

Problems of Distance Learners Regarding Assessment Process in Pakistan

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore problems of distance learners regarding assessment process. Data was collected using open ended questionnaire, answered by random sample of 1683 distance learners enrolled in B.Ed program. It concluded that learners does not receive the study packages and examination related intimations such as roll number slips, examination schedules and result cards on time. All tutors do not communicate their proper addresses and contact numbers to students that make difficult for learners to submit their assignments on time. Some tutors also do not send assignments to students after marking. Study centers, workshop venues and examination centers are selected far away from their residences and do not have proper physical facilities. Workshops held at afternoon timings and continue until evening that cause problems especially for female students. Examination halls does not provide comfortable environment to examinees, marking is not fair and tests used for assessments include only long essay type items. Sometimes students also find errors in result cards that are result of irresponsible work by staff involved in result preparation. The study suggested having well-established study centers, appointing dedicated tutors, introducing objective type items in question papers and improve monitoring during whole process.

Key words: Distance education, correspondence model, assessment, problems of distance learners

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Introduction

Distance education is modern trend for promoting education in Pakistan. A wide range of distance learning courses has been introduced through this mode of education. In Pakistan, distance education started with the establishment of AIOU “through act no XXXIX passed by the parliament of Pakistan in May 1974 and started to work in June 1974. (AIOU, 2002). AIOU is second Open University in the world and first Open University in Asia. It follows the correspondence model of distance learning. Second distance learning university in Pakistan is Virtual University Pakistan, which started in September 2002. It follows virtual model of distance learning.

Distance mode of education basis on activities having limited assistance by teachers but providing educational materials by the institution. Claudio (1998). This mode is appealing especially for working class and underprivileged groups of society. Rai, Bajpai & Singh (2007) reported, students getting admission in distance education courses mostly take admission to broaden their knowledge. They are mostly aged, have jobs and families. According to the Vice Chancellor’s Annual Report (2011) it has enrolled “1170379 students during 2011 in different courses” ranging from matric until Ph. D. Review of admission trend in various courses through distance mode of education in Pakistan has motivated some formal universities to offer courses through distance learning for improving their enrollment rate during last few years.

Many universities in the country have now introduced distance education courses along with formal courses following the dual mode model of education. They identify different reasons for introducing distance learning mode but one most important reason behind the situation is that it is most easiest and flexible system for the poor societies and working class who wants to improve their educational status and skills without leaving their homes, jobs and families.

Statistical review shows that graph of admissions in various programs through distance learning is going up day by day. Admission rate in distance education courses is encouraging. However, high rate of admission through distance mode of education on the other hand also make difficult for institutions to maintain quality through proper monitoring of the system. Therefore, many distance learners criticize the system keeping in view the problems they face in reality. Sometimes they focus institutions responsible for their problems and sometimes they criticize the persons involved in process. Responsible for problems of distance learners may be institutions or an individual running the system but reality is that the criticism make

image of distance education worse in community. The situation needs to highlight the problems of system to search out the ways for bringing improvement in system. Therefore, present study was an attempt on the “problems of distance learners of teacher education courses in Pakistan”. It focused achieving the following objectives.

1. Explore problems faced by distance learners enrolled in teacher education courses.
2. Evaluate the reasons of problems.
3. Suggest measures to deal with the situation.

The study is significant for planners and personnel involved in distance education mode. They can design and implement the system in better manners in future. It is also supportive for researchers working on distance education.

Methodology

Design of the study was survey, a type of descriptive research. Population of the study was learners enrolled through distance education mode. The study was delimited to teacher education programs. So, B.Ed program was selected as sample of the study. Further, open-ended questionnaire was distributed to a randomly selected sample of 6797 (10% of population) students enrolled in B.Ed program of teacher education courses through correspondence mode of distance education from Punjab, Pakistan. They had almost completed their course spending three semesters. They were approached during final examinations and were requested to report problems that they faced regarding assessment process during their period of study without mentioning identity. Responses of only 1683 were found associated to the question asked. Therefore, these were selected for data analysis. At data analysis stage, data was analyzed after classifying it in groups keeping in view the process of distance learning through correspondence courses.

Results and Discussion

Distance education is a new concept in Pakistan. It is defined as educational process in which someone conducts a major section of teaching detached in time and place from the learner. It is used in combination with the old and new media. Two basic models of distance education include correspondence model and virtual model. In Pakistan, AllamaIqbalOpen University uses correspondence model whereas Virtual University follows the Virtual model in which modern communication media is used. Dual mode universities mostly are following the correspondence model of distance education. Moore (2002) identified most of distance education institutions use correspondence mode in developing and under developing countries of the world.

