Library and information science distance education and continuing professional development in Pakistan

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Abstract

Purpose – To reiterate and update previous work in this area in the light of intervening developments in educational technology; and in particular to demonstrate the value of distance education for those sections of Pakistani society who are not well served by conventional educational methods. Those in need of workplace learning and similar forms of educational outreach are an important subset of this population.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a historical account of distance learning in LIS education in Pakistan, with particular reference to the role of the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), and also some conclusions and pointers for the future drawing on developments from 1999 to date.

Findings – Distance education has a unique role to play in Pakistan, where high university drop-out rates in conventional Higher Education, the need for outreach to the remote, rural poor, and the social barriers placed between women and participation in traditional education are notable features of social and educational life.

Research limitations/implications – This paper presents some of the challenges to be faced by practitioner researchers in helping further understanding of how distance learning and education can be offered successfully to a variety of sections of Pakistani society, including those with a need for vocational training in general and for continuing professional development in the workplace in particular.

Practical implications – The example chosen of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) gives a practical context to the paper's assertions about the value and potential of distance education in the developing world.

Originality/value – The paper gives some insight into how 'developed' world models of distance education, delivered via the new media, might offer the way forward to existing distance education activities in the developing world.

Keywords Distance learning, Educational innovation, Information science, Pakistan

Paper type General review

Introduction

As new communication technologies enable learning to take place beyond the classroom, distance education has become increasing popular as a means of extending continuing education world wide, particularly to professionals in practice. Distance education promotes and provides accessible, independent and interactive education at all levels in many countries. It reaches to audiences by using a wide range of technologies for delivering educational services and courses to off-campus sites, workplaces, homes and remote villages. Learners can view diverse educational programmes in their offices and homes as well as across geographical barriers. Thus, distance education is recognized throughout the world as a viable alternative to campus-based education.

Developing countries are facing problems in increasing their literacy rate and providing education to all. This problem is multiplied in Pakistan where population growth rate is high and the people are non-responsive to the concept of Planned

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Parenthood. Although attempts via programmes such as "Education for All" and "Universal Education" (Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, 2006; UNESCO, 2006) though well intentioned, have failed to address the problem, the open and distance education system can be considered as a viable alternative to take education to the as yet unreached, and thus minimize educational inequality (Ghosh, 2001). Indeed industrialization, development, and increased educational opportunity are linked in fundamental ways with a growing role for distance learning (Peters, 1989).

History of open and distance education in Pakistan

The idea of distance education was first proposed in the UK in the late 1960s providing opportunities to many who had left education early, assisting them to upgrade their knowledge and skills in their spare time. The UK Open University (Open University, UK, 2006) was established in 1969 and has since become a major institution of learning in UK and opening up opportunities for millions of working people. The mission of distance and open learning has since then spread throughout the world. More than 60 open universities are operating around the world on the basis of distance education. The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU, 2006) was established in 1974 as the second open university in the world and the first of its kind in Asia or Africa.

The idea of an open university in Pakistan was announced in the Education Policy statement for 1972–1980 (Ministry of Education, 1972):

> Open Universities are being used in several countries to provide education and training to people who cannot leave their homes and jobs for full time studies. An open university will, therefore, be established to provide part-time educational facilities through correspondence courses, tutorials, seminars, workshops, laboratories, television and radio broadcasts and other mass communication media.

The Allama Iqbal Open University was established in June 1974 under an Act of Parliament (Act XXXIX) giving the institution equal legal and academic status as other Universities in Pakistan. It was initially named as the People's Open University, but renamed as Allama Iqbal Open University in 1977 at the eve of the first centenary of the national poet and philosopher, Allama Muhammad Iqbal. The University aims to provide equality of educational opportunities to as large a section of population as possible, not only for professional advancement but to promote lifelong learning.

Certain features of educational need in Pakistan particularly suit the principles of distance education: the rate of literacy, the dropout rate in higher education and access to higher education in the poorer rural areas. The rate of literacy and education is much lower for females, particularly in rural areas, and many conservative parents under the pressure of old age traditions do not allow their daughters to go to school. The AIOU has provided educational opportunities to this group of girls and women. This clearly explains the fact that the majority of students enrolled with the University are female.

