

## **Challenges Faced by Distance Learners in Pursuance of Literacy Activities at Allama Iqbal Open University**

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### **Abstract**

Distance learners need both information literacy and scientific literacy to learn and acquire skills. As they belong from remote areas and their success is conditioned with certain challenges and factors to pursue their literacy skills. There is ample literature indicating the need to address this issue. This paper identifies challenges faced by distance learners in the pursuit of literacy activities at Allama Iqbal Open University. The population of the study comprised all the students of Allama Iqbal Open University from Upper Chitral District. Out of which 100 students were taken as sample using simple random sampling technique. The study was descriptive in nature and participants were administered a questionnaire through survey. The instrument used in this study was validated and reliability was also determined through test-retest reliability. Results indicated challenges regarding access of literacy activities on Aaghi LMS, and challenges regarding teaching and learning. Based on results this paper recommended that suitable plan of action may be devised to address the challenges of distance learners to maximize their literacy activities.

**Keywords:** *Challenges, Literacy, Distance Learners, Literacy problems*

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## **Introduction**

Distance learners come from remote areas having diverse cultures, aptitudes, technology skills, and literacy needs. Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is leading institute in Pakistan in distance learning where millions of distance learners seek literacy skills, knowledge, and educational degrees each semester. The recent worldwide pandemic affected numerous aspects of social endeavors from the decay of industrial manufacturing to the rearrangement of the educational schedules of all educational organizations in the world (UNESCO, 2020). It was the only option for the educational institutions in the world to deliver learning through online means. Certain learning management systems and online classes were initiated. Soon, there was internet usage and continuation of educational and literacy events on LMS all around the world. Different universities and colleges also developed their own learning platforms and many used Google classroom, Microsoft teams etc. AIOU also adopted measures to satisfy literacy needs of distance learners.

Almost all universities of the world are imparting education and literacy through major or minor online medium of instruction. Many online platforms are utilized in which Microsoft teams, google classroom, institution specific learning management systems are used. Different universities, colleges and schools around the globe migrated from face-to-face learning to online education. In this paradigm shift, pandemic-19 played a significant role. This shift brought education and literacy initiative towards technology embedded instructions which also created mix-up and challenges for students belonging from less advanced countries residing in remote areas where technology access is a big challenge. Many universities and colleges have embarked on online literacy initiatives and learning packages for improved learning and teaching as not only teachers can teach online but literacy skills are also acquired by their learners by taking classes online from their home (Bao, 2020). In Pakistan, there are two types of education providers a) Higher educational institutes which are comprised on universities and colleges which deliver learning by utilizing traditional face-to-face learning; b) educational institutions which combine learning through online or blended mode. (Farooq, Rathore, & Mansoor, 2020). Learners who enter in online paradigm also face challenges to go on their literacy tasks as faced by learners of traditional face to face classes. Several literacy skills are developed in both types of educational institutions. However,

challenges faced by students may vary. So, there is a need to explore what sort of challenges are faced by distance learners in pursuit of their literacy skills.

### **Review of Literature**

Literacy is a broader concept which encompasses several types of functional and basic literacies. Different scholars have defined literacies in their own perspectives and scenarios. Literacy is not confined to reading, writing and arithmetic calculations only. Today is the era of information communication where there is importance of information literacy. Since learning is one of the important needs of humans and we need to impart learning to students by employing variety of literacy mechanisms (Hafeez et al., 2020). Since the introduction of the latest technology platforms and social media packages, students can use computers and mobiles via internet to learn anywhere and anytime they want to acquire knowledge of their interest (Acosta-Tello, 2015). Online learning platforms not only provide students leverage of accessing information, taking classes, using student-centered classrooms, but also enhances their virtual real time participation in classroom learning environments. This also improves teaching skills and teaching environments. There are certain challenges associated with this learning mechanism. In such a learning-teaching situation, where a quick response and immediate response is not possible (Littlefield, Rubinstein, & Laveist, 2019) it leads towards dissatisfaction of learners. According to Govindasamy (2002)

Like in any user-oriented system or service, the satisfaction of users is one of the key factors in a successful implementation of e-learning programs. High satisfaction reflects that learners are more willing to continue in online instructional programs, resulting in lower attrition rates, more referrals from enrolled students, greater motivation, better learning achievement and increased commitment to the program. Any significant or critical incident in e-learning, whether positive or negative, has potential to affect the level of satisfaction. Positive critical incidents would probably increase satisfaction, whereas negative critical incidents would affect negatively.

