Transforming Open and Distance Learning in Pakistan: Post Covid-19 Analysis of Students' Perspectives at Allama Iqbal Open University

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ABSTRACT

The study had the objectives to compare gender and Locality wise perception of the students regarding new initiatives of student support services in Open and distance learning (ODL) at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) after COVID-19 Scenario. The study's purpose was to find the perceptions of the students about services for them regarding admissions, mailing, tutorials, library, web services etc. and examinations. The population and sample included 1555 (266 male and 1289 female) of two strata as (33%) with 518 (88 male and 430 female) students were selected respectively that were enrolled in Bachelor of Education (B.Ed. 1.5 Years) during semester Spring-2023. The questionnaire was used as research tool. The software, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was applied to analyze the collected data. Frequency distribution and t-test for respondents' data were found by SPSS software. It was found that services related to the examinations department were required to be improved. It was concluded that there was no significant difference among the students regarding admissions, mailing, tutorials, examinations, library, web services and call centre. However, rural and urban students perceived that the services regarding examination differently. It was recommended that improved and effective use of ICT is imperative to further strengthen the student support services by strengthening LMS Portal existing already for ODL for submission of assignments and evaluation as formative as well as summative too. For future direction it was suggested that same kind of study may be conducted in each province of Pakistan.

Keywords: Student Support Services, Learning Management System (LMS), Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

INTRODUCTION

The distance education has become a real alternate solution to educate those masses who cannot get education through formal mode due to cultural barrier, physically handicapped or due to job restrictions. Distance education mostly depends upon independent study without interaction between the tutors and learners (Moore, 2013). He further states "term distance education began to be used in 1970 and in 1982 the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) officially changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education and now the International Council for Open and Distance Education."

After COVID-19 AIOU which adopted LMS (Learning Management System) as online teaching Software, it was continued for many academic programmes in E-learning. IT is otherwise called web based learning, is characterized as the utilization of any gadget with web admittance to partake in the growing experience from anyplace whenever (Dhawan, 2020). One way to deal with internet learning is to utilize learning the board frameworks. LMSs have been more famous among instructive foundations and understudies as a product device for arranging, carrying out, and evaluating the entire instructive cycle. Learning and management frameworks, course managing in programming, and virtual instructive or learning conditions are terms used to depict LMSs. Moodle, Sakai, Slate, and A-Tutor were used as LMS programmed for learning through internet. Understudy enlistment, tests, tests, tasks, courses for learning, informing, and transferring course material are elements of these frameworks (Almaiah , et. al, 2020). Web based learning framework is utilized in numerous nations of the world with the end goal of education (Afzal et al., 2024).

According to Five Years' Report (1979), "continuing inability of the nation to make financial investments on a scale commensurate with the educational imperatives of modern statehood compelled the country's planners to explore the possibilities of unconventional methods which could transcend the limitations of the formal system". In line with the following broad principles the Government of Pakistan in the Education Policy (1972-80) through an Act of Parliament No. XXXIX (1977) established People's Open University, the first institution of distance education in Asia and second in the world. On the eve of 100th Birth Anniversary of national poet Dr. Allama Muhammad Iqbal in November 1977, in cognition of his services a pioneer leader and philosopher of Pakistan Movement, the President of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, renamed the University as Allama Iqbal Open University (1983) through an Ordinance No. XLIII-A (1977).

The Allama Iqbal Open University was the second one established in the world to provide education through distance education. The success of these both universities resulted in establishment of many open universities in other countries like Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Japan, Canada, Australia, China, etc.

Holmberg (2008) states that "distance education is characterized by teaching and learning being brought about by media in principle students and their teachers do not meet face-to-face". In distance education more than one media is used for learning process i.e. printed material, audio/video aids or latest communication technologies. Due to its flexible mode, distance education became the first choice for those who are already on job for uplifting their academic level and further promotion and for those who wish to educate them at any time and at any stage of life. Shah et al., (2022) explained that pandemic altered the instructive setting and acquired transformation training at all levels particularly in advanced education level through development patterns of innovation and balance (Shah et al., 2022).

