

The Self-Study Model of ODL: An Instigating Factor to Join and a Source to Develop Self Reliance Amongst the Learners

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Abstract: Evidence from all over the world especially developing countries have shown a rapid increase in enrolment of individuals under distance learning academic programmes. In today's modern world, one of the most important objectives of education is to produce such learners who could be self reliant for their learning process. ODL has been an instrumental educational strategy in reaching out masses from far flung areas to build their capacities. A worth mentioning example for this very achievement of ODL in Pakistan is Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). It is quite important to explore that what are the factors which instigate the masses towards joining ODL programmes and their impact on individuals' capacities. The paper is presenting the survey based view point of ODL students in Pakistan about a) the reasons for joining AIOU and b) the impact of this education on development of skills to organize their studies and assess the quality of their written work which enabled them to extract important themes and ideas from the specially developed printed study materials. Findings are made on the basis of data collected through interviews of randomly selected 250 AIOU students of different levels from its 03 regions (Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Saidu Sharif). It can be concluded that distinguishing features of AIOU which turn into reasons for females to join AIOU includes; opportunity of education while staying at home, lower fee structure, study while in service, no age limits and continuation of education after breaks. AIOU offers a wide range of courses/discipline which is also an important reason behind joining the institution. A vast majority mentioned that they have learned the skill of reading, organizing their study plan and preparing lessons and can do self assessment of their written work. These skills were developed because of compulsory written assignments for each and every course of the academic programmes. An area which requires some further and specialized efforts is related to the feedback provided to students by their tutors on the written assignments. The learners can enhance their reading and self evaluative capacities up to the extent, technical feedback is being provided. So, the distance learning methodology of AIOU has been enabling its beneficiaries, through its self study model, to develop self reliance and get education which otherwise is not accessible or feasible in conventional system.

Key words: AIOU • ODL education • Factors behind Joining ODL • Self Study Model • Self reliance

INTRODUCTION

Evidence from all over the world especially developing countries have shown a rapid increase in enrolment of individuals under distance learning academic programmes. In highly populated countries of the developing world, open and distance learning has been seen to offer very significant opportunities for education and training to the masses at large. In Pakistan only, many higher education institutions are converting to distance learning mode because of learners' trend of joining ODL programmes as preference. In addition, one

of the most important objectives of education in modern times is to produce such learners who could be self reliant for their learning process.

During the past few years it has been observed that complex social existence makes it difficult for people to cope-up successfully with different challenging situations in day to day life [1-10]. Among many reasons, one important reason of all such unavoidable situation seems to be in today's educational systems, which focusing only on the completion of a programme without bothering for the development of life skills in individuals to enable them to deal with the adverse situations in life.

The model of ODL by its methodology, as no full time teacher is available, assures compulsive self study and individual's efforts to learn by himself. The open and distance learning system because of its flexible and learner friendly features has the potential to enable the learners to deal with the issues of education without direct supervision of a teacher. As the enrolment of ODL different level educational programmes has increased many times in last decade so, it is quite important to explore the factors which instigate the masses towards joining ODL programmes.

Furthermore, the impact of the study on individuals' capacities is also needed to be assessed to measure the overall success of ODL programmes [2-4]. Allama Iqbal Open University is a national educational institution in Pakistan which offers academic programmes from Matric to PhD levels on ODL method. The paper is an attempt to find out the factors which instigate or attract masses in different areas of Pakistan to join different level educational programmes of Allama Iqbal Open University. It was also tried to assess if AIOU learners develop self reliance through their studies and improve their ability of self study and learn how to comprehend from printed study materials.

Objectives:

- To find out the factors which instigate individuals to join AIOU
- To assess if through ODL education, the learners feel they develop an ability to organize their studies on self help basis
- To explore if there is any role of ODL education from AIOU and development of capacity to assess the quality of written work and extract major ideas from it.

