

Role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Education in Empowerment of Youth

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study is to examine the role of open and distance learning educational system in empowerment of youth in Pakistan. For the present study, 120 respondents both male and female students of post-graduate programs were recruited through purposive sampling technique. Survey method was used as a technique for data collection. A well-structured questionnaire was administered to collect information from respondents attending workshops at AllamaIqbal Open University main campus Islamabad. The study showed that ODL is playing very important role in providing education and enhancing youth' empowerment in especially this three areas, individual autonomy, socio-cultural and economic spheres. It is recommended that curriculum may also be competent enough to meet the futuristic and modern day educational and professional needs of the youth.

Keywords: Youth Empowerment, Open and Distance Learning, Socio- cultural & Economic Empowerment

Introduction

The Open & Distance Learning System (ODL) is the new global technology based process of education, highly valuable in a globalized knowledge society which envisage technological and social changes (see Ziguras, 2001). This system ensures removal of constraints of face-to-face conventional classroom method and bestows flexibility (Wadi& Sonia, 2002). Open and distance learning (ODL) is widely known as the one of the very important way / method used in educational practices (see Jarvis, 2009). The importance of distance learning has universally accepted and recognized as many leading universities of the world has started many of their programs (see Longworth, 2003; Latchem& Jung, 2009). Idowo et al. (2004) considered ODL as very effective mean to reach the young who were otherwise deprived of their basic right of getting education and livelihood trainings (Davis, 2003).

Baran et al. (2011) highlight the importance of ODL and wide and helpful use of modern information and communication technologies for imparting learning, both formal and informal. It has been utilized all over the world in different educational systems and at different levels. ODL has widened the approach and scope of learning (Olusola&Alaba, 2011).

Distance education has eliminated the hurdles for instance age, geography, time, capacity and resources. Now everyone is having the opportunity to learn whatever he want and likes to learn (Perraton, 2012). There are many social reasons which restrict people to get education and like marriage and family, however, ODL has brought education to the doorstep of the learners (Wadi& Sonia, 2002). ODL has very wisely combined the educational resources with technology and provided a convenient mode of leering (Olusola&Alaba, 2011). ODL is using modern communication technologies like mobile phones, internet, audio video, radio and television to disseminate not only the direct/ face to face educational material but also establishing online

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resources to make use of at clients' ease (Ziguras, 2001). ODL is more popular in countries like Pakistan where due to many structural issues like poverty and discrimination it becomes very difficult to reach each and every individual to fetch his/her educational and learning needs (Dikshit, 2003). ODL is a kind of blessing in a country where illiteracy, poverty, dropout and many other socio cultural and economic barriers are restricting opportunities to reach the target group including youth. ODL is a need based strategy and youth centered approach. It is very empowering and enabling. It gives more control over time, resources and opens new horizons. Youth particularly from rural, poor and for flung areas can continue their education and learn life skills at their own time and schedule with a cost effective arrangement. The use of modern, latest technology and educational resources are the value added incentives. Youth can decide to which degree, course or certificate they enroll and complete. The AllamaIqbal Open University (AIOU) is the premier distance education institution in South Asia and caters the educational needs of millions students. It becomes imperative to look into the role this ODL is playing in empowering the youth both male & female.

Youth empowerment indicates the change in the power relations. This unequal power relations breed subordination and results in social, economic and political inequality (Lane & Van, 2011). Youth is a time of social, psychological, emotional and health transitions. This is the time of personality development. The circumstances and opportunities at this time play very important role in shaping up future social being (McCarthy, Brady & Hallman, 2016). Proper guidance and adequate policies can be of prime importance to protect youth from adverse risk factors. Education can provide right trajectory towards safe and healthy future. Youth comprised of 32% of the population of Pakistan and considered as the demographic dividend if tapped adequately (Kugelman, Hathway, 2011; Sathar, Royan&Boongarts, 2013). Glossing over the current scholarship on youth and education reveals the missing scope of academic work in the field of distance learning and youth empowerment particularly in Pakistan. The study in hand calls for the empirical investigation.

