LIBRARY & INFORMATION SCIENCE DISTANCE EDUCATION: A PAKISTANI PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Introduction. Distance education (DE) system in library and information science (LIS) is in practice in many parts of the world. The purpose of this paper is to review the current status of Master of LIS education through distance mode in Pakistan in the light LIS experts' opinion. It also aims to recommend corrective measures accordingly.

Method. The paper is based on literature review and interviews of representative library professionals. A purposive sample consisting of 20 experts was drawn, but only 12 of them could be approached for interview. The data has been interpreted using thematic approach.

Results. The MLIS program is an opportunity for those who cannot leave their homes, job, family, etc. for further formal studies. Nonetheless, imparting the desired quality DE is a real challenge because of the following factors: students' non-compulsory attendance in tutorial classes, the flaws in system of examination & evaluation, bulky study material and lack of resources in terms of physical space, materials and faculty.

Conclusion. Instead of merely relying on one mode throughout, multiple choices of both asynchronous and synchronous systems should be developed. Further, a well established infrastructure based on information and communication technologies is necessary for imparting DE. This case study may be helpful for future library educators in planning LIS DE in sister countries in the region with more or less the same conditions.

Introduction/Background

The review of literature shows that issue of quality DE has been widely discussed by experts. To mention a few, Koehler and Blair (2003) state that nearly all LIS schools of USA are now offering programs both in formal and DE mode through different models. Several consortia have also been developed to provide intermediacy in DE system. DE is rapidly growing but it is still a troubled-water area of higher education. They conclude that not all MLIS courses are suitable and manageable for DE and the skill-oriented courses should adopt hybrid model. Ghosh (2001) reveals that only 27% students could pass the MLIS program in 1996 from Indira Gandhi National Open University through DE mode. The remaining students have either failed or left the program. The reason he mentions is the lack of modern technology infrastructure and expertise.

LIS experts in Pakistan also perceive that distance education (DE) mode is not suitable for the profession mainly because of imparting DE either without or with very poor student-teacher interaction. At present, 12 universities (10 on-campus, 2 DE) both in public and private sector, offer different levels LIS degree programs. (Ahmad, 2007). This study probes various parameters of DE system by obtaining the opinions of selected experts. Their concerns reveal the weaknesses of the system while suggesting ways for the betterment.

Distance Library Education in Pakistan

DE was started in Pakistan after establishment of the People's Open University by the Government of Pakistan in 1974; renamed as the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in 1977. The AIOU has now different educational programs from short certificate course to masters, MPhil and PhD in dozens of disciplines. The method is DE through correspondence, tutorials, workshops, computer-oriented online & offline, and radio & television broadcasts (Allama Iqbal Open University, 2008). The University offers more than 100 programs and 1000 different courses. The number of students is over one million. The University maintains a well-equipped Central Library at Islamabad campus with over 1,200,000 volumes on various subjects including near 1000 volumes of LIS collection. Every main region of AIOU has its own independent library with professional staff to cater to the needs of students, tutors, staff, etc of that area. However, the Central Library and regional libraries do not provide any service to distance learners. The Central Library only has recently launched its web catalogue.

Later, the Sarhad University of Science and Information Technology (SUIT) got established in 2001. The SUIT has just started diploma and master's LIS programs in 2006. Although the SUIT has been established as DE University, the LIS programs are offered almost on-campus. There is another DE university in Pakistan, Virtual University (VU) established in 2002. The VU does not have any LIS program. Therefore, the study is focused on the AIOU LIS education system only as the LIS Department was setup in 1985 at AIOU and it started DE with "Certificate in Library Science (CLS)" in the same year. Later, an undergraduate program "Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS)" and graduate program "MLIS" were respectively initiated in 1988 and 2001.

System of MLIS Education at AIOU

The MLIS is a two-year professional degree program consisting four semesters. The admission is based on merit only on the basis of marks obtained in 14 years Bachelor degree with any subject(s) studied. Neither there is any age limit for getting admission nor written test and interview is required. The average number of admissions is 70 per year while average number of applications is 300 per year.

