

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract

The current research studied the gaps in student support services at regional level in Pakistan. It was a mixed-methods case study research where explanatory sequential paradigm was used. The study was delimited to regional network of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, in Sindh province. The sample of study comprised of 280 B.Ed. students and a focused group consisting of 14 students. The quantitative data was collected through self-developed five-point Likert type questionnaire and qualitative data through semi-structured interview schedule. The descriptive and inferential statistics were used, findings were categorized according to themes, conclusions drawn and recommendations made. The finding of the study includes: poor academic and general facilities at study centers and regional centers. Lack of DE thought at regional centers, poor information system, useless communication through media, traditional and non-professional approach of ROs. The study recommends establishment of model study centers at tehsil level, use of ROs as model study centers and academic hubs, provision of physical facilities at study centers, arrangement of orientation programs, decentralization of books on regional level, attending DLs queries through media, strong and meaningful two-way communication and appointment of DE qualified staff.

Keywords: Distance Education, learner support services, distance learners, regional centers

1.1 Introduction

Distance education (DE) is an alternate route of education provided at home and work, and flexibility, cost effectiveness are its main characteristics. It is an educational opportunity in which education is conducted through physical absence of tutor or instructor, partial formal classes, time factor involvement in instruction and communication by various means (Arain, 2019). DE provides another route hence, it gives a second chance of education for those who

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

could not continue their formal education. Sometimes, it is the only opportunity of getting education in the absence of formal education facilities; especially the higher education. DE is designed in such a way that students can get education at their work place or home, without the help of teachers. In traditional education the teacher teaches but in DE the institution teaches (Keegan, 1998). The institution teaches through study package, distant tutor, providing various academic and administrative facilities, and support. A DL requires academic and administrative support. DLs are provided the study package with a bunch of instruction to use the study material. Distance learning occurs in the absence of face to face teaching. The job of distance learning institutions (DLIs) does not complete after dispatching the distant teaching material unless a successful linking system is provided to him and the goal of this linking is at the center of the organizational structure (Rao, 2004). The linkage between DLs and DLIs aims, to provide support to the learners at home. Thus, to provide a continuous support to the DLs that facilitates the self-study or home study a learners' support service is extended. Techniques of student support are probably the most fundamental to the learning support in DE (Saifi & Mehmood, 2011). LSS is an essential element for teaching and learning and has critical importance for DL. The continuous LSS helps the DLs to retain in the system, and provides a psychological satisfaction. Open universities have responsibility to provide strong LSS to increase its holding power and prevent the students from drop out (Gujjar, 2010). Interaction with meaningful engagement with student candidates is known as one of the main feature of students' access for many years (Pitane, 2017). According to Lockwood (1995) LSS means the range of activities which complement the mass produced materials which make up the most well-known element in ODL. The main aim of LSS was to promote self-study or independent study among DLs in the absence of regular face-to-face teaching (Sharma, 2002). To ensure that all students studying through ODL system have learning experiences and succeed, the system builds students support service (Arko-Achemfuor, 2017). The dropout rate of AIOU is reported high which is evident that some gaps exist in the system. Hence, it was necessary to investigate the issues of LSS in ODL system at regional level in the province of Sindh. The objective of the study was to find out the gaps related with organizational, proactive and reactive LSS in the ODL system of AIOU at regional level in Sindh, Pakistan.

1.2Learner Support Services

All the DLIs introduce DL programs in their own way but the quality of a DL system lies in strength of LSS. According to Kishore (1998) the success or failure of a DL system depends upon strength or weakness of its LSS. Formerly, the DLIs thought it enough to supply the text material but by the time experts recognized the importance of students' support. The question arises what is the learners' support? Simpson (2015) defines learners' support as some other forms of provision or back-up apart from the text, The LSS starts as the DL joins a DLI. The services include study center counselling, tutorial support and administrative support (Rumble, 1992). The services being provided by DLIs depend upon the nature of its operating system. Then, what should include the LSS? Simpson (2000) includes all the activities after dispatching DL material that help in students' learning, interacting, effective communication. Sharma, (2002) adds the responsibility of creating conducive environment for DL, motivation of DL to retain in the system and the socialization that decline the sense of