Literature Review: In today's time it has become difficult for many to pursue their education through conventional systems as the pressure of economy and social responsibilities does not allow this. According to UNESCO's Division of Higher Education report on ODL-Trends, Policy and Strategy Considerations (2002), the terms open learning and distance education means to focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. For many students open and distance learning is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities [5-6].

Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and examples of this growing confidence can be found in the nine high-population countries (referred to as the E-9 countries) i.e. Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan (UNESCO, 2001a, p.61).

Open and distance learning in China has significantly contributed to broadening access and opportunities especially to higher education. With the establishment of the Radio and TV University system (RTVU) in 1960, China became the first country to use radio and television to provide single mode distance higher education with unified planning. (Tait, A., 2000).

Distance education can be used at primary and secondary education levels to provide both in-school and out-of-school programmes. In-school distance education programmes are used to support teaching in schools when learning material is lacking. A variety of approaches are used, including Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI), schools radio, educational television through terrestrial and satellite networks, multimedia schemes delivered through satellite and Web-based delivery of multimedia schemes [7-10].

Bussakorn Cheawjindakarn (2012), in a paper "Critical Success Factors for Online Distance Learning in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature", in which total of 19 papers, published during 2000-2012, were selected, analyzed and synthesized the 5 factors: (1) institutional management, (2) learning environment, (3) instructional design, (4) services support and (5) course evaluation. Each of these 5 factors includes several important elements that can assist to enhance efficiency of online learning courses in higher education institutions.

According to Olivia (2008), statistics from open and distance learning institutions confirm the potential of open and distance learning in achieving parity in education between males and females. Theories of distance education has also outlined the underlying principles for using open and distance learning for educating women.

A small scale qualitative project by Jacqueline Baxter, (2012), using qualitative research methods and based in the Open University, UK revealed insights into factors linked to the expectations, identities and support of students which proved influential in terms of their resilience and motivation to remain on course and confirmed that capacity to progress from one level of study to another, is a key factor to be addressed in future studies of retention and progression within distance learning in higher education [7].

Table 1: Regional Break-up of the Respondents

S.No	Region	No. of Participants	Percentage
01.	Islamabad	100	40.0
02.	Rawalpindi	100	40.0
03.	Saidu Sharif	50	20.0
	Total	250	100.0

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Area: The AIOU has administratively divided Pakistan in to different regions. The paper, covers the opinions of AIOU students from its three regions.

Population: AIOU students of different levels from Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Saidu Sharif regions. The regions were selected purposively, as the major share of AIOU students comes from Punjab and KP provinces so the Rawalpindi and Saidu Sharif were selected to represent the provinces. Islamabad was selected because of two reasons 1) being capital, the population of Islamabad contains representation from all the Pakistani areas and sub-cultures 2) students from different areas of Pakistan especially AJK and GB are called to attend their workshops in Islamabad, so the respondents from different parts of the country can be reached.

Sample: Sample size was 250- The study subjects were selected randomly with the following regional break-up.

Tool of Data Collection: An Interview Schedule was developed for the purpose of data collection in which both open and closed ended questions were asked to get the relevant data.

Data Collection: Interviews were directly conducted by the researcher in the mentioned AIOU regional offices to ensure detailed responses related to the research question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Backgrounds of the Respondents: The demographic data related to study respondents revealed that 80% respondents were from Punjab province and rest 20% were from other provinces with the major share from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Among respondents, 74% were from urban areas where as 26% of the total sample was from rural areas. Furthermore, the vast majority of the respondents were middle aged between 20-40 years and 55% were living in joint family. To cover the opinion

from students of different levels, it was tried to interview students of different classes. Data shows that the share of students from graduate and postgraduate level remained 59% and 41% respectively in the study sample. The respondent's maximum years of affiliation with AIOU was about 8 years and minimum time period of affiliation with the institution was about 1 ½ years. This shows that the opinions of the respondents are mostly based on their personal experiences and observation.