The AIOU has more than 36 regional offices across Pakistan, but these are not used for MLIS program. The University sends study material, subject cataloging tools and assignments to every student and tutor concerned - all in paper-print format, called 'allied material'. There are respectively 12 and 18 tutorial classes with a half-credit course and a full-credit course in each semester. One tutorial class is usually of 90 minutes duration. The attendance in the tutorial classes is not compulsory for students. These classes are held only in Islamabad usually after office hours. The workshop (of eight to twelve days depending on the number of courses per semester) is held at the end of every semester in Islamabad. The duration of

workshop in a day is from four to six hours usually starting at 3:00 pm. The attendance in the workshop is compulsory for students. The two-day workshop is for one half-credit course and four-day workshop is for one full-credit course. The LIS faculty and the external experts act as workshop resource persons and tutors.

Different methods are used for students' assessment that includes assignments (30% weight), each semester's final written examination (70% weight), satisfactory internship certificate & report, and final comprehensive viva voce (fail/pass). Arif's (2004) study reports that 58% students of AIOU left the MLIS program after first semester in 2002 and the overall dropout rate of four semesters was 43% in 2003 mainly due to lack of interactivity. Only 38 students could pass the MLIS program in 2008 out of 100 admitted in 2006.

Since the start of BLIS program by the AIOU, there appeared much criticism in the local literature as well as amongst different circles of LIS community. The MLIS program is criticized in discussions mostly and only a couple of research studies on this program have been done. Mahmood (1999) quotes "this program is a misguided move without having any global example in the LIS profession; it would badly affect the quality of library education in Pakistan; it is a hazardous expansion and thoughtless approach, which will cause damage to the professional status." Ameen (2007) compares all public sector library schools in Pakistan against IFLA standards and finds that none of the library schools here is meeting these standards due to lack of required resources in terms of finance, space, materials, manpower, etc.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the quality issues regarding AIOU's MLIS program and system of education in the light of expert opinions.
2. To recommend measures based on suggestions for the improvement/rectification of this program and system.

Research Methodology

This study is based on semi-structured, face-to-face and telephonic interviews with LIS experts, mostly residing in the capital city of Pakistan, representing LIS teachers & librarians of AIOU and other institutions, office bearers of Pakistan Library Association, AIOU resource persons, theses supervisors, paper setters, and examiners.

A purposive sample of 20 experts was drawn but 12 of them were available for interview. These interviews were conducted during March and April 2008. This method was preferred due to small sample, and the benefits of interview such as spontaneity, flexibility, mutual exploration, and obtaining the real mind of the interviewees. Initially, three pilot interviews and some informal discussions were conducted around two points only--- the concerns and the suggestions about MLIS program of AIOU. It was observed that the respondents were not covering all relevant aspects. Therefore, an interview schedule was prepared covering all the aspects of the study and was finalized after pretesting. Topic-wise collected data were recorded on paper at the spot. Themes from the interview responses have been identified in the following tables. The interpretation of these themes has been appended below each table.

Data Analysis

Satisfaction of Respondents about MLIS Program (n=12)

First of all, interviewees were asked about their general satisfaction regarding LIS DE. The majority showed dissatisfaction with AIOU's MLIS program with regard to quality issues of DE mode. Table 1 shows it. It is interesting to mention that the four satisfied ones were AIOU people and external resource persons of this program.

Table 1. Satisfaction of Respondents about MLIS Program (n=12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
Satisfied	04
Dissatisfied	08

Concerns about AIOU System of Education and MLIS Program

Next important opinion seeking was about the reasons of their dissatisfaction. What makes them think that LIS DE is not appropriate mode of education? Their responses have been categorized in the subsequent Tables.

