

Visualizing Innovative Student Support Services to Promote Literacy in Distance Education

Haque Nawaz*

Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore students' perceptions regarding the new initiatives of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in student support services to promote literacy in distance education. This used survey method and data was gathered from students of the teacher training program bachelor's in education (B.Ed. 1.5 years) through questionnaire. The sample was 33% of the total enrollment of 1555 students. Data was collected through mail and personally by the research. Findings of the study revealed that students perceived that ICT has made their study process easier and more convenient. Timely receipt of course related information from the university kept them motivated to persuade their studies. However, the learners showed their concern about non-responsive attitude from the staff for attending telephone calls, non-awareness regarding financial assistance schemes in rural and far-flung areas and delay and non-receipt of books well in time. It was concluded that there was no significant difference among the students about the AIOU new initiatives regarding admissions, mailing, tutorials, examinations, library, web services and call center. However, students of rural and urban areas perceived those new initiatives regarding examination differently. It was recommended that improved and effective use of ICT is imperative to strengthen the student support services in open distance learning in future to enhance literacy activities' outreach. It was also recommended that apart from printed material, the availability of books online may be ensured.

Keywords: *Allama Iqbal Open University, New Initiatives, Student Support Services, ICT, Distance Education and Literacy*

* Independent Researcher, shani_97@hotmail.com

Introduction

Distance learning provides educational opportunity to the students through student support having components such as printed course materials (books), tutors, arranging occasional tutorial meetings, arrangements of workshops in face-to-face mode and using technology i.e. internet, videoconferencing, cell phones, and social media. The distance education became the one of the most suitable solutions to meet the requirement of people living not only in the populated cities but also in the far-flung areas without the presence of both learner and teaching staff physically at one place i.e. within the educational institution.

The distance learners while on studying are not required to leave their jobs, therefore, in this way, they take the opportunity to uplift their educational/professional skills. According to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) (2021), it has over 192 members including individual institutions and associations spread all over the world and working for the development and to educate the masses through open and distance education. The huge membership list (available at <https://www.icde.org/institutional-members>) shows the popularity and acceptability of distance education in all developed, underdeveloped, and poor countries.

In Pakistan too, the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), realizing the need for utilizing distance education as a useful and effective alternate system to educate the masses, was set up in 1974, was the second Open University on the planet and first in Asia and Africa. Through distance education, AIOU has opened new freedoms for millions, especially female learners, and enhanced the endeavours of the bureaucratic and common governments incredibly and that too without turning into a weight on their assets. Distance Education expected more prominent importance and acknowledgment in Pakistan because of the elements of destitution and relative hardship of girls. The pace of proficiency, occurrence of dropouts, and low literacy rate in the more unfortunate classes of Pakistan are the elements which have been catered by AIOU. The frequency of neediness is a lot higher in the provincial zones, where formal training is significantly less settled. The pace of proficiency and instruction is a lot of lower for females in Pakistan, especially in the rural area, because of cultural limitations and traditionalist customs. Numerous traditionalist guardians under the tension of mature age customs don't permit their little girls to go out to the schools. The AIOU, through its arrangement of Distance Education has, accordingly, gave instructive freedoms to these

housebound female population. This clarifies the reasons why most of the students enrolled with university are females.

The success of distance education mainly depends upon strong student courses because students and teachers both are separated from each other. This gap is filled through two-way communication by using print and electronic media which includes books, CDs, Audio Video Aids, Internet, SMS, Online learning, social media etc. In today's world all these are integral part of student support services managed for distance learners. Student support is an indispensable component of distance education which is meant for serving its students particularly communities of dropouts, old students and disadvantaged groups. According to Manjulika (2000), "the open universities increased access for other disadvantaged groups including older students, who may be geographically isolated or excluded from regular classes because of shift patterns, seasonal or other kind of work, family and community commitments." Student support has been strengthened and implemented through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools such as electronic media, digital mobile devices, etc. in developed countries. However, developing nations are also increasing the use of ICT in student support day by day.

