

EFFECTIVENESS OF TUTORIAL SUPPORT PROVISION AT ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY

By
Prof. Dr. Muhammad Rashid*

Abstract

This research article briefs the system of Allama Iqbal Open University. Special emphasis is being laid on the role of tutorial support in which tutor is the key personnel who has to conduct the tutorials. Responsibilities of tutors are quantitatively discussed in the paper: Activity of tutors at AIOU; Tutor opinions on the purpose of tutorials at AIOU; Tutor rating of the purpose of tutorial support in AIOU; Tutor readiness to undertake specific types of tutorial activity, Tutorial processes identified by tutors as taking place at AIOU, student and; tutors satisfaction with tutorial provision. So, this study concludes that as a group the tutors seem to regard their most important role in providing academic support related to course contents offered by AIOU.

The Allama Iqbal Open University is organized along lines similar to those of the British Open University. The headquarters is based at Islamabad, but there are 48 regional Offices/Regional Coordinating Office throughout the country. These regional offices coordinate the face-to-face tutorial provision of the AIOU and are also responsible for local administration, examinations and counseling. As far as possible, AIOU students utilize the facilities of local study centers. Apart from a regular staff in each regional office, the majority of teaching staff tutors are employed on a part time basis.

The AIOU course materials which are prepared and distributed to students consist of textual materials supported by audio cassettes and a limited number of video cassettes. Broadcast radio is regularly used, but at present there is only a very limited programme of broadcast television.

The AIOU enrolled one million students in 2000-2001 (AIOU, 2000). The student may take courses of their own choice subject to the fulfillment of required criteria. The courses range from Matric level to Ph.D level. In one semester, a student can take two credits courses.

* Dean, Faculty of Education, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad.

As in many distance education universities, face-to-face tuition is provided as an optional supplement to the distance learning materials through Holmberg (1981) points out that such personal contact can facilitate understanding. To this end, AIOU provides eight tutorials per semester for each course of study.

Purpose of the Study

Until recently (Rashid, M. 1999) no extensive study of the tutorial provision in AIOU had been undertaken. Since the AIOU is likely to be called upon to play an important role within the formal education system, it was deemed important to evaluate as fully as possible the elements which make up the teaching provision of the university.

In addition, much (but not all) of what has been published in relation to distance education in higher education (Faith, 1989; Keegan, 1986) has been based on studies of institutes in the developed world, notably Canada, Australia, Germany, Holland, the UK and the USA. This particular study relates specifically to the application of distance education in a developing country which also demonstrates unique geographical features which contribute to the problems to be overcome.

This paper seeks to identify the nature of the tutorial staff and examine their attitudes to tutorial provision within the AIOU, relating to the attitudes of AIOU students. The present study was conducted in one Regional Office of AIOU at Lahore.

The survey, conducted in late 1998 and early 1999, involved planning the distribution of questionnaires to four hundred tutors. Full details of questionnaires, the piloting procedures and the method of distribution and collection are described by the researcher. However, in short, tutors either completed their questionnaires at the end of a tutorial or had them collected by the author a few days later. In the end 1999 out of 400 tutors (72%) completed their questionnaires.

The Characteristics of the Tutors

The tutors surveyed were all employed on a part time basis and only ninety-five were female. Eighty four percent of all of the tutors were over 41 years of age, the rest being between 26 and 40. All tutors had, as a minimum, a BA degree or equivalent, but only 86% had a master's degree and a further 14% had a doctorate. However, the group as a whole were experienced in higher education in Pakistan with 79% were holding the rank of lecturer or above in other institutions. These 79% had more than 10 year's service in higher education.

Seventeen percent of the tutors had worked for AIOU for at least 3 – 4 years. The AIOU has therefore clearly set out to appoint mature, experienced tutors as the core of their part time staff. The question which arose was: 'How well could these experienced tutors (from a traditional environment) manage in a distance education institution?'

The Role of Tutor

From the work of Rashid, M. (1999) Thorpe (1998), Sewart (1983) Keegan (1986), and Jenkins (1981), it is evident that the role of a tutor in a distance education institution is different in many ways from that in a conventional institution. According to Rashid, M. (1998, P. 67) tutor is the main link between distance teaching institutions and their learners.

The researcher decided to examine two broad issues relating to tutor attitudes and behaviour in tutorials:

- (a) Tutor conceptions of the purpose of tutorials at AIOU.
- (b) Tutor conceptions of the tutorial processes.

(a) *The purpose of tutorials*

The main functions of the tutors at AIOU as pointed out by Rashid, M. (1998, p.87) are as under:

1. To solve learning difficulties of the learners.
2. To provide feedback to the learners regarding assignments, practically.
3. To establish cognitive support with the learners.
4. To organize instructions which will correspond to the pace of learning of the learner.
5. To organize activities leading to the environment of personality.
6. To identify and foster desirable personality traits.
7. To prepare tests and evaluate learners.
8. To organize remedial teaching.

However, each tutor was asked to describe the purpose of the tutoring work they did in the AIOU. This resulted in extensive open ended comments being given which were analyzed and classified into the following four aspects:

1. Tutoring which is clearly related to the academic problems of the students.
2. Tutoring which is oriented to general study skills.