Contemporary learning offers many openings for social communication. The spread of such online platforms is essential in this deadly virus (Basilaiia & Kvavadze, 2020). It's time to learn online. A large portion of the globe is in captivity owing to the severe epidemic of COVID-19 and many cities of the world have become phantom cities. The impacts of COVID-19 can be seen in universities, colleges, and

schools. As Pakistan is developing country and the sudden change in the whole world due to covid-19, all organizations are facing problems. Similarly, educational institutions are also affecting negatively, as Pakistani universities have not any advance technology and now a day's advance technology has become more important in every field especially in education said, (Akram, Anjum, Batool, 2020). According to Zahra et al. (2020) due to lack of resources Pakistan considered in developing countries. Therefore, Pakistan is the country who is facing more problems in educational institutions regarding advance technology. Shehzadi et al. (2020) writes in their paper that the covid-19 is the situation where the educational systems has started e-learning system which has become a standard shift for all universities. Moreover, he elaborated that several issues universities are facing during to develop online learning systems. Further, results show that the leading element is the e-service quality of the paradigm shift. Covid-19 has both negative and positive impact on the world level. As due to covid-19 people are facing anxiety, violence, worried, and anxiety on the other hand some other factors are positively affecting quality time with family, improved family relationship and faith healing etc. Technological advancement is also having a positive impact as students are taking online classes. Online learning in Pakistan cannot produced desired results because some factors affecting negatively in educational system such as: internet access, monetary issue, and lack of face-to-face interaction. Further, the results show that 78.6% of students agreed that face-to-face interaction is necessary between students and instructor. The coronavirus has transferred from offline to online mode of learning. For those who are not aware of its potential benefits and are reluctant to use it are in troublesome situation (Shehzadi et al., 2020).

It's online learning through which we can communicate with large number of learners anytime and anywhere worldwide. There are numerous online challenges which are encountered by many students. Although online practice is developing as a winner, there is also a need to increase the worth of online learning and teaching by enhancing its effectiveness and efficiency. Another important concern is that at such a large scale, where open universities are operating, how open universities can embrace learning through online at a large level of participants (Dhawan, 2020). When the Covid-19 emerged in Pakistan 2020 then all educational intuitions started online learning to facilitate their students. Basilaia et al. (2020) says that online learning can be more advanced in the digital countries, but Pakistan is not technologically advanced

country therefore online learning cannot be more effective in Pakistan. Adnan and Anwar (2020) say that lack of fast and reliable internet access is the biggest hindrance in the process of online learning.

Educational institutions are focusing on sending content to the students instead of making effective online teaching and delivery methods. Therefore, lack of resources, insufficient internet access and availability, and advanced technology are affecting quality of education of an organization and students' participation in learning capacity. According to Mailizar et al. (2020), covid19 has had a serious impact on around the globe such, educational organizations, students, and instructors. Pakistani universities have very few advance technologies to conduct online classes therefore institutions will face online learning challenges and opportunities as well. Shahzad et al. (2020) writes that the process of virtual teaching where all the students and instructor online at the same time, questioning and answering or discussion are practiced, and this practice is known as group-based or collaborative learning process. Moreover, the results show that virtual teaching in Pakistan has some drawbacks. The main problems are lack of technology, shortage of resources, and unavailability of proper internet connectivity. Moreover, as teachers and students are not used to online classes, sometimes they feel disturbance in video and audio quality. Further, the advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning: Also, the adequate technological infrastructure of educational institution can be considered another factor such factor are an obstacles to the success of the educational implemented (Mailizar et al., 2020).

