Launch of Distance Education in University of Haripur: Its Rationale, Significance and Challenges

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Abstract

This study was initiated to conceptualize the concept of distance mode of learning and its possible initiative at university of Haripur with special reference to its rationale, significance and challenges. 23 Tutors and 57 students of Teachers' training programs offered by Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad, Sarhad University of Science and Technology (SUIT) Peshawar and University of Peshawar were consulted. Respondents of the study were interviewed and asked about the students support services of universities regarding workshops, provision of course text books, assessment of their assignments and papers, professionalism of their respective tutors, and the way university deal with their issues about rechecking of papers, fee submission, issuance of their detail mark sheets and degrees. At the end they were asked what their views are if university of Haripur takes this initiative of launching programs through distance mode of learning. Study revealed that most of the students were not satisfied with students support services of universities; they had very serious concerns about tutors, resource persons of the workshops, rude behavior of staff etc. It was concluded that these universities had not responsible focal persons and professional tutors in the district to facilitate their students. It was recommended on the basis of results that universities must standardize their students support services and university of Haripur must start distance learning programs for the students of district.

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Distance Education

According to Monolescu, Schifter and Greenwood (2004) distance education programs were started 200 years ago in late 1800s and Illinois Wesleyan was offering bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. Similarly in 1878, John Vincent established a home reading circle of adults and with the passage of time it turned into a Chautauqua Movement a famous education society for expanding educational access for all Americans. After five years, this movement was replaced into Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts which was the first distance learning center in America. (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). According to Harroff (2002), university of Wisconsin was the leading institute of correspondence study. History of distance education is very old and slowly but steadily it got its momentum. Now many of Open universities round the globe are regarded as mega universities like AIOU in Pakistan. Before moving forward it seems important to conceptualize the term distance education.

Distance learning is any type of learning where there is physical space between learners and the instructor (Wahlstrom, Williams & Shea, 2003). The distance learning, synchronous learning, distributed learning, mobile learning, tele learning, distance teaching, distance learning and flexible learning are the terms which are used as distance education because all these terms are characterize with distance between teachers and students (Picciano, 2001). An early definition of distance education was an instructional method in which teaching and learning behaviours are separated and communication take place through print, electronics, mechanics and other devices (Moor, 1973). Later on distance education was also defined as formal instructions where teaching occurs when there is distance between tutors and learners (Verduin & Clark, 1991). Zalenski (2000) defined distance education as quality of instruction should occur even there is distance between educators and students. Allen and Seaman (2004), defines distance education as a course in which students and teachers remain at distance and teachers take more than two classes at the same time and remain in contact with students with the help of multimedia and hypermedia technology. According to Keegan (1996) distance education has the following five requirements: quasi-separation of tutors and students; influence of organization in planning of courses, preparation of study materials, academic and students services; use of different technological tools for interaction;

ensure two way interaction and communication and; quasi-permanent absence of a learning group. Distance education is defined as institution based formal education where students and teachers remain at distance from on another while interactive telecommunication system are used to build connection among students, learners, educators and resources (Simonson, 2006). Teaching and learning at a distance is increasingly popular in press and described in educational literature. Most of the definitions of distance education do not use the word virtual but in reality it is virtual education where process of education carried out with the help of technology with necessary for teachers and the learners to be at the same place (Simonson, 2007b).

Distance education has many benefits to democratize education (Carr, 2005). Furst (2001) women deliberately selecting academic programs offered through distance learning strategies because of they feel comfortable in nearby institutes which offer these programs and they get their academic degrees and balance the family demands. Distance education programs are gaining more acceptances due to use of technological means, its cost effectiveness as compared to other modes of education, and greater opportunities at all levels of education (Allen, 2004). Another study by Saud et al., (2011) highlighted the fact that technology can not only be use for technical education it can be successfully used in all form of educational programs. Similarly Tas (2010) discussed use of information and communication technologies in all forms of education in order to cope the demands of growing and changing global economy.

According to UNESCO (2002) distance and open learning create opportunities for all to avail the services of education at their doorstep by providing them up to date study material without any attending any institute regularly to get required degrees. Open and distance learning have organized teaching and learning material for their students and they fully supported in their attempt while remain at distant from their tutors or instructors. According to Perraton (2010) open and distance education facilitate individuals who want to get in-service or pre-service teacher training. Open and distance learning can be made more effective with proper use and up dated technology in Pakistan and everywhere easily. World Economic Forum, (2009) highlighted that use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is very poor in Pakistan and suggested an increase in funding to develop strong infrastructure of

ICTs. Jung (2005) suggested integration of technology in provision of training of teaching methodology. Patrick and Abdurehman, (2010) explained that problem of training and professional development of teachers have been successfully addressed through open and distance learning programs. With the provision of computer skills with internet facilities revolutionized success rate of open and distance learning programs. Jensen and Brushwood (2006) suggested that institutions must use computer technology which impart training programs through open and distance learning mode of education. In Pakistan, the need and importance of computer technology has been felt and in its latest national policy (2009), special focus was laid down on empowering teachers through their capacity building in the use of computer skills. Higher education commission has developed few courses of information and communication technologies with the help of experts of the field and these courses are being taught throughout Pakistan. There are many barriers in open and distance learning programs and it seems significant to highlight in the following lines.

