

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: ADVANTAGES AND PROBLEMS

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### Abstract

*The cultural diversity is a reality, which prevails everywhere in the educational world. In Distance Education Institutes, it is considered as acceptable truth for all stakeholders despite many advantages and associated problems. This study was designed to investigate the dimensions of cultural diversity, explore the meaning of multicultural education, find out the aims and objectives of Multicultural Education in distance education, explore the advantages of Diversity in Distance Education, and foresee the problems for including cultural diversity in distance education. It was a qualitative study and document analysis method was used for analysis. The population comprises selected and related documents. Theoretical sampling was used as a sampling method. It was concluded that there are three dimensions of diversity, multicultural education represents an educational system, which satisfies all stakeholders from different ethnic and cultural background as its main aim and objective, there are several sources of diversity like students satisfaction and intercultural harmony. Regarding problems, it was concluded that the major problem is its acceptance by different stakeholders. It was concluded that multiculturalism has many dimensions, and it is beneficial for educational institutes, teachers and students facing different problems, isolation and take it as a burden. It was recommended that there is a need for acceptance of Diversity at all levels and inclusion of multicultural education in teacher education programs.*

**Key Words:** Culture, Diversity, Distance Education

### Introduction

Distance education is considered as the backbone for economic development of the country in modern world of education. That is why focus is on its expansion, variety and ways of attainment. The dual mode universities and online learning is the result of this expansion. Besides this positive aspect of expansion, there are some aspects, which are neglected in the race of quality and number of graduates. Cultural diversity is one of these aspects. This paper describes the importance, need and status of cultural diversity in distance education in general and in Pakistan specifically.

Roberto Ibarra (1999), a renowned Sociologist working at the University of Wisconsin/Madison stated that one of the enduring problems for distance education during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was learning how to accommodate the increasing demand for education from populations pursuing a college degree in the past. Social movements, legal mandates and global changes pressured institutions to incorporate educational

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equity for the greater good of our society (Ibarra, 1999). The results for achieving diversity have been still a dream and far away from what is needed. There are more women than men going to college and graduate schools today than ever before.

Despite the hectic efforts, many segments of the global population remain underrepresented in science, math, technology and engineering programs, and as we enter the 21st century, the problem becomes worst and complicated. Academia faces a dilemma; some say it is a crisis, and some become stalled at a cultural crossroad and unable to determine which direction to go (Florio, 1994).

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

In fact, the evidence is mounting that academic programs or institutions that emphasize people-oriented relationships, family/community engagement, supportive psychological environments, working in groups, and collaborative learning environments, focus on society demands and requirements. These are not only attractive to underrepresented populations, but they also provide conditions for them to thrive and achieve academic success in fields where they have been unsuccessful in the past (Bowen & Bok, 1998). The dynamics of diversity have changed over the last decade, and a new paradigm is emerging context diversity, which could provide solutions for achieving equity without relying on traditional methods of affirmative action. With the emergence of the new environment, it was necessary to find out the existing conditions and associated problems with the inclusion of cultural diversity in distance education. Therefore the problem to be investigated is ‘What are the existing conditions and prospective problems related to cultural diversity in distance education?’

### **1.2 Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study were

1. To investigate about the dimensions of Cultural Diversity in distance education.
2. To explore the meaning of cultural diversity in education.
3. To find out the aims and objectives of culturally diverse teaching in distance education.
4. To investigate the advantages of cultural diversity in distance education.
5. To find out the problems for including cultural diversity in distance education.

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

The study is significant for different stakeholders. It would be important for faculty members of distance education institutions to understand the concept of diversity and apply it in actual classroom teaching. The teachers are considered as the main source of imparting cultural diversity by not only their teaching but also through their actions and words. The study would be significant for university administrators to understand advantages of inclusion cultural diversity in distance education. The faculty is responsible for translating the vision set by administration. If people at top level consider cultural diversity as an important issue, they will develop plan and procedure for faculty members, who are at the frontline in teaching learning process. The study would be helpful for university administrators to analyze the existing conditions of cultural diversity in distance education. This study would be useful in assessing the existing conditions and prospective problems related to cultural diversity.

