



IGNOU's Regional Contributions: Transforming Education and Skill Development in Sikkim

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pivotal role of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in addressing educational and skill development challenges in Sikkim, India. Leveraging its open and distance learning framework, IGNOU has significantly enhanced access to higher education, vocational training, and inclusivity for marginalized communities. Using qualitative methods (interviews, focus group discussions) and quantitative analysis (enrollment data), the research highlights IGNOU's efforts and achievements, such as improved Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) and initiatives for human resource developments. The findings underscore IGNOU's transformative impact on higher educational access, development and growth in Sikkim while also addressing localized challenges like infrastructural constraints. This localized perspective offers valuable insights to the educators and stakeholders for strengthening delivery of higher education in the remote regions.

Keywords: Educational Access, Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), Higher Education, IGNOU, Inclusivity in Education, Marginalized Communities, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Regional Centre Gangtok, Sikkim, Skill Development, Teacher Training, Vocational Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indira Gandhi National Open University Act, 1985 was enacted to establish Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) as a National Open University, only one of its kind in the entire country, to promote open and distance education in India. The Act primarily focussed on the followings:

- Expanding Educational Access: Integrating open and distance learning systems to increase higher education opportunities (Ministry of Education, 1985).
- Ensuring Standards: Maintaining uniformity and quality in distance education across the country (Ministry of Education, 1985).

The Act grants IGNOU with the authority to award degrees, conduct examinations, and regulate admissions with nationwide territorial jurisdiction for its operation. It emphasizes leveraging technology to enhance educational access and lifelong learning. In pursuance to this Act, IGNOU came into existence as a Central University under the aegis of Ministry of Education (erstwhile MHRD), Government of India in 1985. As per the objectives inscribed in the University Act of 1985, the IGNOU is providing seamless access to sustainable and learner-centric quality education in the country through Online, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode by using innovative technologies and methodologies. Accordingly, its efforts and contribution has been widely acknowledged with awards and appreciation worldwide.

With its main headquarters located at the capital city, IGNOU operates through a network of 56 Regional Centres (RCs) established at every States and Union Territories of the country together with 11 Recognized Regional Centres in the Indian Army, Indian Navy and Assam Rifles. Every Regional Centre (RC) is supported by a network of the Learners Support Centres (LSCs, *commonly called as Study Centres*). The vast network of RCs and LSCs extends the outreach of IGNOU to the hitherto deprived rural, remote, socially and physically disadvantaged segments of population, providing them with access to quality and cost-effective higher education in a flexible manner.

The establishment of IGNOU's Regional Centre Gangtok in the year 2000 extended educational opportunities to entire areas of Sikkim thereby making significant contribution in bridging educational gaps in the state. Despite its remarkable contributions, specific challenges in operational outreach and infrastructure persist,

particularly in regions like Sikkim. In this context, this paper explores the role of IGNOU in addressing educational inequities and skill development gaps in Sikkim. While several studies highlight IGNOU's general contributions to ODL in the country, a detailed localized analysis and its impact on remote states like Sikkim is lacking. This research accordingly brings out a detailed account of IGNOU's initiatives and contribution in Sikkim inclusive of access to the higher education, vocational training, and inclusivity for marginalized groups.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper seeks to find out contributions of IGNOU in the state of Sikkim with the main objectives considered appropriate and relevant as listed here-below:-

- (a) Evaluation of IGNOU's contributions to the development of the higher education in Sikkim.
- (b) Assessment of IGNOU's role in expanding educational opportunities in Sikkim.
- (c) Analysis on effectiveness of IGNOU's partnership with state institutions in offering vocational, skill-based, and teacher training programmes in Sikkim.
- (d) Investigation on impact of IGNOU's initiatives on the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in Sikkim.
- (e) Assessment of the IGNOU's contributions to the professional development through specialized training and certifications.

Through these objectives, the study captures IGNOU's efforts and contributions in fostering educational development in the state of Sikkim.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review undertaken provides a critical examination of existing studies relevant to the research topic. For this study, the focus was emphasized on analysis of the role and contributions of IGNOU in Sikkim. A structured literature review aligned with the key components and related aspects of objectives covered in the research paper are furnished here-below.

