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Perceptions of Academicians Regarding Assessment Process of Distance Teacher Education Courses in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the assessment process of distance education. The study involved academicians working under distance education system as the faculty of education. It used a questionnaire depending on five point Likert scale. Its content validity and face validity was determined by expert opinion method. Reliability of tool was determined through Cronbach's alpha that was 0.83. It concluded that assignment questions were well prepared. They covered entire courses. Question papers were well balanced but validity of question papers was not determined. Furthermore, marking of assignments was not satisfactory and the institutions did not ensure accuracy of marking of assignments and answer scripts. Tutors marked assignments but did not write comments on assignments to guide students about weak portions of their responses. Results were announced late but were communicated to students just after the result declaration. This suggested that all persons involved in the assessment process should perform responsibility seriously.

Key Words: educational assessment, distance education, teacher training, assignments, examinations

1. Introduction

Distance education is a new trend of education. Perraton, Creed and Robinson (2002) state; it is a different system in a sense that it provides tutor and learning material to learners at place feasible for them. Learners are provided with resources by using different means. It gives option to study according to convenience of learners. So, developing and under developing countries are adopting it keeping in view its benefits for learners as well as institutions. It is cost effective, flexible and easy for working class and deprived groups of society. A person willing to upgrade his education, without leaving his job or business, can easily continue the education by getting admission in an institution working through distance education. Distance learners have opportunity to upgrade their educational status without attending the institution regularly.

Keeping in view the demand of education, Pakistan introduced distance education with the establishment of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in Pakistan from 1974. AIOU was second Open University in the world. Degree of AIOU is accepted in the world. Working class and people belonging to areas where facility of formal education is not available in Pakistan are much benefiting from the AIOU. Moreover, it is blessing for

those who are unable to continue their education by attending a regular institution because of any reason. Observation of rich enrollment of students in AIOU has encouraged formal universities of Pakistan to change their mode of education. Some of the Universities in Pakistan have launched distance education courses along continuing their regular courses. Gomal University Dera Ismail Khan, Government College University Faisalabad, University of Peshawar, Bahauldin Zakria University and The Islamia University of Bahawalpur are some examples of the Universities who have introduced some of their courses through distance mode along the formal mode. High enrolment in distance education courses is encouraging organizers of universities to adopt the mode for future too. A trend to work as dual mode institutions is growing in Pakistan. Higher Education Commission of Pakistan aims to promote distance education mode in formal universities to discourage private education in the country.

The formal universities introducing distance education courses mostly follow the AIOU model to frame their rules for distance education courses. AIOU has high enrollment in teacher education courses. High enrollment of students in AIOU indicates its popularity and importance among the people in Pakistan. According to AIOU (2011) eight lacks, forty three thousands, three hundred and seventy five students were enrolled in different teacher education courses from the B.Ed to Ph. D level during the year 2011. This shows that education through the university is accessible to improve educational status of people in the country. However, high enrolment of the university, on the other hand, demands policy makers and organizers of the university to play a vigilant role to provide quality education to students. Various reports have pointed out weaknesses in the system of distance education in Pakistan. Critics have high dissatisfaction with the quality of distance education. These create problems for graduates of distance education institutions in getting jobs in the market. Therefore, a study to analyze the current assessment process of distance education courses in Pakistan was needed to highlight strengths and problems in the system of distance education in the country. It can be helpful to review the current system to improve its output and establish assessment system on effective basis in future.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The present study was conducted to analyze the assessment process of teacher education through distance education in Pakistan. To analyze the assessment process, paper setting, examination conduct, assignments' marking, paper marking, result preparation and result dissemination activities were analyzed evaluating the perceptions of academicians regarding each component.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to:

- i. Analyze perceptions of academicians regarding the assessment process of teacher education courses through distance education method in Pakistan.
- ii. Explore strengths and weaknesses of the process of assessment in distance education.
- iii. Suggest workable measures to improve the assessment process of distance education.

1.3 Significance of the Study

- i. This study is supportive for highlighting the significant features of assessment process of distance education. Therefore, an idea about the strengths and weaknesses of assessment process in distance education courses can be taken by reviewing the study.
- ii. The institutions that are in the process of starting distance education courses in future can use results of this study while planning their system.
- iii. The study is most important for researchers who are working on assessment process of distance education in Pakistan.
- iv. Results of this study are useful to improve the assessment process of distance education courses.
- v. The study is helpful for planners, organizers of distance education institutions in the improvement of policies about teacher education, assessment process and distance education.

