

Off-Campus Postgraduate Students' Perceptions About Distance Library Support Services: A Case Study of Allama Iqbal Open University Libraries Network

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ABSTRACT. The present study was conducted to assess distance learning students' perceptions about location and physical set up of libraries, collections, resources, and services rendered at thirty-four regional campuses as well as main campus libraries network of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) all over Pakistan. During the spring semester of 2007, a questionnaire was mailed to 250 randomly selected students enrolled in eleven postgraduate programs throughout the country. The response rate was 61.2%, which was made up of 43.1% females and 56.9% males. A majority of the respondents were dissatisfied with the virtual reference services, online database facilities, interlibrary loan, library membership, and borrowing of library material from the AIOU libraries. They were satisfied with the location and physical setup of the libraries, the collections, and the resources of the libraries. The study revealed that most of the respondents used the libraries during workshops as well as for research purposes. The statistical analysis ($t = 0.550$, $\text{Sig.} = 0.970$) showed that there was no significant difference between the opinion of females and males. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 10.0.

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INTRODUCTION

The terms distance learning, distance teaching, open learning, or extended degree program are used interchangeably for distance education (Ellison, 2000; Feasley, 1992; Jones, 2002). According to *Harrod's Librarians' Glossary and Reference Book* (2005), open learning means:

A process of teaching and learning by which students study in their own homes or local centres using materials mailed or broadcast from a central unit. Tutorial work may be handled via the central unit, or on regional basis. The emphasis is on opening up opportunities by overcoming barriers of geographical isolation, personal or work commitments, and conventional course structures, which have often prevented certain categories of people from gaining access to educational and training facilities. (p. 509)

Distance education is gaining momentum day by day all over the world. According to the National Centre for Education Statistics report, *The Condition of Education 2004*, "course enrollments in distance education have increased at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, increasing from 1.7 million to 3.1 million between 1997–98 and 2000–01" (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). The rapid development in this sector is due to mushrooming of private colleges and universities (Jaggannathan, Panda & Kanjilal, 2004). The enrollment trend of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU) in the last 5 years, 2002 through 2006, also indicates that distance education is gaining popularity in Pakistan. The course and student enrollment increased by 15% and 11% in 2003, 6% and 11% in 2004, 8% and 7% in 2005, and 13% and 10% in 2006 respectively (AIU, 2006). Wolpert (1998) states that economic and market needs of higher education are the two main driving forces of distance education. The information and communication technologies, especially the Internet, continuing education, and emergence of non-traditional students, are also playing significant roles in promoting distance education. In the past, distance education was only considered to be correspondence courses. Online learning has played a pivotal role in boosting distance education in the world. Argentati (1999) also reiterates that technological developments

in the last decade, particularly the Internet and World Wide Web, have created many opportunities for distance learners.

Cooper (2000) pinpoints that less emphasis has been given to the problems of providing library services to support distance education programs. The rapid growth of distance education programs in every field has created new challenges as well as opportunities for librarians. Distance learners are increasing in numbers day by day as compared to the past. Now libraries are considering providing library services to meet the needs of this unique community in new and innovative ways (Ault, 2002).

Libraries are the central organ in a university, which plays significant roles in achieving the objectives of higher education (Haider, 2004). According to Yang (2005), the importance of libraries has increased due to rapid emergence of distance education in the United States because the distance patrons are defined now as registered students who live at least 50 miles away from the campus.

Allama Iqbal Open University

The University was established in July, 1974, and was the second open university in the world. The objective of the university was to provide educational opportunities through distance learning to those who cannot leave their homes and jobs. Distance education gained popularity in Pakistan due to the factors of poverty and relative deprivation of women. AIOU is a unique institution with respect to its philosophy, system, approach, functions, and overall structure. The University with its main campus at Islamabad and vast network of 32 regional campuses and centers is serving its clientele all over Pakistan and in the Middle East. Different programs are being offered, ranging from functional courses for illiterates and semi-literates to undergraduate, graduate, master, M.Phil and doctoral level degrees, through distance education (AIOU, 2006).