Factors behind Joining AIOU: The respondents were asked to know about the factors behind selection of AIOU for their studies. The main question was divided in to two parts. Initially the respondents were asked to respond to the eleven statements on a five point Likert's scale. These were asked to know the general opinion of respondents about why a large number of people have been getting enrolled with the AIOU. In the second part of the question, the respondents shared their personal reasons behind selecting and joining AIOU as educational institution. Education is considered as a significant instrument for the socio-economic development of any society. By knowing the factors, we can further enhance the access of masses towards education at different levels.

Results present that 92% respondents mentioned that AIOU offers the opportunity of education while staying at home and this is a very strong factor especially for women or those men who due to any reason could not physically attend any institution. This is an inbuilt strength of the ODL method which enables those to pursue their education who are otherwise denied this right. In response to the second statement 50% of the respondents mentioned that AIOU charges lesser fee than other universities that's why people prefer this institution.

Another reason behind joining AIOU was that it provides an opportunity to study while in service as 91% of the respondents mentioned this as a reason for joining of AIOU by the people. AIOU educational system allows continuing of education after a certain period of time. The analysis shows that 90% respondents agreed that this significant aspect of AIOU's education makes it feasible for many to continue education. Both of these factors are related to the ODL methodology which conventional institutions lack. Furthermore, 66% respondents mentioned that students join this university because it permits to extend the completion period of a program as per convenience of the students.

Table 2: Opinion about Reasons of Seeking Admission in AIOU Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Uncertain (UNC), Disagree (DA), Strongly Disagree (SDA)

	Why seek admission at AIOU?	SA(%)	A(%)	UNC(%)	DA(%)	SDA(%)	Total(%)
I	AIOU offers the opportunity of education while staying at home	116(46.4)	113(45.4)	7(2.9)	5(1.9)	9(3.4)	250(100.0)
li	AIOU charges lesser fee than other Universities	38(15.3)	88(35.0)	36(14.3)	61(24.4)	27(11.0)	250(100.0)
iii	It provides an opportunity to study while in service	145(58.0)	82(32.6)	5(2.0)	7(2.8)	11(4.6)	250(100.0)
iv	AIOU educational system allows continuing of education after a certain period of time	116(46.5)	110(43.7)	11(4.5)	5(2.2)	8(3.1)	250(100.0)
V	It is comparatively easy to pass AIOU Examination	38(15.0)	71(28.3)	33(13.4)	75(29.9)	33(13.3)	250(100.0)
vi	AIOU permits one to extend the completion period of a program	39(15.6)	127(50.7)	38(15.2)	30(12.2)	16(6.3)	250(100.0)
vii	The materials provided in AIOU are self sufficient for their studies	46(18.3)	122(48.8)	23(9.2)	40(16.0)	19(7.6)	250(100.0)
viii	Choices of universities are limited	44(17.7)	107(42.9)	33(13.2)	48(19.1)	18(7.1)	250(100.0)
ix	AIOU offers education with no age restrictions	128(51.0)	103(41.3)	8(3.3)	4(1.7)	7(2.7)	250(100.0)
X	To get promotion/improve their employment status	106(42.2)	116(46.3)	12(4.9)	8(3.3)	8(3.3)	250(100.0)
xi	AIOU offers a wide range of courses/ discipline	76(30.3)	124(49.5)	23(9.2)	21(8.5)	6(2.5)	250(100.0)

Now days due to rapidly changing life styles and improvement in quality standards, every ones wants to improve his/ her socio-economic status which is usually not possible without education. On the other hand education is quite demanding with reference to time and resources and ODL comes as the most feasible strategy to reach out those who otherwise could not access the education due to economic and social responsibilities. It was directly asked that whether people get admission in AIOU to get promotion/improve their employment status? The results show that a vast majority (89%) of the respondents were agreed that education enhances one's skills and definitely brings progress in professional existence.