2. Review of Related literature

2.1 Assessment and its Significance in Education

Assessment is an integral part of educational process. It is process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use of teachers to decide where learners are in their learning (Jones and Tanner, 2006). It is delimited to deciding the progress of students in courses. Khawaja and Brennan (1990) narrate; it is done by the teachers or examining bodies. Mishra (2009) describes, it covers projects, assignments and tasks that provide information.

Role of assessment in educational process is vital. In education, assessment is used to understand success of learners in learning areas of courses. It comprehends problems as well as user's views about the weaknesses of system of education. Evans and Nation (1989) explain that assessment activity guides students through planning of an evaluation exercise in their own field. Without assessment, no system can be organized well. It is one of the dominant educational tools for approving the successful education (Munshi, and Bhatti, 2007). It is essential to provide feedback to students, teachers, parents and administrators about the achievement of goals of education. Assessment provides basis to bring improvement in plans and actions.

2.2 Assessment Process in Distance Education Courses

Assessment in distance education is taken as a continuous process. A distance learner is given different assessment activities at different stages during a course. Course assignments, presentations and examination are taken as major components in the process of assessment of a student. Therefore, assessment results of distance learners represent two components in their results.

- i. Results of Formative Assessment
- ii. Results of Summative Assessment

Major component of formative assessment in distance education includes assessment of students through assignments. Main theme for offering multiple assignments to distance learners is to motivate students to study course in detail and give exercises to students to

write answers of questions according to the format of institution. According to Trivedi (2010), assignments are used to inspire learners to study contents by searching knowledge from multiple sources and prove that they have studied the course by completing assigned work. Murugan (1998) takes assignments essential to screen the level of attainment of a learner about the course contents. In his views, assignments stimulate learners to study frequently and motivate them to contact to class fellows and teachers for academic support. Pandey and Parveez (2006) consider assignments helpful for learners to receive advice of their tutors about their learning deficiencies.

In summative assessment, examination results are taken as major component. Purpose of final examination is to evaluate students' learning in a course. Conduct of examination is not an easy job. It requires trained and dedicated staff to gain valid results. Hodgson (1993) has identified various conditions for ideal conduct of examinations. These include; announcement of examination schedule before 14 days of start of examinations, use of a valid question paper, setting of peaceful conditions in the examination halls and strict control during examination.

Formative and summative assessment both play vital role in distance learning. Therefore, institutions in the world that are working under distance education method give representation to both components in cumulative result of students regarding each course. Different distance education institutions of the world have different rules regarding ratio of formative and summative assessment in the result. Analysis of rules indicates that:

In Australia, Griffin University give stress on projects, assignments, presentations and end of term examinations (Allen and Young, 2006). In China, results of formative assessment and summative assessment are represented in the results. According to Renkun, Tingting and Lina (2011) noted that overall institutions give 20% to 40% weightage to formative assessment in cumulative results but mostly institutions give intensive weight to summative assessment and give 80% representation to final examination marks. About the UK Open University, course assignments and examinations both comprise the entire assessment of distance learners. Number of assignments and duration of course varies according to course credits (Daniel, 2006). In Canada, students are awarded percentage grade in a course based on their performance in assignments and examinations. However, some courses have only one final examination (Albert, 2005).

In India, mostly distance education institutions have fixed 25-30% marks for assignments and 70-75% marks for end term examinations in result (Jahan et al., 2012). In Pakistan, assessment rules of AIOU about the teacher education courses indicates that ratio of assessment in each course comprises formative and summative assessment of each candidate with the ratio of 30% and 70%. Participation of students in all assessment components organized during the period of a course is compulsory for the successful completion of a course (AIOU (2012). Examination and Assessment process as mentioned by the Virtual University, Pakistan (2012) on its website explains that assessment of students is done on continuous basis through online quizzes, graded moderated discussion boards of subject, assignments, project, mid-term and final term examinations. Participation of students in each component is recorded separately. Results of formative and summative assessments are given weight in calculation of result of students. Breakup of assessment results of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur indicates a ratio of 20% to 70% regarding formative assessment (assignments, workshop,

and behavior) and summative assessment (Mid-Term and End of The Term examinations). Assessment rules of Bahauldin Zakria University, Multan and Gomal University, Dera Ghazi Khan explain ratio of formative and summative assessment was 20% and 80% in cumulative results of students.

