



Role of Distance Education in promoting Access in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT :

The right to education is a fundamental human right directed to the development of individual capabilities. It empowers individuals and enables them to exercise all human rights and to overcome the miseries of their lives. According to UNESCO “as an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty, and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities.” Therefore, it is the responsibility of the state or country to provide the right to education along with other basic human rights to every citizen. Pakistan is a developing country with a high illiteracy rate and with low resources. Currently, the literacy rate of Pakistan is 54 percent : 65.25% for men, and 41.75% for women. The urban (71% overall, 78% for men, and 62% for women) and rural (44% overall, 58% for men, and 29% for women) literacy rates indicate the alarming situation of the rural population particularly that of women, which comprise 49% of the total population. Similarly, the participation rate in primary education is only 52% ; of which the retention rate at grade-3 is 78% (83.5% for girls, and 75% for boys). Similarly, the participation rate at primary level is only 52% of which the retention rate up to grade-3 is 78% (83.5% for girls and 75% for boys). About half the total population is deprived of the basic right to education. The formal system of education cannot cope with the high demands for education. The Government of Pakistan aims to provide equal opportunities of education at all levels, and efforts are being made to achieve this through formal and non-formal distance education. Allama Iqbal Open University is providing ‘Education for All’ through distance education from basic (functional) literacy to higher education (PhD) level. The student enrolment at this university during 2005-06 was 704,502, in 1200 courses. Of these, 64% were in rural areas, and 52% were female. These trends indicate that Allama Iqbal Open University is promoting the right to education at all levels irrespective of location and gender.

1. INTRODUCTION :

The right to education is a fundamental human right directed towards the development of individual capabilities. It empowers individuals and enables them to exercise all other human rights to overcome the miseries of their lives. According to UNESCO “as an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty, and obtain the means to

participate fully in their communities”. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the state or country to provide the right to education along with other basic human rights to every citizen. The right to education is set out in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) ; “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher

education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit". Every individual of the state without any discrimination of irrespective of race, gender, nation, ethnic & social origin, religion or political preference, age or disability has right to free elementary education. The right to education may not be limited to basic, primary or elementary education or it is not only for children of a particular age group rather it would include equal opportunities of education or access to education at all levels for all individuals. It may not be an end in itself but provides individuals awareness about their rights and responsibilities to realize practice and enjoy other human rights in right sense.

Education trains individuals for productive future life. It also acts as catalyzing agent for social change. It would equip individuals with the necessary skills and competencies to live successfully in 21st century; the century of knowledge, information & communication technologies and globalization. Therefore, the education of today's youngsters seems very crucial to make them work as leaders in the tomorrow. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) also stressed that the every child has a right to education and the member states should ensure this right providing free and compulsory primary education. The Commission on Human Rights also urged the member states through United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) to recognize and ensure the right to education without any discrimination removing all the obstacles in access to education (Resolution 2003/23).

Therefore, every individual of the society is recognized to practice the right to education accessing to free and compulsory education up to elementary level. S(he) would also have access to available facilities of secondary and higher education without any discrimination of colour, caste or creed

2. BACKGROUND :

Pakistan is an Islamic country, and the ideology of Pakistan puts great emphasis on the provision of education and considers it

obligatory for the government to make education accessible to all citizens so as to enable them to become enlightened and civilized individuals of the society. Such individuals would be committed to the cause of Islam for peace & harmony and for international cooperation & collaboration (brotherhood). The Qura'an as the code of conduct for Muslims also recognizes education as a right of all men and women of all ages (Government of Pakistan, 1998).

