WHY DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS FAIL TO BRING QUALITY: A CASE STUDY OF AN ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The paper identifies the reasons of ineffective implementation of distance learning programs in Pakistan. The distance learning programs are not new in Pakistan, but the induction of technology in these programs made them very different from the traditional distance learning program. On one hand, the use of technology created a huge attraction for people to enroll in these programs. On the other hand, the mode of delivery causes several problems. These problems are of unique nature, and administration is unable to address these due to lack of training and full understanding of the system. The current problems need innovative solutions. The qualitative research method was applied to find the multiple reasons that are responsible for the ineffective deployment of the system, and low learning experiences of students. The participants include the key stake holders such as faculty, administrators, Study Centre coordinators, students and staff. The paper highlighted three major areas; a) Poor policy at administrative level, b) Ineffective communication among stakeholders, and c) Low Learning experiences of students. The researcher's finding includes the in-depth analysis of the ineffective areas in the system. The finding and analysis indicates that the inconsistent policies at top leadership level, followed by the middle and lower administration. The major policy concerns are related to inconsistency, lack of consultancy with stake holders, untrained administrative staff, and poorly developed marketing campaign. The study also found that there is a lack of communication among stakeholders, especially between administration and the study centre coordinators. Due to lack of communication and poor coordination, the system is unable to produce desirable results. Lastly, the student's learning experience is at the lowest level due to lack of understanding of the distance learning mode of teaching. The paper concludes with the strong recommendations and suggestions come from the major stake holders to improve the system. These suggestions and recommendations include the seriousness in leadership to develop better policies with reasonable consistency, identify ways to reduce communication gap between different stakeholders. Lastly, the researcher argues to make academic reforms to provide better learning experiences to the students.
***Keywords**: Distance learning problems, Policies of distance learning programs, Learning experiences of distance learning programs.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Distance learning programs are getting great attention in higher education as people don't want to commute and spend time at physical campuses due to their busy life schedules. Most of the universities around the world are considering distance education as one of the emerging instructional element in their policies. Although it is not a new phenomenon, the integration of technology, especially the induction of internet and social media, has changed the dynamics of distance learning education. On one hand, the use of technology created a huge attraction for people to enroll in these programs. On the other hand, the mode of delivery causes several problems. These problems are of unique nature, and administration is unable to address these due to lack of training and full understanding of the system. The paper is intended to explore the hindrances for students, teachers and administrations to execute the programs without compromising on quality of the programs. Moreover, the researchers, by using outcomes of this study, offers practical solutions that would help the respective stakeholders to improve the quality of distance learning programs at their respective universities.

The history of distance learning programs can be classified into three broader phases. In the first phase, before 19th century, the short-term programs and courses were great attraction for most of the people who wanted to advance their knowledge and skills. These short-term courses were used to offer as correspondence courses and the institutions used postal services to interact with their students who are interested in taking these courses. It has been noticed that the postal services were used to administer the distance learning programs for a long time, even it is practiced today in some parts of the world. The second phase started in the 20th century with the invention of radio and television when educational institutions started offering their programs in electronic medium by the use of radio and TV. The attraction of electronic media has created a deep impact on enrolment of people in these programs. In 1974, the government of Pakistan established the first public distance learning university in the federal capital of the country. Allama Iqbal Open University is the fourth largest institution of higher learning in the world, with an annual enrollment of more than 1.5 million students. The university offers distance learning undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs in several disciplines. The university started with the traditional correspondence mode of delivery, and later added the provision of radio and TV to enhance students' learning experiences.

The third phase features the revolutionary change with the emergence of internet and social media. After the arrival of internet and social media, many elements of this world get the influence. Education is also one of the elements of society that has been influenced by the invasion of internet and social media in our lives. In today's modern education systems, use of internet and social media is considered as an integral part of the delivery mechanism. In 2002, the Virtual University of Pakistan was established as the first ICT based university to provide quality education through its online distance education programs. The state of the art university features satellite television, high-speed Internet, and high-definition video lectures by eminent educationist of Pakistan and abroad. After the success of the Virtual University, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology launched its Virtual Campus in 2012. Similarly, several other universities

started distance learning programs in recent years. Although the enrolment is satisfactory, there are big question marks on the quality of the online distance learning programs.

In order to address the questions of quality, this study was designed to explore the reasons of ineffective online programs. The major objective of the study was to explore the causes of decline in quality of online distance learning program. A public university offering the online distance learning program was used as a case study to explore the causes of low quality. The researchers used qualitative research method to execute this study by engaging students, teachers, and administrators and study center officials in individual interviews, focus group conversation, and document review in order to generate a qualitative data. The data was then used to analyze by applying thematic analysis. The paper concluded with the recommendations to improve the delivery of online distance learning programs.