Table 2. MLIS Education (n=12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
Formal system is not affordable to all interested ones	07
Interaction is essential in certain courses	11
Strong infrastructure based on modern ICT is essential	12
Present system needs modification/up gradation	12

Interpretation

The LIS DE in Pakistan provides opportunity of getting education to people from remote areas, married, particularly women having children, overage, poor and employees. The DE mode is their only hope. However, LIS is a professional and practical discipline; therefore, two-way real time interaction is essential between teacher and taught for a number of courses. Furthermore, on-campus mode helps in developing students' personality, better culture understanding, close community/network, and interpersonal communication skills. The sophisticated ICT infrastructure makes it possible to make DE interactive for remotely residing students, but the situation of ICT infrastructure in a developing country like Pakistan is far from satisfaction. Therefore, the DE system of MLIS program needs amendments in all areas. The use of regional centers must be made. Television, radio broadcasts, Internet and web should be used for better instructions real-time interactive sessions and online examinations. The students who don't have technology affordability may be given long-term loans and digital literacy training.

Table 3. MLIS Admission (n = 12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
Admission criteria should be changed. Other methods of assessing candidates should also be used e.g., written test, and/or interview	12
Distance learners' limitations make it difficult to get quality intake	10

Interpretation

The GAT type written test for new entrants was suggested. Although admission merit remains high, the English language skills of students are very weak. The candidates with degrees like MA English, BBA, BCS, BSc, and unqualified but working librarians should be given preference. There should be some age limit and only limited seats for middle-aged students. The aged students have many preoccupations such as job, family, etc; hence, they do not give proper time to their studies and hardly stay regular. After a long break of formal education they find it hard to cope with all the requirements. The distance learners do not pay the needed attention and do not work hard due to lack of direct supervision or contact which is utmost necessary in DE.

Table 4. Tutorial Classes and Workshops (n = 12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
Tutorial classes and workshops should also be held in other cities	08
Tutorial classes and workshop days are insufficient	10
Attending tutorial classes should be compulsory to a significant percentage	11
Residence facility should be available to students.	08

Interpretation

Students from remote area are usually unable to attend classes/meetings in Islamabad, therefore, there should be tutorial and workshop support in the nearby regional office with hostel facility at affordable charges. Another option may be the collaboration with local formal library schools for practice work. The AIOU LIS Department should monitor the appointments of tutors and workshop resource persons made by the regional heads to maintain quality. For this purpose one or more LIS faculty members may be appointed there permanently.

The tutorial classes are also insufficient in number. It is not possible for a student to learn all skills in just 12 classes equal to about 24 hours duration or 18 classes equal to 40 hours in a semester for half and full credit course respectively. Then, some percentage of attendance should be made compulsory for tutorials as it is 70% for workshop. The workshop's duration is not sufficient also. More than 60% students attend first interactive session in the form of workshop due to compulsory attendance. Therefore, the resource persons have to teach theory from the beginning hurriedly, with little or without feedback or discussion. It is difficult to train a first-time attendee in cataloguing, classification, computing skills in a few days of workshop.

Table 5. Curriculum, Study Material and Students' Assignments (n = 12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
Curriculum be revised and implemented in true sense	11
There should be less formalities in curriculum development and revision process	10
There should be more faculty at the Dept.	10
The collaboration be initiated with schools and libraries in other regions	07
Assignment component has certain limitations	06
Assignments' evaluation process is not up to the mark	10

Interpretation

The majority of interviewees viewed most of the courses as redundant and old. They stressed revising course titles and contents. The revised curriculum should be implemented in letter and spirit. The curriculum development and revision process should be made simple by eliminating unnecessary formalities and involvement of various irrelevant bodies. It should be revised according to local market needs keeping in view the international standards. The curriculum of other Pakistani schools as well as of DE universities of developed countries may be consulted in this regard. The course details should be extensively practice based with more work in libraries and labs than theoretical readings. The faculty direly needs to be strengthened in quantity and quality with faculty development programs at national and foreign level. The collaborative programs with national formal institutions and foreign DE universities of

developed countries may be initiated. The allied reading material sent to the students is bulky and outdated. Standard textbooks should be used instead of compiled study material.