(a) Organizational structure of IGNOU: IGNOU, established under the IGNOU Act of 1985, operates as a National Resource Centre of higher education functioning with online and ODL system with a global presence. Unlike conventional universities, IGNOU integrates innovative technologies like teleconferencing and multimedia to enhance the learning experience. Its decentralized network of Regional and Study Centres ensures accessibility across India. Additionally, its autonomy and governance model allow it to align with national educational policies while maintaining operational independence, making it unparalleled in its scale and scope (IGNOU, 2017a). The mission, vision, objectives, organizational structure, prominent feature and territorial jurisdiction for its operation are furnished in the Box -1 placed here-below:-

Box-1: IGNOU's Structural Mandate as per IGNOU Act, 1985

- 1. Vision:** IGNOU, the National Resource Centre for Open and Distance Learning (ODL), with international recognition and presence, shall provide seamless access to sustainable and learner-centric quality education, skill upgradation and training to all, by using innovative technologies and methodologies, and ensuring convergence of existing systems for massive human resource required for promoting integrated national development and global understanding.
- 2. Mission:** To advance frontiers of knowledge and promote its dissemination through sustainable Open and Distance Learning systems, seamlessly accessible to all, including those hitherto unreached, from among whom the leaders and innovators of tomorrow will emerge, the University shall:
 - i. Strengthen the development of the National Resource Centre as a proactive role model for high quality and learner-centric Open and Distance Learning system;
 - ii. Share professional capabilities and resources to improve standards of distance education in the country;
 - iii. Periodically assess and accredit institutions of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to promote centres of excellence in the country;
 - iv. Develop networks, using emerging technologies and methods, with global reach for effective programme delivery;
 - v. Provide an intelligent and flexible system of education to meet the challenges of access and equity, and work towards development of a knowledge society;
 - vi. Forge convergence of all systems and work for seamless education across national boundaries to develop global collaboration and partnership;
 - vii. Take education to the hitherto unreached and promote community participation for local development through life-coping skills;
 - viii. Provide specific need-based education and training opportunities for continuous professional development and skill upgradation to in-service professionals; and
 - ix. Strive towards continuous development of methods and strategies for research and development for generation of knowledge in frontier areas, including Open and Distance Learning.

3. Objectives

- a) Democratizing higher education by taking it to the doorsteps of the learners.
- b) Providing access to high and quality education to all who seek it irrespective of age, region, religion and gender.
- c) Promoting need-based academic programmes by giving professional and vocational orientation to the courses.
- d) Promoting and developing distance education in India.
- e) Setting and maintaining standards of distance education in the country.

4. Prominent Features

- (a) International jurisdiction.
- (b) Flexible admission rules.
- (c) Individualized study: flexible in terms of place, pace and duration of study.
- (d) Use of latest information and communication technology.
- (e) Nationwide student support services network.
- (f) Cost-effective programmes.
- (g) Resource sharing, collaboration and networking with Conventional Universities, Open Universities, and other educational institutions/organizations.

5. Organisational Structure: The President of India is the Visitor of the University. The Board of Management is the principal decision-making body of the University. The authorities of the University include Board of Management, Academic Council, Finance Committee, Planning Board, Research Council, Distance Education Council and Schools of Studies. The overall functioning of the University is managed by these statutory authorities.

6. Territorial Jurisdiction: Unlike any conventional university, IGNOU's jurisdiction covers the entire Union of India. Its organizational network, therefore extends throughout the country. The IGNOU Act provides for the establishment of Study Centres in different parts of the country depending upon needs and requirements. To coordinate and supervise the work of Study Centres, provisions have been made for the establishment of Regional Centres.

Source: IGNOU (2017b & 2018), IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok Profile/Brochure, 2017.

(b) Expanding Access to Education and Fostering GER in India: The New National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to transform the Indian education system by making it more inclusive, flexible, multidisciplinary, and aligned with the needs of the 21st century. It emphasizes increasing the GER in higher education to 50% by 2035. IGNOU, with its robust open and distance learning framework, supports this goal by offering affordable, flexible, and accessible education to a diverse population, including those in remote and marginalized regions (IGNOU, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2020). IGNOU aligns with NEP 2020's vision of promoting multidisciplinary and holistic education, offers a wide range of programmes across disciplines. Its modular programmes and credit transfer systems enable students to design personalized learning paths that cater to their interests and career aspirations (MHRD, 2020). Furthermore, IGNOU's network of Learner Support Centres has contributed to the improved GER in Sikkim by reaching learners in remote areas (Rai et al., 2020).

(c) Skill Development and Vocational Training: The vocational education plays a crucial role in the socio-economic development of regions like Sikkim, where opportunities for industrial employment are limited. IGNOU's partnerships with the State Institute of Capacity Building (SICB) and the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship have enabled skill-based education for local communities (Sharma & Das, 2018). Studies indicate that IGNOU's flexible and localized curriculum has empowered learners by aligning skill development programmes with regional economic needs (Roy, 2015). IGNOU has partnered with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) to develop entrepreneurial skills among students through inclusive education. This collaboration aims to bridge vocational and academic education, fulfilling NEP 2020's objective of integrating vocational training with higher education to enhance employability (The Telegraph India, 2022).

