

# PERCEPTION OF DISTANCE LEARNERS OF SCHOOL OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES ON POST GRADUATE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

L. M. Ahire<sup>1</sup>, B. S. Sontakk<sup>2</sup>, K. H. Rao<sup>1</sup>

The School of Agricultural Sciences (SAS) of Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Nashik, Maharashtra State (India) started Post Graduate and Research (PGR) programmes namely M. Sc. and Ph. D. in Agricultural Communication, Agricultural Extension and Agricultural Development in the academic year 2003-04 through distance mode. This study was conducted by using ex-post facto research design to know the background profile characteristics of distance learners and their perception on PGR programmes. The study also documented information sources used for awareness of PGR programmes, motivating factors, reasons to join YCMOU and suggestions made to improve the systems and processes in execution / operation of the PGR programmes.

**Keywords :** Distance learners, perception, PGR programmes, YCMOU.

The Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) was established in 1989. It strongly believed that distance education can be best imparted as a part of extension work by agricultural universities and colleges due to their autonomous status and freedom to experiment. Further, agricultural universities can create better impact on farmers, research workers, extension experts, policy maker's etc resulting into the overall improvement in production and productivity of agricultural farm and income level of farmers on a sustainable basis.

The term distance education refers to the Intentional Process of Teaching and Learning in which physical space separates the students and teachers. The students are communicated through the different communicational channels and through conducting contact sessions during the tenure of their course. In this process, the students are in different situations, encounter different difficulties, and needed time- to-time guidance in their studies.

The School of Agricultural Sciences (SAS) of YCMOU is implementing need based and innovative programmes in Agricultural Sciences through the distance and open learning mode. YCMOU is a high magnitude and multi-dimensional mega open university in terms of diversity, levels and mode of outreach of its educational programmes

1. Technical Officer, Post Graduate Studies Cell, HRD Division, NAARM, Rajendranagar, Hyderabad.
2. Professor & Principal Scientist, Training Cell, Professor & Principal Scientist, HRD Division, National Academy of Agricultural Research Management, Rajendranagar, Hyderabad-500 407.

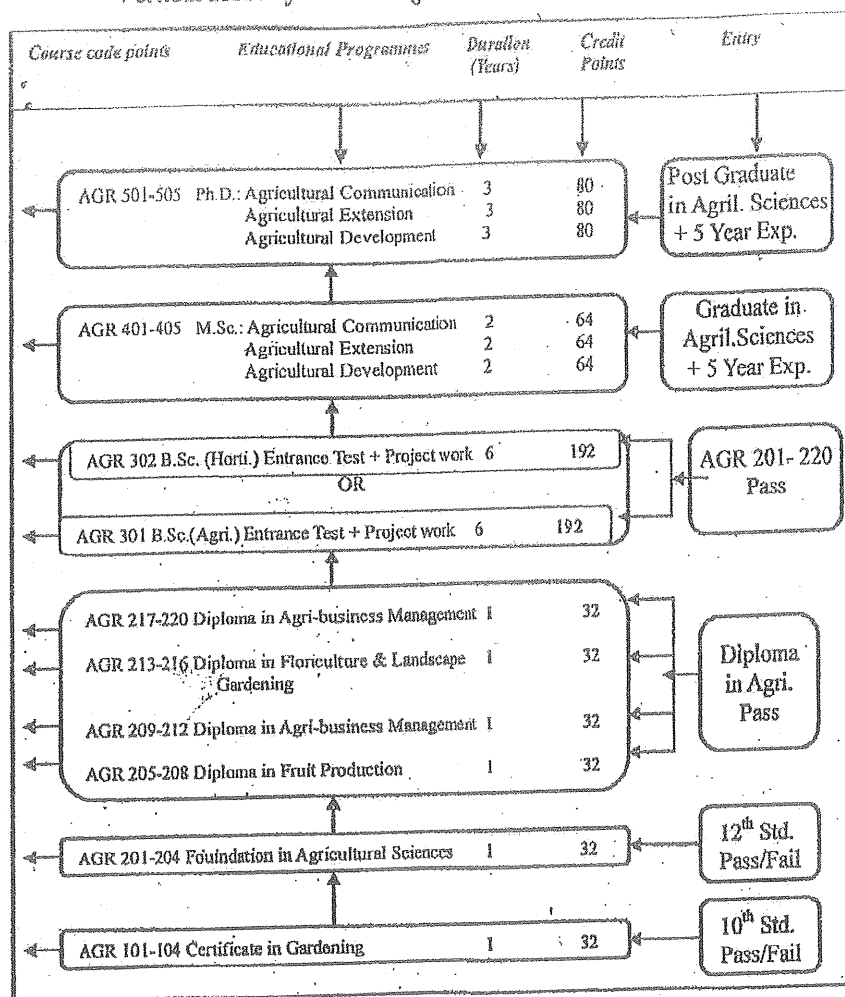
and innovations. The university offers 70 educational programmes for awarding Degree, Diploma and Certificate Courses. The university has a total of 70 programmes and 360 courses, to offer to the distance learners.