Significant literature indicated that online learning platforms are not only good for students but also create any challenges in acquisition of their literacy activities. In this regard, Alman, Tomer and Lincoln (2012) indicating that online instructors must pay attention to what they need to create, develop, and manage their online courses and how to effectively communicate with the learners in the absence of physical presence and interaction. Palloff and Pratt (2013) also indicated usefulness of web-based courses/course materials where internet is used to post learning materials in terms of assignments on LMS and major portion of about 80% of content of courses and teaching activities are shared by using internet. These courses are called 'hybrid/blended courses. On the other hand, online courses are entirely provided and instructed online. Consequently, it may be good to switch to an online paradigm for better learning. Certainly, it may be beneficial to deliberate web-based learning as effective learning for students. Fuller and Yu (2014) indicating that "online synchronous and asynchronous communication and interaction

opens new channels of communication, peer interaction, collaboration, and access to learning materials in variety of formats”. Another noteworthy finding was that quality literacy content is provided on LMS which is also supported by Chen et al. (2008) that e-learning has a positive stronger influence on students’ learning. This paper attempts to explore the challenges faced by distance learners in acquisition of their learning-on the learning management system.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nowadays almost every university in the world is offering online learning fully or partially. The coronavirus pandemic played great role in paradigm shift from traditional to online learning mode and various learning management systems were introduced to impart teaching learning activities globally. AIOU also adopted measures keeping in view the above background, this study was focused to explore the “Challenges Faced by Distance Learners in Pursuance of Literacy Activities at Allama Iqbal Open University”.

### **Objectives of the study**

The following were the objectives of the study:

1. To explore information literacy challenges faced by AIOU students on LMS.
2. To find out the online literacy classroom environment challenges by distance learners of AIOU.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are information literacy challenges faced by students regarding login and password, access of online materials, and uploading assignments.
2. What are information literacy challenges faced by students regarding downloading online material, internet connectivity, internet speed, and technological gadgets.

### **Research Methodology**

This study used survey and it was descriptive in nature.

### **Population, Sample and Sampling Technique**

The population of study consisted of all population of students of AIOU from Upper Chitral District. Following is the description of population:

#### **Description of the population of the study**

Male	Female	Total
129	64	193

#### **Sampling Framework**

Male	Female	Total
75	25	100

For sampling the researcher used simple random sampling technique. Sample was selected through table of random numbers given by L.R. Gay. In the first stage, authorities of AIOU in the regional office of Chitral were contacted and details of participants were taken. Then, the list was arranged alphabetically. After that, one participant was randomly selected, and the rest of the sample was completed by using the numbers from the table of random numbers. The final list indicated 75 males and 25 females comprising on 100 participants. But the participants who filled and returned the questionnaire were 71 (59 males and 12 females).

### **Research Tool**

For data collection purposes, a questionnaire was used.

### **Questionnaire**

- To carry out this study a research questionnaire was developed by the researcher. It consisted of 15 items based on the following objectives of the study. The test instrument used 4-point Likert-scale which assigned 1 to the lowest score and 4 to the highest score to each item (1–Strongly Disagree; 2–Disagree; 3–Agree; 4–Strongly Disagree). The total item score was 60 and the lowest score on this scale was 15.
- The instrument used in this study was validated. Expert opinion was obtained from 05 educational experts to validate the instrument and their suggestions were incorporated. Initially the instrument consisted of fifteen (18) items which were refined to

three (3) items. Also, the initially selected 3-point Likert-type scale for the instrument was changed to 4-point Likert-type scale.

- The reliability of the instrument of study was also determined. To check the test-retest reliability, the test was administered to twenty (20) randomly selected participants (who were not part of the actual study sample). The reliability coefficient was .75\*.

### Data Analysis

Data was analyzed in quantitative organization.

**Table 1**

*Information Literacy Challenges (Male=59, Female=12, N=71)*

Information Literacy Challenges		SDA		DA		A		SA	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Login and Password	M	6	10.1	19	32.2	31	52.5	3	5.0
	F	2	16.6	6	50.0	4	33.3	1	8.3
Access of Online Materials	M	5	8.4	30	50.8	21	35.5	3	5.0
	F	-	-	6	50.0	5	41.6	1	8.3
Uploading Assignments	M	1	1.6	15	25.4	41	69.4	2	3.3
	F	1	8.3	5	41.6	6	50.0	-	-
Downloading Study Package	M	10	16.9	28	47.4	20	33.8	1	1.6
	F	2	16.6	3	25.0	7	58.3	-	-
Internet connectivity	M	4	6.7	25	42.3	25	42.3	5	8.4
	F	2	16.6	5	41.6	4	33.3	1	8.3
Internet Speed	M	3	5.0	28	47.4	26	44.0	2	3.3
	F	3	25.0	2	16.6	6	50.0	1	8.3
Internet Signals	M	5	8.4	15	25.4	33	59.7	6	10.1
	F	2	16.6	5	41.6	5	41.6	-	-
Technological Gadgets	M	-	-	27	45.7	29	49.1	3	5.0
	F	1	8.3	4	33.3	7	58.3	-	-