(d) Teacher Education and Professional Development: The teacher training is essential for improving the quality of education in rural areas. IGNOU has been instrumental in training untrained in-service teachers in Sikkim through programmes such as the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed) (Bhattacharya, 2017). These programmes have enhanced the teaching capabilities of educators, benefiting the state's education system.

(e) Inclusivity and Access to Education: IGNOU has prioritized inclusivity through initiatives such as fee waivers for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students under the ST/SC Sub-Plan. Such measures have significantly reduced financial barriers, enabling marginalized groups to access higher education (Singh & Kumar, 2020). IGNOU provides flexible learning opportunities that address geographical and economic constraints. Its low-cost programmes make higher education affordable, especially for students from rural and remote areas. With over 200 academic programmes, IGNOU caters to a wide range of learners, including professionals, homemakers, and those pursuing higher education alongside employment (IGNOU, 2023). NEP 2020 prioritizes inclusion and equity in education. IGNOU's reservation policies, low

tuition fees, and focus on underserved communities, including women, differently-abled individuals, and SC/ST, perfectly aligns with this national goal and policy. IGNOU's initiatives contribute significantly to bridging socio-economic and gender disparities in higher education (NIEPA, 2021).

(f) Leveraging Technology in Education: NEP 2020 emphasizes the integration of technology in education. IGNOU's digital initiatives, including online courses, virtual classrooms, and the e-Gyankosh digital repository, provide learners with interactive and flexible learning environments. Additionally, IGNOU actively participates in the government's SWAYAM and DIKSHA platforms, extending its reach to millions of learners. IGNOU has leveraged digital platforms such as online courses, e-Gyankosh (a digital repository), and the SWAYAM portal to reach learners across the country. These initiatives enhance learning experiences and promote inclusivity in education (MHRD, 2022).

(g) Support for Open and Distance Learning: IGNOU is a member of international organizations like the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and is globally recognized for its innovative contributions to ODL and lifelong learning (COL, 2022). NEP 2020 recognizes the importance of ODL in achieving its objectives. As the apex institution for ODL in India, IGNOU has tasked with setting quality benchmarks and supporting other ODL institutions to maintain high standards in education delivery (MHRD, 2020).

The reviewed literature underscores IGNOU's pivotal role in addressing educational inequities and promoting socio-economic development through its ODL framework. The studies highlight key contributions in areas such as fostering inclusivity, enhancing GER, supporting teacher training, advancing skill development, and leveraging technology to widen access to quality education. However, existing research predominantly provides a macro-level overview, leaving a gap in understanding the localized impact of IGNOU's initiatives, particularly in remote and geographically challenging regions like Sikkim. This study addresses this gap by offering an in-depth analysis of IGNOU's contributions to education and skill development in Sikkim, thereby providing actionable insights for policymakers and educators to strengthen education delivery in such contexts.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study involves a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively address the objectives. It adopts an exploratory and descriptive design to evaluate the contributions of the IGNOU in fostering higher education, vocational training, and skill development in Sikkim. The methodology is structured to reflect the data collection process exclusively carried out at the IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok and the insights gathered through discussions with its Senior Regional Director and staff.

(a) Research Design: The research employs a qualitative approach to understand the operational framework, contributions, and challenges of IGNOU in Sikkim. The study relies on descriptive methods to document IGNOU's initiatives and an exploratory approach to identify areas for improvement.

(b) Data Collection Methods: The study employed semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions for collection of primary data from the IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok. The contact with the Senior Regional Director and selected staff members was focused on review of their experiences, observations and institutional challenges encountered while gathering collective insights into the Regional Centre's achievements and operational hurdles. The secondary data were collected from document analysis comprising institutional reports and enrollment data maintained at the Regional Centre. Besides, official correspondence related to partnerships with state institutions and land allocation was analysed. The literature review from published sources comprised on the role of IGNOU and its broader contributions through open and distance learning mode in the country with special references to Sikkim.

(c) Sampling Methodology: The staff and administrators directly involved in the operations of IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok taken as population of study, the purposive sampling technique was adopted. The interviews and discussions were held with the Senior Regional Director and two supporting staff having firsthand knowledge and experience of IGNOU's operations in Sikkim.

(d) Data Analysis: The analysis of qualitative data was carried on thematic analysis basis with key themes such as inclusivity, operational challenges and infrastructural needs as identified during interviews and discussions. Further, the content analysis was undertaken on institutional documents thereby highlighting contributions of IGNOU to the region. In case of quantitative analysis, the data on total number of student enrolled annually from the year 2001 to 2023 under January and July cycles were compiled and analysed.

