An Exploration of Issues and Challenges Faced by Students in Distance Learning Environment

Asaf Niwaz	Assistant Professor, Department of Education, The University of Haripur, KP, Pakistan. Email: dr.ansatti75@gmail.com
Qazi Waqas Ahmed	PhD. Scholar, Department of Education, University of Jyvaskyla, Finland.
Sohail Kamran	Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract   This paper investigates the issues and challenges encountered by students obtaining distance education in Pakistan. We conducted interviews with students obtaining distance education and they were enrolled in different study programs. Qualitative interviews were conducted to understand the perception of the study participants regarding the issues and challenges faced by them in learning. Students from five distance learning programs were selected and five participants from each study program were interviewed in this study. The findings reveal that distance learning students encounter impediment in their learning due to their personal circumstances, teachers' related issues, and due to assessment and evaluation issues. These factors negatively affect distance learners learning experiences. Based on the study findings, we provide recommendations to universities for enhancing distance learners experience.

Key Words
Distance education, Experiences, Learners, Challenges, University

Introduction

Open and distance learning (ODL) has the potential to contribute both social and economic development of society. It is an important and indispensable part of general education around the globe (UNESCO, 2000). The mandate of ODL is to meet the educational needs of those who missed the chance of regular education opportunities for any reason or those who are unable to continue their education through a traditional system of education (UNESCO, 2005). ODL gained acceptance in communities on the basis of its reach, productivity, and acceptance. People adopt it in different continents as it is instrumental in addressing their learning needs (Mitchell, 2009); as a productivity, research and development in ODL also contributed positively in research and development of general education (Specter, 2009) and; it is generally accepted as an alternative to the conventional education system (Rao, 2006). Distance education provides different benefits to education e.g., students have greater access to education; it also alleviates different constraints of capacity; capitalization of market opportunities and; it also serves as a catalyst in institutionalizing transformation (Volery &Lord, 2000). The current study was conducted to explore the issues and challenges faced by the learners enrolled in a university located in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Few academic and professional programs were selected to understand this mode of distance learning. The main focus of the research was to investigate the issues and problems of distance learners in their own perspectives through qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2006).

Review of the Previous Literature

Definitions of Distance Learning

The modern-day literature forwards many definitions of distance learning.

Distance education is a type of adult education with wide access having an instructional design including teaching methods both interactive and self-help materials (Holmberg, 1989).

It is an organized activity where teaching mostly occurs at distance between learners and instructors. Distance education mode happens with the teachers and students separated in terms of space and time (Perraton, 1991).

Distance education can be seen as 'planned teaching/learning experiences' for the sake of certification programs through the use of a wide variety of technologies in order to access the learners, teachers, and content (Greenberg, 1998).

Similarly, the United States Distance Learning Association (1998) has defined in terms of acquiring knowledge and skills via instruction by the use of various forms supplemented by different technologies. People across the globe who did not have an opportunity are now able to access the education of their choice with respect to their own time and resources (Rumble, 1997).

Role of Distance Learning

The distance learning enables students to continue their education despite the constraints; time, money, effort, location, prior academic qualifications, etc., (Paul, 1999). It is an approach that encompasses learning needs and educational success of the students, by eliminating the barriers (South African Institute for Distance Education, 2001). Learning-focused, life-long learning, flexibility, easy access, recognition, support, and cost-effectiveness are important principles of distance learning. The learner can save monetary resources that increase the chances of success. Distance learning provides an opportunity for all such people. One can take admission in a program based on own experiences, skills, and competencies. In other words, 'self-paced learning process' is a concept applied in a distance learning system that allows all genres of students to learn. Today, we are living in a world which requires us to learn continuously. In this regard, distance learning is an option for such people where they can easily overcome barriers like access, finances and other requirements (Ledege, 2000). Numbers of research studies were included (890) which comprised of ten years (1990-1999) based on Sherry's (1996) categorization method of ten parameters; "key participants' role, technology selection and adoption, design issues, strategies to increase interactivity and active learning, learner characteristics, learner support, operational issues, policy and management issues, equity and accessibility, and cost/benefit trade-offs". The results obtained from this extensive literature review showed the high frequency of ideas like issues related to the design of distance learning, qualities of learners in the mode, and application of student-centered strategies.