The university is employing a multidimensional methodology suited to distance learning. Textbooks and other reading materials are written and developed by the faculty with the help of different disciplinary experts and are provided to the students for study purposes. Media support, audio and video programs, and information technology applications are other significant aspects of the methodology at AIOU. The university also broadcasts educational programs in collaboration with Educational Television (PTV2-) (AIOU, 2003). The student and course enrollment for 2006 is 796,940 and 2,316,023, respectively (AIOU, 2006, p. 75).

AIOU Libraries Network

Hasan (1982) explains that the library network of AIOU operates through a hierarchical system having a central library at the main campus and branch libraries located at regional campuses spread all over the country. The primary objective of the central library is to acquire, store, and make available all forms of recorded information relevant to the objectives of the university. The library serves students all over the country, as well as faculty, tutors, and full time employees of the university. It also cooperates with other libraries in promoting the educational well being of the community. The regional libraries are located on the main campuses of the university. These libraries are serving the regional campuses at Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Peshawar, Quetta, Karachi, Hyderabad, Mirpur, and Gilgit. The regional campus libraries serve the students, tutors, and employees of the university.

It is important to explain that there are no borrowing services to the students of the university in the central library as well as in regional campus libraries. The students and tutors can only consult the libraries for reference purposes and make photocopies of required materials. Only teachers and employees of the university can avail the borrowing services whether they are working at the main campus or on the regional campuses (AIOU, 1986).

Distance LIS Services in Pakistan

A very limited literature is available on the field of library and information science in the country since its establishment. The reasons may be due to little interest of the faculty members of LIS departments, discouragement to young writers by senior professionals and no recognition of parent organizations of the research in the country. In the limited LIS literature, the most neglected area of research is distance LIS education. At present, the role of libraries in distance education is at infancy stage in the country. Only one article by Hasan (1982) has been written about the libraries and distance learning system in the country. It is evident from the literature that library services standards have not been framed yet for distance learning communities by the distance learning institutions or the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. The library associations of developed, as well as developing, countries like the United States, Canada, UK, and India

have outlined the library services standards for the distance community to meet their information needs.

The review of literature shows that distance education can be promoted only if the libraries play their vital role by employing traditional tools as well as the latest information and communication technologies to provide LIS services at the door step of the distance community. Being the first study of its kind in Pakistan, it will be helpful to improve the services and infrastructure of the libraries of the universities that offer distance education.

The objectives of the study are:

- to assess students' perceptions about location and physical set up, collection, resources, and services of the central as well as regional campus libraries of AIOU.
- to suggest some measures for the improvement of library services for the distance community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Survey method of research has been employed to conduct the study. A structured questionnaire was designed and pre-tested to collect the data from the postgraduate students of the spring semester of 2007. The tool comprised ten close ended questions, including demographic information, age, gender, employment status, frequency of visit, and satisfaction with the location and physical set up, collection, resources, and services of the libraries. A five-point Likert-type scale with response categories was used mainly to get responses from the subjects of the study. Space was also provided for additional comments and suggestions at the end of the questionnaire.

SAMPLE AND RESPONSE

The questionnaire was sent by post to 250 randomly selected students enrolled in eleven postgraduate programs all over the country during the spring semester of 2007. The response rate was 61.2% (153), with 43.1% (66) females and 56.9% (87) males.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The data collected through respondents’ surveys were analyzed and interpreted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 10.0.

THE AIOU STUDENTS LEARNING COMMUNITY

The questionnaire asked the respondents to pinpoint their program, regional campus, age, gender, and employment status.

A majority of the respondents, 77 (50.3%), were students in Master of Arts programs while the remaining respondents, 68 and 7 (44.4% and 4.5%, respectively), were students in Master of Science and Master of Business Administration programs respectively.

