

PERCEPTION OF TUTORS ABOUT TUTORIALS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (A CASE STUDY OF ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY)

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Abstract

Tutoring of learners is an old practice. Tutorials are to be effective if the tutors have some indispensable qualities. One of these is content knowledge of a tutor which is essential for tutoring. There are many other personal qualities and features of a tutor essential for tutoring. If a tutor is willing to be a sincere tutor and help his students then the students will seek solutions of their problems from him and discuss their problems with him. If the students feel that they can get benefit from tutors' contributions then they arrive for tutorials. Much of the quality of tutorials depends on the attitude of the tutors and their capabilities in using modern educational technology. Research suggests that the effective tutorials in open distance learning is based on preparation, excellent communication skills, and understanding of the tutors. This survey was conducted to find out the perception of tutors about tutorials in Open Distance Learning at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). The objectives of the study were to find out the perceptions of the tutors about tutorials in ODL at AIOU and to give suggestions for improvement in the tutorial system. In view of the time constraints, the study was consisted of the tutors involved at the Peshawar and Rawalpindi Regions of the AIOU in B.Ed. Course 512 (Perspectives of Education) of semester spring 2012. The data was collected through a questionnaire developed on five point Likert Scale. The data was analyzed and the results were converted into frequency distribution, percentage and mean scores. The tutors perceived that tutor engages students in learning activities by using question answer approach in tutorials which is more active for teaching. Tutorials can help in student interaction with each other and they can learn and think in a critical way. Majority of the tutors agreed that tutorial can aid in the development of the necessary knowledge and abilities of the students. Tutorial is based on interactive approach, and its timing and duration is perfect. It was found out that in tutorials tutor remains punctual while the students are not punctual. It was found that all the necessary facilities were not available in the tutorials. Tutor's training was found necessary. It was recommended that there is a need of comprehensive training for tutors to conduct the tutorials. The availability of tutors at the study centers may be made ensure as per schedules issued to the tutors and students so that to make interaction between students to learn from each other. Study centers may be established in the locations which would be accessible for the tutors and students and especially for female tutors and students of far flung areas. All the necessary facilities, including multimedia may be provided at the study centers. Monetary incentives for the tutors may be increased and the strength of students per tutor may be decreased so as the tutor

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may participate wholeheartedly and give meaningful feedback on assignments of every student.

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1.Introduction

Open and distance learning refers to education and training in which using learning resources, rather than attending classroom sessions, is the central feature of the learning experience. Distance learning refers to situations where learners are physically separated from the educational provider, communicating in writing, (using letter mail, email, fax, or computer conferencing); verbally (by telephone, audio conferencing, video conferencing); or in face-to-face tutorial sessions. Open learning refers to situations where learners use resources in a flexible way to achieve their goal. These resources may be print, audio- or computer-based; used at home, at a study centre or in the workplace; with or without the guidance of a tutor or mentor. Open learners' goals vary greatly, from completing formal accreditation, to learning a specific job-related skill, to pursuing a leisure interest. ODL allows learners to study when and where suits them best. They continue learning while fulfilling commitments to work, family or community. Those living in remote areas or with limited transport can study courses that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. ODL can provide a variety of study opportunities, (academic, technical/vocational, personal and professional development, basic education) to a range of learners (young adults, adults returning to learning, people preparing to enter trades or professions, people acquiring new work-related skills, established professionals in health and education working towards further accreditation).(CoL, 2003). The advantages of ODL include:

- Increased capacity and better use of resources:

Well-planned ODL enables an educational institution to provide educational programmes to more learners, more flexibly, by using existing resources in a different way or incrementally increasing existing resources. Instead of paying for new classrooms for students, an institution can hire staff to develop and teach distance courses and invest in ODL support structures, such as study centres or technologies.

- The ability to reach learners who cannot attend an educational institution.
- The ability to offer quality learning materials and individualized support:

Good ODL course materials present course content in a format that learners can study independently. This means tutors can concentrate on facilitating learning and providing personalized attention to learners rather than delivering the course content.

Let's take a look at the implications of some key characteristics of ODL.

