

BARRIERS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A PERSPECTIVE OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS & TEACHER EDUCATORS

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Abstract

As the demand of open and distance learning approach is increasing day by day due to its flexible nature at the same time many researches reflect various challenges concerning this field. The study was intended to analyze numerous obstacles faced by distance education learners especially in Pakistan. The population of the study was comprised of all the teachers as well as graduate students of distance learning institutions. The data were collected by the use of open ended questionnaire from 150 students and 10 faculty members. The findings indicated that the challenges in the implementation of open and distance learning are numerous in number but some of them reflected by the participants' views are related to personal, institutional, social and infrastructure barriers. The key recommendation of the study is that the administrative authorities may organize workshops in nearest areas which are accessible for the students to eliminate transport issues. Most of issues may be resolved by the frequent use of information and communication technology (ICTs) among the universities within the same cities or different cities; it may enhance or creates ease for open and distance learners.

Keywords: Barriers, Open and distance learning, Professional development, infrastructure barriers, communication technology

1. Introduction

The term „distance education“ has been observed from many decades, and the paper pencil medium has changed into real time internet and distance learning education. It is the need of time to examine the significance of distance learning and its probable challenges that could be hurdle for students' effective learning (Galusha, 1998). As in running time this is crucial for students to get higher education to enrich their skills and knowledge to enjoy best of their lives, but because of large increase in population, it is getting more challenging to provide enormous educational opportunities to the huge number of students. The role of students and teachers is becoming more challenging and demanding as the student has to be more collaborative, independent and mobilized to get education through distance learning as well as the teachers are seem different from their traditional authoritative role and not expected as sole source of giving knowledge but more likely a catalyst and facilitator to help in students' learning. Many studies emphasized that world wide open and distance learning institutions must focus upon the probable barriers of

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distance learning and all of their academics, administrative and managements departments collectively made efforts to make efforts to deal with them and help students to get maximum benefit from it (Mbukusa, 2009).

Technologies in education have significantly influenced the mode of education as advancements in telecommunications have opened numerous ways in distance education for personal and groups' interactions. It allows introduction of the classes, schedules of learning tasks and activities, discussion forums, interaction between students and teachers more easily only by using computers and audio conferencing even without face to face meeting. E-mails and various Social Medias replace the frequent institutional visits. The distance learning is enabling the learners to acquire education as easily and effectively as a regular student is getting. However truly speaking open and distance education is unable to enjoy the success stories as the regular educational system does. A lot of researches proved that there are enormous unseen hurdles that prevent open and distance education to become a real successful story. Now it is crucial to recognize these barriers of distance learning and try to cope with them to achieve successful stories (Galusha, 1998). The growing need that signifies the role of distance education especially in highly populated and developing countries like Pakistan. Even in developed countries most of universities and colleges offering various distance learning programs to facilitate maximum number of their students. However many of them are confronting various barriers to offer successful distance learning including problems related to defective technologies, domestic hurdles, cost of the distance programs and lack of support services and one to one interactions between teachers and students and much more which are needed to be investigated. This study was intended to explore some unavoidable barriers which distance learners and teachers face and that cause a lot of hurdles in providing and attaining higher education.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

Distance learning is a mode of learning that is really helpful especially for those learners who are not been able to attend classes in institutions at programmed time. There are a number of ways through which adult learners get their higher education. Distance learning is one of the best mode through which adult learners prefer to get their higher education as they need a flexible system of education through which they could compete with their priorities. The adult learners also faces different sort of problems such as motivational issues as the learners have less face to face interaction with the teachers or other peers, they also have potentially exorbitant cost setup and last but not least lack of support from faculty. Other than the previously mentioned barriers literature review reflected are related to other issues like insecurities regarding different problems which includes problems related to self-evaluation, learning, feeling of isolation, lack of support related to tutors or on the other hand technical assistance, having trouble in understanding this mode of learning which further lead to academic problems. There are other barriers related to faculty problems which include lack of proper training for the development of course and technology, provision of proper support for open and distance learning and scarce selection of faculty members for distance learning courses. There are numerous of other barriers related to organization that creates problems for the learners such as lack of provision of proper technology for teaching learning process, infrastructure, and curriculum of course and the proper evaluation of student (Galusha, 1998). Through this mode of learning the students

successfully meet their academic and learning needs. But another important aspect of distance learning cannot be ignored which are the different types of barriers faced by them. Because of these barriers they remain unable to continue their studies. The focus of this research is to investigate accurate information regarding the barriers to the distance education programs or courses. It was intended to explore some unavoidable barriers which distance learners and teachers face and that cause a lot of hurdles in providing and attaining higher education.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

Following were the objectives of the study:

- i. Identify the perception of prospective teachers and teacher educators regarding the barriers in open and distance learning.
- ii. Sort out the possible solutions to overcome barriers concerning open and distance learning.