The response rate received from the regional campuses located in the federal area—provinces of Punjab, NWFP, Balochistan, Sind, and territory of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK)—were 59 (38.6%), 52 (34%), 22 (14.4%), 2 (1.3%), 7 (4.6%), and 11 (7.2%) as shown in Figure 1.

The response rate by gender was 66 (43.1%) female to 87 (56.9%) male (Table 1). A total of 152 respondents indicated their age. A majority of the

FIGURE 1. Response Rate from the Regions

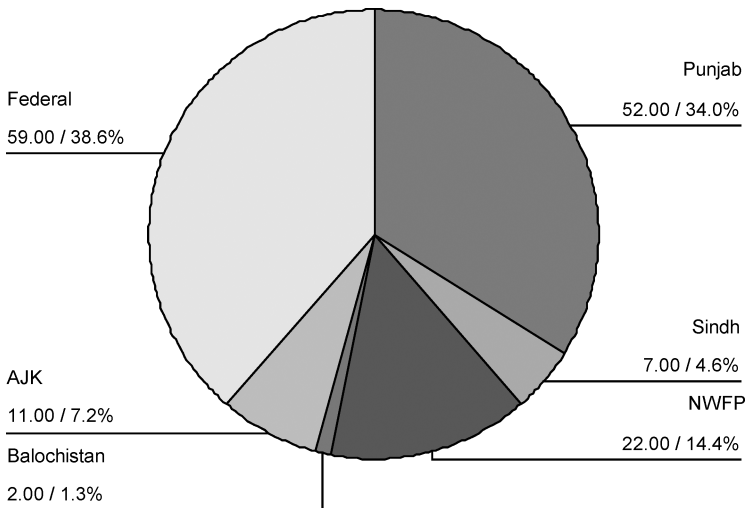


TABLE 1. Frequency distribution of responses by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	66	43.1
Male	87	56.9
Total	153	100.0

respondents (i.e., 84 or 55.3%) fell in the age category of 20–30 years old, followed by 53 (34.9%) in the age group of 31–40 years old, and 12 (7.9%) in the age group of 41–50 years old. Only three (2%) of respondents were above 50 years of age (Table 2).

A total of 151 respondents stated their employment status (Table 3). A majority (i.e., 75 or 49.7%) of those respondents was studying full time and was employed full time. The number of respondents studying full time was only 48 (31.8%); whereas, 28 (18.5%) respondents were studying full time but working part time.

Usage of Central and Regional Libraries

Only 80 (57.6%) respondents at regional campuses used the libraries as compared to 76 (42.4%) respondents who did not use the libraries; whereas, 92 (66.7%) respondents at the main campus of the university used the central library (see Tables 4 and 5). The analysis shows that the respondents were more inclined toward using the central library.

TABLE 2. Frequency distribution of respondents by age

Age	Frequency	Percent
20–30	84	55.3
31–40	53	34.9
41–50	12	7.9
over 50	3	2.0
Total	152	100.0

TABLE 3. Frequency distribution of employment status

Employment Status	Frequency	Percent
Full time student	48	31.8
Full time student/ Work part time	28	18.5
Full time student/ Work full time	75	49.7
Total	151	100.0

Satisfaction With Location and Physical Set-Up, Collection, Resources, Services of Libraries

The students were asked a comprehensive and important question that was comprised of 24 statements. A total of 144 respondents out of 250 expressed their opinion about the statements. The respondents were provided a five-point Likert-type scale to show their satisfaction with the location and physical set up, collection, resources, and services of the regional libraries as well the central library of the university. Descriptive statistics of respondents' opinion about the statements with Mean-wise rank order are presented in Tables 6–9.

Satisfaction with Location and Physical Set-Up

The Mean-wise rank order of statements given in Table 6 shows that the respondents agreed with the statements, "Library within easy access" (Mean = 4.07), "Library's environment (noise level, heating, cooling, lighting, furniture, cleanliness, etc.) is conducive to study" (Mean = 3.97), "Individual study carrels are adequate" (Mean = 3.65), and "Photocopy machine is easily accessible" (Mean = 3.58). The respondents expressed no opinion on the statement, "The present library building fulfills the needs of library users" (Mean = 3.42).

