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Graduate Employability and Mode of Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Regular and Open Distance Learning Degree Holders

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Abstract : *Graduate employability has emerged as a significant concern in the contemporary higher education system, particularly in the context of increasing competition in the labour market and changing professional requirements. Obtaining a university degree does not necessarily ensure employment, as career opportunities are influenced by several factors, including academic knowledge, communication skills, digital competencies, problem-solving abilities, practical experience, and professional preparedness. In this context, the mode of higher education may have an important role in shaping the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for employment.*

The present study aims to make a comparative analysis of the employability of graduates who have completed their undergraduate degrees through Regular and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) modes of higher education. It seeks to examine the major differences between these two educational systems in terms of teaching-learning processes, teacher-student interaction, flexibility, self-directed learning, social engagement, technological proficiency, and opportunities for skill development. The study also attempts to explore how these educational experiences may influence graduates' professional preparedness and employment prospects.

The research is descriptive, qualitative, comparative, and analytical in nature. It is based entirely on secondary sources of data, including published research papers, academic books, government reports, University Grants Commission (UGC) publications, Distance Education Bureau documents, and the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020. The collected information is examined through document analysis, qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis, and comparative interpretation. No primary data, surveys, or direct interviews are included in the study.

The study highlights that Regular and Open and Distance Learning systems offer different educational experiences and opportunities for developing employability-related competencies. Regular education provides scope for face-to-face interaction, classroom participation, teamwork, and institutional activities, whereas ODL promotes educational flexibility, independent learning, self-discipline, and time management. However, employability cannot be determined solely by the mode of education, as individual capabilities, practical exposure, professional training, institutional support, and labour market conditions also play important roles. The study concludes that both educational modes have considerable potential to develop employable graduates and recommends strengthening vocational education, digital literacy, communication skills, internship opportunities, career guidance, and practical training within both systems of higher education.

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Keywords: Graduate Employability, Regular Education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Higher Education, Employment Opportunities, Skill Development, Professional Competencies, Career Readiness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a vital foundation for the holistic development of individuals and society. It plays an immense role in shaping a person's knowledge, critical thinking, values, skills, and professional competencies. Higher education, in particular, does more than just provide theoretical knowledge in a specific field; it equips students to navigate the various challenges they may encounter in their future careers. While the importance of higher education continues to grow in contemporary society, there remains a significant link between academic attainment and success in the professional world. Merely obtaining an undergraduate degree does not guarantee employment; rather, career success depends on one's ability to apply acquired knowledge in practical settings, as well as on personal skills and professional readiness.

In the present day, "employability" is considered a key indicator of the quality of higher education. Employability refers to an individual's overall capacity to secure employment opportunities, obtain a suitable job, demonstrate competence in the workplace, and adapt to an ever-changing professional landscape. This concept is closely tied to subject-specific knowledge, communication skills, technical proficiency, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, and the ability to work effectively within a team. Consequently, the purpose of higher education has expanded beyond the mere awarding of academic credentials; it now encompasses preparing students for the realities of life and the workplace.

Within India's higher education system, various pedagogical approaches exist for students to acquire knowledge—most notably, the conventional (regular) education system and the open and distance learning (ODL) system. While both pathways offer opportunities to pursue undergraduate studies, they differ significantly in terms of the learning experience, the educational environment, teaching methodologies, and the nature of interaction with the educational institution. Investigating how these differences influence a student's overall development and their preparation for a professional career is a central focus of this research.

The conventional education system is primarily rooted in institutional, classroom-based learning. In this system, students attend specific educational institutions, where they benefit from direct instruction by teachers, classroom discussions, practical training, interaction with peers, and participation in various co-curricular activities. Such an educational environment fosters mutual cooperation, social engagement, self-confidence, and a collaborative mindset among students. Furthermore, by engaging in diverse educational and cultural activities, students gain experiences that extend well beyond the scope of textbooks. These experiences play a significant role in shaping their personalities and preparing them for their future professional lives.

On the other hand, open and distance learning systems have made higher education more flexible and accessible. This approach allows students to pursue higher education outside the framework of traditional, classroom-based instruction. It serves as a vital alternative for individuals who—due to financial constraints, family responsibilities, employment commitments, or geographical distance—are unable to attend conventional educational institutions. Through self-study materials, online resources, digital communication channels, and scheduled advisory support, students can pursue their education at their own convenience. This model encourages the development of self-reliance, time management, independent learning, and a sense of personal responsibility.