2.3 Reports of Previous Studies Regarding Assessment Process of Distance Education in Pakistan

Concept of distance education in Pakistan is demanding especially for higher education courses now a day. According to the directions of Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and acceptance of the mode for people, some of the universities have started various courses following distance education method. Keeping in view bringing improvement in the system of distance education, various researchers have evaluated assessment process of distance education in Pakistan. They have reported various findings indicating the strengths and weaknesses in the process. Summary of the reports has given below.

Malik (2000) while evaluating the evaluation system of distance education in the country reported that assignments were related to content and covered major contents of courses. These motivated students to study thoroughly. Asghar (2000) established that questions of assignments were constructed properly. Atique (2009) reported that regional campus management or other authority did not monitor marked assignments. Iqbal (2011) highlighted that tutors were given no instruction to send high graded or low graded assignments to any authority. Furthermore, Ahmed (2011) reported that remarks given on assignments did not help students for their final examinations. While explaining the reasons of invalid evaluation of assignments of distance learners, Shah (2008) reported that tutors were appointed from formal education institutions that had little awareness about the distance education system. In his observation, tutors were not trained to work in distance education.

Report by Parveen (2006) about the evaluation of examinations of distance learners indicated that examinations held in peaceful environment. Supervision during examinations was strict to minimize chances of unfair means. Study conducted by Aisha (2007) reported students' satisfaction with the conduct of examinations but dissatisfaction with the marking of assignments. Study conducted by Shah (2004) pointed out invalidity of examination scripts, lack of reliability in marking of assignment papers and defective evaluation of distance learners. Ali (1999) highlighted that procedure to get result and degree from the university was difficult for students.

3. Methodology

This was a small-scale case study and was delimited to AIOU, Pakistan. It involved whole population (29 academicians of teacher education courses of AIOU) to evaluate assessment process of distance teacher education. Five academicians were involved in pilot study and 24 were included in the final data collection stage. A questionnaire on five point Likert Scale was developed keeping in view the objectives of study. Its content validity and face validity was determined by experts' opinion method involving five experts in the field of education. Moreover, it was pilot tested on a sample of five academicians. The results indicated that all items of the questionnaire were understandable for respondents. Reliability of tool was determined through Cronbach's Alpha method that was 0.83. It explained that tool was reliable.

At the stage of data collection, academicians were requested to provide their opinion about the statements included in the questionnaire on a scale. Statements of questionnaire were about the assignments, question papers conduct of examinations, marking process of assignments, marking of answer scripts and result dissemination process. Twenty-one of the academicians responded the questionnaire. For data analysis, mean score of each item was calculated. For interpretation of data, mean value 3.5 and above was taken as criterion to accept respondents' agreement to the statements. Further, results were classified in different clusters to understand effectiveness of different aspects of assessment process of distance education of teacher education courses.

4. Results of the study

To analyze the effectiveness of assessment process of distance education in teacher education, 25 statements on five point Likert Scale were given to academicians. They were requested to rate the assessments and analyze the process. Results about the respondents' perceptions about the assessment process were arranged under different headings and have given in tables 1 to table 4 along with interpretation of results after each table.

Table 1: Mean Difference of Academicians' Judgment about the Effectiveness of Assessment Process of Distance Education

Gender	n	Mean Scores	S. D	T Value	Sig. (two tailed) At 95% Confidence Interval	Mean Difference
Male	7	84.00	8.68	-1.277	.221	-5.57143
Female	14	89.57	10.75			
Total	21	87.71	10.25			

Table: 1 presents a view about the effectiveness of assessment process of distance education in judgment of academicians. It explains that mean score of female (89.57) is greater than male (84.00) but mean difference (-5.57143) is not significant (.221) at 95% confidence interval. This means, academicians have same opinion about the effectiveness of assessment process of distance education in Pakistan without gender discrimination.

Table 2: Opinion about the Assessment of Assignments

Sr. No	Statements	Mean	S.D.	Variance	S.E.
1	Tutors are given guide to mark assignments	2.71	1.19	1.41	.26
2	Tutors point out mistakes in assignments	2.57	1.08	1.16	.23
3	Tutors suggest ways/strategies to improve answers	2.57	1.08	1.16	.23
4	Tutors return assignments to students after marking	2.67	1.02	1.03	.22
5	Accuracy of marking is rechecked	2.67	1.24	1.53	.27

Table: 2 present’s judgment of academicians about the assessment process of assignments. It discovered that academicians did not agree about the effective assessment of assignments of distance learners. This reveals that tutors are given no marking guide to explain marking rules (Mean= 2.71). Marking of assignments is not rechecked (mean=2.67) by any authority of the institution. Tutors do not point out mistakes while marking the assignments (Mean=2.57) and do not suggest ways to improve the weak sections of responses (Mean=2.57). Further, they do not return assignments to students after marking (2.67) that is necessary to inform students about their learning and identify their performance in skill to response the questions.