• The university bagged the most coveted International Award of Excellence in Distance education from the Commonwealth of Learning, Canada for its innovative approach to open and distance education to suit the common people in every sphere of life who desirous to upgrade / acquire knowledge and skills in the area of their interest.

The SAS offers different educational programmes in the wide spectrum of agriculture ranging from certificate course in gardening to doctoral degree (Ph. D) in Agricultural Communication, Agricultural Extension and Agricultural Development with multiple entry and multiple exit using vertical mobility model for Agricultural Sciences (AGR-401, 2003). This ensures the flexibility of admission with multiple stages of exit and provides with vertical growth to learner in her / his career. It facilitates a secondary school pass / fail learner to scale up his / her education qualifications upto Ph.D. level if he/she desires so (Fig: 1).

Considering the importance and future need for establishing a sound agricultural base and rapid upliftment of rural education, YCMOU took the venture of persuading the open and distance education programmes. In order to cater to the needs of the distance learners, YCMOU has taken initiative to impart knowledge in the most needed area of agricultural extension to educate the extension functionaries working in the development departments. Therefore, an empirical study was aimed to document the benefits of distance and open learning system and validate the same for the distance learners with the following specific objectives.

*School of Agricultural Sciences*  
*Vertical Mobility to the Programmes in Agricultural sciences*



- To study the background profile characteristics of Post Graduate and Research students of School of Agricultural Sciences and identify the information sources used for awareness of PGR programmes.
- To find out the course/discipline wise enrollment of PGR students and to explore their motivating factors/reasons for joining the PGR programme of SAS and
- To know the opinion of the respondents on different operational aspects of the course for improving the quality and convenience of distance learning.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted purposively to know the background profile characteristics of the post graduate and research students of SAS, YCMOU by using ex-

post facto research design and to determine the information sources utilized by the respondents for awareness on postgraduate and research programmes. The study also attempted to explore motivating factors responsible for the learners to pursue their higher education. The data was collected through questionnaire method from 90 students (60 post-graduate + 30 Ph. D) during the second contact session and some of the questionnaires were mailed to the respondents. Further, the questionnaires were collected at the time of fourth contact session and during the final exams personally. Some of the questionnaires were directly mailed by the respondents to investigator. The data was tabulated analyzed by using simple statistical tools such as frequency and percentages.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1- BACKGROUND PROFILE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PGR STUDENTS

The data on different attributes of respondents' background is presented in Table-1. The majority (54%) of the respondents had rural background followed by 46 per cent with urban background. This clearly indicates that majority belongs to rural background and they preferred and pursued agriculture as their profession. These findings are in agreement with the findings of Sunderaswamy et al (1997) and also of Veerataghava Reddy et al (1997).

Table 1: Profile of the respondents

N=39

Category	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Rural - Urban Background</i>		
Rural	21	54.00
Urban	18	46.00
<i>School Educational background</i>		
Rural	13	33.00
Urban	26	67.00
<i>Gender specific</i>		
Co-education	32	82.00
Unisex	7	18.00
<i>School Management</i>		
State Govt.	29	74.00
Private	10	26.00
<i>Medium of instruction</i>		
Marathi	29	74.00
English	5	13.00
Hindi	2	5.00
Telugu	3	8.00

With respect to the respondents school education background (Table 1), it was found that majority (67%) of the respondents had their school education in urban areas followed by 33 per cent from rural schools. Although majority of the respondents had rural background but their parents had admitted them in urban schools for better and quality schooling.

It is evident from data (Table-1) on type of school that majority (82%) of the respondents came from co-education system followed by 18 per cent of the respondents were representing unisex as school background (boys or girls).