### **Methodology**

The study was qualitative in nature. The method of document analysis was used for analysis. The documents or documentary analysis is a social research method, which

is an essential research tool and is an invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation. It refers to the various procedures involved in analyzing and interpreting data generated from the examining of documents and record relevant to a particular study. Documentary work involves reading a lot of written material. It helps to scan the documents onto a computer and use a qualitative analysis package. (Frankel, 2009)

Labs (2011) elaborated more and stated that Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic. Analyzing documents incorporates coding content into themes similar to how focus group or interview transcripts are analyzed. A rubric can also be grade or score a document. (Labs—Document Analysis Para.5)

In this research, written text was used to analyze the data. There are many advantages associated with document analysis. For example:

1. Researcher can get access to information that would be difficult to get in any other way, such as people or cases that might not be willing to talk in a formal research interview or might be difficult to track down.
2. Documentary research is a low-cost procedure, especially when online resources were used.
3. Some documents provide information of excellent quality in an organized way (Frankel 2009)

The most significant advantage of conduction document analysis is that it provides a guideline for a framework, which is the principal focus of the research. Heffernan (2012) suggest the following forms of analysis:

1. Content Analysis
2. Semiotics
3. Discourse Analysis
4. Conversation Analysis
5. Grounded Theory
6. Interpretative analysis (Heffernan 2001)

For this study, Semiotics Analysis was chosen as the analysis method. Semiotics is a science that studies the life of signs in society. It is the opposite of the positivist method of content analysis. Different documents were analyzed to get a comprehensive view. Internal and external criticism was carried out to ensure the credibility of documents.

### **2.1 Population and sampling**

The population comprises all related documents. *For this study, Combination of Maximum Variation Purposeful Sampling and Theoretical Purposeful Sampling was adopted. Theoretical sampling was used as method of sampling.*

## **Findings**

### **3.1 Dimensions of Diversity**

The first objective of the study was to find dimensions of cultural diversity. In this regard, it was found that the diversity is a concept which itself is very diverse. There were many dimensions of the diversity, but there were evident which are:

- a) Structural
- b) Multicultural and
- c) Context Diversity

### **3.2 Structural Diversity**

According to some scholars, structural diversity refers to the numerical and proportional representation of students from different racial/ethnic groups in the student body (Milem et. al, 1998). It was characterized as compliance-oriented and recruitment driven and measured by increasing the number of minority or underrepresented groups of students, faculty or staff. The solution for increasing diversity was to create special programs for recruiting, retaining and remediation of minority populations, to help them overcome barriers to access and success (Pedersen, 1997). It is to some extent accomplishing structural diversity: refine, expand and support operations and business functions of our institutions to accommodate diverse populations. There are three basic assumptions of this strategy viz:

- i. A critical mass of underrepresented populations to achieve diversity
- ii. Underrepresented students were disadvantaged and needed remediation; and
- iii. Unrepresented populations would assimilate into the culture of our institutions.

This model of diversity is trying to balance the current composition of the university. It cannot alone achieve its implied outcome. Structural diversity has limited applications for influencing academic culture and change, but it is still a vital and necessary part of our current diversity paradigm.

### **3.3 Multicultural Diversity**

Multicultural diversity is the second dimension of diversity. This dimension of diversity was introduced during the 1970's and 80's infusing cultural customs or gender issues (multiculturalism) into institutions of distance education. Underrepresented populations were valued for their potential to recruit and retain others and to contribute towards making institutions more aware of multicultural issues. In campuses, the problem is related to uncongenial atmosphere for women, minorities, and students of different colors. The solutions are involved but not limited to introducing campus-wide minority action plans, increasing the number and type of student service programs and creating new cultural awareness initiatives, and creating new ethnic and women's studies programs. The objective of the initiative was to change campus attitudes towards more positive views on ethnic, gender and radicalized issues (Milem, 2003).

Joshee and Johnson opined that there had been considerable interest in comparative studies of multicultural policies. Partly, this interest has been fueled by a growing awareness of the multi-ethnic nature of most contemporary nation-states and the need to account for this aspect of pluralism in public policy (Joshee & Johnson, 2007).

### **3.4 Context Diversity**

The third dimension is contextualized diversity. Some researchers suggest that differences in cultural context could provide a logical alternative to explain as to why capable minority undergraduates transfer from majors in science, engineering, math or technology to pursue degrees in the humanities or social sciences (Ibarra 1999a). The data collected from faculty surveys showed the best clues for observing the differences between the cultural contexts of diverse populations of faculty and the educational context of our colleges and universities and community-based learning. The problem is not associated with teachers and curriculum, but it is extended to students and different office barriers of the university from the top level to front line management (Ibarra 2010).

