

## The Comparative Study of Students Support Services of Payame Noor University of Iran, Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan and United Kingdom Open University

*M. Farajollahi and M. Moeni Kia*

Faculty Members of Payame Noor University, Iran

**Abstract:** The present research was done for the purpose of comparing students support services in Payame Noor University of Iran with those of United Kingdom Open University and Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan. Research method was Ex-post facto. Statistical universe of the research consisted of the students of Payame Noor University of Tehran Province who were at least the 3rd semester students in academic year 2008-2009, students of Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan and students of United Kingdom Open University. Using the appropriate taxonomic method, 1270 students were selected from Payame Noor University. Statistical sample size of United Kingdom Open University and Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan was 200 students from each one of them and they were selected randomly. Using the 50item and five-point questionnaire (Likert Scale) with reliability of  $\alpha = .93$  in Iran and  $\alpha = .87$  in United Kingdom Open University and Allama Iqbal Open University, data from the research was gathered electronically as well as in the form of printed and field questionnaire. Using analyze of variance, results showed that there were significantly differences among the three universities regarding the students support services ( $F_{(2, 1667)} = 28.1$  and  $P < 0.01$ ).

**Key words:** Comparative study • Students support services • Distance education • Distance learning

### INTRODUCTION

The terms distance learning, distance teaching, open learning are used interchangeably for distance education [1]. Distance education has become an integral part of the education process over the past many decades and is developing as a popular medium in promoting education. It is one of the solutions of educational problems and deficiencies for low income group, adult persons, remote individuals and employers. So the role of distance education is appreciable in the countries like Iran.

A planning and designing distance education course is a complex task that includes many factors [2]. Thus educators and planners need to consider these factors to provide their students with effective learning environments [3]. One of the most important of these factors is the students support services [2, 4-5].

Simpson defined a students support services as all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their

studies [6]. Tait divides the primary functions of students support services into three categories: cognitive, affective and systemic [7]. Distance learners have different prior learning experiences and have different learning styles and preferences and coping strategies. These differences are important and must be addressed to meet the learners, diverse needs and to improve the educational experience of distance learning [8]. So students' expectations of students support services are difficult to compare across culturally different countries and institutions. Because the students support services and models of distance delivery and educations depend on conditions, characteristics and culture of learners.

Choudhry *et al.* [9] studied students support services in Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU) and United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) comparatively. According to their study; components of students support services are: general services, regional office services, tutorial services, counseling services, media support services and library services.

United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) is the first distance education university in the world. For nearly 30 years the UKOU has been acknowledged as the leader in part time education and training through the method it successfully pioneered and developed. Allama Iqbal Open University is the pioneer institute of distance education in Asia [9]. Payame Noor University (PNU) is a distance Mega University in Iran. This university was established in 1987 and at present there are about 800 thousands of students in the PNU who study in the different sessions of almost 500 educational centers [10]. Some of the most significant educational characteristics of PNU are: using new educational technology, flexibility of curriculum, using embedded of educational approaches, preparing the scientific context for different subjects, centralized final exam, educational equipment and facilities in campuses, Learner support. Jumani and *et al.* believed that PNU is now grown up university among the higher education institutions of Iran and has an important component of distance education universities in the word [11].

Considering the history, ancient and successful of UKOU and the cultural, economic and social similarity between learners of AIOU and PNU, this study was based on the following objectives:

- To compare the students support services of PNU, AIOU and UKOU.
- To identify the problems in students support services in PNU based on the situation of AIOU and UKOU.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

*Method* used in this research is causative-comparative studies because it compares the situation of support services in three universities.

*Statistical universe* of the present research consisted of the students of centers and university branches of Payame Noor University of Tehran Province amounting to 133032 students who were at least the 3rd semester students in academic year 2008-2009. From among these students 1270 of them were selected using the appropriate taxonomic method and Cochran's formula. Next samples of the research have been from United Kingdom Open University and Allameh Iqbal Open University of Pakistan, 200 students from each of them.

*Instruments:* Data gathering took place in Iran using the 50item questionnaire of 5-option Likert Spectrum, that has been used by Chaudhri *et al.* [9] at UKOU and

AIOU with reliability of  $\alpha = .87$ . Reliability of this research, using chronbach's Alpha was calculated as  $\alpha = 0.93$  and its validity was gained as  $r = 0.71$  according to the correlative opinions of 7 referees. This questionnaire measures the students support services including 6-component: general services, official services, tutorial services, counseling services, media services and library services.

Data gathering method was in the form of both electronic and field and printed questionnaire. Gained data was analyzed using analyze of variance.

## RESULTS

Regarding the results from Table 1,  $F_{(2,1667)} = 28.1$  and  $P < 0.01$  showed that the rates of total students support services in Payame Noor University of Iran (PNU), Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan (AIOU) and United Kingdom Open University (UKOP) were significantly different from each other.

In comparing these services in target universities, using LSD test, results from Table 2, showed that students support services in PNU were significantly lower than those in UKOU ( $P < 0.01$ ), however, they bore no significant differences with students support services in AIOU ( $P > 0.05$ ).

**Comparing Components of Students Support Service in Target Universities:** According to results from Table 1, rate of general services  $F_{(2,1667)} = 56.3$ ; rate of official services  $F_{(2,1667)} = 38.24$ ; rate of tutoring services in face to face classes  $F_{(2,1667)} = 8.8$ ; rate of council services  $F_{(2,1667)} = 28.4$ ; rate of media services  $F_{(2,1667)} = 22.14$  and rate of library services  $F_{(2,1667)} = 33.1$  are significantly different from each other in target universities.

