The Need and Prospects of Distance Education in the Higher Education Sector of Pakistan

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Abstract

The following study aims to create awareness among the stake holders of education that the time has come to take serious interest in promoting Online Education /Distance learning in Pakistan, which is still very much, an unexplored area in Pakistan. A critical analysis is done on the need and future prospects of online education in the context of higher education in Pakistan. The paper highlights the new dimensions and emerging opportunity areas that are there to tap for the entrepreneurs, educationists, social scientists and students. Currently around 1.5 million students are enrolled in different universities in Pakistan. The majority of these enrollments are in on-campus courses. In addition, a good number of students every year get themselves enrolled in on-campus courses of foreign universities. In this scenario the introduction of Distance Education in Pakistan would have multiple benefits for all the stake holders; the introduction would open new doors for the Pakistani students, it would be an opportunity for the international universities to make inroads in the Pakistani market, local universities would be compelled to raise educational standards and provide quality services to students, new jobs would be created for the educated class of Pakistan and above all it would promote the higher education in Pakistan.

However, all this would depend on two major factors: the cost of the courses offered and the national and international accreditation of the degrees which are offered.   For this efforts should be made to convince the international universities to come up with special discounted packages for the Pakistani market and at the same time the Pakistan Government should play its role in promoting this new medium of education in Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Gone are the days when the conventional model of face to face education was the only option available particularly to the students of higher education. Many universities of the world are now successfully running Distance Learning programs as millions of students across the world are benefitting from the blessings of the technology. As Saba (2005) while defining the state of Distance Learning in the recent times argues that the field has recorded an unprecedented growth in the recent times and it is at a critical point in its historical evolution.

However, in Pakistan the situation is not the same as though there are two major Distance Education Universities namely Allama Iqbal Open University and Virtual University that are catering to masses as well but apart from these two universities no other major university is currently offering Distance Education degrees as still majority of the students particularly of urban areas prefer on campus courses only.

Similarly, when it comes to the research in Distance Learning one finds out that though a lot of scholarly work has been carried out on the subject throughout the world, however, there is hardly any research work available on the subject which is related to Pakistan.

OBJECTIVES

- To identify the benefits of Distance Education in the higher education sector of Pakistan.
- To determine the prospects of Distance Education in the Higher Education Sector of Pakistan.
- To sensitize the Stake holders of higher education on the need to take interest in the promotion and development of the Distance Education in Pakistan.

AIOU: Allama Iqbal Open University

Distance Education / Distance Learning: Distance education or distance learning is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not

physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Education delivered from a distance through a medium

HEC: Higher Education Commission of Pakistan

ICT: Information and Computer Technology

Likert Method: A method which is used to get the feedback from people on a given subject

Online Learning / Education: Education through internet

Stakeholders: People who are related with the field

VS: Virtual University

LITERATURE REVIEW

Saba (2005) illustrated that the field of Distance Education Distance education is currently at a critical stage in history as in the past decade there has been a record growth. Because of the backing of governments and leaders of technology most of the higher educational institutions have now been offering course for the distance learners. Even the laws have been amended in the recent times by the governments to support the field. In addition the advancements in technology are making distance learning more appealing and exciting.

According to Saba (2005) in the period of 1995 and 1997-98 the number of distance learners, around 754,000 jumped to 1.6 million (U.S. Department of education) and reached to an estimated number of more than 3.0 million in 2005. The growth in the field is 41% as per the survey conducted by Primary Research Group in 75 randomly selected higher education institutions. Still Distance Education could reach to only 8% of undergraduate students, and 10% of graduate students. (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Romero as cited in Jumani and Khan (2009) while describing the past and present status of distance education illustrated that when the system of Distance Learning came into existence in the seventies, it was often criticized; there was an argument that the mode of education does not fall into a university degree categorization domain; as the degrees were awarded by post. In the last world congress held in Sao Paolo in the year 2000, the mindset took a 360 degree turn as the questions were raised that how could a university be a real university without having Distance

Education System. In three decades, the concepts have been reversed due to the advancements in computing and telecommunication technologies. The trend is dominating that it is thought that in 10 years' time the 'traditional' universities will become non-existent (The Latin American Congress for Open and Distance Higher Education (AIESAD), Cartagena; August,2001).

The above highlights the place of distance education in the modern educational world. As the life has become fast and it is becoming difficult to attend regular classes. Education empowers individuals and nations and it's the only way to progress in modern times.

TRENDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Higher education plays a vital role in the economic and social development of any country. Isanias as cited in Jumani and Khan (2009) refers to a World Bank Report, 'Higher Education: The lesson of experiences', which emphasizes the importance of Higher Education in the economic and social development of a country as the higher education institutions are mainly responsible for preparing individuals for the positions of responsibility in governments and businesses.

Moreover, the Hanover Research (2011) indicated that that there is a growing demand of educational opportunities across the world and to realize this demand, the higher education institutes are progressively adding new services to their offerings. Now the conventional student base and the prospective adults to remain competitive in the job market need innovative and easily accessible methods to acquire knowledge and training this has made a new breed of global potential students has emerged as a result of globalization who demands flexible learning options where local options fail to meet the expectations of these students. The report also sheds light on the positioning of Distance Education in English speaking countries and then examines the key world players of the field. In addition, the report differentiates the traditional universities that are now offering online Distance Learning program to increase their market size with the universities that are dedicated to Distance Education only. The seven key players identified in Distance Learning are:

1. Open University UK
2. University of Derby

3. University of Maryland
4. Drexel University Online
5. Indonesia Open University - Universitas Terbuka
6. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)
7. University of South Africa (UNISA)

Trends of Distance Education in the UK

On the current Distance Learning Trends in the United Kingdom a study carried out by the Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning Team at the Oxford University. The following were the findings of the study:

- Most of the courses offered by the higher education institutions through Distance Learning are of postgraduate level.
- The trend remains the same for the courses offered b the higher education institutions in collaboration with commercial organization and that is the emphasizes is on postgraduate level education.
- The courses offered are targeted towards the continuous professional development specially the ones which are offered in by institutional/private sector partnerships, these are basically business oriented programs.
- A higher number of level 4 and level 5 courses that are offered lead to acquiring higher education. Most of these are standalone courses.
- The commonly offered programs are mostly of business, law, medicine, science, and
- education.

Current Distance Learning Trends in the United States

According to the findings of Hanover Report (2011) the trends of Distance Education in the US are completely different from those of the UK and rest of the World. According to The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report as cited in Hanover (2011) the undergraduate degrees have the largest percentage of fully-online programs this is followed by graduate level programs. The report highlights the type of online programs that are offered through Distance Learning. The public institutions of the US offer more Online programs as compared to private institutions. According to the statistics 97 percent of the

institutions offering two -year programs and 89 percent of the institutions that offer four year programs offer Distance Education programs. As size also has an impact on the offerings, as if those institutions having enrollments over 10,000 are mostly offering Distance Education programs as compared to the smaller institutions.

Future Trends in Distance Learning in the US

The Sloan Consortium's survey as cited in Hanover (2011), there is an increase in demand in Distance Education offerings as reported by many U.S. institutions. 74.5 percent of the institutions which participated in the survey reported an increase in the demand for online courses and programs. This is due to the economic downturn, whereas, a lesser number of institutions reported the increase in demand for face-to face programs.

According to Hanover (2011) The future market of Distance Education is brighter in developing countries because of the lack of infrastructure. According ICDE as cited in Hanover (2011) the number of post graduate institutions would not be able to meet the demands of rapidly increasing pollution in Asia, South America and Africa, therefore, the cost effective and highly efficient methods of Distance Education would likely to gain popularity in these regions.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Distance Learning is particularly helpful in spreading education in developing countries to low income groups of people who live in remote areas as discussed by Raj, N.A. (2000), "Distance education has taken systematic teaching - learning process to persons living in isolated areas where facilities for the traditional form of class room teaching cannot be developed. Further, as distance learning addresses the needs of specific target groups, there is a great variation in the range of programmes offered."

While discussing the situation in developing countries S. Manjulika and Reddy V.V (2000) illustrate that Distance Learning is successfully serving a range of disadvantaged groups, which regular learning has failed to do so. These groups include dropouts, older people, geographically isolated people, low income groups and people who cannot attend regular classes due to social and community related problems.

"In such cases the learning process is carried out through different mediums such as printed material, teaching and learning aids, audio-visual teaching aids, television, radio and computers." describes Ramajah R.Y (2001) "This type of facility to educate masses is particularly help for the Governments of the developing countries where due to economic pressures Governments look for alternate solutions" illustrated S Manjulika and Reddy V.V (1999).

Distance Education in India

In India according to the researchers the rate of adoption of Distance Learning is faster this is because of the legislation by the Government in which the one who earns an online degree will get a raise in both pay and pension. ICED report as cited in S Manjulika and Reddy (1999) gives the figures that 24 percent of all higher education students are enrolled in Distance Education institutions. Mostly in 13 national and state open universities and the 106 institutions, According to the study of Commonwealth study (2007) there is a high potential of Distance Education in India because of its pollution where young people aspire for higher education.