TABLE 4. Frequency distribution of regional library visit

Library Visit	Frequency	Percent
Frequently	26	18.7
Occasionally	54	38.8
Never	59	42.4
Total	139	100.0

TABLE 5. Frequency distribution of central library visit

Library Visit	Frequency	Percent
Frequently	34	24.6
Occasionally	58	42.0
Never	46	33.3
Total	138	100.0

Satisfaction With Library Collection

The Mean-wise rank order of statements given in Table 7 shows that the respondents agreed only with the statement, “Library’s collection is well organized and easy to find” (Mean = 3.52). They expressed no opinion on the statements, “Library collection is adequate for my needs” (Mean = 3.49), “Library collection is current and relevant” (Mean = 3.45), “Journal collection is adequate” (Mean = 3.44), and “Library provides adequate online databases” (Mean = 3.19).

Satisfaction With Library Resources

The Mean values of the statements “I use the library when I have an assignment” (Mean = 3.73), “I use library for research purposes” (Mean

TABLE 6. Descriptive statistics of satisfaction with location and physical set-up

Rank	Statement	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
1	Library is within easy access	143	4.07	4.00	4	.98	1	5
2	Library’s environment (noise level, heating/ cooling, lights, furniture, cleanliness, etc.) is conducive to study	139	3.97	4.00	4	.94	1	5
3	Photocopy machine is easily accessible	141	3.65	4.00	4	1.11	1	5
4	Individual study carrels are adequate	135	3.58	4.00	4	0.93	1	5
5	The present library building fulfills the needs of library users	142	3.42	4.00	4	1.16	1	5

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

TABLE 7. Descriptive statistics of satisfaction with library collection

Rank	Statement	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
1	Library's collection is well organized and easy to find	141	3.52	4.00	4	1.09	1	5
2	Library collection is adequate for my needs	144	3.49	4.00	4	1.02	1	5
3	Library collection is current and relevant	143	3.45	4.00	4	1.01	1	5
4	Journal collection is adequate	142	3.44	4.00	4	.93	1	5
5	Library provides adequate online databases	140	3.19	3.00	3	1.00	1	5

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

= 3.59), "Library staff is helpful, knowledgeable and competent" (Mean = 3.54), and "I use the library during workshops" (Mean = 3.51) show that the respondents agreed with the libraries' resources. See Table 8. They expressed no opinion on the statement, "I use the library during exam" (Mean = 3.21).

Satisfaction With Library Services

The Mean-wise rank order of statements given in Table 9 shows that the respondents expressed no opinion on all the statements, "Use of library catalogue is easy" (Mean = 3.44), "The library hours meet my needs" (Mean = 3.33), "Library provides Internet service" (Mean = 3.32), "I

TABLE 8. Descriptive statistics of satisfaction with library resources

Rank	Statement	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
1	I use library only when I have an assignment	144	3.73	4.00	4	.97	1	5
2	I use library for research purpose	137	3.59	4.00	4	.99	1	5
3	Library staff is helpful, knowledgeable and competent	141	3.54	4.00	4	1.05	1	5
4	I use library during workshops	138	3.51	4.00	4	1.08	1	5
5	I use library during exam	142	3.21	3.00	4	1.04	1	5

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

TABLE 9. Descriptive statistics of satisfaction with library services

Rank	Statement	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
1	Use of library catalogue is easy	144	3.44	4.00	4	1.05	1	5
2	The library hours meet my needs	143	3.33	4.00	4	1.15	1	5
3	Library provides Internet service	142	3.32	3.50	4	1.17	1	5
4	I am satisfied with the overall quality of library services	144	3.32	4.00	4	1.08	1	5
5	Library staff provides timely reference service	144	3.10	3.00	3	1.09	1	5
6	Library membership process is easy	140	2.98	3.00	3	1.10	1	5
7	Library staff provides reference service through Internet and e-mail	144	2.85	3.00	3	1.13	1	5
8	Library borrow information material from other libraries to fulfill the needs of the students	143	2.83	3.00	3	1.05	1	5
9	Borrowing books from library is easy	144	2.67	3.00	3	1.26	1	5