Accessibility

One of the main reasons for delivering training and education via ODL is to make it accessible to people who cannot attend regular classes due to social, structural or personal situations. These might include a lack of places in educational institutions, distance from educational institutions, and absence of specific programmes, family commitments, the need to continue earning while learning, or travel costs. Accessibility is key to ODL, so methods and technologies should enhance, not limit it. A course that requires regular email use will limit accessibility if most learners lack reliable computer access. In this case, allowing learners to write or audiotape assignments and submit them by post fax or in person will improve accessibility. Methods and technologies should not limit access for people with disabilities; learning resources should be adaptable to different media by, for example, transcribing

audiotapes into print for hearing-impaired people, or audio taping, print materials for visually impaired people.

Flexibility: This term covers giving learners:

Physical flexibility to study at a time and place that suits them.

Educational flexibility to study subjects, courses and programs in an order and manner appropriate to their needs.

Educational flexibility is less common in conventional academic institutions, where the content, sequencing and structure of programs tend to be fixed. However, some institutions that offer ODL are becoming more flexible about admission requirements and may restructure programs to meet specific needs, such as specialized training for professionals. Many learners prefer ODL that accommodates their approach to learning. They may prefer print- and text-based courses to classroom sessions if they like to learn by reading, reflection and writing. The phrase ‘learner-centeredness’ is used frequently but inconsistently in ODL. At one level, it enshrines the goal of providing education and training in a way that prioritizes learners’ needs, rather than institutional convenience. At another level, it means enabling learners to pursue their studies in a way that is appropriate for their circumstances, learning goals and learning style. For the educational institution, this means providing good quality learning materials in appropriate, accessible media, and giving sufficient support to ensure learners have a good chance of successful completion (© THE CoL, 2003).

It would be of interest to understand the implication of the two core concepts, that is, tutorial and support. The term tutorial arises from the stem noun “tutor”, i.e., the person who provides tutorials. Tutorial, therefore, means a situation in which tutoring takes place. So, tutorial implies a condition in which the tutorial action occurs or is organized and mechanisms are put in place as a planned activity that is intended to enable learners to learn more effectively. Tutorial includes guiding and advising learners to progress systematically and successfully through their academic programs. Generally, students in ODL systems are provided with study materials in different forms such as print, audio and videocassettes, radio and TV programs, and electronic or web based forms. These are observed to be inadequate where there are no support systems because within the system students are mostly isolated from their instructors and the administrative personnel. The separation leaves a gap when the students encounter problems in their studies. Well built support systems cover the gap by assisting students to confront the problems they face. Tutorial services constitute one of the many forms of support systems for ODL students.

Tutorials are aimed at providing learners with opportunities to engage with and develop better understanding of the contents of the study materials which they use. Tutorial also helps in building necessary bonds between learners and their tutors. Such bonds are important as steps towards developing ODL teaching-learning environments, which are favorable to active engagement of participating members of given tutorial groups. Tutorial further provides avenues for learners to explore ways of broadening their knowledge and skills so that they can adequately and successfully match learning activities with teaching processes, including matching assessment in form of projects, assignments, tests, and examinations with what is taught and learnt. Tutorial should also assist learners to match learning with learners’ day-to-day practical lives, i.e., the learners’ lived worlds. Basically, the needs to relate what learners’ study with what they experience during the teaching-learning processes, as well as with their lived environments provide chances for success in academic progress, specifically in passing assignments, tests and finally, examinations. It also positively contributes into the transfer of learning to practical issues

in the students' lives. These achievements are prerequisites to meaningful teaching and learning and are fundamental in shifting from rote learning to meaningful learning. Additionally, where tutorial is systematic and effective, it aids in developing study skills among learners as well as their ability to communicate and interact.

These achievements help in making learners confident in coping with the demands of the ODL system of education provision and the problems they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Given the nature of ODL, whereby the learners are, mostly, physically separated, from their instructors, tutorial helps tutors to know their learners' needs. Communication between tutors and learners offers tutors the knowledge they need to transmit to the teaching staff and the ODL providing organization in order to foster effective and efficient teaching and learning, and accordingly, improving institutional and individual outputs in relation to set goals. Communication between tutors and learners enables recognition of learners' specific needs and working towards meeting such needs. This motivates tutors to channel learners' studying styles and strategies through specific individualized (where appropriate group) learning pathways.