There is limited number of conventional universities in Pakistan and persons from many parts of the world do not have sufficient options for study. In present study, 60% respondents mentioned this as reason behind getting enrolled at AIOU. Especially for women it is more difficult to go for higher education institutions far from their cities of residence. It was also asked whether a perception of "comparatively easy to pass AIOU exams" was a reason for students to join this university. Responses showed a mixed trend as 43% agreed and the same number did not agree with this. It was highlighted that the other reasons are more important than this one. The ones' who mentioned the ease to pass exams as reasons said that in comparison to other institutions it is comparatively easy to pass the exams especially at Matric and Intermediate levels.

Another statement asked was, do they think that study materials provided by AIOU are self-sufficient for studies and it is a reason behind selection of AIOU? Data showed that majority (67%) of the respondents were agreed because they do not need to be worried for

purchasing books and they get comprehensive instructions based study materials so they could be able to study on their own.

AIOU offers a wide range of courses/discipline in contrary with other educational institutions. 80% respondents agreed with that the higher number of subject options at intermediate, graduation and masters' level is among the reasons for its preference. At last, 92% of the respondents were agreed that those who could not receive or complete formal education due to any reason can join any time in their lives AIOU educational programmes.

Table 3 shows the respondents' personal reason for seeking admission at AIOU. Table indicates that among important reasons one was "it provides an opportunity to study while in service." 26.8% of the respondents reported this reason for getting enrolled with AIOU. They highlighted that the tutorial and assignments based methodology of AIOU make it possible for them to make their dream of getting education come true. 16% of the respondents agreed with the statement that AIOU offers the opportunity of education while staying at home. AIOU educational system allows continuing of education after a certain period of time and 10.8% respondents mentioned this reason for joining AIOU. The fee structure of AIOU is very reasonable and affordable for many. Findings show that 8.4% of the respondents selected AIOU for their studies because of lower fee.

It was mentioned by the students that they do not need to buy any books or study materials as well as there is no need of spending money for transportation charges for attending classes on daily basis. In this way, they feel the educational strategy of AIOU more economically feasible. We can generally observe a very high prevalence of underemployment in Pakistani society and to improve

Table 3: Distribution of the Respondents by Reasons for getting Admission in AIOU

	Reasons for getting admission at AIOU	Frequency	Percent
Ii	AIOU offers the opportunity of education while staying at home	40	16.0
Ii	AIOU charges lesser fee than other universities	21	8.4
iii	It provides an opportunity to study while in service	67	26.8
iv	AIOU educational system allows continuing of education after a certain period of time	27	10.8
V	It is comparatively easy to pass AIOU exams	5	2.0
vi	AIOU permits one to extend the completion period of a program	18	7.2
vii	The materials provided in AIOU are self sufficient for their studies	17	6.8
viii	Choices of conventional universities are limited	15	6.0
ix	AIOU offers education with no age restrictions	8	3.2
X	To get promotion/improve their employment status	20	8.0
xi	AIOU offers a wide range of courses/discipline in contrary with other educational institutions	12	4.8
	Total	250	100.0

Table 4: Learning of Personal skills through Self-study Courses

	Personal skills learnt through self-study courses	To Some Extent	To Great Extent	Not at All	Total
i	Organizing own study plans	123(48.9)	117(46.9)	10(4.3)	250(100.0)
ii	Reading	86(34.4)	152(60.8)	12(4.8)	250(100.0)
iii	Preparing own lessons	90(36.3)	150(59.9)	10(3.8)	250(100.0)
iv	Self-assessment of own written work	95(37.8)	143(57.2)	12(5.0)	250(100.0)
v	Using theoretical knowledge learned from books in the work situation	136(54.5)	96(38.5)	18(7.1)	250(100.0)
vi	Actively participating in decision making process at family or at community level	123(49.1)	98(39.0)	29(11.8)	250(100.0)

