

PROBLEMS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS IN PROVINCE OF SINDH, PAKISTAN*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the problems of DLs in operational system of print-based DE institutions in Pakistan. The study was limited to the DE programs of AIOU. The sample of study comprised of 1170 students of B.Ed, AIOU (2013), residing in Sindh. It was a descriptive research in the form of case study. A five point Likert scale questionnaire was designed to collect data. Important variables contained in the questionnaire were identified from the review of literature. Descriptive and inferential statistics in terms of percentages and mean scores was used to interpret data. Analysis of data yielded delayed confirmation of admission & receipt of study material, high misplacement cases, need of additional material, lack of academic and general facilities at study centers, lack of professional commitment in tutors, improper monitoring, lack of professional attitude of RCs, shortage of supplementary media and late certification as critical problems of DLs. The study recommends timely information of admission & dispatch of books, decentralized delivery of study material, provision of resource rooms at study centers, incumbent assignment return, strong monitoring, intensive training of existing RCs staff and DE qualified personnel appointment, enhanced number of radio & TV Programs and timely issuance of certificates.

Keywords: Distance education, problems of distance learners, print-based DE

INTRODUCTION

Education is directly linked with socio-economic development of a country. Developed countries have high education ratio. Pakistan, a developing country, has high population growth and its current population is 188 million. Some areas of Pakistan are highly developed, densely populated and equally accessible to all types of education and others may be moderate or less developed with scattered population, away from educational facilities. Provision of higher education is inadequate. After completing secondary level, most of the students discontinue their education. The condition is alarming that in the year 2003 only 1.7 percent of 18 to 26 years age group was enrolled at campuses (HEC, 2004). The formal education with infrastructure and faculty cannot be provided to all the scattered population. Therefore, it was necessary to adopt DE as an alternate educational system for this disadvantaged group and working persons to increase their educational capabilities.

DE in Pakistan started in 1974 in public sector vide parliament Act No. xxxix when Peoples Open University was established at Islamabad, later renamed as Allama Iqbal Open University. AIOU provides education from matriculation to PhD level, including teachers training programs and certificate courses. Its programs are mostly print-based and also offer online programs. It has become a mega university with more than 1.3 million students per year (AIOU, 2015). The thrust for modern ODL using ICTs boosted the concept of Virtual University in Pakistan embodied in the action plan 2002 (Malik, 2014). VUP offers ICT-

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based DE and more than 100,000 students have graduated from this university. DE has found its way to Pakistani society that in the year 2003 the share of DE in awarding degrees was 38 percent (HEC, 2004).

DE offers an educational opportunity in which education is conducted through physical absence of tutor or instructor, partial formal classes, time factor involvement in instruction and communication by various means. It is low cost educational facility which saves money and time. Vitality of DE cannot be over emphasized, all over the world. Its clients have no geographical boundaries, age or gender biases, levels and ranges at education and training, diversification and dimensions of programs, structures and strategies. Its clients are all, but more fully deprived groups. Therefore, DE which is considered as second chance may also be taken as alternate to formal or conventional mode of learning.

A large number of students get admissions in DE every year. The volume of DE is increasing day-by-day and with its rapid growth some problems are observed. These problems are related with operational system of DE. DE worldwide faces many problems in operational systems; student-university communication, lacking facilities, reluctance of tutors and other officials. These problems may be different depending on the technology being used. Initially the problems were manifold. With the passage of time and gaining experience the university has addressed the problems in many ways, yet there are many operational problems at the gross root level. They have remained either unknown or seldom realized to reduce them substantially. These problems if not addressed cause dropout. The dropout rate at AIOU is very high (Khurshid, 2009). However, it is necessary to find out such problems resulting dropout and find out their solutions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The prime purpose of this study was to explore the problems faced by the students of DE system in Pakistan, enunciated by AIOU in Pakistan with main focus on the province of Sindh.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper focuses on the following areas:

1. To identify the problems faced by students of print-based DE system in Pakistan.
2. To make recommendations for solution of the problems faced by students of print-based DE system in Pakistan.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The above objectives were converted into following research questions:

1. What range of problems was faced by students of DE in Sindh?
2. How can these problems or barriers be removed to make it more productive?

LITERATURE REVIEW

DE is growing rapidly in the world. With the increase in volume it is facing problems in various fields. These problems, if not resolved timely result in dropout. The DL while studying in isolation faces personal problems. Khurshid (2009), Robinson (1981) and Galusha (1998) indicate lack of time, difficulty in concentration, family commitment and organization of time & planning, low level of motivation, study skills, resources, anxiety and isolation as the personal problems. These are not related directly with DE system, the learner can overcome these problems by proper counseling and motivation by the tutors or counselors.

