TEACHER EDUCATION FOR DISTANCE LEARNING BASED SPECIAL EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Special education is a mode of education in which specially designed instruction material and environment is required to meet the diverse requirements of children with special needs. In Pakistan, Open University (AIOU) exclusively initiated a program for teacher preparation for Special Children through distance learning. This was a unique program of its kind with no precedence of defined services for Special Teachers' Preparation. Dept of Special Education AIOU - through Distance learning system, offers study/training at graduate, masters and Ph. D. levels. Teachers are prepared in 6 specialized areas of Visual Impairment, Physical Disabilities, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Learning Disability and Inclusive Education. The Open University has a well established regional network, outreach system providing educational counseling and guiding services to its students. University has 32 regional campuses with 86 part-time regional coordinating officers throughout the country for providing assistance to the Regional campuses. Over 900 study centers are established during the semester and are managed through the university's regional campuses. Each student is assigned to a tutor who is a subject specialist. To maintain consistency of on and off campus observations, University faculty conducts reliability observations with adjunct Supervisors. Their professional growth impacts the quality of the teaching cadre. It was for the first time in the history of teacher training institutes of Pakistan that a teacher training program at Masters Level in the area of Special Education was offered through distance education. This paper gives the experiences, methodology and successes as outcome of the Distance-learning Special-Educator Program in Pakistan. Also highlighted is the Special Teacher Preparation Model through Distance Education System. Increased program completion rates support the fact that Open University faculty have become better distance educators, that more effective student support systems have been constructed, that distance education delivery methods and technologies have improved and the remote areas in Pakistan have become stronger partners in producing quality teachers.

Keywords: Teacher Education; distance learning; special education; persons with disability; hearing impairment; physical disabilities; intellectual disabilities; visual impairment; learning disabilities; inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

Education is regarded as the most essential element for human progress and prosperity. It aims at producing good behavior which normally covers the whole conduct of life, not merely punctuality, obedience, respect for elders and concern about the feelings of others but also the way in which a person lives, the part he plays in public life and spends his leisure time. Moreover, the essence of modern life is changed and education must look ahead and prepare the members of the state for an ever changing progressive and pragmatic world.

On the other hand the world population has reached its peak. Poverty has gripped the world to such an extent that every citizen has to start work at very young age. Even the parents force their children to be involved in early livelihood. Under such circumstances the major population is deprived of availing chance to be enrolled in schools and colleges.

In the present stage of our struggle for progress and advancement, the formal way of education has not proved to be of much help in eradicating illiteracy on a wider scale. To impart education on a wider scale, it is required to develop such an effective system in which learners don't have to go far away to get education, and secondly it should be financially affordable for the students. The demand for education in third world countries, through the formal system, has consistently run ahead of resources and the bulk of their population, therefore remains educationally deprived. The realization of the magnitude, complexity and pressure of the problem has led more and more countries to turn to distance education as one of the solution to the situation. consequently, distance education system is maturing rapidly from a field of study towards a discipline in its own right.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

The term distance education is a new term as an important mode of non-formal education. It denotes the form of study not led by teachers present in classrooms but supported by tutors (full time or part time) and an organization at a distance from the student. It is a generic term which includes, range of teaching and learning strategies referred as "Correspondence Education", "Independent Study" and "Distance Learning". Its main characteristic is that there is not a continuous and immediate supervision of tutor but there is planning, guidance and tuition through tutorial organization (Rashid, 1998). Distance education in wider term indicates the tangible distance between the learner and the teacher where the proceeds of teaching and learning is not confined within four walls of the classroom anymore. This mode of education with its potential of horizontal mobility transcends the barriers of time, space, sex, creed, community and religion.

Distance education is a planned and regular educational provision where there is a distance between teacher and student. It is a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes which is rationalized by the application of division of labor and organizational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, specially for the purpose or reproducing high quality teaching material which makes it possible to instruct great number of students at the same time. The major characteristics of distance education system are its high productivity, great flexibility and its capacity to respond to varying demands. It is a combination of effective use of mass media such as radio, television, and correspondence material, a variety of audio, visual aids, study centres and distant tutors. The success of distance education system largely depends on the effectiveness of its student support services. It refers to the help which a distant learner receives along with the learning materials. It has many forms i.e. face to face teaching, computer mediated communication, workshops, tutorials and counseling sessions. Students support services comprise of a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the learning processes easier and more interesting for the distant learner (Kranth & Carbajat, 2000, Willies, 2002). The services facilitate and strengthen the delivery system of distance education.