1.3. Research Questions

Following were the research questions:

- i. What are the barriers according to the perception of prospective teachers and teacher educators about open and distance learning?
- ii. What solutions could be available to overcome barriers concerning open and distance learning?

2. Literature Review

In 1840, Sir Issac Pitman provided first distance learning mode for the convenience of the learner. As this mode of learning was adopted by a number of people because of which it proved to be extremely successful and latter those courses were adopted on formal basis. Open or distance learning mode of education can be defined as the education for those type of students who may not be able to get education through physical presence at any institution.

Students are facilitated by the flexibility of freedom by time and place, that open and distance learning provides. The study proves that in Open University students in UK there is less percentage of students who do not want to have contact with other students. Such types of students have chosen this mode so that they may interact less with other people. In distance learning the learners faces issues related to learning, teaching and support of students (Alan & Guest, 2003). The two modes of learning that is distance learning and conventional system are not opponent to each other. Both of these modes can prove to be beneficial for serving the noble cause that is to provide education to all (Attri, 2012).

It can be seen that open and distance mode of learning has most appreciated potential for the generation of new and innovative patterns for teaching and learning. It is strongly linked with informational developments as well as technologies related to communication, on the other hand it interlinked and closed to the development of new requirements of learning and updated guidance of access to information as well as the appliance and learning. There is confirmation about the fact that it can lead to the improvement in conventional education and it may affect the conventional form of education. It can be said without any doubt that openand distance learning plays fundamental role for the establishment of society based on the global knowledge (Evgueni, et al., 2002).

Distance learning is an effective mode through which learning experiences can be enhanced. In order to achieve new information and knowledge, experience must make sense so that it settles down with existing pattern of knowledge. To enhance learning, the atmosphere ought to be: Motivational, Equipped with learning material, Based on activities, Interactive environment of class (Sue, 2002).

There are many motivational theories that signify distance education for instance there is „proactive motivational support theory“ which might sustain learning mode more supportively as compare to other theories. This theory also proves to be encouraging especially for the skills development of distance learners (Simpson, 2008).

Open and distance learning has unique characteristics. On one hand the students faces barriers in learning which are not faced by traditional face to face learners. But the benefits of open and distance learning cannot be ignored. Hillesheim highlighted possible strategies and models which can prove to be beneficial for learners of this mode (Hillesheim, 1998).

2.1. Developments in Open and Distance Learning

It is open fact and is quite clear that open and distance learning will be a significant element of prospective education and system of training. Now it is reaching the status of acceptance within educational convention as well as training in such a way to brought up a part of selection in future most of the educational organizations. It can be seen that considerable pedagogical, efficient as well as organizational implications may be seen with the emergence of new and innovative forms of learning through distance mode of education by the use of communication and information technology. In addition to this it has significant trend towards growing globalization in this field. There is increase in the institutional as well as the intergovernmental cooperation; in addition to this a number of projects have been realized in global classrooms by means of global communication network. There is leadership through governmental approach regarding development of network is done. It can be said that the access will be indispensable in this field. Additionally it can be said that all regions of the world have shown their impression with some similarities and some differences. It is about one hundred and more urbanized regions in which open and distance learning have been existed and in other regions under developing areas. In the developing world for the high developing countries open and distance learning mode has been seen observed to offer education and training with a number of vital opportunities. On the other hand there have been some relevant areas that create problem and important barriers in this mode of learning which includes lack of proper infrastructure as well as competencies in professional approach of open and distance learning. It can be said that there are some forms of educational delivery that come to stay and many countries are looking at open and distance learning through which quality is raised, access is expanded and it also ensure the effectiveness of cost (Evgueni, et al., 2002).