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

isolation (Pier, 2007). These include a set of facilities and activities extended through interaction and communication of DT with DL. There is no limit of range of LSS and depend upon the nature of operational system of DL system. These services may be academic and administrative but their aim may be to facilitate the home study. The DLI need to build a strong two-way communication system, directly and indirectly through DTs. The DLI extends tutorial support, formative and summative evaluation, partial formal classes or compulsory practical work, creation of conducive learning environment, academic and physical facilities, and solution of all academic and administrative issues. Thus, all activities and facilities extended to the DLs after strong two way communication and interaction that support the individual learning and its continuation may include the LSS. The above discussion leads us to define students support services; these services directly or indirectly associated with DLs and include the organizational activities to establish a system of distance learning, proactive and reactive supporting events; that aim to facilitate and retain the DLs in the system for ultimate success.

1.3 Online Learners support services at AIOU

The operational system of AIOU is under development change from print based to technology based. The modern technology is also being stuck strongly but it became fast post COVID-19. AIOU website www.aiou.edu.pk provides many academic facilities and solutions. The webpage completely provides information about books delivery, status, examination information, roll no, slips, assignment marks, result, provisional certificates, degree tracking and verification. The media delivering lectures and information include FM radio, Live TV and Video on demand. The DL may easily download all sorts of forms, fee challans, and brochures. The DL may confirm his tutor, workshop information, and application tracking system, admission fee refund and the alternative route LMS system. These are the online LSS provided, however, the central campus has directorate of LSS, DRS that extend further services.

1.4 Learners support services at Regional Level

At regional level AIOU works with 10 regional offices (ROs) and 11 RCOs in Sindh province, the ROs provide tutors, study centers, evaluation, monitoring and counselling etc. Some of support services are given as under:-

1.4.1 Orientation Program

AIOU arranges orientation program for fresh DLs to inform and train them how to run in DL system; use the study material, role of tutors, study centers and mode of studies. The tutors and regional management may attend such programs.

1.4.2 Tutorials

Study centers are established where face to face meetings with tutors are scheduled, however it is optional for students. The DT may receive or return checked assignments in these meetings. He provides academic help in difficult topics also. AIOU has also started online tutorials and LMS is introduced where students can upload their assignments.

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

1.4.3 Workshops/practical work

The partial practical work is the need of ODL system. The workshops or practical are arranged for a week to ten days at the end of a semester. The DT supervise and DLs are made to do practice. This is the only face to face teaching in ODL system which creates skills in the DLs.

1.4.4 Evaluation

Both summative and formative evaluation is made. The students submit assignments which carry marks and at the end of the semester the final examination is conducted to evaluate the DLs. The final examination is conducted formally at the examinations centers which may be mostly the study centers of AIOU.

1.4.5 Communication with DLs

The two-way communication is established between the DL and DT while he sends his introductory letter through postal services or telephone and DLs submit their assignments through postal services or contact DT for their academic queries.

1.4.6 Study exam center and tutor provision

AIOU hires public sector schools from school education department which are used as study centers as well as examinations centers. These centers are paid by AIOU for facilities. The DTs are also appointed for semester to semester and they mostly belong to government teachers, ex teachers or others.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The distance educationalists and researchers use various theories and conceptual bases to learner's support in ODL context. These theories are mixed with each other and no theory is acceptable in single or proved comprehensive till now. Bath's theory of two-way communication, Holmberg's guided didactic theory, Ferrier's theory of dialogical process and Moor's theory of transactional distance and Trumpet's dialogue. Bath (1982) gave main position to two-way communication and argued the provision of interaction with the study material by such means exercises questions or self-checklists, it gives central role to tutor and argues tutor to communicate DLs by mail, computer, telephone or face to face. He assigned DT the part of pedagogical functions and duty of linking learning material to learning special assistance at the beginning of course. Holmberg (1983) gave the concept that DT activities such as administration, counselling, teaching, enrolment and evaluation are important only if they support the individual learning. He favored autonomy and freedom of DL in choice of both content and procedures and individual pacing but argues the DE is a self-study not private study. Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance seems more applicable to the current research. He considers the distance between the DT and DL as psychological or commutative occurred in the structured or planned learning situation.

1.6 Research Questions

1. What are the issues related with students' facilitation at regional level in Sindh province?
2. What are the issues related with proactive students' support at regional level in Sindh

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

province?