In Pakistan too, the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), realizing the need for utilizing distance education as a useful and effective alternate system to educate the masses, was set up in 1974, was the second Open University on the planet and first in Asia and Africa. While the second university is Virtual University for open distance education and especially established for online learning programmes. Through distance education, AIOU has opened up new freedoms for millions, especially female learners, and enhanced the endeavors of the bureaucratic and common governments incredibly and that too without turning into a weight on their assets. Distance Education expected more prominent importance and acknowledgment in Pakistan because of the elements of destitution and relative hardship of girls. The pace of

proficiency, occurrence of dropouts, and low literacy rate in the more unfortunate classes of Pakistan are the elements which have been catered by AIOU. Numerous traditionalist guardians under the tension of mature age customs don't permit their little girls to go out to the schools. The AIOU, through its arrangement of Distance Education has, accordingly, gave instructive freedoms to these housebound female populations. This clarifies the reasons why most of the students enrolled with the university are females.

Literature Review

Generally, provision of education is categorized through three modes i.e. Formal Education, Informal Education and Non-formal Education. Distance Education is considered by some theorists as an entirely separate form of education, by others merely as taking place on the continuum type of education. Distance education is also equally serving good to the masses living in the far-flung areas or abroad facilitating them to uplift their academic qualification for better future and to meet job requirements.

Moore (2013), in theory of transactional study opines that teaching may take place even though teacher and learner are physically separated during the teaching learning process. Garrison & Shale (1987) explained that distance instruction suggests that most of instructive correspondence among instructor and learner happens is non-conterminously. Distance training includes two-path correspondence among educator and understudy for encouraging and supporting the instructive interaction. Distance instruction utilizes innovation to intercede the essential two-way correspondence. Distance learning provides educational opportunity to the students through student support having components such as printed course materials (books), tutors, arranging occasional tutorial meetings, arrangements of workshops in face-to-face mode and using technology i.e. internet, video-conferencing, cell phones, and social media. Open and distance learning has been accepted by the world as cheapest and alternate system of formal education which involves heavy costs.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is providing education to the masses irrespective of sex, religion, race, creed, age and location through distance learning mode with following main functions:

- To provide educational facilities to people who cannot leave their homes and jobs;
- To provide such facilities to masses for their educational uplift;
- To provide facilities for the training of teachers;
- To provide for instruction in such branches of learning technology or vocations as it may deem fit, and to make provision for research and for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge;
- To prescribe courses of studies;
- To hold examinations and to award and confer degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic distinctions to and on persons who have been admitted to and have passed its examinations;
- To meet the challenge of ever-expanding student network in Pakistan and abroad, AIOU has set up 42 Regional Campuses/Centres in different areas across Pakistan. Many of the regions are functioning in their own purpose-built campuses with state-of-the-art facilities of information technology tools as student support services.

In Pakistan, after establishment of Allama Iqbal Open University, distance education has been getting attention of the masses due to its flexible learning mode using Information and

Communication Technology (ICT) in the form of online classes especially during COVID-19 which became a great opportunity after its integration in ODL. Currently distance education is meeting the needs of specific target population/audience through a large number of educational programs. Allama Iqbal Open University also took initiative to bring its student support services in line with new technological changes for provision of improved quality learning environment to its clientele.

Historical Background of Distance Education

In the modern history of distance education in United States from 1865 to 1890, Holmberg (2008) described correspondence education in following manner: The 'mother' of American correspondence study was Anna Eliot Tickner, daughter of a Harvard University professor, who founded and ran the Boston-based Society to Encourage Study at Home from 1873 until her death in 1897. The idea of exchanging letters between teacher and student originated with her and monthly correspondence with guided readings and frequent tests.

In coming days, the idea of correspondence study got attention and different terminologies of distance education were introduced in the world as Correspondence Study, Independent Study, Study at Home, External Study etc.

Historically, from 1728 to-date, distance education has been classified in five generations by Taylor (2001) covering all its major features through following conceptual framework of distance education model giving details of its generations from Correspondence Study to Internet based online LMS:

Table-1; Models of Distance Education – A Conceptual Framework

Models of Distance Education and Associated Delivery Technologies	Characteristics of Delivery Technologies					
	Time	Flexibility Place	Pace	Highly Refined Materials	Advanced Interactive Delivery	Institutional Variable Costs Approaching Zero
First Generation The Correspondence Model						
• Print	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Second Generation The Multimedia Model						
• Print	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
• Audiotape	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
• Videotape	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
• Computer-based learning (e.g. CML/CAL/IMM)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
• Interactive video (disk and tape)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Third Generation The Tele-learning Model • Audio tele-conferencing						