Though, there is significant variation in the literature on multicultural education, it is better to choose Banks and Banks' (2004) essential five dimensions of multicultural education as they are more relevant and self-explanatory:

- a) content integration—the extent teachers use cultures in their curriculum;
- b) knowledge construction process—the degree to which teachers help students to understand the various frames from which knowledge is constructed;
- c) prejudice reduction—action or activities that teachers use to help students develop positive attitudes towards difference;
- d) equity pedagogy—teachers’ modification of instruction to facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds; and
- e) an empowering school culture and social structure—school culture that promotes equity and empowers its multiple stakeholders to participate in the examination and reform of school practices.

### **3.5 Meanings of Cultural Diversity in Distance Education**

The advantages of cultural diversity in distance education were found as follows:

1. Cultural Diversity is a living reality (Joshee and Sihra 2009). According to Banks (2009), in Canada, Reva Joshee notes that Canadian multicultural discourse constructs diversity as a problem to be addressed in a limited and one-sided way by groups having difficulty with the existing school system (Banks, 2009). Multicultural education was well defined by researchers, teachers, educators, and policy makers (Banks and Banks, 1995). Banks and Banks (2005) reported that —the term multicultural education (now) describes a wide variety of programs and practices related to educational equity, women, ethnic groups, language minorities, low-income groups, and people with disabilities. They pointed out that at one school, multicultural education could mean a curricular adaptation, at another school it could mean a comprehensive school reform effort to increase educational equity.
2. In sum, multicultural education is a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students (Banks & Banks, 2005). Studies documented by Cochran-Smith et al. (2003) in the category of attitudes, beliefs, and conceptions about diversity have focused on pre-service teachers (Smith et al.).

### **3.6 Aims and Objectives of Culturally Diverse Education**

1. Regarding aims and objectives of the Culturally Diverse Multicultural education, it was found that educational philosophers and liberal political theorists were not agreed on the aims and objectives of multicultural education. Educational philosophers encourage for preservation of group culture, fostering child’s development of autonomy and introducing new and different ideas. This exposure would assist children in thinking, and encourage them to have a more open mindset (Levinson, 2009).
2. The political theorists advocate for a model of multicultural education, which needs social action in an acceptable manner. According to this point of view, students are equipped with knowledge, values, skills, attitudes and behavior, necessary to evoke in societal changes, resulting in justice for otherwise victimized and excluded ethnic groups. In this model, teachers would serve as agents of change in student’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Sleeter and Grant, 2007). They are also responsible for accepting and promoting proper democratic values and empowering students to act and perform in society. (Levinson, 2009).

According to Levinson (2009), Multicultural education has a lot of other benefits to avail:

- a) Promote good citizens
- b) Right, the historical record.



- c) Increase Self-esteem of non-mainstream students.
- d) Increase diversified student exposure.
- e) Preserve minority group culture.
- f) Foster children's autonomy.
- g) Promote Social Justice and Equity.
- h) Enable students to succeed in an integrated, multicultural world.

The outcomes listed above might require significant investment and additional effort from the teacher to ensure that the goals set are met. Multicultural education, in its ideal form, should be an active and intentional structure rather than a passive and accidental approach. There are many possible ways to assure that such educational approach is purposeful and fruitful. For example, the adaptation and modification of curriculum may be an example of an approach to preserving minority group culture (Banks, 1995). Multicultural education should span beyond autonomy, by exposing students to global uniqueness, fostering deepened understanding, and providing access to different practices, ideas, and ways of life; it is a process of societal transformation and reconstruction (Levinson, 2009).

### **3.7 Advantages of Diversity in Distance Education**

Many studies discuss the advantages of diversity in distance education. Those were varying in objectives, methods, analysis tools and techniques used in data. Here are examples of these studies.

1. Pascarella et al. (2001), found that students' involvement in diversity experiences during college life had significant positive effects on their scores on the CAAP Critical thinking test (Pascarella et al. 2001).
2. Chang (1999), conducted a study on advantages of diversity to university students. The results from this study showed that a diverse student body has a positive effect on educational outcomes through diversity-oriented student activities and experiences (Chang, 1999). It provides the broader and improved mission of the Institute.
3. According to Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991), the mission of an institute of distance education tells us what a college or university is about, what does it value, what it holds to be true. Educational policies, programs, and practices emerge from the mission of the institution (Milem, 2003).
4. Association of American Universities (1997) also argues for diversity in universities. We speak foremost as educators. We believe that our students benefit from such education that takes place in the ambit of a diverse setting. In the course of their university education, our students encounter and learn from others, who have backgrounds and characteristics very different from their own.
5. According to Association of American Universities —as we seek to prepare students for life in the twenty-first century, the educational value of such encounters will become more important, not less, than in the past. A very substantial portion of our curriculum is enhanced by the discourse made possible by the various backgrounds of our students.....If our institutional capacity to bring together a diverse group of students is removed—or reduced—then the quality and texture of the education we provide will be diminished (The New York Times, April 24, 1997, p. A27). Goodwin Liu (1998), offers a persuasive argument for why, as a legal doctrine, educational diversity should qualify as a compelling interest' (p. 383). This manuscript argues for placing the diversity rationale within the existing norm of equal protection doctrine.