2.1 Situational Analysis :

Pakistan is a developing country with high illiteracy rate and low resources. More than 50 million people of 10 plus age group remain illiterate. Currently, the literacy rate of Pakistan is estimated to be 54 percent; 65.25% for men and 41.75% for women. The urban (71%: for men 78% & for women 62%) rural (44%: 58% for men & 29% for women) breakup indicates the alarming situation of rural population particularly that of women's, which comprise of 49% of the total population. Similarly, the participation rate at primary level is only 52% of which the retention rate up to grade-3 is 78% (83.5% for girls and 75% for boys). Public expenditure on education still remains low. It declined from 2.6% of the GDP in 1990 to 1.8% in 2002-03 (Government of Pakistan, 2006). It shows the priority and will & commitment of the respective governments towards education. The situation is likely to describe that about half of the total population is deprived of the basic human right: right to education.

The number and situation of educational institutions also present a gloomy picture. There are 122349 (53%) primary, 38449 (17%) middle, and 25090 (11%) secondary schools in the country. These schools, particularly primary schools lack in basic facilities and proper physical infrastructure. Of the total public sector institutions, 5% are non-functional, 35% without boundary wall, 31% (40% in rural areas) without drinking water, 54% (78% in rural areas) without electricity, 54% (60% in rural areas) without proper latrines, and 06% (15% in rural areas) without building (Government of Pakistan, 2007).

2.2 Rationale :

Keeping in view the above scenario, it is easy to say that the formal system of education in Pakistan cannot cope with the demands of education. It provides limited access to education particularly to the disadvantaged people living in rural areas (Iqbal, 2007) with all the miseries of their lives. Gender inequalities in terms of educational facilities may reflect the backwardness of the female population involving daily compromising and living in such miserable conditions (Hussain, 2008).

Therefore, it seems necessary to adopt an appropriate alternate strategy and system to cater to the educational needs of the community in a wider context through a more flexible approach across the country. Therefore, distance education that embraces all individuals of the society (Rashid, 2004) may address the issues properly. It may serve the purpose (and at present it is serving and accommodating the people of Pakistan at large scale) supporting the formal system of education extending learning opportunities to all individuals of the country. It adopts (Hussain, 2008) a multi-media approach and has a democratic philosophy grounded in the slogan, "Education for All". Distance education may serve the aspirations of learners of developing countries particularly Pakistan in a better way, where the situation of traditional education is not satisfactory in accordance with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

3. OVERVIEW OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN :

3.1 Establishment of Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad :

Formally, distance education in Pakistan started with the establishment of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad. Established by an Act of Parliament in 1974, Allama Iqbal Open University is one of the mega universities of the world. It was mandated to promote quality education to all individuals of the country and confer degrees and diplomas on individuals after passing the relevant examinations.

It is enhancing the access and equity in education and training particularly in teacher education, higher education, and other specialized professional education. These efforts aim to contribute towards the socio-economic development of the country satisfying the demands of the job market. It is serving the educational aspirations of the people of Pakistan through its distance teaching approach from basic (functional) literacy to higher education (PhD) level. It accommodates a huge number of students across the country. The number of students enrolled during the academic year 2005-06 was 704,502 in more than 1200 courses. 64% students of the total enrolment reside in the rural areas, and 52% of the total are female. The trend indicates that Allama Iqbal Open University is providing every citizen the right to education at all levels.

In Pakistan, distance education is recognized as an alternative to the formal system of education, and imperative because of its flexible nature. AIOU as a distance teaching institution is catering to the educational needs of the Pakistani community at all levels. It is necessary, to assume distance education as a strategy for promoting the right to education.

3.2 Infrastructure :

Infrastructure may be considered as one of the basic components of an organization. It depicts the operational capacity and the potential of the organization. Organizations with good infrastructure may accommodate large numbers providing better services to satisfy their demands. AIOU is a pioneer distance education institution in Asia, and the second in the world - as it was established just after the Open University of the United Kingdom (AIOU 2002). It has developed well, and is now widely recognized among the universities of Pakistan. Established in 1974, it now has 36 regional campuses or centers, 86 regional Coordinating Offices, 1261 Study Centers, 37,000 registered tutors, 40 Faculties and 20 Institutes offering 1377 courses in different disciplines from non-credit to PhD level. AIOU with its good infrastructure can provide educational access to the people throughout Pakistan.