	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
• Video-conferencing	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
• Audiographic Communication	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
• Broadcast TV/Radio and audio-Teleconferencing	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Fourth Generation						
The Flexible Learning Model						
• Interactive multimedia (IMM) online	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• Internet-based access to WWW Resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• Computer-mediated communication	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Fifth Generation						
The Intelligent Flexible Learning Model						
• Interactive multimedia (IMM) online	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• Internet-based access to WWW resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• Computer-mediated communication, using automated response systems	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• Campus portal access to institutional processes and resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: e-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology, 2001

In this table, the systematic and gradual progress in distance education from its start has been narrated mentioning the steps taken up till now. From print to online flexible learning, the distance education has changed into a flexible learning model.

Student Support Services in Open and Distance Learning

Students need help and guidance at every step of their studies through distance education. Student support services include pre-enrollment activities which a student needs before making choice of distance study/guidance in course choice, course admissions information, course design, administration of distance education, evaluation process, tutorial support, exam and post-graduation services etc (Anderson, 2004).

Many distance education institutions recognized that the distance education requires some other forms of back-up apart from a text and that back-up is generally called 'Student Support'. In today's advanced technological age, it is imperative for the mega universities

offering course through open and distance education to strengthen their student support services for success and retention of the clientele (Simpson, 2015).

Philosophy, Methods and Techniques of AIOU

The Allama Iqbal Open University under its given mandate with principal office at Islamabad started providing educational facilities to the masses of Pakistan from the off-shores of Kemari, Karachi to the highest mountainous range of Siachen through distance education. It has also been serving to the expatriates living in gulf-states. From SSC to Ph.D, a wide range of courses/programs in different disciplines of social science and arts, professional and science and technology are available for the students/general public at AIOU.

1. **Correspondence materials** counting self-learning study bundle and advantageous examination materials, (Readers, textbooks and study guides).
2. **FM Radio** has been communicating instructive projects on the public recurrence of 91.6.
3. **Satellite Transmission (TV):** AIOU is putting on air its instructive media material on PTV-2 which is radiating out its transmission through satellite to in excess of 45 nations.
4. **Online Teaching:** Different areas have effectively been connected for online instruction, and online classes through remotely coordinating have been begun for Computer Science programs. A Learning Management System (LMS) has been started and launched to teach the students in online classes through MS Teams.
5. **Non-broadcast media** counting slides, sound tapes, fillip outlines, and handout (general for essential utilitarian and education level courses) and furthermore sound/video tapes as basic piece of learning material.
6. **Tutorial instruction** through contact meetings and scholarly direction offices at study focuses (for the most part in the evenings).
7. **Face-to-face teaching** has been begun for those courses, which require seriously functional/lab work or ability advancement.
8. **Group Training Workshops** for post alumni programs, by and large at MA/MSc./M.Phil/PhD. and Diploma levels.
9. **Internship** for selected postgraduate programs is available for learners as a part of their degree requirements.
10. **Course assignments** as an instrument of guidance, non-stop appraisal and general scholarly direction of understudies: these are assessed by the coaches.
11. **Final examinations** are held at the end of every semester and for each course code.

Although the AIOU students work mainly at home by writing course assignments, attending tutorial meetings at study centers is optional for them in most of the courses. At study centres, students are provided a variety of facilities, which can supplement some of those available at home, but above all they enable students' interaction with peer students to discuss each other course in shape of group discussion. These study centres are also the focal points for tutor-student interaction at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Learning Management System (LMS) at AIOU After COVID-19 Scenario

After COVID-19, Learning Management Systems (LMS) have been better known among teachers and understudies as a product device for arranging, carrying out, and surveying the entire teaching and learning tool of communication. LMS is a structure or thought of guidance that involves information development in teaching and understanding, where learning is

coordinated using computerized contraptions or PC system to help the learning cycle (Shah et al., 2023).