The structure and activities of these services are dependent upon:

> - **The infinite needs of clients**
> - **The educational ethos of the region and of the institution**
> - **Dispersal of the student, availability of resources and curriculum**
> - **Generic differences (extent of heterogeneity) of the target group**

Like most of the countries, problem of access to education in Pakistan is of great concern and distance education is found to be one of the modes to overcome these problems.

The Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan was established in 1974 as an entity to overcome the gap of required resources for education at all levels. The main objectives of the university are:

> - **to provide facilities for people who can not leave their homes and jobs in such manner as it may determine;**
> - **to provide such facilities to the masses for their educational uplift as it may determine;**
> - **to provide facilities for the training of teachers in such manner as it may determine;**
> - **to provide for instruction in such branches of learning technology or vocation as it may deem fit, and to make provision for research and for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge in such manner as it may determine;**
> - **to hold examinations and to award and confer degrees, diplomas, certificate and other academic distinctions.**

The programmes of the university are offered under its distance education system throughout the country. The regional campuses and study centres are established in a country-wide-net-work. Tutorial support are arranged for student at local level, through the study centres established in various educational institutes of formal system which is an example of the partnership nature of the university.

It is working hand in hand with government departments and agencies at all level as well as with a range of non-government agencies, both national and international, in carrying education and development forward throughout the country. The university has 32 regional campuses with 86 part-time regional coordinating offices throughout the country for providing assistance to the regional campuses. Over 900 study centres are established during a semester and are managed through the university's regional campuses and centres. Each student is assigned to a tutor who is a subject specialist. About 12500 tutors are appointed per semester. Tutor-student contact is arranged at study centres in the afternoon or weekly holidays. Regions also arrange workshops, practical and they also identify examination centres. (Vice-Chancellor's Report 2006-07)

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Special person is one who on account of congenital deformity, injury or disease is partially or wholly unable to pursue everyday human activity. He is deficient in education or skills for undertaking any gainful profession or employment. He may be classified as a person who is visually impaired or hearing impaired or physically handicapped or intellectually deficient.

The disability result in a variety of learning problems which require special educational arrangements by way of modified curriculum, special instructional strategies, use of special aids and equipment and specialist support for optimum learning and achievement. These arrangements for meeting the special needs constitute special education.The availability of reliable data plays a vital role for planning, developing and implementing the proposals and policies.

The two references regarding the population of persons with disabilities (PWD) are quoted in Pakistan. One based on the World Health Organization's (WHO, 1981) estimates the 10% of total population of developing countries suffers from some sort of disability. The other based on the national census 1998, which indicates a low estimate of 2.49% of the total population.

However, comparison of the two data creates doubts, which shows there is a dramatic decrease from 10% to 2.49% in disability rate in Pakistan.

Considering the 1998 census though having loop holes in the procedure for data collection, the population of persons with disability is as follows:

Table: 1
Population of Persons With Disabilities In Pakistan

Province	No. of disabled persons	Percentage
Punjab	1,826,623	2.48
Sindh	929,400	3.05
Balochistan	146,241	2.23
NWFP	3,75,448	2.12
Islamabad	8434	1.04
Northern Areas	21,705	2.46
AJK	80,333	2.70

2.49% of total population i.e. out of 150 million of population, 3.7 million is persons with disabilities.

Table: 2
Disability-Wise Percentage of [1]pwd According To Census 1998:

Physically Handicapped	19%
Intellectually Disabled & insane	14%
Multiple Disability	8%
Visually Impaired	8.6%
Hearing Impaired	7.40%
Others (not classified)	43%

Number of disabled persons category-wise (Census 1998) is shown below:

Table: 3
Category-Wise Distribution of [1]pwd (Census 1998)

Type	Male	Female	Total	%age
Physically Handicapped	382262	243523	625785	19%
Intellectually Disabled	254532	206506	461038	14%
Multiple Disabled	140285	130166	270451	8%
Visually Impaired	146039	119369	265408	8.6%
Hearing Impaired	138235	105448	243683	7.40%
Others Not Classified	857362	569438	1426800	43%
TOT	1918715	1374450	3293165	100%

Table: 4
Age-Wise Distribution of Disability (Census 1998)

