

A Review of the Problems Faced by AIOU Regional Centers in Pakistan

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Abstract: The objective of the study was to investigate the problems faced by the regional centers of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) Pakistan. For the purpose of collection of data, a questionnaire was developed and the data collected through the questionnaire were tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted. Major findings of the study reveal that the major problems faced by AIOU regional centers staff are the limited frequency of capacity building workshops, shortage of transport facility, and the absence of purpose-built infrastructures for the regional centers. Overcoming these deficiencies at the regional centers will result in better working environment at these centers and hence yield to overall better performance.

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1. Introduction

In distance education system, the teaching is decentralized and learners are given instruction and guidance preferably where they live or at the nearest place. According to Perraton (1978), distance teaching means an educational process in which significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone moved in space and or time from the learner" while Rehman (1998) has given the following definition of distance education: Education conducted by the postal services without face-to-face contact between teacher and learner. Teaching is done by written or tape-recorded materials sent to the learner, whose progress is monitored through written or taped exercises to the teacher, who corrects them and returns them to the learner with criticism and advice. The above definition of distance education, adopted by UNESCO, is very simple and indeed a realistic one. Actually, the student in distance education is an individual who cannot attend classes and does not have the luxury of coming face-to-face with the teacher in a classroom environment, at least for extended period of time. A student always needs guidance and assessment of his performance with regard to his academic ability and achievement. It is provided by a teacher/tutor who guides and helps from a distance. Harris and William (1977) state that the term "distance training" includes "any planned or regular educational provision where there is a distance between teacher (or instructor or educator) on the one hand and student (or learner or receptive audience) on the other hand."

Need and Nature of Distance Education

Distance education plays complimentary, supplementary, as well as an independent role. It provides cost-effective education to diversified target groups eliminating the class disparity. David (1983) has discussed the need and nature of distance education in these words:

The distance education whether concerned with elementary, university, occupational or professional study regularly includes three types of activities on the part of the organization that administers it. First of all, the development of self-instructional study material or courses printed and/or recorded which may either be self-contained or of a study guide type relying on set text. Secondly, teaching at distance by comments in writing, on the telephone or an audiocassette on student work submitted. Thirdly, general support and counseling of student work by the same distance study media.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) has been a pioneer in providing distance education to the wide masses of Pakistan population for years. It has facilitated easy access to education for working class men and women. In case of women, its performance is even more admirable keeping in the view the traditional culture of Pakistan. Faure (1972) is of the view that:

Due to unequal growth rate, the educational needs and demands are both increasing to a great extent in the whole world. Such growing needs are producing pressure to institutions and resulting in out of school education. So much of national resources are being allocated to education. AIOU, being a distance education institution, relies heavily on all varieties of available media to reach its students in appropriate manner.

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According to the University's Vice-Chancellor Annual Report (AIOU (2004)) the main components of AIOU's distance education package are the following:

- Correspondence materials: including self-learning study package and supplementary study materials, such as textbooks and study guides, delivered by mail.
- Radio and television broadcasts: generally related to the study materials of the package. AIOU has been airing educational media material on PTV-2 television channel which is beamed through satellite to more than 45 countries.
- Online Teaching: Various regional centers of AIOU are being linked for online education through teleconferencing, CDs, and other recorded media are being provided to the students.
- Non-broadcast media; including slides, audio/video cassettes, flip charts, and leaflets, commonly for basic functional and literacy level courses.
- Tutorial instruction: as face-to-face contact sessions, practical labwork sessions, and academic guidance sessions at regional study centers. For postgraduate programs such as M.A., M.Sc., M. Phil, Ph.D., group training workshops are conducted while short-term/long-term internships in industrial or business concerns for BBA and MBA programs are a mandatory component of these programs. The students are given course assignments which are evaluated by the tutors and final examinations are held for each course at the end of the semester.

Thus, distance education system of AIOU ranges from the most traditional methodology to highly advanced satellite and internet media. This wide range provides easy learning opportunities to students belonging to various areas of Pakistan.