3. What are the issues related with reactive support at regional level in Sindh province?

2. Review of Literature

According to Rotar (2022) the support services to be provided to DLs need to include pre enrolment advertising with comprehensive information of course, orientation program after enrolment, strong interaction system, pointing out high risk DLs and provide more care to retain them, socialization of DLs, peer mentoring and cost effectiveness policy, teaching skills, feedback and proper counselling.

Arain, Khatoon & Samson (2020) conducted a research on ICT based DL system of Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP) and found students support gaps as delayed information of admissions, short help at regional level & short academic facilities at regional level.

Arain & Munshi (2019) in their research on print based DL system of AIOU and found lack of professional behavior, and authority at regional level. The lack of academic and general facilities and DL thought were the main problems for students at regional centers. The libraries and internet services at regional centers were not extended for DLs.

Arain & Munshi (2017) conducted a research on print based DL system of AIOU and found late information of admission, short academic and general facilities at study centers. The regional centers gave no attention on postal or e-mail applications. The system lacked the DL logic at regional level.

Joubert & Snyman (2017) conducted a study in South Africa and found lack of interaction between tutors and distance learners, feeling of isolation by e-tutors, and inadequate training of e-tutors. He suggested to reply the DLs as soon as possible and even if the tutor can't find the answer of question, he must intimate the DL and say thanks and wait for answer.

Rashid (2015) in his study about students support services of AIOU concluded that the counselling of DLs at AIOU was inadequate. He also pointed out shortage of course coordinators so tutors can't be briefed well. Further, he found short briefing for tutors as the gaps of support services at AIOU.

Gujjar (2010) conducted a comparative study on student support service provided by UKOU, AIOU and OUSL. They found that the learner support services provided by UKOU and OUSL were better than AIOU Pakistan. The physical and academic facilities given by the two universities were found better.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The current study was a case study designed to investigate the issues of student support services provided by AIOU at regional level in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. It was a mixed methods case study research where explanatory sequential mix-methods design was used (Creswell, 2018). The Primary data for quantitative phase was collected through a survey by developing a five point Likert type questionnaire, followed by the qualitative phase where unstructured interview schedule was used to collect data. The secondary data was collected from the official record, website, broacher and annual reports. The sample of the study comprised of 280 B.Ed. 2015 students of AIOU through simple random and stratified sampling technique (Cohen, et.al, 2007) and focus group by purposive sampling (Gay, L.R, 2012) and consisted of 10 respondents from 5 regional centers. The internal consistency of

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

the questionnaire was checked by Cronbatch alpha and was found between 0.70 and 0.79. Descriptive analysis was used to interpret quantitative data using MS Excel program, where percentages and mean scores were calculated. The qualitative data was analyzed by inferential statistics. The findings were aligned into themes, conclusions were made according to themes and recommendations made.

4. Data Analysis and interpretation

The paradigm used in this mix methods research is explanatory sequential mixed method design. Hence, first the quantitative data is analyzed and interpreted and secondly the qualitative data.

4.1Phase I. Quantitative data analysis (Descriptive statistics)

The quantitative data was analyzed by using MS excel and calculating percentages and mean scores.

Table 1.1 Academic and physical facilities at study centers

Item		SA	A	UD	DA	SDA	Mean
Libraries at study centers.	f	06	39	09	181	45	3.8
	%	02	14	03	65	16	
Computer Lab and Wi-Fi.	f	16	57	10	188	09	3.4
	%	5.7	20	3.6	67	3.2	
AV aids at study centers.	f	07	45	00	210	18	3.6
	%	2.5	16	00	75	6.4	
Satisfaction about physical facilities.	f	26	83	00	160	11	3.2
	%	9.3	30	00	57	3.9	

Table 1.1 shows that 68% of the respondents reported unavailability of library facility and 16 % availability while 3% remained undecided. The mean score was 3.8. In next question 70% of DLs did not found computer lab and Wi-Fi at the study centers and 25% found while 3.6% remained undecided, the mean score was 3.4. In the next question 81% of the students were not provided AV aids at the study centers and 18% found while there was no undecided case. The mean score was 3.6. There were 39% respondents satisfied with the physical facilities and 61% unsatisfied, there was no undecided case. The mean score was 3.2.