Age	%age
Children under five who require some form of support, as will their familie	10.34%
Children aged 5-14 who require some form of special education	23.09%
Young people up to the age of 29 who will need further education, trainin and employment opportunities	23.98%
Disables Adults requiring other welfare support and assistance	25.15%
The disabled senior citizens requiring more special facilities.	16.56%

Self-reliance is the highest priority of all the nations. So contribution of every individual in economy for well being of the society is given prime importance. A country like Pakistan cannot ignore 3.7 million people to furnish their responsibility in nation building as productive useful members, who, either temporarily or permanently fall outside traditional norms due to disability. However, many of these individuals seek assistance from professionals who draw upon a specialized system of services directed at helping them to promote their abilities to enter more fully the mainstream of the society. To fulfill this purpose, institutions both in public and private sectors are contributing tremendously. The institutions working for education, training and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities are given below:

Table: 5
Special Institutions, Students And Teachers

Organizer		Categories					Total
		[1]HI	[2]MR	[3]PH	[4]VI	Multiple	
[5]F.G	Institutes	13	12	11	11	---	47
	Teacher	110	54	61	52	---	277
	Students	1054	656	576	562	---	2748

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[1] Hearing Impairment
[2] Mental Retardation
[3] Physical Handicap
[4] Visual Impairment
[5] Federal Government

[6]P. G.	Institutes	37	04	04	23	114	182
	Teacher	395	34	26	182	164	801
	Students	4286	314	261	857	1560	7278
[7]N G O	Institutes	29	39	27	28	32	155
	Teacher	303	191	102	98	299	993
	Students	2717	1741	610	790	3440	9298
Grand Total		Institutes 384		Teachers 2071		Students 19324	

Purpose of the Study

The study was undertaken to highlight the experiences, methodology and successes as outcome of the Distance- learning Special-Educator Program in Pakistan. Also highlighted is the Special Teacher Preparation Model through Distance Education System through the document analysis.

The department of Special Education at Allama Iqbal Open University was established in 1985 in response to the desperate need of trained staff to provide services to special people.

The objectives of the teacher training programme are:

> ➢ to acquaint the teachers of special children with latest curricula, teaching methodologies and teaching techniques with research oriented skills
> ➢ to meet country's increasing demand of trained/specialized personnel in special education at all levels of teaching to policy making
> ➢ to develop attitude and behavior appropriate for special education personnel to enable them to meet individual student's and group needs.

Through distance education, currently department is preparing teachers in six specialized areas i.e. visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, learning disabilities and inclusive education. The programmes and course outlines are closely aligned to the international standards of teachers preparations for special needs and gone through the university statutory bodies for approval before launch.

The department prepares special teachers with critical thinking skills and experimental base necessary to undertake professional positions in a variety of clinical, educational and other related settings. The emphasis of courses offered by the department is also on the training of regular teacher who will play a vital role in dealing with inclusion of children in regular schools – the ultimate Goal of Special Education. The objectives of these courses are to give special teacher:

> ➢ An understanding of exceptionality
> ➢ An appreciation of the impact of disability upon an individual
> ➢ Attitudes and skills in the areas of assessment, instruction and management
> ➢ Knowledge of relevant research and literature
> ➢ An understanding of community based rehabilitation (CBR) as a goal of Special Education

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[6] Provincial Government
[7] Non-government Organization

Table: 6
Presently, following programmes are being offered
for special teacher preparation through distance education.

Degree	Entry Qualification	Requirement (Credit Hour)	Study Period
M.A	B.A (14 years of schooling)	60	4 Semester
M.Ed	B.Ed. (14 years of schooling + year of teacher training degree	36	3 Semester

All courses of special education are offered on semester basis. Each academic year spans on two semesters i.e. spring and autumn.

Core Courses

● Educational Psychology	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
● Perspective of Special Education	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
● Handicapped Person in the Community	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
● Foundation of Education	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
● Educational Research	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
● Curriculum Development & Instruction	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
● Teaching Students with Special Educational Needs	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
● Community Based Rehabilitation	Full Credit (6 Credit Hours)
● Organization and Management of Special Schools	Full Credit (6 Credit Hours)

Areas of Specialization

➢ Communication Disorders	Hearing Impairment Including
○ Hearing Impairment	General Introduction to the Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
○ Development	Psychology of Deafness and Child Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
○	Speech and Hearing
○	Audiology and Audiometry Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
➢	Intellectual Disabilities
○ Mentally Retarded Full Credit	Introduction & Assessment of (6 Credit Hours)