Objectives

1. To examine the role of ODL in individual autonomy
2. To find out the role of ODL in Social empowerment
3. To see the role of ODL in economic empowerment

Review of Literature

Open distance learning is providing an alternative source of education to youth of rural and far-flung areas including women. It is convenient, cost effective, student centered and less bureaucratic. It helps to enhance the opportunity range for youth including women. It also overcomes the scanty educational facilities in the remote areas (Munawar&Akhtar, 2017).Jumaniet. al. (2013) highlighted the role of distance education and particularly the AllamaIqbal Open University. They considered the distance education blessing for young women from rural areas who otherwise were unable to get and continue their education due to their productive, reproductive and socio cultural gender role in Pakistani society.

Mehsudet. al. (2014) assessed the role of ODL in economic empowerment of women including youth. The researchers applauded role of AllamaIqbal Open University (AIOU). The respondents expressed that ODL has provided them a platform and ready to help guidance to enhance their overall status including economic. They feel that they have asserted at least one of the key areas of economic empowerment. The researchers also pointed out the overall wellbeing

of the respondents. Selinger & Austin (2003) emphasized the vital role played by the ODL. They pointed out that education planning should be directed in line with the potential and experiences of ODL. The policy makers should realize these opportunities in the broader frameworks of national development. This could also harness the potential of the youth development.

Globalization has made the world borderless and has catalyzed the melting hard realities into soft, melting. Advent of communication technology and growing use of internet has brought people together and now it has become possible to communicate with thousands of students while sitting hundreds of kilo meters away and with having minimalist teaching gadgets. People (youth) can be the ultimate beneficiaries of these modern communication technology (Reddi & Dighe, 2002; Sissel et al., 2001). Wadi & Sonia (2002) highlighted the growing use of distance learning training methods in business corporations and organizations. They indicated the distance education has become the need of the corporations for corporate trainings and education due to its various benefits. Use of modern communication and technology has made these trainings more effective, beneficial and widely covering with more engagement of young employees. Dikshit (2003) narrated the rural Indian experience of ODL. He highlighted the imparting quality education with the use of modern technology to the youth in India. He asserted that student support services are compensating the face to face support and interaction with teacher. He also pointed out the importance of ODL while students are far away from formal structural facilities available to them.

Murray et al., (2013) emphasized the importance of education in the society. They ascertained that education has the capacity to inclusion. Education not only developed the individual capabilities but also inculcate the skills needed by the society. It is society that designed the scope of social and individual development. The education also brings social solidarity in the society. Hence, effective education can guarantee the smooth functioning of the society. With the recognized benefits of ODL the MGDs can be realized while engaging youth in all the tiers of education. However, Marxist educationists are quite skeptical of the distance learning system. They thought of education as one of the major dividing force/factor in the society. They consider modern education as a tool of capitalists resulting in the selected opportunities to selected portion in the society. They are very critical of ODL. They take this as the normalizing tool that make poor, disadvantaged, rural and far flung youth not to criticize the overall subordination in the system. ODL helps minimal benefits for this group particularly the youth (Latchem & Jung, 2009; Latchem, 2014).

Materials and Methods

The population of the present study consisted of Post-Graduate students of Allama Iqbal Open University. Both male & female students from different faculties of Islamabad region were recruited for the present study. Purposive sampling technique was applied to select 120 respondents from the target population to conduct survey. A well-structured questionnaire was administered to collect data from respondents. Data were edited, coded and computerized. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze data and draw results.

Results and Discussion

Table No. 1 Residential area of respondents

Sr. No	Residential area	Frequency	Percent
1	Capital Territory Islamabad	39	32.5
2	Punjab	48	40.0

3	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	10	08.3
4	Sindh	03	02.5
5	Baluchistan	03	02.5
6	Azad Kashmir (AJK)	09	07.5
7	Gilgit-Baltistan	08	06.7
Total		120	100.0

Table1 indicates the respondent's area of the residence. It points out the diversity of residence of respondents. Majority of the respondents were from Punjab i.e. 40%. This table also indicates Capital territory Islamabad has 39%, KP 10%, Azad Kashmir 9%, Gilgit-Baltistan 8 %. The table also indicates low participation rate as of 3 % from the Sindh & Baluchistan.

