

Issues in Teacher Education through Distance Education: A Case Study of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Pakistan

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Abstract *Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) offers teacher education programs from Primary School Teacher to Doctor of Philosophy in Education. The current study is focused on B. Ed., 2-year M.Ed., and Associate Degree in Education (ADE). AIOU has rendered great services in the field of education and particularly teacher education. Distance education internationally is an established system of education but in the context of Pakistan there are certain issues in distant mode of education which if addressed, may improve quality in teacher education. The current study investigated issues from the perspectives of tutors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Data were collected from tutors in 03 districts through interviews. Interview was conducted with total of 20 tutors. The purpose of the study was to get an in-depth understanding of the issues and suggest recommendations for improvement of the teacher education through distance learning from AIOU and the distance education programs offered by other universities.*

Key Words:

AIOU, Teacher Education, Tutors' Perception, Distance Mode

Introduction

Open education means easy access for students to study while working; for the employer it means easy professional development with less cost in the place of job and for the government it means education and training for more learners at less cost. Besides these benefits, distance education increase equal opportunities, facilitates people who are over aged for sitting in the traditional classrooms. Moreover, distance education system easily reaches out to a large chunk of population even across borders. Distance education has played vital role in teacher education - enhancing qualification, in-service professional development, especially in developing countries (UNESCO, 2002).

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In Distant mode of education, technology has brought education to the work place. Many traditional universities have started distance educational programs. These programs have their benefits, but they are not bereft of some issues and challenges. Distance education programs must have an explicit mission policy for quality, engaging and maintaining motivation of faculty, ensuring better communication between learners and faculties. Distance education places great responsibilities on the learners, therefore, they need to be highly motivated and disciplined besides organizational commitment and quality programs. The purpose of distance education should be other than financial (AACSB International, 2007).

Distance education can play an important part in educating people if proper system is followed. Watkins and Kaufman (2003) opine that many educational institutions fail to realize their aims in true spirit. Despite good intentions, education institutions are still failing to recognize particular key planning and implementing steps which could make the difference in successful and sustainable distance education initiatives. Nonetheless, there are many more challenges affecting the planning of open or distance learning, such as globalization, joint course development, material sharing, computer and information technology. According to Levy (2003), adopting vision, policies, and procedures for distance learning implementation are key challenges for policy makers. The planning mostly focus budget and staffing issues and sideline critical pedagogical issues of distance learning. Similarly, Kerka and Wonacott (2000) posit academic dishonesty, a key issue in distance education all over the world.

There may be some issues which would be related to facilities and the use of information technology. The faculty may want to use internet in their teaching and learning process but they do not have the required expertise and the institution do not support them in the form of faculty training (Clark, 1993; Wonacott, 2001).

Distance education is an established factor in the field of education. There are distance learning universities all over the world and there are many non-distance learning universities which offer some programs through distance mode. The purpose of distance education is to give an opportunity to those who due to one or another reason cannot attend formal educational institutions.

Context of the Study

Pakistan is fortunate that it has one of the biggest Open Universities in Asia. In 1972, Pakistan has one of the highest rate of illiteracy, there were about 40 million illiterates in the country. The policy maker felt need for working on illiteracy, professional development, continuing education and preparation of elementary teachers in large number and training of the members of National Literacy corps. Hence, a People's Open University was established as per the recommendations of education policy 1972-80 (Education Policy 1972-80). Since then it has attracted millions of students. The nucleus of National Council on Adult Literacy was also

established in Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) as per recommendation of National Education Policy 1979. The university offers teacher education program from 2 years to 4 years along with M.Phil. and Ph.D. in education. Students from all over the country and overseas Pakistanis seek admission in AIOU. Many changes have been made in teacher education, like, duration has been increased from one year to 18 months and in 2006, the duration was increased to 04 year degree program. .

There is one narrative that teacher education programs in Pakistan are lacking quality. Teacher education in KP is provided by departments of education in Universities, affiliated colleges, Regional Institutes of Teachers Education (RITEs), Provincial Teacher Education Institute (PITE) and AIOU. The major chunk of teachers are educated by AIOU. Therefore, the prevailing condition of teacher education and concerns about quality of teacher education, especially, teacher education through distant mode necessitates to get feedback from the stakeholders and recommend suggestions in terms of improvement in quality of teacher education through distant mode. The current study investigates issues in the teacher education programs of AIOU. The issues were identified through discussion with the students and tutors of AIOU.