Review of Relevant Literature

This section of the paper deals with the relevant literature about the quality issues in online distance learning programs. Before the researcher jumped into the issue of quality, they feel it important to establish the concept of distance learning through a relevant literature. As far as the need of distance learning is concerned, Beldarrain (2006) believed that the provision of online distance learning program serves the needs of those students who cannot participate in physical classes due to any domestic reason. Keegan (1996) was considered as a first person to elaborate the conceptual idea of distance learning. He mentioned that the distance learning is extension of learning process for those students who are placed in diverse locations with various resources. Similarly, Eisinger (2000) noted that the distance learning is a well-planned learning experience process created for students to communicate and reach out fellow students across the globe regardless of the physical locations.

Since the modern day online distance learning programs are heavily dependent on technology and students spend a considerable time with technology (Newland & Bylest, 2014), the mode of delivery in most of the online distance education programs is internet-based. In the last fifteen years, the concept of distance education has dramatically changed by the inclusion of internet-based learning, interactive lectures, and emergence of several other educational technologies. As the result, institutes of higher education are making considerable investments in bringing new technologies into their classroom for

teaching (Yang & Tung, 2007). The research conducted in first few years of 21st century revealed that the online learning empowers educational institutions to expand their online distance learning programs with convenience (Hara & Kling, 2001; Hill, 2002; Hofmann, 2002). However, contradictory evidence was also found in the study of Hannafin, Hill, Oliver, Glazer, & Sharma (2003) that there is no empirical data available to justify the effectiveness of online distance learning program
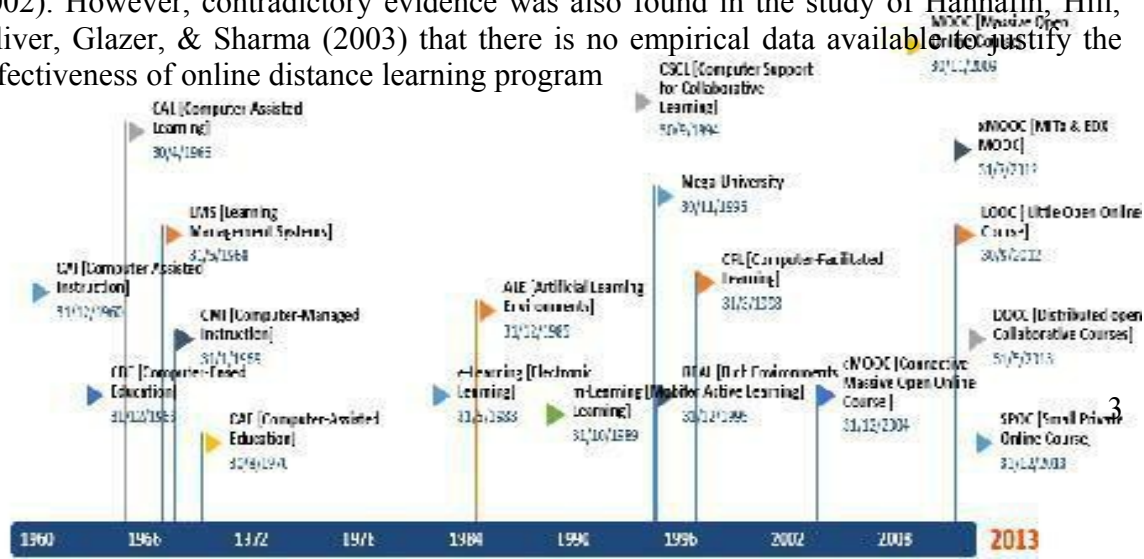
Figure 1: Timeline of E-learning programs (Aparicio, Bacao, & Oliveira, 2014)

Although a reasonable number of researches were conducted on distance learning programs, there are few studies that have explored issues related to policies, and students' perspectives together to identify problem areas in online learning programs. Petrides (2002) conducted a qualitative study by engaging students to get their insights on online distance learning programs and their experiences. Another study on students' perspectives was conducted by Vonderwell's in 2003 to learn about their perceptions about the asynchronous mode of delivery in their online program. Some of the research participants mentioned that the asynchronous mode of delivery enabled them to refine their ideas before they post them online (p. 86). Similar results were reported by Chizmar and Walbert (1999) that students were found more careful in posting their assignments and work because they know that the comments are not only visible for the class but in some ways it is made public.

