

The Status and Possibilities of Professional Education Through Distance Mode

(An AIOU Experience)

By

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1. Background

Distance education is being increasingly recognized as the most viable system for responding to the multifarious educational/training needs of the teeming billions of people around the world. Obviously there is lot of scope of the application of distance education techniques for imparting professional education.

Before discussing the topic let us be clear about the term *professional education*. Profess means to know better than others the nature of certain matters and to know better than ones clients, whereas the word professional can be defined as the one who practices a profession, who is regarded as an expert in a specific field of learning and the one who seeks the mastery of the branch of learning upon which his occupation will be, or, is based.

Friedson (1970) classified an occupation as a profession in which some amount of higher education is made a pre-requisite for employment. The rationale behind this classification is that the formal knowledge creates qualification for a particular job.

Applying this definition to 1996-97 Pakistan Economic Survey figures produced an estimated total 150,696 thousand students (126, 840 thousands of male and 24,129 female) enrolled in 161 professional conventional colleges of Pakistan whereas enrolment in 35 conventional universities (including private sector universities which have been granted the charter by the Government) comes up to 71,819 thousands (53,863 thousands male and 17,956 thousands female). This includes the professional education for accountants, engineers, doc-

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tors, nurses, teachers, health technologists, computer professionals, managers, administrators and agricultural specialists etc.

Since the technicians, school teachers, legal, personal and computer assistants do not require higher education credentials, they are not generally included in the stream of professionals. However, the definition is quite fluid in nature and is followed with a lot of variations in different countries especially the developing ones.

Professional education is a life long process wherein the the professionals remain engaged in learning throughout their careers. Professional education is embraced through printed material (newspapers, books, journals, newsletters etc.), discussions on formal and informal forums, through formal and non-formal educational programmes and several others of this kind.

The professional education in Pakistan is of two types as in any other country. These two types include:-

- i) Consulting professional education, and
- ii) Scholarly professional education

The *Consulting Professional Education* caters for consulting professionals such as law, medicine, architecture and income tax professionals, on a face-for-service basis with an individual and personal relationship between client and professional. On the other hand, *Scholarly Professional Education* relates to others who are working as college and university teachers or scientific researchers and accountants. They usually serve either many clients at one time (students) or superiors in a corporation, enabling the professional to later work for a salary rather than on entrepreneur, who depend on attracting individual clients. Therefore, some of the post secondary school level technical and vocational education, middle, supervisory level technical education, commercial education and teacher education is also referred as scholarly professional education in distance educational system of Pakistan.

The foundation of professional education is the knowledge and its application whereas the essence of distance education relates to the provision of opportunities for uplift of the pre and in-service professionals and dissemination of latest knowledge with the help of multi-media. Therefore, the relationship between mastering by either of the educational modes and applying knowledge, formal or distance education and training (theory and practice) is very strong.

The main aim of the professional education through distance mode is to help the professionals to develop their ability to reflect in and on their own practice and to become critically aware of the evaluative frames within which their professional knowledge-in-action is embedded.

2. The Status of Professional Education Through Distance Mode at AIOU

Before we take up discussion on *Existing Status of Professional Education through Distance Mode*, it seems appropriate to say few words about the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) Islamabad.

The AIOU is the first national level institution of distance education in Pakistan. It was established in 1974 under an Act of the Parliament. Main objectives of AIOU include:

- (a) To provide educational facilities to people who cannot leave their homes and jobs in such manner as it may determine.
- (b) To provide such facilities to masses for their educational uplift as it may determine.
- (c) To provide facilities for the training of teachers in such manner as it may determine.
- (d) To provide instruction in such branches of learning technology or vocations as it may deem fit, and to make provision for research and for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge in such manner as it may determine.

Main campus of the AIOU is in Islamabad. University has got about 32 different regional centers/sub-centers and 923 study centers throughout the country which are providing a very strong net work for reaching its target groups who, for one reason or the other, did not have any access to education. Nearly 6,717 part time tutors are appointed in every semester for providing face to face guidance.

The University in a short span of 23 years has produced a number of professional courses in the fields of health, teacher training, special education, BBA, MBA and languages. There has been a continuous increase in professional education programme/course offerings. The present number of professional educa-

tion programmes is 30 (see Annex-A). The number of professional courses presently being offered is 466 per semester. The total course enrolment in professional courses during 1997 remained 41,5390 out of the total course enrolment of 64,8996 (64%) of the total enrolment (Annex-A). Roughly 35% of these students are female. This number fluctuates between 35-40% in various semesters. The percentage of female population in teacher training courses has gone up as high as 51%. Most of the professional programmes of the AIOU are scholarly professional educational type programmes. At the moment, none of the programmes of the AIOU can claim as purely consultancy professional programme. Programmes like BBA, MBA, Bachelor's of Computer Sciences (BCS), B.A Computer Application, computer maintenance, B.Sc. Primary Eye Care and Teacher Training programmes are all scholarly professional education programmes of the AIOU.