Allama Iqbal Open University continued to provide the AAGHI LMS entrance to students and their teachers as a solid E-learning stage in which a bigger number of learners and teachers through and through extended their insight after the pandemic disintegration too. The rules through LMS impact the educational experience of the learners. Regardless, learners on each level need to keep learning it is finished through internet based stages like Aaghi LMS. This is the LMS gateway likewise gives general media admittance to the learners also. (Sun et al., 2020). Allama Iqbal Open University has strengthened its Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Services for IT Support to all the processes of the university in the student. The AIOU Digital Transformation is an initiative taken by Allama Iqbal Open University to step into the digital Era and extend benefits of these services to the AIOU community including Students, employees and collaborators. Digital Transformation is the utilization of the digital technology across the University and is dire need for the future success as an international reputed institution. Digital Transformation uses digital technologies to vitally change the way existing services being delivered. It boosts use of ICT as an efficient way to provide services to our stakeholders (students, tutors and employees). Digital Transformation works across whole horizon including digitally revamping of Admission Process, Fee Submission, Books Dissemination, Tutor Registration & Allocation, Examination process, readily availability of resources through integration of LMS and CMS including Student /Tutor Digital space, Access to sports & co curricular activities, access to Library resources, Alumni Services, Regional Connectivity & provisioning of Support Services and above all, this will enable the senior management to have complete view of the system for accurate information for strategic decisions. The implementation of these services has ensured Quality of education and support services to the stake holders particularly strengthened the student support services. The conduct of online classes during COVID-19 saved the students from loss of their studies

Examination Support Services

The learners' academic achievement is assessed through formative and summative assessment. The formative assessment is carried out through tutors whereas the summative assessment is managed through end semester examinations at hundreds of examination centres established by the University throughout the country and overseas. Examination Centres are established not only in AIOU's Regional Campuses but the services of government formal education institutions are also hired to facilitate the students to take exam nearer to their living place. For overseas students in Gulf States, the AIOU seeks cooperation from the Pakistan Embassies in these countries. Although Roll No. Slips, Semester Result and Certificate/Degrees are dispatched through CMS.

Libraries play a pivotal role in the academic achievement of students. These resources help the learners in fulfilling their educational requirements for higher grades. According to (George & Frank, 2008); without information literacy skills, students, especially distance education students may not succeed in their academic career. Librarians are able to partner with faculty to provide distance education (DE) students with the same opportunities as on-campus students to develop these skills.

Complaint Management System (CMS)

AIOU students are using the online Complaint Management System for addressing their complaints lodged through AIOU Web portal. Through this system, each complaint is assigned a ticket number and due to its effective follow up by the AIOU authorities, these complaints are given priority and so every student gets response in the minimum possible time. Apart from above services, AIOU has established CMS for students to inform them all their academic activities, information about Admissions, roll No. slips, Certificate/Degree application status through, correspondence. Allama Iqbal Open University is making every effort to strengthen its support services to help out the students living inside the country or abroad in gulf-states.

Statement of the Problem

Keeping in view widespread of open distance learning and diversified clientele across the country and overseas as well, Allama Iqbal Open University took certain new initiatives for strengthening different student support services to facilitate its students. There was need to confirm the perception of students about these initiatives so that university may continue or make changes in the systems. The present study was aimed to analyze the students' perception about new initiatives taken for student support services at AIOU after COVID-19 Scenario.

Significance of the Study

The present study is of much significance for the students, academic and servicing departments, Regional Heads and the Student Counselors of AIOU for improving the student support services being provided by the AIOU. The study will highlight strengths and weakness in the student support services of AIOU especially after COVID-19 scenario. The study will further identify the areas to be improved which will be helpful to stakeholders such as planners, academic departments, servicing departments, regional services, directorate of student affairs, counseling services providers and student counselors. Allama Iqbal Open University would improve the quality student support services by using modern technology in redressing the grievances of students and hence making the system more efficient and more responsive.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify new initiatives of the students regarding student support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 Scenario.
2. To find out students' perceptions regarding new initiatives regarding r student support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 Scenario.
3. To compare gender-wise perceptions of the students regarding for student support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 Scenario.
4. To compare perceptions of urban and rural students regarding for student support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 Scenario.

Research Questions

1. What is the new initiatives' perception of the students regarding student support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 Scenario?
2. What do students perceive regarding new initiatives' perception regarding students support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 Scenario?
3. How do the male and female students perceive differently for student support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 scenario?

4. How do the students from rural and urban background perceive differently for student support services in ODL at AIOU after COVID-19 scenario?

METHODOLOGY

The study analyzed the students' perception about student support services in open and distance learning open and distance learning (ODL) at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). The instrument was developed in the form of a questionnaire with its validation, administration in the study to collect data from respondents in Rural and Urban areas. The internal reliability of the research instrument was checked, procedure of determining validity and also statistical analysis of data to was carried out in the study as part of descriptive research.