Present study focusing the problems of distance learners, involving a randomly selected sample of 6797 distance learners (20% male and 80% female representing 46% rural and 54% urban) having at least experience of studying three semesters through distance learning from whole Punjab, Pakistan was conducted. Sample required identifying their problem regarding the process of distance learning in the country keeping in view their experiences during the whole process. It explored that many of the learners (68%) were working on different locations and selected distance education mode to upgrade their educational status. They were happy and thankful for getting chances to upgrade their education. Some of them stated, "Distance education is a blessing for people to provide opportunity for learning as well as providing chances for getting higher degrees". On the other hand, when they were asked to identify their problems they pointed out different complications regarding the process. The problems belonged to different components of the system. Prominent problems by respondents were further classified keeping in view the assessment process and now have been discussed in following.

Analysis of data of study indicated that problems indicated by 1683 learners were important. Analysis of the problems indicated by distance learners indicated that 29.53% of respondents indicated, "We did not receive the study package, roll number slips, examination schedules and result cards on time. This created lot of problems for us to prepare for assessments and get feedback about our achievement in the courses".

In distance education system, study packages normally sent to learners by postal services or by electronic mail. In the correspondence model, all study packages are mailed to learners by postal services. Distance learners study materials sent by the institutions at home or work place, prepare their assignments and prepare themselves for other assessment tasks as according to the given schedules. However, unluckily, if they do not receive the study packages from the university on time, they can never prepare themselves for the assessments designed for them. No receiving of roll number slip/examination entry card by students means he/ she cannot appear in the examination too. The situation on the other hand becomes a reason for the failure of the students and achievement of goals and targets of the programs as well. Therefore, problem is serious in nature and institutions must realize that it is necessary to be solved. It does not mean that distance education institution is always responsible for the problem. It is possible that personals involved in the process of mailing the materials to learners but the postal services in the country canal so be one of the important accountable parts in this regard.

The second prominent problem indicated by a prominent group (14.32%) was that study centers, workshop venues and examination centers are mostly far away from the residences of learners. An institution also does not provide any transport to facilitate learners on the other hand. Therefore, distance learners face problems to reach on the venue on time. The reason for the problem is that distance learners belong to remote areas. Distance education institution cannot facilitate learners providing opportunity to have a study centre or examination centre near to the home of each one. The problem can only be solved by using technology in testing. However, this can only be possible if modern communication technologies and necessary tools are available to all distance learners. Analysis of demographic characteristics of distance learners help to conclude that most of the distance learners belong to rural areas of Pakistan where modern communication media such as electronic mail is not available and if available then each one cannot afford it. Therefore, problem of distance learners is important and needs solution. One possible solution of the problem can be that responsible persons at study centers can help students in arranging the transport during workshop and examination dates. Distance learners can bear the transport charges in this regard. Other solution can be to arrange accommodation near to the study centers during examination and workshop days on nominal charges.

Workshops play vital role in learning by lectures of experts and peer groups during the workshop days. Workshops must be arranged in suitable environment keeping in view the physical and academic needs of the distance learners. However, a group of students (11.94%) recorded their objection regarding the workshop management. They reported that physical facilities like as availability of proper comfortable seating, writing boards, modern technology, drinking water, substitute arrangements for electricity in case of load shading are also not ensured in the workshop centers". This means the authorities do not properly monitor workshop that is an important event for the distance learners and is only opportunity to interact with tutors as well as fellow students. Lacking physical facilities in the study centers selected for workshop means workshop lacks facilities for effective workshop. Distance learners in such conditions cannot learn effectively. They may be present in workshop but cannot achieve the required learning targets of institution. Availability of low standard facilities during the workshop can be a prominent indicator for failure of system. No doubt, all study centers for distance learning are mostly selected from the traditional institutions but distance education institutions must keep in mind that availability of required conditions must be given priority in selection criteria for a study centre for workshops especially. Authorities of the distance education institution must select vigilant, hardworking, dedicated and honest staff for the purpose. Moreover, monitoring during the workshops can also be an important key factor of success in this regard.

Role of tutor in learning process of distance mode of education is central. He is responsible to educate learners and help institution in achieving goals. Learning of distance learners importantly bases on tutors' efforts. Model role of tutor can be helpful for the effective learning of distance learners. The (9.15%) learners in the study pointed out that their tutors did not send information about their tutorship to learners by mail and about those who send information about their tutorship did not communicate their proper address and contact details. This no doubt is a professional approach and need attention of organizers for eradication. Proper monitoring by the authorities of respective institute can change the situation, facilitate learners and provide base for attainment of objectives of institute.