3. The role of the tutor in dealing with general problems arising from students working within the overall distance education system.
4. The counseling role of the tutor.

As might be expected, several tutors preferred to work in more than one aspect, as such altogether the 400 tutors made 62 clearly identified points. These could be classified as shown in Table 1.

Table - 1
Activity of tutors at AIOU

Distance tutor activity	
Dealing with academic problems	26 (41.93%)
Dealing with study skills	11 (17.74%)
Dealing with general problems	18 (29.00%)
Counseling	7 (11.29%)

As a group the tutors, therefore, regard their most important role as providing academic support. However, 10 of the tutors did not mention this aspect at all, concentrating instead on the other aspects of tutorial work. The specific role of the distance education tutor has always involved a balance between the four roles identified above, but it appears that training provision for part time tutors within AIOU needs to clearly emphasize the complex role of the distance education tutors and to give special guidance in areas which are likely to assume importance in such a learning situation. Millard (1985) has identified the importance of tutor/counselors in supporting first year students in the British Open University and Rumble (1986) have emphasized the advantages to be gained from the tutor functioning as a student counselor as well as a subject tutor. It would perhaps be appropriate for the AIOU to formulate a clear policy in respect of tuition and counseling and their relationships within the tutorial programme.

The tutors were then asked to judge each of eleven factors as being legitimate aims of face to face and to assess the extent to which each relevant aim was being achieved by using the following key:

- A: This is not a purpose of tutorials
- B: This is a purpose but is only partly applied
- C: This is a purpose and is applied
- D: This is a purpose and is well applied.

The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table - 2
Tutor opinions on the purpose of tutorials at AIOU

Purpose	Response rate (%)			
	A	B	C	D
To establish a personal link	72	22	6	0
To provide an opportunity for student interaction	12	51	18	19
To provide practical experience	7	16	42	35
To help students to work with confidence when on their own	21	45	29	5
To provide a stimulus for written work	5	15	62	18
To encourage students to think independently	23	27	34	16
To form self-help groups	15	35	38	12
To develop students ability to solve their personal problems	42	30	15	13
To provide counseling services	15	16	35	4
To provide remedial support	26	30	27	17
To provide enrichment support	7	29	26	38

The greatest disagreements occurred in statement one (to establish a personal link between student and tutor) and statement eight (to help students to solve their personal problems). In responding in this manner the tutors were perhaps indicating a subconscious desire to distance themselves from their students and retain only subject related links. However, Dallos (1984, p. 113) emphasizes the importance of the tutor student relationship and suggests that for this to develop successfully there must be mutual understanding and acceptance. Rogers (1984), p. 365) also suggests that tutors should take responsibility for encouraging a warm, friendly atmosphere within tutorials and this is likely to come from a closer student tutor relationship than that which the AIOU tutors seem to want.

The responses to this somewhat complex question were then scored as follows:

Not a purpose	—	0
A purpose only partly applied	—	1
A purpose which is applied	—	2
A purpose which is well applied	—	3

The results are presented in Table 3.

Table - 3
Tutor ratings of the purpose of tutorial support in AIOU

Provide practical experience	74
Provide a stimulus for written work	69
Facilitate environment support	69
To form self-help groups	53
To provide opportunity for student interaction	50
To encourage independent thought	50
To attend to personal problems	36
To develop personal links	16

From Table 3, it is clear that tutors see a range of relevant activities as applying to tutorial provision. Of these the ones which they believe are being achieved are those with the highest scores. Thus the provision of practical experience in tutorials, to provide a stimulus for written work, and the provision of general enrichment experiences are all seen to be well done. These items all relate to subject matter content. Interestingly, the second group all relate to self study in some way (self-help groups, student interaction and independence), while the third group relate to counseling and remedial work. If these are taken to be accurate assessments by the tutors then the second and third areas (self-study and counseling work) are the areas, which would merit attention in any initial or in-service tutor training which is being provided by AIOU. The tutors are obviously most confident that their work in stimulating written work and providing further insights and experiences relating to course content are already successful. However, in a distance learning context general advice on study skills and the counseling of students are likely to be important issues which the tutor is called upon to deal with in the absence of other personal contacts available to the students.

(b) Tutorial processes

Tutors were then asked to indicate how prepared they were to undertake eight specific tutorial activities which ranged from communicating with students to evaluating the tutorial process. Thus each item can have a score ranging from + 2.0 to - 2.0.

The results are presented in Table 4.

Table - 4
Tutor readiness to undertake specific types of tutorial activity %

To give advice to students who are in need	291	58.2
To allow students to participate in actively	296	59.2
To be natural and honest with students (e.g., in admitting lack or knowledge)	352	70.0
To monitor what actually happens in tutorials	80	16
To evaluate the tutorial programme	462	93
To explore how a student experiences his or her own world	210	42
To evaluate the performance of students	340	68
Accepting students for what they are rather than for what they ought to be	035	7

It can be seen that, while all items received a positive score, there were considerable differences in the responses. Predictably tutors see their most important role as giving advice where needed and in encouraging active participation. Being honest with students and maintaining tutorial processes also scored highly.