DLs face many organizational problems. The first major problem is related with study material. The correspondence material is one of the three basic elements of the DE. The correspondence material dispatched to the students often misplaces. Sometimes, the material is dispatched to wrong persons or the students get the mail late (Jumani, 2003). The mailing or material dispatching system in Pakistan is centralized at AIOU as well as VUP. The mailing system might be slow or unreliable (Rashid, 2011). Sometimes, the material is dispatched late due to late admissions. Another set of problems is related with communication. DLs need facility to communicate institution easily. The students face trouble in contacting with regional offices and central office. Rashid, (2011) highlighted interaction and coordination between the institution and student or communication gap as problem faced by DLs. The next set of problems is related with tutors and assignments. The work of tutors is to check, mark and return the assignments. They should also give guidelines to distant students; how to refer the books and make assignments. But, mostly the tutors are not aware of their role. They seldom help students in solving assignments. The assignments are compulsory in DE. Sometimes, the assignments are not properly checked or marked. The assignments may not be returned by the tutors in some areas or returned during examination. The feedback by the tutors on the assignments is helpful in enhancing their education.

The main focus of guidelines in studies is the distant tutor. Attri (2012), Nart (2013), Khurshid (2009), Valentine (2002) highlight lack of feedback from lecturer, reluctance of tutor, absence of teacher, improper treatment of tutor and no contact or communication with tutor as the main problems faced because of tutors. Valentine (2002) expresses that the quality of DE depends upon the attitude of administration and instructor. The tutor makes the mind of learners to concentrate at their studies. The effective teachers do more than technology (Pall & Part, 2000).

The attitude of the tutor inspires the learners to work with zeal and zest. The tutors are mostly hired from formal institutions and their style of work may be formal. The tutors lack training to deal with DLs hence, such problems arise. The next area of problems lies in support services. Support services, attitude of administrators, monitoring, and efficiency of management are the issues of regional management in DE. The RCs in DE represent their institutions before DLs. Every facility regarding learning process, libraries, internet and study aids are needed at RCs. The libraries/resource rooms may be fully equipped with reference material. Jacobsen (1994) in Spodick, E.F (1995) recommends equal rights of distant students to approach libraries like formal students. The RCs must be fully equipped with all students' needs.

PROCEDURE

The related literature provided the critical information on students, tutors and organization. A special questionnaire was designed to collect relevant data. The target population consisted of 5670 students of AIOU who had completed B.Ed from AIOU in 2013. The sample was drawn through simple random and stratified technique i-e 1170 (20 % of the population) from all the seven regions of AIOU in Sindh. The questionnaire was developed on five point Likert scale. The questionnaire covered all the operational aspects of DE as admission, curricula, study meetings, assignments, tutorial services, communication, examinations, supplementary media and certification etc. The data was collected by postal services followed by personal visits. Descriptive and inferential statistical procedures in terms of percentages and mean scores were used for statistical treatment.

SUMMARY

The paper examined the nature and range of problems faced by DLs. 1170 students of B.Ed (2013) of AIOU were taken as a sample. Critical factors relating confirmation of admission,

delivery of instructional material, support material, facilities, checking & returning assignments, tutorial commitment relating to attendance and assistance in assignments, exam environment, attitude and commitment of RCs for solution of the problems, delivery of instructional material, issuance of error free certificates, dissemination of information through radio and TV and associated problems were found.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1. Confirmation of admission

You got information about your admission in time.					
A	M	O	ST	N	Mean
118	342	01	51	46	3.14
4.0%	29.3%	0.94%	55.5%	10.0%	

Table 1 shows that a fair majority of the students (65.8%) did not get information about their admission in time.

The analysis of the data shows that the students remained in suspense and isolation to contact institution for collection of material. The admission confirmation is related with receipt of books. The material may be received late or misplaced because the student does not know that his admission is confirmed and material was dispatched to him.

Table 2. Delivery of instructional material

You received books in time.					
A	M	O	ST	N	Mean
118	302	10	671	68	3.2
10.1%	25.8%	0.86%	57.4%	5.82%	
Your books/study material was misplaced.					
16	275	52	758	68	3.5
1.37%	23.5%	4.45%	64.8%	5.82%	

Table 2 shows that a fair majority of the students (63.2 %) did not receive books/study material in time. About one-fourth of the students (24.9 %) reported that their books were misplaced.

The data revealed inaccessibility of the study material for preparing assignments and coverage of course. The misplacement cases were high. The study material is the main element in DE hence, it is an important issue.

Table 3. Need of multiple services

You needed some more books in addition to the material supplied?					
SA	A	UD	DA	MDA	Mean
81	809	27	229	23	3.6
6.93%	69.2%	2.31%	19.6%	1.97%	
You copied the assignments word-by-word from books.					
27	755	32	339	16	3.4
2.31%	64.6%	2.74%	29 %	1.37 %	

Table 3 shows that a high majority of students (76.1 %) agreed that they needed some more books to refer in addition to the material supplied and a fair majority (66.8 %) of the students agreed that they copied word-by-word from the books provided to write assignments.