\*SDA=Strongly Disagree, DA=Disagree, A=Agree, SA= Strongly Agree



Table 1 explains gender wise descriptive analysis of information literacy challenges faced by students. Regarding login and password issues there is difference between male and female opinions. Male participants agreed (52.5%) that they face login password issues, however females (50.0%) disagreed with this. There is seen no difference between male and female participants' opinions regarding access of online materials. Majority of males (50.8%) and females (50.0%) disagreed with it indicating that there is no challenge faced in accessing online literacy materials. Another aspect in which gender differences are seen is uploading assignments. In this aspect majority (69.4%) of males agreed however, most of (41.6%) females disagreed with it, which indicated that males face problem in assignment uploading on LMS whereas, females don't face issue in it. Another notable difference in the mean scores of males versus females is seen in downloading study package. Most of male participants (47.4%) agreed that they face difficulty in it whereas, most of females (58.3%) disagreed with it.

In this internet connectivity, males remained neutral by indicating 50% in agreement and 50% in disagreement. However, females (44.3%) disagreed. So, it can be concluded that both genders had faced no internet connectivity challenges. Regarding internet speed challenges, majority of males (47.4%) disagreed with it however, majority of females (50.0%) agreed with it. So, in this statement we can see the difference between the opinion of both genders. Regarding internet signals, males (59.7%) attributed that they face internet signals problems, however, majority of females (SDA=41.6%, DA=16.6) disagreed with it. In technological gadgets issues, both genders (M=49.1% and F=58.3%) indicated that they face challenges in accessing the latest android or desktop technological gadgets.

Overall, this table concludes that there are certain gender differences in their opinions regarding login and password issues, uploading assignments, downloading study package, internet speed challenges, however, in technological gadgets, no difference is seen.

**Table 2**  
*Online Literacy Classroom Environment (Male=59, Female=12, N=71)*

Online Literacy Classroom Environment		SDA		DA		A		SA	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Teachers' Competency	M	7	11.8	28	47.4	24	45.7	-	-
	F	2	16.6	4	33.3	6	50.0	-	-
WhatsApp groups and Exchange of Materials	M	8	13.5	20	33.8	28	47.4	3	5.0
	F	2	16.6	4	33.3	6	50.0	-	-
Teacher-student Communication	M	11	18.6	28	47.4	20	33.8	-	-
	F	2	16.6	3	25.0	7	58.3	-	-
Quality Content	M	-	-	31	52.5	26	44.0	2	3.3
	F	-	-	7	58.3	5	41.6	-	-
E-Interpersonal Skills	M	2	3.3	11	18.6	44	74.5	2	3.3
	F	2	16.6	5	41.6	4	33.3	1	8.3

\*SDA=Strongly Disagree, DA=Disagree, A=Agree, SA= Strongly Agree

Table 2 demonstrates gender wise descriptive analysis of challenges faced by distance learners in online literacy classroom environment. Regarding teachers' competency issues there is difference between male and female opinions. Male participants disagreed (47.4%) that they encounter with competent teachers in online literacy classes, however females (50.0%) agreed that the teachers had full competency in teaching. There is seen no difference between male and female participants' opinions regarding WhatsApp groups and exchange of materials. Majority of males (47.4%) and females (50.0%) agreed with it indicating that there is no challenge faced in accessing WhatsApp groups and exchange of literacy materials. Another aspect in which gender differences are seen is teacher-student communication. In this aspect majority (47.4%) of males disagreed however, most of (58.3%) females agreed with it, which indicated that males face no problem in teacher-student communication on LMS whereas, females face issue in negotiating with teachers online.

There is no difference in the mean scores of males versus females is seen in quality content. Most of male participants (52.5%) disagreed with

it whereas, most of females (58.3%) also disagreed with it indicating that quality literacy content is provided on LMS. Another challenge indicated in this table is E-interpersonal skills. In this area, majority of male respondents (74.5%) agreed with it however, females (41.6%) disagreed with it. So, it can be concluded that both genders have difference of opinions in E-interpersonal skills which may also vary from their personal experiences with their peers in online classes.