(e) Ethical Considerations: The verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews and discussions together with access to the institutional documents and reports with assurance on use of data exclusively in the research studies.

The combined qualitative and quantitative approaches enabled a detailed understanding of the institution's achievements and challenges within the localized context. It reflects a focused exploration of IGNOU's contributions in the state of Sikkim, relying on firsthand accounts and institutional data from the Regional Centre Gangtok. It allows for a holistic understanding by combining numerical data with personal experiences and perspectives. The review, analysis and findings of the current study carried out as per the objectives are summarized in the following paragraphs.

5. ANALYSIS, FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study, aligned with its objectives, are categorized into four major areas for a comprehensive analysis and discussion. These categories focus on IGNOU's contributions to Sikkim from both general and regional perspectives, its role in enhancing the state's Gross Enrolment Ratio, and the challenges faced in establishing a permanent Regional Centre in Gangtok.

5.1 IGNOU's Contributions to Sikkim: General Perspectives

(a) Facilitation of course development and award of degree to students of the Institute of Hotel Management, Sajong, Rumtek Gangtok, Sikkim under Government of Sikkim & Govt. of India: IGNOU as a partner institution facilitates in development of syllabus of different courses offered by Institute of Hotel Management (IHM), Sikkim under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between IGNOU and National Council of Hotel Management & Catering Technology (NCHMCT), Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. After successful completion of the prescribed course of study and industrial training, students of IHM Sikkim were/are awarded "B.Sc. Degree in Hospitality and Hotel Administration", "Diploma in respective Trade", or "Craft Certificate" by the National Council and the IGNOU, New Delhi (IHM, 2021).

(b) Facilitation of course development and award of certificate/diploma to students of State Institute of Capacity Building (SICB), Karfector, Sikkim: The SICB signed MoU with IGNOU, New Delhi for certification of courses through IGNOU Institute for Vocational Education and Training (IIVET), Shillong, Meghalaya. Accordingly, all the courses, syllabus and curriculum delivered in SICB and Livelihood Schools were approved by IGNOU and the Certificate of Completion were provided upon successful completion of prescribed courses of the studies (Government of Sikkim, 2023).

(c) Training of un-trained in-service government teachers of the Sikkim: On demand from the Education Department, Government of Sikkim, the untrained in-service government teachers of state were trained through enrollment in B.Ed and D.El.Ed programmes of the IGNOU (Bhutia, 2023).

(d) Training and Skill Enhancement of States' Human Resources: Through conduct of skill-based workshop, seminars, conferences, short term trainings, orientations, induction meetings, etc on tie up with several institution of State Government, the IGNOU has been contributing to enhancement of skill and knowledge of the state's human resources (Bhutia, 2023).

(e) Facilitate simultaneous higher studies to the learners of Government Industrial Training Institute (GITI) of Sikkim through tie up with the Skill Development & Entrepreneurship Department, Government of Sikkim: Under the MoU signed by IGNOU, New Delhi and Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, Government of India, the IGNOU-MSDE Centres were established in all the GITIs of Sikkim. Through this mechanism, the learners of the institute are facilitated to pursue higher studies simultaneously under the relevant provision of the University Grants Commission (UGC) for dual degree registration (Bhutia, 2023).

(f) Facilitate training and certification to the nurses of Sikkim Government under Ayushman Bharat Prime Minister Jan Arogya Yojana: Under the Ayushman Bharat Prime Minister Jan Arogya Yojana, the Certificate in Community Health was made compulsory to all State Government sponsored candidates for the purpose of strengthening community health services across the country. In line with this, MoU was signed between Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW), Government of India and IGNOU, New Delhi on 16th March 2017 and in pursuance to which, the university conducted Bridge Program Certificate in Community Health to the State Government sponsored GNMs/BSc Nurses of Sikkim (Bhutia, 2023).

(g) Facilitation of fee exemption to students of ST and SC categories under ST/SC Sub-Plan of Government of India: Within ST/SC Sub Plan, the Government of India provides sponsorship to IGNOU and in turn, it provides fee exemption to the students of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. Under this provision, the students of these communities from state of Sikkim have significantly availed/availing the facilities of fee exemption of their admission and re-registration in select undergraduate degree, certificate and diplomas. Such facilities have benefitted the students of SC and ST communities of Sikkim to pursue and fulfill their aspiration of higher education (Bhutia, 2023).

(h) Increase in GER in higher education of Sikkim: Augmentation of the higher education and increase in state's GER through its Regional Centre Gangtok by facilitating admission of learners in several certificate, diploma and degree programmes of IGNOU (Bhutia, 2023).