Research Design

This study was cross sectional research. Survey method was used to find out the students' perception about new initiatives taken by AIOU in open and distance learning for student support services (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Design was selected as according to Creswell (2009) survey research provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. Data gathered from students through questionnaire comprising of 29 questions. Main purpose was to analyze the research problem designed for this study. The questionnaire consists of specific questions designed to measure the students' perception about new initiatives for student support services at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU).

Population

The population of the current research was the 1555 (266 male and 1289 female) students enrolled in Bachelor of Education (B.Ed. 1.5 Years) during semester Spring 2023 who were studying in Rawalpindi and Islamabad Regions of Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan.

Sample

Total 518 students (33%) of the population were included in the sample by using stratified random sampling technique which was 430 females and 88 males from both regions. Every 3rd student was selected randomly from the whole population as described.

Delimitation

The study was delimited to the students enrolled in B.Ed. (1.5 years) Program in Course General Methods of Teaching (Professional) Course Code-8601 during Spring-2023 Semester in Rawalpindi and Islamabad Regions.

Research Tool & Validity

It was developed in three phases. In the first phase, the researcher developed a tool of items based upon the main construct/parameters of the topic "To Analyze the Students' Perception about New Initiatives in ODL for Student Support Services in ODL at Allama Iqbal Open University". In this phase 42 question items were developed. In the second phase, researcher found the content/face validity of the tool by seeking expert opinion from 6 experts. Based upon their opinion, some items were excluded and with the approval of the Research Supervisor, total number of 29 question items was included in the final instrument. In the third

phase, the Supervisor and the researcher checked the language and layout of the scale. Moreover, the scale has following 5-point Likert rating scale ranging from Strongly Disagreed to Strongly Agreed.

Response Indicator	Strongly Disagreed	Disagreed	Uncertain	Agreed	Strongly Agreed
Weight	1	2	3	4	5

The scoring of scale was done in terms of total scale score. Minimum total score was 29 (1 X 29) and the maximum total scale score was 145 (5 X 29). Cut point value was determined by Measures of Central Tendency in which score above the Mean indicated that new initiatives taken by the Allama Iqbal Open University for improvement in ODL for Student Support Services were perceived positively by the students/ respondents and same is the case where the respondents did not express favourably. The tool was developed in English language and it approximately took 30 minutes to complete. The results of analyzed data were placed in tables and those tables were interpreted. To compare the differences among demographic variables such as gender and living area, the Independent Sample t-test was applied. On the basis of results findings, conclusions, recommendations were made and sorted according to research questions. At the end of the research, some recommendations were suggested.

Reliability

To find out the internal reliability of the questionnaire, the cronbach's alpha reliability test was applied, and the result was 0.886 of 29 items. Hence, the research instrument was found valid to be used for the study.

Data Collection

The date collection was administered by sending questionnaire through mail by attaching self-addressed envelope. Some questionnaires were collected personally by the researcher. List of all 1555 students along with their addresses were obtained from the Directorate of ICT. The survey questionnaire to all the 518 sample respondents (every 3rd student was selected randomly from the whole population) was dispatched through post along with self-addressed (postage paid) envelops on their given addresses. A positive response was received in first instance and more than three hundred questionnaires were received back. Later reminders were sent to remaining respondents. Lastly some questionnaires were also collected by the searcher from local respondents of Islamabad and Rawalpindi Regions personally from their homes. At the end, 400 (58 male and 342 female) questionnaires from the respondents were received/ collected. The purpose, philosophy and necessary instructions were also explained to students along with obtaining informed consent.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After post COVID-19 scenario, this research study was originated to analyze the students' perception about new initiatives for student support services at Allama Iqbal Open University. The demographic analysis of the respondents was found first. Comparison of the variables as well as quantitative analysis of the collected data was also explained here as follows;

Demographic Analysis of the Study

Table-2: Frequency distribution of the genders of the respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	58	14%
Female	342	86%
Total	400	100%

Above table-2 showed that minority (14%) of the respondents was male and majority (86%) of the respondents was female. The AIOU has more than 50% female enrollment and the same trend was seen in B.Ed. admissions in the semester, Spring-2023 which is in accordance with overall female ration in AIOU enrollment.

