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URBAN-RURAL DISPARITIES IN ENROLMENT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A STUDY OF MANUU

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines disparities between urban and rural enrolments in Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes at the Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad, from 2015-2025. It is based on secondary data derived from institutional records. To identify trends and to compare urban and rural enrolments, simple statistical techniques, such as percentage analyses and comparisons, were utilised. Results of analyses indicated that overall enrolment distributions for urban and rural students are close to each other; however, there are large differences between the two groups relative to the different types of programs offered by MANUU. Urban students are disproportionately enrolled in the science and commerce programs compared to arts and language programs, which are more likely to be represented by rural students. The findings of this study indicate that although Open Distance Learning (ODL) is providing some degree of access to education for all sections of society, more focused and targeted efforts should be made to ensure that rural populations can access every program available in distance education.

KEYWORDS: *Urban-Rural Disparities, Open and Distance Learning, MANUU.*

INTRODUCTION:

In India, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is recognised as an alternative approach to providing educational opportunities to those who lack access to formal education. ODL allows learners to access educational opportunities, such as those in rural or traditionally marginalised communities. By allowing flexibility and providing access to learning resources that are unavailable due to geographic, social, or economic barriers, ODL enables learners to achieve their goals through educational programmes.

The creation of educational opportunities through ODL, however, has not resulted in equal access to education between rural and urban populations. For instance, urban learners often have access to better infrastructure, more information, and more support from universities and colleges, while individuals living in rural areas have limited access to connectivity, lack an understanding of ODL, and face socioeconomic barriers to participation in ODL. Such barriers disproportionately impact the ability of rural learners to participate in higher educational programmes, including ODL.

The growing concern regarding the lack of equity and inclusion in education, particularly concerning rural and urban students, has received attention in educational policy and national development. While ODL may be viewed as a mechanism to reduce inequality in education, a thorough examination is needed to understand how, if at all, ODL has addressed and narrowed the urban/rural gap between learners and whether existing barriers remain evident in the ODL enrolment patterns. The present study will analyse the number of urban and rural ODL enrolments for the 10 years from 2015-

2025, with reference to the ODL programmes offered at Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, through the use of secondary data.

The findings from this study will assist in identifying trends in the number of urban vs. rural ODL enrolments, comparing ODL programme participation, and measuring the degree of urban/rural than those accessing ODL. The findings can also assist in providing insight into the role of ODL in promoting equitable access to education and identifying areas that may require additional interventions.

Review of Literature

The review of related research reveals that ODL in India intends to promote access to and equity in higher education. However, there are still substantial disparities between rural-urban learners. Structural challenges such as poor infrastructure, poor connectivity and poor quality of educational opportunities are prevalent for rural learners, therefore limiting the number of rural learners that actually participate in ODL programmes (Agrawal, 2014). Despite the fact that ODL has increased and improved the overall enrolment rates within India, the majority of ODL growth has occurred in urban cities and in more economically developed regions of India (Sharma & Gupta, 2020).

A main contributor to the rural-urban divide is the digital divide between the two populations. Several studies have shown that rural households have much lower levels of access to the Internet, lower levels of ownership of devices and lower levels of digital literacy than urban households (Laskar, 2023). The digital divide between rural and urban learners was accentuated during the pandemic as rural students attended fewer online learning opportunities than urban students (Sharma & Gupta, 2020). Moreover, the continued lack of access to digital resources will result in rural learners not enrolling in any ODL programme that relies on digital resources for instructional purposes (Learning Routes, 2025).

There are still significant disparities between rural and urban learners in regards to infrastructure, learner support services, and learner contact location (Commonwealth of Learning, 2023). Further, studies indicate that rural learners incur more financial costs, will have less access to technology, and face greater logistical challenges in their attempts to study via distance education (Agrawal, 2014). Therefore, ODL must target solutions that improve digital connectivity and create integrated institutional procedures as part of the overall effort to reduce the disparities between urban learners and rural learners participating in ODL programmes (Gol, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Urban-Rural Disparities in Enrolment in Open and Distance Learning: A Study of MANUU

Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the year-wise trends in urban and rural enrolment in ODL programmes of Maulana Azad National Urdu University from 2015 to 2025.
2. To analyse programme-wise patterns of enrolment with reference to urban and rural learners.
3. To compare the level of participation between urban and rural learners in ODL programmes.
4. To assess the extent of rural-urban disparity in enrolment.

Delimitations

The present study is subject to the following delimitations:

1. The study is confined to the secondary data of ODL programmes offered by Maulana Azad National Urdu University only, and does not include other ODL institutions in India.

2. The analysis is limited to ten years from 2015-16 to 2024-25. Data from earlier years has not been considered for detailed analysis due to inconsistency.
3. The study focuses only on the rural and urban classification of learners and does not consider other demographic variables such as gender, age, socio-economic status, or caste.
4. The analysis is restricted to selected programmes for which consistent data is available, such as B.A., B.Com., BZC, MPC, English, History, Islamic Studies, Urdu, Arabic, Hindi, and B.Ed.

