner without a compromise to his/her roots and culture. To avoid the cultural chaos through this metamorphosis, keeping up the basic values and integrity is very crucial. This is to protect the local interests of the self, family, country and beyond. Distance Education (DE) in this process has a significant place for the professional to carry on the learning process while caring for their immediate requirements with a perfect work-life balance.

### ***Social –Economic Growth***

Changing social circumstances, increasing economy are promoting the natural curiosity to learn the subjects that improve the quality of the citizen’s economic, social and spiritual lives, living standards and offer protection from exploitation to participate in social change in a confident mode. DE has the power to facilitate this luxurious learning.

### **Barriers to Progress**

Not only progress but also, the constraints that lie to forge ahead with the tide catalyze learning (Shankaracharya, 1996).

Following are some of the aspects that have not seen much change with time. These cause hesitation to readily participate in schools.

- Personality problems in adults
- Social issues and crisis situations
- Rural reluctance and language barriers

In essence, like in any other field both hurdles as well as progress can nurture the urge to search for more faculties to evolve.

## **Women and Distance Education**

### **Researching Women**

Research needs to be understood by many particularly in developing countries as an aptitude and it need not necessarily remain as a means to earn. Women particularly in India from times immemorial had been intellectual seekers (Harshananda, 1998). We see several references to this in our scriptures. Invasions to the countries temporarily halted this learning process, defined them with certain traditional roles and confined them to family for security reasons. Times have changed and women yet again are into society as workingwomen trying to liberate them selves particularly against any forced suppression they faced. Currently they are also elevating themselves beyond working just for financial needs to a level of mental plane.

The proximity of DE to a woman at higher levels of research cannot be undermined while they indirectly hold the staff of a flourishing family and society. Hence it is important that some of the intellectually oriented woman pursue their inquisitive studies to keep all happy around them.

### **Sensitive and Responsible Seeking Spirit**

The role of women is well defined in most of the countries by their social surroundings and is less likely to change in a deeper sense. Also naturally a woman wishes to grow causing less conflict to these fundamental responsibilities and moulds her self and her interests after satisfying the needs of the family provided there is faith, psychological, moral support from the prime family members. This is an inbuilt feature into her dynamics. Women students perform well with financial self-sufficiency provided there is encouragement.

### **Realistic Scenario: Amending Attitudes**

To foster the spirit of a woman to her choicest interests is increasingly needed with a broad understanding of the realistic scenario (<http://scpd.stanford.edu>).

- The role of a woman is significant always as a daughter, wife, mother trying to better her surroundings and society
- Lack of jobs due to unemployment, layoffs etc. are forcing woman to work for survival
- They share the responsibility to meet with the required living standards
- Sudden calamities keep her ready to face life with more strength, than to prepare her while the difficulty pounces (Kanwar and Taplin, 2001).

DE no doubt can offer a solution without compromising too much on her family also without deviating herself too much from her traditional roles.

### **Present Status**

DE definitely is a solution in all the above cases. But state-of-art perception that it is a cost effective, pliable by location, flexible by timing of completion is true only at the basic education levels of certificate, diploma and degree level courses.

With a closer look, we clearly notice that DE is lagging at higher education levels. The academic curriculum and education standards are not on par with the rate of change at which the world is booming.

### **Advanced Studies**

Along with the rise in the living standards the intellectual yearning of the individuals towards higher education is getting prominent.

Increasing number of people are aspiring doctoral level studies worldwide.

## **Means of Global Research and Learning: Limitations and Improvements**

### **Courses and Curriculum**

Universities have limited DE Programs at an advanced study level.

**Deficiency of engineering, science as well as medicine courses is very obvious at the research level.** Selected number of these courses in certain disciplines is available only up to Master's level at some of the prestigious institutions too.

While a research degree is time-consuming, the students can obtain the most effective results in this, while they are in the proximity to their emotional/personal interests. This is more pronounced for women as described in the earlier sections.

## **Inter Disciplinary Subjects**

The curriculum offered by a university usually prescribes to a confined set of subjects. The scope for research, if the student is interested in multiple subjects is restricted. The student is not left with much option but to pursue what is available. This is particularly true when it is a multidisciplinary area.

## **People on Career Change or Break**

Presently DE is available more to people in work as a professional improvement program. What about the people who are not in-service?

### ***Laid Off From Jobs***

Changing economic scenario is forcing many people out of jobs. This unexpected break time perhaps is the best time for them to constructively focus and improve their skills without feeling the loss of time imposed by the uncontrollable situations.

### ***On Recovery Ramp***

While the people are on change of jobs or on a recovery ramp from unmanageable situations, DE offered at affordable fees will be a major confidence booster particularly to nurture them back to strength.

### ***Professional Change***

It can even be as an intellectual hobby for a man/woman who is towards professional change into academics from any other profession. It can be useful for a woman who could be a prosperous mother, who will educate many children and family.

Children, who have creative and intellectual mothers, fare better in life compared to idle mothers as long as there is care for the family.