The AIOU is also tackling the challenge of rising costs in professional and technical education in Pakistan which has resulted from the government's policy of encouraging the private sector in these fields. In effect, this has marginalized the lower middle classes with future generations having very little chance to get into higher education in fields like Business Administration, Computer Science, Medicine and Engineering. The AIOU is attempting to meet this challenge by keeping costs at the minimum and with the creation of a student assistance fund.

Outreach (regional) system

The AIOU provides an outreach system via 62 regional campuses and offices and more than 1,000 study centers throughout Pakistan. This outreach system plays a pivotal role in distance education. The regional directors prepare rosters of experts in the region and arrange for qualified tutors to meet with students at least twice a month. The regional offices register partner institutions as study centers, organize workshops and practical training in the region and arrange examination centers. All the regions have now been linked with the central database to facilitate better and faster communication.

Distance teaching system

The distance teaching system enables students in diverse localities to undertake self-study. The most dominant teaching media used by AIOU for distance education is print media, but use is also made of radio and television broadcasts, cassette tapes, video tapes, computer-assisted instruction and face-to-face tutoring. Students are evaluated through continuous assessments, written assignments for submission, practical work, attendance at regular workshops, and written final examinations which are conducted at various study centers around the country.

Distance education in library and information sciences at AIOU

Information professionals have been involved in distance education since 1888, when Melvil Dewey called on the library school at Albany, New York to develop correspondence courses for librarians in small and special libraries. Since then LIS schools have permitted the enrolment of part-time students, scheduled evening and weekend classes, summer courses, opportunities for intensive sessions, and have offered courses away from the home campus and other alternatives to a "traditional" classroom education. (Barron, 1991).

Charles Williamson became interested in correspondence education in library science, recommending to the Carnegie Corporation in 1921 and 1923 that library schools adopt the correspondence method of instruction. He later recommended that the Carnegie Corporation fund the development of a school in New York City to develop correspondence study on a large scale and of high quality (Barron, 1996). Numbers of colleges, universities and institutions offer courses via the distance education system. As a result, someone pursuing a degree or trying to keep pace with new developments in his or her profession can often study the required courses without needing to enrol in a conventional campus-based course.

In this important development of the information age, emphasis is on the need for further education, continuing education and lifelong education for the information professionals and those who have already been in the workforce. Distance learning is the most useful and cost-effective means of enhancing or updating information and library skills and qualifications (Stoker, 1995) and offers an ability to integrate diverse skills and professional backgrounds (Markowitz, 1990). The goal is:

> … to continue such missions and in response to the demand for library education from in-service personnel in libraries who do not hold library qualifications, as well as by inhabitants who live in far-off cities and towns where library education facilities are not available.

Degrees offered

The Department of Library and Information Sciences was established as part of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities in 1985. Since then Allama Iqbal Open University is offering the following information science programmes:

(1) *Certificate in librarianship*. Offered at post-intermediate level since 1985 for training students to perform different para-professional tasks. The course work is skill-oriented and based on a how-to-do approach consisting of two courses, Organizing Library Resources (422) and Library Services (423), which are divided into 18 units each (one full credit).

(2) *Bachelor in library and information sciences (BLIS)*. Two certificate courses (422 and 423) offered at CLIS level and two new courses, History of Libraries with reference to Pakistan (466) and Classification and Cataloguing (467) which were introduced in 1988 to fulfill the requirement of eight full credits for a BLIS degree. The compulsory modules of the course are Islamiat, Ethics, Functional English, Cataloguing and Classification, Library Organization, Library Services, and History of Libraries. Students can also choose from the following elective modules: Pakistan Studies, Urdu, Education, Pakistani Literature, Reporting, Public Relations, Communication, Book Editing and Advertising.

(3) *Master of library and information sciences (MLIS)*. Introduced in 2000, this course consists of four semesters spreading over two years and requires ten credits by completing 13 courses (or 11 courses plus thesis). Eleven compulsory courses are covered during the first three semesters and two courses are offered in the 4th semester or submission of research thesis. A 2nd class division bachelor's degree is necessary for admission to MLIS. However, selection is made on merit basis, following the Provincial Quota System.

