

A Survey of Quality of Guidance Services at Allama Iqbal Open University

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Abstract

Provision of dynamic guidance services is an important aspect of any educational system of a country. Because of changes in the life style of people and working patterns in various sectors due to scientific and technological developments, several problems have also come up which are linked to various aspects of education, vocational training, social life, political system, health and well-being, religion-moral and spiritual values. This paper focused on improvement of guidance services in Pakistan with a special reference to open and distance learning – the Allama Iqbal Open University, since the presence of a proper system of guidance becomes even more crucial when the element of distance becomes part of the educational process. Main objectives of this research were to study the quality status of guidance services at Allama Iqbal Open University and some Measures for improvement. The present study entails a qualitative research of the guidance services at AIOU for measures that can be taken to improve the existing framework of guidance services at the Allama Iqbal Open University. The current guidance services at AIOU need to be updated and redesigned.

Keywords: Guidance services, personal development, open and distance learning,

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Introduction

The guidance provides a foundation for human development and it is a continuous process of helping people in making important choices that positively affect their lives (Gladding, 1996). The real objective of the guidance is to enable an individual to accept responsibility for his own decisions and to develop the ability for self-analysis, self-direction and the process of thinking with the desired end of achieving self-reliance (Khan, 1998). In this context, education molds the mind and soul of an individual, but it is impossible without proper guidance from a teacher. In the view of Srivastava (2003), it is the teacher's close and continuous communication with the learner that assists a teacher to observe the student with more vigilance, more regularly and under different situations. For instance, reported observation in the form of anecdotes, student's written expression and work, makes an important input to therapist and supervisors.

It is customary in developing countries (such as Pakistan itself as well) that learners and researchers do not have much facility of guidance which is important for their professional and personal development. For this reason, many times they have no clear vision and direction for their future. Indirectly, this situation also creates an environment where various government departments and other organizations are not able to play an effective role in the overall development of the education sector. In Pakistan's education system, there are different service providers and these services are made available in different universities. Some service providers are providing constant counseling and guidance at different levels. Some of the famous institutions which provide guidance services about child health and psychological help are Government College of Education for Men, Government College of Education for Women and Government College (all of which are in Lahore). Apart from these institutions, the lack of proper guidance services at a larger level, covering a broader spectrum of issues is an alarming situation given the high percentage of students and young professionals that emerge every year.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is the number one institutes in Pakistan chosen for open and distance education, providing a vast variety of programs and subject combinations. Education in general and open and distance education in particular needs extremely efficient guidance services and networks to function effectively and yield positive results. AIOU network also has such a center, which conducts workshops through video conferences, radio and television programs to provide

guidance services at different levels with the aim to solve a variety of problems of students throughout the country. Earlier on, in the University of the Punjab, there was a limited help available to B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) students.

Commission of Education has emphasized to provide suitable guidance and counseling services to students during different stages of their personal, educational and professional development. In 1960, the government selected a committee comprising of experts to explore ways and means to implement the recommendations suggested by the Education Commission in the field of guidance. Thus, to develop a plan for all educational institutions, the guidance services were prepared and implemented in subsequent years. The subsequent education policies also highlighted to develop plans for the provision of guidance services at school, college and at university level. Presently, there is further need for strengthening the guidance process in the educational system because the students are facing several problems such as rising crime, wrong career choices and the wrong subject combinations among many others.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is the first Open University in Asia to import distance education to the masses. It is a unique institution in Pakistan because of its philosophy, system, approach, functions and overall structure. The University with its main campus at Islamabad and huge network of 44 Regional Campuses/Centers spread all over the country is serving its clientele all over Pakistan and in the Middle East. AIOU is a Distance Education institution provides multi-disciplinary education from basic to doctoral level programs. Its system is link education where, specially prepared instructional materials and supplemented with face to face tutorials. As the last 42 years of AIOU have proved, Distance Education has opened new opportunities for millions, particularly women, and enhances the efforts of the federal and provincial governments in a big way and that too without becoming a burden on their resources. The idea of distance education assumed greater relevance and acceptance in Pakistan due to factors of poverty and relative deprivation of women. The rate of literacy, incidence of dropouts, and excess to higher education is much lower in the poorer classes of Pakistan.

The present study aims to analyze the present status of guidance services available at the AIOU and how to improve them, and to implement similar approaches in fixing the status of similar systems all over Pakistan. It also aims to delve deeper into the situation of the guidance services provided by the AIOU as part of the bigger picture of how Pakistan as a country fares when it comes to supporting its young

generation in various educational aspects where guidance services are direly needed. As AIOU is the pioneer of open and distance learning in Pakistan, this institute was the best choice to select for the study. The main objectives of this study are to identify the weak points of the current guidance system in place at the AIOU and to provide suggestions on how to make it better.