Government Policy and Plans for Distance Education

Allana (1990) has discussed the growing need of distance education in Pakistan in this manner:

There is vast scope for Allama Iqbal Open University to start different types of both formal and non-formal education programs. The following relatively recent developments are indicators of current planning. Though the Allama Iqbal Open University offers its courses to both male and female

populations without any discrimination, it has established a Department of Women's Education which takes exclusive care of specialized courses for women. In addition to home economics, food and nutrition, etc. it has started a project for providing education at matriculation level for out-of-school women, which could be extended to the whole of Pakistan in a phased manner and then converted into a regular program of the Allama Iqbal Open University. Further, the Department of Literacy, Adult and Continuing Education is also embarking upon an Integrated Functional Education Program for the 10+ age group of females. Since the participation rate of females at primary and subsequent stages is already very low, there is enormous scope for launching courses designed for women's education in the near future. The advent of modern information technology, the use of satellites and, most importantly, the internet have opened new vistas in the field of distance education. As the access to internet increases for the general population, the University will be in a position to supplement its instructional efforts through the internet throughout Pakistan. The traditional system of correspondence, tutorials, and written words will be gradually replaced by on-line teaching through the internet. Hussain (2002) has discussed the setting of future policy for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Pakistan through AIOU as the following:

The University is trying to get a license for starting its own full time Radio and Television Stations to harness them in support of its educational programs. Similarly, the University has already made a significant beginning in the fields of Basic and Applied Sciences. Science and Technology is the focus of academic expansion in the next five years or so. The University has made a beginning in the field of medicine. It has launched post graduate diplomas in eye care, nutrition and dietetics with the expertise of recognized hospital in the country. AIOU has taken on a special role in the remote northern areas. The National Education Policy 1998-2010 also expects radio and television to play crucial role and be extensively used for social mobilization and promoting the cause of basic education, particularly amongst rural females, and to impart life skills to the new literates.

Problems in Distance Education System

Jumani (2003) and Saleem (1987) have pointed out the problems faced by distance education system as the following:

- Firstly, in distance education system, printed material is dispatched to the students by post at their postal addresses. The postal services

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are slow and unreliable in Pakistan. Sometimes this material is dispatched to a wrong person or the students may get their mail late.

- Secondly, there is a shortage of trained staff for managing distance education, particularly staff like writers, course designers, coordinators, reviewers, etc. to prepare distance education material.
- Thirdly, in any education system, evaluation is essential i.e. internal and external assessment. Internal assessment, which includes students' assignments, is not working up to the mark. Sometimes students fail to submit their assignments or tutors do not evaluate the assignments and this leads to many problems.

Furthermore, Saleem (1987) has pointed out that expansion of distance education into science and engineering programs is not easy in developing countries due to difficulties in the development of appropriate instructional material, availability of well equipped laboratories, high expenses of use of electronic media, inadequate cooperation from conventional universities and research laboratories, and high cost involved in setting up own laboratories at different places.

Similarly, the usefulness and relevance of AIOU radio and TV programs is also not certain. The large student audience has diverse needs and problems. Different students have different problems. These radio and TV programs may not be effective for such divergent needs and problems of the students. Moreover, students' problems cannot be addressed at the spot that makes students lose interest in studies. Similarly, reaching out to the students, especially women, in far-flung villages is very difficult and expensive, at least at the initial stage. Thus, the cost of education may be higher than conventional education. This creates another hurdle in the way of the students to get education through distance education system.

Sometimes even the credibility of distance education degree or certificates is at stake due to wrong perception of people who think that degree or certificate obtained through distance education is not of the same standard as the degree obtained through the conventional face-to-face educational system.

Critics of distance education say that this mode of education does not socialize its students up to the required standards due to infrequent face to face contact whereas it is the distinctive characteristic of conventional university. Distance education in developed as well as in developing countries faces numerous challenges. The equivalence, social

recognition, media, information, material, mailing, trained faculty etc are problems and issues pertaining to distance education all over the world. Jenkins (1993) has observed that:

Growth in distance education has been very fast, and it is not easy to identify the areas in which success is most significant. Judging by the extent of provision, programs in management have done remarkably well. No doubt this is partly due to demand, but continuing and growing demand is, in itself, a measure of success. When one considers the extent to which management training involves interpersonal interaction, discussion and practical application, its success in the distance mode, which can be weak in precisely these areas, is of great interest. A study of why distance education in this area is proving so effective appears to be overdue. Another area which needs further study is costs. As distance education first became popular, it was often sold to governments on the argument of its cost effectiveness. More learners could be taught more cheaply than by conventional means, it is now recognized that this argument could be misleading. Though cost effectiveness is of critical importance, it is not necessarily achieved by large numbers. The issue is by no means simple. Quality may sometimes suffer if costs are cut too far, large schemes are not always what is needed, reaching marginal students may be essential though costly. The issue of the costs borne by students is often overlooked.

