

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS PERTAINING TO DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Distance education is of supreme importance for Pakistan where the literacy percentage according to Population and Housing Census 1998 is 45%. So as to cope with this challenge, distance education can play an important role. Distance education is rewarding for people as well as for the country in more than one way. There is now considerable evidence that distance education can, in certain situation, be cheaper or more cost effective than traditional model of education. One of the major advantages of distance education is economy. Another advantage of distance education is that it allows the use of various media in combination. Distance education is advantageous to the learners. In fact, it offers an opportunity to learn while doing any job. Distance education also offers learners convenience; it saves them the cost and time of travel to classes that sometimes can be tiresome. Another important factor in the development of distance education is that it can be effective as conventional education in terms of learning gains measured by the learner's academic performance. Distance Education in developed and developing countries falls numerous changes in terms of issues and problems. It is beach of its nature as complimentary, supplementary and independent role. The equivalence, social recognition, media, information, material, mailing, trained faculty etc. are problems and issues pertaining to distance education. This paper, therefore discuss major problems and issues in distance education.

The term distance education is used to describe various forms of study at all levels. It is a mode to learning & teaching in which majority of instruction occurs while educator and learner are at a distance from one another.

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

The word issue in general terms means a matter in dispute between two parties. There occurs controversy in the opinion of the people. In the last few years, distance education has become a major topic in the sphere of education. In this regard Simonson, M. et al (2000, p.5) highlights that "In 1998 there were over 50 conferences dealing with some aspects of distance education, and almost every professional organization's publications and conferences have shown an increase in

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the number of distance education – related articles and papers.” The contemporary period is often characterized as one of the unpredictable change. Globalization, brought on by supersonic air travel, satellite television, computers, communications and social changes has inspired new ways of looking at distance education. Edwards (1995) uses the term open learning to describe a new way of looking at education in a quickly changing and diverse world. Hence the concept got evolution one or other way. In turn, different issues and problems erupted.

i) Access of Rural People

Village is considered to be a community made up by smaller units termed as family, very far off from urban areas and full of greenery where the absence of facilities is greatest. Village people are hard working for whom institutions are held, but they are deprived of education. Literacy facilities can prove helpful to resolve their problems. As distance education is defined as a method of assessing the needs and interest of adults and out of schools youth in developing countries is a member of community with them, motivating them to participate, helping them to acquire their productivity and improve their living standards. The prevailing note among the village people is their poverty not only of resources but also of enterprise and intelligence.

There is indeed much truth in comparison what they have to undertaken a duller kind of labor on the poorest diets and for meanest of the reward that is why people in rural areas are poor and indebted they have either been unable to pay the cost of education or seen any material advantage in it and are deprived of modern and necessary education facilities. In fact, material poverty is due to educational poverty; for example lack of functional knowledge, lack of relevant skills need to adapt attitudes and values, which can support the process of modernization.

Goel, A. (2000, p.57) says “Distance education can be a particular boon for women, especially since parents are unwilling to send them beyond their immediate local for education after the completion of primary or middle school...”

Rural women are an important component in the complex subject of rural development and there is a growing realization that participation of women who constitute of half of population, is essential for any planned and rapid progress of the nation. As regards women education in rural areas, of course, there is a positive objection to their education, except among parents who

are enlightened. That is why proportion of village women is un-educated and they cannot participate effectively in the rural development.

In the context of Pakistan, especially in rural areas, it can be safely hypothesized that the situation is aggravated by the unprecedented population increase in these areas. Because of their illiteracy, by and large, people in the rural areas generally do not have the capacity to understand and analyze the problems emanating from population increase. These problems may pertain, inter-alia to food, agriculture, health, education, housing resources, etc. their ignorance about population related issues and concepts like family size and standard of living, disease control, water resources management, etc. it is continuously having an adverse effect on their overall pace of development.

Another prevailing note in village is illiteracy of people for they are unaware with their fundamental needs and rights. Owing to poverty and illiteracy, unemployment has become a problem in rural areas.

There is a dire need to develop such programmes for rural development, which involve activities in agriculture, health and nutrition, family planning, community development literacy, public works and related fields designed to improve production and living standards of rural poor. In order to make distance education, programmes successful and effective especially for rural people, there is a need to be sure that various problems involved in the use of distance education are resolved. Distance education courses have to develop a high degree of competitiveness efficiency and resilience in order to meet these challenges. One has to recognize that it is the national policy on education to have alternative strategies for the acquisition of knowledge. As one of these alternatives, distance education must learn to stand on its own legs without any external help.

ii) *Social Change*

Education is a key factor in economic development and social change. It determines the level of prosperity welfare and security of the people. Distance education being a part of the development system must make something of a system out of existing distance education programmes without losing the established virtues of flexibility and relevance to the needs of the mainly target population. Koshy T. A. (1978, p.84) has rightly pointed out:

“Included in this view of education is a variety of human learning needs, such as the acquisition of occupations and household skills, the assimilation and successful utilization of information on nutrition, sanitation material, child care, health care, family planning, small farm management, housing improvement, the cultivation of vegetables and fruits on family plots of lands and the basic everyday consumer economics. It also includes the formation of new attitude, values and aspirations and the building of an informed, active citizenry where each member is concerned with his own individual well being of his neighbors and of his environment. This view of education and learning is focused on human being; its intentions are to help an individual find ways of articulation his needs and those of his community mobilization resources to meet these needs and taking appropriate action.”