## **Mix and match of courses**

To mix and match courses from different disciplines and universities is prime necessity in research studies based on the thesis that is required for the specific work. This need is more pronounced while technologies are converging and renaissance modes are setting in universally.

### ***Recognition of Previous Learning***

Recognition of courses completed at other prestigious institutions is required at the advanced level. At the same time, opening up of the universities to become versatile is the need of the hour.

## **Standardization**

While the symptoms hint at this point pervasion of global universities, the necessity to standardize the fees, course structure, language requirements, efficiency of faculty etc, across the various institutions remains in limelight for the betterment of all. The provisions of the universities have to be flexed as required.

## Access to the Means

**Investment and planning** based on the suggestions mentioned above in DE at the research level are imperative and important. The government as well as the education funding agencies should accordingly support this.

Minimal **residential requirements** to complete courses can be organized if necessary. In this technological age it may be possible to carry on a lot of activities through video conferencing and remote participation.

**Faculty should be trained** sufficiently well to manage the programs. They should be in a position not to discourage the students with stringent logistics but to encourage the research bent of mind in the student, advising them to choose the correct topics that can fit in a DE mode.

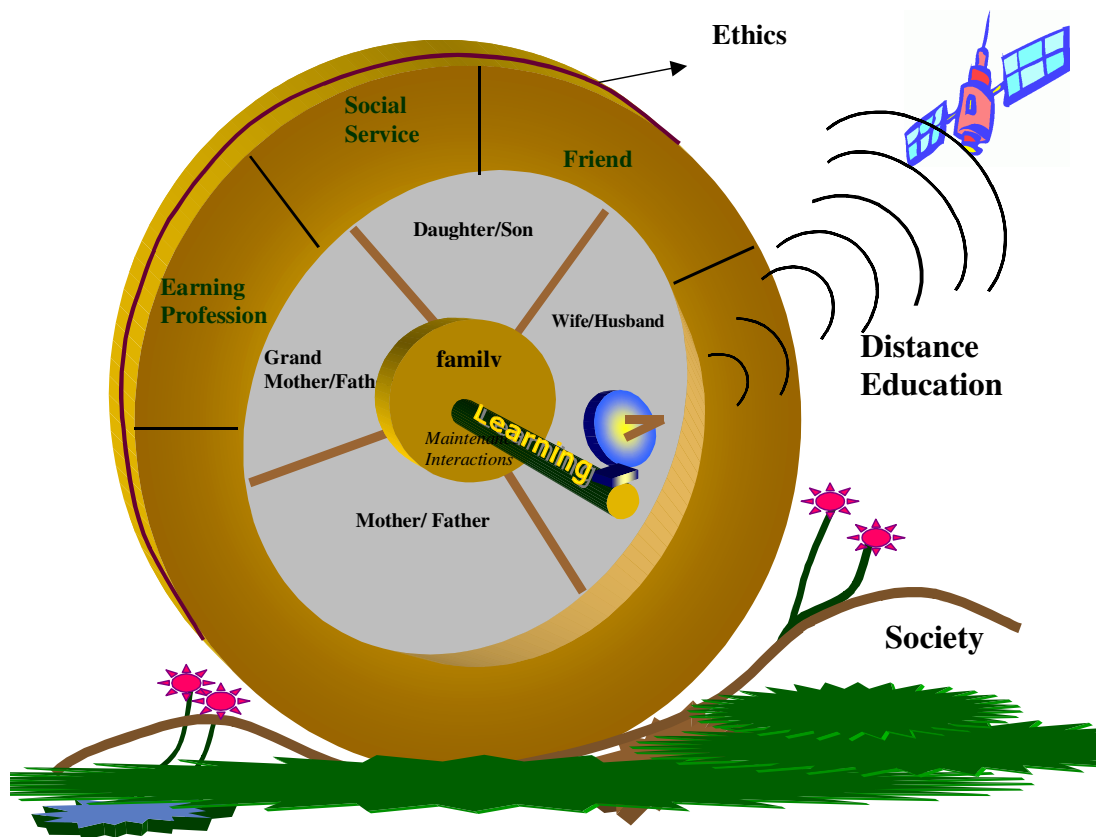


Figure 1: The wheel of dynamic life

## Summary

This paper focuses on the need to improve distance education at the level of advanced research studies. Added flexibility of courses, evolving a combinatory culture across various participating universities and increased infrastructure at affordable fees are crucial to boost the gamut of DE.

This will open possibilities to encourage the enthusiastic students to accomplish their dreams, irrespective of their age, gender or any uncontrollable circumstances.

The author's invaluable association with the Stanford Center for Professional Development (SCPD) as a student and the experience gained there by has been informative to identify several issues and help many.

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Gomata Varanasi holds M.Sc.(Physics) & M.Tech(EE) from IITs. She had been with Industry in India and US for about 10 years and also was a non-degree student at Stanford University. Her research interests include digital signal and image processing, acoustics, psychology and culture. Currently she is involved in research studies, teaching and guiding students around India.