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

am satisfied with the overall quality of library services” (Mean = 3.32), “Library staff provides timely reference service” (Mean = 3.10), “Library membership process is easy”(Mean = 2.98), “Library staff provides reference service through Internet and e-mail” (Mean = 2.85), “Library borrow information material from other libraries to fulfill the needs of the students” (Mean = 2.83), and “Borrowing books from library is easy” (Mean = 2.67).

Opinions of the Respondents by Gender

The statistical analysis ($t = .550$, Sig. = .970) shows that there was no significant difference between the opinion of females and males (see Table 10).

TABLE 10. Results of t-test regarding opinion by gender

Statement	Gender	N	Mean	t	Sig.
I am satisfied with the overall quality of library services	Female	61	3.38	0.550	0.970*
	Male	83	3.28		

Note. *Significant at.05 level

Use of Information Sources Other Than AIOU Libraries

The last question of the survey asked respondents to pinpoint sources other than those in the university libraries that they used to fulfill their information needs. The results of the frequency distribution of the respondents (153) showed that 92 (60.1%) respondents used the Internet, 64 (41.8%) respondents used personal collections, 52 (34%) respondents used friends as resources, 50 (32.7%) respondents consulted the university faculty, 31 (20.3%) respondents received help from the university administrative staff, and 17 (11.1%) respondents availed the outreach libraries services.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Since all the questions of the survey were close ended, the respondents were asked to give their additional comments or suggestions at the end of questionnaire; 88 (57.5%) out of 153 respondents provided additional responses.

Most of the respondents requested that the university should arrange information literacy programs about the libraries for the students. Other responses indicated that borrowing privileges should also be provided to the students and that most of the regional libraries have small collections whereas the central library has a reasonably large collection, which is not organized properly. Yet other respondents specified that the libraries' environment is not conducive for studying due to limited furniture, space problems, odd behavior of the staff, and use of mobile phones in the libraries.

The respondents requested that the libraries should provide Web OPACs, virtual reference services, and online databases facilities to the students.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The respondents were content with the location and physical set up of the libraries, but they were dissatisfied with libraries services. A majority of the respondents emphasized that they should be provided with virtual reference services, Web OPACs of the libraries' collections, online databases, interlibrary loan, and borrowing privileges from the libraries. The regional libraries lack collections according to the needs of the users whereas the central library of the university has reasonable collections, but the students find it difficult to search for relevant materials. The environment in libraries is not conducive to the studying due to limited furniture, space problems, odd behavior of the staff, and use of mobile phones in the libraries. Most of the respondents used the libraries for research purposes, during workshop, or for exams only.

The respondents suggested that the university should arrange information literacy programs for the students during workshops as well as online. They also suggested that the university should send CDs for this purpose so that the students could have information about the available resources.

Recommendations

Owing to the response from the subjects of the study as well as the consideration of the distance library services in the countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and India, the following measures should be taken immediately:

1. The AIOU should immediately frame the distance LIS services standards by considering the unique requirements of their students. The same recommendations may also be sent to the HEC Pakistan for national standards of distance library services.
2. Web OPAC of the libraries' collections should be available to students.
3. The online databases of the HEC digital library should also be provided to the AIOU students. For this purpose, a reasonable number of computers with Internet access should be provided in each library.
4. A toll-free telephone number for information should be provided in every library in all of the regions.
5. The libraries should be open for longer hours, so that working students can contact staff at their convenience.

6. The university should establish an agreement among all the libraries as to which services may be beneficial for the AIOU students.
7. Borrowing privileges should be provided to all university students.
8. A CD for information literacy programs should be prepared for students so that they can have information about how to access the libraries' resources.

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