Table-3: Frequency distribution of the living area of the respondents

Living Area	Frequency	Percentage
Urban	303	76%
Rural	97	24%
Total	400	100%

Above table-3 showed that majority (76%) of the respondents was belonged to urban area and minority (24%) of the respondents was belonged to rural area. This shows that AIOU is equally getting popularity in rural areas.

Table-4 Comparison of students' perceptions in ODL at AIOU in post COVID-19 scenario on the basis of gender of respondents regarding Admissions, Mailing &Tutorials

Gender	N	M	Df	t	Sig
Male	58	45.98			
			398	-1.674	.095
Female	342	47.74			

*P < .05 the significance level

The above mentioned table-4 depicted that on the basis of gender of respondents no significance difference found in the students' perception for new initiatives about their' support services in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario at AIOU regarding Admissions, Mailing & Tutorials. It can be accomplished that both male and female have same percepts regarding the admissions, mailing & tutorials in the university.

Table-5: Comparison of students' perceptions for support in ODL at AIOU in post COVID scenario on the basis of gender of respondents regarding Examinations

Gender	N	M	Df	T	Sig
Male	58	24.70	398		
				.496	.620
Female	342	24.27			

*P < .05 the significance level

The above mentioned table-5 depicted that on the basis of gender of respondents no significance difference found about new initiatives in the students' perception about their support services in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario at AIOU regarding Examinations. It can be accomplished that both male and female have same percepts regarding the Examinations at the university.

Table-6: Comparison of students' perceptions for support in ODL at AIOU in post COVID scenario on the basis of respondents' gender regarding library, web services, internet etc.

Gender	N	M	df	T	Sig
Male	58	28.98	398	-.595	.552
Female	342	29.40			

*P < .05 the significance level

The above mentioned table-6 depicted that on the basis of gender of respondents no significance difference found in the about new initiatives of students' perception for their support services in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario for support services at AIOU regarding Library, Web Services, Internet, Call Centre etc.. It can be accomplished that both male and female have same percepts for support services regarding Library, Web Services, Internet, Call Centre etc. at the university.

Table-7: Comparison of students' perceptions for support in ODL at AIOU in post COVID scenario on the basis of respondents' locality regarding Admissions, Mailing and Tutorials

Living Area	N	M	Df	T	Sig
Rural	97	48.43	398	2.356	.019
Urban	303	47.19			

*P < .05 the significance level

The table-7 showed that based on living area of respondents highly significant difference was found about new initiatives in the students' perception about their support services in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario at AIOU regarding Admissions, Mailing &Tutorials. It can be accomplished that respondents of both living area rural and urban have different perception in

ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario about students' support services regarding Admissions, Mailing &Tutorials in the University.

Table-8: Comparison of students' perceptions for support in ODL at AIOU in post COVID scenario on the basis of respondents' locality regarding Examinations

Living Area	N	M	df	T	Sig
Rural	97	24.60	398	2.001	.046
Urban	303	24.25			

*P < .05 the significance level

Above table-8 showed that based on living area of respondents highly significant difference was found about new initiatives in the students' perception about their support services in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario at AIOU regarding Examinations. It can be accomplished that respondents of both living area rural and urban have different perception in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario about students' support services regarding Examinations in the University.

Table-9: Comparison of students' perceptions for support in ODL at AIOU in post COVID scenario on the basis of respondents' locality regarding library, web services, internet etc.

Living Area	N	M	df	t	Sig
Rural	97	29.15	398	-.424	.470
Urban	303	29.39			

*P < .05 the significance level

Above table-9 showed that based on living area of respondents no significant difference was found about new initiatives in the students' perception about students' support services in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario at AIOU regarding E-Library, Web Services, Internet, Call Centre etc.. It can be accomplished that respondents of both living area rural and urban have same perception in ODL in Post COVID-19 Scenario about students' support services regarding Library, Web Services, Internet, Call Centre etc. in the University.

DISCUSSION

The study was conducted to analysis of students' perception about new initiatives for student in post CVID-19 support services at Allama Iqbal Open University. By virtue of enrollment and its services, the Allama Iqbal Open University is the largest university of Pakistan working under distance and open learning mode. Currently more than 1.4 million students from all over the country and overseas as well are benefitting from the services being provided by AIOU. To cater the needs of such a huge enrollment with its limited resources within semester time frame is a challenge.