Review of Literature

Mishra (2004) describes guidance services as methods of involving and to respond to others, giving them such opportunities to explore and to work towards having a life that is more satisfying and resourceful. Nayak (2004) says that guidance and counseling is a process which is the most essential part of the professional life, which enables people in enhancing their potentials for the betterment and growth of their own lives as well as the well-being of the society to have a better social life for mankind.

According to Braddock (2001), the purpose of guidance services for students and scholars is to improve academic achievement, rear positive attitudes toward learning and work, boost achievements and in the application of conflict resolution skills and decrease the number of dropouts. The importance of guidance services for the personal, social, economic and psychological uplift of an individual is an established fact, especially developing his interpersonal relationships with the fellow human beings from the early stage of the life to death (Staley and Carey, 1997).

Guidance services are a continuous ongoing process which should cater for all individual needs. The schools, colleges and university guidance services program encompass a sequential, developmental program, specially designed to enable the students to take up the challenges of their future (Wilma Gees and John Allen, 2000). This type of program comprises of a curriculum especially organized around three areas vital for pupil's growth and development, i.e. academic, professional, personal and social development etc. In current times, this complex life has built up the value of organized guidance and counseling system in the society (Kochhar, 1991). The third question is where the guidance should be given? Kothari Commission report (1964) described that there should be a well-prepared guidance service which can fulfill the need of our scholars and younger generation for getting sound and well-informed conclusions. According to this commission report, from

primary to secondary stage adequate guidance services should be introduced.

In Pakistan, the concepts of guidance services exist in the national documents. The Pakistan Educational Conference, which held from 27th November to 1st December 1947 also recommended “The integration of spiritual, social and vocational fundamentals of education are essential” (Educational Conference, 1947, p. 25). There were various commissions and the national education policies stressed on the need of guidance and its services in overall educational institutions of Pakistan especially in universities. Later, some programs relating to the guidance and counseling services were offered at some of the teacher education colleges, but still there is a need of a well-established system of guidance services even in higher educational institutions which are preparing the future teachers (Khan, 1998). According to Rao and Hari (2005) there is vital case for strengthening and introducing the guidance and its services in universities, colleges and at school levels in our country to meet the challenges of the students who are facing problem in their educational career and stages. The UGC (University Grant Commission) and now HEC (Higher Education Commission) has emphasized the universities of the country to establish guidance services on their campuses. Here, the focus has been to facilitate students and teachers to solve their immediate problems. Several clinics and counseling centers have been established in various universities of the country.

Allama Iqbal Open University is the only university in Pakistan practicing the guidance services through Distance mode of education. The university was established in 1974 with an aim to provide education to all the people at their doorsteps. Its students get guidance services throughout the country. The AIOU is a unique system of education consisting of a main campus along with forty-four regional offices across the country. The purpose of this education system is to provide information and advice to the students who are beyond the geographical reach of the university. The directorate which is located on the main campus is responsible for the coordination of all the activities of the sub-campus located throughout the county to facilitate the students in different disciplines of their chosen studies and courses (Rashid, 1996). The University started operating with a few courses with enrolment of 100 students in 1974. Now it has become a mega university with 1380 courses and 124 programs from basic literacy to Ph.D. Annual enrolment is over 700,000. Most of AIOU courses are available throughout the country and some of them are available in Middle Eastern countries. AIOU has 44 Regional centers/campuses in various parts of the country

to coordinate and facilitate decentralized system of education of the university programs and courses.

Objectives of The Study

The objectives of this study were:

1. To delve deeper into the situation of the guidance services provided by the AIOU.
2. To study the quality status of guidance services at Allama Iqbal Open University.
3. To take some measures for improvement of guidance services at Allama Iqbal Open University.

Limitation of the Study

This study was conducted in Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad Pakistan. The nature and status of availability of guidance services, understanding and application of these services by AIOU academic professionals, other personnel and problems faced by the students may be different in other government and private universities of Pakistan. Therefore, this study cannot be generalized to other educational institutions of the country.

Methodology

The nature of this study required that a qualitative approach is used. The data gathered from academic professionals and other personnel of the AIOU. These respondents were selected through purposive sampling which is the most common sampling strategy for qualitative data collection procedure.

After studying the relevant literature review, the researcher designed the interview questions in the light of objectives. The main target of the interview process was to study the views and the responses relevant academic professionals and other personnel on the notion of guidance services, related problems and suggestion for its improvements in the respective organization.