A brief review of the relevant literature suggested the need of a research having both the components of student's learning and administrative policies to see the combined effect of these two variables on effectiveness of distance learning programs. In countries like Pakistan, it was noticed that the traditional correspondence courses were replaced with online internet-based programs by some leading universities such as Virtual University, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, and Agriculture University, Faisalabad. Many other universities are also offering programs in a distance learning mode of delivery. This new format of delivery attracted many students and informal learners, but the quality of programs in contrast to face-to-face program is a serious question for researcher. This study in aimed to explore the policy issues related to administration of distance learning programs along with the students'learning experiences. The study has great implications for policy makers, students, teachers and other stakeholders of distance learning programs.

Methodology

The qualitative research method was applied to find the multiple reasons that are responsible for the ineffective deployment of the system, and low learning experiences of students. The participants include the key stake holders such as faculty, administrators, Study Center coordinators, students and staff. In this section of the paper, the justification for qualitative research methods is illustrated, and explains the strengths of qualitative research methods for this study. Additionally, a detailed account of the research participants is mentioned. Qualitative methods provide description, analysis, and interpretation of the research issue. Greene and Harris (2011) argued that many different types of qualitative research methods are used for human participants, but understanding the human experience remains the common interest. Moreover, the researchers choose qualitative research method because it provides in-depth analysis of the issue, its causes, and possible solutions.

In this qualitative study, three major approaches were adopted to get the in-depth ideas of the issue, and the possible solutions. The major tool used in this study was multiple interviews of policy makers who are involved in the implementation of distance learning programs in Pakistan. Second approach was the document review. In this aspect, the researchers collected related documents form the universities that offer online distance education programs. Last and the final approach was 13 visits of the researcher

at 38 study centers in Islamabad, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to gain insights of one of the important element in distance learning programs. After the collection of data from these three different sources, researcher triangulated the data to making a generalization of the issue. Based on the available data and its analysis, recommendations were made to find appropriate solutions of the problems related quality of online distance learning programs in Pakistan.

Table 1: Details of Data Collection

Tool	Purpose	N	Type	Number	Duration
Interviews 1	To get insights of online programs administrators	12	Directors, Managers, IT specialist	2-3 each	30 minutes each
Interview 2	To get insights of University teachers	15	University teachers and Moderators	2-3 each	30 minutes each
Interview 3	To get insights of students	34	Students enrolled in Online Programs	2 each	60 minutes each
Interview 4	To get insights of Study Center Officials	38	Managers of Study centers in ISB, Punjab and KP	1 each	60 minutes each
Focus Group Conversation	To get collective insights	15	Teachers, Moderators, and Director	1 each	60 minutes each

Document Review	To enhance knowledge	Several	Document	Varied	Varied

Data Analysis

The researchers initiated the qualitative analysis by reading the interview transcripts and observational notes. After collection of data through multiple interviews, focused group conversations, document review, and online data, the data were organized for presentation and analysis. Table 2 reflects the major themes emerged from data.

Table 2   Summary of Major Themes

Major Themes	Sub Themes
Poor policy at administrative level	Lack of experience in online education
	Absence of national and institutional policy
	Weak administrative decisions
Ineffective communication among stakeholders	Uncertainty of information
	Role of stakeholders
	Lack of dialogue
Low Learning experiences of students	Study material quality issue
	Different lecturer and moderator
	Examination issues
	Role of student affairs department

Findings

This section of the paper would discuss the major findings of the study in a thematic form. Major themes emerged from the collected data are a) Poor policy at administrative level, b) Ineffective communication among stakeholders, and c) Low learning experiences of students. These major themes and sub-themes will be analyzed in detail to gain understanding of problems related to distance learning programs.

5.1.   Poor Policy at Administrative Level

Policy making and its implementation emerged as one of the most critical factor responsible for ineffectiveness of online distance learning programs. Absence of national and institutional policy is a clear reflection of non-serious policy making practices in Pakistan. A committee has been formed earlier this year to compose a national level policy for distance education in Pakistan. Currently, due

to absence of clear national and institutional policy, most of the institutions are following the policies which are regulated in the physical campuses. A senior director of distance learning programs in one of the public sector university mentioned that we don't have any option other than following the physical campus polices. Commenting on the same, head of the English Department said that the efforts to implement the physical campus policies in an online format are a big mistake. The needs of a distant learner are very different from that of a face-to-face learner. As the result, we need to have a separate policy for distance education that caters the needs of a distant learner.