Barriers of Distance Education

There are many barriers in distance education. According to Neighbors (2004) absence of face to face interaction of both genders is the primary barrier of distance education. Secondly, quality of and the accuracy of content of courses offer through web based; there is also a lack of students support services and administrative services for distant learners; lack of confidence in students as compared to the student of face to face; and lack of time are the main or prominent barriers of distance education. Some are faculty, institutional and students' barriers as well. Yap (1996) concluded that the institutional barriers generally occur due to lack of cost and lack of equipment which are necessary for proper delivery of content and assistance. Hall (1996) and Van Dusen (2000) stated that ongoing cost of online courses generally considered as a significant barriers for institutions. Similarly according to Zirkle (2002) concluded that in engineering courses scheduling is a barriers while students advisory services, library and registration process are also institutional barriers in distance learning. According to Berg, Muilenburg and Haneghan (2002) institutional network for technical assistance is major barriers of online courses, some faculty members do not change their style of teaching (Dillon & Walsh, 1992), some faculty members

need professional development to use technology (Zirkle, 2002) and motivation behind deploying online courses (Franklin & Kaurman, 1999; Picciano, 2001; Wolcott, 1999). Galusha (1998) concluded that cost, motivation, lack of interaction, proper feedback of assigned tasks, students support and lack of experience are the barriers to distance education. Poor communications, feedback, sense of isolation are barriers of distance education (Zirkle, 2002) communication between instructors and students and between students themselves (Dooley Patil & lineberger, 2000; Flowers, 2001). Despite of many barriers in proper implementation of open and distance learning there are many advantages of distance education as well.

Advantages of Distance Education

Lawrence (2005) enlisted following advantages of distance education in paper presented at an international conference on Informing science and IT education, according to him;

- Students can take courses of their choice when and where they want. Flexibility is the characteristic of distance learning programs
- Students of distance learning proceed with their own pace, avail preferred medium of instruction and enjoy a more favoring environment.
- Students of distance learning programs have number of choice in taking courses of choice without any fear of any conflict with class mates.
- Open and distance learning programs apply more student centered teaching leaning approaches as compared to traditional and formal study programs.
- Generally instructors seem ready to provide any support their students require
- It is cost effective and more updated knowledge is shared

Research Questions

1. What qualities of students support services are present for distance education learners of AIOU, SUIT and Peshawar University in Haripur?
2. How general issues and problems of students are deal by AIOU, SUIT and Peshawar University?

Methodology

Study was qualitative in nature. Respondents were selected through snow ball sampling techniques. 11 tutors of AIOU, 7 tutors of SUIT and 5 tutors (from two distance study centers) were selected along with 32 students of AIOU, 13 students of SUIT and 12 students of Peshawar university were also selected. Final sample comprised on 57 students and 23 tutors. Interview protocol was thought appropriate for satisfactory answers of research questions. Interview session of tutors was about 40 minute's duration while students interview session was little bit longer as compared to tutors' session. Questions asked in interview protocol were firstly presented before a group of expert tutors and few statements/ questions were modified as per directions received from group. In interview protocol respondents were asked about timely delivery of their course materials, process of admission and registration, assessment of their assignments and final papers, availability of course tutors and their attitude towards them, venue of workshops and level of input through resource persons, rechecking of papers, fee submission and receiving final degree etc. All of the respondents were also asked about the possibility of launching distance learning programs at university of Haripur, its possible challenges, issues and advantages. Data were analyzed simply on the basis of what the most frequently said by the respondents along with what else have been mentioned less frequently. Against each of the question, direct quote of any one also presented reflecting stance of majority of the respondents.

Results

Provision of Course Material: Most of respondents of all two universities (AIOU and SUIT) reported that in the first semester, usually they faced lot of problem in receiving course materials on time while learners of distance study centers of Peshawar university reported that generally course outlines were shared with past question papers with them but the content of the courses which were shared at the time of admission did not cover all of the questions given in previous examination of the university. A respondent from SUIT claimed that;

> "Tutors of SUIT convinced her to take admission in Associate degree in Education (ADE) and promised that he would help her in passing the examination in good grade. The tutor and the

university did not provide us even course outlines of the courses and I manage to have course outlines from Regional Institute of Teacher Education (RITE) Haripur with the help of my husband".

Conduction of Workshops: Majority of students respondents of all three universities were not satisfied with the quality of workshops conducted in each semester while majority of tutors claimed that they taught with great zeal during workshops and they blamed that most of the students of (Peshawar University and SUIT) did not bother to come in study centers. Tutors of AIOU said attendance in the workshops is necessary and we managed it successfully. A student of AIOU reported that;

"Most of the tutors or resource persons (who are school teachers) did not contribute positively in sharing relevant knowledge; they delivered their lectures without preparation; they were not following schedule and topics of workshops; most of the time they share their personal experiences during lectures".