The data on the management of schools depicts that majority (74%) of the respondents completed their schooling from State Government managed schools and 26 per cent of the respondents completed their school education from private managed schools (Table 1). Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of the respondents completed their schooling from State Govt. funded managed schools because at that point of time the private schools were very few and those schools were not popular among the parents, of students.

The medium of instruction at school was Marathi for 74 per cent of the respondents followed by English for 13 per cent of the respondents, Telugu for 8 per cent respondents while 5 per cent of the respondents completed their schooling with Hindi medium. It can be inferred that, since, majority of respondents completed their school education in Marathi medium, majority of the respondents enrolled from the state of Maharashtra for PGR programmes.

*Table 2: Academic performance of the respondents*

Qualification	Academic performance at different level of education				Total
	Distinction	First	Second	Third	
S.S.C.	8 (21.00)	26 (67.00)	4 (10.00)	1 (2.00)	39 (100.00)
Intermediate	6 (15.00)	23 (59.00)	9 (23.00)	1 (2.00)	39 (100.00)
Graduation	6 (15.00)	20 (51.00)	13 (33.00)		39 (100.00)
Post-graduation	8 (53.00)	7 (47.00)	-	-	15 (100.00)

The distribution of respondents in terms of academic performance is presented in Table-2. It is observed that majority (67%) of the respondents achieved first division followed by 21 per cent with distinction, 10 per cent in second division and only one respondent got third division in his/her SSC examination. At intermediate level, 59 per cent respondents achieved first division, 15 per cent secured distinction, whereas, 23 per cent got second division and only one respondent just passed in third division. In respect of the academic performance at graduation level, majority (51%) of the respondents secured first division, 15 per cent respondents achieved distinction and the rest 33 per cent passed in second division. Out of 39 respondents, 15 enrolled for Ph. D. programme

and their academic performance at post-graduate degree was observed to be very high. Majority (53%) of them achieved distinction and 47 per cent secured first division. It is evident from the data on intermediate examination that majority (74%) of the respondents achieved distinction or first division because of the fact that it is necessary to get high percentage of marks to join the agricultural courses / universities and the admissions are made purely on the basis of merit in most of the colleges. Further, the candidates with high performance are tend to pursue the professional higher education. Therefore, it is quite natural to expect better performance by the respondents at SSC and intermediate level.

## II- INFORMATION SOURCES UTILIZED BY THE RESPONDENTS

The efforts have been made to know the awareness among the respondents about PGR programmes of SAS and to identify information sources utilized by them as indicated in Table 3.

*Table 3: Information sources utilized by the respondents for awareness on PGR programmes of SAS*

Channel	Frequency	Percentage
Media (News papers & Radio)	15	38.00
Employees/Teachers of YCMOU & NGO's	12	31.00
Friends & Teachers	9	23.00
Neighbor	1	3.00
Family members	2	5.00
Total Sample	39	100.00

The media (Newspapers & Radio) played a major role to make the respondents aware of PGR programmes of SAS. It was found that 38 per cent of the respondent's got awareness of PGR programmes through media. The Students of PGR programme (31%) could also source the information about PGR programmes through Employees/Teachers of YCMOU & Non Governmental Organisations. 23 per cent of the PGR students were aware through their friends or teachers from other colleges/institutions. The remaining 8 per cent of the respondents used neighbours or family members as information sources. Therefore, it can be inferred that media, teachers/employees of YCMOU and NGOs are considered to be the most effective sources for making to students aware on PGR programmes of SAS. Our findings on the information sources utilized by the respondents to that of media in present investigation are similar to that of Mangaraj (1997).

Table 4: Enrollment of respondents for PGR programmes at SAS

Enrollment	Frequency	Percentage
M. Sc.	24	62.00
Ph. D.	15	38.00
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.00</b>
<i>Discipline</i>		
Agricultural Communication	5	13.00
Agricultural extension	24	61.00
Agricultural Development	10	26.00
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The results on enrollment of the respondents for PGR programmes (Table 4) revealed that the majority (62%) of the respondents enrolled for M. Sc. Programme and the rest (38%) of them enrolled for Ph. D programme. The main reason of enrollment in post-graduation by more number of respondents may be due to the fact that M. Sc. provides competitive advantage to the agricultural officers working in the departments to avail promotions in their career. Enrollment for Ph. D was observed among respondents who preferred to join academic institutions / colleges.

