

# Understanding Our Learners

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A typical profile of learners in distance education programmes, would be as follows:

- A wide age range as opposed to regular conventional students who would have a small age range;
- A mix of male and female students;
- A mix of students of married and single status that would create differences in responsibility and time availability;
- Students with varied status in society with social commitments and responsibilities that could affect their learning environment and competing interests.

It is possible that the general distribution of the students could cover a region, a whole country and for some programmes, many countries. They may be away from the institution offering the programme, in urban or rural setting, with varying learning facilities. The educational background of the learners may also vary. An open learning institution would bring in students with a wide range of basic education and language competence. On the other hand, in a dual mode system, admissions might be standardised on specific examination grades, with a specific minimum cut off point.

In terms of professional/occupational background, it is possible that in the case of some programmes, the students may have undertaken some professional training or could already be employed. They may have varied aspirations and motivation for joining the distance education programme. Considering the varied backgrounds of the students of such programmes, it is important to understand our learners.

## Objectives

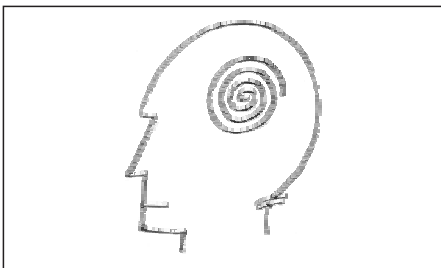
At the end of the section, you will be able to

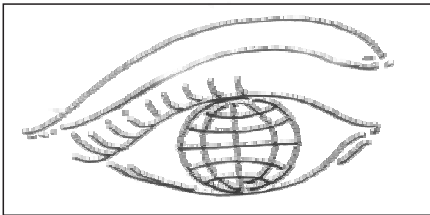
- Discuss the importance of understanding our learners;
- List various factors that need be known about learners;
- Explain how adults learn; and
- Prepare a generic picture of the target learners.

## Why is it important to know our learners?

Given the wide range, background and interests of the learners, it is important to know our learners so that we understand their:

- educational and social background;
- present knowledge level;
- learning needs and their learning styles;
- values, attitudes, and their cultural background;
- motivation and desire for learning.





Information about our learners would be useful in defining our learning objectives and in determining our mode of communication as well as in designing the learner support system.

### **What do we need to know about our learners?**

There are different aspects of our learners that we need to know about. But some of the most important ones are:

#### ***Demographic factors such as,***

- What age group?
- What sex, marital status?
- What occupations (if any)?
- What educational and income background?

#### ***Motivation factors such as,***

- Why do they want to learn?
- What are their aspirations?
- What are their hopes and expectations?
- How would the programme relate to their lives and their work?

#### ***Learning factors such as,***

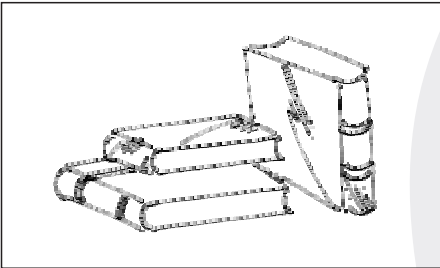
- What learning styles do they have?
- What learning skills do they have?

#### ***Subject background such as,***

- What knowledge and skills do they already have in the subject?
- How do they feel about the programme?
- What personal interests and experiences do they have that could be relevant?

#### ***Resource factors such as,***

- When, where and how will they be learning?
- Who will be paying their fees and expenses?
- How much time will they have for the programme?
- What access do they have to media/facilities?
- What access will they have to human support - counsellors, other learners?



### **How will we collect information?**

There are different ways in which we can collect information about our learners. Some of these include the following:

- Meeting some of the prospective learners and discussing with them (individually and as a group) to know what they would like from the course or the programme and what they already know/feel about the subject;
- Sending a questionnaire to the prospective learners and trying to elicit the information we need. If this can be followed up by discussion with the learners, so much the better;
- Making a summary of the student enrolment and personal data to identify students' characteristics/profile;
- Making a summary of any surveys, which may have been done by institutions in relation to students' characteristics/profile;
- Keeping in touch with our learners- through meetings or by reading and commenting on their assignments- once they start working on the materials.

### **How do adults learn?**

An adult learns differently from a child for an adult is a developed individual. However, there are certain characteristics that are common to the learning of all of us. Thus it is important to understand the following:

**Self-directed learning:** Adults have a self-concept and, unlike children, they are less dependent and more self-directed as learners. However, there are social, cultural and gender differences. Learners from certain cultural and social backgrounds exhibit lack of self-confidence and have low self-esteem. By and large, women prefer collaborative learning rather than individualized learning.