Technological advances particularly enhanced use of internet and introduction of other digital support service, i.e., Bulletin Board Systems, The Web, Computer Mediated Communication, E-Learning, Open Educational Resources, E-Portfolios, social media, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) etc. have changed the role of student support services in distance education. Allama Iqbal Open University also took initiative to bring its student support services in line with new technological changes for provision of improved quality learning environment to its clientele. systematic and gradual progress in distance education from its start has been narrated mentioning the steps taken up till now. From print to online flexible learning, the distance education has changed into a flexible learning model. The use of technology in distance learning has been helpful in educating the people living in far flung area and even at any corner of world. The tools such as radio, telephone, television in the past and internet through satellite technology in recent era has made it possible learning for a person living anywhere in the world through distance and open learning system. It saves energy and time of the student as compared to formal mode of education.

According to these models, the world is now working under 5th Generation Model of distance education through which learning is managed by maximum use of ICT tools including social media. Keegan (2005) as quoted by Holmberg (2008) while enforcing the notion further

says “the utilization of specialized media – print, sound, video or PC – to join instructor and student and convey the substance of the course” has supported the distance education.

In view of present technological changes as described. in 5th Generation Model of Distance Education, the use of internet in spreading education has increased multi-fold. In USA only 66% of post-secondary degree-granting institutions were providing online education (Nong, 2012). However, it has been observed by researches that dropout rate in distance education much more as compared to the formal education institutions and how to overcome this problem is debatable. The case study of UKOU for dropout ratio, Simpson (2013) has urged the need of proactive contact which increases student retention. To meet the requirements of 5th Generation, distance education in a best way and effective manner, strong student support services play a vital role.

Students need help and guidance at every step of their studies through distance education. Student support services include pre-enrolment activities which a student needs before making choice of distance study/guidance in course choice, course admissions information, course design, administration of distance education, evaluation process, tutorial support, exam and post-graduation services etc. (Anderson, 2004). The use of internet, smartphone, email, short messaging service, social media, and live chats is now quite common. In today’s technological world, empowering the student by helping them in acquiring education through information and communication technology (ICT) is a better way to improve their studies. Learners are benefitting from these technological advancements. There is a need to build up such databases of prompt services through these devices to strengthen the student support services in such a way that each learner can get the information relating to his studies without wastage of time (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017).

This study was conducted to fill the gaps in literature as during the last 25 years, there is lot of technological changes, and the role of printed material has become limited. These changes have also eased out the learners through use of internet based educational services. The usually understandable concept of student support emphasizes the complete view of student learning. The innovations of latest technologies are proved more useful in distance education. These are emerging technologies in distance education that can meet the needs of the learners. Use of satellites, eLearning, social media, and open education resources is becoming equally helpful in pursuit of knowledge through distance education across the borders. Student support commences with a learner-cantered approach to enhance retention rates of distance learners was the gap to be filled in

this research as indicated by Simpson (2013). He also urged the need of proactive contact which increases student retention. Students need help/guidance at every step of their studies through distance education, which include pre-enrolment requirement, course admissions information, course design, administration of distance education, evaluation process, student needs before making choice of distance study/guidance in course choice, tutorial support, exam services etc. Students support services refer to the assistance help which all distance students get alongside the learning material. It has numerous structures for example eye to eye educating, PC cured correspondence, directing direction, workshops, and telephonic instructional exercises. There is no quick arrangement of a mentor or instructor in distance schooling. Distance schooling measure relies on the understudy uphold administrations. Along these lines, each distance educational establishment facilitators emotionally and quantitatively supports organizations. In today's advanced technological age, it is imperative for the mega universities offering course through open and distance education to strengthen their student support services for success and retention of the clientele.