However, three items scored less well with one in particular (accepting students for what they are) almost scoring zero. This acceptance of a student is an important aspect of tuition in an institution like the AIOU where the students are likely to be more cosmopolitan, and varied in their background and experience, than those in a conventional degree programme. This seems to be true of other third world distance teaching universities (Rumble and Harry, 1982, p.112). However, this issue produced almost complete polarity on the part of the tutors. Interestingly, the tutors who disagreed most strongly with this statement were those holding postgraduate degrees and those with more experience in higher education. Such tutors appear to want students to conform to a stereotype or perhaps to their concept of an ideal student.

One item referred to the tutor's role in evaluating students' performances. In AIOU, tutors do not normally evaluate or assess learner performance, since exams and assignments are processed separately. Tutors seem not to be ready to accept this as part of their part-time tutorial role. However, as the AIOU expanded and has created more flexible planning provision (e.g. by allowing enrolment and commencement of study at twice in a year i.e. 1st February and 1st August every year. Also a centralized system of evaluation and assessment was established which proved to be unwieldy and inflexible. Assessments conducted by part-time tutors, with

appropriate centralized system of evaluation and assessment may provide to be unwieldy and inflexible. Assessments conducted by part-time tutors, with appropriate centralized monitoring, would confer considerable flexibility on the overall system and so part-time staff may ultimately needed to be trained in this respect.

When the tutor responses to the item on evaluation of students were examined against experience and qualification, no differences were seen. However, the tutors working in the education faculty were very much more prepared to evaluate student performance than their colleagues in other faculties. Before the AIOU education faculty was established, staff in institute of education were involved in pilot projects which used the willingness to utilize such procedures. However, it may be important for a distance teaching institutions, to develop a workable system of local assessments (suitably controlled and monitored from the centre) since such systems may confer a greater degree of flexibility in course provision by the institution.

Tutors were also asked to identify the processes which regularly took place in their tutorials. A list of ten processes were presented and tutors rated these according to the degree with which they occurred in tutorials in the AIOU. The ten items were scored as in table 4 above and the ratings are presented in table 5.

Table - 5
Tutorial processes identified by tutors as taking place at AIOU

S. No	Processes taking place in tutorials	Tutor rating	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Used to explore subject content in greater depth		386	77.2
2.	Used to develop group skills in problem solving		372	74.4
3.	Provide opportunities for discussion with individuals about content		374	74.8
4.	Provide opportunities for discussion with individuals about study problems		322	64.4
5.	Use mainly for remedial work		310	62.00
6.	Used for discussing study skills which the students need to acquire		275	55
7.	Allow an opportunity to conduct group discussions		262	52.4
8.	No more than additional class-based lectures		38	7.6
9.	Used for chalk expository sessions		74	14.8
10.	Tend to change the emphasis from active to passive learning		18	3.6

From table 5 it is evident that in item 8 there was a rather divided response with 36% of tutors agreeing that tutorials are no more than lecture periods. When the tutors were examined with regard to this response it was found that 80% of the younger (under 40) group agreed with this, while only 20% of the older (over 40) group agreed. It seems clear then that age (and hence experience) is a significant factor which is likely to influence the behaviour of a tutor in tutorials and thus dictate the nature of those tutorials. It seems that the AIOU has been wise to appoint a preponderance of mature, experienced tutors to support its courses and those younger tutors may need specialist training provision in this respect.

Overall the responses show that 'exploring the subject in greater depth' 'providing opportunities for discussion of content with individuals' and 'allowing the group to develop problem solving skills' are perceived as the most important qualities of tutorials. These subject-related activities take precedence over issues regarding study skills and individual study problems, re-affirming the subject-orientated attitudes of the tutors.

Satisfaction with Tutorials

In order to check their satisfaction, the students were asked to indicate the degree of satisfaction with the tutorial provision. Tutors in this study were also asked to indicate whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the tutorial provision they had made. The results are summarized in table 6.

Table - 6
Student and tutors satisfaction with tutorial provision at AIOU

	Students	Tutors
Satisfied	63%	94%
uncertain	17%	Not responded
Not satisfied	20%	6%

It may be said that we are measuring a degree of self-satisfaction on the part of the tutors, since the response of the students, while being largely positive, is not ideal. It is suggested that student reasons for dissatisfaction are concerned more with the frequency of tutorials and the problems associated with attendance than with the quality of the tutorial provision itself.

Conclusion and Suggestions

1. The AIOU tended to appoint mature tutors, who are experienced in higher education, as the core of their part-time staff.
2. As a group, the tutors seem to regard their most important role as being to provide academic support related to course content. Attention to student

study skills and the counseling of students seem to be given lower priorities in the eyes of the tutors.

3. Perhaps predictably, tutors see their most important role as giving advice where needed and in encouraging active participation in tutorials. However they are reluctant to form close relationships with students.
4. Age and experience seem to be significant factors in influencing the behaviour of a tutor in tutorials and thus dictating the nature of those tutorials.
5. The AIOU needs to consider the training provision which it makes for part-time staff and to pay closer attention to the roles of a tutor which are not directly related to subject content.

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