



## PERCEIVED ASSURANCE OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH DISTANCE LEARNING MODE IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

Education is working as change agent. In advanced countries of the world, education is among the top priorities and it enables them to rule over the world. Education is a key for socio-economic development as quality education is the right of every child. According to Economic Survey of Pakistan 2007-08, the literacy rate of Pakistan is 56 % and only 4 % students enter into universities. Higher Education is considered as vital for progress that provides opportunities of research, which ultimately play a vibrant role in the development of a nation. Learning through distance is accommodating a large number of people all over the world. Internet gave a new position to distance learning and currently distance learning system is working parallel to conventional learning system. In Pakistan, Allama Iqbal Open University is imparting Education to those who have left education due to some reasons years ago and those who are unable to attend conventional institutions. In Pakistan, it is a common believe that distance education system is producing a large number of students who have degrees without knowledge. People believe that distance learning can play its role in increasing literacy rate but higher education through distance learning is not as effective as higher education through conventional system. At present, Quality in higher education through distance learning is an issue in Pakistan.

### Purpose of the Study

To investigate the effectiveness of quality in higher education through distance mode in Pakistan.

### Sample

Students from Allama Iqbal Open University enrolled in M. Phil (Education) and Ph D (Education) were the sample for the study.

## **Methodology**

In order to examine the quality in higher education through distance learning, Student's evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) survey instrument was used to investigate the students' perception about quality of higher education through distance learning. SEEQ was developed by Marsh (1982) and is widely used for students' feedback. It helps in discovering nine dimensions of quality education. For the present study, five scales, Learning, Group Interaction, Breadth, assignments and examinations of SEEQ were used.

## **Statistics**

Each statement was checked by using t-test.

## **Major Finding**

- The courses of distance education are challenging and stimulating.
- The respondents learn valuable things.
- The courses are designed in such a way that their interest in the subjects increased after reading these materials.
- During workshops, students are encouraged to discuss their problems with teachers and teachers respond them properly.
- Students are invited to share ideas and knowledge with others.
- **Key Words:** Distance Education, Quality, Quality Assurance, Quality Assurance in Distance Education,

## **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education is considered as a major change agent, which steers a nation to the progress and prosperity, and the nations who have found this secret are ruling over the world. In today's world, higher education aims are to produce students with clear vision, creativity, and curiosity, potential of shaping the world. Today's world is research based, only those nations who are ahead in the field of research are ahead in every field of life. It is higher education which provides the sources which for research. Currently, education through distance mode is very popular all over the world. Initially, it was criticized, that it has no potential to fulfill the future needs. As time passed, its popularity spread more and more because it facilitated the people who were living in the far flung areas where traditional teaching learning was not possible. Russell (1999) summarized 355 research papers about the outcomes of learning through distance mode and through traditional mode and concluded that there was no significant difference in the educational outcomes between distance education and traditional education. Today, distance education system is working in different modes, education through correspondence and E-learning are the most famous modes of distance education.

In Pakistan, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is providing education to a large number of peoples who are not in a position to attend the institutions regularly. Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is providing education from metric to Ph.D level through distance mode. In Pakistan, It is a common perception that distance education can help in earning a degree but without knowledge. The people who oppose this system have their own opinions and justifications. These peoples provide many reasons to strength their opinion. For example, tutors assign marks without checking assignments and students do not interact with each other and even with teacher. On the other hand, the people who advocate this system are of the view that it has the same potential as traditional system has. In response to the criticism, they believe that all the tutors do not assign marks without checking assignments and AIOU is providing the opportunities to students for interaction. Tutorial meetings are arranged which is an optional part of distance system and workshops are the necessary components of this system, which are the sources of interaction between students and teachers.