However, both educational models possess distinct characteristics and limitations. While traditional education offers greater opportunities for direct interaction and institutional engagement, open and distance learning places a stronger emphasis on independent study and technology-mediated instruction. In distance learning, in particular, a student's capacity for self-discipline and time management is crucial. Conversely, participation in traditional education does not automatically guarantee that every student will acquire all the skills necessary for the workplace. Therefore, rather than declaring one system superior to the other in every respect, it is essential to analyse the actual knowledge, skills, and

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employability attained by students in both models. In today's labour market, employers value not only a candidate's academic qualifications but also their practical skills, communication abilities, technical knowledge, workplace adaptability, and capacity to function in new environments. Consequently, the extent to which knowledge acquired in higher education institutions aligns with the demands of the actual workplace has become a critical issue. In particular, it is necessary to investigate whether there are any significant differences in employability between graduates who completed their degrees through conventional education systems and those who did so via open and distance learning.

Furthermore, issues such as educated unemployment, limited employment opportunities, and the growing demand for skills-based education have created new challenges for the higher education system. Many students struggle to secure suitable employment even after obtaining a bachelor's degree. A key reason for this lies in the gap between academic knowledge and workplace requirements.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Yorke (2006), Employability in Higher Education: What It Is, What It Is Not. This study explains the concept of graduate employability and highlights the importance of academic knowledge, personal skills, achievements and professional competencies. It emphasises that obtaining a higher education degree alone does not guarantee employment; rather, graduates need to develop appropriate skills and abilities to meet workplace requirements.

Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), The Key to Employability: Developing a Practical Model of Graduate Employability. This study introduces the CareerEDGE model, which identifies career development learning, work and life experience, degree subject knowledge, generic skills and emotional intelligence as important components of employability. It highlights the need for higher education institutions to develop students' overall competencies to improve their employment opportunities.

Holmes (2013), Competing Perspectives on Graduate Employability: Possession, Position or Process?. This study examines different perspectives on graduate employability and explains that employment opportunities are influenced not only by individual skills and qualifications but also by social background, professional identity and labour market conditions. It provides an important theoretical understanding of the relationship between higher education and graduate employment.

Khare (2018), Employability of Graduates in India—Hard Realities. This study discusses the challenges of graduate employability in the Indian higher education system. It highlights the gap between academic qualifications and the skills demanded by employers. The study emphasises the importance of improving educational quality, practical knowledge and skill-based learning to make graduates more suitable for the employment market.

Agbu, Olivier, Shadrach and Awadhiya (2025), Bridging the Job Skills Gap in India: Assessing Graduate Readiness at Indian Open Universities. This study examines the relationship between the educational experiences of open university graduates and the skills required by the employment market. It highlights challenges related to institutional support, industry collaboration and curriculum development. The study suggests strengthening skill-oriented education and improving the connection between open universities and employment opportunities.

University Grants Commission (2020), University Grants Commission (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations, 2020. This regulatory framework focuses on maintaining academic standards and ensuring the quality of Open and Distance Learning and online education in India. It provides guidelines relating to institutional recognition, programme delivery and student support services. It is relevant to understanding the educational structure and quality assurance of distance education in comparison with regular higher education.

Government of India (2020), National Education Policy 2020. The policy emphasises multidisciplinary education, vocational training, digital learning, critical thinking and the development of practical skills. It highlights the importance of making higher education more inclusive, flexible and employment-oriented. The policy is relevant to the present study because it provides a framework for improving graduate competencies through different modes of higher education.

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Tomlinson (2017), Forms of Graduate Capital and Their Relationship to Graduate Employability. This study examines the different forms of capital that influence graduate employability, including human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capital. It explains that graduates require more than academic qualifications to establish themselves in the employment market. The study highlights the importance of personal development, social relationships and professional experiences in improving employment prospects.

Jackson (2014), Employability Skill Development in Work-Integrated Learning: Barriers and Best Practice. This study examines the development of employability skills through work-integrated learning experiences. It highlights the importance of practical exposure, workplace participation and collaboration between educational institutions and employers. The study suggests that practical learning opportunities can help graduates develop the competencies required for professional employment.

Allen and Seaman (2017), Digital Learning Compass: Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017. This report examines the growth and development of distance education and online learning in higher education. It discusses the increasing role of digital platforms in providing educational opportunities to students. The report is useful for understanding the changing nature of distance education and the importance of technology in higher education.