Another issue related to policies is weak administrative decisions on different administrative and academic affairs. According to a deputy registrar academic of a public sector distance learning institute, sometimes it is very hard to make good decisions due to lack of clear policy and direction from the top management. Even at the national level, HEC has no clear policy on online distance learning programs, as the result, they know what is wrong, but unable to identify the correct course of action. More importantly, the lack of experience becomes a big reasons of ineffective implementation of online distance learning programs. During one of the interview with a senior Human Resource Officer, researchers learned that unavailability of experienced teachers and skilled IT professional is a big hurdle in bringing quality in online programs. The university has no option other than recruiting people without experience in online teaching. They might have good professional teaching experience of face-to-face teaching, but online experience is hard to find. Secondly, the university has no training program to train these faculty members and IT staff.

Another aspect of policy discourse is the lack of engagement of study center officials in policy making. One of the study center representative mentioned that one decision related to fee was made without consulting them, resulted in significant decline in enrolment. Institutional management decided to offer two fee structures. The first one is for those students who directly enrolled themselves without the involvement of study center, and the second one is for those students who secure their admission through study centers. The fee for direct enrolment is significantly less than the study center fee. As the result, when students were told about the difference, everyone prefers a direct admission. On the other hand, the institutional capacity is limited to attract students from all over Pakistan, resulted in lowest enrolment in its history. More importantly, the institution also lost the trust of study centers. Such decision without the involvement of a major stakeholder, bring significant threat to existence of the institute.

5.2. Ineffective Communication among Stakeholders

Lack of effective communication among stakeholders is another reason of ineffective online distance learning programs in Pakistan. Major stakeholders include students, teachers, IT staff, admin and study centers. Most of the respondents considered uncertainty of information a major factor in ineffective communication. Two major possibilities regarding the information delivery were found while interviewing the participants. First of all, the information related to important events such as exams, assignments, and graded discussions was not shared in a timely manner. Later, while talking to administrative stakeholders such as directors and student affairs department, it was identified that the decision made at the top level were conveyed to the academic department but no follow up mechanism was found to implement those decisions in a timely manner. So, the internal lack of coordination inside the institute significantly contributes towards ineffective communication. One of the participants reported one incident to strengthen the aspect of ineffective communication. In one of the terminal exams, due to some technical issues in IT system, the top management decided to postpone the exams for one week. Due to ineffective coordination in the institute, students and even some faculty members were unaware of the change, As the result, students

reached at the exam centers and later learned that the date has been changed. Similarly, few more examples related to dissemination of information were shared.

The second evidence of ineffective communication was explored while taking to external stakeholders such as study center owners. The institute established more than one hundred study center all over Pakistan on the principle if public-private partnership. These study centers play a central role in promoting the idea of distance learning in various places in Pakistan and helps in improving enrolment of students. Owners and representatives of 38 study centers were interviewed to get their insights. While interviewing them, they mentioned that there is a huge disconnect between them and the institute in terms of information sharing and policy making decisions. They also pointed out that students receive different information when they contact the institute as compare the information that was sent to the study center. Due to lack of coordination, students were found confused and unable to concentrate on their study. Additionally, in terms of financial benefits that the institute has promised in the agreement, the institute violates the agreements and the study center noticed delays and incomplete payments. This attitude results in distrust, and become a major cause of lack of motivation.

Role of all the stakeholders is important. Researchers of this study found that the roles are not clearly defined and communicated to all the stakeholders. Study centers, for instance, are motivated to enhance enrolment but no efforts have been made to think about the quality issues such as content, exams reforms, curriculums, programs, and other aspects of the online distance learning programs. Lack of dialogue is another big reason for ineffective communication. There was only one meeting with study centers in last two years. Due to lack of connection and poor coordination, the online distance learning programs fail to achieve quality standards.

5.3. Low Learning Experiences of Students

The third major theme is related to low learning experiences of students who are enrolled in online distance learning programs. The overall observation about students in terms of their learning experiences is unsatisfactory. Although they achieve high grades and maintain good academic standing, they are unable to develop the required skills and academic excellence that is expected from a relevant degree. Four major causes of students'low learning experience were found while interacting with them individually and in groups: a) study material quality, b) different lecturer and moderator, c) examination issues, and d) role of student affairs department.