3. Teaching System, Methods and Media Used for Professional Courses

The professional courses of AIOU mainly rely on print media. However, additional support is provided with non-broadcast audio or video programmes. Since the number of enrolled students in professional courses generally is less than 1,000 per semester broadcast media programmes if prepared and presented, the courses do not remain cost effective.

The main components of study package include:-

- (i) **Correspondence:** Study material (print or photocopies) including self-learning study package, supplementary study material, readers, text books, study guides, field activity books comprising structured activities.
- (ii) **Hands on training (Practicals) Instructions:** Step by step instructions are provided to students and tutors for carrying out practical activities and for hands on training in various professional institutes like banks, hotels, hospitals, schools etc. Generally 65 to 75 hours of practical work is carried out per semester per course.
- (iii) **Broadcast media:** Mainly radio is used to give additional support to professional courses. Radio programmes are generally based on the study material.
- (iv) **Non-broadcast media:** It includes audio and video programmes. Some of the professional courses have video programme support

and whereas generally audio is used. These audio programmes are mailed to the students and are part of the study packages. However, video cassettes are provided to the tutors in study centers where viewing sessions are held after the tutorials.

- (v) **Group Training Workshops:** These are meant for advance level professional courses/programmes. These group training workshops are arranged, generally at M.A/M.Sc., M.Phil and diploma level as well as for teachers education courses at PTC, CT, B.Ed. M.A, M.Ed. and M.Phil levels.
- (vi) **Internships:** Short and long term internship for various courses are arranged for the students at various institutions/organizations of national repute. These include industrial/business/commercial courses in BBA and MBA programmes. Similarly placements for internships are provided for Eye Care students at opticians workshops/ophthalmology departments etc.
- (vii) **Course Assignments:** Course assignments is an instrument of higher instruction just like any other educational programme. Students enrolled in professional education courses of AIOU complete their assignments (4 for full credit and 2 for half credit) and submit them to their tutors according to schedule programme just like any other student enrolled in general education programme. Continuous assessment, feedback and general guidance is carried out by tutor.

4. **Future Possibilities of Professional Courses at AIOU**

In view of the status of Pakistan as developing country, the AIOU has a great scope for promoting the cause of professional education in Pakistan. A brief account of future possibilities of professional courses through distance education mode is briefly described as under:

1 **Launching of New Courses**

The AIOU has already made a head way in developing courses for M.Sc./M.A., M.Phil. and Ph.D level programmes in different disciplines especially Education, Islamiat, Iqbaliat, and Arabic. Since the AIOU is already offering M.Phil level programmes in these

fields, Ph.D offering would also be made in these disciplines in the very near future. In addition to that the AIOU is also going to launch F.Sc. Pre-medical and Pre-engineering programmes, M.Sc. Agriculture Extension, M.Sc. Livestock Management, M.Sc. Physics programme in the various disciplines of Basic and Applied Sciences.

The AIOU also plans to develop and launch M.Sc. programme in areas including Environmental Studies, Chemistry and Biology. Law is still another area which the AIOU is also planning to develop and launch programmes at Graduate and Master's levels. M.Phil. in Home Sciences is also at preparatory stage.

2 Strengthening of Media Input

In view of the specific requirements of professional courses, the AIOU is quite conscious of the importance of media input at this level. Consequently, the AIOU has to strengthen the regional campuses and equipped them with latest audio/video operatus which will be used by the future need of the students in these areas.

3 Strengthening of Tutorial Services

The role of tutorial services cannot be over-emphasized in imparting professional education to the masses. Consequently, the AIOU has planned to further strengthen the tutorial services in a number of ways. Computerized data bank is being developed for tutors with their educational backgrounds and specializations so that the most appropriate person may be picked-up and appointed as tutor for the relevant professional course.

4 Wide Area Networking (WAN) and Local Area Networking (LAN)

The facilities of Local Area Networking has already been provided to its user departments at the Head Office. Efforts have to be made to connect the Regional Campuses with the Computer centre at the Head Office for immediate exchange of information and data related with tutors and students.

Collaboration with GOs and NGOs

The AIOU is gradually increasing the sphere of its collaboration with GOs and NGOs in different professional educational fields. This include Computer Science, Health Sciences, Fine Arts, and Agricultural Sciences etc. The AIOU will ensure the quality of available facilities with NGOs before entering into any collaboration with them. Collaboration with Petroman, teaching hospitals, technical and vocational institutes, agriculture extension institutions, Center for Nuclear Studies (CNS) Pakistan Institute of (PIEAS).

References:

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