Distance Education in Africa

Africa is another region of high potential market for the Distance Education as the rate of higher education in the continent is below 45 percent and even far lesser in remote places like Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus it has been declared a land of great demand for higher education by the the Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa. Similarly, (UNISA), declared Africa as the region of highest demand for Distance Learning.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

In Pakistan there are two main universities catering the distance education sector of Pakistan, one is Allama Iqbal Open University and the second is Virtual University. Both the universities have bulk of the share of distance education students' market of Pakistan.

Allama Iqbal Open University

The Allama Iqbal Open University, is the First Distance Education University in South Asia, which looks after the educational needs of around 1.3 million through its distance learning offerings as cited in (www.aiou.edu.pk) The AIOU was the first Distance Education University

of Pakistan which was established in May, 1974. with the aim to spread education by providing access to education particularly to those who want to continue their education without having to attend classes at the university premises. This has opened doors for the working professionals and females by making education reach to their door steps. In this regard, since its inception, the first virtual university of Pakistan has played a key role over the years in spreading mass education in Pakistan. The Allama Iqbal Open University was established in 1974. At the time of establishment it was the second Open University of the world and the first in Asia and Africa. Since its inception, the university has played a major role in educating masses and has created opportunities for millions who benefitted from its distance education courses. One of the major achievements of the university is the empowerment of household girls and women of Pakistan through education, which is evident from the enrollment of students in the university, majority of which are females. Beside the empowerment of women, the University has been paying attention to the low cost professional and technical education in Pakistan which has become very costly in the resent years. Currently more than 2000 courses are being offered, the University has 9 regional campuses, 33 regional centres, 41 approved study centres(for face to face sessions) and 138 part time regional coordinating offices. It has the largest publishing house in Pakistan with over 1.8 million books printed annually.

Virtual University of Pakistan

The second prominent institution of Distance Education in Pakistan is the Virtual University of Pakistan. As cited in (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_University_of_Pakistan) the university is a public enterprise and the campuses of the university are located in urban areas of Punjab and Sindh.

The Virtual University was established in 2002 by the Government of Pakistan. The aim was to promote Distance Education using modern information and technology. The university offers range of undergraduate and post graduate programs in many discipline of business, economics, computer sciences and information technology. The university uses both Television and Internet for delivering lectures. Through internet the students enrolled and residing overseas also attend online courses. The institution holds a federal charter and it is recognized by the Higher

Education Commission of Pakistan Since its inception in 2002, the university has experienced unprecedented growth as now it is operational in more than one hundred cities of Pakistan and many associated members institutions providing services and support to students.

The history and the achievements of Virtual University of Pakistan:

- Feasibility study was completed in December, 2001
- The inauguration was held on 23rd March 2002
- Federal Charter granted in September 2002
- The broadcasting started on VUs dedicated TV channels on June 15, 2004
- The first lectures on YouTube was put in November, 2005
- MCS, MIT and MBA programs were introduced in March 2006
- Launched two new dedicated TV channels in September 2006
- VS got the Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) membership in. November 2006
- Launched of MS in Computer Science in 2007
- Launched B.A., B.Com., B.Sc. (2-year programs) in 2009
- Developed its dedicated LMS (Learning Management System) in 2009
- The first Convocation was held in May 2010 at Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Jamshoro, Karachi and Quetta simultaneously.
- The HEC recognizes the university in Category 'W' which is the highest in university ranking in Pakistan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to determine the need and prospects of Distance Education in the higher education sector of Pakistan. It is a descriptive study in which a questionnaire is used as a research tool and the primary data is collected from a selected sample of 150 respondents on Likert scale. The questionnaire consisted of three variables benefits, prospect and the need of stakeholders. The respondents were asked to give their opinion on six statements for each of the three main variables.

ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE

The pie-charts below are the macro representation of the three main variables 1) Benefits of Distance Education in the Higher Education Sector of Pakistan 2) Prospects of Distance Education in the Higher Education Sector of Pakistan 3) The Need for the stakeholders of Higher Education to take interest in the Distance Education of Pakistan.