Statement of the Problem

There is widespread of open distance learning and diversified clientele across the country and overseas as well, Allama Iqbal Open University has taken certain new initiatives for strengthening different student support services to facilitate its students. There is need to confirm the perception of students about these initiatives so that university may continue or make changes in the systems The present study was aimed visualising student support services in distance education.

Objectives of the study

To explore new initiatives taken by AIOU for student support services at AIOU.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

- RQ1: What are the new initiatives taken by AIOU for student support services?
- RQ2: What do students perceive regarding new initiatives for student support services at AIOU?
- RQ3: How do the students perceive new initiatives taken by AIOU for student support services?
- RQ4: How do the male and female students perceive differently regarding new initiatives taken by AIOU for student support services?

Research Methodology

This was quantitative study. Survey questionnaire was used for collection of data and administered to respondents. The researcher developed a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. Later, the filled in questionnaires were analyzed through SPSS. The study was delimited to the students enrolled in B.Ed. (1.5 years) program in the course General Methods of Teaching (Professional) Course Code-8601 in Rawalpindi and Islamabad Regions. Population was 1555 (266 male and 1289 female) registered students of AIOU in Bachelor of Education (B.Ed. 1.5 Years) of Rawalpindi/Islamabad Regions. Total 518 (88 male and 430 female) students were randomly selected as sample from both regions. Sample size was determined through online sample size calculator (<https://www.calculator.net/sample-size-calculator.html>) which constituted 33% of total population. A questionnaire for respondents was developed to analyze their perception about the new initiatives taken by AIOU for student support services. The validity and reliability of the instrument was confirmed through experts' opinion and Cronbach's Alpha. The data collection was administered by sending questionnaire through mail by attaching self-addressed envelope. Some questionnaires were collected personally by the researcher. After the collection of data, the data was analyzed on percentage basis in tabulation form and Standard Deviation, Mean and Frequency Distribution of the score was explored by SPSS software.

Results

Reflect the results in the tables below:

Table 1

Admission Campaign through Media (TV/Radio/ social media)

		f	%	M	SD
Admission Campaign through Media (TV/Radio/ social media) conducted	Strongly Agreed	104	26%	3.95	.938
	Agreed	225	56%		
	Uncertain	27	7%		
	Disagreed	35	9%		
	Strongly Disagreed	9	2%		

Above table indicated that 26% of respondents were strongly agreed and 56% of the respondents agreed, 7% uncertain, 9% disagreed whereas 2% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Admission Campaign through Media (TV/Radio/ social media) conducted. Mean is 3.95 and Standard Deviation is .938. Before 2016, the AIOU was only using print media for admission campaigns i.e. through 2/3 leading newspapers. Use of electronic media for admission campaigns has been proved helpful in accessibility/awareness of students. Therefore, most of the respondents showed their satisfaction over the use of electronic media (TV/Radio & social media) for boosting up admission campaign.

Table 2
Information Seminars (Open Day)

		f	%	M	SD
Information Seminars (Open Day) conducted	Strongly Agreed	65	16%	3.24	1.215
	Agreed	124	31%		
	Uncertain	88	22%		
	Disagreed	88	22%		
	Strongly Disagreed	35	9%		

The above table indicated that 16% of respondents strongly agreed and 31% of the respondents agreed, 22% uncertain, 22% disagreed whereas 9% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Information Seminars (Open Day) conducted. Mean is 3.24 and Standard Deviation is 1.215. Previously, AIOU only relied on printed media and Regional Heads visit to different institutions for admission purposes. However, the initiative regarding conduct of information seminars at the main campus and regions were found helpful to convey its message to the masses at their doorsteps. Most of the respondents showed their positive response by welcoming the steps taken by AIOU in disseminating information about its academic programs through Open Day Seminars in different areas. The information seminars provided information about University's academic programs and admission requirements.

