

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: AN ISSUE NEEDS TO BE RESOLVED ON PRIORITY BASES IN PAKISTAN**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This research study investigates the role of distance education in a substantial development in Pakistan, its strengths, weaknesses, and responsibilities of accreditation bodies working under the umbrella of HEC Pakistan in maintaining, or improving their standards of education to meet future challenges. For the purpose, the institutes offering distance education were explored and their selected curricula for different levels and procedures were analyzed through the opinions of the students, tutors, course coordinators, and heads. Mixed methods research strategy was adopted to achieve the desired results tailor-made questionnaires were used to collect data from the heads of the institutes, course supervisors, tutors and students getting education through distance learning programs. The findings show that the selected curricula by the institutes offering distance education are not up to the mark moreover their ways of assessment need improvement. On the bases of findings, it is recommended that distance education institutes need to improve their procedure to assure quality education. Further, it is recommended that the government of Pakistan should plan to promote better and quality distance education by establishing more distance education institutes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As the world is changed in a global village, therefore the importance of education in Pakistan is increasing day by day, because it is a social instrument through which man can guide his destiny and shape his future. An uneducated man can't become a part of development. Education is necessary for the social and economic development of a nation. But Wafa (2015) writes in his comments written to Daily Times that the illiteracy rate in Pakistan is increasing day by day and the figures have reached millions. He further says that education is the right of every child whether rich or poor and if the right of education is taken away from children, how will Pakistan make progress? The government and NGOs should make concrete efforts to spread education in underdeveloped areas of Pakistan. In the present era of technology, there are many ways for spreading education in remote areas i.e. the blogosphere, books, podcasts, and online videos. As the majority of people in Pakistan are poor, having no access to such advance technologies or maybe the elders in the families having a misconception about those technologies could be used to promote education in Pakistan. As it is difficult for the government to open new educational institutes to fulfill the educational needs of the people living in remote areas, there are several areas in Pakistan where parents do not send their children especially girls to schools/colleges, in such circumstances institutes providing distance education can play their role in promoting education in Pakistan. Distance education has become a major topic of interest in the field of educational communications and technology. According to Simonson (2006) distance education is defined as institution-based formal education where the learning groups are separated and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors. Margaret (2005) says, distance education sometimes called e-learning, is a formalized teaching and learning system specially designed to be carried out remotely by using electronic communication. Because distance education is less expensive to support and is not constrained by geographic considerations it offers opportunities in situations where traditional education has difficulty. Grenberg (1998) defines contemporary distance education as "a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction certification of learning" (p.36). Teaster and Blietzner (1999) say "the term distance education has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and learners are separate in space and possibly time" (p.741). Desmond Keegan (1995) provides another definition, he states that distance education and training result from the technological result from the separation of teacher and learner

which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, to be trained. From these definitions, we can see that the student and teacher are separated by space, but not necessarily by time. A few years ago, online education was unthinkable; now it is a reality and it has expanded beyond imagination. The internet has allowed us to cross boundaries that took a long time to cross; technology has allowed us to learn and grow with people from around the world. It has given access to new opportunities in work, learning and in socializing. We are now witnessing a transformation in the way people learn. The future of education in general and college education, in particular, will be of more access, more educational choices, and new fields in education research.

Distance education has been used for formal as well as professional education, it has also been used to teach, support and develop teachers for many years, while the success of programs has varied, experience demonstrates that distance education can be used to enable teachers to learn and to gain qualifications. The use of new information and communication technologies has drawn new attention to open and distance learning and offers new possibilities. Saide and Saide (2003) have defined distance education as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. Open learning, in turn, is an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on the study are minimized in terms either of access, or of time and place, peace, method of study, or any combination of these. In the context of teacher education, we have found it useful to understand distance education not as a mode of delivery with one identity, but rather as a collection of methods for the provision of structured learning in situations where students are unable primarily to attend fixed classes at a centralized venue and physical presence of a teacher.