Methodology

This research study employs a descriptive and analytical methodology that looks into the urban versus rural enrolments in ODL programmes offered by MANUU over ten years (2015-16 until 2024-25). The research uses data gathered from the institution's records to conduct its analyses, which consists of a simple percentage analysis. For the sake of clarity, legibility, and comparison, the data analysis and interpretations are presented along with tables.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

The data analysis and interpretation are organised as per the objectives of the study and supported by relevant tables.

Objective 1: To examine the year-wise trends in urban and rural enrolment (2015-2025)

Table 1.1: Year-wise Rural-Urban Enrolment with Percentage Distribution

Year	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
2015-16	12699	7875	20574	61.73	38.27
2016-17	4263	5781	10044	42.45	57.55
2017-18	10423	10317	20740	50.25	49.75
2018-19	4095	3805	7900	51.84	48.16
2019-20	6953	6723	13676	50.84	49.16
2020-21	2453	3124	5577	43.98	56.02
2021-22	459	894	1353	33.93	66.07
2022-23	2666	6467	9133	29.20	70.80
2023-24	6334	7556	13890	45.60	54.40
2024-25	5031	10116	15147	33.22	66.78

Data Analysis

The data shows the highest amount of rural enrolment occurring in 2015-16 of 12,699 (61.73%). In 2016-17, rural enrolment experienced a substantial decline down to 4,263 (42.45%) before recovering somewhat to 10,423 (50.25%) in 2017-18 and staying relatively around 50% from 2018-19 through 2019-20. Starting in 2020-21, rural participation experienced continued decline with a record low of 459 (33.93%) in 2021-22. In 2022-23, rural enrolment started to recover somewhat at 6,334 (45.60%) before once again declining at 33.22% in 2024-25. Conversely, urban enrolment showed a trend opposite to rural enrolment with urban enrolment increasing from 38.27% in 2015-16 to 57.55% in 2016-17. Urban enrolment also consistently remained above 50% starting in 2020-21 and peaked in 2022-23 at 70.80%.

Interpretation

Examination of overall patterns across rural and urban enrolment suggests a shift from rural to urban enrolment dominance over time. The significant decreases in rural enrolment in 2020-21 and

2021-22 are most likely attributable to limited programme availability due to pandemic related closures. The larger proportion of urban learners than rural learners during later years indicates that urban learners were better able to maintain enrolment during periods of disruption. This could be possible due to overall higher levels of access to digital infrastructure and support for academic success.

Objective 2: To analyse programme-wise patterns of enrolment (urban vs rural)

Table 1.2 Programme-wise Rural-Urban Enrolment with Percentage Distribution

Programme	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
B.A.	68249	77565	152715	46.96	53.04
B.Com	842	3819	4840	17.39	82.61
B.Sc (BZC)	2341	9909	12254	19.11	80.89
B.Sc (MPC)	1276	4589	5867	21.75	78.25
M.A (English)	9514	14073	23587	40.34	59.66
M.A (History)	4563	6546	11109	41.08	58.92
M.A (Islamic Studies)	310	159	469	66.10	33.90
M.A (Urdu)	36359	19379	55738	65.23	34.77
M.A (Arabic)	1937	2182	4119	47.03	52.97
M.A (Hindi)	653	859	1512	43.19	56.81

Data Analysis

The highest enrolment is observed in B.A. (1,52,715), followed by M.A (Urdu) (55,738) and M.A (English) (23,587). Urban participation is significantly higher in B.Com (82.61%), B.Sc (BZC) (80.89%), and B.Sc (MPC) (78.25%). Rural participation is higher in M.A (Islamic Studies) (66.10%) and M.A (Urdu) (65.23%). Programmes like B.A. (46.96% vs 53.04%) and M.A (Arabic) (47.03% vs 52.97%) show near balance.

Interpretation

The analysis indicates that science and commerce programmes are dominated by urban learners, while language and culturally rooted programmes attract more rural learners. This reflects differences in access, academic exposure, and socio-cultural preferences between rural and urban learners.

Objective 3: To compare the level of participation between rural and urban learners

Table 1.3: Overall Rural-Urban Participation (2015-2025)

Category	Enrolment	Percentage
Rural	118034	49.50%
Urban	120823	50.50%

Data Analysis

The total enrolment shows that urban learners (50.50%) slightly outnumber rural learners (49.50%), with a difference of only 1%.

Interpretation

Although the overall difference is minimal, it masks programme-level disparities. The near parity suggests that ODL has expanded access to both groups, but not equally across all disciplines.