3.3 Accommodating Large Numbers :

AIOU is one of the mega universities of the world. It offers courses from literacy (functional) to higher education (PhD) level in almost all fields of education. In the academic year 2007, it offered 1,377 courses in different programmes. It has the potential to accommodate a large number of students, as seen by the enrolment numbers from previous years.

TABLE 1 : Enrolment at AIOU

Year	Course Enrolment	Student Enrolment
2003	1,344,374	456,551
2004	1,526,143	566,599
2005	1,775,008	647,377
2006	2,316,023	796,940
2007	2,623,270	962,220

The course enrolment and the student enrolment increased by 6% and 11% in 2004, 8% and 7% in 2005, 13% and 10% in 2006, and 6% and 9% in 2007, respectively. These trends indicate that more and more people are taking interest in distance education for catering to their educational needs. It provides the growing evidence that distance education has the potential to deliver all kinds of education to accommodate a huge student body (AIOU, 2007). Similarly, the overall course-wise female participation rate is 51%, and that of the male participation rate is 49% at AIOU (AIOU, 2006). The female participation rate is greater than in the formal system, and proves that distance education in Pakistan can cater to both genders equally and so reach all individuals of society.

3.4 Specialized Courses :

AIOU mostly uses correspondence material for the teaching-learning process. For this process, the AIOU academicians prepare specialized self-instructional courses in the form of study guides and allied material for students to study at their homes or workplaces. The course materials

are designed to be self-explanatory and accompany the learning activities. Such activities enable students to reproduce whatever they have learned. Students are directed by their tutors on different issues. They also may consult them in case of any difficulty. All the courses are printed by the university's own printing press. During the year 2007, the AIOU printing press produced 538,000 copies of course books and 24,225,000 copies of small booklets or leaflets.

3.5 Media Support :

Use of media and technology bridges the gaps between the learners, the tutors and the Institution. AIOU adopts a multi-media approach for teaching at a distance. It has a full-fledged Institute of Educational Technology, which prepares CDs, radio and television programmes for different courses. AIOU also has its own AIOU FM radio channel *Assalam-o-Alaikum* - which translates as 'This is the Voice of AIOU : the FM Radio of Allama Iqbal Open University'. Total programme transmissions of radio and television were 264 and 277 in 2005, 264 and 293 in 2006, and 264 and 382 in 2007, respectively (AIOU, 2007). Radio and television programmes supplement the correspondence material and help learners in enhancing their learning. Radio and TV transmissions have almost countrywide coverage and therefore, provide equal access to all learners living in different parts of the country.

3.6 Correspondence Materials :

The correspondence materials of AIOU may be regarded as the backbone of its distance education system. They are specialized course materials that learners read at their homes or workplaces, and from which they then prepare assignments for formative evaluation. Most correspondence material comes with assignments, question papers, assignment schedule, directions on how to consult the material and how to prepare the assignments, radio and television schedule. The materials cater to the learners' interests and learning styles. Therefore, learners of all ages feel at ease to read the correspondence materials.

3.7 Regional Networks :

The AIOU has a countrywide network of regional campuses and centers. These regional campuses or centers are local centers that provide help and assistance to the distance learners, provide tutorial support, motivate potential learners through promotional materials, establish study centers, appoint tutors, and identify venue and supervisory staff for final examinations. The regional center provides help at the doorstep of each student. The study centers and examination centers are set up in the hometowns of the learners. In case of any difficulty, learners can always at any time seek help from the regional office.

4. CONCLUSIONS :

The Allama Iqbal Open University has the appropriate infrastructure and potential to provide access to the right to education on a large scale. It can cater to the educational needs of all the people irrespective of their background circumstances and living conditions. Of important note is that AIOU addresses the issue of access and equality particularly for the female population living in rural or culturally restricted areas of the country. Therefore, it can be used as a strategy to provide the right to education at all levels to all individuals of Pakistan.

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