There is another issue of higher education through distance system. It is also perception that higher education is only possible through traditional learning system and in this regard distance mode cannot work effectively. There is a question mark on the quality of higher education through distance learning system. AIOU is trying its best to assure the quality of higher education through distance learning. For assurance quality of higher education through distance learning, AIOU follow the same lines provided by Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. AIOU has established a Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC), which assures the quality of higher education through distance learning system in the light of guidance provided by HEC.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Distance Education**

Moore and Kearsley (1996) define distance education as:

A planned learning that normally occurs in a different place for teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special method of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. (p.2)

Keegan (1986), states that distance education has six major features: (a) the separation of teacher and learner, (b) the role of educational organization, (c) the place of technological medium, (d) two-way communication, (e) the separation of the learner and the learning groups, and (f) industrialization.

Rumble (2003) identified four generations of distance education systems: correspondence systems; educational broadcasting systems; multimedia distance education systems; and online distance education systems. UNESCO (2002) highlights that distance education has been advancing in four main phases:

- Correspondence systems originated at the end of the nineteenth century, and are still the most widely used form of distance education in less developed countries.
- Educational television and radio systems use various delivery technologies terrestrial, satellite, and cable television and radio.
- Multimedia systems encompass text, audio, video, and computer-based materials, and usually some face-to-face learner support delivered to both individuals and groups.
- Internet-based systems in which multimedia (text, audio, video and computer-based) materials in electronic format are delivered to individuals through computers, along with access to databases and electronic libraries, and which enable teacher-student and student-student, one-to-one, one-to many, and many-to-many interactions, synchronously or asynchronously, through e-mail, computer conferences, bulletin boards, etc.

The material of distance education is considered at par with the traditional educational system, even better in some ways as compared to the traditional educational system.

Comparison of Materials of Distance Education and Textbooks of Traditional Education system.

ODL materials typically ...	Textbooks typically ...
Are divided into study units, sometimes representing a week's work	Are divided into chapters, based on topics rather than study time
Include a study guide on how to use the materials and how to study by oneself	Do not include study guides or study guidance
Include study tips (e.g., on note-taking)	Do not include study tips
Include examples	Include examples
Include diagrams and pictures	Include diagrams and pictures
Include numerous activities	Have few or no activities
Provide feedback on answers	Do not provide feedback
Are tightly structured	Are more loosely structured
Address the learner as 'you'	Use passive language (e.g., 'it can be seen that' or 'the reader will note that')
Have a generous layout, often including space for learners to write in	Have pages filled with text, figures, tables, lists and other graphic elements – there is no space for learners to write in
Have as an audience the individual learner	Serve a dual audience: the learner and the teacher
Attempt to meet all the needs of the learner	Assume that the learner has a teacher who will be able to amplify the printed text

Source: COL, 2005

## **Distance Education in Pakistan**

National Education Policy (1972) confirmed the importance of open universities for catering education and training of the people and suggested the idea of establishing an open university in Pakistan in the following words:

Open universities are being used in several countries to provide education and training to people who cannot leave their homes and jobs for full time studies. A people's Open University will, therefore, be established to provide part-time educational facilities through correspondence courses, tutorials, seminars, workshops, laboratories television, radio broadcasts, and other mass communication media. (p.22)

Vice Chancellor's Annual Report (2008, p.7) documented that AIOU was established under an act of parliament in July 1974. It was the second Open University in the world; the first such university was established in UK in 1969.

A report entitled "25 years of AIOU" (1999, p. 1) describes the following functions of AIOU:

- To provide educational facilities to people who cannot leave their homes and jobs.
- To provide such facilities for the training of teachers.
- To provide such facilities to masses for their educational uplift.
- To make provision for research and development of educational technology and advisory services and to enter into arrangement with other institutions.

## **Phenomenon of Higher Education through Distance Learning in Pakistan**

Currently, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is providing education from matriculation to PhD levels. Higher education (M.Phil and PhD) through distance learning is a little bit different as compared to other degree programs.

### **Formative evaluation/Assignments**

Reading material is sent to the students through post mail with assignments and workshop schedules. Students are advised to consult Reference books and Internet for assignments. Latest Reference style (APA style) is recommended for reference. PhD level tutors are appointed for the students of M.Phil and PhD.