Objective 4: To assess the extent of rural-urban disparity in enrolment

Table 1.4: Programme-wise Percentage Gap

Programme	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Gap (%)
B.A.	46.96	53.04	6.08
B.Com	17.39	82.61	65.22
B.Sc (BZC)	19.11	80.89	61.78
B.Sc (MPC)	21.75	78.25	56.50
M.A (English)	40.34	59.66	19.32
M.A (History)	41.08	58.92	17.84
M.A (Islamic Studies)	66.10	33.90	32.20
M.A (Urdu)	65.23	34.77	30.46
M.A (Arabic)	47.03	52.97	5.94
M.A (Hindi)	43.19	56.81	13.62

Data Analysis

The largest gaps are observed in B.Com (65.22%), B.Sc (BZC) (61.78%), and B.Sc (MPC) (56.50%), all showing strong urban dominance. Rural dominance is seen in M.A (Islamic Studies) and M.A (Urdu), with gaps above 30%. Minimal disparity is seen in B.A. and M.A (Arabic).

Interpretation

The disparity is clearly programme-specific rather than uniform. Technical and professional courses are less accessible to rural learners, while language-based programmes are more accessible. This suggests that structural and contextual factors influence access to different types of programmes. The inclusion of structured analysis shows that rural-urban disparity is not reflected in overall enrolment alone but is deeply embedded at the programme level. The COVID-19 period further disrupted enrolment patterns, highlighting inequalities in access and adaptability.

Major Findings

The major findings of the study are as below;

1. The analysis indicates that rural enrolment was higher in the first year (2015-16: 61.73%), but over time, urban enrolment has increased and dominated the total number of enrolments in most years, particularly in 2022-23, when it is 70.80%.
2. The enrolments have decreased sharply in the years of 2020-21 and 2021-22, mainly due to limited programmes available during the pandemic period, since only the B.Com and M.A. (Urdu) were previously available.
3. Although there was approximately an equal number of enrolments for rural (49.50%) and urban (50.50%) learners, there were large differences when analysed at the Programme level between the two geographical categories.
4. Programmes such as B.Com (82.61%), B.Sc. (BZC) (80.89%), and B.Sc. (MPC) (78.25%) have a high level of urban dominance, indicating that very few rural learners were enrolled in these types of programmes.

5. Programmes such as M.A. (Urdu) (65.23%) and M.A (Islamic Studies) (66.10%) had high levels of rural participation, indicating they are more accessible to and culturally appropriate for rural learners.
6. There were equitable levels of participation between rural and urban learners in B.A. and M.A. (Arabic) programmes, suggesting there was a fairly equal level of access in those types of programmes.
7. There are large levels of rural- urban disparities, but these differences are programme-specific and vary regarding the nature and/or focus of the programme.
8. Enrolments recover post-pandemic (after 2022); the rate of urban enrolments recovers better than rural enrolments, indicating a widening gap in accessibility and adaptability.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that ODL has generally improved access to education for all learners, urban and rural; however, there is still a difference in enrolment by program and by overall participation. Although the total number of students registering is nearly equal, the number of students registering in science and commerce is dominated by urban residents, whereas rural residents are predominantly represented in language and arts programs, i.e., Urdu, Islamic Studies, etc. The impact of geographical, socio-economic, and cultural differences affects the communities of urban and rural learners. The significant impact of the COVID-19 epidemic has also caused significant disruption of the collection of enrolment data from 2020 to 2022; however, the trend post-epidemic shows that there has been a recovery in enrolment numbers, with urban learners experiencing higher growth than rural residents.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested

1. Special efforts should be made to increase the availability of ODL programmes in both the science and commerce fields for rural students, where participation is comparatively low.
2. Since urban students appear to be doing better than rural students during this pandemic time, there needs to be an improvement in internet connectivity, digital devices and online support systems to facilitate student success in rural areas.
3. Awareness campaigns should be conducted within the rural area to provide students with information concerning the ODL programmes available to them and the benefits identified through participation.
4. New ODL programmes that meet the needs and interests of rural students should be developed, while also ensuring that existing ODL programmes are made available and relevant to the rural context.
5. Academic counselling, study centres and learner support mechanisms should be enhanced in the rural areas to reduce students dropping out or to assist with increased participation rates.
6. Incentives such as grants, fee reductions or bridge programmes may assist with student enrollment in the sciences or commerce programmes.
7. A blended approach is encouraged (i.e. a combination of online and offline learning) to ensure that students who lack the necessary digital access are not deprived of the opportunity to learn.
8. Institutions should monitor enrolment trends on a regular basis to identify and take appropriate measures in a timely manner to address the disparities will improve student participation.

Suggested Topics for Further Research

The following topics may be explored in future studies:

1. Gender-wise Analysis of Rural-Urban Enrolment in ODL

2. Socio-economic Factors Affecting Rural Participation in ODL
3. Programme-wise Academic Performance of Rural and Urban Learners
4. Effectiveness of Learner Support Services in Rural Areas

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