The institutes providing distance education in Pakistan are Aga Khan University, Allama Iqbal Open University, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships for Pakistani and Developing Countries, COMSATS IIT, Virtual Campus, Gomal University Dera Ismail Khan, Government College University, Faisalabad, Islamia University Bahawalpur, Sarhad University of Science and Information Technology, University of Engineering and Technology Lahore, University of Peshawar, University of Sindh, Preston University, and the Virtual University of Pakistan.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In Pakistan, the institutes providing distance education enroll the students, send them the related material i.e. books, assignments, and tutors names, etc., the students are provided opportunity to meet the tutors fortnightly, the tutors are supposed to solve the queries or give instructions to the students, the students are supposed to complete the assignments within a fixed time and at the end of the semester, the institutes conduct a comprehensive examination. Usually, it is observed that students do not attend the meeting/classes, just finish and submit the assignments, appear in final exams, get the certificate or degree but when they hunt for the job then find it difficult to have a good job, because the question on quality of process and transparency is always raised by the educators of formal education institutes and administrators of institutes having the mandate of recruitment of quality employees.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this research study was to measure the quality of education provided by distance education institutes working in Pakistan as this system caters to a large number of populations with several programs in Pakistan. This system is providing lifelong learning opportunities to those who for any reason cannot attend regular study programs like females at home, working people, and people living in remote areas having social, financial as well as cultural barriers but are willing to enhance their knowledge and skills.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Following questions were raised to achieve the purpose:

- Are the students satisfied by the knowledge, and the medium used to impart it?
- Do the students get a high-status job after completing their education from distance education institutes?
- Are the heads/coordinators/tutors satisfied by the students' attitudes towards their studies?
- Do the programs offer by such institutes meet international standards?
- Do the heads check the effectiveness of their programs offered by their institutes?
- Do they wish to get the offered programs evaluated by external bodies?

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The mixed approach was used during this research study both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze the collected data. The research was based on a descriptive study because it describes the effectiveness of distance education programs offered by distance education institutes.

The population of the study was students, tutors, course coordinators, administrators (Employees recruiting bodies) and the head/s of the institutes offering distance education programs. There are (13) thirteen institutes in Pakistan offering distance education programs, there are only two (2) institutes having their campus in Karachi or working in Karachi, therefore the data was collected by using five tailor-made questionnaires to get the answers from the target population.

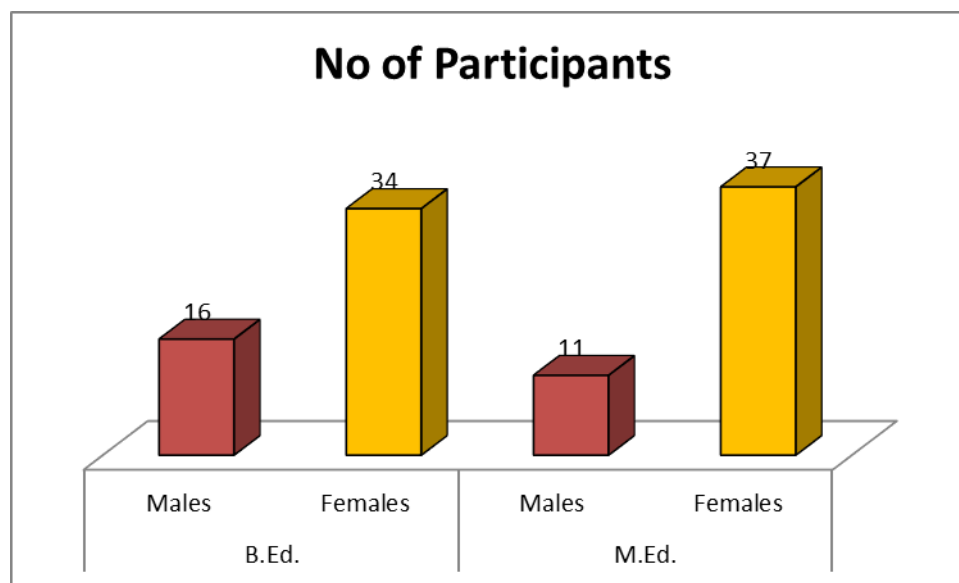
### Sample and Data Collection Procedure

By using a stratified random sampling procedure, the data was collected in five phases:

#### Phase-I

In this phase, data were collected from one hundred (100) B.Ed. and M.Ed. students 50 each including males and females completing their education using distance education mode, a questionnaire consisting of five closed-ended and one open-ended question was used. The ratio of the participants is shown in the table and graph below:

S. No.	Course	Gender	No of Participants	Total	%age
1.	B.Ed.	Males	16	50	32%
2.		Females	34		68%
3.	M.Ed.	Males	11	48	22.91%
4.		Females	37		77.08)



#### Phase-II

In this phase, data were collected from the administrators or bodies involved in teachers' recruitment, a questionnaire consisting of three close-ended and two open-ended questions. The questionnaire served to forty-eight (48) heads of both public, private, primary, secondary, and higher secondary institutes, the details of respondents is shown in the table and graph given below:

S. No.	Category	Level	Gender	No of Respondents	Total	%age
1.	Public	Primary	Males	03	08	37.5%
2.			Females	05		62.5%
3.		Secondary	Males	04	08	50%
4.			Females	04		50%
5.		H. Secondary	Males	04	08	50%
6.			Females	04		50%

7.	Private	Primary	Males	00	08	0%
8.			Females	08		100%
9.		Secondary	Males	04	08	50%
10			Females	04		50%
		H. Secondary	Males	04	08	50%
			Females	04		50%

### Phase-III

In this phase data was collected from the tutors, imparting distance education, using a questionnaire consisting of eight closed-ended and one open-ended questions. The questionnaire was served to fifty (50) tutors including males and females taking B.Ed. or M.Ed. or both levels classes. The detail of respondents is as under:

S. No.	Gender	Level	No. of Respondents	Total	%age
1.	Males	B.Ed.	13	25	52%
2.		M.Ed.	05		20%
3.		Both	08		32%
4.	Females	B.Ed.	15	25	60%
5.		M.Ed.	04		16%
6.		Both	06		24%

### Phase-IV

In this phase, data were collected from the course coordinators. Who works as a bridge between the students and the tutors, using a questionnaire consisting of five closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was served to four (04) course coordinators, coordinating B.Ed. and M.Ed. or both the courses. The detail is as under:

S. No.	Gender	Course	No. of Participants	Total	%age
1.	Males	B.Ed.	02	04	50%
2.		M.Ed.	02		50%
3.	Females	B.Ed.	00	00	0%
4.		M.Ed.	00		0%

### Phase-V

In this phase data was collected from head/s of the institute conducting distance education programs, using a questionnaire consisting of five closed-ended questions to measure their level of satisfaction about the programs offered by them and their consent about the evaluation of programs by external evaluators. The designed questionnaire was served to 02 (two) heads one each institute, one was male while the other was female.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed by using a simple percentage formula, and the item-wise analyses of all questions asked from heads/administrators/coordinators/tutors/students are as under:

### 1. Students Responses

- In response to the first asked question (How do you get your assignments?), the students responded that they get their assignment through postal services and sometimes they are also sent messages by using short message service.
- In response to the second question-related completion of tasks given (How do you complete your assignments?) the responses of the students are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Tutor Assistance	12	12.24%
2.	Self-Study	78	79.59%
3.	Both	08	8.16%

- In response to the third asked question which was about the students' level of satisfaction (Are you satisfied by the knowledge you gain through this system?), the responses of the students are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
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1.	Yes	07	7.14%
2.	No	03	3.06%
3.	Sometimes	88	89.79%

- d. In response to the forth asked question in which they were asked to give some suitable suggestions for improvement and majority of the students shared/proposed that modern technology should be used for teachers' and students' interaction for a better understanding of the subject.
- e. In response to the fifth asked question which was about the utility of knowledge gained in practical life. The responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Strongly Agreed	18	18.36%
2.	Agreed	25	25.51%
3.	No Comments	58	59.80%
4.	Disagreed	00	0%
5.	Strongly Disagreed	00	0%

- f. In response to the last asked question, this was about their level of confidence in getting a suitable, good or highly paid job after completing a distance education program. The responses of the participants are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Strongly Agreed	7	%
2.	Agreed	12	%
3.	No Comments	57	%
4.	Disagreed	13	%
5.	Strongly Disagreed	9	%

## 2. Administrators or Recruiting Authorities Responses

- a. The responses of the participants about the first asked question, which was about the selection criteria of teachers, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Knowledge	32	66.66%
2.	Degree Awarding Institute	7	14.58%
3.	Both	9	18.75%