It was also evident from data that majority of the respondents enrolled for agricultural extension (61%) followed by agricultural development (26%) and agricultural communication (13%). Majority of the respondents might have joined in agricultural extension because of the fact that the agricultural extension is well known branch as compare to the other branches which was recently introduced by the School of Agricultural Sciences.

#### IV- MOTIVATING FACTORS TO JOIN THE PGR PROGRAMME

The majority (54%) of the respondents was self-motivated to join the PGR programme to pursue higher education in agriculture and each 5 per cent respondents were motivated by their teachers, parents and spouse (Table 9). The remaining 7 per cent of the respondents were motivated by their friends to join the SAS for higher education in agriculture. Hence, it can be inferred that majority of the respondents are self motivated due to their desire to obtain respectable social status as well urge to explore the new avenues and opportunities in their employment career.

*Table 5: Motivating factors to join PGR programme*

Motivating Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Self motivated	21	54.00
Teachers	5	13.00
Parents	5	13.00
Spouse	5	13.00
Friends	3	7.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Reasons to join the distance learning programmes	Frequency*	Percentage
To upgrade knowledge and skills	20	51.00
Promotional avenues in service	10	25.00
Social status	9	23.00
Advantage of good job opportunities and career development	10	25.00
Personal satisfaction	5	12.00
Helps in scientific and technical writing	4	10.00

\* Multiple responses

The reasons quoted by the respondents to join the PGR programme at SAS to acquire higher education are depicted in Table 5. It was found that majority (51%) of the respondents joined to upgrade their knowledge and skills in their particular subject area. 25 per cent each joined distance learning programmes to explore the promotional avenues in service and to get the better opportunities for career development. On the other hand, 23 per cent of the respondents joined just for social status in the society and 12 per cent of the respondents joined for personal satisfaction. The rest of 10 per cent respondents were joined to gain the scientific/technical writing skills.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the students who are entering the open system for higher education had expectations to upgrade their knowledge and skill levels and also to avail better job opportunities, promotional avenues in service and career development. Therefore, the Open University system should fulfill their expectations to become efficient and effective to register sustainable growth and development.



#### V- OPINION OF THE RESPONDENTS ON COURSE MATERIAL AND COURSE CURRICULUM/TEACHER COUNCELLORS

The opinions /expectations of the respondents regarding various aspects of distance learning practices adopted by YCMOU are depicted in table 6 and 7. The multiple responses from the respondents for each aspect have been considered to arrive at the frequency distribution and percentages, from which inference drawn.

*Table 6 : Opinion of respondents on course material of PGR programme*

Sl. No.	Percentage	Opinion	Frequency
1.	Satisfied with the course material but still there is a scope for improvement	36	92.00
2.	Course material is already in Self Instructional Material format, still improvement is required	5	11.00
3	Course material is very bulky and should be reduced / concised	8	20.00

The opinion of respondents on course material (Table 6) indicated that more than 90 per cent (92%) of the respondents satisfied with course material and also opined that there is a scope for improvement, whereas 20 per cent of the respondents felt that the course material is bulky and hence suggested that it should be concised or reduced appropriately. The rest 11 per cent of the respondents were happy with the SIM (Self Instructional Material) format with some improvement.

Based on the comments of course material it can be inferred that the format of course material is highly appreciated by the PGR students, and simultaneously suggestions are made to improve in terms of its bulkyness and SIM format.

*Table 7: Opinion of respondents on course curriculum / teacher counsellors*

Sl. No.	Opinion	Frequency*	Percentage
1.	Satisfied with the course curriculum and teacher councilors	36	92.00
2.	One or two teacher councilors may be changed during contact sessions	4	10.00
3	More emphasis may be given on statistics and special contact session may be conducted on statistics	12	31.00

\*Multiple responses

The opinion of the respondents on course curriculum and teacher councilors is indicated in Table 7. It is very gratifying to note that more than ninety per cent (92%) of the respondents were satisfied with the course curriculum and teacher councilors. More than one-third of them (31%) expressed that the special contact session should be organized and suggested to give special emphasis on statistics. 10 per cent of the respondents opined that change in one or two teacher councilors could have been better during contact to bring the better change in subject coverage.

#### VI- PROBLEMS FACED AND SUGGESTIONS MADE BY THE RESPONDENTS

The problems faced by the respondents during the study of distance learning course and suggestions made there of for betterment of the programme have been presented in the following tables (8 and 9).