Purpose of the Study

There is a growing concern about the quality of education which results in concerns about teacher education in Pakistan. AIOU produces more teachers at all levels than other regular teacher education institutions in the country. Literature about distant mode of education has shown issues in distance education. The government of Pakhtukhwa in Pakistan started recruiting teachers without professional degrees. One of the pleas of the authorities is that the teacher education degree holders do not have quality. This prompted the researchers to investigate issues in teacher education through distant mode from the perspectives of the most relevant persons, tutors of AIOU.

Main Question

What are the issues in teacher education through distant teacher education of AIOU Islamabad?

Methodology

Population of the Study

The researchers selected tutors from 03 districts because it was convenient for the researchers to collect data from the tutors in these districts. The 20 participants

were purposively selected keeping in view their experience in teaching teacher education courses, and all of them had more than 10 years' experience. They had more in depth understanding of this mode of education. The interviews were one on one either in study centers or homes of the participants. The participants also work in public sector as principals or subject specialists and they also work as tutors in AIOU in second time.

Study Design

This is a qualitative study based on the interviews with the tutors of AIOU, since they are important stakeholders in implementing the curricula of teacher education. We used qualitative method as it may reveal the real issues related with the teacher education through distant mode because interviews allow the researchers to go deeper and try to find reality.

The semi-interviews were conducted during August 2018 to November 2018 from tutors in 03 districts in KP. The interview questions were: 1) what are the issues in writing assignments? 2) What are the issues in the selections of tutors? 3) What are the issues in the conduction of examination? 4) What are the issues in communication with the students? 5) What are the issues which are related with the tutors? 6) What are the issues in holding workshops? 7) What are the issues in the teaching practice? 8) What are the issues in supervising research project to B.Ed. 02 year students?

Data Analysis Process

Data were collected from the tutors of AIOU in 3 districts. Tutors are supposed to take face to face sessions with students for guidance, solving problems and check their assignments. Thus, they are most relevant persons to explain the situation. Those senior tutors who have more than 10 years' experience as tutors in AIOU. Data were collected by writing down their responses. Braun & Clarke (2006) steps of analysis qualitative data was followed for data analysis. However, the steps were not linear, the researcher has to move to and pro for getting clearer understanding. The data were read many times for becoming familiar with the same. Second, generate initial codes were created and then themes were identified. The participants were coded as KI (key informer 1), K2, K3..... 20 and so on.

Presentation of Results

Assignments

Assignments are given to the learners, that they may study the books and write down answers to the given questions after thorough study according to their

understanding. They may also take guidance in case of difficulty if they have problem in understanding certain things. It was found that students do not write assignments themselves and if they do write their assignments, they just reproduce the original text of the books they are given for reading. *“The students do not submit their assignments on time, they do not read and understand the reading but they just reproduce the given books. And, they expect full credit for reproduction”* (K3, K7, K5).

Some tutors award marks even without seeing the assignments. Most of the tutors are local, they may be easily influenced for more and undeserved marks. *“Tutors are local and they cannot say “NO” to any one for marks or awarding marks for free”* (K1, K3, K5, 6). Reasons being relationships and circle of friendships.

Selection of Tutors

Most of the participants pointed out that tutors are selected without proper screening. They do not have the required abilities to become teacher educators. Teachers are doing just fill in the blanks.

Qualified tutors play an important role in teaching learning process. It is easy to get registration as tutor in AIOU. A person who is not a may become tutor who have neither experience nor regular connection with the teaching learning process (K1, K5, K7).

The selection of tutors is made only on paper qualification which does not guarantee quality teacher educators. The tutors suggested there should be proper selection criteria which may be based on written test, demonstration and interview. The tutors explained that there are many tutors who can neither face their students in classrooms nor deliver them anything valuable in terms of academics.

... there are many tutors who themselves are not good teachers... how they may become teachers' teacher. Teacher educators should be role models” (K11, K15, K17).