Formal education is inadequate to reach the entire population and inappropriate to the needs of rural Pakistan. A carefully planned programme of distance education can fulfill this need. It can resolve the problems of rural poor. Most of the Europeans and Western countries have given attention to the study of rural development, but so far Pakistan has not made any organized concrete and solid efforts to resolve the problems involved in the way of rural development. A commission is needed to be established and the members of this commission should comprise educationists, psychologists, agriculturists and scientists.

iii) ***Financing***

Financing of distance education is a very significant issue. Distance education can in certain situations be more cost effective than traditional education i.e. in terms of cost per set but only when less costs are accompanied by effective consequences. Since the cost of education through distance mode is less as compared to formal system, there is a need to allocate more resources to this mode to meet the growing demands of higher education. Singh, B. (2000, p.22) while discussing cost of education says “In view of the comparatively low cost of educating students through the distance mode its utility for large scale application, the need for qualitative improvement and innovations to make education relevant to the needs of society and the nation, need for diversification of education towards vocational, technical, professional ... government should adopt a liberal policy for funding the flexible and innovative system of distance education”. It must, therefore, review as a long-term investment in a country future. The government should subsidize the Open University for providing education to masses at large.

iv) *Equity Issues*

The distance education has not proved successful in strengthening equity in education i.e. take education to the door steps of those who are known as the sure adults women and employed in the unorganized sector and at lower range of personnel in the organized sector of industry and government. Goel, A (2000, p.53) discusses the discrimination with the product of the Distance Education Departments. He says "It has been seen in the university and outside that the products of Distance Education are not equated with the products of traditional system inspite of their better achievement in the same examination. Why is it so? This needs to be examined and discouraged".

There is a dire need of attention to skill up-gradation, continuing education. Vocational programmes and unconventional courses leading to certification. Thus, relevance of distance is not beyond.

v) *Obtaining Appropriate Material*

A course is more than study material. It can be considered a process of intellectual interaction of students, tutors and course teams based on the course material produced at university. Goal, A. (2000 p.64) while highlighting the importance of study material in distance education mentions "the quality of distance education depends essentially upon the quality and quantity of instructional material provided to the learners in regular timely installments. The most important input in the distance education system is the course material since more than half of the students depend mainly in printed material."

Getting of material is difficult and for achieving this end a trained staff is required to write distance education material. This problem can be solved by getting reference material from library and academic staff and good writers can be identified through advertisement in the media.

vi) *Maintenance And Security*

The maintenance and security of material used in distance education has great significance. Materials are of various kinds, including printed material, hardware and software. The institution should take care about the storage of printed material, security, storage and maintenance of media equipments. Proper warehouse is needed to store it and to protect from fire, dust, etc. However, the other material needs accurate selection installation and storage, Rashid, M. (2001 p.361) gives the solution to this problem. He says, "complete centralization of equipment is an attractive solution to this service need and one which is adopted by many colleges".

PROBLEMS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Problem is difficult matter or situation or the gap between actual situation and desired situation. The following are the problems of distance mode of education.

i) *Delivery System*

In the system of distance education there is a problem of delivery system. Normally the printed material is mailed to student by the mailing department of institution. On the other hand, mailing is also computerized for having address slips and through e-mail particularly in the developed countries. In Pakistan, Allama Iqbal Open University is sending material to its students through the post. Unfortunately postal services in Pakistan are very slow and unreliable and there is every likelihood that correspondence units are at times dispatched to wrong person or student get mail quite late. Rashid, M. (2001, p.362) gives recommendations for improvement of delivery system:

- 1) "Publishing a separate educational supplement and delivery to students through the government, newspaper agencies that exist all over the country."
- 2) Distribution of material to the inspectors of schools office.
- 3) Coordination between government postal authorities for delivery of correspondence material.
- 4) Operation of late services for rapid disposal of correspondence material by facilitating with casual workers to complete the task on time."