Children

○ Children	Education of Mentally Retarded Full Credit (6 Credit Hours)
➢	Physical Handicaps Including

Health Impairments

o	Physical Handicaps
o	Educational Adaptation for
Children with	Full Credit (6 Credit Hours)

Physical Disabilities

➢	Visual Impairment Including Low
Vision	
o	Braille System Practical Course in
Urdu and	Full Credit (6 Credit Hours)
English	
o	Independence Training for
Visually Handicapped	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours
o	Special Education for the Visually
Handicapped	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
➢	Learning Disability
o	An Introduction to Learning
Disabilities	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
o	Characteristics of Students with
Learning	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
Disabilities	
o	Learning Disabilities: Assessing
Individual's	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
Strengths and Struggles	
o	Intervention Approaches for
Students with	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
Learning Disabilities	
➢	Inclusive Education
o	Perspectives of Inclusive
Education	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
o	Inclusive Education: Adaptations
in Curriculum,	Full Credit (6 Credit Hours)
Instructions & Evaluation	
o	School Improvement for
Inclusive Education	Half Credit (3 Credit Hours)
➢	Practical Teaching

Teaching Methodology

Methods of instruction combines the salient features of distance education and face-to-face contact between student and teacher. The correspondence phase of each course last approximately 16-18 weeks which includes study of course material, preparation of assignments, and training workshops.

Teaching by correspondence

The course material which includes, study guides and allied material based on the contents of the courses are sent to the students through mailing package to their respective places.

These packages also contain any audio-video support on the contents of the course, for the topic which had been declared significant for audio-video preparation by the course development team. The study package also includes the assignment question paper along with a schedule of doing these home-based assignments.

Each student is allocated a tutor for each course independently, nearest to his/her home. These tutors are subject specialists and cater the needs of the students on the tutorial meetings or whenever they other-wise require.

Tutor-student meeting (tutorial) schedule is formally prepared at the centre i.e. the main campus of Allama Iqbal Open University, and is dispatched to both the tutors and the students. As a general rule there is one tutor for every 33 students for each course.

But this number does vary according to the need and requirement of the course, student and the region to which the student belong.

Students do the assignments and the corresponding tutor grade the students according to his/her performance and understanding of that particular topic or course. This is called continuous assessment which is ultimately included in the final assessment of the trainee-teacher.

Assignment

Student are required to do four assignments for each full credit course and two assignments for each half credit course over the span of one semester. Each full credit course comprises of 18 units while each half credit course comprise 9 unit. A unit is a write-up format of distance education corresponding to the chapter of a text book. A unit require 10-12 hours of study in a week.

Workshop

After successful completion of assignments, a group training workshop is organized for students of each course. These workshops are scheduled on brain – storming sessions, presentations on the course contents by the students and group discussions among students and course-coordinators. The workshop co-ordinator evaluate the students performance.

Final Examination

A final examination is held at the end of the semester in the prescribed centres which are generally near the student's home.

Practical training

Practical training of special teacher to be, enhances the professional skills by interacting with special children. The student teachers are required to do 8 weeks training of teaching the special children under the supervision of a senior teacher. Each trainee teacher is allocated a special school to conduct this training.

Generally a special school near their homes is allocated to them for this purpose so that they don't have to leave their residences and yet achieve objectives of their studies, which is a basic theme and spirit of distance education.

Again their practical training of teaching to special children is evaluated by the senior tutors of that particular subject.

Table: 7
The final evaluation of the trainee teachers comprises
the results of assignments, workshop performance and final examination.

YEAR-WISE, ENROLMENT DATA OF STUDENTS OF MA/MED. SPECIAL EDUCATION SINCE FIRST
PRESENTATION TO 2005-06

Year/Semester	Enrolment	Appeared	Passed	Dropped out	Passed %	Dropped out %
1987 to 1990-91	**220**	**127**	**113**	**14**	**89**	**11**
1991-92	**630**	**244**	**200**	**44**	**82**	**18**
1992-93	**287**	**198**	**170**	**28**	**86**	**14**
1993-94	**897**	**312**	**210**	**102**	**67**	**33**
1994-95	**1543**	**797**	**613**	**184**	**77**	**23**
1995-96	**1703**	**1043**	**838**	**205**	**80**	**20**
1996-97	**1847**	**1086**	**943**	**143**	**87**	**13**
1997-98	**2071**	**1114**	**1035**	**79**	**93**	**7**
1998-99	**1836**	**1191**	**982**	**209**	**82**	**18**
1999-2000	**1851**	**781**	**583**	**198**	**75**	**25**
2000-2001	**866**	**570**	**460**	**110**	**81**	**19**
2001-02	**598**	**430**	**370**	**60**	**86**	**14**
2002-03	**802**	**424**	**369**	**55**	**87**	**13**
2004-05	**3481**	**2414**	**2131**	**283**	**88**	**12**
2005-06	**8375**	**6452**	**5481**	**971**	**85**	**15**
Total	**27007**	**17183**	**14498**	**2685**	**84**	**16**

Source: Research &Evaluation Centre, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad.