6. The researchers in distance education have examined individual students' growth and change during their college life (see, for example, Astin, (1977, 1993); Feldman and Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). There are abundant research evidence supporting arguments for the continued use of affirmative action in college admissions. Individual advantages; educational experiences and outcomes of individual students are enhanced by diversity on campus. Research evidence regarding the individual advantages of diversity suggests that diversity enhances student growth and development in the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal domains.
7. Alexander Astin (1993), found that emphasis by faculty on diversity in courses had positive effects on increased racial understanding and overall satisfaction with college. Tanaka (1996, cited in Smith and Associates, 1997) founds that a more supportive campus climate and policies according to cultural norms of students has positive effects on sense of community, cultural awareness, commitment to promoting racial understanding, and overall satisfaction with the college experience.
8. Another study revealed that socializing across race and discussing racial/ethnic issues have a positive effect on students' retention, overall satisfaction with college, intellectual self-concept, and social self-concept (Chang, 1996). Bikson and Law (1994) argue that if colleges meet the problems created by the global economy, they would have to change many areas. The areas may include curriculum, extra-curricular activities, enhanced faculty development, and innovative cooperative ventures with other colleges and universities around the world with private industry (Bikson and Law, 1994). The colleges should provide incentives to faculty (and, if possible, with resources) to develop new courses or adapt existing compelling interest-courses to address globalism. The faculty should receive strong signals that the only relevant performance criteria will be publications and teaching evaluations.
9. Gurin (1999) suggests that three major categories; citizenship engagement, racial/cultural engagement, and compatibility of differences, characterize democracy outcomes.
10. Kay Joseph (2014) stated four hidden advantages of diversity in distance education. These are i) easier graduation for non-blacks ii) less work for professors iii) helping instructors overcome bias and iv) creating a burgeoning middle class. Diversity aficionados and researchers mention these advantages and they are real. The last opportunity to witness awkwardly denied truths—is just as real.
11. Davis and Smith (1994) examined the relationship between college, quality and the wages of young men. The authors found that attending a distance quality college increased the wages of young men (Davis and Smith 1994).
12. The American Council on Education (ACE) has a longstanding record of commitment to access to distance education for all qualified Americans and the equal educational opportunity. This commitment is also reflected in ACE's position on different issues like public policy, programmatic activities and its employment practices. The ACE Board of Directors regarding affirmative action, non-discrimination, equity, equal opportunity, and admission standards has expressed it in various resolutions. Some institutions are public, while the others are independent, in the same way, some are large urban universities, and some are two-year community colleges. It was found that every institution has its specific distinct mission.

Diversity has many other advantages like stereotyped preconceptions; it encourages critical thinking, and it helps students learn to communicate with people of varied backgrounds. Moreover, it strengthens communities and the workplace. Education in a diverse setting prepares students to become good citizens in a complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork, and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and contributions. There are several advantages of inclusion of diversity in distance education. American Council on Education (ACE) stated following advantages:

- a) It enriches educational experiences.
- b) It promotes personal growth and healthy society.
- c) It strengthens communities and corporations and it enhances competitiveness.

### **3.8 Problems for Including Diversity in Distance Education**

In addition to advantages, some studies state different problems related to the inclusion of diversity in distance education. Here is a glimpse of these studies.