In view of the above discussion, it is clear that distance education has its benefits as well as problems which need to be addressed to make it an effective educational system.

Establishment of Allama Iqbal Open University

Informal distance education programs were initiated in Pakistan during the 1960s by the Pakistan Television Corporation and the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation. The formal establishment of the first distance education institution in Pakistan was by the name of Peoples Open University, which was later renamed as Allama Iqbal Open University. It would not be wrong to say that Allama Iqbal Open University education system is based on scientific and modern teaching practices employed across the world. The University utilizes latest multimedia approach and multidimensional methodologies to make teaching and learning process simple, easy, and interesting.

Objectives of Allama Iqbal Open University

According to AIOU Act (1974) the main objectives of the University are described as the following:

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- To provide facilities to the masses for their education in such manner it may determine.
- To provide facilities for the training of teachers in such manner it may determine.
- To provide for instruction in such branches of technology or vocation, and to make provision for research and for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge in such manner it may determine.
- To hold examinations and to award and confer degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic distinctions.

Institutional Framework of Allama Iqbal Open University

The distance education system followed by Allama Iqbal Open University has proven its potential for expansion and growth. Hussain (2002) has stated that: "(AIOU)... has supplemented the efforts of both the federal and provincial governments by easing their load, and served the citizens of the nation by making educational access more available." In this respect its largest contribution has been in making education accessible to the female learners and the working people. According to AIOU Act (1974), AIOU was set up with the following framework:

There shall be established a University to be called the Peoples Open University as a specialized educational institution with its Principal seat at Islamabad for purposes of teaching, holding of examinations and tests, establishment of audience level regional centers for guidance and examinations at the post-matric, graduate, post-graduate and research levels in accordance with the provision of this Act. The Peoples Open University was renamed as the Allama Iqbal Open University by an (amendment) Ordinance 1977. The University shall consist of:

The Chancellor, the Pro-Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor, the Deans, the Chairmen of Teaching Departments, Directors of the Institutes, the Director of the Regional Tutorial Services, the Registrar, the Treasurer, the Auditor, the Controller of Examinations, the Librarian, and such other officers as may be prescribed.

- Members of the Executive Council, the Academic Council and other Authorities.
- All University teachers; and
- Professors Emeritus.

Organization and Administration of Allama Iqbal Open University

The Vice Chancellor in his Annual Report (2004) has explained the administrative structure of Allama Iqbal Open University as the following:

The organizational structure of the University is based on the three areas of academic, service and administrative departments. AIOU is meeting and managing the vast educational needs through its four faculties i.e. Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Faculty of Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Education, and Institute of Mass Education. The collective academic strength at the main campus in Islamabad is 200, with 734 supporting staff. Total staff is 364 and total number of course offerings is over 850. The statutory bodies of the university include the following:

- Executive council
- Academic Council
- Board of Advanced Studies and Research
- Academic Planning and Development
- Research and Educational Technology Committee
- Faculty Board of each faculty
- Committee of Courses
- Selection Board
- Finance Committee
- Administrative Departments

In addition to the faculties consisting of academic departments, there are also several other administrative, supervisory, and service departments working under the Vice-Chancellor. These departments support the academic needs of the Allama Iqbal Open University system. According to AIOU in Brief (2005), the following are the administrative departments at Allama Iqbal Open University:

- Registrar's Department
- Treasurer's Department
- Audit Department
- Project Directorate
- Public Relations Office

Service Departments

According to AIOU in Brief (2005), the following are the administrative departments at Allama Iqbal Open University:

- Admissions
- Examinations
- Bureau of Academic Planning and Course Production
- Institute of Educational Technology

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- Print Production Unit
- Editing Cell
- Directorate of Regional Services
- Students Advisory and Counseling Cell
- Central Library
- Computer Center
- Research and Evaluation Center

Regional System Network

The outreach system of the University in the form of its Regional Campuses and Centers is the backbone of its instructional methodology. The regional campuses/centers play an essential role in distance education. The head of a region prepares rosters of experts in the region in all the subject areas. He/She arranges qualified tutors from amongst these experts for each group of students. The students have the opportunity to meet the tutors at least twice a month except in case of low enrollment courses for which correspondence tutors are appointed. The head of the region also arranges collaboration with relevant local institutions and registers them as Study Centers. These centers organize workshops/practical training in the regions. Examination centers are also identified and arranged by the regional head. Recently all the regions have been linked with the central database through e-mail/fax/internet to facilitate better and faster communication, removal of complaints, and to enable decentralization as much as possible. Besides this, there are 101 part-time regional coordinating offices in different parts of the country for providing assistance to the regional campuses/centers. There are more than 60,000 part-time registered tutors with the University for tutorial support and guidance.