During the interview 16 out of 20 tutors showed their concern about the examination system. They said that conducting examination is not taken seriously in AIOU examinations. The principal of the school, where workshops or meeting are held, is appointed as superintendent for years. There are some principals who have been posted in a specific station for 10 years and since then they are also performing the duties of superintendents for the above mentioned examinations. They are known to the people and are easily influenced by the examinees. Students write from books, there is no check on them. There is no system of proper inspections. Examination halls are mostly over-crowded and most of the time there is not even space for seating of students. Examiners cannot follow proper seating plan. Examinees sit wherever they want. At a time different examinations are conducted, the examiners make announcement for one level and another time for

another which disturbs the hall and the candidates cannot concentrate on the papers. Number of examiners/invigilators' are not allotted on the basis of students. In traditional institutes an examiner per 40 students is given but that is not followed in case of AIOU. The participants were critical of the remuneration. "*Meager remuneration is given to the invigilator staff which cannot be expressed*" (K9, K12, K17, K19).

Low Quality of Learners

Learners play an important part in their learning. Distance mode of education need comprehension abilities from learners in English and Urdu, but there are some students, especially, those who have just passed their intermediate or bachelor, they cannot follow the courses. Most of the students are weak in reading skills, they cannot follow lessons through distant mode of education. "*There should be entry test for intermediate and bachelor passed candidates, at least there should be some merit. The students cannot comprehend reading. How, they may become good teachers. Their content knowledge is weak*" (K12, K13, K17, K18). Although, students do qualify the intermediate examination, they do not have the required ability of studying through distant mode. K11 opined, "*Books are above the level of students of Intermediate level, they cannot learn through self-study..... Time for each code is only 02 days, tutors cannot cover the problems within given short time*".

The students do pass intermediate examination which qualifies them for seeking admission in ADE or B.Ed. honor program but they cannot follow the content of the courses independently. Thus, their pedagogical competency is affected thus resulting in low quality teachers.

Study Centers

Infrastructure plays an important role in facilitating learners. AIOU does not have any well-developed centers where teachers and students can get some help from library or internet facilities. "*There are no well-furnished study centers of AIOU, they do not have facilities, like, internet, multimedia and proper seating arrangements*" (K13, K12, K17).

The university does not support study centers. They even do not pay electricity bill. The tutors request for space to different schools. We are one time in one school and another time in another school. Due to the lack of proper full time office, students keep their assignments in private shops nominated by the tutors. Had there been proper office, it would facilitate the students as well as tutors (K5, K11, k15).

Students of AIOU are totally depended on the AIOU material which in many cases are scattered pieces from other books. They do not have a designated library

which is only to be used by them nor is there any provision of the library in general in the designated schools. Besides, the schools where AIOU arrange workshops, have hardly any place for their proper seating. All the programs of AIOU are held in schools in a makeshift arrangement. The interviewees suggested permanent centers which are properly equipped with books and access of internet where in the students can get access to soft material prepared by AIOU or other such institutes meant for distant learning. The new courses of teacher education need a lot of self-study material and access to internet.

The new courses of B.Ed. honor and ADE need a lot of self-study. Internet is needed for getting access to material. Most of the candidates do not have access to net. Even, teacher educators do not have access... how they will update themselves (K5, K7 & K10)

Teaching Practice

Teaching practice acquaints the students with the reality of classroom. The learners convert theory by practicing through practical activity. The students are supposed to teach in schools for specific period, and get feedback on their work. In reality, however, mostly it is just a formality.

..... students persuade the principals of the schools, get stamps on their certificate... we look at the stamp and accept it. There are no visits of supervisors to the schools. The students get no feedback (K12, K15 & K17).

When the prospective teachers do not get proper feedback, they will follow the trodden path, no innovation will take place. Feedback sensitizes the teachers about their own weaknesses in teaching and they become conscious. Students get a certificate from schools without actually doing teaching practice and show it to the examiners. There are not any visits from the supervisors and no guidance is provided. The supervisors are supposed to visit schools, observe students' lessons, give them feedback and let the learners benefit from the field experiences and learned tutors. The problem in class observation lies in the fact that most of the tutors are full time teachers and they themselves are busy in their duties when the schools are open and learners are supposed to be in schools. Moreover, in many cases the students who are to undergo teaching practice are themselves teachers in government or private schools.

Workshops for the Learners

The AIOU programs also contain face to face interaction with the teachers and students learn from them through interactive sessions on certain topics. All the tutors have to cover specific topics in the given time period. Workshops require teachers to cover topics which are lengthy and need more time than the allotted

duration. These workshops are arranged for short duration only tutors cannot cover all the topics in details in the specific time. Moreover, some of the workshops fall in rough weathers - severe cold and hot seasons, which make it difficult for the learners and tutors to attend. Hence, the learners as well as the tutors face problems. Thus they suggested more time for workshops in M.Ed., B.Ed. and other such courses. Moreover, the tutors complained of frequent load shedding which disturb teaching and learning. They suggested such centers which may facilitate learners or the university should arrange generators or Universal Power Supply system for the centers.