Global Perspective of Distance Learning

Both progressed and progressing nations of the world tend to use distance education mode as a means of mass education, educating people at large with easy accessibility. According to Howell et al. (2003), the governments at the global level shift from the higher education model; campus-based to ODL model. Zimbabwe spreads education to all citizens. Under distance college program, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) initiated open learning programs. It became a full-fledged university in 2000 through parliament. Some stand-alone universities;' University of South Africa (UNISA), Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)', work in the field of open distance learning. Saint (1999) mentioned high flexibility in ODL mode of education that takes care of students' individual needs. Flexibility, affordability, and accessibility have also been reported as Pityana (2004) said it increases the enrollment in higher education as compared to traditional universities.

Challenges in Distance Learning

UNESCO (2004), declared distance learning as a global strategy to provide universal access to education. Despite the fact, distance education has its issues. Drop-out in large amounts and late completion of the programs are the major problems (Kamau, 2007). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students are facing these challenges. Sometimes situational, attitudinal, psychological and pedagogical challenges were being confronted in distance education (Berge et al., 2002; Kruger and Casey, 2000). On the other hand, socio-cultural, institutional relevant challenges and instructional challenges are also being faced by the distance learners Zirnkle (2001). Cosmas and Mbwette, (2009); Mbukusa, (2009) and Mushi, (2001) pointed out various challenges faced by the students of distance learning. Situational, institutional and dispositional as three major, challenges have been categorized. Similarly, Garland (2007) recognized a poor learning environment and time deficiency as two major situational challenges. Coursework could not be very well managed by the students (Daniel, 2005; Zirnkle, 2001). Lack of time management skills on the part of the learner also lead to problems like balancing demands of home, work, social commitments and study (Kember, 1989). Other challenges like getting the study materials on time, engagements at social/economic levels and weak learning support have also been reported (Ukpo, 2005; Mossberger et al., 2003).

To conclude this section, distance learning is an important tool to facilitate access to education (UNESCO, 2004). Distance learning mode could certainly enhance access to education in various developing countries (i.e. Pakistan), where people encounter difficulties in accessing education owing to various reasons. It is vital to deliver

good educational services to students, which can set the basis for a sustainable distance learning environment (Warschauner, 2003). However, to the best of our knowledge difficulties faced by the learners in distance learning environment remains an under-addressed research topic. Therefore, the current study explores the challenges encountered by the students in a digital learning environment in Pakistan.

Methodology

Qualitative interview technique was used to gather the data. This method allowed us to explore the issues and challenges of distance learners at a university in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. Students from five distance learning programs were approached and requested to participate in the research study. Thirty participants were interviewed in distance learning education in the province of Khyber Pakhtoon Khawa. The participants were selected based on a purposeful sampling technique, which is a widely used sampling method in qualitative research. We recruited five students from each of the academic as well as professional programs in this study. The professional programs included learners of Associate Degree in Education (ADE), Master of Education (M.Ed), Junior Diploma in Physical Education (JDPE), similarly few academic programs Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Bachelor of Electronics (BE) were also included.

All the informants participated voluntarily in this research. Information sheets explaining the study objectives were distributed among the study participants and all the participants signed a consents form before the beginning of interviews. All the interviews were carried out by the first author, who ensured that all the necessary information about the study topic is obtained from the research participants. Interview guidelines were prepared, which included the questions related to the participants family and work commitment, time constraints, difficulties in concentration, lack of physical and human resources, teacher-student contact, availability of guidance at the study center, provision of course outlines and reading material, completion of assignments, and University Management.

Thematic analysis technique was performed to analyze the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis in this research helped to enhance credibility and correctness of data analysis. Various themes were identified in order to understand the situation prevailing at distance education center at Comwave, Haripur. The accuracy of the data was re-checked during the process of analysis. Data was not complex so the principle of the majority was authority applied. It means, what most of the learners told was reported or highlighted (as a theme) against each question of the interview.