Table 3
Guidance and Counseling

		f	%	M	SD
Guidance and Counseling is provided	Strongly Agreed	89	22%	3.64	1.144
	Agreed	184	46%		
	Uncertain	43	11%		
	Disagreed	63	16%		
	Strongly Disagreed	21	5%		

The above table indicated that 22% of respondents strongly agreed and 46% of the respondents agreed, 11% uncertain, 16 disagreed whereas 5% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Guidance and Counselling is provided. Mean is 3.64 and Standard Deviation is 1.144. Formerly, student counsellors were working in some regions. To increase the aspect of guidance and counselling for better student support services in the regions, new personnel were appointed. Many of the respondents were aware of the facility and usefulness of Guidance Counselling Services being provided by the University.

Table 4
Online Admission Registration

		f	%	M	SD
Online Admission Registration is available	Strongly Agreed	173	43%	4.21	.911
	Agreed	173	43%		
	Uncertain	30	7%		
	Disagreed	14	4%		
	Strongly Disagreed	10	3%		

The above table indicated that 43% of respondents were strongly agreed and 43% of the respondents agreed, 7% uncertain, 4% disagreed whereas 3% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Online Admission Registration is available. Mean is 4.21 and Standard Deviation is .911. In the past, only printed admission forms were used for admission purposes. In the last days of the admission campaign, the non-availability of admission forms always remained a problem. To curb this problem, the university authorities took the initiative regarding provision of online admission

form facility through AIOU Website. Most of the respondents showed that they are not only aware about the online admission forms' availability and their increased use by students was evidence that most of the clientele are now benefiting from this online source.

Table 5
Financial Assistance: Fee Concession

		f	%	M	SD
Financial Assistance: Fee Concession is provided	Strongly Agreed	68	17%	2.99	1.360
	Agreed	83	21%		
	Uncertain	106	26%		
	Disagreed	63	16%		
	Strongly Disagreed	83	20%		

Above table indicated that 17% of respondents were strongly agreed and 21% of the respondents agreed, 26% uncertain, 16% disagreed whereas 20% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Financial Assistance: Fee Concession is provided. Mean is 2.99 and Standard Deviation is 1.360. Financial assistance is always considered to be a source of inspiration for needy poor but intelligent students. To provide help and encourage such needy students particularly females, financial assistance under various schemes was introduced. From the responses, it is evident that a considerable number of students (26% of the sample) were unaware of the facility. It was felt that there is a need to widely publicize this incentive and to fix some share for needy students in far flung areas.

Table 6
Fee Installment facility

		f	%	M	SD
Fee Installment facility is available	Strongly Agreed	51	13%	3.17	1.207
	Agreed	124	31%		
	Uncertain	117	29%		
	Disagreed	56	14%		
	Strongly Disagreed	52	13%		

The above table respondents 13% of respondents were strongly agreed and 31% of the respondents agreed, 29% uncertain, 14% disagreed whereas 13% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Financial Installment facility is provided. Mean is 3.17 and Standard Deviation is 1.207. This initiative was just to facilitate low-income segments of society, who were unable to pay a total fee in lump sum. From the responses, it is evident that a considerable number of students (29% of the sample) have no information on the subject matter. Regions must focus on poor needy students to provide them relief.

Table 7
Earn to Learn Scheme

		f	%	M	SD
Earn to Learn Scheme is available	Strongly Agreed	40	10%	3.26	1.068
	Agreed	140	35%		
	Uncertain	139	34%		
	Disagreed	47	13%		
	Strongly Disagreed	34	8%		

Above table indicated that 10% of respondents were strongly agreed and 35% of the respondents agreed, 34% uncertain, 13% disagreed whereas 8% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Financial Assistance: Fee Concession is provided. Mean is 2.99 and Standard Deviation is 1.360. The young generation was encouraged through this initiative. Students were engaged in office working environments so that they could continue their education by earning while learning. From the responses, it is revealed that 45% of respondents have knowledge about the scheme but 34% of the respondents were unaware. Appropriate action on the part of Regional Heads is required to accommodate needy people.