Overall, this table concludes that there are certain gender differences in their opinions in terms of mean score regarding teachers' competency, teacher-student communication, and E-interpersonal skills. However, in WhatsApp groups and exchange of materials, and quality content no difference in the opinions of both genders is seen. So, overall, there are certain challenges which are faced differently by both genders.

### **Findings and Discussions**

It was found from the data that in the construct of information literacy challenges certain challenges were met by the male participants and some were faced by female participants. However, there were some challenges which were jointly encountered by both genders. In this regard, login and password issues were faced by male participants than females. Both genders equally faced challenges more than online materials (Table. 1) and said that they face no challenge in accessing online literacy materials. Another aspect was uploading assignments in which males faced problems whereas, females don't faced issue in assignment uploading on LMS. Another finding was that in downloading study package, male participants confronted difficulty than female participants.

Findings on internet connectivity indicated neutral response from male students and female students faced internet connectivity challenge on LMS. Allen and Seaman (2014) provided a classification for courses according to how internet technology contributes to their delivery and proposed that web-based courses are more useful for students. Regarding internet speed challenges, it was found that male students opposed it however, females indicated that they face challenge while connecting with the internet to execute literacy activities. Males attributed challenges regarding internet signals than females. In technological gadgets issues, i.e. accessing the latest android or desktop technological gadgets to access literacy information and activities online on LMS portal both genders faced challenges equally. Findings of this study are supported by Haidera and Sundin (2022)

This study found that challenges faced by distance learners in online literacy classroom environment. Gender differences were found

regarding their opinions on teachers' competency. Male participants did not encounter with competent teachers, however female participants indicated that they are taught by competent teachers online. Participants of this study responded teachers' competency in online environment differently which is justified by Alman, Tomer and Lincoln (2012) indicating that online instructors must pay attention to what they need to create, develop, and manage their online courses and how to effectively communicate with the learners in the absence of physical presence and interaction. For both instructors and learners, it is crucial to consider time management issues. It is also important to note that the sense and control of time have different patterns in online courses.

This study found that for participants of the study, it is feasible to create and learn in WhatsApp groups and exchange materials easily. Palloff and Pratt (2013) also indicated usefulness of web-based courses/course materials where internet is used to post learning materials in terms of assignments on LMS and major portion of about 80% of content of courses and teaching activities are shared by using internet. These courses are called 'hybrid/blended courses. On the other hand, online courses are entirely provided and instructed online. Consequently, it may be good to switch to an online paradigm for better learning. Certainly, it may be beneficial to deliberate web-based learning as effective learning for students.

In teacher-student communication females faced problems while males faced no problem. This might be due to the gender roles females play at home or lack of confidence. However, potential benefits of online interaction are reported by Fuller and Yu (2014) indicating that "online synchronous and asynchronous communication and interaction opens new channels of communication, peer interaction, collaboration, and access to learning materials in variety of formats". Another noteworthy finding was that quality literacy content is provided on LMS which is also supported by Chen et al. (2008) that e-learning has a positive stronger influence on students' learning. It was found that in E-interpersonal skills, males faced challenges than female participants. which may also vary from their personal experiences with their peers on LMS.

### **Conclusions**

According to the findings of the study it is concluded that both genders face numerous information literacy challenges on LMS of AIOU regarding login and password issues, uploading assignments, downloading study package, internet speed challenges, internet signals,

however, in technological gadgets, no difference in the opinions of both genders is seen.

- There are certain challenges varied between male and female students e.g. online literacy classroom environment in the aspects of teachers' competency, teacher-student communication, and E-interpersonal skills. However, in WhatsApp groups and exchange of materials, and quality content no gender difference exists.

### **Recommendations**

- It is recommended that to overcome the challenges login and password, students' online facilitation services may be activated, and auto login password service may be introduced by AIOU authorities.
- To overcome uploading assignment and downloading study materials issues, more swift centers may be established in far flung areas especially in Chitral so that students may access and resolve their issues.
- The challenges of internet connectivity, low internet signals etc. authorities of AIOU may provide internet devices/USBs on rent or small installment loans so that more students may be facilitated in remotes areas.
- Students face competent teachers' issues which may be tackled by giving in-service training to tutors before commencement of workshops and their evaluation form may be made mandatory by students after completion of workshops.
- Teacher-student communication issues may be tackled by giving orientation to teachers to use immediacy teaching practices during their online sessions.

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