Findings

This study examined issues and challenges impeding students distance learning endeavors. We find various factors that impede students distance learning endeavors. The data analysis resulted in three themes which are labeled as (a) Personal circumstances (b) Teachers related issues (c) Assessment and evaluation issues. The themes are being elucidated in the section below:

Personal Circumstances

Our participants' accounts indicate that their personal circumstances impede their distance learning endeavors. Family and work commitments, time constrain and difficulties in concentration impede their distance learning which is linked to the personal circumstances of the participants. The participants' family and work responsibilities were among the major impediments which prevented study participants to effectively learn through the distance learning system. One of the participant's stories indicates how family and work responsibilities impede students distance learning endeavors.

"I took admission in [university] just because of my part-time engagements with family matters. I cannot take admission in any other university because I cannot manage to attend classes on a regular basis. Usually, departments do not allow their employees to leave office before time"

Distance learners in both professional and academic programs of university encountered difficulties to spare time for study owing to their family and work engagements, responsibilities, and commitments. Their family circumstances and work-related responsibilities bring a great challenge for them to meet the demands of challenging distance learning degree programs in a befitting manner.

Most of the distance learning studies were unable to manage their time properly. They were not able to attend classes on a regular basis at the study centers. The participants' inability to manage their time effectively was due to their work and family-related issues. However, those participants who were not doing any job argued that at the center there was no proper system of mentoring and guidance for learners. One of our study participants explains his views regarding time management in the following manner:

"Time management is a big issue even for those who are not doing jobs. Suppose I am not doing any job, whenever I visited the center, I did not find any instructor there just because they know that no one is there to inquire"

Teachers Related Issues

The study participants faced problems from the teacher of distance learning centers. The teachers were unable to serve their distance learning students owing to either their personal incompetence of intentional ignorance and work avoidance. Teacher related issues were linked to unavailability of advice of study technique to students, lack of student-teacher contact and unavailability of course outlines and reading material for students. These factors impeded our study participants learning endeavors.

The study participants were eager to receive guidance from their teachers regarding the adoption of appropriate study techniques for enhancing their learning outcomes from their respective degree programs. However, participants' stories reveal that they were unable to receive any guidance from their teachers. Likewise, participants' stories reveal that availability of a guidance for the preparation of examination or preparation of assignments was also completely missing at the distance center. The following interview excerpts explain how lack of guidance to distance learning students impedes their learning.

"In this semester, I visited the center twice. No instructor was found in the center to seek guidance about how to develop good study skills"?

"Due to the absence of instructors, there is no system of guidance regarding preparation for examination or preparation of assignments in the center"

Another issue impeding students distance learning endeavors were a lack of teacher-student contact, which negatively influenced our study participants learning experiences. Some learners were not coming to the center due to which management of the center did not arrange regular classes for those who wished to attend classes on a regular basis. A student explained his concerns in the following manner:

"I want to attend classes on a regular basis. In most of the cases, I could not meet with my teachers/instructors in the center. Therefore many other students who can manage to come in the center do not just because of the mismanagement of study centers".

The participants who were enrolled in distance learning programs of the university could not get proper course outlines of their respective courses. They also expressed that reading materials are usually not provided to them. Most of the learners said course outlines were not provided and due to which they were unable to study. Provision of course outlines was provided very late in each semester almost at the start of the examination. A female student explains her views in the following manner:

"[University] has only scheme of studies to give to the students of each program. Students generally get information about a subject they have to enroll themselves only. I requested again and again for course outlines and reading materials for self-study but the management did not give these to me. Almost in near the examination, we could have a course outline for preparation".

Assessment and Evaluation Issues

The participants encountered assessment and evaluation related problems which served as impediments in their distance learning endeavors. The assessment and evaluation issues were linked to course assignment and projects and also to the conduct of the examination.