Table 3: Opinion about the Assessment Items Included in Assignments and Question Papers

Sr. No	Statements	Mean	S.D.	Variance	S.E.
1	Expert reviewers review assignment papers to ensure suitability of questions included in assignments.	3.71	1.19	1.41	.26
2	Assignments are according to the distance education format.	4.43	.51	.26	.11
3	Question papers are well balanced.	3.86	1.01	1.03	.22
4	Validity of question papers is determined.	2.67	1.11	1.23	.24

Table: 3 present judgment of academicians about the assessment questions. About the questions used for formative assessment, it indicates that validity of assignments questions is determined before finalizing them (3.71). This means, assignment questions are finalized carefully. Academicians review the assignments’ questions before giving them to students. Experts judge suitability of assignment questions before assigning them to students. Further, assignment questions are prepared according to demands of distance education mode (Mean 4.43). Academicians who are responsible to propose assessment activities for distance learners are also responsible to train learners according to the demands of distance education mode. They aim to enable distance learners to study whole course, become independent learners and propose assessment activities to learners during a semester to prepare them for examinations.

As final examination is a part of assessment process of distance learners to evaluate performance of students at the end of semester. Academicians take the task of construction of question papers keeping in mind the requirement of assessment process. It explains that question papers are prepared keeping in mind to include a mixture of easy and difficult level questions. Academicians keep in mind the level of learners and use balanced papers in examination process (Mean 3.86). But, it indicates that content validity of questions included in question papers is not determined (Mean 2.67) before finalizing them. This means that managements just focus to request examiners to propose question papers without ensuring the validity of questions included in examinations. It ignores the important quality “validity” of test while preparing question papers for learners. Therefore, a quality of questions included in question papers, whether tests measure what they purposes to measure is not ensured. This suggests management to review policy about the preparation process of question papers.

Table 4: Opinion about Marking of Answer Scripts and Examinations

Sr. No.	Statements	Mean	S.D.	Variance	S.E.
1	Answer scripts were marked on merit.	3.57	1.21	1.46	.26
2	Head examiners recheck the marking done by sub examiners.	3.14	1.39	1.93	.30
3	Results were declared timely.	3.38	1.40	1.95	.34
4	Result cards were timely dispatched to students on their address.	3.67	1.06	1.33	.23
5	Roll number slips, date sheet and results were timely uploaded on the website of the university.	4.29	.16	.72	.51

Table: 4 represents judgment of academicians about three aspects related to examination process; marking process of answer scripts, announcements about the examination related information to students and result intimation to students. It explains, although answer scripts are marked on merit (mean 3.57) but head examiners normally do not ensure accuracy of marking done by sub examiners (mean 3.14). They do not take task of rechecking of marking serious for them. This reveals that accuracy of results of students is not ensured. Supervision of marking process needs attention of responsible authorities to ensure accuracy of marking by sub examiners as well as by the head examiners. Further, it indicates that results are not declared on time (mean 3.38) but results are intimated to students properly by mailing result cards (mean 3.67). Moreover, internet is used by the institution to intimate examination schedules, roll number slips, result declaration information and provide a copy of result cards (4.29). This reveals that students get results easily.

5. Discussion

Objective of this study was to analyze the assessment process of courses in distance education so; various components involved in the assessment process were evaluated. Analysis showed different strengths and weaknesses of the system regarding; construction of assignment papers, construction of question papers, marking of assignments, examination hall arrangements, marking of answer scripts dissemination of examination schedules to students and result dissemination to students. Major findings have discussed in the following.

Present study explored that assignments prepared for distance learners were of good quality. These covered complete course. These were according to format of distance education and various experts evaluated assignment questions before finalizing them and offering them to the learners for formative assessment. This means, academicians kept in mind the rules of test construction while preparing the assignments' questions. They suggested such questions in assignments that compelled students to study whole course contents thoroughly before writing the assignment. These results have resemblance with results of previous studies reported by Asghar (2000) who admitted that questions of assignments were constructed properly and Malik (2000) who reported that assignments were related to content and covered major content of the course. This clues that assessment rules of distance education regarding assignment construction are well

designed by the institution. These are according to theme of distance education. Role of assignment in distance education is to help learner to learn by his own effort by studying course contents and doing exercises to prepare themselves for examinations. This also evidences efforts by the institution to recruit qualified academic staff to run the programs by serious efforts. No institution can run the system well without getting services of competent, experienced and qualified staff.

