

Exploration of Anxiety Factors among Students of Distance Learning: A Case Study of Allama Iqbal Open University

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Abstract

Present study aimed to find out the anxiety factors among students of distance learning of Allama Iqbal Open University. The sample of the study comprised of 322 students of M.Ed. programme selected by using purposive sampling technique. The study was descriptive in nature. Questionnaire was used as the research instrument which was based on five point Likert scale. Mean score and t-test was applied by using SPSS version 21. The results highlighted that factors, like lacunae in admission process, books distribution, assignments, course tutorials and student support services were found to create anxiety among the students of AIOU. The overall mean values for all factors of anxiety were slightly higher in male students as compared to female students. A significant effect of anxiety on the academic performance of distance learners was found. Present research found a significant effect of anxiety on the academic performance among distance learning students of AIOU. It is recommended that University may support students in managing their academic anxiety through counseling and behavioral techniques.

Keywords: Anxiety, academic performance, and distance learner.

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Introduction

Anxiety is a basic human emotion that consists of fear and uncertainty and usually it occurs when an individual believes that the event is a threat to self or self-esteem. Anxiety can also be state or trait depending on its duration. Anxiety blocks the normal thought processes. It favors a passive approach to material rather than interaction with it. Anxiety is the human emotion that everyone experiences. Students experience problems during their studies, and feel anxious when taking exams or making significant life decisions. There is evidence in the literature that there is a negative correlation between anxiety and student achievement, and there is a negative correlation between anxiety and the realization of important cognitive and emotional outcomes in distance learning education (Jegade, Alaiyemola, & Okebukola, 1990). The apparent difference between face-to-face and distance learning and the accompanying environmental variables that affect distance learners make the impact of anxiety on distance learning more likely. Gibbs, Habeshaw, and Habeshaw (1989) put it succinctly, 'Anxiety causes students to consistently underperform. Anxiety in distance learners stems mainly from their life experiences, and expectations/ assumptions they make as a result. The distance learners tend to fear failure, yet conversely can have high, even unrealistic expectations of themselves. They may have had negative experiences of educations in the past, and assume that distance learning education may provide the same disempowering learning environment as that experiences by many school.

In contrast to traditional classroom instruction, various studies have been conducted to assess students' attitudes, dropouts and academic performance in distance education. Compared with classroom education, there are many factors identified in distance education of poor results and high dropout rate; boring courses, economic difficulties, lack of feedback and encouragement, isolation, lack of motivation, dissatisfaction with requirements or regulations, and changes in career goals (Bernard, 2004; Fozdar & Kumar, 2007). Saddington (1992) highlighted that the expectation of disempowerment is one of the key issues in feelings of anxiety and poor confidence. The fear of interaction with other people triggering self-consciousness, feelings of being negatively judged and evaluated, inferiority, embarrassment, humiliation, and depression which leads to avoidance from gathered activities where different types of people are present. Anxiety becomes a major concern among distance learners when they realize that they will have to give an oral presentation while using modern technologies such as multimedia presentations etc.

As far as distance education is concerned in Pakistan, most of the students belong to remote areas and have other major responsibilities in their lives than studies. For example, some students have full time jobs and others have their own business to run. So, usually they have difficulties in sparing enough time for studies. Books are not received in time due to negligence of postal services or due to late dispatch. Mismatch of their tutorial and examination schedules with their job's schedule creates major anxiety in them. Social anxiety issues during tutorial activities influence their performance significantly. All these anxiety problems affect performance causing deterioration in their studies and are the major issue among distance learners (Woodley, 2004). In order to solve this problem present study provided some insights on the development of distance education in Pakistan and carried out a detailed analysis of distance education practice. Finally, the main thrust of the paper has been dedicated to the analysis of factors of anxiety that affects distance-learning students' performance.