CONCLUSION

> ➢ **The increasing enrolment in the programmes reveals its popularity and success which may be due to its convenience for the masses to undertake it. Its students don't have to leave their places, jobs and other responsibilities as required by the formal system.**
> ➢ **Distance education is a potential mode of disseminating knowledge and skill to meet the diverse need of the population who require specialized curriculum, instructional strategies, equipment and resource/full time teachers, as this system has the capacity to make bulk production of teachers keeping the quality of programme at the same time.**
> ➢ **Distance education is cost effective as compare to the formal system of education as its students may continue work and earn money still getting themselves educated and trained for a specialized field. On job teaching personnel also undertake this programme to acquaint themselves with the latest pedagogy.**
> ➢ **Urban and rural population get equal opportunities to get themselves educated at all levels.**
> ➢ **The dropout ratio to enrolment is significant.**

Issues for consideration

- Although internationally non-categorical teacher preparation is appreciated and we are still preparing special teachers in the specialized area (i.e. visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities and inclusive education). The reason being that in Pakistan, general education and special education are still dealt as two separate entities and work under the umbrella of separate ministries. The government and non-government organizations have open institutes on the basis of specific exceptionalities. Moreover, job opportunities for special teachers come up on the same specific categorical trainings. This makes one of the major reasons for universities and teacher training institutes to prepare teachers for specialized area of exceptionalities. Although globally integrated teacher trainings are in vogue.

- Although the distance education of Allama Iqbal Open University is very well developed and based mostly on utilizing the provisions existing in the surrounding of the students but still we face some issues in disseminating the services in most of the areas of the country. As Pakistan is an agriculture based country, most of the population dwell in rural or under developed areas. These areas are trapped by their remoteness, lack of transport links and face many other problems of social and cultural contexts which keep them far from accessibility. This results not only in low enrolment and more dropouts but also hatch hindrances in providing appropriate student support services and organizing proper practical teacher trainings. However, Allama Iqbal Open University is playing its role not only in creating awareness but disseminating knowledge and skills to every possible nook and corner of the country and prepares personnel for special education to meet the diverse need of the country.

- As the distance education system is quite flexible due to its non-discriminatory spirit and theme, in terms of time and age, its student may stretch the study period according to his/her availability, convenience and domestic as well as professional responsibilities. This discontinuity delays the completion of the programme within its stipulated period and sometimes creates a gap in the practical implementation of the knowledge gained and   requirement of that particular discipline in the field, with the fast growing advancement in all disciplines of education and technology.

Challenges and Threats

There has been a worldwide movement to include the marginalized children in the general education stream (World Education Forum, 2000, UNESCO, 2003, Bernard, A. 2000). Children with disabilities constitute a major portion of this marginalized population who too often do not benefit from such global initiatives and are rejected by the general education stream. The teacher training curriculum for general education system does not contain the necessary content which can acquaint its teachers with special educational needs in terms of adaptations in the curriculum, instructional strategies, child-friendly accessible classrooms and environment. The instructional strategies and classroom environments are mostly teacher-centered and based on rote learning methodologies at school level.

The movement on Inclusive Education acknowledges that all children can learn and enables education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children which includes children with disabilities and all the other marginalized population, in a single system of education.

It is quite difficult to find such schools at the moment as the movement of creating Inclusive schools has not taken up its momentum substantially. So a big challenge of organizing the teaching practice is being foreseen for those trainee teachers who opt to specialize in the area of "Inclusive Education" which is a fresh launch of the department through distance education system.

At Allama Iqbal Open University special teacher preparation is taking place through distance education, however there are many other special teacher preparation institutes which prepare teachers through formal education system. There is a need to conduct a comparative study on the performance of special teachers been trained by the two systems. The findings of such study would highlight the strengths and weaknesses of distance and formal systems in the preparation of special educators.

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