

Research and Evaluation Centre*
A Helping Hand in Designing Systems
and Materials of AIOU

by

Masooda Chaudhry**

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) began operations at a time when there were no patterns or norms for a new distance education institution to follow. The British Open University was barely out of its infancy, and no other one existed to share experience with AIOU. Anyhow, it started foundation courses patterned after those of the Open University in UK. These courses, offered on a pilot basis proved to be a terrible flop because the level and value of the courses was not recognized by the potential clientele. These were immediately discontinued. At the same time, the University incorporated a language teaching institute, and found itself teaching post graduate programme in such foreign languages as English, Spanish, Persian, German and French. These courses were being delivered through face to face instructions though that gained popularity but went against the basic philosophy of distance learning. This experiment did not last long either, and the language institute shortly after affiliated with a conventional university.

These and a number of other examples of popular and unpopular attempts at offering courses, led to a felt need to establish a research centre in the University.

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**The writer is Associate Editor of PJDE, and currently working as Incharge, Research and Evaluation Centre, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad.

Among other things, it was felt that a research centre could help in devising and directing the development of the systems and academic courses of the new open learning institution. Thus, the Research and Evaluation Centre (REC) was founded.*

After having a look at the brief resume of REC, the reader will have gotten an idea of the objectives and the activities of the Centre, but even so, there is much more to the story.

Since its inception, the REC has been involved in institutional research. This has included needs assessments, marketing, feasibility and economic viability of courses. Course development activities have included pre-testing and post testing of course materials, mid and end of course evaluations, and formative and summative programme evaluation. REC is also responsible for compilation and dissemination of all statistical and quantitative achievements as well as the personal profiles of the learners of AIOU.

The products and publications of REC might be good, bad or indifferent, but, nobody can doubt the Centre's sincere efforts to work for improvement for both the students and the organization as well. Following are some of the contributions of this Centre.

At an early stage, during the conduct of a field-survey, the research team observed that a large number of students felt themselves stranded or isolated. Some of them also indicated a big question mark regarding how and to whom they could register a volley of complaints which must be redressed, otherwise they intended to drop their studies with the Open University. In its report, the REC strongly recommended that there be a students' advisory and counselling cell on the main campus and in the

*For further detail, brief resume on the Centre could be seen in last pages which was also distributed among the participants prior to its presentation just to have an acquaintance with the Centre and its activities and achievements.

Regional Offices as well. It was envisioned that this cell could arrange frequent extra-curriculum activities and functions like quiz programmes, competition, musical concerts, etc., in addition to attending to students' complaints.

The subsequent establishment of a unit based on that idea has proven to be a great help in minimizing the drop out rate and lessening the ambiguity the student feels about the programmes, courses, and the distance education system. It appears that once the student becomes thoroughly acquainted with the system, and clearly understands it, they find that the system suits them very well, and will not discontinue their studies.

The year the University should have been enjoying her "sweet sixteen" was actually the year of her largest deficit. REC was instrumental in identifying courses with low enrolment or otherwise not cost effective through a study on the costing of 350 courses. (See REC Brief Resume: Sr.No.20 under completed Research Publications) This was done in consultation with course managers, heads of departments, and the deans of the faculties. The result was a plan to temporarily withdraw courses for one or two semesters until demand would build up again. At the same time, writing on some of the core courses of B.Ed programme had been stopped due to deficit. REC strongly recommended that those courses have to be offered because of students' interest and demand.

Another plan proposed by the Treasurer and the Planners was to increase tuition fees to balance the deficit. Because of the evidence REC had from the students' profiles of the low financial status of the majority of the students, it was able to present a strong justification against such a move and the suggestion for a large increase in tuition fees was not acted upon.

In the early periods of the University, the admission forms were provided to the students free of cost. Concerns about the costs of printing, and other abuses such as local persons "grabbing" all of the avail-

able forms in a locality and selling them for personal profit, led to a recommendation of pricing the forms. However, the course planners and coordinators were afraid that the price might cause a decrease in enrollment. The then Vice Chancellor directed REC to prepare a snap study. (See Brief Resume: Sr.No.3) Based on the findings of the study, REC recommended nominal charges in the beginning with a gradual increase in subsequent years. The action was taken with no negative impact on the enrollment; rather, it has been increasing in each and every semester.

It is interesting to note that sometimes something which seems unimportant can have significant impact in the long run. This decision to charge a small fee for the admission forms appeared to be insignificant in its nature at the time of its inception. But, with the large increase enrollment since that decision was taken, special help for extra bankshifts is now needed at the beginning of each semester to maintain the accounts of selling the admission forms.

In another survey, respondents had a favourable opinion about the television programmes supporting their studies. Although television has been proven as an expensive media component for the courses, REC recommended more television programmes. The Finance and Planning Committee provided their support for an increase in the television components on the condition that the programmes must help the students in enhancing their comprehension of the contents given in the textbooks and activity books for certain courses.

I do not claim that the report (See REC Brief Resume: under completed Research Publications Sr.Nos. 1 & 2) we have produced is a good one. But some important changes in policy of the mailing system were brought which were based on the feedback we have received from the students. Before, conducting this study, every writing assignment used to be sent to the students follo-

wing each other month. Majority of the students desired to get all the assignments together as one package. So, an immediate action was taken hence, and this saved a lot of labour and expenses on the benefit of the University, and on the other hand the recipients felt a relief from anxiety and the long wait for the next one.

