

## STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT IN ACADEMICS MATTERS: AN EVALUATION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU) Islamabad, examination papers checking evaluation was targeted by the current research. The Constructive philosophical world view was taken as the base with the addition of qualitative approach by applying two interview protocols as research instrument. The sample of the study comprised 31 paper evaluators and 6 administrative members of examination department. The process through which the selection of paper evaluators was brought under discussion during the interviews and it came to light that the actual process was defective. As a result, the checking was below standards due to numerous problems including qualification of evaluators, experience, and number of papers per day to be checked, time frame to check the papers, seating arrangement and check and balance. A system of quality assurance for the solution of the problem used by ... the system adopted by the Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education was suggested in order to overcome the issue with convenience.)*

**Keywords:** Examination, assessment, paper checking, open & distance learning

### INTRODUCTION

According to Khan (2006), the current examination system does not fulfill the requirement of checking the real abilities hidden among the students. It is an observed fact by now in general that many of the rote-learning based material tests pave way of getting good grades on the part of those who have just committed to memory the bookish information and not the creative side of the student.

Many of the institutions running on the name of education only produce good graders in most of the instances. They have acquired a belief in having prestige in getting good grades as suggested by Rehmani (2003), goodwill and getting a hollow honour has become an object of attraction for most of the schools, colleges and universities. The teaching has been turned into something which tests the students and not specifically their actual learning. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2009), the examinations tests the competencies of the students in certain specialized areas and stress on review process of the whole system on periodic stages. It is stressed by the Ministry of Education (2006) to make sure the implementation of both formative and summative assessments as well teacher has to provide effective feedback whenever asked.

Ensuring the importance of tests, Khan (1996) as well critically analyzed the reasons for decline in standards of the examination system in deciding the students' actual academic worth (p. 6). As well highlighted by the same researcher "design and content" of the test is such that it only attracts the memorized part of the learning ignoring other important parameters thus producing bad effects especially upon "syllabi and teaching practice" (p. 6).

These views were supported by Khan (1996) and cited in the work of Imran (1998) and they added other important parameters of reliability and validity of the test before going to be administered.

Enlightened by the ideas, Ali (1994) said tests are found to be devoid of teaching component and are thought to be something other than the learning and teaching (as cited in Imran, 1998, p.6). Test or exam demands for its standardization to be valid as well as reliable in some crucial aspects like 'curriculum, selection of paper setters, marking system and results', Rehmani (2003) suggested such (p.3). On the flip side, similar ideas were presented by SPELT (1996) supplementing that exams are conducted in books that are supposed to be learnt and reproduced the way they are given in the books no less no more (p. 12). The problem as pointed out by these researchers have led Shan and Saleem in (2010) to conclude that the examination system in Pakistan is based upon 'rote learning' or 'memorization' that resulted in passivism on the part of our students as they don't long to be creative because the current testing system demand them to be crammers in order to get higher grades. The exams in most of the instances, evaluate the students' surface knowledge and not in-depth learning to evaluative, synthetic or analytical levels (Khan, 1995).

### **ASSESSMENT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

In any educational system, the value of assessment is inevitable and the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is no exception. This aspect of educational endeavor is in need of continuous nourishment in terms of updating the skills of those who are involved in the whole process. According to Stefani (1998), both assessment criteria and the comprehension of the learning material are mandatory in order to carry out the assessment task. In the absence of these prerequisites, the dream of quality education cannot be realized as that of 2015 being targeted to be achieved by the government agencies (Peraton, Hilary, Creed, Charlotte, Robinson, Bernadette, 2002). Social change via quality education has become the point of attention for many nations around the world because these countries have set for their corresponding nations some goals that obviously created some demands on their part to be fulfilled. Suggested and elaborated by Peraton et al (2002) these demands of basic education for all, for democracy, peace and social mobility. Also some other demanding parameters include multi-grade teaching to be applied in classrooms, overhauling of the current practices in check and balance and their immediate rehabilitation. It is a commonly observed phenomenon that though society on the one hand wants to improve the quality but it is seen practically that the most resisting areas are those of evaluation and assessment (Morris et al, 2000).