Courses details by semester are shown in Table I.

Resources and services

Library resources, local study centers, regional and resources centers, special study centers and cooperating government and private institutions are all used for the

Course title	Course number	Credits
1st semester		
Foundation of librarianship	5500	Half credit (HC)
Introduction to library and information science	5501	HC
Information sources and services	5502	HC
Classification theory and practice	5503	HC
Cataloguing theory and practice	5504	HC
2nd semester		
Collection development	5505	HC
Management of libraries And information centers	5506	HC
Library automation/ information storage and retrieval	5507	HC
3rd semester		
Resource sharing and networking advance	5508	HC
Technical operations	5509	HC
Research methods and techniques	5510	HC
4th semester		
Public records	5511	Full Credit (FC)
Serials management	5519	FC
Research thesis	5520	2 FCs

Table I.

course. This system provides numerous contact points for students and allows full use of learning resources and services of professionals working in well reputed libraries around the country.

Conclusion

As with any skill oriented professional discipline, an LIS education teaches the students the skills required for the prevalent job market. Critics of distance learning systems point out the inadequacy of the system in terms of imparting real practical skills that will enable students to move into the workplace. This is an arguable point since there are many good examples of practical, skills-based LIS education programmes around the world (Xiaoying, 1997; Sacchanand, 1998; Ruksasuk, 1999). However, for those already in the workplace, ideally a new system is necessary to combine media-based learning alongside their work in a practical environment to assist distance learning students to compete in the employment market. In practice, distance learners are sometimes not treated on a par with conventional learners in a work environment. And in terms of educational technology, the dual mode delivery system for distance education (print based and other media) will continue at least for the foreseeable future until new infrastructure is in place and learners develop skills to handle continuing development materials via new interactive, multimedia based technological platforms.

The establishment in 2002 of a virtual university for Pakistan (Virtual University of Pakistan, 2006), as described by Mahmood *et al.* (2006), shows that the new media can be used to support distance learning in what is at present a small number of subjects (such as Masters' programs in computing, IT and business administration). It is not an insurmountable step to progress from these to Masters' courses in LIS, delivered as virtual university courses. Indeed the current VUP course in "Teacher training for web based e-learning courses" < http://vulms.vu.edu.pk/library/courses_catalog.cfm > is paving the way for the skills of e-learning based pedagogies to spread through the entire educational system in Pakistan.

Recommendations

- Self-instructional material has a role in motivating students, creating and maintaining interest in the topic and suggesting new tasks for developing higher level competencies in distance education. Whether it is a radio or television programme, or print or web-based instruction, it is an accepted fact that individuals are capable of self- learning only if they are provided with appropriately designed materials.
- It would be advisable for a consortium of librarians and academics from various library science schools to produce educational material of high quality, assisting to overcome the shortage of appropriately designed self-instructional materials.
- Information Science is a constantly changing field and this is an important factor affecting distance education programmes. Providers of education in this field will have to carry out such research activities as are required to review their curricula from time to time and make them relevant and current.
- In addition to the development of simulated practical courseware, the inclusion of internship programmes in US courses as a compulsory component should produce successful library and information professionals, particularly through

open and distance learning methods. With support and investment this could be a model for developing countries too.

- Modern telecommunication technologies allow distance learning to take new formats and approaches by bringing students and instructors together in a virtual world. Virtual or digital teaching laboratories are meeting the growing demand in the USA at various levels. This model utilizes advanced technologies on the internet and the web to bridge the physical distance between the students and their instructors by facilitating lectures and class discussions, effectively handling assignments and providing efficient library support. Allama Iqbal Open University has already opened a similar system, the Online Institute of Education (OLIVE) and has the resources and expertise to convert the present computer infrastructure of its LIS Department into a similar virtual digital teaching laboratory.

However, it will be a difficult task to achieve these targets within an LIS Department which is staffed by two regular MLS degree holders from a local university, as has been the norm at AIOU. A competent and professionally well educated faculty with foreign training and education is a pre-requisite to run the distance professional courses such as MLIS and PhD. In such circumstances, if the appropriate training, resourcing and infrastructural development is made available, this distance learning model has a unique opportunity to answer the present and future pattern of educational need in Pakistan.

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