Regarding preparing assignment work and question papers, they are well set. The problem is on the part of students and evaluators. Most of the students lack English writing skills and remain unable to reproduce in their own words whatever they learn. The majority do not consult library for some extra material. The students from remote areas often fail in assignments of technical courses such as cataloguing, classification, automation, etc. Also, some evaluators do not check assignments carefully. Assignments should be more practice based and not merely theoretical. The students need to be exposed more to fieldwork.

Table 6. Library, Lab and Physical Facilities (n = 12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
Library material borrowing be allowed	12
Regional libraries be strengthened and connected through networks	11
Outreach library services be initiated	10
The LIS Department should have its own labs	10
Majority of students don't know the use of computers	08
Physical facilities are insufficient	12

Interpretation

Findings in this section show the poor state of needed facilities available to all stakeholders. AIOU library policy does not allow issuing of even a single book to regular students. Then, the regional libraries do not have needed resources and books. Students should be allowed to draw books and journals from any AIOU library, regional or central. For this purpose, the central and regional libraries may be networked and strengthened in resources to provide desired services.

There is severe shortage of physical facilities at the LIS Department. It does not own computer lab and uses PLA (Pakistan Library Association) Computer Training Center. The Center has already become obsolete with old P-2 computers while very few students have computing facility at home. More than 80% students have no email accounts and do not know how to use computer and Internet. The LIS Department should have its own latest computer lab at main campus with speedy Internet connection. Private computer labs may be hired in other cities. The students may be given loans to buy PCs for home use.

Furthermore, the Department does not have classroom, lecture hall, workshop venue, meeting room, etc. Even the rooms for the faculty, staff and storing accessories are insufficient. Therefore, the PLA Center is mostly used for tutorial classes and workshops. Sometimes the different conference halls of AIOU are used for the workshop when the number of students exceeds 40. The AIOU Regional Office Islamabad makes arrangements with different local schools and colleges for MLIS classes. These schools/colleges do not have properly equipped classrooms and students hardly develop any sense of belongingness to these places.

It was emphasized that properly equipped modern classrooms, conference hall, study rooms for students, and sufficient faculty rooms should be there in Islamabad and other cities.

Table 7. Internship and Comprehensive Viva Voce (n = 12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency

Internship is a good practice	11
Internship process be formalized and monitored	10
Internship exercise be weighed instead of just satisfactory report	07
Comprehensive viva-voce be coupled with comprehensive written exam	08

Interpretation

The internship is a good practice, but it is not monitored by LIS Department or tutors. Often, no attendance record of internees is maintained by libraries. The student(s) can manage to get satisfactory certificate from the head of library without going through it in real terms. Some library heads engage internees in paraprofessional tasks while others would allow doing a few tasks and disallow doing all tasks.

Hence, the internship and its evaluation system should properly be devised, monitored, and documented in collaboration with reputed libraries. Internship work should be graded also. Fifteen to thirty minutes' viva voce may not truly assess what the students have learnt in two years; therefore it should be coupled with comprehensive written examination.

Table 8. Examination and Assessment System (n = 12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
Examiners should be external instead of LIS faculty and tutors for maintaining impartiality	12
Students' answer sheets should be fictitiously numbered	11
Sufficient time be given to examiners for papers' evaluation	08
Evaluation of scripts be decentralized	09

Interpretation

The paper setting system is good, but the examination system has its own flaws. Often, the same tutor is examiner for that course too. This sometimes leads to favoritism developed during tutorial classes. Due to non-use of fictitious roll numbers of students on answer scripts they remain identifiable. Only the experienced and impartial external examiners should be appointed. Furthermore, the Examination Department sends answer sheets very late and gives very short time for their grading, thus, making fair evaluation very difficult. The evaluation of students' scripts may be decentralized at various nearby library schools. Appointment of examiners without any orientation also causes problems.

The analysis reveals that there are serious flaws in the assessment system which needs to be addressed.