According to Adeys, Heese, and Roux (1992), "tutorial support is needed not for fundamental humanitarian reasons only, but for two simple practical reasons; namely, "because of the open mode itself, in particular the physical separation" that exists between the tutor and the student, and "because in the most current scheme learners are [mostly, adults who study] part-time" (Lewis, 1984b: 7, cited in Adeys, Heese, & Roux, 1992, p. 57-58). However, the same learners wish to meet their learning goals; including attaining target knowledge and gaining social and individual fulfillment.

According to Szczypulata, Tschang and Vikas (2001) model, Szczypulata, Tschang and Vikas point out that in order for tutors to execute the different roles that have been enumerated above they need four broad capabilities which are:

- (i) Creative abilities that enable tutors to generate new ideas to address challenges emerging from the fast changing social-cultural environments.
- (ii) Constructivist thinking which encourages collaborative, multidisciplinary and situated approaches to bring about changes that are ethically derived in education systems and content.
- (iii) Problem-Solving abilities, which are those abilities that equip humans with the capacity to manipulate information in order to solve real-world or contextually based problems. Problems are tackled with open-ended questions and responses to such questions are not expected to be rigid, rather they may be multiple in their nature. In this case responses to questions posed in solving a single problem may be applicable to communities with different backgrounds and different goals.
- (iv) General information manipulation abilities; are abilities for tutors to search for information, organize the information, summarize the information display the information and use it intelligently. Always tutors have to "learn how to learn" (p. 112).

There are different ways through which tutorials are provided in ODL systems. At the general level, tutorials are organized and executed on a continuum between centralized and decentralized systems; in between there are semi-decentralized tutorial systems. Across the continuum tutorials are provided using different approaches. For example, there are ODL systems in which tutorials are provided using face-to-face sessions while in others tutorials are provided using technology media. A third way of providing tutorial is the blending of face-to-face and technology media.

The environments under which ODL institutions operate determine the means that tutorial services are provided. Three types of tutorials may be provided. These are:

- 1- Face-to-face session.
- 2- Tutorial support offered at a distance using media technologies.

1-Face-to-Face Session:

According to Kleinschmidt (1998), all events that take place as part of tutorial support should deal with the problem of distance, i.e., distance in space (spatial) and distance in time (temporal). Learners in ODL systems are attracted into the system because of the opportunities for flexibility that the system offers. Flexibility in time and space constitute major attractions to ODL programs because such flexibilities allow individuals with multiple responsibilities and complex schedules to participate. This implies that if an institution provides face-to-face tutorial support, the tutorial sessions should be organized in such a way that they do not constitute a push-out force for the learners. Face-to-face sessions should be organized to accommodate all learners regardless of their diversities. Moreover, there should be alternatives to the general scheduled face-to-face tutorial sessions to accommodate those learners who are not able to fit into fixed institutional face-to-face times and locations.

ODL institutions have to encourage its tutors to ensure that all messages and course content provided to learners who attend face-to-face sessions reach those who for one reason or another fail to attend the face-to-face sessions. For example, alternative face-to-face sessions could be organized on different dates, times and locations. However, technology media could also be used to serve the same purpose. The tutors could send letters to students, use phone calls to reach the students, send fax messages or develop web sites on which to post all information that would otherwise be delivered at physical face-to-face sessions.

2- Tutorial support offered at a distance using media technologies:

Using ICT for tutorial support means that learners could be reached anytime and anywhere through the ICT's asynchronous features. Kleinschmidt (1998) advises that, on the basis of availability, affordability, and accessibility to ICT by ODL institutions, tutors and the learners, tutorial support systems may be designed to include the use of ICT. This idea is supported by Perez (2001) who observes that ICT-based education encourages interactive and networked learning, therefore, when used for tutorial support services ICT could be more productive than when face-to-face tutorials support singly for such support. Perez argues that ICT offer "unprecedented qualitative development [that facilitates] collaborative and inter-cultural working groups ... formed to carry out assignments and projects, and solve problems in virtual spaces using the electronic networks" (p. 338).