**Prior experience:** With the process of growing up, adults gather experiences which are their own. These experiences determine the way one learns and these also facilitate or hinder one's learning. It is important to recognize the varied experiences and perceptions of the adults as they largely affect their learning process.

**Problem-centred learning:** On the whole, adults tend to be more task-centred or problem-centred. Problems and tasks that are more related to one's world of work and life generate interest in adult learners. As a result, learning situations that are based on these problems and tasks contribute to effective learning. People are known to learn best when learning is based on their lived experience.

**Learning by doing:** Adults learn better by using their psychomotor skills and by doing rather than by rote learning. As a result, adults need to feel challenged by giving them opportunities for learning by doing.

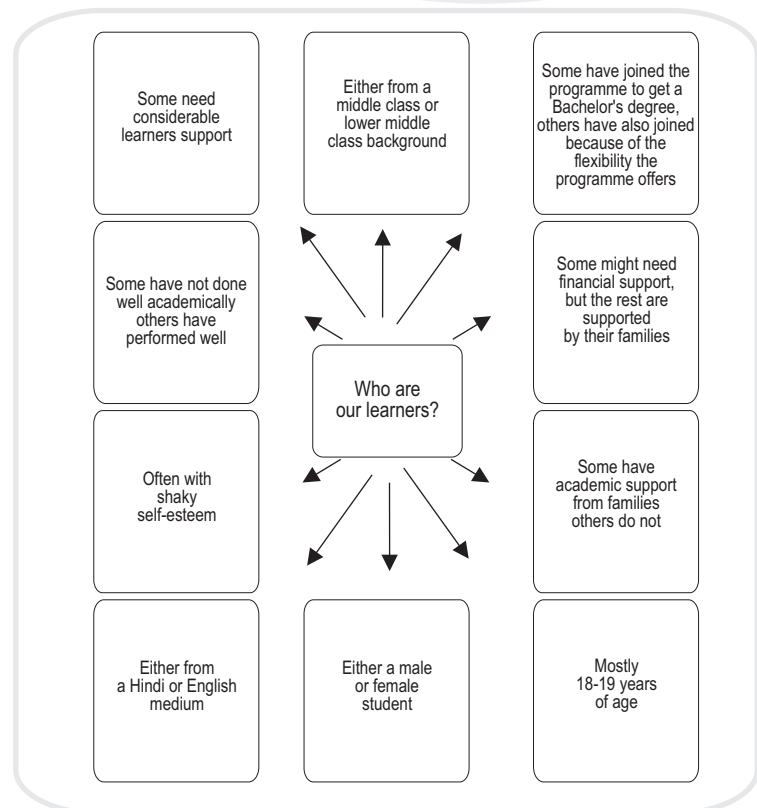
**Preference for democratic style of learning:** Adults prefer a democratic, participatory style rather than an authoritarian style of learning. Rather than the popular perception that views students as 'empty vessels' whose minds have to be filled with knowledge, a dialogical, interactive, cooperative style of learning finds favour with adults.

**Experiencing a sense of progression, a sense of achievement:** Adults learn best when they feel they are making progress. Adults have varying learning needs. But in order to meet those needs, it is important for them to experience a sense of achievement, a feeling that their creative urge is challenged.

### Picturing our learners

It would be useful to have a mental picture of our learners and start identifying their attributes and characteristics. Thus, the following profile has been drawn of students who are enrolled as first year students of a Bachelor's degree programme in a dual mode university in north India.

**Fig 1: Picturing our learners**





## **Implications of understanding learners' characteristics**

The information on the learners would be helpful in developing materials that are learner-sensitive and learner-friendly and in setting up a Learner Support System that is relevant to the needs of the learners. Specifically, it would enable us to:

- understand the language level that would be easily understood by the learners in comprehending concepts, new information, theory, etc.;
- understand the entry level of the learners with regard to knowledge and skills so as to build on what the learners already know or possess;
- include examples that are based on learners' experiences;
- include references and further readings that the learners are able to access within their learning environment;
- present information in a manner that would minimise their learning difficulties;
- develop materials that would ensure interaction between the learner and the text;
- evolve a Learner Support System that is sensitive to the learners' needs;
- develop a system that ensures regular feedback on the quality of materials that are issued as well as students' perceptions on the efficacy of the Learner Support System.

By applying the principles and steps outlined above, it is possible to effect dramatic improvements in quality and learner centredness of self-learning materials prepared by many an open and distance learning system, whether single or dual mode.

In the next section we will discuss the concept of instructional design for multimedia.