

# SHORT TERM EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES OF AIOU: WHAT DO THE STUDENTS THINK?

By

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*This research article is based on a study of the feedback from students of the Short Term Educational Programmes (STEPS) of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). The author conducted this study in 1999, while she was working as coordinator of STEPS. The article presents a brief introduction of the programme, objectives and methodology of the study. It even presents students' viewpoint about the utility of the programme and their suggestion for the improvement of the courses as well as improvement in the management of the short-term courses. In the end the author presents conclusions and recommendations.*

## **Introduction**

Short Term Educational Programmes launched by Allama Iqbal Open University in 1996, provides a more flexible scheme of study to people. Although, the University caters to the needs of thousands students with semester bound courses, a number of people still cannot take advantage of University's flexible method of study. The principal reason is **time**. It takes more than a year to complete any programme of the University; therefore many people do not take admission because it takes too long. The University has devised a system of study through offering short-term courses for those who wish to seek knowledge and improve their capabilities in a short period of time.

Short Term Education Programmes offers seventy-eight courses in five groups i.e., Management Sciences, Social Sciences, Community Education, Secondary Education Media Tuition and Hotel Services. Anyone who has interest in any of the courses can join the programme. Admission is not semester bound and is open throughout the year. The minimum duration of the programme is three month, however, the student can take longer time. The students can take admission in more than one course at a time. The study package includes learning material and evaluation paper. A feedback form is sent to the students to gain their opinion on the quality of the courses and the programme as well. On the basis of the result of the evaluation paper a certificate is awarded to students. The programme is being offered for six years now. At the time the study was conducted, more than six thousand students had benefitted from the programme and about three thousand certificate had been awarded.

## **Objectives and Methodology of the feedback study**

The study was conducted with the following objectives:

- ◆ To find out students perception about the quality of the course contents and presentation to improve the quality of courses.

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- ◆ To collect students' opinion and suggestions about the management of the programme in order to improve the quality of services to students.
- ◆ To identify the problem that the students encounter during the course of their study.
- ◆ To find out how the certificate has benefited the students.
- ◆ To collect students' suggestion about the possible new courses that can be offered in future.

The feedback form that has been used for the study contains eight closed questions. Students' comments and suggestions about the programme are invited in the end. The student gives the comments and suggestion in this section; therefore, this section provided most of the information for this study. Feedback form of all students who completed their evaluation papers, were included in this study. Almost all students answered the eight questions asked in the first part, but only four hundred and seventy (470) students gave their comments and suggestions. Therefore, only the evaluation papers (470) with comments and suggestion were included in the study.

The selected forms were group-wise sorted out and the responses were tabulated with the help of the computer. Following table shows the number of the evaluation group wise:

Course Groups	No. of forms
Management Sciences	276
Social Sciences	101
Community Education	87
Secondary Education Media Tuition	6
Total	470

Management Sciences Courses are the most popular courses with a high rate of return of the evaluation papers. Secondary Education Media Tuition courses apparently does not show a good response but as a matter of fact, the courses are based on the video tapes of formal school syllabus, therefore, the students take admission and study the courses but do not seem interested in acquiring the certificate. In the following paragraphs, this article will deal with the findings of the study:

### **The Programme**

The programme clearly meets the needs of the students. One of the students said:

*I really appreciate Short Term Educational Programmes of Allama Iqbal Open University. The programme is very helpful to me. I am a banker and I have no time for study in a formal institution. AIOU satisfy my desire to study at home. The system is very for those who want to improve their knowledge.*

*Iqbal, Peshawar*

The students found the programme and its courses a source of enhancement in their potentials and knowledge. They say:

*The courses under STEPs are no doubt a source of enhancement in one's potentials. I really believe that it is the best way to have better know-how of the modern*

*methods of study. It is a great opportunity for me to learn.*

*Kashif, Gujanwala*

*In my view, this is an excellent programme offered by the University. It helps students in increasing their knowledge in the field of their interest in a very short time. Short Term educational Programmes should continue.*

*Saadia, Karachi*

The programme is not beneficial to students only in terms of self-development (39% of the students answered in affirmative and for 52% of the students it helped to some extent), but it is a source of professional development for many employed students. About 33% of the total students understudy said that the courses actually helped in the professional development in terms of knowledge, promotion and financial benefits.

The utility of any educational programme to the students accentuates when it is offered and implemented in a way that causes minimum concerns to the students. In the case of STEPS, the students expressed their concern and opinion about the administration of the programme. According to the students the programme was generally managed well, but many students were confronted with the problem of delayed mailing of course material and issuance of certificates and the students suggested that mailing of materials and certificate may be improved. Only 9 students complained that their letters were not answered. Regarding the dispatch of the certificate, the students recommended that the certificate should be sent in a special envelope.