Table 9. Comparison of Distance Learners with On-Campus Learners (n = 12)

Respondents' opinion	Frequency
The product of each library school is different	11
No uniformity among library schools	10
Quality of education of formal schools is better	08
Comparison of quality is not possible due to non-existence of accreditation body	04

Interpretation

The majority of experts view that every library school is producing students of different quality. There is lack of standardization in nomenclature of the departments, courses, scheme of studies, and programs/degrees, etc. All schools have different kinds of strengths and weaknesses. However, it was accepted by the majority of interviewees that the quality of formal system is better than DE due to more interaction between student & teacher and availability of other resources. A few respondents told that DE graduate is better than some contemporary programs of both public and private sectors. They further added that there is no accreditation body in Pakistan and no library school here is meeting international or all Higher Education Commission (HEC) standards. It was also found out by Ameen (2007). The comparison of this program and its students with other formal contemporaries may not be fair enough.

It is apparent that the majority favored formal MLIS while urging to tackle the problems of DE mode and bring it at par with good formal programs.

Summary of Findings

The experts largely agreed that regular, on-campus education is a better option. Nevertheless, DE is a good opportunity for different, deprived segments of society, however, to meet this aim with quality, certain prerequisites needs to be met.

The researchers themselves have a vast experience of teaching MLIS in both DE and on-campus universities. Their experience, observation as well as discussion with peers testifies that despite following open merit policy for admission, mostly admitted students in all library schools lack analytical and communication skills. It has been observed that LIS community criticizes AIOU DE system without knowing much about it. It is also a fact that none of the library schools in Pakistan is meeting international standards as set out by organizations like IFLA. Consequently, the comparison of quality amongst different schools' LIS education systems needs further extensive study before generalizing findings in this regard.

The findings show that DE program has following issues/weaknesses:
1. Non-compulsory attendance of students in tutorial classes.
2. Insufficient number of tutorial classes and workshop days.
3. Poor lab, library and physical facilities.
4. The lengthy procedure of curriculum development and revision.
5. Flaws in students' assessment system.
6. Insufficient faculty.
7. Lack of technology support in instruction methods.

Recommendations/Conclusions

In the light of above findings, following recommendations have been made for the prompt attention of all concerned quarters:

1. There should be at least 60% compulsory attendance of students in the tutorial classes of all skill-oriented courses, e.g. resource description and access, organization of information, computing and library automation, research project and fieldwork, etc. This compulsion should be for first three concept building classes and all practical sessions also. Those fresh graduates should be given preference in admission who can manage to attend classes regularly. There may be limited seat allocation (e.g. 20%) for old graduates.
2. Different modes of imparting instructions should be used for different type of courses. The tutorial classes should be three times more than present for practice based, skill oriented courses. The workshop component may be eliminated if the number of tutorial classes is enhanced with compulsory attendance.
3. The LIS Department should be equipped with all required physical facilities and resources. The libraries of AIOU may be networked and enriched with latest knowledge resources. Libraries

should also provide needed services, especially the outreach one. Regular hostel facility on economical charges should be provided for the students and resource persons from other cities during the tutorial classes, workshops, and examinations.

4. Reading/allied material needs to be updated using current textbooks. Furthermore, courses such as presentation and communication skills, ICT applications, organization of information, research project & fieldwork, and management &leadership skills may be given special attention.

5. The curriculum revision process should be made simple by eliminating unnecessary formalities/procedures.

6. Senior and competent external examiners may be appointed for fair assessment. Tutors should have fewer role in this process.

7. There should be more faculty positions in the Department (at least professor 1, associate professors 2, assistant professors 3, and lecturers 4). Extra faculty position of assistant professors may be created for the management of MLIS program in each region. The regional centers should also have the needed facilities.

8. Internet based interactive teaching along with TV & radio broadcasts and their recordings on DVD should be made available. The DE models of other successful library schools in the world should closely be observed.

To conclude, it may be stated that there are serious quality issues in the system of DE in Pakistan. It also becomes apparent that maintaining the desired quality of professional education in distance mode is even hard for developing countries like Pakistan and India; It is mainly due to the serious lack of needed ICT infrastructure, non-availability of competent human resources in sufficient number and poor quality student intake. Before offering such programs all universities in Pakistan, formal and nonformal, need to make sure meeting local and international standards.

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