5.2 IGNOU's Contributions to Sikkim: Regional Perspectives

(a) Establishment of Regional Centre Gangtok: As defined under Section 2(J) of the IGNOU Act, 1985; 'Regional Centre' means a Centre established and maintained by the IGNOU for the purpose of coordinating and supervising the work of the Study Centres in any region and for performing such other functions as may be conferred on such Centre by the Board of Management (BoM) of the University. The Regional Centres are established with the support and cooperation of the respective State Governments and Union Territories, which are basically responsible for promotion of the ODL system in the State/region,

establishment, development, maintenance and monitoring of LSCs. A Regional Centre is the sub-office of the University for all practical purposes, and also intended to act as resource centre of the University in respective regions. The RCs are primarily responsible for the delivery of programmes and student support services and organization of staff development programmes. The major activities of a RC can be broadly categorized as academic, administrative and promotional. The RCs are responsible for the promotion of the Open University system; development, maintenance and monitoring of Study Centres and Student Support Services; and organisation of human resource development programmes in the region including training of the staff, coordinators, academic counsellors and other functionaries (IGNOU, 2017; Bhutia, 2023).

In case of state of Sikkim, the activities of IGNOU were operational since 1991 with its Study Centre established at Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College, (erstwhile Sikkim Government College), Tadong, Gangtok but in order to enhance support services to learners at every nook and corner of the state, Regional Centre Gangtok was established on 7th December 2000. The Regional Centre is performing roles as per the mandate thereby augmenting higher education in Sikkim.

(b) Establishment of LSCs for learner support services in Sikkim: The Government of Sikkim officially announced the implementation of 'The Sikkim (Re-Organization of Districts) Act, 2021' through a notification issued by the Land Revenue & Disaster Management Department thereby creating two new districts namely Pakyong and Soreng (Government of Sikkim, 2021). Prior to this, IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok established LSCs in all four districts of the state for providing opportunities and access to students to pursue higher education through ODL mode. A total of twenty-six LSCs were established in the span of two decades of its existence as furnished in the Table-1 placed here-below:-

Table 1: LSCs of IGNOU established in the state of Sikkim excluding IGNOU-MSME Centres

Sr.	LSC Code	Estb. Year	LSC Type	LSC Name and Address	District Covered	Current Status
1	2401	1990	Regular	Sikkim Government College, Tadong	East	Active
2	2402	2002	Special	Government Senior Secondary School, Mangan	North	Closed
3	2403	2002	Regular	Government Senior Secondary School, Soreng	West	Closed
4	2404	2002	Regular	Sikkim Government College, Namchi	South	Active
5	2405	2002	Programme	Loyola College of Education, Namchi	South	Closed
6	2406	2006	Programme	State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), Jorethang	South	Closed
7	2407	2007	Regular	Sikkim Government College, Rhenock	East	Closed
8	2408	2009	Regular	Government Senior Secondary School, Temi	South	Closed
9	2409	2009	Programme	Spastics Society of Sikkim, Gangtok	East	Closed
10	2410	2009	Special	District Disability Rehabilitation Centre (DDRC), STNM Hospital, Gangtok	East	Closed
11	2411	2009	Regular	Paljor Namgyal Girls' Higher Secondary School, Gangtok	East	Closed
12	2412	2010	Programme	State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Gangtok	East	Closed
13	2413	2010	Programme	Sikkim Government B.Ed. College, Soreng	West	Closed
14	2414	2011	Programme	District Institute of Education & Training (DIET), Gangtok	East	Closed
15	2415	2011	Programme	District Institute of Education & Training (DIET), Gyalshing	West	Closed
16	2416	2011	Programme	District Institute of Education & Training (DIET), Namchi	South	Closed
17	2417	2013	Regular	Damber Singh Degree College, Samdur	East	Closed
18	2418	2013	Special	Sikkim Government College, Gyalshing	West	Closed
19	2419	2017	Programme	Government Senior Secondary School, Namchi	South	Closed
20	2420	2017	Regular	Sikkim University (SU), Gangtok	East	Active
21	2021	2017	Programme	Sikkim Government College of Nursing, STNM Hospital, Gangtok	East	Closed
22	2423	2021	Regular	Sikkim Government College, Gyalshing	West	Active

Source: IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok, Sikkim

The network of IGNOU LSCs in Sikkim has significantly helped and supported the learners from all nook and corner of the state. The UGC (Open and Distance Learning) Regulations, 2017 and subsequent amendments stipulated that study centres can be established only in colleges or institutions affiliated with a university, in order to ensure maintenance of high standard of education and reliable interface between teachers and learners, facilitating effective teacher-learning experiences (University Grants Commission, 2017). In view of this, the IGNOU undertook streamlining of its LSCs and several of those established in Sikkim were closed. However, prior to this process, LSCs established for delivery of teacher education at DIETs and SCERT were closed upon completion of project purpose executed under MoU. Whereas, the Special Study Centre established in 2014 at Sikkim Government College, Gyalshing was upgraded to a regular centre in the year 2021. Currently, IGNOU RC Gangtok is supported by only four active LSCs bearing Code Numbers 2401, 2404, 2420 and 2423 along with four IGNOU-MSDE Centres.