Undoubtedly, it can be said that open and distance education plays vital role in the progression of knowledge and skills of learners. It also helps in the progression of learners at higher education level and educational agencies. Teaching faculty and teacher educators may be assisted through tutorials or web-based resources for the progression of their knowledge and skills in different areas. The teacher educators“ progression in the field or area of technology for learning may influence and modernize in the use of technology for teaching of different courses for prospective teachers. In

Pakistan, renowned university that is Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad provides the form of education that is known as non-formal education all over the country and in rural areas through its practical educational projects. There is provision of audio-cassettes/ CD"s and the provision of flip cards for the leaders of the groups which forms resources to be used in group studies and discussions. It has been suggested through evaluation that this mode of learning is an effectual approach while on the other hand it is also a fact that annual learners have never been increased more than 1500. There is consistent ratio that has been found in other countries which is cause of their growing confidence level. For instance, distance education efforts has been recommended in major and recommended high population countries which includes Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Maxico, Indonesia, Nigeria and India. The major focus is on the equivalence and expansion of teacher education, health education and non-formal mode of education. For all the mentioned areas strategies have been developed which could usefully be applied in all or mostprobably in some areas of the mentioned countries. The other forms of strategies like broadcasting and low technologies figure strongly but on the other hand there are growing variety of projects which makes new and innovative utility of information and technology (UNESCO, 2001).

In China there is a need to expand the access to higher education for which government-led „Modern Open and Distance learning mode of education“. There is a long history of distance learning by the use of radio, television and other technologies but now modern technology that is the use of computer is promoting the development in education. Nowadays it also entertains students with online learning, to different degrees. But there are various types of barriers faced by the learners which include lack of communication, teaching material, learning material, support, economic burden and internet facility, etc. The findings of the research showed that lack of communication with experts and other peers is the most important barrier which creates hurdle for the learners so this mode of learning should create a way through which it become easy for the learner to communicate (Wang, 2013).

Adults have to compete with numerous priorities because of this reason they need a method of gaining education which is flexible in nature. Hence especially for such type of learners open and distance learner mode proves to be the best one. But we cannot ignore the problems faced by adult distance learners as well. They may loss the motivation because of lack of face to face interaction with the peers as well as educators, lack of support from tutors creates barrier in their learning. Distance learners may face insecurities regarding their: self-evaluation, thoughts of isolation, technical backing problem and inexperience with this mode of learning, which leads to academic problems. The faculty members/teachers also face some barriers which include lack of training in course development and technology, lack of coordination with the other members, of distance learning courses (Galusha, 1998).

All the barriers in distance learning are closely linked with technical infrastructure and support. These barriers can be reduced in intensity if there is strong support of administration with organizational norms and culture which remains favorable for distance education (Soomyung & Zane, 2002).

Rumble said that the practical use of open and distance learning practice is continuously misleading its basic concept. This system is open in practice and is

supportive, deals with dialogue, etc. But this system is misleading by the concept of so-called „open learning system“ (Rumble, 2006).

3. Methodology

The design for this study was qualitative in nature based on open ended questionnaire.

3.1. Sampling

Simple random sampling technique was used to select sample for the study. Total sample was consisted of 150 graduate students and 10 teachers.

3.2. Instrumentation

For the data collection from teacher educators and prospective teachers an open ended questionnaire was developed on the basis of extended literature review.

3.3. Data Collection & Analysis

The data were collected through personal visits of the researcher. Data were collected through questionnaire which was given to 150 student participants and 10 teacher participants.

The data were analyzed by generalization of codes and themes.

4. Findings

Qualitative data analysis involves the identification, examination, and interpretation of patterns and themes in textual data and determines how these patterns and themes help answer the research questions at hand. The analysis was done in steps in this research; the researchers made initial coding on the basis of common words/statements of the participants and were highlighted under the same theme. In second step, axial coding was made to create broader categories on the basis of initial coding. Finally, themes were generated reflecting the initial coding and axial coding. Following is given the detail of it.