Review of the Related Literature

Researchers in the field recognized two types of anxiety, trait anxiety and state anxiety where trait anxiety is the tendency of each person to be relatively stable internally and able to respond to anxiety and state anxiety as the temporary emotional state of the individual, as well as the structure of the intensity that changes and fluctuates over time. This is a relatively stable and permanent personality trait that is neither bound to time nor of any specific situation. Anxiety has an adverse effect on learning and achievement because the anxiety caused in the educational environment tends to be context specific. Many types of academic-related anxiety have been identified, including computer anxiety, research anxiety, statistical anxiety, writing anxiety, foreign language anxiety, general test anxiety and math anxiety (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostick, 2004).

Ordinary students and students with learning disabilities are not the only students with academic anxiety. Gifted students may also suffer from anxiety disorders. Fletcher and Speirs (2012) studied how perfectionism and achievement motivation affect gifted students. Perfectionist students may undergo from academic anxiety because of unrealistic expectations set by themselves or others. Perfectionism is not restricted to gifted students. In different studies, it was found that the amount of hours worked by the students also had a bad effect on their academic performance. However, Brint and Cantwell (2008) argued that the results of their study showed that Academic performance is positively affected by the time spent with family.

Huberty (2009) reported that anxiety affect students' behavior, cognition and physiology. For example, for students with anxiety, high-risk testing can be very difficult. Anxious students may also suffer from depression. He recommends that teachers and parents work together to help students learn to handle with anxiety. Nadeem, Ali, and Zaidi (2012) studied the impact of anxiety on student achievement at the University of Bahawalpur in Pakistan. An in-depth survey of the results by these analytical data shows that anxiety has an impact on students' academic performance. The results show that when anxiety increases, the academic performance of both male and female students declines.

Tuncay and Uzunboylu (2010) investigated student anxiety and resistance to learning through distance education. Precisely the study pursued answers to questions such as why students did not choose distance learning courses, the symptoms of anxiety, if any, the performance of distance learners for distance learning, gender and the perception of distance learners or any relationship between these factors. 120 distance education students from Near Eastern University were observed, 96 of whom were interviewed. Computer anxiety, language anxiety, and social anxiety are one of the reasons why students resist distance learning. Akinsola and Nwajei (2013) conducted a research to explore the relationship between test anxiety, depression, and academic performance. The results showed that test anxiety, trait anxiety and depression coexisted and were positively correlated, and negatively correlated with academic achievement. Shakir (2014) study focuses to explore the relationship and impact of academic anxiety and student academic achievement. The academic performance of students with high and low academic anxiety groups, the academic anxiety group of male and female, the academic anxiety group of female high school students, and the high anxiety level between male and female students have significant differences in academic performance and also between the low academic anxiety groups of male and female students.

Agboola and Evans (2015) conducted a research to explore the relationship between anxiety and academic achievement among international students in UK universities. The results of the study showed that anxiety was significantly associated with academic performance. Singh (2015) study focused to measure the impact of anxiety on academic achievement of under graduate students. The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature. It was found that low and moderate anxiety is positively correlated with academic achievement. Shibli (2015) conducted a study to explore the effects of anxiety on achievement and performance of college students. The analysis of responses revealed no significant relationship with anxiety and achievement. Rehman (2016) research study focused on exploring the causes of anxiety among Indian higher education students. The researchers reviewed relevant academic anxiety literature and identified factors that led to serious academic anxiety. Exploratory research design is used for

qualitative analysis. The results show that personal, family, institutional, social and political factors are considered to be potential threats to students' serious academic anxiety. For students with severe academic anxiety, various preventive measures can be taken both non-clinical and clinical. The need for hours is to build awareness among students so they can get help from professionals at the right time. Exploratory research design is used for qualitative analysis. The results show that personal, family, institutional, social and political factors are considered to be potential threats to students' serious academic anxiety. For students with severe academic anxiety, various preventive measures can be taken both non-clinical and clinical. The need of the day is to build awareness among students so they can get help from professionals at the right time.

Statement of the Problem

Majority of the students who get admission in distance learning system have previous experience of formal education system because of that they face problems and feel anxiety that ultimately affect their learning in new setting. The present study analyzed those factors that cause anxiety in students of distance education. Furthermore, the study investigated the differences based on gender regarding the factors of anxiety.

Objectives of the Study

The following were objectives of the study.