one's employment status, education can play a vital role but getting education with full time job is not possible in many situations. In this scenario, AIOU provides an opportunity for making it possible. In present study, 8% of the respondents told that the reason for studying from AIOU is that they are working and this institution's educational methodology makes it feasible for them to study. The other major reasons for joining the university by the students include in AIOU usually there is no restriction on completion period of a degree, the material provided by AIOU is self sufficient and comparatively easy to understand, the university offers a wide range of courses and one can get a course of his/ her interest. In addition, one can get admission at any age in almost any academic programme so when an individual realizes that he/ she should get further education any time in the life, AIOU is there to accept the person. Following table shows the details:

Development of Personal Skills and Self Reliance Through AIOU Courses: It was tried to assess the opinions of the study subjects regarding effectiveness of different components of AIOU over all study package. The focus was given to explore if studies from AIOU enhance any personal skills of the respondents and reduce their traditional dependence on teacher. The

analysis of the data given in table 4 shows that a vast majority (93%) of the respondents were having the view that education from AIOU has improved their understanding about daily life matters. They positively utilize their educational skills for performing different tasks more efficiently. It was observed that unlike students from conventional schools, even the students of secondary and higher secondary level was found with the view that they can find answers to their queries on their own from books.

They further mentioned that by writing their compulsory assignments they had to go through most of the study material. This enables them to understand abstract concepts and technical parts of the courses which otherwise students cannot comprehend on their own. The respondent's opinion about their learning of personal skills as students of AIOU's self-study courses demonstrates that (96%) agreed to some or great extent with the help of courses they have learnt the skill of organizing study plans. By this they can break the curriculum in parts and cover the whole in specified time frame of a semester. Responses further revealed that more than 90% study subjects mentioned that AIOU's self-study courses have enhanced their skill of reading, ability to prepare lessons and self-assessment of own written work.

Data further presented that the ODL methodology of AIOU has enabled its students, by providing high quality reading materials and compulsory assignments, to use the theoretical knowledge in their work. It was found through the responses of (88%) respondents that development of skills and self confidence through education ultimately results in a pro-active participation of AIOU students in decision making process at family or at community level. It was further asked to know that which type of changes the respondents feel that the study had brought in their self. On the basis of Analysis of the respondents it can further be synthesized that, due to improvement in education, the students feel more confident in assuming different responsibilities given to them by the people in their surroundings. They mentioned that this ability is the result of education from AIOU as before that they were afraid of doing new things. They always felt scared of not coming up to the expectations of others whenever they were asked to do something.

It was also found out by the analysis of the data that another skill developed by education from AIOU was the ability of farsightedness at least related to the further course of academic studies. The reason found out was the AIOU's distinctive feature of course offering from below Matric level to PhD. Many respondents were students of AIOU for their second or third certificate/ degree and most of others were having clear future vision of studies. It is mainly the result of offering of same and related subjects from Matric to Masters Level that a student who gets enrolled in any subject has an option of continuing the studies in same field for higher levels.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that AIOU has a number of features in its instructional model which attract masses especially working people and those women who otherwise could not reach out the conventional education facilities. The major reasons which reportedly turned into reasons for students to join AIOU include; opportunity of education while staying at home, studying while in service and no age limits for admission. People also feel comfortable in getting enrolled with AIOU because it is also comparatively economical with a wide range of courses/disciplines available.

The study further found that majority of the respondents was of the view that the education from AIOU has turned quite beneficial for them and they have

developed certain skills through it. It was reported that the skill of reading, organizing the study plan and preparing of lessons has been enhanced because of their education. The students of AIOU are of the view that they can do assessment of their written work and comprehend from the larger written text. These skills were developed because of compulsory written assignments for each and every course of the academic programmes. The learners can enhance their reading and self evaluative capacities up to the extent, technical feedback is being provided by the tutors. So the capacity building of tutors regarding communication skills and teaching methodologies can further enhance the effectiveness of AIOU programmes.

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