It is obvious from the above analysis that students needed additional sources for references to fulfill academic needs. They have only single choice of material; hence copy word-by-word from the source in hand. This question was asked in context of writing assignments.

Table 4. Supporting material and facilities

The number of reference books at the study center was ____.					
MS	S	UD	IS	MIS	Mean
14	396	06	741	12	3.29
1.2 %	33.9 %	0.51 %	63.4 %	1.03 %	
AV aids at the study center were _____sufficient.					
A	M	O	ST	N	3.6
14	237	13	820	85	
12 %	26.3 %	1.11 %	70.1 %	7.27 %	
The facilities provided to the students at the study centers were _____.					
14	388	14	726	27	3.3
1.2%	33.2%	1.2%	2.1%	2.31%	
What in your opinion are the main problems faced by you while studying under distance education system. (Open question)					

Table 4 shows that a fair majority (64.4 %) of the students stated that the number of reference books and study aids at the study centers was insufficient and a high majority of students (77.3 %) told that AV aids were not available at the study centers. A fair majority of the students (55.6%) said that facilities provided to the students at study centers were not sufficient. In an open question 35% of the students maintained that general facilities at the study centers were insufficient.

Study center is the place where the students find answers to their queries. There are no libraries or services of libraries are not extended to the DLs. However, the reference material and AV aids are also not available. The study center is a facilitation center but the centers lacked general and academic facilities.

Table 5. Checking and returning assignments, tutor guidance etc

The tutors returned checked assignments.					
A	M	O	ST	N	Mean
20	275	33	650	191	3.61
1.71%	23.5%	2.82%	55.6%	16.3%	
The tutors _____ attended meetings regularly.					
117	389	12	602	49	3.07
10%	33.3%	1.03%	51.5%	4.1%	
The tutors provided guidance to the students in study meetings.					
4	576	28	533	18	3.03
1.2%	49.3%	2.4%	45.6%	1.5%	
The tutors _____ helped at practical work/in preparing lesson plans.					
05	460	16	667	21	3.2
0.43%	39.3%	1.37%	57.1%	1.8%	
What in your opinion are the main problems faced by you while studying under DE system. (Open question)					

Table 5 shows that a high majority of students (71.9 %) reported that the tutors did not return the assignments. A fair majority of students (55.6%) said that tutors did not attend meetings regularly. About half of the students (47.1 %) reported that tutors did not provide guidance in study meetings, while a fair majority of the students (58.9 %) reported that tutors did not help them at practical work. In an open question 17.1% of the students said that tutors did not attend meetings regularly.

The failure in returning assignments by tutors, absconding in study meetings and non-provision of guidance in study meetings or practical work shows lack of commitment of tutors. The tutors lacked interest and commitment to their task. This is a serious problem as DLs depend on tutor and services provided at study centers.

Table 6. Examination environment

Students ___ cheated in the exams.					
A	M	O	ST	N	Mean
128	704	05	312	20	3.52
10.9%	60.2%	0.43%	26.6%	1.71%	
The exam environment was conducive.					
79	447	22	601	20	3.03
1.71%	51.4%	1.88%	38.2%	6.76%	

Table 6 shows that a high majority of the students (71.1 %) reported cheating in the examinations and a fair majority of students (53.1%) reported unconducive environment at the examination centers.

The analysis of the data shows that the examination environment was seldom conducive. The students used unfair means in the examination. It shows weak management system and improper supervision at the regional centers.

Table. 7 Attitude and level of problems

The regional center solved your problems by postal applications/e- mail.					
A	M	O	ST	N	Mean
33	297	18	780	41	3.43
2.82%	25.4%	1.54%	66.7%	3.57%	
The regional center was authorized to solve your problems.					
30	476	09	570	84	3.17
2.52%	40.7%	0.77%	48.8%	7.19%	
You had to contact the University/main campus for your problems.					
47	634	18	457	13	3.21
4.02%	54.2%	1.54%	39.1%	1.11%	

Table 7 shows that a high majority of the students (70.2%) reported that regional center did not solve their problems by postal applications/e-mail. A fair majority of the students (55.9%) also reported that the regional center was unauthorized to solve their problems. A fair majority of the students (58.2%) told that they had to contact the main campus for solution of their problems.

The analysis of data shows that the RCs did not help the students through any communication mode. The students had to reach in person at the RCs for their problems' solution. It is also observed from data that RCs were unauthorized in most of the cases and mostly the students had to contact with the main campus for solution of their problems. This shows their formal style of work, lack of commitment & DE concept and high centralization.