The participants explained that assignments are not provided, in case those are given by teachers those are not evaluated at all or properly and when assignments are checked the teachers usually don't keep a proper record of the marks obtained by various students. These factors negatively influence distance learning students learning experiences and impedes their learning in different ways. The participants perceive that there is no proper system of preparing course assignments and similarly, evaluation of assignments was also bogus. The participants perceive that management of the center is only interested in enrolling more and more students in their respective programs. They don't provide any support to the learners and violate the basic principles of distance education. An adult learner explained it as follows:

"In the absence of any course outlines and reading material, preparation of assignments is very difficult. Generally few students prepare assignments and the rest of the class gets its copies. Similarly, there is no transparent system of assessment. No proper record is maintained. Some time students failed who fulfilled all the requirements and sometimes students passed who think they performed poorly"

The participants also expressed that the examination system of their study center is very poor; cheating in the examination is a very common issue. The problems in the examination process of distance learning students were

linked to both the exam invigilators and the management of distance learning center. A participant highlights the issue below in the following words:

"Everyone cheats in the examination. In most of the cases, superintendents came who are corrupt and seek financial support [bribery] from students and they allow them to copy material from books, etc. in final papers. The management never ever bothers to look into the matter of cheating in examination. It seems that the management of the study center also favors cheating practices during the examination".

To conclude the findings section, student personal circumstances, teachers related issues and assessment and evaluation issues impede the learning endeavors of students.

Conclusions

Distance learning is considered as a substitute for the conventional education system (Rao, 2006). Distance learning is an important way of providing access to education (UNESCO, 2004) to those who find it difficult to access higher education in a suitable manner. Distance education can definitely improve access to education in different developing countries (i.e. Pakistan), where individuals face problems in accessing education due to different reasons. This study investigated the impediments faced by students in learning from distance education in the Pakistani context. The results of the study suggest that distance learning students encounter impediment in their learning endeavors due to their personal circumstances, teachers' related issues and due to assessment and evaluation issues. Firstly, students' personal circumstances impede their distance learning, which includes their family and work commitments, time constraints and difficulties in concentrating on education. Second, teacher-related issues were linked to unavailability of advice of study technique to students, lack of student-teacher contact and unavailability of course outlines and reading material for students. Lastly, students encounter assessment and evaluation related problems which served as impediments in their distance learning endeavors. The assessment and evaluation issues were linked to course assignment and projects and also to the conduct of the examination. These factors impede learning endeavors of those students who are enrolled in a distance learning degree program. The universities involved in distance learning education must facilitate their students in their learning environment.

The data for this study were collected from single university students who were receiving distance education, but it is expected that students who are obtaining distance education in other universities of Pakistan could encounter similar kind of issues and challenges. The university providing distance learning may develop a flexible mechanism for students' support services so that the learners who find difficult to spare time from their work and home responsibilities have an alternative way of getting support from their tutors e.g. use of social media. Second, the university may develop the capacity of their tutors to guide students about time management skills. Third, the university may facilitate tutors and distance learners in concentrating on their studies through the placement of a proper monitoring system of executing distance education programs in true spirit and philosophy. Lastly, the university may make it possible for their study centers to conduct the examination in true spirit by minimizing the cheating practices at the centers. Some remedial measure may need to be taken to ensure smooth functioning of the center.

References

Ahmad, A., Hussan, S., & Malik, M. S. (December 2018). An Overview of English Language as a Window of Economic Opportunity in Pakistan. *Review of Economic and Development Studies, 4*(2), 281-291.

Ahmad, A., & Khan, A. (2016). Integration Through Language in the Pak-Afghan Borderland: The Interplay of past legacies, present realities and future scenarios. *Central Asia Journal, 79*(winter), 33-51.

Berge (2002). Obstacles to distance training and education in corporate organizations. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 14 (5), 182-189.

Berge, Z.L., Muilenburg, L.Y., and Haneghan, J.V. (2002). Barriers to distance education and training: Survey results. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 3(4), 409-418.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

Carr, S. (2000). As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students. *The chronicle of higher education*, 46(23), 47-61.

Creswell, J. W. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Cosmas, B. F., and Mbwette, T.S. (2009). Open and distance learning in developing countries: The past, the present and the future. Dar es Salaam: Open University of Tanzania.

Daniel, J. (2005). Open and Distance Learning in Africa.15CCEM Mid-Term. *Educational media international*, 39(1), 17–22.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National policy in education (4th ed.). Lagos: NERDC Press*.

Flick, U. (1998). An Introduction to Qualitative Research. Sage, London.

Fozdar, B., Kumar, S. A., and Kannan, S. (2006). *A Survey of study on the reasons responsible for student dropout from the Bachelor of Science programme at Indira Gandhi National Open University*: IGNOU Press.

