

AIOU: A University For All-At Their Doorsteps

An interview with Prof. Dr. Anwar Hussain Siddiqui*

It is an excerpt from an extensive interview of Prof. Dr. Anwar Hussain Siddiqui, given to "Dawn," a noted newspaper of Pakistan. For the general information of our readers, we are reproducing this invaluable interview highlighting the role and achievements of AIOU.

Editor



Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad, is a unique university where students do not have to come, but it goes to their doorsteps both in Pakistan and abroad.

Set-up in 1974, it is the largest university in Pakistan in terms of student enrolment. More than 300,000 students have been enrolled so far from Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC) to Ph.D. level, making it a mega university.

Vice-Chancellor Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Dr. Anwar Hussain Siddiqui in an interview to *Dawn* said, "University's distant learning programmes are best suited to overseas Pakistanis".

Dr. Siddiqui said that Pakistanis living abroad especially in Middle East are facing problems as most of the schools are up to Higher Secondary Certificate

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(HSC) level. The parents have to send their children back to Pakistan or to abroad which is very expensive and most of them cannot afford it. The AIOU courses provide them excellent opportunity to continue their education without leaving their homes and facing any dislocation.

There is a demand from the overseas Pakistanis from many countries that they want to study Urdu and Islamic Studies. "We are trying to reach out to them and develop programmes to serve them," he added.

Dr. Siddiqui said that at present AIOU offers BBA honours and BA programmes and soon it will be starting Masters' level degree programmes for overseas Pakistanis. "We are looking for the collaboration of reputable institutions and faculties in Middle East or Masters' level programmes," Mr. Siddiqui said.

The AIOU degrees are recognized nationally and internationally, owing to its high standards of education. The University was formed by an Act of Parliament. "We are as good as any other university in the country, only our teaching methodology is different," he said.

The university's curriculum is the same as other universities of the country, and we do not award degrees without hard examinations. Owing to these criteria, "many of our students are getting higher education abroad and getting good jobs." The University has a semester system and provides guidance at its centres all over the country with the help of experts and tutors. The students meet the tutor every week and discuss their assignments. It also arranges workshops and refresher courses.

The Vice Chancellor said that the university is getting popular between students and about 35,000 applications were received for M.Ed this year, of which 3,000 were selected. "No formal university can produce 3,000 graduates in a year, but we are doing it," Siddiqui said. AIOU, he said, is the largest university in the country in terms of its enrolment and budget. Only this year, it enrolled 325,000 students in various subjects. About 55 percent of enrolment is female because the university is catering to the needs of women, who cannot go to colleges for various reasons, he added. Besides this, AIOU provides opportunities to those who could not get higher education to improve their qualification while they are on the regular jobs.

Dr. Siddiqui said AIOU is the only self-supporting university in the country. Out of the Rs.300 million expenditures each year, the University meets about

66 percent of its expenses through its own resources, while the government allocates Rs.80 million.

The University has 32 regional campuses and 2,000 study centres, and its basic clients are working people in the urban centres, and people living in rural areas, besides women students. The AIOU is planning to open new campuses at Loralai, Kalat, and Khuzdar areas in Balochistan, Dr. Siddiqui said. The university is trying to reach students all over the country through audio-visual aids, and where there is no electricity people can use the tape recorders run by batteries.

After achieving success in computer education, the University plans to introduce applied and basic sciences, he added, "We are collaborating with the private sector to arrange practical training, in science and technology branching out in a big way," the VC said.

The University, he said is meant for the poor and non-privileged class, therefore, it is being run on 'no profit-no loss' basis by keeping the fees at the minimum levels. "Our fees are one-third of other universities," he added.

The University also has a state-of-the art audio-video production unit which prepares educational programmes for the students. The University broadcasts its programmes on satellite television and radio as well to reach out to the maximum number of students even in remote areas and villages where no educational institutions exist. The University is also getting satellite facility with the help of UNESCO to expand its coverage.

"We are working to improve our programmes by acquiring services of private productions," Mr. Siddiqui said. The AIOU also wants to increase its time on Pakistan Television (PTV) from one hour to three hours daily for the convenience of students. Dr. Siddiqui said, presently there are 56 open universities in the world, but Pakistan was the second country to establish AIOU in 1974.

Britain gave the idea of open universities in 1968, and now this concept of distant education is very popular in the world owing to the introduction of Internet and E-mail, he said.

The government has limited resources for education so it has decided to open 250,000 non-formal schools by hiring volunteer teachers. The AIOU would assist the government in training of teachers in such a large number for these schools, he added. "No formal system can train such a big number of teachers," Dr. Siddiqui said.