Through application of the interview method, the researcher got much deeper understanding of the topic of inquiry. The data analyzed (both primary as well as secondary in nature) was collected through structured interview of relevant officials and academic professionals of

the AIOU as well as from other secondary sources. Part of the research also included the analysis of previously researched data and a broad review of secondary data sources.

Results and Discussion

Responses to various questions on current guidance services as well as how to improve student guidance services were recorded from various individuals inside the institute itself. The current system of guidance services was also thoroughly evaluated.

Current Support & Guidance System in place at AIOU

The current AIOU Student Support Facilities include correspondence with students through tutorial meetings, online teaching interaction with students, face to face teaching for practical and for lab work, group training workshop for postgraduate students as well as video conferencing and use of FM radio for teaching purposes. The four major elements of student support were studied which are as follows.

Tutorials

The first facility for distance learning is tutorial; Opportunities for personal contact in a distance education course are limited. But meeting students now and then in a classroom situation in cities where there is a concentration of students is an effective way of bridging the gulf between the teacher and the learners. Face to face sessions help pull students out of the stopper they fall into. During or immediately after a contact program, the frequency of students' assignments increases and the quality of answers also improve.

Workshops

Workshop is yet another component of student support services. In most of the courses at higher education offered by the Open University, workshops are considered a compulsory element. Students who miss these workshops are declared fail in that course. However, the student may complete the workshop component within a specified period to pass that course.

Workshops play an effective role in the learning of distance students. These are opportunities for them to interact with their tutors and other fellow students and thus can discuss their problems. During workshops, students are taught with the help of modern technology; including radio television video slide projector, overhead projector filmstrips, etc. they are encouraged and motivated to express whatever they know about the subject. Experts are invited to deliver lectures on different topics are allotted to students to make presentation in front of their fellows and senior teachers or experts. Such presentations are usually evaluated.

Study Centers

The effectiveness of distance learning system depends upon student support services to a considerable extent, in distance education, support services are organized and managed on the concept of (i) local centers and (ii) study centers. Local centers generally carry out one or more of three functions academic advisory and administrative. Local centers facilitate the students by providing opportunities of contact with other students and with tutoring and counseling staff. They enable access of students to materials and provide a good place to study. But the role of study centers in distance education is only to facilitate the students regarding their studies. They study centers provide facilities for tutoring and counseling. T.V and Radio, Copies of course units and, in some cases, computer terminals and loud speaking telephones.

Study centers can also be used for informal self-help groups organized by students. One of the limitations of study centers is that they do not meet the needs of all tutorial events. e.g. for science or technology students, a laboratory setting at a different study center is required which cannot easily be provided in every study centers in the network.

The Functions of the Study Centre are to:

- Encourage group activities such as discussions and paper readings students are informed in advance about the topics to be discussed. The teacher acts as moderator the teacher acts as moderator; the students do most of the talking and
- Invite students to come with their problems arising from the study material they have studied during the intervening period;
- Provide opportunities for feedback on assignments
- Provide place for direct instruction and personal communication with fellow students

- Afford an opportunity for promotion of groups for studying the course.

Regional Offices

Regional office is the very important facility available to distance learners. The main characteristic of distance education is that there is a vast distance between students and tutors. This separation or vast full is reduced to a large extent by using different ways and means. But still, students of distance education have to experience a variety to problems at different stages from pre-entry stage to passing out. In order to reduce and eliminate such problems, open universities have established a network of Regional offices to arrange decentralized support areas in order to cater for a large number of students of distance education, Robinson, Bernaddette (1981) delineated the major functions of a regional office.

- Recruitment and supervision of part time tutors and counselors
- Allocation of student groups to tutors
- Local arrangements for study centers
- Planning the tutorial program along with guidelines provided by the center;
- Local organization of examinations, degree ceremonies and summer schools;
- Provision of advisory services
- Keeping student's and tutor's records

The Regional Services meet the essential purpose of instructional support information and advice for the students, who may be hundreds of kilometers from the main Campus. The Regional Services comprise of Directorate at the Campus mainly responsible for the policy and coordination of the activities carried out by a network of Regional Offices/Sub Regional Offices/Personal Co-coordinating offices and part time Regional Co-coordinating offices. The regional offices serve for a variety of purposes outlined below.

- Providing tutorial support to AIOU students spread in all parts of the region at the same time
- Publicity of AIOU Academic Program and sale of Admission Forms.
- Motivation through promotional material i.e. Banners, Posters, Handbills, letters to Heads of Institutions etc.