The assessment must be based on some pre-defined criterion. The traditional stress on being fair and impartial has now been criticized with the advent of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) in the ODL as compared to the annual or semester exams being conducted in traditional educational institutions (Morris et al, 1999; Young, 2001 & Biggs, 1998). These academic institutions serve the consumers or students in the light of their up gradation or promotion to next classes and final degree-awarding via examination of typical kind; in short they are to the core of the system (Pong & Chew, 2002; Morrison and Tong, 2002). This can't be denied now in the current examination system that it is bulked with examinations and this has necessitated the urgency of implementing certain changes that may reduce the adverse outcomes that it was yielding in the past (Cheng, 1999). In this connection, the efforts being made by Nigerian government are noteworthy because of the reformation of their system in terms of learning, teaching, assessment and evaluation. It was initiated under the government act in education sector under the heading 'learning to learn' reform. There is obviously a need for developing the capability of the individuals to perform the task of assessment and evaluation effectively. (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Fullan, 1999) This has made

the focus of the paper at the challenges, prospects and the mandatory skills faced by the practitioners in this field. The role of educational evaluation cannot be denied in achieving the educational goals.

In this connection, the current research study was designed in order to evaluate the evaluation process being carried out at the postgraduate level, AIOU. The paper focused on three widely applied approaches to the evaluation process i.e. goal-oriented, decision-oriented, and the responsive or naturalistic approaches. Madaus, Stufflebeam, and Scriven, (1983) discussed the three approaches and decided the three differ only in their mode of inquiry. The Goal-oriented approach is the one that already decides the criteria for evaluating the performance of the students while the decision-oriented approach were meant to make up the deficiencies made by the goal-oriented approaches and on the other hand, the naturalistic or responsive approaches were designed to expand the width and depth of the evaluation and assessment process like each and every side of the educational program being evaluated or assessed.

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION**

The main aim of distance learning system is to acquire knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes (Kirschner, Valcke & Sluijsmans, 1999). It is highly elastic way of delivering the teacher learning process and interactive as suggested by Bates (1995) that the distance mode brings the way of its own interaction as it is collaborative and open in nature in order to equip the communities within the greater society via the use information communication technologies (ICTs). In the opinion of Wilson (2002), distance education is the mode of teaching and learning applying the use of technologies, interaction, material taught and the utilization of human resources. The distance education occurs when there is a difference either in time or space or in both at the same time between the sender and the receiver, along with a large variety of delivery modes including for instance, correspondence, broadcast like the use of television or radios, teleconferencing, computers via internet (Conceicao, 2006). All these various modes and means of sending and receiving has led Dabbagh (2004) to elaborate that this is actually a deliberate and conscious arrangement of all the available resources being used differently for the sake of communication among the masses. All these activities and sources are used to achieve the common goal of education. These means, methods, and ways of giving and taking exhibit a large scale flexibility, as suggested and forwarded by King and his colleagues (2002), that these various kinds of modes making the plethora of information communication technologies are applied and used in such a way that the educational goals being set by the distance and open learning providers, in terms of personal and professional goals which are set by the individuals for themselves.

There is no need of a student to set in the classroom by himself or herself physically as suggested by Walker (2005) that the teacher or instructor does not necessarily to be present at the same time and place in a classroom. Pearson and Trinidad (2005) spotted out the various objectives that the distance and open learning carries with it; like the supported learning, blended learning means when the traditional face-to-face is mixed with online learning or purely online learning and teaching via the use of internet. In this regard, the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is offering the services of distance education through different means and sources for instance, television broadcasts, letter correspondence via post offices, internet locally inside Pakistan as well as the students is provided these services abroad. Walker (2005) found that this will increase pressure on the instructors instructing the students. The distance learning is actually based upon the sharing of ideas, thoughts and points of view and thus paves way for the development of learning (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). In other terms simply distance education need person to person interaction and that is between the teacher and the students (Walker & Fraser, 2005). These reasons as proposed by Perraton

(1991:1), are those which are felt more including meeting requirements of the people, reasonable prices or affordable education, no age limits and one can learn at any stage of life, and those individuals who are on job and don't have access to the formal education, they may join the distance education in order to increase their professional qualification.