III. AIM OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of the present study is to examine and compare the employability of graduates who have completed their undergraduate degrees through Regular and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) modes of higher education. The study also seeks to understand how different modes of learning contribute to the development of graduates' knowledge, skills, competencies, personal attributes and professional preparedness. Furthermore, it aims to explore whether the mode of higher education has any significant association with graduates' employability and their ability to meet the expectations of the contemporary employment market.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To assess the level of employability among graduates who have obtained their degrees through Regular and Open and Distance Learning modes.
- To compare the employability levels of Regular and Open and Distance Learning degree holders.
- To examine the differences in academic knowledge and subject-related competencies between graduates of the two modes of higher education.
- To compare the communication skills, digital competencies and problem-solving abilities of Regular and Open and Distance Learning graduates.
- To investigate the differences in self-confidence, self-directed learning, adaptability and interpersonal skills among graduates from the two educational modes.
- To examine the professional preparedness and career-related competencies of Regular and Open and Distance Learning degree holders.
- To analyse the relationship between the mode of higher education and the employment status of graduates.
- To identify the major challenges faced by Regular and Open and Distance Learning graduates in obtaining suitable employment.
- To suggest appropriate measures for improving graduate employability through the enhancement of teaching-learning practices and skill-development opportunities in both modes of higher education.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is a structured process used to collect, analyze, and interpret data concerning a specific research topic. Selecting an appropriate research methodology is crucial for successfully achieving the objectives of any study.

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The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comparative analysis of the employability of graduates who have earned their degrees through 'regular' modes of study versus 'Open and Distance Learning' (ODL) systems.

This study does not involve the collection of primary (direct) data. Instead, the research topic will be analyzed using secondary sources, including academic research papers, published books, government reports, documents from the University Grants Commission (UGC), national education policies, and other reliable published information.

❖ **Nature of the Study**

This research is primarily qualitative and descriptive in nature. Additionally, it employs comparative and analytical approaches.

The study will examine various aspects of both regular and Open and Distance Learning systems, including their educational characteristics, teaching-learning processes, opportunities for skill development, and factors related to employability.

❖ **Research Design**

This study utilizes three types of research design:

a) Descriptive Research Design

This approach is used to describe the characteristics, learning environments, pedagogical methods, educational facilities, and skill-development opportunities within both regular and Open and Distance Learning systems.

b) Comparative Research Design

This approach is used to examine the similarities and differences regarding the employability of graduates from regular programs versus those from Open and Distance Learning programs.

c) Analytical Research Design

This approach involves a critical analysis of existing research, government reports, and published data. Specifically, it explores the relationship between educational methodologies and employability.

❖ **Sources of Data**

- This research will rely exclusively on secondary data.
- The sources of data include:
- Reports and guidelines published by the University Grants Commission (UGC).
- National Education Policy (NEP), 2020.
- Documents published by the Distance Education Bureau.
- Various national and international research journals.
- Academic books concerning higher education and employment.
- Published research papers and Ph.D. theses.
- Government reports related to education and employment.
- Academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR.

❖ **Method of Data Collection**

Published data and documents relevant to the research objectives will be collected. Information pertaining to the educational characteristics, employability, skill development, and professional preparation associated with both regular and open/distance education systems will be categorized separately.

In the process of data collection, emphasis will be placed on relevance, reliability, the period of publication, and the credibility of the sources.

❖ **Method of Data Analysis**

- The collected data will be analysed using the following methods:
- Document Analysis.
- Qualitative Content Analysis.
- Comparative Analysis.
- Thematic Analysis.

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- Critical Interpretation of Published Findings.

❖ **Scope for Comparative Analysis in the Research**

Aspects of Comparison	Regular Education	Open and Distance Learning
Teaching Methodology	Classroom-based	Self-directed and distance-based
Teacher-Student Interaction	Opportunities for direct interaction	Interaction via technology and structured guidance
Flexibility in Education	Relatively limited	Relatively high
Self-directed Learning	Alongside institutional support	Strong emphasis on self-study
Use of Technology	Supplementary learning material	Primary medium of instruction
Social Interaction	Campus-based interaction	Relatively limited and mediated (dependent on specific channels)
Employability Skills	Opportunities through various institutional activities	Opportunities through self-directed and digital learning

❖ **Limitations of the Research**

- The research relies solely on published secondary data.
- Opinions of graduates will not be collected directly.
- There may be variations in the definitions and measurements of employability used across different published studies.
- The research findings will depend on the availability of reliable and comparable data.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As this research does not involve any surveys or sampling, no actual survey results or hypothetical statistics are presented here. The following points serve as a framework for exploring potential themes and discussions based on the analysis of secondary data.