Table 1.2 Academic and general facilities at regional centers

Library facilities.	f	15	171	24	60	10	3.4
	%	5.4	61	8.6	21	3.6	
Computer lab and Wi-Fi facility.	f	09	61	35	67	08	3.3

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

	%	3.2	58	13	24	2.9	
AV aids availability.	f	03	69	37	157	14	3.4
	%	01	25	13	56	5	
Satisfaction about physical facilities.	f	06	179	35	54	06	3.4
	%	02	64	13	19	02	

Table 1.2 shows that 66.4 % of the respondents found library facilities at the regional center and 24.6 % did not, while 8.6% of them remained undecided. The mean score was 3.4. In the following question 61.2% of the DLs found computer lab and Wi-Fi at the RCs, while 13% could not decide. The mean score was 3.3. In the next item 26 % of the respondents found AV aids at the RCs but 61% did not while 13% remained undecided. The mean score was 3.4. In the last item of this section 66 % of the DLs seemed satisfied with the physical facilities at The RCs and 21 % reported dissatisfaction while 13 % could not decide. The mean score was 3.4.

Table 1.3 Pro-active support

Orientation programs.	f	10	113	13	132	12	3.1
	%	3.6	40	4.6	47	4.3	
Tutor intimation letters.	f	05	69	03	190	13	3.5
	%	1.8	25	1.8	68	4.6	
Communication with tutor.	f	05	190	15	60	10	3.4
	%	1.8	68	5.4	21	3.6	
Communication with regional center	f	11	170	06	80	13	3.3
	%	3.9	61	2.1	29	4.6	
Update information by regional center.	f	07	179	30	61	03	3.5
	%	2.5	64	11	22	1.1	

Table 1.3 shows that for 43.6% of the DLs orientation program was arranged but 51.3% opposed the statement while 4.6% could not decide. The mean score was 3.1. Next, 72.4 % of the students did not receive the intimation letter from the tutor and 26.8% received while 1.3% could not decide. The mean score was 3.5. In next, question, 69.8% of the DLs had good experience of communication with tutor and 26.4 % reported negatively while 5.4% remained undecided. The mean score was 3.4. The communication with regional campus was reported positive by 64.3% and 33.6% replied in opposite while 2.1 % remained undecided. The mean score was 3.3. In the last item, 66.5% of the DLs reported receiving of updates from regional office and 23.1% did not receive while 11% remained undecided. The mean score was 3.5.

Table 1.4 Reactive support

Books misplacement.	f	08	61	30	173	08	3.4
	%	2.9	22	11	62	2.9	
Return of Assignment	f	10	113	13	132	12	3.1
	%	3.6	40	4.6	47	4.3	
Solution through telephone, e-mail or postal application.	f	09	55	12	193	11	3.5
	%	3.2	20	4.3	69	3.9	
Help and counselling at various issues.	f	12	125	12	123	08	3.0
	%	4.3	45	4.3	44	2.9	

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

Satisfaction about dealings of regional centers.	<i>f</i>	08	129	20	112	11	3.0
	%	2.9	46	7.1	40	3.9	

Table 1.4 shows that 24.9% of the students misplaced their books in their tenure of studies and 64.9% did not, while 11% remained undecided. The mean score was 3.4. In next item, 51.3% of the DLs were not returned checked assignments however, 43.6% were returned while 4.6 % remained neutral. The mean score was 3.1. In the next question 72.3% reported no solution of problems through communication means and 23.2% affirmed while 4.3% remained undecided. The mean score was 3.5. In the next question, 49.3 % of the DLs seemed satisfied by the help and counselling provided and 46.9% did not agree, while 4.3% remained undecided. The mean score was 3.0. In the last item, 48.9 % of the students were satisfied with the dealings of regional centers and 43.9% did not seem satisfied while 7.1% could not decide. The mean score was 3.0.

4.2. Phase 2. Qualitative data analysis/ inferential statistics

The qualitative data was analyzed and grouped as per themes in the following.

1. Academic & general facilities at Study centers

AIOU does not have its own study centers; the study centers are borrowed from provincial schools. So, the academic facilities existing at the study centers belonged to schools which are not extended to DLs. The schools extend only infrastructure and general facilities. However, AIOU does not provide any additional support or AV aids; the partial provision of AV aids are the efforts of local DTs. The general facilities are of minor level.