(c) Training of teachers through teacher education programmes: IGNOU allotted two hundred seats in B.Ed programme without Entrance Test for untrained in-service teachers of the Sikkim Government nominated/sponsored through its Human Resource Development Department (HRDD) from the years 2003 to 2005, which further continued from 2010 to 2015 upon further request. Under the Regional Centre Gangtok, around 2500 in-service teachers of Sikkim were trained through B.Ed programme including those enrolled through the Entrance Test. Whereas, in pursuance to the Memorandum of Collaboration (MoC) signed between the IGNOU and HRDD, Government of Sikkim, the untrained in-service elementary teachers of state government were enrolled in D.El.Ed programme of IGNOU in phased manner from the year 2013 to 2017. For this purpose, the IGNOU Programme Study Centres were established in DIET-Gangtok; DIET-Gyalshing and DIET-Namchi with an intake of 100 (one hundred) seats in each centre. Around 350 (three hundred fifty) in-service government teachers were trained or/and completed the D.El.Ed programme from Sikkim. In line with the policy of the State Government, Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education (DECE) programme of IGNOU has been considered as pre-requisite criteria in appointment of teachers in the pre-primary section of all government schools in Sikkim (Bhutia, 2023).

(d) Programme in community health: The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) signed a MoU with IGNOU to train 14.4 lakh healthcare workers by 2025 under the 'Skills for Life, Save a Life' initiative. The program includes 10 short-term courses, with MoHFW providing financial support for training and certification. The initiative addresses the growing demand for skilled healthcare professionals, especially for 1.5 lakh planned Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs) (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2018). Accordingly, IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok conducted Bridge Program on Certificate in Community Health for Nurses (BPCCHN) to the State Government sponsored GNMs/BSc Nurses of Sikkim. A total of 166 (one hundred sixty-six) mid-level health workers completed the programme during the year 2018 and 2020 from IGNOU Programme Study Centre established under Sikkim Government College of Nursing, STNM Hospital, Gangtok and those qualified thereon were engaged by the state government at its various Primary Health Sub-Centres in Sikkim (Bhutia, 2023).

(e) Capacity Building through Strategic Partnership: The SICB collaboration with IGNOU's Institute of Vocational Education and Training (IIVET), Shillong has come as an innovative capacity-building initiatives to address unemployment. This partnership standardized training, and enhanced employability by providing nationally recognized certificates ensuring quality assessment. It targeted state's youth aged 18–to 34 years, especially school dropouts or those unable to pursue higher studies, offering short-term courses with hostel facilities and a ₹2,500 monthly stipend for maintaining 85% attendance. The SICB emphasizes skill development in the vocational fields like tourism, agriculture, construction, and retail. By 2011, 1,607 trainees were successfully placed, with many starting independent ventures. This initiative being fully funded by the Government of Sikkim, has been successful with each department having allocated 2% of its budget for capacity building of human resources (Government of Sikkim, 2012; The Arunachal Times, 2012). In alignment with Sikkim's youth empowerment policy, it significantly addressed skill gaps, particularly targeting the informal workforce and unorganized sectors, thereby equipping the state's youth with practical, industry-relevant skills (Sikkim NOW!, 2011). Similar strategic collaborations of other state's institutions with IGNOU like IHM, Sikkim has come to enhance vocational education and skill development in the state, meeting national standards of training programs so delivered.

(f) Establishment of LSC for skill and entrepreneurship: The MoU signed between the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE), Government of India and IGNOU on January 18, 2022, aims to strengthen vocational and technical training in India by linking it to higher education. This initiative aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.4 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which target increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education, including vocational education, to 50% by 2035 (PIB, 2022). Accordingly, IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok established four IGNOU-MSDE Centres in Sikkim comprising one at Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Kendra (PMKK), Medhavi Foundation, Singtam, Sikkim while one each at the Government Industrial Training Institutes located at Rangpo, Namchi and Gyalshing.