Table 2, shows the results from two by two comparisons of universities in dimensions of students support services, using LSD test. According to Table 2, rates of general services, council services and media services in Payame Noor University of Iran are significantly lower than those in UKOU and AIOU ( $P < 0.01$ ); rate of official services in PNU of Iran is significantly lower than the rate of official services in UKOU ( $P < 0.01$ ), however, it doesn't bear significant difference with that of AIOU ( $P > 0.05$ ). And finally, the rate of tutoring services in face to face classes and the rate of library services in PNU of Iran are significantly lower and higher than those of UKOU and AIOU, respectively.

Table 1: Compare of students support services among PNU, AIOU and UKOU

Factor	Source	S.S	df	MS	F	Sig.
General	Between groups	155.8	2	77.9	56.3	0
	Within group	2306.2	1667	1.4		
	Total	2462	1669			
Official	Between groups	123.3	2	61.6	38.3	0
	Within group	2687.1	1667	1.6		
	Total	2810.3	1669			
Tutorial	Between groups	26.1	2	13.1	8.8	0
	Within group	2480.7	1667	1.5		
	Total	2506.8	1669			
Counseling	Between groups	103.6	2	51.8	28.4	0
	Within group	3035.6	1667	1.8		
	Total	3139.2	1669			
Media	Between groups	73.6	2	36.8	22.1	0
	Within group	2780.1	1667	1.7		
	Total	2853.7	1669			
library	Between groups	110.6	2	55.3	33.1	0
	Within group	2788.9	1667	1.7		
	Total	2899.4	1669			
Total	Between groups	84.3	2	42.1	28.1	0
	Within group	2498.8	1667	1.5		
	Total	2583.1	1669			

Table 2: LSD test to compare the universities

University (I)	University (J)	Factor (service)	Mean difference (I-J)	Sig.
PNU	UKOU	Library	-0.74	0
			0.19	0.048
		General	-0.95	0
			-0.21	0.02
		Official	-0.82	0
			0.07	0.47
		Tutoring	-0.29	0.002
			0.022	0.02
	AIOU	Counseling	-0.76	0
			-0.24	0.021
		Media	-0.59	0
			-0.36	0
		Total	-0.7	0
			-0.6	0.54

## DISCUSSION

Students support service is among the most important components of designing and compiling the distance education courses [2, 4-5]. These services play an important part in effectiveness of learning [3], educational success [2], meeting the educational needs of learners [12] and their emotional affective needs [7]. Despite such importance of students support services, results from analysis showed that the situation of above said services in PNU of Iran is significantly more unfavorable than that of UKOU and AIOU and this, requires more and serious care if the objectives of distance education are to be realized in their complete and effective forms and students as independent learners are

to meet their educational and instructional needs [8]. In almost weakly justifying the students support services in PNU of Iran in comparison with UKOU and AIOU we can aloud to the fast quantitative growth of students of PNU of Iran during recent years [10, 11]. Quantitative growth of students during the recent years, has eliminated the opportunity for qualitative development of questions and has caused the population combination of this university to be closer to traditional universities [10], so that students of PNU of Iran, from the view point of psycho-social characteristics and traditional features have become similar to the students of ordinary universities and consequently they count on expectations from distance education similar to those from traditional one.

Results from the research showed that in comparison with UKOU and AIOU, the components of general services, official services, council services and media services in PNU of Iran were significantly more unfavorable. This is while general services, official services [3] and council services [13] are significant predictors for success of students of distance education and media services is the most basic factor for transmission of educational materials and contexts to the learners so that definition of distance education is based upon transmission of educational materials and contexts through technical media [14]. In clarifying this situation it can be said that general services, official services and council services are indicative of the customer oriented principle in instruction and at the present time in educational system of Iran, students aren't viewed as customers and text books as the main media to transfer training require reappraisal and the situation of communicative band width also causes the offline and online services to be offered together with some difficulties.

But, results from analysis showed that the rate of educational services in face to face classes and the rate of library services of PNU, despite the fact that they are lower than those of UKOU, are more favorable than those of UKOU. As mentioned before, regarding the fact that because of being away from instructional centers learners of distance education feel loneliness researchers and theorists believe that successful distance education systems, have in themselves an element of face to face tutoring [3, 4], so that Kubota *et al.* believe that face to face tutoring services meet the instructional educational and emotional difficulties of students and removes the probable communicative weakness in media [15]. Although results from the research Zandi *et al.* showed that face to face tutoring services in PNU is teacher oriented instead of being student oriented, this shows that such a situation needs basics acts to be taken and required instruction to be instructed to the teachers [16].

Besides the tutoring services, library services in PNU can also compensate for weakness in media services, because as researchers believe, in distance education, libraries are essential centers [17], however, more attention should be paid to offer services in their modern ways. Although at the present time as in Pakistan, library services in Iran are also offered in their traditional forms, in short it can be said that, regarding the services and success of UKOU in offering distance education [19] and socio-cultural similarity of AIOU with PNU of Iran [11]

and the importance of PNU of Iran in meeting educational difficulties of Iran [10], it is proposed to authorities to take the advantage of the experiments of these two universities and thereby making the ground ready for PNU of Iran to be promoted and providing educational success for students.

The time of doing the present research in three target universities can be alluded as one of its limitations so that data gathering at PNU took place after data gathering at two other universities and this may influence the results.

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