1: Benefits of Distance Education in Pakistan

| Q No.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1	41	79	13	17	-	150
2	29	42	5	49	25	150
3	36	74	13	13	14	150
4	37	78	9	18	8	150
5	32	93	-	18	7	150
6	29	86	16	16	3	150
Total	204	452	56	131	57	900
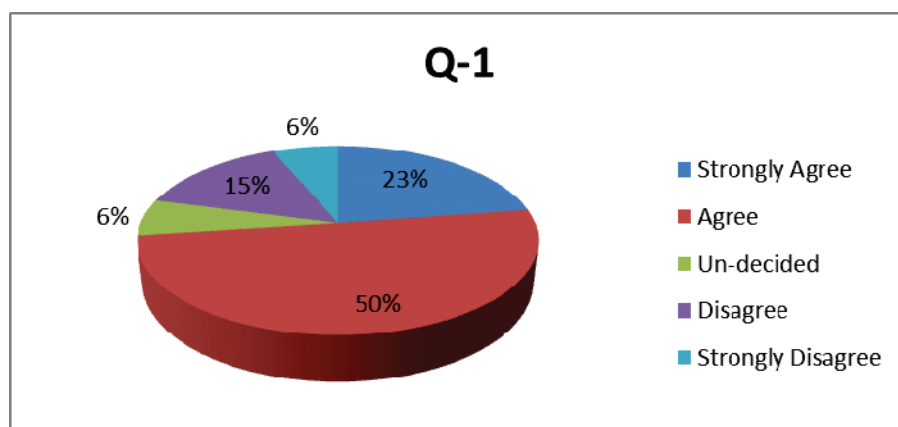
From a sample of 150 (one hundred and fifty) respondents 23% strongly supported the benefits of Distance Education in the higher education sector of Pakistan, a very high percentage around 50% also agreed to the idea that Distance Education has multiple benefits in contrast 5% strongly

disagree and 15% disagree with the benefits of Distance Education, whereas, 6% of the respondents remain undecided.

2: Prospects of Distance Education in Pakistan

| Q No.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1	31	83	9	21	6	150
2	42	71	11	19	7	150
3	33	92	4	21	-	150
4	24	90	12	19	5	150
5	34	87	17	9	3	150
6	30	92	3	16	9	150
Total	194	515	56	105	30	900
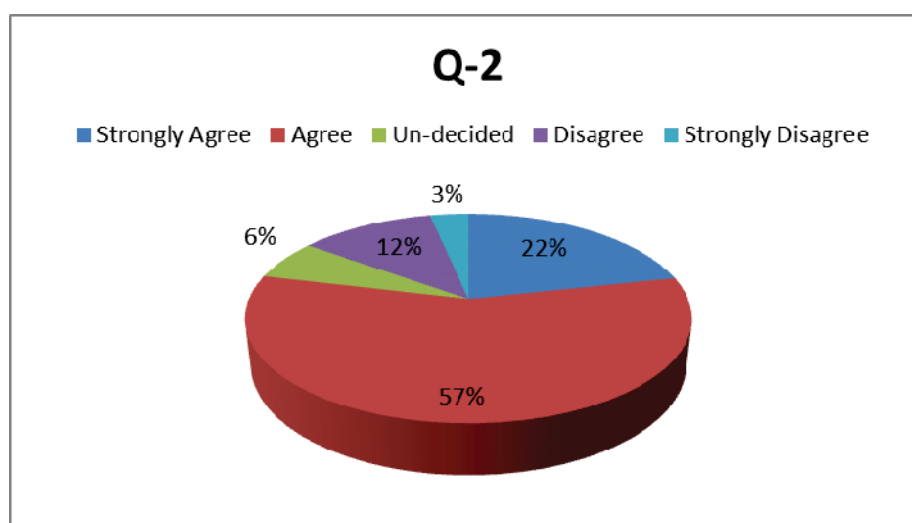
When it comes to the prospects of Distance Education for the Society and Higher Education Institutions 22% strongly agreed and 57% of the survey participants agreed with the statements in support of the bright prospects of Distance Education in Pakistan; whereas, 3% strongly

disagreed and 12% disagreed on the prospects of distance education in Pakistan, while 6% remain undecided in this case.