Table 8. Supplementary Media

The radio & TV provided sufficient knowledge about your course.					
SA	A	UD	DA	MDA	Mean
119	385	30	620	15	3.6
10.2%	32.9%	2.57%	53%	1.28%	
The number of radio/TV programs introduced for your course is sufficient.					
107	239	06	814	03	3.4
9.15%	20.4%	0.51%	69.6%	0.26%	

Table 8 shows that a fair majority of the students (54.2 %) reported that the radio and TV did not provide sufficient knowledge about their course. A high majority of students (69.8%) pointed out very limited involvement of supplementary media.

Analysis of the data shows that supplementary media is not introduced as required. The number of programs was not satisfactory. Supplementary media is always helpful in understanding typical topics hence, it is an important problem.

Table 9. Certification

The students get certificate by postal service in time.					
A	M	O	ST	N	Mean
17	346	10	783	13	3.29
1.45%	29.6%	0.86%	67%	1.11%	
The certificates delayed due to mistake of university.					
29	563	53	501	23	3.06
2.48%	48.2%	4.53%	42.9%	1.97%	

Table 9 shows that a high majority of students (68.1%) did not get certificates by postal services in time and about half of the students (50.6%) told that the certificates delayed due to mistake of university.

The analysis of data shows that university delayed in issuing certificates due to late completion of process and documentations. Students need certificates at once after passing a course to make the most of their qualification. Late certification makes them disheartened. It is an important problem.

CONCLUSION

1. Distance Learners don't get timely information about their admission.
2. About half of the students get study material late and one fourth experienced misplacement of books.
3. Students need additional material at study centers to refer for content enrichment.
4. Libraries, resource rooms & study aids are not available at study centers. The study centers lacked general facilities.

5. Tutors seldom return checked assignments and lack commitment.
6. The exam centers have uncondusive environment.
7. RCs do not solve students' problems through postal or e-mail requests.
8. The supplementary media is not properly introduced.
9. The certificates are issued late.

DISCUSSION

Distance learning depends on books, instructional material provided by the institution, supplementary media, and study meetings for solution of academic queries, tutors for academic guidance and regional centers for solution of problems. The findings of present study indicated delayed confirmation of admission. The fresh candidates for admission in DE program after submission of admission form wait at home for the study material. This is evidence of confirmation of their admission and remains in suspense whether the admission was confirmed or not. They remain busy in their routine work and feel isolated and helpless. About half of the respondents reported late receipt of books and one-fourth experienced misplacement of books. The courier services are not reliable. They hesitate to deliver the books in rural or typical areas. Sometimes, the undelivered books are received by RCs where some of affected students contact and receive material or unduly stored. Sometimes the books are dispatched late due to late admission or late receipt of admission forms from collecting banks. There are no reference books or libraries available at study centers. The students have a single choice of reference material. Hence, they tend to copy assignments word-by-word from books provided. Sometimes, DLs want to study more on a particular topic. DE system cannot bound a DL to study only the provided material. However, it provides such a material which fulfils the needs of students. DL has equal rights to use the libraries for his mental satisfaction like formal students. The tutors lacked interest at their work and seldom return assignments. They did not prove helpful for learners during study meetings or practical work. The tutor is academic helper and counselor to the students. The study meetings and the assignments are the only difference in conventional private and DE. The attendance of students is very short at study meetings and now tutors are also found absent. It is alarming for the future of study meetings. DE study centers are interesting, useful, attractive place of meeting where the students come willingly, have counseling and guidance and resolve queries with the help of tutors and academic reservoir in libraries at the study centers. The exam centers have uncondusive environment. There may be not or a few visits of the monitoring staff. This proves weak monitoring and supervision of regional management. The RCs don't response on postal or e-mail requests for solution of problems. This shows lack of training, formal style and lack of DE concept. Supplementary media not only provide information on typical topics of the concerned subjects but also make the students study, eliminating sense of isolation. The certificates are issued late. The DLs need certificates at once after passing course but it takes long. After declaration of results the certificates are needed to issue earlier to create satisfaction in students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. SMS services need to be extended to fresh and running students for timely admission information and collection of books.
2. Study material may be decentralized to RCs to cover late receipt and misplacement of books.
3. Libraries, resource centers equipped fully with relevant material and technological tools need to be established at study centers.

4. Make incumbent the timely return of assignments through postal services and monitor the study centers.
5. Strong monitoring and on rotation appointment of superintendents may give a sound environment at examination centers.
6. Deployment of professional DE qualified personnel and provision of DE training to existing RCs' staff would resolve students' problems at doorsteps.
7. The number of radio & TV programs for every course may be increased for typical topics.
8. Timely issuance of certificates needs to be made sure and resolve all the fee and documents related issues during tenure of the course.

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