ROLE OF PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITIES IN PROMOTING HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Present research focused to know the role of public sector universities in promoting higher education through distance education in Punjab, Pakistan was conducted to evaluate the support services like reading material, teaching faculty, study Centre support, assignments, assessment, correspondence, use of instructional technology and teaching strategies. An additional concern of the study was to explore the problems and facilities in public sector universities for their distance learners. Population of this study was consisted 92 teachers of three public sector universities (GCUF, BZU & IUB) of distance education programs. The study was descriptive by nature therefore questionnaire for teachers was used for data collection. Data were collected, screened, tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted through using SPSS v21.0. Data was interpreted through applied statistics using mean, standard deviation, chi-square and t-value. Results revealed that reading material, assignments, assessment, correspondence and instructional technology systems was partly fulfilling the requirements whereas study centers support, assignments and access services were needed to be updated.

Key Words*: Distance education, quality education, universities*

1.Introduction

Education policies have made education compulsory with constitutional guarantee for children from 5 to 14 years of age, will add to the challenge of higher education. Hence, slogans like 'education for all' and 'equality of educational opportunity', from a quantitative as well as qualitative point of view, will have to take recourse to distance teaching (Lockwood, 2001). Distance Education is a term, which is widely discussed in the academic circles all over the world today. In spite of all objections it is one and the only way in which higher education can come within the reaches of the entire population of our country (Creed, &Perraton, 2008).

Garrison (2002) describes as; "distance education is imparted education and knowledge through various innovative means suited to the Open and Distance Education Mode without compromising on quality   This provides not only higher education to large sections of the population, but particularly disadvantaged segments of society and strengthens the natural and human resources of the country through the medium of education" (p.12).

A degree or certificate program is considered distance education when a substantial number of credit hours (fifty percent or more of the courses for the program) will be delivered through distance education (Garrison, 2002). In recent times, courses in distance education are offered in blended way. It means that some

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courses are offered through traditional face to face instruction where as some courses are offered using any one mode of distance education through modern sources like Internet video or audio conferencing, electronic mail, radio, television, Internet, cable, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, wireless communications devices, etc. Provision and expansion of facilities for expending population of the country are the need of the hour. For this purpose distance education is the most effective tool in order to provide educational facilities to maximum population in a cost effective manner (Sewart, 2001).

According to Bates (2001), "though distance education is a new concept in educational system but it has been catching up very fast in all countries-developed, developing or underdeveloped, socialist or capitalist, Western or non-western, hence, its importance is being realized all over the world and certainly in developing countries". Further he argues that "Adult education researchers found in distance education a myriad of interesting issues that they can study along with distance education researchers, with their focus on improving people's performance, may welcome the chance to deal with some of the important problems posed by distance education practice" (p.6).

We knew that distance education is not newer but academic people didn"t respect it has a large number of problems and difficulties for the distance education administrators and learners (Rashid, 2002). With the increasing amount of adult learner population is showing distance education as a progressively prior choice of teaching and learning strategies. Further study of student demographics and motivators will help target the adult learner population and will help institutions develop course materials and techniques appropriately (Garrison, 2002).

According to Bransford (2000) "short scrutiny of the basic problems in distance education will help overcome problems of students and faculty. Understanding and mitigating technology problems are important in this regard. Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance learning classroom"(p.2).Enrollment in higher education has to co ntinue at a terrific pace and where available resources in terms of men and money are limited, the obvious solution, if proper, standards are to be maintained and the demand for higher education from different sections of the people is to be met, is to adopt the Open University System with its provision of higher education on part-time or whole-time basis. The Group, therefore, recommends that the Government of Pakistan should establish, as early as possible, a national Open University by an Act of parliament. It"s essential "to satisfy existing thirst for knowledge as well as degrees admission to formal courses on the basis of merit required that opportunities for off-campus studies should be created on a large scale, for a great variety of courses of high quality. We already have a number of Universities offering correspondence courses; we need to utilize and coordinate this expertise and infrastructure to create an effective system of distance learning" (p.115).The scope of distance education in Pakistan can also be witnessed by its number range. In other words, we can say that this distance education saves time and money of an individual. These e-learning universities in Pakistan will surely and certainly pave great paths of success for the students of Pakistan. Hopefully in the near future more and more universities come at the front stage so that learning environment of Pakistan may get

more enhanced and polished and each and every student may get equal amount of chance to get his desired amount of education.

In Pakistan Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is the pioneer in providing non-formal and distance education in the region. This University is a unique educational institution with the aim to provide ready access to academic and professional skills to the people of Pakistan. Due to its magnificent Success in Pakistani society the general public sector universities have started its several programs under distance education to promote higher education. It is observed that students are taking keen interest in distance learning education because it facilitates them in a good manner."Distance learning has provided an excellent platform to students for learning at their own convenience and at their own pace. In this rapidly changing system of learning, if you are working and need a good degree as well as specialized knowledge to enhance your career then Distance Education can be your cup of tea".www.citehr.com

Punjab is the largest populace province of Pakistan where educational curiosity is increasing with the passage of time rapidly. So to cope with its educational needs public sector universities have launched distance learning programs to promote higher education through Distance Education. Widely researches have been done in distance education on various aspects but this study is pioneer in its nature.