Table 8
SMS for admission campaign

		f	%	M	SD
SMS admission campaign is active	Strongly Agreed	184	46%	4.13	1.089
	Agreed	149	37%		
	Uncertain	19	5%		
	Disagreed	31	8%		
	Strongly Disagreed	17	4%		

The above table indicated that 46% of respondents strongly agreed and 37% of the respondents agreed, 5% uncertain, 8% disagreed whereas 4% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that SMS for admission campaign is active. Mean is 4.13 and Standard Deviation is 1.089. Earlier to this initiative, lots of complaints were in the field regarding non-receipt of Continue Admission Forms. The SMS campaign was found helpful in increasing the retention rate of students in each semester. This initiative from the responses, it is evident that majority of students are benefiting from SMS services. Telecom Companies need to be approached for subsidized packages for AIOU Students.

Table 9*Online Admission Amendment System*

		f	%	M	SD
Online Admission Amendment System introduced	Strongly Agreed	93	23%	3.70	1.042
	Agreed	162	41%		
	Uncertain	93	23%		
	Disagreed	37	9%		
	Strongly Disagreed	15	4%		

The above table indicated that 23% of respondents were strongly agreed and 41% of the respondents agreed, 23% uncertain, 9% disagreed whereas 4% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Online Admission Amendment System introduced. Mean is 3.70 and Standard Deviation is 1.042. In the past, data amendments were being sent through post which was not only cost but also time consuming. The initiative helped to instantly send the amendment data through SMS and email. This saved both time and money. The usefulness of this initiative is revealed from the responses, as most students are satisfied with this facility. Therefore, the initiative taken by the university is well acknowledged.

Table 10*SMS for removal of Objection on incomplete admission form*

			f	%	M	SD
SMS removal of Objection on incomplete admission form is effective	for of	Strongly Agreed	77	19%	3.48	1.161
		Agreed	151	38%		
		Uncertain	90	23%		
		Disagreed	52	13%		
		Strongly Disagreed	30	7%		

Above table indicated that 19% of respondents were strongly agreed and 38% of the respondents agreed, 23% uncertain, 13% disagreed whereas 7% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that SMS for removal of Objection on incomplete admission form is effective. Mean is 3.48 and Standard Deviation is 1.161. The responses show that more than 50% of the respondents are satisfied with this facility. Sending objections was time consuming and costly. Online system keeps update students about any objection and its removal status. The university must think about an online solution to avoid delays due to the mail system.

Table 11*SMS for admission confirmation*

		f	%	M	SD
SMS for admission confirmation is active	Strongly Agreed	174	43%	4.16	1.008
	Agreed	168	42%		
	Uncertain	20	5%		
	Disagreed	24	6%		
	Strongly Disagreed	14	4%		

The above table indicated that 43% of respondents strongly agreed and 42% of the respondents agreed, 5% uncertain, 6% disagreed whereas 4% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that SMS for admission confirmation is active. Mean is 4.16 and Standard Deviation is 1.008. From the responses, it is evident that 85% of the respondents are satisfied with this facility. Earlier, the students could confirm their admission status through AIOU Website. Now soon after admission finalization, the students get SMS about admission confirmation. This initiative is considered more appropriate which save the students from calling and sending applications for confirmation of their admission.

Table 12*Online Books Dispatch Tracking System*

		f	%	M	SD
Online Books Dispatch Tracking System is available	Strongly Agreed	129	32%	3.79	1.196
	Agreed	156	39%		
	Uncertain	42	11%		
	Disagreed	48	12%		
	Strongly Disagreed	25	6%		

Above table indicated that 32% of respondents were strongly agreed and 39% of the respondents agreed, 11% uncertain, 12% disagreed whereas 6% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Online Books Dispatch Tracking System is available. Mean is 3.79 and Standard Deviation is 1.196. In the past, therefore, there was no system regarding books dispatch status. Now, the students after receipt of admission confirmation SMS, were able to see their books dispatch status. From the responses, it is revealed that most of the respondents are aware and fully satisfied.