The "learner support services as one of the key component in the success of Distance Education and she has recommended tying up the faculty with student support services". To meet this challenge, strong student support services and coordination at every level from pre-admission to post degree stage are required (Pena-Banalaria,2011).The development of frequently asked questions for immediate assistance of learners for smooth use of LMS. The Allama Iqbal Open University is also using LMS AAGHI Portal for graduate and postgraduate

level, above suggestion can be helpful for its learners. Mir (2017) has urged the need of Online Support System for speedy disposal of the complaints. This study was primarily aimed to look into the existing facilities available and students' perception in view of new initiatives for reducing problems/issues relating to student support services of the AIOU at large.

Another factor which attracts the learners to distance education is its low fee structure as compared to formal education institutions. Lim and colleagues (2019) while quoting substantial increase in enrollment of Cyber University of South Korea have also stated that "the annual fee of at Cyber universities is approximately 2000-3000 U.S. dollars which is only a quarter of that at traditional universities."

Realizing the need for providing online learning sources to the distance learners, academic programmes has been strengthened by many universities of the world on their website by use of latest ICT.

The world of open and distance learning is changing very fast. The innovations in ICT have made it more flexible and accessible through palm held devices i.e. smart phone, tablet and laptop by internet accessibility. Provision of online resources has changed the role of tutors and occasional face to face tutorial meetings. Virtual classroom activities through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, U-Tube and other social media resources has facilitated most of the student but on the other hand students of far flung areas of Pakistan, are still facing difficulty in internet connectivity.

It has been observed from the findings of the study that AIOU is mostly meeting the requirements of the students regarding Admissions, Mailing, SMS Services, tutorial support, conduct of course workshops, conduct and award of degree, library services, Web Services etc. and students showed their satisfaction on these services. Likewise, foreign distance learning institutions, AIOU needs to upgrade further of its existing system rethinking about fee structure and provision of maximum online resources to the students. However, matters relating to financial assistance schemes, SMS for result intimation, re-checking of answer scripts, and Helpline/Call Centre Services were not up to the mark and students were not satisfied with these services. These areas need digitalization of existing system and consideration by the University authorities for improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

1. There was no significant difference found in the students' perception about new initiatives for student support services in ODL at AIOU in post COVID scenario on the basis of gender of respondents regarding admissions, mailing & tutorials, examinations, library, web services, Internet, call centre etc. It can be accomplished that both male and female have same perception about student support services in ODL in post COVID scenario regarding the admissions, mailing & tutorials.

2. It can be accomplished that both male and female have same perception for student on the basis of gender of respondents for support services in ODL in post COVID scenario in AIOU regarding the examinations.

3. It can be accomplished that both male and female have same perception on the basis of gender of respondents about student support services in ODL in post COVID scenario in AIOU regarding library, web services, internet, call centre etc.

4. There was highly significant difference found in the students' perception for student support services ODL in post COVID scenario at AIOU on the basis of living area of respondents regarding the admissions, mailing & tutorials. It can be accomplished that

respondents of both living area rural and urban have different perception about for student support services ODL in post COVID scenario at AIOU regarding the admissions, mailing & tutorials.

5. It can be accomplished that respondents of both living area rural and urban have different perceptions on the basis of living area about student support services in ODL in post COVID scenario at AIOU regarding examinations.

6. There was no significant difference found in the students' perception about student support services in ODL in post COVID scenario at AIOU on the basis of living area of respondents regarding library, web services, internet, call centre etc.

7. It can be accomplished that respondents of both living area rural and urban have same perception about student support services in ODL in post COVID scenario at AIOU regarding library, web services, internet, call centre etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To meet the requirements of large population of AIOU, existing online services may be upgraded through digital transformation by hiring latest ICT solutions/ resources especially LMS strengthening to supplement student support services.

2. Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan through close coordination with Regions may launch an extensive awareness campaign regarding its student support services in ODL in all over the country in general and in Rural Areas particularly about financial assistance/scholarships by using electronic/digital media (Radio/TV/Social media) including.

3. Services related to Result Intimation, Online Paper Rechecking System, speedy disposal of Certificate/Degree applications and student inquiry system of Examinations Department may be improved.

4. One window services at the main campus may be strengthened by establishing online linkage with Student Counselors working in the Regions by arranging on job orientation/ training on ODL System & AAGHI LMS Portal of personnel of all ladders to help facilitate the students.

Future Direction

The present study was delimited to only two regions i.e. Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Same study may be conducted in each province of Pakistan.

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