These observations have implications to tutorial support in ODL. That is, if ICT were used for tutorial support it would be easy for tutors to organize group work, including long-term and short-term projects. ICT would also make it possible to involve all learners since tutors and learners may use the ICT' asynchronous features to share their ideas. They may also encourage learners to share and exchange ideas with fellow learners without all of the learners having to be online or at a physical location, all at the same time. Szczypula, Tschang and Vikas (2001) propose that using ICT for tutoring can improve knowledge representation, which promotes problem solving and the possibility of modifying knowledge itself to suit learners' interests. Through the use of ICT, learners and their tutors can open up avenues through which each member of the learning group link others to web sites with relevant information to what they are learning. Szczypula, Tschang and Vikas point out that "students reading a particular document can follow links to more detailed documents, depending on the extent of their interests" (p. 115).

Variation in the information that tutors and learners can access through the use of ICT makes it possible for both learners and tutors to become relatively interdisciplinarians, i.e., tutors and learners get exposed to information from a variety of disciplines or fields of specializations. This condition is positive for knowledge application in real world experiences of the learners, especially, where simulations are applied in the website documents, which the learners access. For example, if a learner is studying a lesson about soil erosion, deforestation and desertification, and fortunately one of them has access to a web-site that thoroughly documents and graphically represents the formation of the Kalahari Desert or any other desert it would be easy for those who view the site to not only view site but also to interpret the information on the basis of their own environment. Nipper (1989) has also noted that while home-based learners are interactive users of CMC, social users dominate and educational focus can be swamped by chat. He also recognizes the vital role of tutors in creating an environment which persuades novices to use the medium and use it effectively (Davie, 1989; Fabro and Gibson, 1998) (in Thorpe, 2007, p. 2) for studying and not otherwise.

The AIOU is the biggest provider of distance education in Pakistan, with nearly 1000 courses offered to undergraduate and postgraduate students. The University employs part-time tutors, who act as the human interface between the university and its students. Each tutor is responsible for supporting a group of around 40-60 students, although the group may vary in size depending on the geographical distribution of students. So, in spite of the scale and size of the University, the strength of the system is that all students are known individually by their tutor. The tutor's role is to mark assignments with detailed formative feedback, and to provide support to students as appropriate. Central academic staff designs the courses which are delivered in the form of printed or web based course materials. The nature of tutor support will vary to some extent with the faculty and course, but broadly speaking there is a standard remit.

Earlier research at the Open University (Price et al, 2007) described how students viewed tutoring and tuition differently. While tuition was seen as a more objective impersonal activity intended to meet the needs of a group and involving interpretation and assessment of a subject, tutoring was a more subjective and personal activity that was intended to meet the needs of individuals, where the students themselves had the greatest influence on the nature of tutor- student interactions. It was pastoral and interactive, involving supporting; counseling; and mentoring students aimed at helping them grasp the big picture'.

It can be argued that distance learners need help and guidance in coping with the associated demands of this type of studying (McGivney, 2004) and hence, the attitudes and behaviors of the tutors are crucial to students perceptions of the academic quality of courses in distance education (Richardson, Long, & Woodley, 2003). Our aim in conducting this study has been to explore tutor and student perceptions of what constitutes good tutoring in a distance learning environment. The following analytic strategy was used:

Finally, the discriminate analyses were used to determine the scale that contributed the most to the differences among the different clusters of tutors and students. This analytic strategy has been used in a number of previous exploratory studies in higher education and clinical psychology (Makoe, Richardson, & Price, 2008; Richardson 1996, 2007; Zelinski, Gilewski, & Thompson, 1980).

