System Assessment Mechanism in Open Distance Learning:
A Case Study of Allama Iqbal Open University

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Abstract

Present study aims to explore the system assessment mechanism of Open Distance Learning (ODL) system followed by Allama Iqbal Open University. It further purports to find out the perception of teachers and students about the system assessment in instructional design mechanism of ODL. Present study was descriptive in nature and survey design was used. Population of the study comprised students and faculty members of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad. By using convenient sampling technique, data was collected through questionnaire from 100 teachers and 300 students. Three point Likert scale was developed by researchers which consists of five subscales including Course Development, Course Delivery, Admission Procedure, Student Support Service and Assessment and Evaluation. Questionnaire consists of 30 statements and its Cronbach Alpha reliability was .81. Findings of the study revealed that ODL system in AIOU comprised five major dimensions while some of those need improvement. It is recommended that AIOU may develop a framework of assessment based on systematic process of identifying, analyzing and assessing the present needs and issues of students and university by shifting its trend towards online workshops and assignments on Learning Management System (LMS), etc.

Keywords*: Assessment, Learning Management System, Open Distance Learning.*

Introduction

In the current era of rapid growth and information technology, the facility of higher education is not limited to developed urban areas only but it has also reached to far reaching remote areas with the help of online education system. The access to affordable high-quality university education for all men and women is also a global goal to achieve till 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Assessment and evaluation practices, the core components of teaching process, have strong impact on the content and methods of student learning. They play a key role in helping students to become self-regulating (learning guided by meta-cognition), reflective, and independent learners which in turn make them able to conduct high-level assessments of lifelong learning for themselves and others. Distance education aims to focus teaching methods and techniques designed to provide instruction to students who are unable to attend traditional classroom lectures (Williams, 2003).

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Keeping in view the limitations such as time constraints, work as well as family responsibilities of the students, many of the academic institutions in the world have introduced online or distance education system. Some institutions rely on distance education to reduce capacity constraints and increase the number of students while others do it as a business (Hussain, 2018). However, there is a dire need to determine the success of such system through effective and planned assessment. The concept of assessment involves the process of determining the value of the experience perceived by the students. At higher education level, students usually evaluate the course experience, course content, materials and teaching methods. In distance education, the students' course experience is influenced by the delivery methods employed and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies designed to create social interactions in the virtual environment. Therefore, the distance process is promising in terms of performance as it does not follow the same procedures as the traditional face to face classrooms environment does (Boud, 2000).

Open and distance learning (ODL) in Asia Pacific has many unique characteristics. The most notable feature is the large number of students at ODL. Approximately 7 out of 10 ODL institutions in the Asian Pacific region are larger universities (over 100,000 in-service students in degree programs). There are more than 5.6 million active students in AIOU (Pakistan), Anadolu (Turkey), CCRTVU (China), IGNOU (India), KNOU (South Korea), STOU (Thailand), UT (Indonesia) and PNU (Iran). The change is because of the rapid growth of ICT usage. According to a report released by the International Telecommunications Union (2004), the growth rates of fixed-line, mobile and Internet users in Asia Pacific over the past few years have exceeded the single-digit growth rates in other regions. The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has made the process and functioning of ODL easier as most of the institutions use ICT as a tool for improving student services.

Literature Review

Today's educational system is predominantly marks-oriented as every tier of education, from kindergarten to higher education, is based on the evaluations and assessments which aim to determine grades. This phenomenon is partly driven by policy makers who look for apparent results from educational programs while ignore its latent and long term outcomes. Over the past decade, distance education programs around the world have gained popularity and appreciation by the beneficiaries. Accordingly, many universities and other higher education institutions have started distance education programs to expand their market reach and provide affordable education for people who are not be able to receive higher education due to geographic, financial and family restrictions. The distance education program also seeks to engage teachers who are not able to teach regularly and it also connects students from different socioeconomic strata and various cultural backgrounds (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