5.3 IGNOU's Contributions in increasing Sikkim's GER

IGNOU offers fresh admission in certificate, diploma and degree programmes twice a year under January and July cycles. However, the undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes requiring completion of studies respectively in span of three and two years also mandates re-registration of learners in the subsequent years, which actually amounts to their continuation in studies. Consequent to establishment of Regional Centre Gangtok, the first batch of admission has only thirty students enrolled in July 2001 session. However, the total admission under different Degree, Diploma and Certificate programmes reached to approximately 48,200 learners till July 2023 session. The number of students enrolled in the fresh admission in both the January and July session along with corresponding Re-registration (RR) since 2001 is presented in the Table-2 placed here-below:-

Table 2: Student Enrollment under IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok: 2001-2023

Sr	Year	January Session			July Session			Grand total with % increase over previous record					
		Fresh	RR	Total	Fresh	RR	Total	Fresh	%↑	RR	%↑	Total	%↑
1	2001	0	0	0	30	0	30	30	0	0	0	30	0
2	2002	360	17	377	22	14	36	382	1273	31	0	413	1377
3	2003	394	94	488	772	16	788	1166	305	110	355	1276	309
4	2004	547	194	741	626	166	792	1173	101	360	327	1533	120
5	2005	736	99	835	943	0	943	1679	143	99	28	1778	116
6	2006	228	10	238	867	699	1566	1095	65	709	716	1804	101
7	2007	72	2	74	833	787	1620	905	83	789	111	1694	94
8	2008	216	0	216	822	705	1527	1038	115	705	89	1743	103
9	2009	621	14	635	1416	726	2142	2037	196	740	105	2777	159
10	2010	822	279	1101	1366	1121	2487	2188	107	1400	189	3588	129
11	2011	1142	342	1484	2297	1384	3681	3439	157	1726	123	5165	144
12	2012	686	625	1311	2155	1939	4094	2841	83	2564	149	5405	105
13	2013	779	476	1255	1869	2255	4124	2648	93	2731	107	5379	100
14	2014	1310	642	1952	1764	1839	3603	3074	116	2481	91	5555	103
15	2015	1239	844	2083	1925	1712	3637	3164	103	2556	103	5720	103
16	2016	476	935	1411	1950	1889	3839	2426	77	2824	110	5250	92
17	2017	434	614	1048	1805	1612	3417	2239	92	2226	79	4465	85
18	2018	666	573	1239	1818	1601	3419	2484	111	2174	98	4658	104
19	2019	718	655	1373	2323	1604	3927	3041	122	2259	104	5300	114
20	2020	844	662	1506	1838	1690	3528	2682	88	2352	104	5034	95
21	2021	883	992	1875	2209	1852	4061	3092	115	2844	121	5936	118
22	2022	587	1062	1649	2029	2082	4111	2616	85	3144	111	5760	97
23	2023	824	768	1592	1852	1936	3788	2676	102	2704	86	5380	93
	Total	14584	9899	24483	33531	27629	61160	48115		37528		85643	

Source: IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok, Sikkim

The GER is a critical metric that reflects the percentage of individuals enrolled in higher education compared to the eligible age group population. The data provided in the table above offers a comprehensive overview of fresh admissions and re-registrations under IGNOU's Regional Centre in Sikkim from 2001 to 2023. A detailed trend analysis on fresh admission and re-registration carried out on decadal basis are furnished here-below:-

- During 2001–2010 (early periods), initial start of 30 fresh admissions in 2001 was a humble beginning. However, by 2010, fresh admissions had risen to 2,188, indicating a nearly exponential growth while Re-registration numbers also increased significantly, reaching 1,400 in 2010.
- During 2011–2020 (middle period), the fresh admissions continued to grow, peaking at 3,092 in 2021. Similarly, the Re-registrations showed consistent improvement, reaching 2,564 in 2012 and continuing at a high level through the decade.
- In the later period of 2021–2023, a slight decline in fresh admissions was observed, with 2,676 students in 2023 compared to the 2021 peak. On the other hand, the Re-registrations remained strong, reflecting sustained engagement and retention among enrolled students.

The steady increase in fresh admissions, particularly during the early and middle periods, reflects the growing reach and necessities of IGNOU's programmes in Sikkim particularly requiring the training of untrained teachers. The high re-registration numbers indicate that students find value in continuing their education and completing their programmes. The data further demonstrates IGNOU's substantial role in increasing Sikkim's GER through the combination of the following mechanisms:-

- (a) Accessibility: The establishment of the Regional Centre and LSCs together with IGNOU's flexible admission policies and affordable fees have made higher education accessible to aspiring general population of state and underserved communities in particular. The programmes offered through remote local LSCs enabled students from remote areas to enroll and continue their higher education.
- (b) Inclusivity: As fee exemptions for SC and ST students under the ST/SC Sub-Plan have significantly reduced financial barriers, this is contributing to higher enrollment among marginalized groups.
- (c) Retention: The high re-registration rates suggest strong student retention, which is crucial for GER improvement as it ensures that learners enrolled complete their degrees.