Most of the resource persons/tutors reported that generally students attended workshops for the sake of their attendance they never took interest in learning and sometime they spoiled the environment. They asked irrelevant questions during the sessions and they always requested to leave them early in workshops. When we follow strict rules of workshop they felt it inappropriate.

Assignment Checking: Students of AIOU and SUIT were not satisfied the way their tutor check assignments. One of the students of SUIT said;

"Our tutors checked our assignments carelessly and sometimes they missed away our assignments. They cooperated with us and sometimes they gave us marks without assignments. In most of the cases, they favored their near and dear ones".

Majority of students of Peshawar University reported that they never ever submit any assignment to their resource persons/tutors of courses. They did not know how their assignments marks were given.

Assessment of Paper: Majority of students and tutors of all three universities were opined that students usually got more marks who wrote a lot regardless of its relevance to the question.

Tutors Attitude towards Students: majority of students of AIOU and SUIT were not satisfied the way their tutors behave. They claimed that most of the tutors remained absent for study centers and they were rude and uncooperative if they requested for guidance. Interestingly point of views of females' students was quite different regarding their male tutors while about their female tutors they almost opined the same as male student had about their male tutors. Majority of them claimed that their tutors neither check their assignments on time nor they sent their assignments back. If they were asked about assignments, they behaved rudely.

Most of the tutors of both universities reported that students always submitted their assignments late to us; they generally take help from others to complete their assignments; they never write to the point and they try to reproduce the text from course material. As per rules of assessment, they do not qualify to have some marks on their assignment which are almost ditto copy but we cooperate with them and try to accommodate them to some extent. Some try to reach us through their relatives or our friends and request to give them marks in the absence of their assignments.

Students of study centers (Peshawar university) claimed that most of their resource persons cooperate with them on the other side most of the resource persons reported that attendance of the students in study center was minimum.

General Students Support Services of Universities: Most of the students and tutors stated that generally behavior of staff in universities was rude; they did not even bother to listen us with attention; they never ever referred us to right person; students faced lot of problems in rechecking of their final papers or assignments; female students complained that clerical staff of the universities try to develop relation with them; they offered their services to enhance marks of examinations and; they promised to give final papers before the start of examinations.

Launching of Distance Learning Programs at University of Haripur: All of the tutors and students welcomed the idea of launching distance learning programs at university of Haripur. At the same time

they raised their concerns regarding provision of students support services, selection or development of courses; dispatching course material on time and the huge finance which required launching these programs in newly established university. They were happy for having approaching university where their most of the problems would be solved easily through their relatives working already in the university or due to their own easy access. Students were showing their serious concerns regarding appointment of these tutors again in university of Haripur. Students recommended that tutors must be trained to facilitate students at large at the hour of need. They further suggested that tutors and students attendance should be made compulsory in the workshops; workshops should be conducted in the university instead of government schools where there is not proper arrangements of seating, water, electricity, washrooms or writing boards.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Following conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made on the basis of results of the study;

Course material of AIOU usually reached late in the start (first semester of each program) due to its vast jurisdiction and largest number of admission in each semester. Continuing students of AIOU received their relevant course material on time. It was suggested that course material may be send to each of the regional office for smooth and quick dispatch process. Course material of SUIT may late due to insufficient and inexperienced human resource power. There seems a little negligence as well. It was recommended that the SUIT may develop an effective system of dispatch similarly administration of study centers were reflecting lack of professionalism in receiving and then distributing courses to the students. Workshops were conducted repeatedly by the same personnel in each semester of AIOU and SUIT. There was monopoly of these personnel in Haripur; they distributed workshops lectures among friends instead to hiring the services of experts. It was recommended that workshops coordinators may be replaced in each semester and proper monitoring mechanism should be in place for smooth execution of the teaching learning component of distance education. Administration of distance study centers of

Peshawar university did not engage experts from the field instead they preferred to avail the services of retired personnel and teachers. It was recommended that university of Peshawar must monitor this segment of distance learning and may ensure quality input from experts in the study centers. There was no system of monitoring tutors to assess the way they marked the assignments that's why problems occurred. It was suggested that university may develop a system through which marked assignments could be reassessed to address the problems of students. AIOU has a very good system of centralized marking in the university other universities sent their papers for evaluation to their paper setters. Universities must have a valid and transparent system of students' assessment. Usually clerical staff creates problems everywhere so it was recommended that there should be a one window operation in each of the university to address the students' problems. Respondents concerns regarding the start of distance education programs in university of Haripur were genuine and it was recommended that department of education must keep in mind these possible problems and solutions. University must move forward to experience distance learning programs which will definitely address many students' problems easily as they claimed.

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