According to Nelson and Quick (1997), "social perception is the process of interpreting information about another person." In other words, you may be in possession of the same set of information that other people have on a particular situation, person or group but still arrive at

different conclusions due to individual differences in the capacity to interpret the information that you all have. Rao and Narayan (1998) obviously share the main characteristics of the above definition. However, they emphasize that perception ranks among the “important cognitive factors of human behavior” or psychological mechanism that enable people to understand their environment. In their own words, “perception is the process whereby people select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulations into meaningful information about their work environment.” They argue that perception is the single most important determinant of human behavior, stating further that “there can be no behavior without perception.” From a third perspective “social perception refers to constructing an understanding of the social world from the data we get through our senses” (Michener, DeLamater and Myers, 2004). Thus, perception “refers to the process by which we form impressions of other people’s traits and personalities.” You may have noticed that by referring to “our senses” as the means of data collection the authors may have placed too much emphasis on its perception component, which the first two definitions clearly avoided. In order to shed more light on this concept it is important to pay attention to the following elements of the above definitions of perception listed by Rao and Narayan (1998):

1. Our attention, feelings and the way we act are influenced by our environment,
2. Perception helps you to gather data from your surroundings process the data and make sense out of it,
3. In perception it is sometimes difficult to separate the information from the action,
4. It is basically a process of gaining mental understanding, and
5. Perception guides the perceiver in harnessing, processing and channeling relevant information towards fulfilling the perceiver’s requirements. (Godwin Oghenechuko Unumeri, 2009).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Tutorials are used as avenues for tutors and their students at a physical location to discuss issues related to course content. They also discuss issues other than course content. These issues require the attention of the tutors. The issues range from management, financial, and social, advising to helping learners become more autonomous. The Allama Iqbal Open University has the aim to provide quality education to the masses of the country. The university has its tutorial system to minimize the students’ issues and problems and help them to become more autonomous in learning. This study is to find out the perceptions of students about tutorials in Open Distance Learning (ODL) at AIOU and to identify the issues and problems faced by the students at tutorials.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:-

1. find out tutors’ perceptions about tutorials in Open Distance Learning (ODL) at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU).
2. identify problems/barriers inhibiting implementation of tutorials in ODL at AIOU.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are tutors’ perceptions about tutorials in ODL at AIOU?
2. What is possible solution for problems and issues inhabiting in implementation of tutorials in ODL at AIOU?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study would help the tutors to understand the tutoring in ODL and they will use the study centers as a platform to reflect their practices. Tutor will address the tutoring linked challenges at the National and Regional campuses. Its findings and implementation would benefit the students' services department in the ODL to improve and enhance the students learning. The planner of ODL will be benefited and will change the rules of planning in ODL. The study may be significant in the following ways:

1. It would be beneficial for the planners of ODL at the AIOU.
2. It would be beneficial for the course coordinators at the AIOU.
3. It would be beneficial for the writers of courses at the AIOU.
4. It would be beneficial for the process of evaluation at the AIOU.

2.Methodology

This study is of survey type and a single questionnaire was used for the tutors. Likert's five rating scale questionnaire was used in this study. The questionnaire was developed to investigate tutors' perception of tutoring. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each item using 5-point rating scale. Random sample of available tutors was selected. Tutors were selected from B.Ed. program offered by the AIOU. Those responses were included in the analysis which contained in the original sample. The questionnaire was administered through post and personally face to face. The study is basically descriptive in nature and survey was conducted to collect the data. The study was delimited to the tutors of B.Ed. Course 512, (Perspectives Of Education) of Peshawar and Rawalpindi Regions. The Semester Autumn 2012 was considered for this research.

2.1. Population and Sample

All tutors of B.Ed. Course Code 512; i.e. (150) of Peshawar and Rawalpindi Regions of the A.I.O.U were the population of the study. This Population was comprised of Semester Autumn 2012. All tutors (150) from Rawalpindi and Peshawar Regions of Course Code 512 were responded conveniently which is 100% of the population. The total responses received were 124 which are 83% of the population. This is a survey study, therefore, percentage and mean average scores of each statement of the questionnaire were calculated.