According to Vice Chancellor's Annual Report (AIOU (2004)) the University has the following 36 regional campuses/centers in the country:

Punjab

1. Regional Campus Rawalpindi
2. Regional Campus Lahore
3. Regional Campus Faisalabad
4. Regional Campus Multan
5. Regional Center Gujranwala
6. Regional Center Bahawalpur
7. Regional Center Sahiwal
8. Regional Center Sargodha
9. Regional Center Mianwali
10. Regional Center D.G.Khan
11. Regional Center Jhang
12. Regional Center Sialkot
13. Regional Center Chakwal
14. Regional Center Rahim Yar Khan

Sindh

15. Regional Campus Karachi
16. Regional Campus Hyderabad
17. Regional Center Sukkur
18. Regional Center Mithi
19. Regional Center Dadu
20. Regional Center Thatta
21. Regional Center Larkana

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

22. Regional Campus Peshawar
23. Regional Center Abbottabad
24. Regional Center Dera Ismail Khan
25. Regional Center Saidu Sharif
26. Regional Center Chitral

Balochistan

27. Regional Campus Quetta
28. Regional Center Zhob
29. Regional Center Dera Murad Jamali
30. Regional Center Turbat
31. Regional Center Kalat

AJK/Northern Areas

32. Regional Campus Mirpur
33. Regional Center Muzaffarabad
34. Regional Center Gilgit
35. Regional Center Skardu

Islamabad Capital Territory

36. Regional Center Islamabad

2. The Aim of the Current Research

The current research was designed to determine the problems faced by the regional campuses/centers of the Allama Iqbal Open University.

3. Population

All the heads of Regional Campuses/Centers (BPS-17 and above) constituted the population of the study.

4. Sample

100% heads of Regional Campuses/Centers were taken as sample for the study.

5. Instrument

One questionnaire (closed and open ended) was prepared and discussed with experts of the field to validate it with respect to content, language and format. It was improved in the light of their suggestions. The questionnaire was also pilot-tested using officers other than the heads not included in the sample. Necessary improvements were made to make a final version of the questionnaire.

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6. Collection of Data

The questionnaire was sent to the regional campuses/centers through registered mail along with a self-addressed stamped envelope for reply. Request for quick response was made through telephone and e-mail. Responses from all the heads of the regions were received.

7. Analysis of Data

The collected data were tabulated and analyzed by applying mean score. The data collected through open-ended questions were analyzed by using priority frequency of responses. The following formula was used to calculate the mean score:

$$\text{Mean score} = \frac{.X}{N}$$

Where .X = Sum of the scores
N = Total number of responses

The data obtained were tabulated in term of frequency. The frequencies were converted into score by assigning the following scale value to each of the five responses:

SA	= Strongly Agree	05 points
A	= Agree	04 points
UNC	= Uncertain	03 points
DA	= Disagree	02 points
SDA	= Strongly Disagree	01 points