3. The Need for the stakeholders of education to take interest in the Distance Education Sector of Pakistan

Q No.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1	29	94	8	16	3	150
2	33	88	6	19	4	150
3	38	89	10	9	4	150
4	32	87	9	17	5	150
5	36	83	9	16	6	150
6	42	84	8	12	4	150
Total	**210**	**525**	**50**	**89**	**26**	**900**
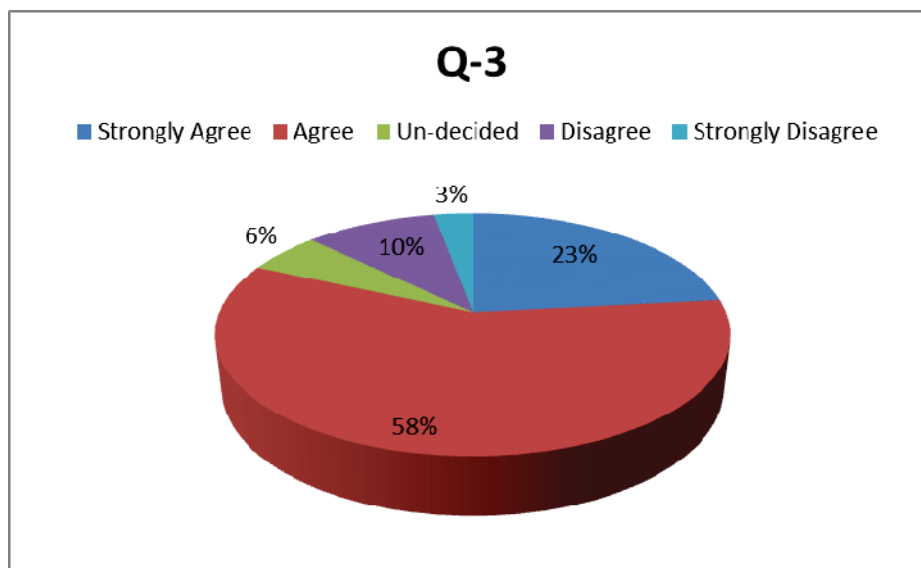
On the questions on the need for the stakeholders of higher education and the Government of Pakistan to take interest in Distance Education the responses were heavily in favour, as 23% of the respondents strongly agreed and 58% agreed that there is a need for the stakeholders and

Government to pay attention to this neglected area; whereas, only a minor percentage of 3% strongly disagreed and 10% disagreed with the thought.

Conclusion

Distance education started with correspondence method in 1950s with low or no acceptance in that era, evolved with the passage of time and took a leap in 1970s when organized research work started in the Open University UK in different areas of distance education. Later in the 1980s and 1990s major developments in the US and UK provided the much recognition to distance education and by the year 2000 in a conference in Sao Palo the discipline had gained so much importance that it were questions raised on the status of universities not offering distance education. It was mainly due to the research work conducted in the field and the advancement in technology. Today, in the modern world most of the top universities of the world are offering distance education program and millions of students and professionals are benefitting from the offerings; however with all this development and evolution going on the situation in developing countries like Pakistan is different, where students prefer on-campus courses and the trust level of employers on the distance education qualifications is low. In this scenario, with the bombardment of technology it is expected to be sooner than later that the situation is likely to change. Therefore, the time is right for the stakeholders such as students, educational institutions and government to take initiative and grab the opportunity.

FINDINGS

To test this hypothesis this research was carried out. A sample of 150 high education students and working professionals gave their opinion on six variables namely; benefits of distance education in Pakistan, prospects of distance education in Pakistan, delivery modes that are being used for distance education in Pakistan and the need for the stakeholders and Government to take interest in the distance education sector of Pakistan.

Majority of the respondents in a sample of 150 (one hundred and fifty participants) were of the view that distance education is highly beneficial and has multiple benefits in education. 73% favored the concept of distance education and its educational benefits in Pakistan. Only 21%

were against the statements which were supportive of distance education in Pakistan and highlighted different benefits of distance education in Pakistan.

Majority of the respondents believed that the prospects of distance education in the higher education sector of Pakistan are bright conditional to the delivery modes and accreditation of the courses offered. Around 79% gave their decision in support of the statements, only 15% opposed the idea that the prospects of distance education for the stakeholders are not bright in Pakistan. .

A large majority of 81% of the respondents believed that the stake holders of higher education and the government of Pakistan should pay attention to the alternate system of distance education and this would have positive impact on the higher education and the society.

In light of the above it could be stated that the study showed positive trends are towards acceptance and the People of Pakistan believe that the promotion of Distance Education in the higher education sector would be beneficial for the stakeholders of higher education, government and society.

RECOMMENDATION

Since the study fetched positive results, therefore the following are recommended:

- The Government of Pakistan shall take positive initiative to promote and authenticate distance education in Pakistan through setting standards and creating awareness among the general public and stakeholders of higher education.
- Established National universities shall initiate Distance Learning program in Pakistan and start offering Distance Education Degrees at a mass level across the country.
- International Universities that are already offering Distance Education in different parts of the world shall promote distance education in Pakistan by bringing special discounted package of their offerings.
- Students and professionals shall explore the option of Distance Education for their professional and educational growth
- Employers shall give equal opportunity in employment to the distance education graduates.

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