The study showed that the major source of information of the students about the programme was newspaper. The students were asked about the source of information of the programme, 355 out of the total 470 students came to know about the programme through the newspapers. About sixty students follow their friend and took admission in the programme. Poster was another source of information and about 23 students reported to have seen the poster displayed and approached the program for admission. The programme attracted more people because it was publicized heavily in the newspapers. But after a year of launching the publicity of the programme came to almost none (only advertised twice a year with admission announcement of the other programmes of the university), which noticeably reduced enrollment in the programme. This clearly indicates that there is a need for more publicity of the programme. The newspaper seems to be the most effective media of the publicity and advertising. However, a few students also suggested publicity of the programme through television to reach wider clientele. A comprehensive publicity plan for the programme will contribute to attract more people resulting in the increased enrolment in the programme.

### **The Courses**

The students wanted the programme to offer wide variety of courses for the interest of larger group of people. Due to in-built flexibility of the programme, there is a lot of potential for the expansion in terms of courses. Many students suggested that the programme should offer diploma in several courses.

About the quality of the courses, the students understudy commented on both the printing quality and the quality of the contents. According to them there were several spelling mistakes and editing error in the course books as well as in allied materials and suggested that the quality of editing and printing should be improved. When asked about the quality of course contents, 330 liked the contents but insisted that course contents may be updated and new information may be included in the contents. Only ten (10) students reported that course contents were unsatisfactory. The quality of contents of evaluation papers of different subjects was another area where students showed great concern. About half of the total students understudy rated the standard of evaluation paper as good and almost the same number of the students thought that quality of the evaluation paper in terms of contents was unsatisfactory. They suggested that evaluation papers may be revised both in terms of contents and editing/printing.

For overall implementation of the courses, the students suggested the following:

- ◆ Course materials may be provided in regional offices to save time for mailing.
- ◆ Course Coordinators' address may be provided to the students for further guidance in course materials.
- ◆ Evaluation papers may be sent back to students after marking. It will help students improve their learning and writing style.

The student identified many areas in which new courses could be developed and offered in STEPS. Following are the areas suggested by the students:

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|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ◆ Textile Designing                 | ◆ Professional Computer Courses     |
| ◆ Home Management                   | ◆ Information Technology            |
| ◆ Civic Education                   | ◆ Textile Designing                 |
| ◆ Personnel Supervisor Development  | ◆ Home Management                   |
| ◆ Factory Administration            | ◆ Civic Education                   |
| ◆ Employees Management              | ◆ Personnel Supervisor Development  |
| ◆ Teaching Methodology              | ◆ Factory Administration            |
| ◆ Civil Aviation                    | ◆ Employees Management              |
| ◆ Environment                       | ◆ Teaching Methodology              |
| ◆ Forestry                          | ◆ Civil Aviation                    |
| ◆ Rural and Urban Planning          | ◆ Environment                       |
| ◆ Quality Control Management        | ◆ Forestry                          |
| ◆ Education                         | ◆ Rural and Urban Planning          |
| ◆ Education Planning and Management | ◆ Quality Control Management        |
| ◆ International Relations           | ◆ Education                         |
| ◆ Public Administration             | ◆ Education Planning and Management |
| ◆ Veterinary Sciences               | ◆ Health Sanitation                 |
| ◆ Economics                         | ◆ Engineering                       |
| ◆ Mind Development Techniques       | ◆ Fitness Exercise                  |
| ◆ Physical Education                | ◆ Child Labor in Pakistan           |
| ◆ Medical Courses                   | ◆ Local Self Government             |

- ◆ Office Automation
- ◆ Home Economics
- ◆ Sociology

- ◆ Industrial Relation Management

In addition to comments and suggestions on the overall programmes and courses, the students expressed their opinion about individual sections of the programme. The following paragraphs deal with section wise analysis of the programmes.

### Management Sciences

Short Term Educational Programmes offer twenty-two courses under this section. Management Science courses are the most popular among the students. There is a higher rate of return of evaluation paper for these courses, that is why, more evaluation papers with comments and suggestion were included in the study. The students gave many useful suggestions for the programme as well as suggested possible new courses that can be offered under this section. Majority of the students regarded management courses very practical. One of the students commented,

*Management Sciences programme is a success and standard of materials is excellent and thought provoking.*

Many of the students were of the opinion that these courses may be offered as credit courses because without credit their utility reduces. The students suggested that management courses should be offered as diploma, for example, Diploma in Marketing, Diploma in Export Management, Diploma in Accounting and Diploma in Logistics. They also stressed on the need of practical work, workshops and seminar for these courses. Many students demanded that tutorial support should also be provided for these courses.