Garland, M. (1993). Ethnography penetrates the "I didn't have time" rationale to elucidate higher order reason for distance education withdrawal. *Research in distance education*, 8(2), 181-198.

Greenberg G. (1998). Distance Education Technologies: Best practice for 1 – 12 setting. IEEE *Technology and Society magazine p 36-40*

Holmberg, B. (1989). *Theory and practice of distance education*. London: Routledge.

Kamau, J. (2007). *Retraining primary school teachers against diminishing resources: Is distance education the answer*? Conference paper, UNESCO, a second regional seminar for Africa, Accra Ghana; UNESCO.

Kember, D. (1989). A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education. *Journal of higher education*, 60(3), 278-301.

Knowles, M. (1984). *The Adult Learner: A neglected species (3rd Ed.). Houston*, TX: Gulf Publishing.

Kruger, R. A., and Casey, M. A. (2000). Focus Groups: A practical guide for Applied Research, 3rd ed. London: SAGE.

Lee, Y., Driscoll, M. P., & Nelson, D. W. (2004). The past, present, and future of research in distance education: Results of content analysis. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 18(4), 225-241.

Mbukusa, N.R. (2009). Barriers to rural remote students' access to distance education support services offered by the center for External studies at the University of Namibia. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Mitchell I. M. (2009). Distance Education: An International Journal: reflections on how it all began. Distance Education, 30(1):143-156.

Mossberger, K., Tolbert, C. and Stansbury, M. (2003). Virtual Inequality: Beyond the digital divide. Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press.

Mushi, P .S.D. (2001). Prospects of combining residential and distance mode of university education in Tanzania. In UTAFI (News Series Special Issue, Volume 4,1998-2004:221-255.

OECD. (2000). Beyond Rhetoric: Adult Learning Policies and Practices. Paris: OECD. Retrieved from. www.springerlink.com/.../gp636820v09671k2.pd. on 21/01/2012.

Paul. R. H (1999) *Open learning and open management: leadership and integrity in distance education* London: Kogan Paul 1 Nicholas publishing. New York.

Perraton. H. (1991) *The Management of distance learning system* Paris: UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Pityana, B.N. (2004). Open distance learning in Africa: Access, quality, and success. South Africa: UNISA.

Rao, S. S. (2006). Distance education and the role of IT in India. The Electronic Library, 24 (2), 225-236.

Rumble. G, (1989). *Open Learning, distance learning and the misuse of language*. Open learning June 28-35.

Saint, W. (1999). Tertiary distance education and technology in Sub-Saharan Africa. Washington DC: The World Bank: ADEA Working group on higher education.

Sherry, L. (1996). Issues in distance learning. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications, 1*(4), 337-65.

South Africa Institute for Distance Education (2001). What is Open Learning in *Shabani J. and Okebukola? P Guide to the development of materials for Distance Education* UNESCO –BREDA – Lagos Nigeria

Spector, J. M. (2009). Reconsidering the notion of distance in distance education. Distance Education. 30(1): 157-161.

UNESCO (2000a). The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments, adopted by the World Education Forum Dakar, Senegal, 26 28 April 2000, Paris: UNESCO

UNESCO (2004). Final report of the meeting of higher education partners (World Conference on Higher Education). Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2005). Final Report, World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal), Paris: UNESCO

United States Distance Learning Association (1998) Distance Learning *Definition (online) Available http:/www.usdla.org/pages/define.htm*

Volery, T. & Lord, D. (2000). Critical success factors in online education. The International Journal of Educational Management, 14 (5), 216-223.

Zirnkle, C. (2001). Access barriers in distance education. Contemporary education 72 (2), 39-42.

Zawacki-Richter, O. (2009). Research areas in distance education: a Delphi study. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 10*(3).

Zawacki-Richter, O., & von Prümmer, C. (2010). Gender and collaboration patterns in distance education research. *Open Learning, 25*(2), 95-114.

Zawacki-Richter, O., Bäcker, E. M., & Vogt, S. (2009). Review of distance education research (2000 to 2008): Analysis of research areas, methods, and authorship patterns. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning, 10*(6).