Table 1: Analysis for Personal Obstacle

Theme	Axial coding	Initial coding
Personal obstacles	Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students generally face financial problems. Sometimes they do not get books so they have to make photocopies. Along with the semester fee it becomes difficult to manage finance.
	Insecurity about learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes they cannot understand anything but they have to memorize it so they feel insecure about learning. They find it difficult to read at home because of domestic issues. Because of family responsibilities their learning becomes insecure.
	Feeling of isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They cannot connect with other fellows and teachers because of which they cannot clarify few unclear concepts. Feeling of isolation creates complications in their learning process.
	Lack of support and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes they receive their study material very late. Most of the students do not know how to use computer and they do not have any guidance and support in this regard. Sometimes they cannot get access to

	internet.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many people stay in remote areas and faces power problem.
Demotivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Due to isolation their internal motivation decreases. In many cases they cannot understand concepts which decrease their interest in studies.
Inexperience with this mode of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Due to lack of experience with this mode of learning it becomes difficult to manage. Handling with this mode along with other activities i.e job, house, etc becomes difficult to manage.

Table 2: Analysis for Organizational Obstacles

Theme	Axial coding	Initial coding
Organizational obstacles	Poor infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The students as well as teachers faces problem while attending workshops at different institutions. Required facilities are not available.
	Lack of feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When students ask things from tutors, they cannot get proper feedback. Due to lack of feedback skills cannot be developed.
	Technology problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required technologies are not available in the workshops. No development in technology occurs in students.
	Evaluation problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most of the students are not satisfied with evaluation system. Evaluation is not done according to the teaching provided in workshops.
	Communication gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No daily or weekly face to face contact with teachers less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life
	Inadequate faculty selection for distance learning courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of in time presence of teacher. They must meet the needs of distance students without face-to-face contact Teachers may lack the basic skills or hardware to fully participate in distance education.
	Lack of funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bright students are not given any type of incentives. No funds are generated for students.

Table 1: Analysis for Social Obstacles

Theme	Axial coding	Initial coding
Social		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This mode of learning does not develop the social skills.

obstacles	Lack of social development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is less face to face interaction of students with teachers and with other students because of which they do not have social interaction.
	Lack of transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes the classes are arranged during off days because of which many students face difficulty of transport. For many people it is easy to attend on weekends but they also face transport problem. Sometimes they cannot access the centre of their workshop because they are far away.
	Less community link	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is very less community links because of which students face many problems. This mode of learning does not promote social interactions.
	Lack of confidence in handling situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students lack confidence in handling situations. Activities are not available which could their confidence level. Students do not know about their own abilities because of which they lose their confidence.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the research showed that lack of communication with experts and other peers is the most important barrier which creates hurdle for the learners so this mode of learning should create a way through which it become easy for the learner to communicate. The findings revealed that students of open and distance learning mode face problem in payment mode as well. Few teachers also agreed on the fact that students face problem because of un-trained teachers which creates hurdles for their learning (Wang, 2013). Teachers also said that due to lack of resources they are unable to communicate with students and could not give proper response them regarding their problems. In a nutshell, it can be stated that the curriculum may be set in such a way which may overcome social, organizational and personal obstacles to its best extent.

No one can neglect the importance of distance learning in new digital and global age as it plays fundamental role for the establishment of society based on the global knowledge (Evgueni, et al., 2002). The two modes of learning that is distance learning and conventional system are not opponent to each other. Both of these modes can prove to be beneficial for serving the noble cause that is to provide education to all (Attri, 2012). By studying different researches it can be said about open and distance learning mode that there are a number of challenges that are faced especially by open and distance learners. With the arrival of globalization and new technologies changing should be made in this mode of learning. Teachers were of the view that modern techniques should be adopted in this mode for students learning. Among the individual learners noted problems are found to lie for which this study recommended one of the major solutions that are the use of information and communication

technology amongst the universities within the same cities or different cities may enhance or creates ease for open and distance learners.

6. Recommendations

Following recommendations were made on the basis of findings of the current research:

1. Most of issues may be resolved by the frequent use of information and communication technology (ICTs) among the universities within the same cities or different cities, it may enhance or creates ease for open and distance learners.
2. Different educational funds, stipends may be granted to minimize financial problems indicated by various students.
3. Administrative authorities may organize workshops in nearest areas which are accessible for the students to eliminate transport issues.
4. The government may establish guidance and counseling centers for students of this mode of learning which could help the students in their learning.
5. Due to fewer resources teachers cannot give feedback to students in time regarding their queries so more resources may be allocated for advancement in this area.
6. Other than workshops regular meetings may be arranged for the students to overcome the limitation of one to one interaction.

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