1. A study of minority faculty at universities and colleges in eight Midwestern States showed that students of color experience exclusion, isolation, alienation and racism in predominantly white universities.
2. Pascarella et al., (2012) stated that numerous studies have reported that women and minority faculty members are considerably less satisfied with many aspects of their job as compared to majority male faculty members.
3. Multiple studies demonstrate that minority students often feel isolated and unwelcome in white dominated institutions.
4. The increasing cultural diversity in schools and classrooms weighs heavily on teachers, and one can say that reality of the educational setting at present is increasing ‘cultural mismatch’ between teachers and their students on the one hand and between teachers and students’ parents on the contrary (Levinson 2009).
5. Another challenge for the educational institution is related to the fact that cultural pluralism, i.e. an ethnoculturally diverse society, is not necessarily a desired state of affairs for everyone. The surveys in a variety of countries have indicated a growing intolerance among nations towards immigrants’ presence and a loss of patience with immigrants’ integration, which growing numbers of nationals consider to proceed too slowly (Heath & Cheung, 2006).
6. The teachers’ attitude towards diversity is another challenge. Several studies (Pedersen, 1997; Pettigrew 1998) indicate teachers’ own concern is one of the major problems in inclusion of diversity in distance education.
7. The role of administration is always a determining element in the inclusion of diversity in distance education. The Role of administration and authorities is one of the major barriers in promoting cultural diversity.
8. The various studies indicate that minority women students experience unwelcoming atmosphere that includes sexist language and presentation of stereotype differential treatment from professors (American Council on Education-2012) on the importance of diversity <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/BoardDiversityStatement-June2012.pdf>)

### **Conclusions**

As stated above there were five basic objectives of the study and based on findings, conclusions were drawn.



#### **4.1. Dimensions of Diversity**

It was found that there were different dimensions of diversity viz Structural, Multicultural, and Context. It was concluded that there are different forms of diversity and it would be better to find out the best-suited diversity in distance educational institute to make the diversity responsive. It was also concluded that there were five dimensions of multicultural education, which were content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy and an empowering school culture and social structure.

#### **4.2 Meaning of Cultural Diversity**

1. It was concluded that there are several ways of defining cultural diversity in education. The inclusion of various programs for students, belong to various cultures, is the backbone for good academic results. It was also concluded that there is a difference in meaning and application of the concept of diversity.
2. Multicultural Education claims for educational equity.
3. It was also found that the focus of studies was on pre-service teachers.

#### **4.3 Aims and objectives of Multicultural Education**

1. It was concluded that there is no agreement among researchers about the aims and objectives of multicultural education. Educational Theorists focus on group culture and its development, while Political theorists argue for multiculturalism.
2. Regarding aims and objectives of diversity, it was also found that the main aim of cultural diversity is to meet several aims like developing good citizens, correction of historical record, increase self-esteem of non-mainstream students, increase diversified student exposure, preserve minority group culture, foster children's autonomy, promote social justice and equity, enable students to succeed in an integrated, multicultural world.

#### **4.4 Advantages of Diversity in Distance Education**

The fourth objective was to find out the advantages of cultural diversity in distance education. In this regard, it was concluded that:

1. Several studies describe and discuss the advantages of cultural diversity in distance education for example Pascarella et al. (2001), Chang (1999), Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2009) identified many advantages of diversity.
2. In the same thread, American Association of Universities, Astin, (1977, 1993); Feldman and Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991), identified individual student growth and change due to diversity. Individual and group advantages were also identified in these studies.
3. It was also concluded that diversity has positive effects on students' achievement scores (Astin 1993).
4. Studies also revealed that diversity has a positive effect on students' retention (Chang 1996, Bikson and Law 1994). Gurin (1999), identified three broad categories as an outcome of diversity viz citizenship engagement, racial/cultural engagement, and compatibility of differences.
5. Some researchers, like Joseph (2014) describe various hidden advantages of diversity like overcome on the bias.

#### **4.5. Problems Related to Diversity**

The fifth objective was related to problems associated with diversity and it was concluded that:

1. Students of color and especially girls face unacceptable behavior by other ethnical groups. The faculty members were also less satisfied, especially women become a soft target and they are less satisfied as compared to men.
2. The students feel isolation due to cultural diversity.
3. The teachers take it as the burden and not a thing of joy, as their job requirements increased.
4. The cultural mismatch between student and teachers and teachers and parents, the cultural pluralism that reflects ethnoculturally diverse society also gives birth to intolerance in students.
5. Teachers own attitude is a problem. The problem is more multidimensional and powerful when it was not addressed by administration.
6. The problem is more prominent for female students if they are in minority in the class as compared to any other situation.

#### **Recommendations**

It was recommended that:

1. It is necessary to take diversity as living reality. Instead of taking it as a negative thing, it is necessary that every member may take it as a matter of joy and accept it at every level
2. The teachers' attitude towards diversity may be changed by introducing the concept of cultural diversity in teacher education programs. Culturally responsive teaching may be helpful in overcoming the problems related to diversity.
3. There is a need to develop training programs for all stakeholders of distance education so that they may become familiar with the concept and apply in their area of influence.

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