During another field survey regarding dropouts of AIOU courses, the research team discovered that for many students, the transmission distance from the radio broadcasting transmitters led to muffled voices which were not audible. The radio programmes were thus of no use for them. This finding of REC led to the use of local radio stations for broadcast instead of FM Islamabad.

There are those who might view REC as having little or no relationship in designing course materials. Honestly speaking, it is a fact that REC doesn't write or design for the learners. But, it is doing much more as a supporter of the course designers and system planners. From the beginning to date, the Centre has been providing feedback on everything from the petty issues to the most crucial ones. The REC not only aids the course designers, but also looks into other activities or services relating to course delivery and success. For example, the best text-book, if it does not reach to the students in time, is of no use. Similarly, it is again of no use if it does reach to the students well in time, but is full of rubbish, unclear concepts and poor presentation. So the scope of REC's vision includes the whole of the procedures of the University throughout each semester through intensive and extensive monitoring and evaluation. (Pl. see REC Brief Resume: under On Going Research Studies; S.No.12).

1995 is marked as AIOU's 20th anniversary year. Frankly speaking, twenty years are more than enough to devise a system and expand programmes. The University which started with 904 course enrolments, has now reached three hundred and fifty thousand course enrollment. But the University should not be contented merely with quan-

titative growth alone. The aim of AIOU is to offer educational programmes of quality to even a larger number of people. To achieve this objective, it is necessary that courses are constantly evaluated including the media inputs and, where necessary, revised in the light of REC findings. It is with this purpose in view that recently the REC has undertaken another project (Pl. see REC Brief Resume Sr.No.13) to analyse 100 selected courses of the Intermediate and B.A. levels. REC has investigated statistics of these sampled courses covering course enrollment, course pass rates, dropout rates, overall completers and certificate holders from the first presentation to date. The second part of this study will determine the extent to which the system of AIOU is effective, and student satisfaction with the quality of textbooks, writing assignments, media and tutorial support, the conduct of examinations, and the timely declaration of results. REC has already administered 12000 questionnaires to sample students and 750 to the tutors for their feedback and has completed also face to face interviews with sub-sample throughout the country.

So far as the subject matter or contents given in the majority of the text books are concerned, students, tutors and also other users have high opinion about them. They say that the subject matter in those textbooks is informative and also meets the contemporary needs in all respects. However, the way it is being presented/printed, they do not find it attractive.

REC has serious concerns about the poor quality of printing generally done on course books, and the even worse quality of designing and printing of illustrations, graphs, charts and pictures. Another concern is the poor quality of writing assignments and non-availability of feedback from the tutors on these assignments.

The last one can be improved by restarting the monitoring of the tutor-marked assignments which was done for several years but was discontinued for a variety of

reasons.¹ However, the other three areas of inadequacy could be improved only by the course team, designers and the printer. These improvements cannot be ensured without the wholehearted support of the academicians.

While discussing improvement of AIOU, it is worth mentioning that among the academicians at AIOU there appear to be two extremes. First are those who believe in perfectionism. They request evaluations by REC in each and every semester even though they have already improved substantially as a result of REC feedback. The second group consists of those who need improvement, but take the attitude that REC should not poke it's nose in their academic affairs! REC is continually in the middle trying to balance both groups...but one can't please everyone all of the time.

Course content and overall academic quality has been another issue under discussion in recent years. In previous years there were hundreds of courses in the pipeline, and frequently the work was rushed and done "willy nilly" in order to get them through the various formalities and hurdles, and delivered to the students by the promised semester. This was necessary at the time perhaps, but has resulted in very uneven quality across

¹ The system of monitoring was initially expected to serve purposes. Evaluate tutors, give them further training in how to teach through distance correspondence, and provide feedback to the course teams. It seems to have withered on the vine, so to speak, for a complexity of reasons. The major one is that the course team leaders did not have time to monitor 100s perhaps 1000s of assignments for multiple courses each semester as the enrollment exploded, as well as to supervise the heavy load of course production during those years. In addition, there was a lack of interest all around. The regions were burdened trying to gather the assignments from the tutors, and then returning them to the students, etc., and felt frustration when no response from campus came on those which were sent.

the courses. Weaknesses in the course materials and in their presentation might have acceptably or expediently been ignored due to limitations at that stage. Now, however, with the target number of courses produced, it is appropriate that AIOU takes wise decisions and timely actions to revise and improve the courses because it has the time, resources and expertise to do so.

While the importance of multi-media to distance learning cannot be ignored, not all of AIOU's target learners enjoy the facilities needed for that support. In this context, the only instructional aid which is *text or printed material*. Therefore, it must be improved in all respects. Course-quality-improvement represents a responsibility and challenge for REC as well as the academic staff of the University.

A substantial proportion of AIOU students are living in remote areas where they do not have any possibility to attend the conventional institutions. They don't have any other choice except AIOU. As such, this institution of much significance seems to be their solitary hope, thus it should not disappoint them at all.