A result of the study highlights that questions included in question papers were well balanced but validity of question papers was not evaluated before finalizing them for examinations. No doubt, this is against the rules of construction of tests in the field of assessment. However, we should keep in mind that this exercise is probably because of the reason to frame a secret question paper, save time to construct question paper within short time period or probably because of the tradition to use teacher made tests instead of framing and using standardized tests in examination process. This traces a suggestion for planners to change the rules. Valid question paper is necessary to evaluate students' mastery in the subject well.

Results indicated that tutors mark assignments and submit results to appropriate authority. Marking of assignment was not reviewed at any stage. This gives no clue about the proof of accuracy and reliability in marks of students in assignments. This result has similarity with the conclusion reported by Shah (2004). He reported that process of assessment and evaluation procedure included lack of reliability in marking of assignments. The study conducted by Iqbal, (2011) also reported that tutors were given no instruction to send high graded or low graded assignments to any authority. This result of study recommends authorities to plan and implement rule for re checking of assignments by the authorities. Reevaluation of some marked assignments by academicians can alert tutors to mark assignments accurately and award valid marks keeping in mind the quality of answers. Furthermore, vigilant role of regional directors and other managing authorities of regional campuses can also stress tutors to mark assignments paying appropriate level of attention.

This study indicated that tutors do not mark assignments keeping in view the process of distance education (Table 2). The process to mark assignments explains that tutors should write comments on assignments instead of just ticking or crossing and writing marks on evaluation sheet. Moreover, they must return assignment after marking to the students. This finally indicates that marking of assignments is neither valid nor useful for distance learners to improve themselves. Results of some previous studies have similarity to this result. Aisha (2007) indicated, "Assignments were not evaluated properly". Ahmed (2011) reported, "Remarks given on assignments did not help students for their final examinations". These indicate that tutors are not playing their role well. They are not taking the task of tutoring serious for them. This recommends tutors to work hard and suggest authorities to monitor the reason for this situation. No training of tutors or lack of monitoring can be a basic reason for this problem.

A major weakness in the process of examination pointed out by this study is that head examiner does not ensure quality of marking by sub examiners. This means rules of examinations include the process to evaluate an answer script by more than one evaluator. In practice, the rule is not implemented seriously. Mostly sub examiners mark answer scripts but head examiners assume that marking is fair. They do not feel necessary to recheck the validity of marks assigned to an answer. Negligence of

authorities to observe the implementation of rules by examiners appointed by the institution lays down foundation for critics to criticize the progress of institution. This ultimately affects the value of degree earned by distance education method in the country. This traces the suggestion to observe the implementation of rules by the authorities of institution.

6. Conclusions

- i. Assignment items are framed according to the format of distance education. Assignments cover whole course and different experts evaluate suitability of questions.
- ii. Assessment items included in question papers are well balanced but their validity is not determined by any method.
- iii. Academicians give no guideline to tutors to mark assignments. Tutors do not write comments on assignments to indicate weak portions of assignments and suggest ways to improve the answers to students.
- iv. None of the authority of the institution evaluates the accuracy of marking of assignments done by tutors
- v. Marking of answer scripts is fair but academicians do not ensure accuracy of marking of answer scripts.
- vi. Results are not declared timely but results and examinations regarding intimations are communicated to students at proper time by mail and by website of the university.

7. Recommendations

- i. All staff working in distance education institutions may be given trainings.
- ii. Assignments may be marked seriously. Tutors / evaluators may point out mistakes of students. They must point out ways/techniques to improve the weak sections of responses.
- iii. Authorities may observe the validity of marking of assignments.
- iv. Validity of question papers may be determined before using question papers for examinations.
- v. Controller of examinations may observe the implementation of rules regarding the rechecking of answer scripts by sub examiners and declare results timely.
- vi. A further study may be conducted involving distance learners in data collection.
- vii. A further study on determining evaluation problems of tutors may be conducted.
- viii. A further study through observation method may be conducted.

8. Limitations of the Study

This study was about the assessment process of distance learners in Pakistan. It covered analysis of assessment process of only one institution because other all universities were new in the field of education. No representative samples were available to provide data about the topic. In future, whenever these universities will produce a reasonable number of graduates and establish their own rules completely, a study involving all universities may be conducted. Moreover, in this study author used only one tool that was

questionnaire. In future, a study based on open ended interview and observation may be conducted.

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