*Table-8 : Problems faced by the PGR students during course*

Sl. No.	Opinion	Frequency*	Percentage
1.	Lack of library facilities	21	54.00
2.	Difficult to contact with the research guides, guides didn't have time to spent with students	13	31.00
3.	Difficult to sit whole day during contact session	10	21.00
4.	Difficult to present ORW/SRW due to lack of presentation skills	12	32.00

\*Indicates the multiple responses

Data on the difficulties faced by the respondents during the course revealed that 54 per cent respondents faced lack of library related facilities while 32 per cent of the respondents faced presentation related problems. It is due to the fact they are not equipped with much needed / suitable presentation skills. 31 per cent of the respondents opined that they faced guide related problems and the rest of 21 per cent expressed that they were unable to sit the whole day continuously in the classroom.

The difficulties expressed by the respondents have to be mitigated by establishing appropriate processes and systems in order to improve distance learning programmes. The students could be advised to use library resources available near their place of location as well as online virtual libraries. The university management should appropriately address issues concerning the guide with a provision for students to change their guide, when there is a genuine difficulty in contacting the guide and or, when he / she is unable to spare time to guide the student. The improvement in presentation skills of students needs special attention. Even before the Outline of Research Work (ORW) or Synopsis of Research Work (SRW) presentations, the students have to be taught on how to make the best presentations and have to be given access to use audio visual aids

for presentations and feedback.

During the contact sessions, care should be taken that the session should not be too long. If the session is continuous for more than two hours at a time the learning efficiency and effectiveness is reduced. Alternatively, between the two sessions some hands on practice activities can be planned to cut down the monotony (for example: skill development, exercises, discussions on case studies etc.) or even the physical movement of the students from one venue to another could be, beneficial to create conducive learning environment.

**Table 9: Suggestions given by PGR students for improvement in PGR programmes**

Sl. No.	Opinion	Frequency*	Percentage
1.	Library facilities may be provided	12	11.00
2.	No. of contact sessions may be increased	5	13.00
3.	No. of guides should be included	6	15.00
4.	First day contact session should be started at 10.00 a.m. instead of 8.00 a.m.	20	51.00
5.	Simple study material should be given instead of bulky	4	10.00
6.	Number of assignments may be reduced	7	18.00
7.	Teacher councilors must be from open universities only	3	8.00
8.	Online theoretical exams may be conducted for long distance student	4	10.00
9.	Regular interaction with teacher councilors is necessary	7	18.00

\*Multiple responses

The suggestions given by the students for improvement in PGR programmes are depicted in Table 9. The major suggestions include a) first day contact session should start at 10.00 A.M instead of 8.00 A.M which would avoid the over night stay at Nashik and also enable the students to attend the contact session on right time without missing any part of the session (51%); b) there should be regular interactive sessions with teacher councilors (18%); c) reduction in number of assignments (18%); d) increase the number of eligible guides (15%); e) increase the number of contact sessions (13%); f) provision of library facilities (11%); g) concised study material instead of bulky (10%) and h) online theory examinations for long distance students (10%). Therefore it is the

responsibility of SAS of YCMOU to develop appropriate strategies to bring changes in the processes and systems to address the suggestions to and fulfill the expectations of PGR students for efficient functioning of the distance learning programmes.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION :

The study revealed that majority of distance learners had (54%) rural background and 67 per cent of total respondents completed their schooling from urban schools in spite of their rural background for want of improved and quality education. Interestingly, the majority (74%) of distance learners completed their education at school level in Marathi medium. Among the 51 per cent of respondents, those who have enrolled for post-graduation had completed their graduation in first division and those who have enrolled for Ph. D. programme completed their post-graduation with distinction (53%). Majority (62%) of respondents enrolled for M. Sc. Programme and out of them, majority (61%) of the respondents enrolled for agricultural extension. The maximum percentage (38%) of respondents utilized print media (newspapers) and radio as sources of information about PGR programmes. Majority (54%) were self-motivated to join PGR programmes and 51 per cent of the respondents joined to upgrade their knowledge and skills in their specialized / interested subject areas for better performance in their job and professional activities. More than 90 per cent (92%) satisfied with the course material as well as course curriculum and also satisfied with teacher counselors. 54 per cent of the respondents opined that lack of library facility is one of the major problems faced by distance learners. Around half of the (51%) respondents suggested that the first day contact session should be started at 10.00 A.M instead of 8.00 A.M. The respondents also suggested several steps/strategies for improvement in course curriculum and course material and also in the operational guidelines of distance learning programmes.

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