Workshop is conducted at the end of each semester. Mostly, tutors assign topics to learners for presentations during the workshop. Appointed resource persons also deliver lectures on assigned topics. Workshop activities are part of teaching learning process and as a part of assessment of distance learners. Some (7.37%) respondents pointed out their problem regarding workshop timings and duration. They reported, "Workshop ends after evening. It becomes difficult for learners to go back to home especially for those who live far away from the workshop venue. The situation becomes worse especially for the women". Actually, the problem is because of the reality that most of study centers are selected from the regular institutions that work at morning timings. Therefore, workshops can be conducted at afternoon timings only. Secondly, tutors and resource persons also mostly appointed from the regular staff who cannot work for distance education institution during their office hours. Most important reason is also that distance learners are also mostly working persons. Theme of distance learning is also based on that "it is for those who want to continue their education without leaving their home, families and jobs" (Annual report of AIOU Vice Chancellor (2002, p. 4). A reasonable solution of the problem of distance learners can be use of technology during workshop. It is only possible if necessary arrangements for audio video conferencing like activities are possible. Surely, review of demographic review of distance learners enrolled in teacher education courses in AIOU indicates that such facilities are not available to learners nor can be provided by the university. Therefore, a workable solution can be to reduce the workshop timings but expand the workshop schedule (increase days and reduce daily hours).

Examinations, arranged at the end of each semester are important for learners. Learners need comfortable environment and proper examination conditions during exams. Unstandardized conditions in examination can cause the weak performance of learners. Regrettably, 6.12% respondents of the study pointed out that

they did not find the proper conditions for examinations. They reported, “Physical facilities in examination halls were worse. There was no comfortable seating, voice proof buildings and lighting in some examination halls. Examination staff was also not so efficient to control talking and cheating like activities properly”. No doubt, this type of environment does not favor learners to attempt their papers peacefully. Moreover, evaluation of such reporting of learners gives a bad impact to critics. Only efficient management and proper monitoring of the authorities can solve the problems of learners.

Furthermore, 2.14% reported that questions included in question papers require long answers and they cannot answer them properly. The problem no doubt is much related to the skill of learners. Those who are trained in how to answer long essay type items can never complain in this way. Moreover, some of the respondents (9.57%) complained that questions asked in assignments and question papers were not conceptual and they noted biasness in marking of assignments and presentations. In distance education courses, where examination papers are only subjective type, objective marking of the answer scripts is not possible. An effective solution of the problem can be introduction of objective type tests in assessment process.

An important problem indicated by 2.38% of respondents was that examination staff does mistakes in preparing results. When students receive result card, they come to know about wrong entry of their results in record of university. When examination section on the other hand is not in approach of learners, they face much problem for approaching to the authorities for requesting to make correction in records. No doubt, the problem is only because of the careless and unsympathetic role of persons involved in assessment process during result preparation. Proper training and monitoring of staff involved in process can resolve the problem.

Another problem explored by study indicated that 3.21% reported that tutors appointed are sometimes not skillful nor committed with their duties. Moreover, 4.28% of respondents also exposed that tutors do not return assignments to learners after assessment. The problem is much bitter to spoil the theme of distance learning system. Return of marked assignments is a rule in distance learning having theme to give feedback to learners about their achievement and help them to improve their work in future. Nevertheless, no return of marked assignment to learners is evidently a sign of careless attitude of tutors. Rai, D. P., Bajpai, R. P. and Singh, N. (2007, p. 113) have declared, “surface approach of distance teaching” to give less importance to assignments that is not appreciating in any case. Goel, A. and Goel, S. L. (2000, p. 146) have suggested to “return marked assignment preferably during 15 days of

receiving by the institution”. Institutions can develop rules independently as according to their own environment but must monitor implementation of rules properly. May be the authorities appoint well qualified tutors following a predefined criteria having broad experience but hardworking and honest effort by the tutors for working in the system can help the system to implement rules and achieve the goals. For getting solution of the problem, complaints received by respective appointing authorities must be entertained. No tutors, neglecting rules given by the institution must be further appointed.

Conclusions

1. Study packages, workshop schedule, roll number slips, result cards are not received by learners on time.
2. Tutors do not communicate students about their tutor ship providing complete contact details. Marked assignments are not mailed to learners by tutors.
3. Proper facilities for effective workshop are not arranged. Workshop schedules are not favorable for learners. Attending long hours during workshop make process inconvenient and boring for learners.
4. Examination centers, study centre and workshop venues are selected far away from the students’ addresses. Environment in examination centers is also not comfortable for learners to attempt examination papers in peaceful environment.
5. Questions included in papers are not conceptual. Assessment process of courses is not completely fair. Examination staff does not work carefully.

Recommendations

1. Study centers and examination centers must be selected nearest to students address.
2. Universities should have their own study centers that must be properly furnished and equipped with all necessary items in different cities. Only these must be used for workshops and examinations. Transport to students during examinations and workshop must be arranged.
3. Only devoted tutors and staff may be appointed. Moreover, authorities must monitor them during the whole semester.
4. Objective type test items must be given representation in question papers used for assessment of students’ achievement at each phase.
5. Distance learning institutions must use reliable courier services for mailing materials and letters to students. Important messages to students can be communicated on their cell numbers.

6. All study packages for the whole semester may provide to enrolled students at the start of each semester by calling them in regional offices. Orientation about the tutors can also be given by university in this meeting.
7. Workshop may be schedule in such manners that total workshop days may be increased but may not take more than three hours daily.

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