1. To explore the factors creating anxiety among the students of distance learning.
2. To explore the effects of anxiety on students' performance.
3. To compare the gender wise perception of students of distance learning about the effects of anxiety on their performance.

Research Questions

The following were research questions of the study.

1. What are the factors that create anxiety among students of distance learning?
2. How anxieties affect the performance of students of distance learning?
3. Is there any difference in perception of students of distance learning about the effects of anxiety on their performance regarding their gender?

Research Methodology

Present study was descriptive in nature. Population of the study comprised the students of Allama Iqbal University. The study comprised of the sample size of 322 students purposively selected (132 males and 190 Females) of M.Ed. programme enrolled in Semester Spring, 2017 from Regional campus Rawalpindi of Allama Iqbal Open University. A self-developed questionnaire based on five point Likert rating scale was used to collect the data by survey. Pilot testing was conducted to check the validity and reliability of the instrument before its administration. Mean score and t-test was applied for the analysis of data by using SPSS.

Results

Table 1

Factors of Anxiety (N=322)

S. No.	Factors	Gender	N	Mean	t	Sig.
1	Admission	Male	132	3.99	16.22	0.00
		Female	190	2.68		
2	Books distribution	Male	132	2.49	-10.04	0.00
		Female	190	3.95		
3	Assignments	Male	132	3.43	5.33	0.00
		Female	190	3.12		
4	Course tutorials	Male	132	4.1	20.78	0.00
		Female	190	1.92		
5	Student support services	Male	132	3.41	2.08	0.04
		Female	190	3.29		
6	Barrier	Male	132	4.31	1.45	0.15
		Female	190	4.14		
7	Exams	Male	132	4.08	-1.31	0.19
		Female	190	4.22		

The above table shows the mean result of factors of anxiety and results of independent sample t-test analysis, for all factors of anxiety among students under study. For most of the factors, t values were observed less than 0.05. If we observe the overall mean values for assignments factor, the mean value was moderate in case of males and females. It supports the fact that male and female students both felt low level of anxiety due to lack of time given to prepare assignments, due dates of assignments, understanding of assignments, and assessment of assignments and tutor remarks.

On course tutorials factor, the mean value was high in case of male students and low in case of female students. It supports the fact that male students felt high level of anxiety due to poor quality of books as compared to female students. On student support services factor, the mean value was moderate in case of male and female students which revealed that both felt low level of anxiety due to lack of communication with tutors, poor feedback from the tutors, lack of communication with the regional offices.

Regarding barriers factor the mean value was high in case of male and female students which revealed that both felt high level of anxiety due to performing jobs side by side with education. Mean on factor exams was high among both male and female students which revealed that both felt high level of anxiety due to the location of exam center.

Table 2
Factors of Students Performance (N=322)

S. No.	Factors	Gender	N	Mean	t	Sig.
1	Assignment performance	Male	132	2.34	-12.58	0.00
		Female	190	3.79		
2	Class grouping	Male	132	4.4	-2.36	0.02
		Female	190	4.17		
3	Exams performance	Male	132	3.96	-6.13	0.00
		Female	190	3.59		
4	Scope of degree	Male	132	3.8	8.55	0.00
		Female	190	3.09		

Table shows the mean values which represents the level of anxiety which affects student's performance felt regarding due dates of assignments by male and female students of AIOU. The mean value was high in case of female students and low in case of male students. It supports the fact that female students felt high level of anxiety regarding due dates of assignments and male students did not face such issues and their anxiety level was low.

If we observe the overall mean values for performance in assignments factor, the mean value was high in case of female students and low in case of male students. It supports the fact that female students felt high level of anxiety regarding assignments schedule and they feel that it affects their academic performance. If we observe the overall mean values for performance in exams factor, the mean value was high in case of male students and slightly high in case of female students. It supports the fact that both felt high level of anxiety due to lack of knowledge and understanding of paper pattern, exams schedule, location of exam center, behavior of invigilators at exam center, paper marking and they feel that it affects their academic performance.