### **Workshops**

Workshop is a compulsory element of the distance learning system. At M.Phil and PhD, one week workshop is arranged for each code. These workshops provide the opportunity of interaction between student to student and student to teacher. During workshop, highly qualified resource persons are invited for lectures. These resource persons belong to different educational fields and have diversified experience in the field.

## Presentation

Teachers inform students about workshop through post mail, also send them three topics for presentation and ask them to prepare presentation on one of these topics. Students are also advised to explore Internet for preparing this presentation.

## Quality

Robinson (1993, p.77) defines quality as a product of planning, monitoring, control and coordination. Gandhe (n.d) consider the quality in education as a combination of

- Exceptional high standards
- Perfection and consistency
- Fitness for purpose
- Value for money
- Transformation capabilities

According to Clark (2003) the word quality in higher education has been subject to an active debate for at least 10 years and is used in ways that blur the distinction between the two terms quality and standard. He defines quality as the attribute of a process or product that assures that it is fit for purpose. Rao (2003, p.18) says that quality is a dynamic idea. ... Quality is designed into the process to ensure that the products are produced to a predetermined specification. Simply, Quality assurance is a means of producing defect-and fault free products. He states that quality must be matched to the expectations and requirements of customers and clients. Quality is what the customer wants and not what the institutions decides.

Dhanarajan and Hope (1992, p.211) identify the four main things for judging whether the quality of the products (i.e., courses and programmes) offered by a distance learning institution to its clients is of a standard comparable to other systems:

- 1) Logic of products: This includes the structure and content of courses, the level, sequence, relevance, currency and sensitivity to social concerns. It is in this area that academic judgments about standards are made; it is also the area where knowledge and skills are conveyed.
- 2) Development of products: The course and programme development process can reasonably be expected to mirror the concern for quality. Instructional design and product development procedures show quality-control checkpoints in the system.
- 3) Face value of products: This is concerned with the technical quality of the learning materials that are created for the individual learner, whether they are print, audio, video or computer-aided learning packages. In some cases precise parameters can be applied to measure quality, and in others judgments are made on “feel” and “impressions.” Badly packaged learning materials cases have a negative impact on students.

- 4) Delivery of products: The ability of the system to deliver the products to the intended learners is a measure of its success. The question of delivery is an important consideration for any distance-teaching institute whose clients are a heterogeneous mix. New technologies offer great opportunities to teach and learn only if staff and students accept their use.

Calder (2002) suggests that for providing good quality distance education and training, the provider needs:

- Content expertise
- Distance teaching expertise
- Realistic levels of finance to cover development and production costs
- Time for the materials development and production process
- A support/course delivery infrastructure

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

According to Biggs (2003) Quality assurance (QA) is quality enhancement (QE). Hodson & Thomas (2003) thinks that quality assurance is emphasis compliance and accountability. Chernay (1990) states "Accreditation serves as a mechanism for quality assessment and quality enhancement with quality defined as the effective utilization of resources to achieve appropriate educational objectives". American Library Association Standards (1992) for accreditation assess following six major areas: Mission, Goals and Objectives; Curriculum; Faculty; Students; Administration and Financial Support; and Physical Resources and Facilities. Quality assurance does not merely mean a set of procedures to be followed – it is also an attitude which influences every aspect in an organization's activity" (Robinson 1993, p.79). According to Tait (1997):

The quality assurance system attempts to define, in consultation with the user, what services should be provided to the user. It involves the assurance analysis of what needs to be done, with information broken down in what can seem an exhaustive fashion.