Table 13

Combined Tutor Intimation letter is used

		f	%	M	SD
Combined Tutor Intimation letter is used	Strongly Agreed	98	24%	3.77	1.031
	Agreed	175	44%		
	Uncertain	75	19%		
	Disagreed	39	10%		
	Strongly Disagreed	13	3%		

The above table indicated that 24% of respondents strongly agreed and 44% of the respondents agreed, 19% uncertain, 10% disagreed whereas 3% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Combined Tutor Intimation letter is used. Mean is 3.77 and Standard Deviation is 1.031. Previously, each student was receiving tutor intimation letter according to enrolled number of courses. By this initiative, a single tutor intimate letter for all courses taken in a semester is now being sent. This initiative is the best example of economic measures. At the same time, tutor intimation is also displayed on AIOU Website. The result shows that most of the respondents are receiving this information. However, SMS also be sent to students about uploading of their tutors' particulars on AIOU Website.

Table 14
Online Degree Tracking System

		f	%	M	SD
Degree Tracking System is active	Strongly Agreed	42	11%	3.48	.915
	Agreed	173	43%		
	Uncertain	130	32%		
	Disagreed	45	11%		
	Strongly Disagreed	10	3%		

The above table indicated that 11% of respondents strongly agreed and 43% of the respondents agreed, 32% uncertain, 11% disagreed whereas 3% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Degree Tracking is active. Mean is 3.48 and Standard Deviation is .915. Before this online system, the applicants were not able to see their application status. Now, they can not only see their application status but objection, if any and displayed on AIOU Website apart from certificate dispatch status. The result shows that most of the respondents are using this service for information and status about their certificate/degrees.

Table 15
SMS for Exam Schedule

		f	%	M	SD
SMS for Exam Schedule are delivered	Strongly Agreed	73	18%	3.07	1.354
	Agreed	105	26%		
	Uncertain	54	14%		
	Disagreed	112	28%		
	Strongly Disagreed	56	14%		

The above table indicated that 18% of respondents strongly agreed and 26% of the respondents agreed, 14% uncertain, 28% disagreed whereas 14% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that SMS for Exam Schedule are delivered. Mean is 3.07 and Standard Deviation is 1.354. This initiative was taken just to send intimation to the student for awareness and preparation of forthcoming exams. The printed Roll No. Slips are sent after SMS. The result shows that a considerable number of the respondents are not satisfied with the SMS service. This issue needs more attention of the University authorities.

Table 16*Student Complaint Management System (CMS) on AIOU Website*

		f	%	M	SD
Student Complaint Management System (CMS) is available on AIOU Website	Strongly Agreed	73	18%	3.62	1.058
	Agreed	181	45%		
	Uncertain	91	23%		
	Disagreed	31	8%		
	Strongly Disagreed	24	6%		

Above table indicated that 18% of respondents were strongly agreed and 45% of the respondents agreed, 23% uncertain, 8% disagreed whereas 6% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Student Complaint Management System (CMS) is available on AIOU Website. Mean is 3.62 and Standard Deviation is 1.058. The AIOU aims to address the students' grievance as top priority. To save the students from visiting Regions/main campus, E-complaint Management System was introduced. Through the system generated ticket, students can keep track of their complaint progress. The system is regularly monitored by the Directorate of ICT. The result displays that respondents are well versed with the availability and usage of this compliant redressal system on AIOU Website.

Table 17*Web TV is active*

		f	%	M	SD
Web TV is active	Strongly Agreed	44	11%	3.40	.952
	Agreed	142	35%		
	Uncertain	159	40%		
	Disagreed	38	10%		
	Strongly Disagreed	17	4%		

The above table indicated that 11% of respondents strongly agreed and 35% of the respondents agreed, 40% uncertain, 10% disagreed whereas 4% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Web TV is active. Mean is 3.40 and Standard Deviation is .952. As per the

above result, although 46% of respondents have agreed but on the other hand 40% have shown no concern with the facility. AIOU has got license to launch its own education TV Channel from Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority. Before launching regular transmission, the existing TV programs along with new ones were placed on AIOU Web TV for students' convenience to watch the pre-recorded lectures and other University related informative programs. This initiative needs to be more publicized for students' awareness about updated news relating to their studies.