Table No. 2 *Enrolment of respondents*

Sr. No.	Respondents' Faculty Name	Frequency	Percent
1	Social Sciences	48	40.0
2	Pakistan Study	14	11.7
3	Education	28	23.3
4	Finance	19	15.8
5	Islamic Studies	06	05.0
6	Gender Studies	02	01.7
7	Computer Science	03	02.5
Total		120	100.0

Table2 shows that 40 % of the respondents were from faculty of social sciences followed by 23% from faculty of education, 15.8 % from MBA/ Finance, 11.7 % from Pakistan Study, 5 % from Arabic & Islamic Studies, 2.5 % from Computer Sciences, and 1.7% from gender studies.

Table No. 3 *Gender of Respondents*

Sr. No.	Gender	Frequency	Percent
1	Male	39	32.5
2	Female	81	67.5
Total		120	100.0

Table 3 shows the gender wise distribution of the research participants. High percentage of 67.50 for females and Males 32.50 %,.

Table No. 4 *Occupation, Personal and Family Monthly Income (PKR)*

Sr. No.	Occupation	Frequency	Percent
1	Govt. Servant	14	11.7
2	Private Job	34	28.3
3	Farming	01	00.8
4	Business	12	10.0
5	Student	58	48.3
6	Unemployed	01	00.8
Total		120	100.0
Personal monthly income (PKR)			

1	Less than 20,000	26	21.7
2	20,000-30,000	25	20.8
3	30,001-40,000	08	06.7
4	40,001-50000	07	05.8
5	More than 50000	14	11.7
6	Unemployed	40	33.3
Total		120	100.0
Family monthly income (PKR)			
1	Less than 30,000	18	15.0
2	30,001-40,000	36	30.0
3	40,001-50,000	24	20.0
4	50,001-60000	10	08.3
5	More than 60000	31	25.8
6	Support from other sources	01	00.8
Total		120	100.0

Table 4 indicates occupation of the respondents. Half of the respondents (48.3%) were Unemployed, 28.3 % were doing private jobs, 11.7 % were government employee and 10 % were doing their business. On the other hand 33.3 % of the respondents were unemployed and were full time student and only 5.8 percent had their personal monthly income ranging from 40001 to 50000 PKR. While family monthly income of the respondents, 30 % of the respondents' family monthly income was ranging from 30000 to 40000 and only one percent of the respondent was getting support from other social safety nets like Zakat, Baitul Mall.

Table No. 5 *Type of Family, Marital Status and Age of Respondents*

Sr. No.	Family Type	Frequency	Percent
1	Nuclear Family	62	51.7
2	Joint Family	48	40.0
3	Extended Family	10	08.3
Total		120	100.0
Age Distribution			
1	Below-20	11	9.2
2	21-25	55	45.8
3	26-30	38	31.7
4	31 and above	16	13.3
Total		120	100.0
Marital Status			
1	Married	41	34.2
2	Unmarried	79	65.8
Total		120	100.0

Table 5 indicates the respondent's family type, marital status, and ages. Data shows that 51.7 % of the total respondents were living in nuclear family system, whereas 40 % of them were having joint family system and only 8.3 % were in extended family. 45.8 % of the respondents were aged between of 21-25 years, 31.7 % of the respondents were in 26-30 years, 13.3 % of the respondents were from age 30 and above. Data also indicate that 79 % of the respondents were unmarried, while 41 percent of total respondents were married.

Table No. 6 Responses to the Different Statements

Sr. No.	Statements	SA	A	N	DA
1	ODL eliminates age related issues while taking admissions	55 (46%)	46 (38%)	14 (12%)	05 (4%)
2	ODL provides education opportunities to employed	57 (48%)	54 (45%)	05 (4%)	04 (3%)
3	ODL removes barriers to higher education	59 (49%)	38 (32%)	16 (13%)	07 (6%)
4	ODL increases individual decision making	30 (25%)	57 (48%)	26 (22%)	07 (6%)
5	ODL increases confidence in self	18 (15%)	78 (65%)	20 (17%)	04 (3%)
6	AIOU is playing very important role in promoting education	65 (54 %)	49 (41%)	06 (5%)	-
7	AIOU provides easy access to education	64 (53%)	48 (40%)	04 (3%)	04 (3%)
	Total	120	120	120	120

Table No. 6 reflects the opinion of the respondents pertaining to different statements asked regarding the empowerment and role of AIOU in promoting distance education in the Pakistan. Statement one asks about the age related restrictions. Respondents were of the opinion that ODL has given them an opportunity to take admission and continue their education at any level in any of their age. Overwhelming majority was having the same above opinion.