Lack of Communication

Some tutors apprised the researchers that communication between tutors and students is not facilitated in AIOU.

“There are rare face to face meetings and these meetings are optional for students. Teachers do not take it seriously” (K1, K5 & K12).

Thus the students do not get proper information on time.

There 09 tutorials for B.Ed. honor... the students do not get books on time. When they get books half of the time of tutorials is gone. There is gap in communication between university and students and there is lack of quick communication between student and teacher. All this wastes a lot of time (K11, K13 & K15).

There is not any systematic structure for the meeting, they would be successful when students and teachers come with some set plan of work, when tutors and students have some questions. And when they come without any outlines, questions or preplanned things, then the meeting is just a waste of time.

Revisiting Teacher Education

There was one tutor who did not want to comment on the system. He opined that teacher education through distance education needs to be revisited. It was needed when there was scarcity of teachers. The tutor noted his views in the following words:

Now, it is time to assess if we really need this mode of education or we just need to earn money. Teacher education through distance mode has a bad effect on the quality education. Just like Beecham law which says bad money drives out good money from the market; so, it is time to assess (K20).

Research in Bachelor Studies

Research is an essential component of teacher education. One tutor has to guide students beyond his/her capacity as noted by an interviewee

“In distance learning one teacher has many students and it becomes very difficult, even if she/he genuinely wants, to provide proper guidance to the students” (K5, K8, K11 & K15).

Yet another interviewee noted that *“Most of the female students have passed MA as private candidate, it is very difficult for them to do research.....they bring copied material. The tutors are not paid for the research task, the university did not ask for bill. The coordinator just assign work and do not ask about payment (K2, K3 K17 & K19).*

Moreover, it was found that many tutors are not even expert in research. The students face problems and most of them opted for illegal means. They copied, produced others research work. As for research is concerned, one teacher supervises more than 20 prospective teachers. A teacher is given students of any discipline. A teacher explains his point of view in the following words; *“I have done mathematics, but there are students of English literature who I supervise” (K11).* Many tutors have to supervise many students in their research *“I have to supervise the research work of 25 B.Ed. 02years students. How is it possible? (K9, K12, K15, K17 & K 18).* And that is the reason that students try to seek readymade copies of research from various departments of education and research in universities. The researchers also noted that many such students or their near and dears visit the department for getting students research copies. In case they are denied help through unfair means they go to the people who deals in this business. There was also the problem of remuneration. *“We do not get any remuneration from the university for guiding students in their research work” (K11, K2, K16 & K12).*

Main Findings

1. AIOU admits everybody to it teacher education programs. There is no entry test or criteria to check if the learner may benefit from the distance mode of education.
2. Cheating is very common in the examination in the form of writing answers from the books and other material. Examinations halls are overcrowded, most of the time there is no space for students’ proper seating in the halls. Examiners cannot follow proper seating plan. They sit wherever they want. Number of examiners do not match number of students, as in other traditional institutes examinations an examiner per 40 students is given but there is no such system in AIOU .Moreover, very less remuneration is paid to the examiners that contribute to towards their low motivation for proper conduct of examination.
3. There is not any proper criteria for the selection of tutors, in some cases such teachers are selected as tutors who do not have credibility in their own locality. Even non-teaching staff also perform the duties of tutors.

4. There is short time for the workshops. The topics given can be hardly covered in the given time. Tutorial are not held properly due to late arrival of books to the students and then the non-serious behavior of students and tutors.
5. Teaching practice is an important element of teacher education. The students are supposed to teach in a school for specific period, and get feedback on his/her work. But under the system the process is not followed in true spirit. The tutors do not visit the students. The learners in most of the cases just get signature from the head of a school and that qualifies the candidate for marks.
6. There is no professional development program, especially tailored for tutors.
7. AIOU does not have proper study centers where there is proper seating arrangement, facilities, teaching kits or a small library.
8. In B.Ed. 2 years program a lot of students are assigned to only one tutor without any consideration of field or specialty, tutors have also not been trained in conducting research by the university.