Table 18
Online PDF Books Delivery

		f	%	M	SD
Online PDF Books Delivery is active	Strongly Agreed	60	15%	3.44	1.084
	Agreed	159	40%		
	Uncertain	102	25%		
	Disagreed	56	14%		
	Strongly Disagreed	23	6%		

The above table indicated that 15% of respondents strongly agreed and 40% of the respondents agreed, 25% uncertain, 14% disagreed whereas 6% of respondents strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Online PDF Books Delivery is active. Mean is 3.44 and Standard Deviation is 1.084. The responses show that 55% of the respondents are satisfied but a considerable portion, 25%, is least bothered about the availability of books on the AIOU Website. In the past, only printed books were sent to students after finalization of their admission. Now at the initial stage filling in admission form, the applicant can see and download books for their study without wasting time. This initiative was as a part of digital transformation of AIOU. This initiative has been appreciated by the students.

Table 19**Call Centre/Helpline Services**

		f	%	M	SD
Call Centre/Helpline Services are available	Strongly Agreed	85	21%	3.38	1.325
	Agreed	148	37%		
	Uncertain	55	14%		
	Disagreed	59	15%		
	Strongly Disagreed	53	13%		

The above table indicated that 21% of respondents were strongly agreed and 37% of the respondents agreed, 14% uncertain, 15% disagreed whereas 13% of respondents were strongly disagreed regarding the statement that Call Centre/Helpline Services are available. Mean is 3.38 and Standard Deviation is 1.325. UAN helpline (051-111-112-468) was activated for responding to students' online queries. The result shows that most of the respondents are aware of the Call Centre/Helpline Services provided by the University.

Findings and Discussions

By virtue of enrollment and its services, the Allama Iqbal Open University is the largest university of Pakistan working under distance and open learning mode. Currently more than 1.4 million students from all over the country and overseas as well are benefitting from the services being provided by AIOU. To cater to the needs of such a huge enrollment with its limited resources within semester time frame is a challenge. Findings indicated innovative student support services at AIOU.

Pena-Banalaria (2011) has described the "learner support services as one of the key components in the success of Distance Education and she has recommended tying up the faculty with student support services". To meet this challenge, strong student support services and coordination at every level from pre-admission to post degree stage are required. Chatpakkarantana and Khalisang (2012) have suggested development of frequently asked questions for immediate assistance of learners for smooth use of LMS. The Allama Iqbal Open University is also using LMS AAGHI Portal for graduate and postgraduate level, above suggestion can be helpful for its learners. Mir (2017) has urged the need of an Online Support System for speedy disposal of complaints. This study was primarily aimed

to investigate the existing facilities available and students' perception in view of new initiatives for reducing problems/issues relating to student support services of the AIOU at large.

Another factor which attracts the learners to distance education is its low fee structure as compared to formal education institutions. Lim and colleagues (2019) while quoting substantial increase in enrollment of Cyber University of South Korea have also stated that "the annual fee of at Cyber universities is approximately 2000-3000 U.S. dollars which is only a quarter of that at traditional universities."

According to Latchman (2019) while discussing the future of ODL in Australia has opined about the ICT and strong student support services that "uses of technology will affect student choices between education providers and so that institutions will need to ensure that their teaching and learning is accessible, equitable, student-focused, flexible, affordable and informed by the latest theories and practices."

Realizing the need for providing online learning sources to distance learners, many universities of the world have strengthened their academic programs with MOOCs, OERs on their website.

Bates (2019) has indicated acceptability of distance and online education due to its flexible mode and accessibility viz a viz traditional university.