The quality assurance system then finds ways of monitoring and evaluating that analysis and builds in procedures with users and providers for continuously seeking to improve practice. Embedded in the practice of quality assurance is the notion that expertise is widely distributed in the organization, that is, that not only the higher levels of management understand what should be done. In fact for many it is those wring closest to the "customer" who best understands his or her needs. Efforts to assure quality in education have been implemented at institutional and national levels. (P.1)

Ameen (2007) gives the following recommendations for the quality assurance:

- To assure quality, all schools should follow the HEC standards beginning with the formulation of mission and goals of programs. These should be formulated considering the local present and future professional scenario.

- The procedure of curriculum revision should be efficient and regular.
- Alumni and student evaluation must be introduced to improve the quality.
- A uniform assessment method is also important to maintain the quality.
- The faculty needs to fully exploit available electronic resources for their instruction and research purposes and explore faculty development opportunities.

## **ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Regarding the need of quality assurance in distance education institutions World Bank (2002) documented that:

It is doubtful that the philosophy, principles and standards customarily applied in evaluating and accrediting campus-based programs can be used without major adjustments for assessing the quality and effectiveness of on-line courses and other modalities of distance education. Appropriate and reliable accreditation and evaluation processes are needed to assure the public that the courses, programs and degrees offered by the new type of distance education institutions meet acceptable academic and professional standards.

Quality Assurance is a mechanism of review process through which institutions can determine acceptable standards for learners. It provides the means through an institution ensures that conditions are such that students can achieve the standards set by that institution or other awarding body (Lambropoulos, 2008).

The Vice Chancellor Annual Report of AIOU (2008) documented that:

AIOU has been actively involved in undertaking institutional research projects to get stakeholders' feedback on quality of programs offered. A Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) has been created in 2007, which has developed a comprehensive plan of academic audit of the programs offered by all thirty-five departments. Four detailed audits have been completed during 2007-008. The QEC is headed by a Senior Professor of the University and works in close collaboration with the Institutional Research Cell. (p.1)

In the present era, technology also affects the field of education, and provided such opportunities, which strengthen the teaching learning process. Today's education system faces the challenge to prepare individuals for information society in which one of the most important aim is to handle information. Such a shift in focus can be seen as a new stage of our society, characterized by a new predominant paradigm (Siddiqui, 2004). Keeping in view such importance of technology, AIOU established Institute of Educational Technology.

Vice Chancellor's Annual Report 2006-07 (2007, p.76) describes that success of open and distance learning system depends upon, among various other inputs, the effective use of communicational technologies. The so called 'gap' between the teachers and the taught in a distance education systems demands alternate methods of contacts for smooth conduct of teaching and learning.

## **ESTABLISHMENT OF QUALITY ENHANCEMENT CELL (QEC)**

At AIOU, Quality Enhancement Cell was established in 2007 for effective management of quality programmes of AIOU. Quality Enhancement Cell is monitored by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Higher Education Commission (V.C's Report, 2007).

Vice Chancellor's Report (2007, p.69) documented the following pertinent measures taken for enhancement of quality of AIOU educational provision:

- For training of staff and faculty, programs were designed as chair of the media advisory committee and training started in radio/TV production.
- "Good practices for quality assurance for accreditation councils in Pakistan" prepared by HEC are being implemented.
- Criteria for HEC admission for MS leading to Ph.d, evaluation of thesis, etc adopted.
- Prepared time-line in consultation with the deans for revision of courses of each faculty.
- Student support services proformas as were developed.
- Tutor evaluation proformas developed.
- Course proposal and revisions form were strictly followed.
- ICTs input evaluation form prepared.
- Outreach students feedback forms prepared.
- Equated course credit system of AIOU with internationally credit hours system.
- For quality input AIOU staff development program was developed and got approved through statutory bodies.
- QEC was recognized as member of the Asia Pacific Quality Network

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

Students are the consumers of distance education system. Students' views about their academic experience, is of interest and present the actual situation of the system. The perception of students is central and provides an opportunity to the managers of higher education to shape the decisions about the system for enhancing quality of education through distance learning. For the present study, 100 students of M.Phil and PhD level were selected through random sample technique. The questionnaire was sent to the students through post mail as well as through email. On Internet, there is a yahoo group of Distance learning students, the questionnaire was uploaded and they were requested to fill in it.