At present public sector universities are introducing multiple modes of education. The purpose of this research study was to investigate the role of public sector universities in promoting higher education through distance education in the province of Punjab.Distance education being an innovative idea in public sector universities aims at to enhance participation in higher education, so that the learners in remote areas may get an opportunity in this sector. Considering that this research study may help the policy makers in future to bridge the gulf of women empowerment providing this segment of population in public sector universities increasing enrollment and future strong footing. This research study may indicate the gaps in the system, in doing so it will provide footing towards improvement of distance learning system in the university. This research would help to promote the culture of distance learning in Pakistan effectively. Study results may help the experts of distance education area for modeling new programs with multi-dimensional strategy to cope with the problems of distance learner. Findings of research would help in developing a cost effective and affording mode of education for the students of remote areas. Awareness among experts of distance learning system may enhance by consulting this study to investigate the needs of the potential clients moreover the study would be helpful to promote the culture of distance learning in Pakistan effectively.

The main objectives of this study were to 1) evaluate support services provided by the public sector universities to their learners in distance education, 2) find out the facilities provided by public sector universities to their distance learners and 3) investigate the problems faced by distance learners in public sector universities.

2.Methodology

2.1   Participants

Ninety two teachers involved in teaching of distance learning in Public Sector Universities of the Punjab were selected as sample.

Table 1: Distribution of Teachers (Department of Distance Learning Education) in Universities

Universities			Number of respondents	Female	Male
Governm ent	College Faisalabad	University			
Islamia	University of Bhawalpur				
Bahauddin	Zakariya University Multan		23		
	Total		**92**		

2.2 Research Instrument

A self-developed study Attitude questionnaire was the instrument of the study. For the constructing of the questionnaires, the researcher reviewed the relevant literature along with the tools of research. Questionnaire for teachers comprised on 27 items with the following section; 1) Reading Material , 2) Study Center Support, 3) Assignments ,4) Access, 5) Assessment, 6) Correspondence ,7) Use of Instructional Technology, 8) Teaching Strategies.

2.3 Validation of Research Instrument

The questionnaire was validated by panel of experts (faculty of education and psychology department).The preliminary questionnaire was consisted of 40items. After the amendments, final questionnaire for teachers was consisted 27 items. In order to ascertain content and construct validity, the researcher also conducted interview in the public sector universities for the distance learning program coordinators.The items were scored by positive system of scoring and the rating of the responses was made on the basis of following scoring procedure ; Strongly Agree as 5, Agree as 4,Un-decided as 3, Disagree as 2, Strongly Disagree as 1.

3.Results and Discussion

3.1 Reading Material

1) Sixty five percent (65%) male teachers agreed and 27% strongly agreed whereas 90%female agreed and 8% strongly agreed regarding to reading material provided by the university fulfills the program objectives.
2) Fifty eight percent (58%) male teachers agreed and 31% strongly agreed while 68%female agreed and 25% strongly agreed regarding supplementary reading are available on student"s demand.

3) Twenty seven percent (27%) male teachers strongly agreed and 25% agreed whereas 42% female strongly agreed and 35% agreed the students are given access to the library.

3.2 Study Center Support

1) Sixty percent (60%) male teachers strongly agreed and 29% agreed whereas 63% female agreed and 23% strongly agreed regarding study centers are opened when student reach there.

2) Thirty seven percent (37%) male teachers agreed and 19% strongly agreed whereas 38%female agreed and 13%strongly agreed regarding study centre are equipped with multimedia.

3) Fifty four percent (54%) male teachers agreed and 6% strongly agreed whereas 43%female agreed and 10% strongly agreed regarding net browsing facility is available on study center for the students.

3.3 Assignment

1) Forty six percent (46%) male teachers agreed and 33% strongly agreed however 58%female agreed and 35% strongly agreed regarding assignments are keenly evaluated.

2) Fifty four percent (54%) male teachers agreed and 27% strongly agreed whereas 65%female agreed and 28% strongly agreed regarding corrective feedback is given on the assignments.

3) Thirty seven percent (37%) male teachers strongly agreed and 35% agreed while 53% female agreed and 18% strongly agreed regarding assignment are given back to the students in time.

3.4 Access

1) Forty four percent (44%) male teachers disagreed and 11.5% strongly disagreed while 47.5%female disagreed regarding students are provided inter-city pick and drop facility.

2) Forty four percent (44%) male teachers agreed and 25% strongly agreed while 60% agreed and 13%female strongly agreed regarding study centers are allotted to the students as per their local needs.

3) Forty percent (40%) male teachers agreed and 8% strongly agreed while 40%female agreed and 13% strongly agreed online research journals access is given to the students.