➢ **The Relationship Between Educational Methods and Employability**

Higher education methods play a multifaceted role in students' acquisition of knowledge, development of skills, and professional preparation. Conventional education offers opportunities for classroom discussions, direct interaction, and co-curricular activities. In contrast, open and distance learning (ODL) systems emphasize self-directed study, time management, and digital learning.

Drawing upon existing research, this section analyzes how these characteristics relate to various dimensions of employability.

➢ **A Comparative Discussion on Knowledge and Academic Skills**

In conventional education, instructor-led teaching and classroom-based discussions facilitate the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge. In distance learning, students primarily acquire knowledge through self-study materials and other learning resources.

However, determining the actual differences in knowledge and skills between students from these two modes of education requires evidence from published evaluative research.

➢ **Communication and Interpersonal Skills**

Effective communication, teamwork, and the ability to maintain interpersonal relationships are crucial in the workplace.

Conventional education often provides greater opportunities for direct interaction with peers and instructors. Conversely, students in distance learning gain experience in online communication and the use of digital platforms.

This section provides a comparative discussion on how these distinct experiences contribute to employability.

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➢ **Digital Skills and Technological Proficiency**

In today's workplace, the importance of technical knowledge and digital skills is steadily increasing. While open and distance learning involves the use of digital learning materials, it cannot be assumed that an individual automatically acquires superior digital skills simply by virtue of being a distance learner.

Therefore, this section analyzes the opportunities for—and limitations to—the development of digital skills within both educational approaches. 4.5 Self-reliance and Self-confidence

Distance education requires a greater emphasis on self-study, time management, and personal responsibility. This experience can help foster self-reliance among students.

Conversely, the various co-curricular activities and social interactions inherent in conventional (regular) education can provide opportunities for students to develop self-confidence and teamwork skills.

➢ **Professional Preparation and Employment Prospects**

A student's professional preparation does not depend solely on the mode of education. Factors such as the choice of subject, individual skills, internships, practical experience, training, and the demands of the labor market also play a significant role.

For this reason, the professional preparation and employment prospects of graduates from both educational systems will be compared based on published research and government reports.

➢ **Overall Comparative Discussion**

Based on the various dimensions explored in this research, the following aspects will be specifically examined:

- Educational opportunities and limitations of both modes of education.
- The importance of skill development for employability.
- The relationship between educational flexibility and professional preparation.
- The potential of technology-based education.
- The necessity for career-oriented higher education.

VIII. MAJOR FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Potential Major Findings

- Through the analysis of secondary data and existing research, the following points may be identified:
- Both conventional (regular) and open/distance learning modes serve as significant pathways for pursuing higher education.
- There are distinct differences in the teaching-learning processes and educational experiences between these two modes of education.
- Beyond subject-specific knowledge, communication, technical, and interpersonal skills are crucial for developing student employability.
- Open and distance learning systems offer unique opportunities for self-directed learning and flexibility.
- Conventional education provides opportunities for direct social interaction and participation in institutional activities.
- Beyond the mode of education, factors such as personal skills, practical experience, and labor market conditions can influence a graduate's career.
- There is a need to create further opportunities for developing employability-oriented skills within both educational modes.
- The points above are potential findings; in an actual research study, these would need to be verified and refined based on empirical evidence.

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VIII. CONCLUSION

In the contemporary context, a primary objective of higher education is to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to adapt to an ever-changing professional landscape. Both conventional and open/distance learning modes contribute significantly to the expansion of higher education. However, they possess distinct characteristics regarding their teaching methodologies, educational experiences, and opportunities for skill development.

Conventional education systems facilitate direct teacher-student interaction, classroom-based discussions, and social engagement. Conversely, open and distance learning offers students greater flexibility, the scope for self-directed study, and broader access to educational opportunities.

Nevertheless, it is not reasonable to deem any single mode of education as universally superior in terms of fostering employability. This is because a graduate's employability is contingent upon a complex interplay of their academic qualifications, personal skills, practical experience, and the specific demands of the labor market. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance the curricula of both educational systems by incorporating vocational education, practical training, communication skills, digital literacy, and opportunities for professional development. Such initiatives can make higher education more effective and employment-oriented.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Greater emphasis should be placed on vocational/career-oriented curricula within both higher education systems.
- Special programs should be implemented to enhance students' communication and digital skills.
- Opportunities for career counseling and professional support should be expanded within distance learning systems.
- Initiatives should be taken to increase practical and workplace-based experience within conventional (regular) education.
- Opportunities for internships and skill-development activities should be broadened across both educational systems.
- In addition to evaluating the quality of education, published data regarding the employment of graduates should be reviewed on a regular basis.

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