- Making tutors appointments and allocation of students for each course.
- Establishing study center in the premises of formal institutions as well as at AIOU's own offices.
- Arranging workshops for all Teacher Education Programs i.e. PTC/CT/ATTC and B.ED.
- Conducting workshops for all Postgraduate Program at the end of each semester.
- Identifying Institutions and Supervisory Staff for End Semester Examinations.
- Collection and dispatch of Continuous Assessment Results (Assignment Cumulative Results) to Examinations Departments.
- Organizing Student Extra Curricular Activities in the Regions.
- Celebrating National events in the light of Government instructions.
- Providing Financial Assistance to the needy students through Regional Assistant Committees
- Monitoring of Tutorial Support and Examination Centre.
- Keeping close liaison with the local educational authorities for utilizing their services for uplift of educational facilities in the region.

Methods to Improve Guidance System at AIOU

From the preceding account it has already been established that although the basic framework for guidance systems do exist in Pakistan yet there is a huge room for improvement. For the study, personal interviews of key people from within the AIOU were conducted to get a better idea of how to recommend the improvement of these services in the AIOU, and to hopefully implement similar strategies across the country in other organizations where necessary. The data gathered from academic professionals and other personnel from the AIOU was analyzed thematically as follows

Improving Coordination between Regional Centers

Since the clientele of AIOU is spread across the country and the regional centers are supposed to hold everything together to give it a central approach of management, more coordination between the regional centers of AIOU is necessary. Also, there has been a notice in lack of coordination between the main campus and regional offices and

this gap must be bridged as firstly students attempt to approach to the regional office to seek solution/guidance whereas the policies are made at central level (Saleem, 22.04.2018).

Increase in level of Interaction and Coordination

The need of effective coordination and interaction between various levels in an open education institute is a direct determinant of its efficiency. The current guidance system in AIOU lacks some element of promptness and interactive capability that is affecting the efficiency of operations negatively at different levels (Waqar, 12.04.2018). Measures should be taken to decrease this effect and optimize communication as well as interaction of maximize efficiency.

Updating Methodologies with Proper Training of Staff

Outdated approaches call for a need to be upgraded and adjusted in accordance to the rapidly evolving technological advances of the new millennium. Changes in trends of online and long-distance learning require constant attention and learning so that staff can keep up to provide the best experience to students (Tariq, 18.04.2018). Current systems in place at AIOU need to be revamped and staff training and awareness in this regard is a crucial step to improve guidance at AIOU.

Attention to Student Counselors

Since student counsellors are the main backbone of direct guidance to students, proper measures must be taken to update their skills and knowledge to be sure they meet all the criteria of a world class open and distance education institution (Amin, 20.04.2018). AIOU student counsellors need training sessions and education to update themselves on the latest trends in student counselling to be able to address student issues and tackle individuality of problems faced by the youth in open and long-distance education (Siraj, 15.04.2018).

Promotion of Professionalism

Commitment of staff and other employees, lack of professionalism and academic finesse are some of the prominent areas in which AIOU needs to be better (Saleem, 22.04.2018). These are challenges which

need to be addressed from the root to improve AIOU's guidance services. Professional development needs to be a priority to maintain and improve standards.

Annual and Strategic Planning

Self-review, annual reporting, feedback from students to help in strategic planning and development of strong leadership are crucial to improve the current guidance system of AIOU (Ahmed and Ahmad, 17.04.2018). Guidelines need to be developed and be put in place to ensure that students have sufficient access to support services in every aspect (Amin, 20.04.2018).

Conclusion and Recommendation

In a nutshell, the areas where Pakistan is lacking when it comes to guidance systems are an absence of vital acknowledgment of direction and centralized approach, lack of matching skill gaps with learning opportunities, poor communication, lack of professional development, absence of knowledge of the newest trends and tools and lack of self-review and planning. It suggests that the goals and approaches catering towards student wellbeing need to be considered when revamping and upgrading guidance systems to improve the current quality of such services at the AIOU and throughout Pakistan. The current guidance services at AIOU also need to be updated and redesigned to be more effective. More in depth research needs to be carried out in this regard as the present study has only touched the surface and aims to provide an initial glance into the matters that should be taken under consideration when it comes to fixing the existing framework of guidance systems at AIOU.

The recommendations and conclusions are given below that are needed to improve guidance system at AIOU in order to achieve an organized guidance services for the betterment of the students and the wider community.

- The gap of coordination between the main campus and regional offices should be bridged. Measures should be taken to decrease this effect and optimize communication.
- Current systems in place at AIOU should be revamped and staff training and awareness in this regard is a crucial step should be taken to improve guidance services at AIOU.

- AIOU student counsellors should be trained and to update them on the latest trends in student counselling.
- Professionalism and academic finesse should be developed for maintaining and improving Professional standards.
- Strategic planning, guidelines should be developed and be put in place to ensure that students have sufficient access to support services in every aspect.
- The current guidance services at AIOU should be updated and redesigned.

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