First major reason of low learning experience is the ineffective study material. Study material is comprised of printed text, recommended books and video lectures. The students, in their interviews, mentioned that they receive the material very late, sometimes mid of the semester. Secondly, the recommended text books are unavailable in the market and both study center and institute do not offer any help in getting the recommended text books. Some of the students also mentioned that there is no connection between the recommended books and the recorded lectures. In spite of the fact that students pay a reasonable amount of money for the study material, most of the participants were not satisfied with the study material and its delivery process. The second thing associated with the study material is the provision of different lecturer in the video lecturer and the moderator of the course. The institute engages senior professors to record lectures, and then asks the course moderators to teach the course to distant learners. It has been pointed out by both students and the course moderators that there is a

lack of synchronization between the recorded video lectures and the approach of a course moderator. More importantly, since the lectures are recorded by senior professors and taught by a junior faculty, the faculty never intended to disagree with anything that senior professor mentioned in the lecture. Due to these inconsistencies and disconnects, the students experience a low level of learning.

Another issue is related to evaluation process, the examination of students. In contrast to the traditional examination system in which the university is a sole authority to conduct examination and evaluate its students according to a standard evaluation criterion, the online distance learning programs of the institute depends on a third party to conduct exams. The students shared serious concerns over the involvement of a third party in university affairs due to the reported cases of organized cheating and unethical practices at some of the examination centers. As the result, there are two important consequences that are happening in the system. First, it demoralizes the students to work hard. Secondly, the reputation of the institute and its credibility come under a serious question of quality and standards.

Another serious observation during the visit of researchers to study centers is important to mention. The enrolment in notorious center is highest because students find it an easy way to obtain a degree. This trend is the most critical aspect of quality of distance learning programs. Last, but not the least, the passive role of student affairs department is a big reason of students' low learning experiences. The students pointed out that the student affairs department of the institute is least interested in answering their questions and queries. It is important to note that distant learners need additional services and information as compared to a face-to-face learner. A regular physical campus student has an access to the university's physical facility whereas the distant learners are located at different places in Pakistan and only depends on the information and services provided by the institute through its student affairs department. Due to delayed responses and lack of trained staff, the students' learning experiences are greatly influenced.

5.4. Possible Solutions

Based on the collected data and suggestions of key stakeholders, the researchers of this study offer the following solutions to the major problems identified in this study:

1. The most essential step to address most of the problems related to online distance learning programs is to revisit the policies that govern the online distance learning programs in Pakistan. The policies that online distance learning programs are following were developed for face-to-face mode of instruction, and can't fulfill the needs of online distance learning programs. All the key stakeholders must join hands to craft a new policy for online distance learning programs. A national level policy, exclusively for online distance learning programs is the most important requirement to improve the quality of online distance learning programs in Pakistan. The policy should be made in context of online delivery mode of instruction and must address the needs of online system.

2. Since the students of online distance learning programs are located in different geographical locations in Pakistan and abroad, a mechanism of effective communication must be designed to improve interaction with students and study centers. The institute must develop strategy to train its staff and that of study centers to improve quality by solving problems at a faster speed.

3. Regular meetings with study center official and incorporation of their input in policy can improve the quality of online distance learning programs in Pakistan. Since they play a significant role in expanding the outreach to all parts of the country, their input for various policy level decisions must be invited and incorporated in the institutional policy. Similarly, more interaction on academic and administrative issues among faculty and staff of institute is recommended to improve quality.

4. An effective call center in the department of student affairs should be established to address the problems and queries of students at a faster speed. The special needs of students must be considered and possible help must be extended to them. Moreover, an effective system of delivery of study material to students and study centers must be devised to improve quality of online distance learning programs. Support and services along with the technical assistance for distant learners must be provided in a timely manner. Students especially need the technical support related to internet and Learning Management System (LMS) in order to complete courses requirement on time.

5. Interaction between professors of video lectures and moderators of the course must be scheduled to reduce the gap between creator and executor of the course in order to improve learning experiences of the students. Additionally, examples, activities and experiences in the content must be included in study material in accordance with the needs, learning experiences and expectations of the distant learners.

5.5.   **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study concluded that the inconsistent policies at top leadership level, followed by the middle and lower administration. The major policy concerns are related to inconsistency, lack of consultancy with stake holders, untrained administrative staff, and poorly developed marketing campaign. The study also found that there is a lack of communication among stakeholders, especially between administration and the study center coordinators. Due to lack of communication and poor coordination, the system is unable to produce desirable results. Lastly, the student's learning experience is at the lowest level due to lack of understanding of the distance learning mode of teaching. The researcher recommended viable solutions to improve the effectiveness of online distance learning programs. These recommendations include the development of national policy for online distance learning programs, mechanisms for effective communication and interaction among key stakeholders, and institutional reforms to bring quality in online distance learning programs in Pakistan.

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