### **The Survey Instrument**

In order to examine the quality of distance learning system, Student Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) developed by Marsh (1982) was used. It covers the following nine dimensions: Learning, Enthusiasm, Organization, Group Interaction, Individual

Rapport, Breadth, Examination, Assignments and overall. For the present study, five dimension (Learning,, Group Interaction, Breadth, Assignments, Examination ) were used.

The following table shows the area and number of items in that area

Area	Number of Items
Learning	4
Group Interaction	4
Breadth	4
Assignments	2
Examination	3

### Data Analysis

Each statement was checked by using one way t-test on significance level 0.05.

LEARNING						
Statement	Very Good	Good	Moderate	Poor	Very Poor	t-value
You find the course intellectually challenging and stimulating.	16	78	1	4	1	15.99
You have learned something which you consider valuable.	5	59	18	11	7	4.41
Your interest in the subject has increased as a consequence of this course.	45	22	19	4	10	6.74
You have learned and understood the subject materials in this course.	2	68	16	9	5	6.01
GROUP INTERACTION						
Students are encouraged to participate in class discussion	39	57	2	1	1	19.85
Students are invited to share their ideas and knowledge.	56	28	6	6	4	11.68
Students are encouraged to ask questions and are given meaningful answers.	6	72	11	4	7	7.15
Students are encouraged to express their own ideas and/or question the instructor.	26	29	21	21	3	4.59
BREADTH						
Instructor contrasts the implications of various theories.	45	22	15	15	3	7.49
Instructor presents the background or origin of ideas/concepts developed in class.	28	46	16	9	1	9.64
Instructor presents points of view other than his/her own when appropriate.	9	66	5	11	9	5.02
Instructor adequately discusses current developments in the field.	37	45	2	9	7	8.14
ASSIGNMENTS						
Required readings/texts are valuable.	39	36	15	6	4	9.32
Readings, homework, etc., contribute to appreciation and understanding of the subject.	45	32	13	8	2	10.58

EXAMINATION						
Feedback on examinations/ graded materials is valuable.	14	35	39	9	3	5.06
Methods of evaluating student work are fair and appropriate.	38	32	9	16	5	6.60
Examinations/ graded materials test course content as emphasized by instructor.	49	39	8	3	1	15.96

$Df=99$

table value of  $t$  at  $0.05= 2.02$

## DISCUSSIONS

For Higher education through distance, institutions use modern technology to ensure the quality product. The experts in the field of distance education observe all the advancements in the field and try to incorporate these advancements in the course for enhancing quality. These efforts mad the course challenging and stimulating. In addition, the material forces the students for consulting reference books and other related material on the Internet. In distance education, opportunities of interaction are provided to the students to share ideas, knowledge and discuss their problems with students and teachers. Different theories related to the distance learning system embedded time to time to ensure the quality. During workshops, instructors discuss new trends and issues related to the higher education through distance learning system in the classes, this discussion provide students up to date knowledge and challenge them to meet these issues potentially. AIOU tries its best to ensure quality of higher education through distance learning, and for this purpose, AIOU follows the rules and regulations set by the HEC for higher education through traditional leaning system. AIOU has established quality enhancement cell (QEC), which reviews the courses of higher education and ensures quality of its programs.

## FINDINGS

The respondents confirm that the courses are challenging and stimulating and they learn valuable things. The courses are designed in such a way that their interest in the subjects increase after reading these materials. During workshops, students are encouraged to discuss problems with teachers and teachers respond them properly. Students are invited to share ideas and knowledge with others. In the class, the instructors explain in detail the origin of educational theories and current advancements in the related field, and also share their own opinion about these theories. Assignment is a compulsory element of distance education system and the respondents agreed that reading material is valuable and assignments play an important role in understanding the subject. Respondents show their satisfaction towards the examination system in distance learning.

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