Adult learning is different from children's learning. Educators use the term "andragogy" (method and practice of teaching adult learners) to identify the art and science of adult teaching. Most of adult learners often seek learning opportunities to cope with life changes; they often want to learn ways to improve their status. They are not always interested in knowledge. These adults bring a wealth of information and experience to the learning environment. They usually want to be treated equally and are open for a self-directed academic learning. Adult learners tend to be self-directed both in the classroom and in the distance learning environment; their teachers guide them to master their knowledge rather than providing them with facts. This is more evident in distance learning environments where teachers cannot use face-to-face Socratic teaching styles (cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals) or knowledge based on group participation and class discussion. However, distance education is a learner-centered assessment as well as a learning tool that goes beyond certification and degrees (Brown, 2011).

Numerous open online courses are now available and are popular because of their accessibility and potential benefits. Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and Open Educational Resourses (OER) are the most popular courses which gained quick popularity in distance learning system. Extensive development of MOOCs was launched in 2008 and became a widely accepted form of learning in 2012 (Bozkurt, 2015). The Learning Management System (LMS) is a software application for managing, recording, reporting and tracking instructional programs, classroom as well as online activities, e-learning programs and training content (Ryann, 2009). Many educational institutions have implemented versions of learning management systems, such as WebCT, Moodle, Blackboard Learn and e-Portal which provide users the informative and educational platforms equipped with visual impacts to help them maintain their connections with educational experiences.

These concepts focus on assessing the potential benefits that can be brought to students learning process, as well as using assessment (action of assessing someone or something) methods that assess students as learners. The assessment function also determines the learning process (Webber, 2012). Higher education assessments influence students' learning in a variety of ways (Simms & George, 2014). The way such assessment is conducted not only affects students' learning but also influences and anticipates their modes of learning (Johnston & Miles, 2004). The way teachers look at assessments affects their assessment practices and the way they relate these practices to the teaching process. Evaluation (making of a judgment about the amount, value and number of something) can take many forms. Formative assessments are conducted during educational activities for continuous improvement, while summative assessments are conducted at the end of educational activities to measure outcomes. Educators believe that any technology-based learning which is one of the most important characteristics of the environment is the ability

to assess knowledge acquisition and retention to meet the needs of students (Fletcher, 2012).

The main goal of the Allama Iqbal Open University is to provide educational opportunities for people and those who cannot leave their jobs and families. It has opened up opportunities of obtaining education for working-class as well as for women at homes. Allama Iqbal Open University develops and has its own instructional design process. Department level curriculum committees and faculty committees are made for the development of courses. The monetary decisions of these committees are made by the Academic Planning and Development Committee, while decisions on research and media are passed on to the research and technical boards. When appropriate, the proceedings are sent to the Academic and Administrative Committee for final decision and enforcement. The university is based on distance education and methods of its instructional design include self-study of printed texts and supplemental materials, broadcasted material via television and radio, academic seminars, course assignments, tutorial support, and other technical assistance. Allama Iqbal Open University is a distance education institution that offers a variety of programs ranging from academic to the professional across the country.

The instructional design of the Allama Iqbal Open University is an orderly method for the development of curriculum guidance for students. In May 2011, an instructional design center was established with the goal of developing comprehensive technical guidance, assessment methods, revision and upgradation of courses, and improving media-based instructional techniques. The main task of the center is to devise the high-quality instruction materials which should not violate the assessment standards designed at national or international level. It also focuses on the development of new instructional designs and organizing the training of media developers, mentors, academicians, course developers, scholars, and researchers. In addition, the development of policy guidelines and the inclusion of printed materials in technology-based learning are central goals and functions of this center. The Instructional Design System of Allama Iqbal Open University was revised alongwith modern technology tools to provide learners with online staff reports in their environment.

Objectives

1. To explore the system assessment mechanism of ODL system as followed by AIOU.
2. To find out the perception of teachers and students about the system assessment in mechanism of ODL system as followed by AIOU.