The world of open and distance learning is changing very fast. The innovations in ICT have made it more flexible and accessible through palm held devices i.e. smart phone, tablet and laptop. Provision of online resources has changed the role of tutors and occasional face to face tutorial meetings. Virtual classroom activities through Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other social media resources have facilitated most of the student but on the other hand students of far-flung areas of Pakistan, are still facing difficulty in internet connectivity.

It has been observed from the findings of the study that AIOU is mostly meeting the requirements of the students regarding Admissions, Mailing, SMS Services, tutorial support, conduct of course workshops, conduct and award of degree, library services, Web Services etc. and students showed their satisfaction on these services. Likewise foreign distance learning institutions, AIOU needs upgrading of its existing system re-thinking about fee structure and provision of maximum online resources to the students. However, matters relating to financial assistance schemes, SMS for result intimation, re-checking of answer scripts, and Helpline/Call Centre Services were not up to the mark and students were not satisfied with these services. These areas need digitalization of the

existing system and consideration by the University authorities for improvement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is concluded that AIOU has introduced innovative student support services and is meeting the requirements of the students regarding Admissions, Mailing, SMS Services, tutorial support, conduct of course workshops, conduct and award of degree, library services, Web Services etc. Based on findings and conclusions, following recommendations were made:

- To meet the requirements of large population of AIOU, existing online services may be upgraded through digital transformation by hiring latest ICT solutions/ resources to supplement student support services.
- Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan through close coordination with regions may launch an extensive awareness campaign regarding its student support services all over the country in general and in Rural Areas particularly about financial assistance/scholarships by using electronic/digital media (Radio/TV/social media) including.
- Services related to Result Intimation, Online Paper Rechecking System, speedy disposal of Certificate/Degree applications and student inquiry system of Examinations Department may be improved.
- One window service at the main campus may be strengthened by establishing online linkage with Student Counsellors working in the Regions by arranging on job orientation/training on ODL System & AAGHI LMS Portal of personnel of all ladders to help facilitate the students.
- Web TV Programs and course related lectures may be shared with students through LMS along with printed material.
- Helpline/Call Centre services of Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan may be improved to work properly / actively along with auto answered helpline system.
- The present study was delimited to only two regions i.e. Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Same study may be conducted in each province of Pakistan.

References

- Anderson, T. (2004). Practice guided by research in providing effective student support services. In C. W. R. Jane, E. Brindley, J. E. Brindley, C. Walti, & O. Z. Richter (Eds.), *Learner support in open, distance and online learning environments* (9th ed., pp. 259-272). Oldenburg.
- Holmberg, B. (2008). *The evaluation, principles and practices of distance education*. Oldenburg.
- Keegan, D. (2005). *Theoretical principles of distance education*. Routledge.
- Mir, K. (2017). Design and development of online student support system. *Pakistan Journal of Distance and Online Learning*, 3(1), 1-8. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Kamran-Mir-2/publication/318259147_Design_and_Development_of_Online_Student_Support_System/links/595f2db2aca2728c1146a931/Design-and-Development-of-Online-Student-Support-System.pdf
- Nong, T. D. (2012). *Factors contributing to perceptions of Southeast Asian learners regarding satisfaction and quality in online education*. Miami.
- Simpson, O. (2013). Student retention in distance education: are we failing our students? *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 28(2), 105-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2013.847363>
- Manjulika, S. R. (2000). *The world of open and distance learning*. Viva Books Private Limited.
- Nsamba, A., & Makoe, M. (2017). Evaluating quality of students' support services in open distance learning. *Turkish online Journal of Distance Education*, 18(4), 91-103. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1161816.pdf>
- International Council for Distance Education. (2021, March 31). International Council for Open and Distance Education. <https://www.icde.org/list-of-members-alphabetical>

Citation of this Article:

Nawaz, H. (2024). Visualizing innovative student support services to promote literacy in distance education. *International Journal of Literacy Theory and Practice*, 2(1), 35–54.