2. Academic and General facilities at Regional centers

The regional centers have libraries of minor level and computer labs with Wi-Fi but these facilities were seldom extended to the students. The general facilities were better but the system of students' accommodation or use as study facility was seldom possible.

3. Proactive support

Mostly the system of information depends upon tutors and regional centers directly don't inform. The tutors' works were checked by the RCs. The DLs easily call the RCs but they demand to visit and talk F2F about the issue.

4. Reactive support

The book misplace issues were the major issue, although there is online facility of checking book status of delivery but the online update was partially helpful. RCs receive the undelivered books from the Pakistan Post. The tutors seldom returned checked assignments and did not resolve the DLs issues through postal application, email or media. One of the respondent stated

"I had to visit multiple times to regional center to resolve my issue related with wrong code of admission."

Another DL stated that *"We were advised to write directly to the main campus Islamabad."* The counselling was partially helpful and behavior of the personnel was reported unsatisfactory and used traditional style.

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

5. Conclusion Discussion on results

Firstly, the study centers in various regions lack academic and general facilities. AIOU borrows public schools buildings from Government of Sindh to use as study centers. Most of these schools don't have libraries or those of secondary level. The libraries were necessary for DLs just like formal students (Jacobsen, 1994). These schools at tehsil level have computer labs and Wi-Fi. But, they don't extend the libraries, computer labs or Wi-Fi to DLs. There was no provision of AV aids by the university however, tutors arranged sometimes with the help of DLs and used for the next groups of DLs. These study centers have low level basic facilities like drinking water, electricity and seating arrangements which are considered enough. The missing academic and general facilities were

Secondly, most of the regional centers lack academic facilities like libraries, computer labs and Wi-Fi. Moreover, one fourth of the centers have such facilities but seldom extended for DLs. There was seldom use of RCs as study centers hence, AV aids were also not found. The general facilities like electricity, drinking water, alternate power sources exist at regional centers but there was no special waiting rooms for the DLs. Arain, et.al, (2020) found unequally developed RCs, where some were highly developed and others missing facilities.

Thirdly, the orientation programs was not arranged at half of the centers. That shows the reluctance from the DL will and work. Stone (2019) emphasized orientation programs and concluded that such programs have proved to support students' transition to higher education and life time guidance. The DLs occasionally received intimation letters at half of the centers but mostly the DLs had to enquire about their tutors themselves. The DLs were able to contact DTs after their letters of appointment however, they easily communicated regional centers through telephone. The DLs received SMS about various events from RCs.

Fourth, a quarter of the DLs had a chance of book misplacement during their tenure of studies, which was a big number. It shows the weak postal services, however the undelivered books were dropped at regional centers and the DLs waited at their addresses. The RCs obstructed the work of courier services and made them further careless. The assignments were seldom returned by the tutors which raised problems for the DLs at their studies. The RCs gave a deaf year to postal applications or telephone calls and the DLs had to visit the RCs for the solution of their issues and problems. It shows the missing of DE thought of the RC personnel. The counselling at RCs on visit was found satisfactory but the behavior of the RC personnel was not found professional. Their traditional dealing made the DLs disheartened.

6. Recommendations

To resolve the issues found in this research the researcher recommends to establish model study centers at tehsil level all over Sindh and use them as academic hubs with all the required facilities. Provision of funds may maintain standard level facilities at the study centers. The regional centers may have high standard study centers at their own building with modern academic and general facilities and counselling. The ROs may help the courier services in locating the DLs but let them do their job. The orientation programs may compulsorily be arranged at each study center and make assignment return incumbent. AIOU needs to resolve the issues of DLs on requests received through various electronic media and establish strong two-way communication to update DLs. Training may be given to the

Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

existing personnel to deal with DLs, teaching them the facilitation concept for DLs and appoint distance education qualified persons in future.

Future research

Further, the researchers should find the ways to train the DE personnel to deal with DLs, distance learning logic and a special study may be conducted to find out areas of weakness in dealing with DLs.

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Learner Support Services in ODL: Gaps at Regional Level in Sindh, Pakistan

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