- b. In response to the second asked a question that does the candidates having degree through distance education program meet the standards fixed by your institute, the responses of both public and private institutes heads are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	2	4%
2.	No	37	77.08%
3.	Sometimes	9	18.75%

- c. In response to the third asked question which was about the reason that candidate having degree through distance education do not meet the standards set by the institute, majority of them argued that as they do not attend regular classes, having any chance of interaction with a teacher, as a result, their comprehension, retention, and implication of knowledge is weak or sometimes equal to none.
- d. In response to the forth asked question, it was concluded from their responses that modern technology should be used teacher-students interaction.
- e. In response to the fifth asked question which was about the presence of employees having degrees through distance learning programs, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	None	29	60.41%
2.	Few	18	37.5%
3.	Many	1	2.08%

### 3. Tutors Responses

- a. In response to the first asked question, which was about the tutors' interaction with the students, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	2	4%
2.	No	17	34%
3.	Sometimes	31	62%

- b. In response to the second question related to their satisfaction towards the performance of the students their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	9	18%
2.	No	23	46%
3.	Sometimes	18	36%

- c. In response to the third asked question which was about the relation between the knowledge gained through a distance education program and good or highly paid job for the students. The responses of the teachers are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Strongly Agreed	2	4%
2.	Agreed	5	10%
3.	No Comments	33	66%
4.	Disagreed	7	14%
5.	Strongly Disagreed	3	6%

- d. In response to the fourth question, which was about the curriculum of distance education institutes and need of the modern world of technology, the responses of the tutors are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Strongly Agreed	1	2%
2.	Agreed	7	14%
3.	No Comments	38	76%
4.	Disagreed	3	6%
5.	Strongly Disagreed	1	2%

- e. In response to the fifth asked question, which was about the knowledge gained through distance education and its utility in practical life by the students, the responses of the participant's tutors are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Strongly Agreed	30	60%
2.	Agreed	14	28%
3.	No Comments	2	4%
4.	Disagreed	3	6%
5.	Strongly Disagreed	1	2%

- f. In response to the sixth asked question, which was about their satisfaction while working with distance education institutes, the responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	11	22%
2.	No	15	30%
3.	Sometimes	24	48%

- g. In response to the seventh asked question, which was related to the incentive given to them and their satisfaction, the responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	1	2%
2.	No	45	90%
3.	Sometimes	4	8%

- h. In response to the eighth asked question which was about the changes needed in aspects of distance education i.e. programs offered, the medium of students-teachers interaction, or submission of assignments, the responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Programs offered	3	6%
2.	The medium of students-teachers interaction	11	22%
3.	Mode of submission of assignments	13	26%
4.	All of the above	23	46%

- i. In response to the ninth asked question, it was an open-ended question asking suggestions for improvement in distance education programs offered by the institutes in Pakistan. The responses of the tutors were tagged as up-gradation of incentives, the medium of communication, overall they suggested bringing change in the distance education programs of Pakistan institutes and to align them with the modern world.

#### 4. Coordinators Responses

04 coordinators 02 from each institute were elected to get their consents about the programs offered by them, the detail of the responses are as under:

- a. In response to the first asked question which was about their expectation from the students, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	1	25%
2.	No	0	0%
3.	Sometimes	3	75%

- b. In response to the second asked question which was about the students' satisfaction from the services provided by them, the responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	1	25%
2.	No	0	0%
3.	Sometimes	3	75%

- c. In response to the third asked question related to students success in getting good or highly paid job in the market, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	2	50%
2.	No	0	0%
3.	Sometimes	2	50%

- d. In response to the forth asked question which was related to their satisfaction for services provided by their institute, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	2	50%
2.	No	0	0%
3.	Sometimes	2	50%

- e. In response to the fifth or the last question, its purpose was to get their consent about the areas of their institutes needs improvement, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Selected Contents	0	0%
2.	Teacher-students interaction	1	25%
3.	Assignments procedure	1	25%
4.	All of the above	2	50%

### 5. Responses of Heads of the Institutes Offering Distance Education

To get the consents of the regional heads of the institutes offering distance education programs semi-structured interviews were conducted, their responses are as under:

- a. The first question was about their satisfaction related to services provided by their institutes, the responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	1	50%
2.	No	0	0%
3.	Sometimes	1	50%

- b. In response to the second asked question related to the up-gradation of the curriculum, the responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	After one year	0	12%
2.	After five years	0	22%
3.	When needed	2	24%
4.	None of the above	0	42%

- c. In response to the third asked question which was about evaluation to measure the effectiveness of the programs offered by them, the responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Internal Body	0	0%
2.	External Body	0	0%
3.	None of the above	2	100%

- d. In response to the forth asked question which was to get their opinion for programs evaluation by the external body, their responses are as under:

S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	0	0%
2.	No	0	0%
3.	May be	2	100%

- e. In response to the last or fifth asked question, which was related to the standard of the programs offered by their institute in relation with the international standards used for distance education, the responses are as under:



S. No.	Response	Total	%age
1.	Yes	0	0%
2.	No	0	0%
3.	May be	2	100%

## DISCUSSION

The collected data indicates that

- The students get their assignments through postal services which are unreliable and costly, they finish the assignments by themselves (79.59%), and are sometimes (89.79%) get satisfaction. They wish that modern technology should be involved in distance education programs offered in Pakistan. The majority (59.80%) of students were having no response to the utility of knowledge in their practical life, moreover, most of the students were not confident that they will get a good or highly paid job after completing the program through distance education.
- The recruiting authorities consider the knowledge (66.66%) of the candidate, not the degree awarding institutes, but they (77.08%) said that those who finish their education through distance education do not meet the standards required by their institutes in case of knowledge or confidence in performing the tasks assigned, in this regard they argued that as they do not attend regular classes, having no chance of interaction with a teacher, as a result, their comprehension, retention, and implication of knowledge is weak or sometimes equal to none, further they proposed that distance education institutes could modern technology for that purpose. It is also disclosed that they (60.41%) do not employees having a degree through the distance education program.
- The tutors said that they (62%) do not have frequent interaction with the students, they (46%) are not satisfied by the performance of the students, they (66%) gave no comments when they were asked that will the students get highly paid jobs and in case of curriculum and needs of the modern world of technology 76% were having no comments. They (60%) said selected contents are useful if students study it seriously, the tutors (78%) are not highly satisfied by their job with distance education institutes because 90% are not satisfied by the incentive they are given, they (46%) suggested overall improvement in the distance education programs and asked for use of modern technology.
- The course coordinators (75%) feel that students sometimes perform as per their expectations, they (75%) disclosed that sometimes they find students being satisfied by the services provided by their institute, they were having a fifty-50 ratio in case of students succeed in getting a well-paid job, moreover, they all suggested for improvement.
- Regional heads of the institutes sometimes get satisfaction provided by their institute, they (24%) revise curriculum when needed while (42%) chose no option, 100% having no external or internal body for evaluation of the programs offered, they (100%) feel maybe there should be some external body for evaluation of the program as they (100%) are not sure that the programs offered by them meet the international standards.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the collected responses from the respondents and views of scholars, it is concluded that

- The students neither satisfied by the process and nor confident that after finishing their education they will get highly paid jobs.
- The tutors and coordinators themselves are not satisfied by the students' attitude towards the tasks assigned and ultimately the knowledge gain by them.
- The recruiting authorities feel that the candidates having degrees through distance education programs cannot compete with candidates having degrees through the regular formal education system in case of knowledge and confidence.
- The heads of the institute neither get their programs up-dated on regular bases nor get them evaluated from internal/external evaluators, moreover, they do not get feedback from students or the market to bring changes in the programs as per changing time.
- Overall it is concluded that the question raised by other institutes providing formal and heads having the mandate of recruiting quality employees is true.

## Recommendations

On the bases of findings, it is recommended that as the demand of distance education is increasing day by day and to upturn the effectiveness of the programs offered and to bring their standards to international levels, the institutes offering distance education should

- up-date their curriculum on regular intervals
- should get regular feedback from end-users i.e. students, tutors, recruiting authorities to measure the effectiveness of the procedure and the programs

- c. should get the programs to be evaluated by some external neutrals evaluators
- d. keeping in view the requirements of the present-day market, the accrediting body needs to play an active role.

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