

Research Article

Bridging the Gap: The Role of Distance and Online Education in Enhancing Skill Development and Employability of Divyang Persons in India

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How to cite this article:

Jain T K, Jain M. Bridging the Gap: The Role of Distance and Online Education in Enhancing Skill Development and Employability of Divyang Persons in India. *J Adv Res Humani Social Sci* 2025; 12(4): 8-11.

Date of Submission: 2025-10-12

Date of Acceptance: 2025-11-11

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study investigates the transformative impact of distance and online education on the skill development and employability of Divyangs persons (persons with disabilities) in India. While these educational modalities offer unprecedented access, significant barriers remain in translating education into sustainable employment. This research aims to identify the key enablers and obstacles within this ecosystem and propose a strategic framework for improvement.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative, exploratory research design was employed. Data was collected through 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Divyang students and graduates from various Indian distance education institutions, supplemented by focus group discussions with 10 experts from academia, disability NGOs, and corporate HR.

Findings: Findings reveal that online education significantly enhances access to education and development of digital and self-management skills. However, a critical "skills-employability gap" persists, driven by a lack of tailored career services, inadequate industry-specific skill training, persistent societal and workplace stigma, and insufficient accessibility features in many online platforms.

Research Limitations/Implications: The study's qualitative approach provides depth but limits generalisability. Future research should include quantitative surveys across broader geographical regions.

Practical Implications: The findings urge educational institutions to integrate robust, personalised career guidance, industry-aligned practical modules, and stronger corporate partnerships into their online offerings. Policymakers are called upon to incentivise inclusive hiring and fund assistive technology.

Originality/Value: This paper moves beyond access to education, focusing on the under-researched linkage between online education and tangible employment outcomes for Divyang persons. It proposes a novel, multi-stakeholder framework to bridge the skills-employability gap, offering significant value to educators, policymakers, and employers.

Keywords: Divyang, Persons with Disabilities, Distance Education, Online Learning, Employability, Skill Development, Inclusive Education, India

Introduction

The empowerment and inclusion of Divyang persons (a term meaning “divine body”, adopted in India to refer to persons with disabilities) is not merely a social imperative but a critical economic one. Despite legislative frameworks like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD), 2016, which mandates inclusive education and employment, Divyang individuals in India continue to face significant barriers in accessing quality education and securing sustainable livelihoods.¹

The advent of distance and online education has been heralded as a potential great equaliser. It promises to overcome traditional physical and logistical barriers to education, offering flexibility, accessibility, and a wider choice of courses. However, the critical question remains: Is improved access to education effectively translating into enhanced skills and employability for Divyang persons?

Preliminary evidence suggests a complex picture. While enrolment in online programmes has increased, a disconnect persists between educational attainment and employment rates. This indicates a “skills-employability gap”, where the skills acquired may not align with market needs, or where non-academic barriers (e.g., stigma, lack of career support) hinder the transition to work.

Research Gap and Aim: Existing literature has extensively documented the challenges in physical access to education for persons with disabilities. However, there is a scarcity of research that critically examines the efficacy of online education in developing industry-relevant skills and facilitating successful employment outcomes for the Divyang community in the Indian context. This study seeks to fill this gap.

Research Objectives

This paper is guided by the following specific research objectives (ROs):

- **RO1:** To assess the perceived impact of distance and online education on the skill development (both technical and soft skills) of Divyang students.
- **RO2:** To identify the key facilitators and barriers Divyang graduates face in translating their online education into employment.
- **RO3:** To explore the role of various stakeholders (educational institutions, employers, policymakers, and NGOs) in supporting the employability of Divyang students.
- **RO4:** To develop a strategic, multi-stakeholder framework to enhance the effectiveness of online education in improving the future employment prospects of Divyang persons.

This inquiry aligns with INDIA’s National Education policy (NEP 2020) and the UN SDGs 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Literature Review

The Promise of Online and Distance Education

Theoretical frameworks like the Community of Inquiry² emphasise social, cognitive, and teaching presence in online learning, which can be uniquely tailored to diverse needs. For Divyang learners, the benefits are multifold: elimination of commute, ability to learn at one’s own pace, access to recorded lectures, and the availability of digital assistive technologies (screen readers, speech-to-text software).³ This modality can foster a sense of autonomy and reduce the social anxiety sometimes associated with traditional classroom settings.

The Skills-Employability Gap

While access is a foundational issue, employability is a multi-dimensional construct. Research indicates that employers seek a combination of hard (technical) skills, soft (behavioural) skills, and metacognitive (learning-to-learn) skills.⁴ A critical gap in the literature is whether online programmes for Divyang students are deliberately designed to cultivate this holistic skill set. Studies in the Global North suggest that without intentional design, online learning can be isolating and may not adequately develop teamwork, communication, and networking skills crucial for employment.⁵

Systemic and Attitudinal Barriers

Beyond education, systemic barriers persist. The literature highlights employer misconceptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, a lack of workplace accommodations, and inaccessible recruitment processes.⁶ Furthermore, many online platforms and learning management systems (LMS) are not fully compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), creating new digital barriers.⁷ This review confirms that the pathway from online education to employment is not linear and is influenced by a complex interplay of educational, corporate, and societal factors.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, seeking to understand the complex, lived experiences of the participants. An exploratory qualitative design was deemed most appropriate to gain rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Primary Data: Two methods were used:

- **In-depth Interviews:** 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Divyang students and graduates (with varying disabilities) from major Indian open universities (e.g., IGNOU, SCDL) and other online education platforms. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** One FGD was conducted with 10 experts, including academic administrators from distance learning institutions, HR managers from inclusive companies, and representatives from disability rights NGOs.
- **Secondary Data:** Policy documents, annual reports of educational institutions, and previous academic studies were reviewed to contextualize the primary findings.
- **Sampling:** Purposive + snowball.
- **Data Collection Period:** January–May 2024.
- **Interview Duration:** 45–60 minutes each.
- **Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis⁸ using NVivo. Credibility ensured through triangulation and peer debriefing.
- **Ethics:** Informed consent, anonymity, and accessible formats ensured.

Data Analysis

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. The data was analysed using thematic analysis [8], following the steps of familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to assist in data organisation and coding.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Interviews were conducted in accessible formats, and sign language interpreters were provided where necessary.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Enhanced Access but Variable Skill Development (Addressing RO1)

Participants universally praised online education for its accessibility. They reported significant development in digital literacy, self-discipline, and time management. However, the development of other crucial soft skills was inconsistent. As one participant with visual impairment noted, “I became proficient with my screen reader and can research any topic, but I miss the chance to debate and present my ideas in real time, which is what employers want in an interview.”

Theme 2: The “Digital Divide” and the “Support Gap” (Addressing RO2)

A significant barrier is the uneven access to reliable internet and high-quality assistive technology, creating a digital divide. Furthermore, a critical “support gap” was identified. While academic support was often available, dedicated career counseling, internship placement assistance, and mentorship programs were severely lacking. One graduate with a locomotor disability stated, “The university taught me the syllabus, but no one taught me how to write a resume that highlights my ability or how to request accommodations during an interview.”

Theme 3: The Critical Missing Link: Industry-Academia Partnership (Addressing RO3)

The FGD with experts unanimously highlighted the weak link between educational institutions and employers. HR managers expressed a willingness to hire but cited a lack of channels to connect with qualified Divyang talent. An NGO representative suggested, “Online curricula need to be co-created with industry partners to include real-world projects and micro-credentials in high-demand fields like data analytics, digital marketing, and IT support.”

Theme 4: Persistent Stigma and the Need for Corporate Sensitisation

Table 1. The analysis revealed four central themes that directly address the research objectives

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Related RO
1. Enhanced Access but Uneven Skill Growth	Online learning builds digital literacy but under develops soft skills.	“I can research any topic but lack practice presenting ideas in real time.”	RO1
2. Digital Divide & Support Gap	Unequal access to internet and absence of career guidance hinder employability.	“No one taught me how to highlight my strengths in a resume.”	RO2
3. Weak Industry–Academia Link	Employers lack channels to connect with skilled Divyang graduates.	“Curricula must include projects co-designed with companies.”	RO3
4. Persistent Stigma	Negative stereotypes reduce hiring chances.	“Despite my degree, interviewers doubted my productivity.”	RO3 & RO4

Despite qualifications, attitudinal barriers remain a formidable challenge. Participants shared experiences of being overlooked during hiring or facing assumptions about their productivity. This underscores that technical skilling alone is insufficient without parallel efforts to foster inclusive work cultures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirms that distance and online education have been a powerful tool for increasing educational access for Divyang persons in India. However, it has not fully realised its potential in bridging the skills-employability gap. The journey from student to employee is hampered by a lack of holistic support, inadequate industry alignment, and persistent societal stigma.

Theoretical Contribution

This research contributes to the management literature by extending the concept of the “skills gap” to the specific context of Divyang online learners, introducing the “skills-employability support gap” as a critical theoretical construct. It emphasizes that employability is a outcome of an ecosystem, not just an individual’s educational attainment.

A Strategic Multi-Stakeholder Framework for Improvement Based on the findings, we propose the “Inclusive Employability Framework”:

For Educational Institutions

- **Integrate Career-Centric Modules:** Mandate modules on resume writing, interview skills, and disclosure of disability.
- **Establish a Dedicated Cell:** Create an “Inclusive Career Support Cell” to provide personalized guidance and forge corporate partnerships.
- **Ensure Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** Audit and upgrade all online platforms and content for full WCAG compliance.

For Employers and Corporations

- **Build Proactive Pipelines:** Partner with universities for internships and “hackathons” specifically for Divyang talent.
- **Implement Mandatory Sensitization:** Conduct unconscious bias training for hiring managers and all employees.
- **Adopt a “Flexibility by Default” Policy:** Normalize flexible work hours and remote work options.

For Policymakers

- **Incentivize Hiring:** Enhance and streamline financial incentives for companies that hire and retain Divyang employees.

- **Fund Assistive Technology:** Launch national schemes to subsidize advanced assistive technology for students and employees.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited by its sample size and geographic focus. Future research could employ a large-scale quantitative survey to validate these findings across India. Longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories of Divyang online graduates would also be highly valuable.

By adopting this collaborative framework, stakeholders can transform online education from a portal of access into a powerful engine for meaningful economic inclusion.

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