Respondents think that ODL is opening a window for all those who are employed somewhere in some organization or running their own business/ self-employed. ODL is supportive in terms of time and geography. Respondents were thinking that they can be more productive financially and enhance their education as well. A substantive majority i.e. 93% were of the same view.

Respondents were of the view that ODL is removing barriers. Now though ODL students from rural, far flung areas, employed, lower socio economic background can get the education at their own convenience. Now education was at their door step. It is giving them an option to change them.

Respondents thought that ODL have improved their decision making and empower them control over their own selves. They were feeling more confident as they were having educational and training facilities at their own convenience. They can take the charge of their own and this confidence can enhance their life chances and growth either personal or professional.

As for as the role of AIOU was concerned, the respondents highlighted its role in providing access to education and in promoting quality education to all who intend to enhance their socio economic status. The respondents both male and female were very satisfied.

Discussion

The current study was an attempt to evaluate and analyze the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) education system in empowerment of youth in Pakistan. The present study find out that youth both male and female found ODL a very useful and empowering. They were having educational opportunities while doing their jobs, staying at home and running their own businesses. This system of learning was removing barriers related to age, gender, geography,

socio economic status. It was empowering and enhancing the status of youth. The study findings are in congruence with the existing scholarship for instance see also Mckay&Makhanya, 2008; Buksh, 2013; Akhtar, 2014; Latchem, 2014. The study also corresponds to the previous researchers indicating the biggest challenge to present youth is unemployment (Commonwealth, 2013). It also supports that lack of educational opportunities also contribute towards low paid jobs and mostly unemployment (Hou, 2010). However, ODL is playing its tremendous role in equipping youth with education and training that help them find employment later in their life courses.

Present study has also pointed out that youth recruited for this study strongly believed that ODL has improved their learning abilities and hence, improvement in decision making. They were more trusting in their capabilities and believing in them. The present study supports the scholarship addressing women youth and their empowerment like Munawar&Akhtar, 2017: Mahsud et.al, 2014; Akhtar, 2014; Buksh, 2013; Jumaniet. al., 2013. However, study's finding regarding the empowerment of male youth was new phenomena investigated which was missing in the previous literature.

Distance education is a multipronged strategy not only engages students but also other people who are workers, laborers, farmers and homemakers. No matter from where they are because distance education bestow them autonomy to decide time and place of their education/ learning. It saves time, money, human resources and enhancing communication. South Asia is a region with very extensive network of distance education (Baranet al., 2011). Many other countries of the world have now realized the importance of distance education (Achimugu et al., 2010). The study has put forth the role of AIOU is playing in disseminating distance education in the country. Many of the researches have also highlighted the quality education and services provides by AIOU in the Pakistani society for instance see Munawar&Akhtar, 2017: Mahsud et.al, 2014; Akhtar, 2014; Buksh, 2013; Jumaniet. al., 2013

Conclusion

ODL has been found very effective to transform people particularly the youth in world and especially in developing countries including South Asia. Poor social, economic, political structure with weak institutional framework is unable to support and sustain the youth bulge in Pakistan. This demographic dividend can only be harnessed if provided quality education and training that is cheap, time saving, learner centered, technologically advanced, market driven and empowering. ODL qualifies in the socio economic conditions of Pakistan. The empowered youth can be turned into future assets. The study has highlighted the role of ODL in youth empowerment and also signified the contribution of the AllamaIqbal Open University (AIOU) in providing effective ODL and empowering youth that can take charge of them and make them able to decision regarding them. However, ODL curriculum may also be competent enough to meet the futuristic and modern day educational and professional needs of the youth.

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