Research Questions

1. What is the system assessment mechanism as followed by AlOU?

2. What is the perception of teachers and students about the system assessment in ODL system as followed by AIOU?

Research Design

Present study was descriptive in nature and survey design was used. Population of the study comprised students and faculty members of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad. By using convenient sampling technique data was collected through questionnaire from 100 teachers and 300 students. Five point Likert scale was developed by researchers which consists of five subscales including Course Development, Course Delivery, Admission Procedure, Student Support Service and Assessment and Evaluation. Questionnaire consists of 30 statements with a Cronbach Alpha reliability of .81. Originally data was gathered on 5 point Likert scale but during interpretation, options of 'Strongly Agree and Agree' were merged together while options of 'Disagree and Strongly Disagree' were merged for a clear picture of the opinion of the respondents.

Results

Table 1   *Status of Course Development Process (N=400)*

	Course Development	Agree %	Disagree %	Unaware %
1	My institution offers online courses.	43	41	16
2	Course goals, learning objectives and outcomes are made clear in courses.	81	17	2
3	Print material is provided by institute in form of books and notes.	56	41	3
4	Books are available online in soft form on university webpage.	40	43	17
5	Courses are well organized and need based.	77	18	5

Table No. 1 shows practice of course development which is one of the main dimensions of instructional design mechanism. Considering the first question about offering online courses, 43% respondents agreed and 41% didn't agree. Regarding statement two majority of respondents i.e. 81% agreed that course goals, learning objectives and outcomes are made clear. 56% of the respondents agreed that institutions provide print material in form of books and notes. Majority of respondents i.e. 43% didn't agree about the availability of online books in soft form by university. 77% respondents believed that courses are well organized. The overall result of this dimension depicted that there were some practices on which respondents agreed and there were some on which they didn't.

Table 2   *Status of Course Delivery Process (N=400)*

	Course Delivery	Agree %	Disagree %	Unaware %
6	Learning Management System (LMS) facility is available for students.	67	23	10
7	Instruction television and radio is used for delivery of lectures.	23	68	9
8	Stored lecture notes on CD-ROM are available for students.	30	59	11
9	Skype and other related networking sites are used for live lectures and conversations with instructors.	23	66	11
10	Teleconferencing is conducted frequently.	25	60	15
11	On-campus workshops are conducted for each course separately.	54	37	9

Table 2 describes the opinion of respondents related with the practice of course delivery by AIOU. On first statement 67% respondents agreed that Learning Management System (LMS) facility is available for students. Statement no. 7 inquires about the use of instructional television for delivery of lectures and 68% respondents showed their disagreement regarding this statement. 59% responded that recorded lectures on CDs are not available. On statement no. 9 majority of the respondents i.e. 66% disagreed about the usage of Skype and other networking sites for live lectures and conversations with instructors. Majority disagreed regarding practice of teleconferencing and 54% respondents agreed that on-campus workshops are conducted for each course separately.

Table 3   *Status of Admission Procedure Process (N=400)*

	Admission Procedure	Agree %	Disagree %	Unaware %
12	Institute informed about admission procedure through advertisement on social media.	69	22	9
13	Admission procedure is clear to understand.	84	13	3
14	Proper guidance is provided by the institute administration whenever needed regarding admission queries.	82	14	4
15	Entry test is mandatory to clear for admission.	79	19	2
16	Admission fee is affordable.	67	31	2

Table 3 shows practice of admission procedure by AIOU. 69% respondents agreed that institute informed about admission procedure through advertisement on social media. Majority of the respondents i.e., 84% agreed that admission procedure was easy to understand while regarding statement 14, 82% agreed that guidance was provided by institute's administration about admission queries. 79% agreed that entry test was mandatory for admission and 67% were of the view that admission fee was affordable.