Table 1: Results of Data Analysis

Statement	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
The facilities by Allama Iqbal Open University to the Regional campuses/center are up-to the mark.	7	20	1	4	0	3.94
	84%		3%	13%		
Regional campus/center is provided required funds for providing satisfactory services, especially under the following heads: (i) Postage (ii) Telephone (iii) POL (iv) Stationery	6	26	0	0	0	4.19
	100%		0%	0%		
Regional campus/center is provided required funds for providing satisfactory services, especially adequate instructional material is provided to the Regional campus/center	3	18	6	3	2	3.53
	65%		19%	16%		
Adequate transport is available	5	12	4	8	3	3.25
	54%		12%	34%		
Communications are responded to within reasonable period.	8	22	2	0	0	4.19
	94%		6%	0%		
Electronic devices such as Fax & Internet is available at Regional campus/center.	8	14	0	0	0	4.56
	100%		0%	0%		
DRS has a direct and regular contact with the regions.	24	8	0	0	0	4.75
	100%		0%	0%		
Problems/difficulties of regions are solved within reasonable time.	13	19	0	0	0	4.41
	100%		0%	0%		
DRS has a system of monitoring the working of the regions.	16	13	3	0	0	4.41
	91%		9%	0%		
Update information is communicated to the Regions.	13	19		0	0	
	100%		0%	0%		
Capacity building workshops for the offices in the regions are conducted by DRS/University Administration.	7	6	7	10	2	3.19
	41%		22%	37%		
Queries are responded to in time.	4	22	6	0	0	3.94
	81%		19%	0%		
Meeting of the Regional Heads are arranged for interaction between the personnel of the Regions and Main Campus.	10	17	5	0	0	4.14
	84%		16	0%		
Financial claims of the office are cleared quickly.	2	24	4	2	0	3.81
	81%		13%	6%		
Furniture that the meet the needs of the Region.	11	17	4	0	0	4.22
	87%		13%	0%		
Building facility is enough to meet the needs of the Regions.	3	15	8	6	0	3.28
	56%		25%	19%		

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8. Summary of the Findings

Following is a summary of the findings from the data analysis:

- 84% of the respondents agreed with the statement that the facilities provided by AIOU to the regional campuses/centers were up to the mark.
- 100% of the respondents agreed with the statement that regional campuses/centers were provided requisite funds for postage, telephone, POL and stationery.
- Majority of the respondents i.e. 65% agreed that adequate instructional materials were provided to the regional campuses/centers.
- It was observed that 54% of the respondents agreed that adequate transport was available.
- Majority of the respondent i.e. 94% of the respondents agreed that communications were responded to within reasonable period.
- 100% of respondents agreed that electronic communication facilities, such as fax and internet, were available at regional campuses/centers.
- All the respondents agreed that DRS has a direct and regular contact with the regions.
- All of the respondents agreed that problems/difficulties of regions were solved within reasonable time.
- 91% respondents agreed that DRS have a system of monitoring the working of the regions.
- All of the respondents agreed that up-to-date information was communicated to the regions.
- 41% of the respondents agreed that capacity building workshops in the regions are conducted by the University.
- Majority of the respondents i.e. 81% agreed that queries were responded to in time.
- 84% respondents agreed that meetings with the Regional Heads were arranged for interaction between the personnel of the regions and the main campus.
- 81% of the respondents agreed that financial claims of the offices were cleared quickly.
- 87% of the respondents agreed that existing furniture meets the needs of the region concerned.
- It was found that 56% of the respondents agreed that building infrastructure was enough to meet the needs of the region.

9. Conclusions

After analyzing the result of the survey, it is clearly evident that, based on majority positive

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responses on the whole, all regional campuses/centers of AIOU are satisfied with the facilities provided to them to impart distance education to the students in their specific regions. Starting from physical infrastructure to electronic communication facilities, provision of postage and stationery to regular contact with the DRS and AIOU administration, provision of adequate transport facilities to holding of capacity building workshops, in short, in every aspect, regional campuses/centers are able to cope with the responsibility of distance education in Pakistan in an efficient and admirable manner.

10. Recommendations for enhancing AIOU distance education experience

Following is a summary of the recommendations made by regional campuses/centers for enhancement of AIOU distance education experience in Pakistan:

- Building infrastructures always have a vital role in the improvement of organizational performance. It is recommended that AIOU should build purpose-built infrastructure for every regional center with the latest modern
- Distance education facilities like video conferencing and the internet etc. In addition, there should be a facility for boarding and lodging of students and visitors at the regional centers.
- In-service training/ refresher courses enhance the capability and performance of the officers/employees of any institution. Therefore, frequency of capacity building workshops/trainings in the regions may be increased by the University.
- Provision of adequate means of transport is an essential need of students as well as staff of AIOU regional campuses/centers. Currently only 54% of the regional centers agree that this facility is adequately provided to them. Efforts need to be made to enhance the provision and quality of this service to the regional centers. Administrative problems either become stumbling blocks or add to the stress of the employees and, as a result, an organization fails to achieve its objectives efficiently and effectively. If neglected for a long time they become root cause of conflicts, underperformance, disillusion, and low quality. They also block creativity in the long run and thus deprive the organization from the ability to evolve and grow. Therefore, it is vitally important that AIOU administration should take initiatives to implement the

recommendations mentioned above so that the regional centers can provide best possible services to the students for quality education.

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