To assure the quality and authenticity of the courses a few students suggested examination for these courses. The students also suggested that management courses might be supplemented with audio and TV programmes. The students suggested following new courses for management section:

2. Personnel Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Industrial Psychology</li> <li>◆ Human Resource Development</li> <li>◆ Marketing Management</li> <li>◆ Civil Aviation</li> <li>◆ Accounting</li> <li>◆ Strategic Management</li> <li>◆ International Management</li> <li>◆ How Stock market Works</li> <li>◆ Banking</li> <li>◆ ISO 9000 with Video</li> </ul>	Money management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Credit and Finance</li> <li>◆ Banking Operation</li> <li>◆ Export Documentation</li> <li>◆ Leadership</li> <li>◆ Hospital Management</li> <li>◆ Strategic Planning</li> <li>◆ Quality control and Management</li> <li>◆ Hotel management</li> </ul>
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The students provided feedback on all management science courses (please see the study available in IME) in terms of contents, presentation and evaluation. For most of the courses, the students suggested that the contents of the management science courses

might be revised to include new knowledge, case studies and a Pakistani context especially for the courses of export management. The students suggested that the programme should provide a list of reference books with all courses so that they can gain additional information and knowledge. Spelling errors and language mistakes came up as a common problem in all management science courses and evaluation papers which students demanded should be rectified. The students also recommended that subjective questions in evaluation papers might be replaced by objective question. They were of the opinion that objective questions will test the knowledge more than the subjective questions and will also save their time.

### **Social Sciences**

Under Social Sciences twenty different courses are being offered. Among these a few courses are very popular such as advertising, public relations, common health problems and their prevention, bee keeping, tree plantation, and journalism. The other courses attract only a small number of students. The students gave their opinion and many suggestions about the above-mentioned courses. The common suggestions were:

3. The printing, layout, editing of the courses may be improved.
4. The contents may be updated.
5. The evaluations papers may contain objective type questions
6. More illustrations and media support may be provided with the courses.

They students suggested a few more advance courses in Health such as Rheumatology, Neurology, Psychology, Surgery, Eye, Community Medicine and Mental Disorders.

### **Community Education**

Community Education section of STEPS comprises of eight courses which are generally popular among women. The students liked the courses and suggested that more topics may be added to these courses. Many of the students thought that audio and video support with these courses will help increase enrollment in theses courses. The students suggested that quality of printing; editing and layout of these courses may be improved.

### **Secondary Education Media Tuition**

Evaluation papers of only three courses i.e. English, Urdu and Pakistan studies contained evaluation form, therefore; students' feed back on the courses was included in the study. The students gave following suggestion for the improvement of the courses:

- ◆ Course book may be provided with videocassette.
- ◆ There is not enough space given for answers in evaluation paper.  
More space may be provided.
- ◆ Some parts of the videos are not clear. Quality videos may be provided to students.
- ◆ Courses do not cover the entire syllabus.

## **Conclusions**

The students clearly indicated that the programme was extremely helpful in self and professional development. In addition, it provided opportunity for improvement in knowledge to those who are already working and do not have time to study full-time. The students expressed a desire for continuity of the programme. The students wanted the program to offer a wide variety of courses for the interests of a larger audience. They recommended professional courses with high quality and extensive publicity of the programme, which can increase enrollment. There were some problems that students faced especially with regard to delivery of certificates and course materials and issuance of roll number and registration number, which need to be taken care of. The students in general appreciated existing courses of STEPS but suggested improvements in terms of contents, printing, layout and editing. The new courses suggested by the students can be a very useful addition to the programme.

## **Recommendations**

On the basis of the finding of the study, the author recommends the following:

- ◆ The delivery of study materials may be made more quick and efficient. In the publicity material. It has been promised that the package will be delivered within fifteen days of admission, therefore, the students expect it to reach them within promised period. The enrollment and mailing may be streamlined to solve students' problem.
- ◆ The evaluation paper may be sent directly to course-coordinator by the students and vice versa. It will not only reduce workload of STEPS staff but the students will get feedback on their evaluation papers.
- ◆ For all most every course the students have pointed out spelling mistakes, editing problems and missed contents. Therefore, the courses may be re-edited and printed. The print quality of all courses may also be improved by using fine paper and well-designed colored title pages.
- ◆ For course contents, the students require updating and more illustrations. A through revision of the courses is recommended.
- ◆ The feedback of students on individual courses may be communicated to course coordinators, so that they can revise the course on the basis of students, opinion.
- ◆ From the list of courses suggested by the students, a plan of development of new courses may be made and work on some selected courses may be started. Offering of new courses is essential at this point because saturation point of current courses will arrive soon and to attract old and potential students, more courses are needed.
- ◆ Evaluation papers of almost all courses require revision in terms of editing and length. It is recommended that pattern of

evaluation papers may be changed. Evaluation paper may consist of only or more objective type questions.

- ◆ There is a great need for publicity and advertising of the courses. In the initial days of the programme, extensive publicity resulted in more enrollments. Therefore, the courses may be heavily publicized through newspapers, Radio, TV, schools, and other AIOU sources.