Table 4   *Status of Student Support Services (N=400)*

	Student Support	Agree	Disagree	Unaware
17	Social media (Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, etc.) is used by university to convey information about activities.	57	34	9
18	Access to external websites is provided by the university.	54	34	12
19	Technical support is provided by institute when I encountered difficulties related with my online course.	39	49	12
20	Face-to-face and online academic counseling (tutoring) is available.	50	35	15
21	E-learning portal is established by the institute.	41	41	18
22	SMS information service is available for students by university.	63	30	7
23	Call center is operational for addressing queries.	46	35	19

Table 4 shows practice of students' support by distance education institutions of Pakistan. 57% respondents agreed that university uses social media to convey information, 54% responded that university provides access to external websites, 49% disagreed regarding the provision of technical support in case of difficulties related with online course. 50% responded that academic counseling is available in both online and face to face modes, on the other hand 35% disagreed on this. On statement 21 almost 41% responded that e-learning portal is established by university but 41% showed their disagreement on this. 63% response rate was positive regarding the availability of SMS information service practice for students. 46% respondents agreed that call center is operational for addressing queries. The overall result regarding practices of students' support services by distance education institutions is not much satisfactory as there are different aspects on which majority of respondents didn't agree.

Table 5   *Status of Assessment and Evaluation Process (N=400)*

	Assessment and Evaluation	Agree %	Disagree %	Unaware %
24	Online practice questions and tests sessions are available for students	35	52	13
25	Standards for evaluation of assignments are made clear.	70	20	10
26	Plagiarism of assignments is checked.	66	23	11
27	Grading policy clearly defines expectations for the course and respective assignments.	73	16	12
28	The assessment instruments are detailed and appropriate to the student work and respective outcomes being assessed.	64	20	16
29	Proper feedback is provided by tutors about assignments and exams.	80	14	6
30	System is updated on the basis of regular feedback by student.	64	26	11

Table 5 shows practice of assessment and evaluation by AIOU. 52% respondents disagreed regarding availability of online practice questions and tests sessions but majority i.e. 70% agreed that standards for evaluation of assignments are made clear. 66% respondents agreed that plagiarism of assignments is checked by universities. Majority of respondents i.e. 73% agreed that expectations for the courses and respective assignments are clearly defined. 64% respondents agreed that assessment tools are detailed and quite related to the course work and respective outcomes being assessed. Majority 80% agreed that proper feedback is provided by tutors about assignments and exams. On the last statement, 64% showed their agreement that system is updated on the basis of regular feedback by student.

Findings

1. Practice of course development, one of the main dimensions of instructional design followed by AIOU, is not much up to mark. There are many factors behind including offering online courses, provision of print material in form of books and notes, and availability of online books in soft form on which majority of respondents disagreed. Overall result of this dimension depicted that there are some practices on which respondents agreed while on others they didn't.

2. Findings of the study related to the practice of course delivery by AIOU revealed that majority of the respondents didn't agree with availability of different course delivery practices such as use of media sources for delivering lectures, recorded lecture on CDs, usage of Skype and other networking sites for live lectures, discussions with instructors and practice of teleconferencing.

3. Findings regarding practice of admission procedure by AIOU showed that some of the respondents agreed with current admission procedure which includes provision of admission related information through advertisement on social media, addressing admission queries, information about entry test and admission fee but majority was not satisfied with the aforementioned services.

4. Regarding practice of students' support by AIOU, findings revealed that most of the respondents agreed that SMS information service is provided and university uses social media to convey information. Call centre of university is operational and almost fifty per cent of the respondents agreed that academic counselling is available online and face to face as well. Majority disagreed regarding the provision of technical support in case of difficulties related to online course i.e., unavailability of e-learning portal by the university.