ii) *Availability Of Trained Staff*

Any institution imparting education and training through its distance education approach, which is quite distinct formal system needs special type of trained staff. Such staff like writers, course designers, coordinators, reviewers, etc. to prepare distance education material including textbooks, study guides, assignments and radio T.V. support in a manner, that they are largely self-explaining. According to Rashid, M. (2001, p.364), "problems of getting trained staff can be solved by providing in-service training to academicians in major aspects of distance education and development of research cell solve this problem".

iii) *Evaluation*

Evaluation highlights the deficiency of the programme. Lauffer (1978, p.39) points out:

“Student evaluation in distance education should provide diagnostic information and continuous feedback so that students can identify their problems against an agreed upon level of knowledge or skill. So student evaluation becomes partially way of improving not just measuring learning”

In the system of distance education, evaluation is a must. It is necessary that evaluation should be done internally and externally. Both internal assessment and final examination exist in distance education system. Internal assessment consists of periodical assignments. It is no wonder that it is not working well in distance system. Either it is due to failure on the part of students to submit the assignments or it is due to the lapses on the part of tutors to evaluate and correct them.

In this way there are a lot of problems in external evaluation of distance education. Problems of management are high in distance education. It can serve their purpose, if item included in them are carefully formulated. Assignments need special attention and careful preparation.

iv) **ACCESS**

The main objective of the distance education institutions is to provide education to all at their doorstep, especially to those who could not get access to the formal education system. Easy access and equal opportunities to education for all, there are some factors to be taken into account to increase opportunities for access of all potential students. There are:

- Geographical coverage.
- Ease of access to the media used to deliver the programme
- Level of awareness of distance education programmes among the masses in general and potential students in particular.
- Level of awareness of employers both in public and private sectors that might sponsor students to take appropriate courses.

v) ***Relationship between the Programmes of Distance Education and Needs of the Labour Market, etc.***

Through distance education a variety of programmes of study including academic technical, vocational and functional courses each serving distinct. Some of the institutions have closely linked community-based education set out to meet the local needs. Some serve company needs for on-the-job training to attract employers to sponsor their employees to take courses of these institutions. However, it is not easy to identify needs of individuals and

community as a whole and to evaluate whether or not they are being met satisfactorily. To assess or evaluate these factors very comprehensive study is required to be carried out, because it is fact that there is a need for adequate market research to identify potential level of demand for the supply of educated / trained manpower.

vi) ***Quality of the Programme***

The quality of the programmes can be judged by a number of ways. One way is to assess the quality of material or content. The other way is to check the level of ease or likelihood of the material being used successfully by the students. Many studies have been conducted on the practical problems of using multimedia distance education material. Rumble (1986, p.209) suggests:

Even before a course is presented, the material can be evaluated in a number of ways through expert appraisal by content specialists, educational technologists and so on, and through developmental testing. Subsequently the course can be evaluated using informal feedback from tutors and students."

The need is to emphasize the quality of educational experience. Some critics of the distance education are of the opinion that distance education hardly provides any education experience. For example, Niazi, H. K. (2000, p.973) argued that:

"Much of the value of a university education is captured in its socialization content and that this cannot be provided into distance teaching university."

The quality of programmes may also be reflected through the quality of student's achievement and their recognition in society.

vii) ***Graduate Outcomes***

All distance education programmes have an objective to impart standard education to their student's to obtain a degree, diploma or certificate. Regarding the learner outcomes it is important to note the output-input ratio, which measures the graduates as a proportion of the number of students entering a course or programme. Some of the distance education institution accepts students with regular qualification. While some adopted an open admission policy and accept both qualified and unqualified students. These policies raise a question of quality of output and input.

Judgment of the success of distance education is reflected through the success of individual's labour market. This may lead other institution to modify and develop educational programmes and launch them on the pattern of distance education.

viii) *Socialization of Students*

Critics of distance education comment that students of distance education are not provided with enough opportunities of socialization due to deficiency of a face-to-face contact, which are distinctive characteristics of conventional universities. Although tutorial support and group training workshops cover these problems to some extent but the question of socialization is still open to question.

CONCLUSION

Distance education plays complimentary, supplementary as well as an independent role. It provides education to diversified target groups eliminating the class disparity. Rural population is the beneficent target population from distance education but there is a need of careful planning and monitoring when compared to formal education. The distance education is more cost effective. Initially, in Pakistan degrees obtained through Open learning mode were not being considered at par with the degrees obtained from conventional universities. Various research studies reveal that students of distance education are badly effected by delivery system. One of the major reason is remote and far-flung areas where the instructional material is to be mailed. Another important problem is availability of trained staff. Generally the personnel involved in distance education have got education through formal mode of education. As a result they are not fully aware of the philosophy of distance education. In this way quality of education is being compromised. As a result the compatibility with formal mode is questioned. In the country like Pakistan where Kabdeosapic culture occurs, the distance education mode deem fit but mode of education i.e. Educational Technology is to be based effectively.

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