Conclusions

Teacher education is passing through a critical period in Pakistan, many changes have been made in the curricula. The higher education commission (HEC), Pakistan initiated 4 year program for elementary and secondary teachers. But the government did not introduced any recruitment policy. Hence, there is a lot of disturbance in this regard. One province in Pakistan introduced induction training for the newly recruited teachers. Everybody on the basis of academic qualification was allowed to apply for the post of a teacher. Academicians are raising fingers at the falling standards of teacher education in Pakistan. This paper investigated the issues in teacher education through distance mode in Pakistan.

The respondents showed concern on the examination system, evaluation assignments, and lack of any method to assess the ability of the students to study through distance mode of education. Moreover, tutors themselves do not have the required qualification and competencies. The problem lies in the selection process of tutors, everybody, having paper qualification, may become a tutor. There is no recruiting process of selecting the tutors. The results showed students through distance mode have little exposure to realities in the field. There is not any rigorous program for getting practical know how in real classroom environment, this badly affects the quality of teacher education. Moreover, the teacher education curricula needs a lot of preparation and use of IT. The findings revealed that only rooms in public schools are requested where there is no facility of internet or multimedia. Thus, teachers and prospective teachers may not benefit from the treasure of

knowledge. Such centers should be set up or such institutions should be selected for the purpose where internet and power is available.

Most of the courses get very short time for workshops, in these workshops the tutors cannot cover all the topics and involve prospective teachers in the process of learning. The tutors try to cover the given topics through lectures, thus they may not be able to exemplify interactive teaching to the prospective teachers. Consequently, they would not be able to do students' centered teaching which is required for effective learning. The workshops may prove helpful if more time is given and it is termed compulsory in real sense for all the learners. Research has been introduced for the purpose to enable to the prospective teachers to do action research and find solution to problem in their professional life but there are only 03 days in the workshop for research. The prospective teachers do not get proper orientation and they may not be able to do research work. The research element needs more time, expertise and proper number of tutors to facilitate the learners.

Teacher education through distance mode need reorientation, all the points raised by stakeholders need to be addressed. Distance mode may not be used a source of earning for universities, this should be used as a mean of access to those who cannot get access to education. Second, no mode of education should compromise on the quality of education, especially in teacher education because this leads to downfall in education as a whole.

Recommendations

1. There may be an entry test when candidates are accepted in teacher education program. These test may cover reading, writing, speaking, listening, basic numeracy and basic concepts in science.
2. Examination system of AIOU need overhauling. The principal of the school where workshop are held may not be appointed as superintendent. A person of good repute from another institute may be appointed as superintendent. Moreover, tutors of the students should also be not appointed as examiners or invigilators. Examiners from colleges or universities may be preferred. Proper wages may be given so that quality people may be engaged.
3. All assignments need to be conceptual type so that copying from course material is not possible. There may be different assignments for different students, this will minimize the chances of cheating from the assignments of another students. The teacher may also give more time to the marking of assignments. Moreover, marked assignments may be submitted to the AIOU, not only the marks.
4. Teaching practice may be made more realistic, it should not be just the production of a certificate to the supervisor from a principal of the school. As most of the tutors are full time faculty in schools, they do not have enough

- time for all these practices. AIOU may train some other fresh and unemployed persons for this purpose.
5. Proper study centers need to be established where the tutors and students can meet and solve their problems. They will not be depended on a school. A permanent office for the coordinator is more than essential.
 6. Tutors are the backbone of any teaching learning process. There should be proper recruitment of tutors. Everybody may not become a teacher educator.
 7. There is the need of further enhancing face to face communication. The current sessions for face to face communication are less. There should more face to face to interaction and this should be compulsory in the real sense. Tutors may also be trained who to engage learners through different activities.
 8. Almost all the teachers do not have expertise in research. They may not be able to give proper guidance for the research element in .B.Ed. 2 years or four year program. When the students do not get proper guidance from tutors or tutors are overburdened; the students opt for unfair means. This practice may further deteriorate the standards of teacher education in Pakistan.

Potential for Future Research

The current research investigated issues from the tutors' perspectives, in future the researchers may investigate the matter from the perspectives of students and their parents. It would give more in depth understanding of the issues.

Limitations

AIOU operates in all parts of Pakistan. The current study was carried out in 03 districts. This did not cover the perspectives of tutors from other parts of the country. Second, data was collected only from tutors. The learners' voices are missing. So, the study may not be generalized to other parts of the country and it may not be considered as the point of view of all the stakeholders.

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