5. Findings related to the practice of assessment and evaluation revealed that majority of respondents disagreed regarding availability of online sample test. Some respondents agreed that standards for evaluation of assignments are made clear, plagiarism of assignments is checked, expectations for the course and respective assignments are clearly defined, and assessment instruments are detailed and appropriate to understand by the students. Moreover, respective outcomes are being assessed, proper feedback is provided by tutors about assignments and exams and system is updated on the basis of regular feedback by students.

Discussion

Present study tries to grasp perception of students and teachers of Allama Iqbal Open University regarding methodologies of assessment and evaluation. Henckell (2007) conducted a study to know about the opinion of students enrolled in Open Distance Learning system regarding the evaluation methods which revealed that students wanted thorough modifications in the entire evaluation system. Kim, Smith and Maeng (2008) researched three programs of distance education and found that assessment activities of distance education courses were not strictly followed as they should have been. They found a lack of harmony between the assessment tools and poor opportunity for online discussion and group work while the only facility observed was availability of assessment for cognitive skills.

There were five major indicators examined in this study. Study found that majority of respondents agreed on a variety of components of course development including offering online courses, provision of print material in form of books and notes, and availability of online books in soft form on which. Regarding the practice of course delivery such as use of instructional television for delivery of lectures, recorded lectures on CDs, usage of Skype and other sites for live lectures and conversations with instructors

as well as practice of teleconferencing, majority of the respondents didn't agree. Regarding practice of admission procedure some of the respondents agreed with ongoing different practices of admission procedure which i.e., provision of information about admission procedure through advertisement on social media, clarity of admission procedure to understand, provision of guidance by institute's administration regarding admission queries, entry test information and admission fee.

Regarding practice of students' support, results are not much satisfactory as majority of respondents didn't agree to provision of technical support, addressing the difficulties related to online courses and making the e-learning portal functional by the university. Mowes (2005) evaluated students' support services in open and distance learning and concluded that students were facing many problems like communicating with their tutors, having clear orientation of distance setup, getting information regarding books and learning material. He found that they were of the opinion that students' support service was very much important to solve their issues so it must be functional. Lee (2003) in his study concluded that there was lack of learner-centered approach in developing and practicing student support services in distance education systems. Practice of assessment and evaluation is a very important indicator on which majority disagreed regarding availability of online practice questions and tests sessions, clarity of standards for evaluation of assignments, plagiarism of assignments as well as proper feedback about assignments, exams and system.

Findings reflect that Allama Iqbal Open University adopts Formative and Summative assessment techniques where Formative technique comprises written assignments, workshops and mid-term examination while in Summative evaluation, a formal traditional final-term exam is taken. Final GPA is prepared on the basis of all components. Written tests are the most common method of assessment and evaluation in Allama Iqbal Open University. Group work, reports, research and assignments are also used but less frequently. Findings revealed that overall assessment is based on subjective pattern, even examination system also consists of subjective questions which is one of the drawbacks. Teachers and students recognize the importance of assessment methods that allow for continuous assessment, guidance, and monitoring of learning and skills development while some favored student-centered assessment methods. Some of them were of the view that traditional methods promote memory rather than knowledge, however, written testing remains the most common method for participants to determine. As described by Ramsden (2004), there is no single method that meets all educational goals, so the diversity and balance of assessment methods is a key issue for innovation and improved assessment practices. Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) researched on the orientation of teacher assessment practice which showed that teachers believe that the purpose of assessment is to support students' learning and feedback.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that AIOU may develop a framework of student support by establishing a systematic process of identifying, analyzing and assessing the present needs and issues of students.

2. By keeping in view the need of time, it is recommended to establish ICT based online assessment and evaluation tools (i.e., on-line examination and e-portfolio) for the students which may be objective in nature rather than the on-going subjective one.

3. It is recommended to make a proportionate for all components in formative and summative assessment and online assessment technique should be introduced for practicing e-assessment.

4. University may shift its trend towards online workshops, assignments on Learning Management System (LMS) and e. assessments, etc.

5. It is recommended that rather than subjective examinations they should be objective in nature.

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