Table 3*Comparison of Overall Anxiety Factors and Overall Students Performance (N=322)*

S. No.	Factors	Gender	N	Mean	t	Sig.
1	Anxiety factors	Male	132	3.69	9.09	0.00
		Female	190	3.33		
2	Student performance	Male	132	3.63	-0.82	0.00
		Female	190	3.66		

Table above shows the comparison of male and female students regarding anxiety factors and student's performance. On anxiety factors male mean scores ($M=3.69$) are higher than female mean scores (3.33). A significant difference among male and female scores related to anxiety factors ($t=9.09$) and student performance ($t=-0.82$) has been found.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to search out anxiety factors among distance learners. A group of students who are studying in distance institutions face a lot of problems and anxiety factors. Research participants of this study felt anxiety due to issues faced at the time of admission, while getting a prospectus for admission, locating a bank to deposit fees, receipt of books, shortage of time given to get ready tasks, assignments, and projects, lack of standardized and quality books, lack of communication with tutors, poor system of feedback, communication gap between learner and regional offices of institution, due dates of assignments, comprehension of assignments, appraisal system, tutor remarks and their anxiety level was high, performing a job side by side with education, location of exam center, issues faced regarding assignments schedule. Lack of interaction with the class fellows, lack of knowledge and understanding of paper pattern, exams schedule, location of exam center. Behavior of invigilator at exam center, regarding paper marking, detail marks sheets and degree, equivalence and scope of degree. Merrell (2008) conducted a study to know about the relationship among anxiety and task performance. It was explored in the study that as anxiety about school performance becomes more serious, students' ability to fully perform these tasks is diminishing, even as anxiety becomes a severe issue for them. Thus, students' performance falls down gradually. Students in this dilemma may be overwhelmed by the tasks they face and worry about their capability to accomplish these tasks and that they simply cannot complete the task effectively. The observations made in the above studies mean that there is a different degree of relationship between anxiety levels and performance.

Findings revealed that a significant difference is found between male and female university students regarding anxiety and performance. As compared to female students male students felt slightly high level of anxiety due to different factors of anxiety under study. Results of present study are in-line with the study conducted by Ahmad, Hussain, and Khan (2018) where compared to male students, female students show better performance and less anxiety. Therefore, findings of past studies are supporting the results of this research.

Conclusion

Present study was conducted to explore anxiety factors among students of distance learning in context to Allama Iqbal Open University. Students feel more anxiety in distance learning approach because due to distance they are unable to discuss or share problems with instructors on daily basis. It is concluded that the majority of the students felt anxiety due to issues faced at the time of admission, while getting a prospectus for admission, locating a bank to deposit fees, receipt of books, lack of time given to prepare assignments, poor quality of books, lack of communication with tutors, poor feedback from the tutors, lack of communication with the regional offices, due dates of assignments, understanding of assignments, assessment, tutor remarks and their anxiety level was high, performing a job side by side with education, location of exam center, and issues faced regarding assignments schedule. Lack of interaction with the class fellows, lack of knowledge and understanding of paper pattern, exams schedule, location of exam center. Behavior of invigilator at exam center, regarding paper marking, detail marks sheets and degree, equivalence and scope of degree. All these factors are cause of students' anxiety in distance learning and affect their academic performance.

Recommendations

It is recommended to establish information desks well in reach of the students from where they can easily obtain all necessary information related to admission. Administration may strengthen online information system for students that they can access information easily. It is suggested to update the system of student support services in main campus as well as in regional offices and study centers. It is recommended to introduce counseling center/programs for students so that they may cope with examination anxiety, academic anxiety and management problems. As high level of anxiety is responsible for low academic performance, it is recommended that students may be provided with satisfactory feedback by tutors. Instructors may deal students with positive behavior to overcome and reduce their level of anxiety. A healthy relationship between tutor and students is helpful to minimize the anxiety factors. The students with higher level of anxiety must be identified and treated to enhance their academic performance and for timely and effective

gender-sensitive counseling and therapeutic interventions. It is recommended that instructional brochures and pamphlets for all matters regarding academic as well as administrative should be developed by the faculty and distributed among students so that majority of factors affecting anxiety may be redressed.

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