4) Thirty seven percent (37%) male teachers agreed and 19% strongly agreed while 88% agreed and 13%female strongly agreed regarding the fee structure of distance education is affording as compare to formal education.

3.5 Assessment

1) Forty two percent (42%) male teachers agreed and 39% strongly agreed whereas 70%female agreed and 28% strongly agreed regarding exams are conducted with proper discipline and control.

2) Fifty six percent (56%) male teachers strongly agreed and 37% agreed while 60%female agreed and 38% strongly agreed regarding students are facilitated during the exams.

3) Forty eight percent (48%) male teachers agreed and same strongly agreed 65%female agreed and 30% strongly agreed regarding examination mobile inspector, supervise the exam center.

3.6 Correspondence

1) Forty eight percent (48%) male teachers agreed and same were strongly agreed whereas75%female agreed and 15.0% strongly agreed regarding educational information is provided by the university in time.

2) Forty four percent (44%) male teachers disagreed and 11.5% strongly disagreed while 47.5%female disagreed regarding reading material sent to the students through correspondence well in time.

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3)   Fifty four percent (54%) male teachers agreed and 37% strongly agreed whereas 58%female agreed and 25% strongly agreed regarding teachers" appointment sent to the student in time.

3.7 Use of Instructional Technology

1)   Thirty nine percent (39%) male teachers agreed and 25% strongly agreed while 62%female agreed and 10% strongly agreed regarding online information about the educational schedule is available.

2)   Thirty one percent (31%) male teachers agreed and 15% strongly agreed whereas 48%female agreed and 20%strongly agreed regarding admission confirmation facility is available on the website.

3)   Twenty three percent 23% male teachers agreed and 16% strongly agreed while 43%female agreed and 13% strongly agreed regarding reading material is available online.

3.8   Teaching Strategies

1.   Thirty nine percent (39%) male teachers agreed and 19% strongly agreed while 48%female agreed and 8% strongly agreed regarding reading workshops are conducted by the University for Post Graduate Courses.

2.   Forty percent (40%) male teachers agreed and 29% strongly agreed whereas 53%female agreed and 18% strongly agreed regarding seminars on specific topics are conducted.

3.   Forty eight percent (48%) male teachers agreed and 1.9% strongly agreed while 33% female agreed and 13% strongly agreed regarding video conferencing is managed by the university to consult the world experts of the subjects.

4.   (44%) male teachers disagreed and 11.5% strongly disagreed while 47.5%female disagreed regarding audio-video CDs are supplied to the students.

5.   Twenty seven percent (27%) male teachers agreed and 13.5% strongly agreed while 60.0% agreed and 12.5% female strongly agreed regarding internship is managed wherever required.

4.Conclusions

It was observed that study centers were opened at universities when students reached there whereas study centers were not equipped with multimedia and net browsing facility. Majority of respondents observed that exams were conducted with proper discipline and control moreover students were facilitated during the exams, mobile inspectors supervised the exam centers and the fee structure of distance education was affording as compare to regular program. Majority of respondents mentioned that almost educational information was provided by the university and teachers" appointment letters were sent to the students timely but it was also investigated that reading material was not sent to the students through correspondence. It was found that online information about the educational calendar, admission confirmatory facility on website and reading material were available online. It was also observed that video conferencing was not conducted by the university to consult the world experts, CD,s were also not supplied to the students but internship program was arranged by the university administration.

5.Discussions

This study investigated the role of public sector universities in promoting higher education through distance education in Punjab. It was admitted that study centers were opened when students reached there but study centers were not equipped with multimedia and net browsing facility.

The findings from this study were also consistent with the findings of Rehman (2004) who found out missing facilities of modern technology in distance education. The study explored that correspondence queries were addressed by the university, this idea also supported by Afridi (2008) who described that students‟ complaints were entertained properly.It was admitted that exams were conducted with proper discipline and control, basic facilities were provided to the students during the exams, findings of this study were consistent by the Rehman (2004), who stated that examination system of distance education program was satisfactory.

It was exhibited by the results of the study that assignments were keenly evaluated by teachers and corrective feedbacks were not given to the students. Video conferencing facility was not provided by university administration as mentioned by the students while on the other hand teachers described that this facility was provided by university whereas majority of respondents admitted that facility was not available by university. The findings of this study were similar to the results of Ali (1999) who concluded that video conferencing facilities were not available in universities.

6.Recommendations

In the light of conclusion, It is recommended that supplementary reading material should be available to students. Study centers should be equipped with multimedia. Corrective feedback should be given on the assignments by teachers in time. Study centers should be allocated to the students as per their local needs.

Online research journals access should be given to the students. Audio-video conferencing should be conducted by the university administration. CDs should be supplied to the students to facilitate them in their learning process. Universities may take measures to arrange media program for each course. Guidance and counseling centers may be established to facilitate students to solve their problems. Intercity pick and drop facility should be provided to the students by the universities. Availability of reading material should be made possible through correspondence.

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