Besides, IGNOU's focus on skill development and vocational training has also contributed to the GER in Sikkim through the programmes such as the Bridge Certificate in Community Health and partnerships with state institutions for vocational training have attracted non-traditional learners, thereby increasing the overall GER. It is pertinent to state that at the time of IGNOU's operation in the state, there were no university to offer higher education on ODL mode and accordingly the admission in first two decades shows increasing trend.

However, the period from 1992 to 2022 represents a transformative era for higher education in Sikkim, marked by the establishment and growth of universities. During this period, a total of fourteen universities comprising one central university, one state public university and twelve private universities were established (Darjee, 2023). This growth of universities in the state provided opportunities for conventional education on regular basis to prospective students and accordingly, there was decline in fresh admissions from 2021 to 2023 under IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok. This highlights challenges such as competition from other institutions, evolving educational preferences for regular studies and limited outreach in newer regions of the state.

Considering total fresh admissions of 48,115 student enrollment from 2001 to 2023 along with 37,528 re-registrations, the total of 85,643 student enrollment in the state of Sikkim is a significant number as compared to roughly 6.12 lakhs of state's total population recorded under 2011 census. Therefore, the data highlights IGNOU's critical role in improving Sikkim's GER by providing accessible, inclusive, and skill-based education.

Despite challenges such as infrastructure limitations and recent declines in fresh admissions, the overall trend underscores IGNOU's significant contribution to democratizing education in Sikkim. The stakeholders including policymakers can leverage these insights to further strengthen initiatives for higher education in remote regions of the state.

5.4 Challenges in the Permanent Establishment of IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok

Despite its significant contributions to the higher education, professional and skill development of human resources in Sikkim, the permanent establishment of the IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok has faced several challenges, primarily related to securing land for its infrastructure. Since its inception in 2000, the IGNOU Regional Centre Gangtok has operated from rented premises. This arrangement has posed limitations in terms of space and resources mobilization, and also its ability to expand services to meet the growing educational demands of the region. IGNOU has been actively pursuing the allotment of land for over a decade. Despite follow-up letters and continuous dialogue with various government departments, progress has been slow. The process of land allocation has involved multiple departments, including the Education Department and the Land Revenue Department. Coordinating approvals and recommendations from these various offices has been time-consuming and complex, contributing to delays in securing a permanent site. Many other states, such as Mizoram, Nagaland, and Assam in the north-eastern region of the country were provided land free of cost for the establishment of IGNOU Regional Centres. In contrast, the protracted process in Sikkim underscores challenges in aligning state priorities with the university's infrastructural needs. The lack of a permanent establishment has constrained the Regional Centre's ability to enhance its learner-centric services. A permanent facility would enable IGNOU to provide modern infrastructure, including libraries, conference halls, and interactive learning spaces, thereby improving student support and the overall learning experience (Bhutia, 2023).

6 CONCLUSION

The IGNOU has significantly contributed to democratizing access to education in Sikkim, addressing the unique geographical and socio-economic challenges of the state. Through its Regional Centre in Gangtok and collaborations with various government and non-governmental institutions, IGNOU has enhanced higher education, skill development, and professional training in the region. Key initiatives, such as fee exemptions for SC/ST students, teacher training programmes, and vocational certifications, have empowered marginalized communities while enriching the state's human resource base. Moreover, IGNOU's efforts to establish LSCs and its integration of technology into education have been instrumental in reaching even the most remote areas of the state.

The study highlights that IGNOU's initiatives perfectly aligns with the goals of the NEP 2020, particularly in improving GER and promoting equitable education. However, challenges like infrastructural constraints and the lack of a permanent establishment for the Regional Centre Gangtok limit IGNOU's potential to expand its services further. Addressing these issues could enhance its role as a catalyst for educational development in Sikkim and other remote regions. It is accordingly recommended that issue of allocation of land for the permanent establishment of IGNOU's Regional Centre Gangtok should be properly expedited so as to enhance its operational efficiency and expand student support services. The partnerships with the Sikkim government can align with state priorities for fulfilment of educational needs. By implementing these recommendations, IGNOU can make furtherance in its role as a leader in open and distance education, contributing not only to Sikkim's development but also to the broader national goals of educational equity and socio-economic growth.

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