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Research at the Postgraduate level in Off-campus/Correspondence/Distance Education courses in Music and Dance in India.

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20

Introduction

Of late, there is an increase in the number of postgraduate degree courses offered in music and dance in India in both regular and off-campus/correspondence/distance education streams. The regular stream is perhaps the most ideal for any postgraduate study. Perhaps more so for performing art forms like dance, vocal or instrumental music. Various constraints faced by those desirous of pursuing postgraduate studies have made the off-campus/correspondence/distance education quite popular and viable. The discussion as to whether this is a step in right direction with reference to music and dance studies is for elsewhere. Fact of the matter is that it is here to stay.

One paper in the second year of most postgraduate courses is the dissertation paper.¹ Typically a dissertation is for sixty pages. It is here that for the first time the candidate is introduced to the concept of 'research'. And, it is also perhaps for the first time that candidates who have been so far focusing only on the performance aspect of music or dance have to now, analyze and put down on paper different concepts of the same.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

The postgraduate dissertation assumes importance as,

- it is taken into consideration for admission to the Ph.D programs

and,

- the quality of research at the postgraduate level does seem to influence the quality of research in the Ph.D. programs

The purpose of the study is to take a look at the concept of research and the research process at the postgraduate level. For, apart from the challenge of dealing with the concept of 'research' for the first time by the candidate, both the guide and the candidate have to deal with distance and time constraints. And, wherever contact classes are offered, majority of the time is for learning the items.

The scope of the study is limited to the off-campus or correspondence or distance education programs offered in India.

Limitations of the Study

The skill levels and attitude of the candidates who take up the off-campus/correspondence/distance education programs, varies drastically from excellent to very average. It is perhaps not quite possible to cover or include a comprehensive study of all benefits or challenges of research activity at this level. This paper does not investigate four other points of angle, namely,

- if it is good idea to have dissertation paper for MA
- if having one has helped improve the quality of research in the next level
- if the challenges faced here are similar to the ones faced in other streams of correspondence courses
- the actual research content as in topics dealt with in the dissertations

¹Incidentally, Universities of Chichester, York, Huddersfield, to mention a few, all in United Kingdom, offer MA by Research, as it is called, a one-year full time or two year part time course. The entry for these courses is an undergraduate degree.



Methodology Employed

The methodology employed at the outset has been to study the syllabi of the Universities offering the off-campus/correspondence/distance education programs in India and to ascertain which of these had a dissertation as a paper. UGC's recommendations for this have been taken into account. At the next level, a questionnaire was circulated to the select guides and select students to determine the both the pros and cons of research at this level. It came to light that there are six Universities/College/Research Center wherein submission of a dissertation is mandatory for dance. At one University, the students were not assigned guides for the dissertation. Hence this course was not taken into the study. From the others, at least one or two guides were sent the questionnaires. More often than not each department/college did not have more than two guides per course.

Universities/Colleges offering the course

The courses are offered by

- Department of Music, Annamalai University, Cidambaram
- Department of Indian Music, Madras University, Chennai
- Research Department of Music and Dance, TDES, Tiruchirappalli
- Department of Music, Tamil University, Thanjavur
- Directorate of Distance Education, Sastra, Thanjavur
- Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Mumbai

Of the above, the courses offered in dance and music by Tamil University and TDES include a dissertation paper. At Annamalai, Sastra, Madras University and Tilak, the dance masters have a dissertation paper. The Rhythmology course at Madras University does not include a dissertation. At Tilak, the candidates are evaluated on their own ability to write a dissertation.

The 'Who'

Typically, candidates who take up the off-campus or correspondence course music and dance are,

- full fledged performers desirous of acquiring an academic qualification
- musicians/dancers, not regular performers, interested in furthering theoretical knowledge²
- those unable to sing/dance due to various reasons but having a fair knowledge of the practical and theoretical aspects
- those who pursued other professions aggressively despite learning the art forms from a young age and are now switching careers by returning to music and dance
- those who did not have opportunities to learn music and dance earlier and now, late in life are fulfilling their wishes
- retired people pursuing the course as a hobby
- those pursuing dual degrees

Of the categories of candidates enlisted above, more often than not the first six are early middle to middle to late middle age. The seventh category perhaps, are those in their early twenties.