3.Results and Discussions

The data analysis is based upon the responses of the participants to the statements in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the mean score of the participant's responses as given below:

S.NO.	Statement	Mean Score
1	Tutor engages students in learning Activities	4.19
2	Question answer approach in tutoring is more active in learning.	4.57
3	Tutorials interacts students effectively.	4.29

4	Tutorials help student to learn.	4.43
5	Tutorials help student to think in a critical way.	4.09
6	Tutor refers to have discussion on the assignments in the tutorials	4.03
7	Tutorials can aid in the development of the necessary knowledge and abilities of the students.	4.23
8	Tutorial timings are perfect.	3.65
9	Tutorials duration is perfect.	3.74
10	All the necessary facilities are available in the tutorials.	2.71
11	Tutor feels confident in carrying out tutorials.	4.04
12	Feedback is given on the assignments to every student	4.01
13	Tutor is always sympathetic when students need help on their study.	4.17
14	Tutor knows how to encourage self-learning	4.16
15	Tutor knows how to motivate students to learn.	4.16
16	Tutor is aware about students' need	3.94
17	Tutor makes preparation before tutoring	4.00
18	Tutor has expectation of success for all students.	4.01
19	Tutor gives adequate guidance on	3.95

	Assignment and about examination	
20	Tutor is punctual.	4.09
21	Student is punctual.	2.23
22	Tutor has a thorough knowledge of his subject	3.87
23	Tutor communicates effectively in the tutorials.	4.01
24	Tutor promotes students' learning through effective media use.	3.57
25	Tutor clarifies course objectives and Goals to students.	4.05
26	Tutor checks the student's progress.	3.98
27	Tutor is expert in the open distance learning system.	3.95
28	Tutor needs training about open distance learning system.	3.53
29	Tutor provides an environment for the students to learn.	3.56
30	Tutor encourages discussion among students.	4.10
31	Tutor uses appropriate participative methodology	3.88

4.Conclusion and Recommendations

Collected data was analyzed and on the basis of findings and literature cited. Following results and conclusions were drawn.

1. Majority of the tutors (83%) are agreed that tutor engages students in learning activities by using question answer approach in tutorials which is more active for teaching. Tutorials help in student interaction with each other and to learn and think in a critical way. Majority of tutors (89%) are agreed that tutorial can aid in the development of the necessary knowledge

and abilities of the students. Tutorial is based on interactive approach, and its timing and duration is perfect.

2. Majority of the tutors (52%) are remained normal, (31%) agreed and (17%) disagreed that all necessary facilities are available in tutorials. Majority of the students (80%) feel confident in carrying out the tutorials.

3. Majority of the tutors (81%) are agreed that feedback is given on the assignments to every student, and also tutor is sympathetic when students need help on their study. The tutor is aware about students needs, makes preparation before tutoring, gives guidance on assignments and about examination, and counsels students when necessary in tutorials.

4. Majority of the tutors (78%) are agreed that tutor is punctual and (74%) are disagreed that students are punctual in tutorials. Tutor has a thorough knowledge of his subject, communicates effectively in tutorials, and promotes students' learning in tutorials.

5. Majority of the tutors (74%) are agreed that tutor clarifies course objectives and goals to the students. The tutors (76%) are agreed that tutor checks the students' progress, and also is an expert of the open distance learning system. However, (55%) of tutors are agreed that tutor needs training about ODL system.

6. Majority of the tutors (75%) are agreed that tutor provides an environment for students to learn and (79%) are agreed that tutor encourages discussion among the students while (71%) tutors are agreed that tutor uses appropriate methodology in tutorials.

5.Recommendations

On the basis of findings and conclusions, the recommendations of the study perceptions of tutors about tutorial in ODL at AIOU'' are proposed as under.

1-There is a need of comprehensive training for tutors to conduct the tutorials and give meaningful feedback on the assignments which will help in students learning. This training may organize tutors of their roles and responsibilities that may be targeted at improving their professional competence.

2-The availability of tutors and students at the study centers may be made ensure as per schedules issued to the tutors and students so as to solve the students' problems related to course work well in time, and make interaction among the students to learn from each other and promote critical thinking among the students. Attendance of students in tutorials may be awarded with marks in their academic program so that they may understand the worth of tutorial meetings.

4-Study centers may be established in the locations which would be accessible for the tutors and students and especially for female tutors and students of far flung areas. All the necessary facilities, including multimedia and internet may be provided at the study centers that may make constant interaction between tutor and student to help overcome student isolation and other issues as they arise.

5- Monitory incentives for tutors may be increased and the strength of students per tutor may be decreased so as the tutor may participate wholeheartedly and give meaningful feedback on assignments of every student.

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