The 'Why'

The reasons for candidates to take up this kind of course is perhaps,

- flexible timing
- dual degree options
- benefit of earning a degree while working
- earning a degree without compromising on family time

² Music and dance are performing art forms wherein the focus is on the practical aspects in an informal learning process. It is an unfounded but popular belief that pursuing a course or taking an exam is the best method to acquaint oneself with the theoretical aspects of these twin art forms.



Challenges in guiding writing a dissertation

A questionnaire was circulated to select guides from the Universities/Colleges/Research Centers mentioned above. The challenges of a guide in helping a candidate writing a dissertation include,

- methodology of research – data collection, analysis and conclusion
- use of diacritical marks
- understanding concepts and ideas of the candidates
- coining or coming up English terms or verbs for certain vernacular language terms
- cautioning against plagiarism
- drawing out a time frame to complete the dissertation
- convincing the candidate about the time required to write and format a dissertation
- naming and saving files/documents and naming different versions of files
- method of sending across files/documents for review by e-mail/sharing on google docs
- compatibility issues between one laptop and another
- in a dilemma whether to correct or to not correct grammatical errors and English language usage

Challenges in writing a dissertation

A questionnaire was circulated to select students from the Universities/Colleges/Research Centers mentioned above. The challenges in writing a dissertation from the point of view of a candidate include,

- unfamiliarity with the very idea of research
- understanding the guide's suggestions
- unfamiliarity with editing software
- unfamiliarity with the diacritical marks and the way to key them in the computer/laptop
- difficulty in putting down concepts of dance and music on paper
- prior commitments of different types
- underestimating the time required for writing a dissertation

Common Challenges

Some common challenges faced by both the guide and the candidate include

- deciding the correct topic
- understanding each other's thought process
- not much choice in choosing the guide or candidate
- absence of official methodology classes
- absence of any official written material as a template
- compatibility issues between laptops

The Research Process

At the post graduate level, the research process includes

- selection of guide
- selection of topic
- methodology class
- writing the dissertation which includes data collection and analysis and on the formatting front using diacritical marks and MLA style
- reviewing

There is not much choice as far as selecting a guide is concerned. In most institutions the guides are not many. When given the choice, two other reasons for choosing the guide, from the candidate's point of view are - familiarity with the guide and the topic chosen. As far as the guides are concerned there is not much choice in selecting students.



Topic selection is between the guide and the candidate in most institutions.³ Though the topic has to be approved by a higher authority in one or two institutions. The most challenging aspect of topic selection is in gauging the candidate's understanding of key concepts and in convincing the candidate to take up a topic that has facts that can be put down on paper. Views on the selection of topic seem to vary from guide to guide in terms of repetition of topics. If repetition is permitted then there is the chance of a previously submitted dissertation being recycled with a slightly changed format.

Most courses do not offer methodology classes or written material. Even when classes are offered, they are optional. Hence the attendance is very low. Typically, it is left to the guide's discretion to conduct the class and provide written material.

Since methodology classes are not provided or are not compulsory, the process of data collection and analysis is dependent on the guide. In some institutions, it is not mandatory to follow incorporation of diacritical marks or the MLA style for formatting. Again it appears to be dependent on the guide to enforce or not, the afore mentioned.

There is no strict review process. It is more often than not between the guide and the candidate.

Conclusion

Dance or music courses offered via off-campus/correspondence/distance education are few in comparison to the ones offered in the regular stream. The majority offered, are in Bharatanātyam and Carnatic music.⁴ The dissertation paper is a part of the masters degree at four or five institutions. The UGC does not enforce the dissertation in the masters course.⁵ Further, the different stages in a research process are not very defined. It is more often than not up to the guide to enforce or not. Hence, the role of the guide assumes great importance. On the other hand there is only that much that a guide can do too. The research at the post graduate level, on an average, is at embryonic stage. Compilation of appropriate information is more than the actual contribution in terms of analysis and bringing to light the hitherto not seen. However, it is also the stage wherein good research practices can be impressed up on the candidate. It is also the stage where candidates can decide if the process of research fascinates them enough to take up further advanced research. For, as in any activity, an interest and passion for research works in the best interest of the candidate and the topic being researched.

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³ The term institution is used from here on to refer to the department or research center offering the course. At Annamalai University it is the Department offering the course. While at TDES, it is a research centre affiliated to Tamil University, Tanjore. At Sastra University, it is the Directorate of Distance Education. Hence the common term – institution.

⁴ A masters in Kathak is offered at Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth. However the students are gauged on the individual ability to write a dissertation.

⁵ This is evident from 6.2, UGC Regulations, 2003.

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