The far-off located person can get education without any discrimination and the like each and every individual within the borders or across the borders of that country can achieve the degree or diploma of his or her choice from the ease of his or her work place and home because the way the distance education providers use include cassettes, books, CDs etc and which can be applied for this purpose quite easily (Wardani, 2001, p.1). Chaudhry (2002) found AIOU as one of the biggest educational universities across the whole world educating millions of students annually. The university has a slogan of 'continuing education and education for all'. The main aim of the university is to provide education to all the citizens of Pakistan without any discrimination or difference of color, creed, caste or religion via its special mode of lesson delivery i.e. television broadcasts, cassettes, CDs, books, or other programs with a variety of activities being carried out by various regional centers of AIOU across the whole country.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As the study was qualitative in nature and used constructivist philosophical world view. The aim was to evaluate the evaluation system of AIOU at postgraduate level with a sample of 31 paper evaluators and six administrators from the department of examinations. The data was collected by applying convenient samplings techniques and two interviews. The interviews focused the core issues related to evaluation and assessment; selection process of evaluators, academic qualifications of the evaluators, number of papers that can be checked per day and per evaluator, seating arrangements, and check and balance system. The researcher collected the data in personal capacity with the application of content analysis techniques.

## **FINDINGS BASED ON COMMENTS OF PAPER EVALUATORS**

### **Criteria of Evaluators**

A special pro-forma came under discussion to be used in order to select the paper evaluators. This document contains information like the academic and professional qualification of the prospective evaluator, as well the experience details where the individual has served, the place where he or she lives with the necessary credentials.

### **Selection of Evaluators**

The selection of an exam evaluator is carried out via a pro-forma which is given to everyone who is interested in most general terms but in specific the selection of evaluators is carried through personal relations and reference. Some groups of individuals are so influential that have more access to the administrative cadre and get the required evaluators appointed as per their choice.

### **Years of Experience**

One of the selection criteria is to have five years of experience being gained after completing the master degree on the part of the evaluators. This rule is violated at large because with the strong powerful group, this does not matter and the privileged candidates are selected quite easily by the authoritative officers without looking at their minimum qualifications.

### **No. of Papers to be Evaluated per Day**

The selected evaluators are allowed to check 40 papers in one session or sitting. This activity takes hardly one or one and a half hour of the individuals concerned. Besides this those who work in two sessions i.e. morning and evening are sanctioned to check 80 papers.

### **Seating Arrangements for Paper Evaluators**

This part of the whole evaluation process is as well not up to the mark because the seating arrangement conducted by the university does not fulfill the required physical needs where the examiners may check the paper with ease, in relaxed conditions and satisfaction. These conditions do not let the evaluators to work satisfactorily.

### **Check and Balance System of Quality Assurance**

Regarding the check and balance system for quality assurance, the university does not seem serious in checking the papers of the students properly. Most of the evaluators are not concerned with quality of the papers being checked. They just carry on marking the papers with tick mark. In some cases, due to negligence and carelessness, the examiners paste the marks in wrong places. Even the head examiner is not careful enough to see whether the papers have been checked properly. The only thing they are found interested is to put their signature in the prescribed documentary locations.

## **FINDINGS BASED ON COMMENTS OF ADMINISTRATORS**

The administration presented their point of view regarding the importance of having a strict pro-forma for the selection of adequate and qualified paper evaluators for the mandatory task of assessment. At present the university is devoid of a system to verify their awarded degrees for their health and originality. The universities with respect to the checking of papers are in demand of talented, experienced and expert exam evaluators every time they conduct examinations. It is the compulsion of the universities to have strong friendly relations with these experts in order to carry out these important duties but at the same time it's also true that these relations are sometimes misused and those evaluators are selected for evaluation that they are not able to perform the important task properly. In a nutshell, these experts are responsible for the documentary evidence of the whole examiners and their subordinates.

It is among the duties of the university to hire paper evaluators with a minimum of five years teaching experience right after they completed their master degree in a relevant subject. Another requirement is about the number of papers that can be checked within a single shift i.e. 40. It was found that after distributing the paper bundles equally among the test checkers, the required was violated i.e. more than 40 to 50 papers per checker. The groups were allowed to work properly in double shifts morning from 09:00 – 01: pm and evening from 02:00 – 5:30 pm.

As per the seating arrangement is concerned, the university has a separate building for this purpose and collectively 500 seats were arranged in various locations within the premises. The available furniture was wrongly used. The participants complained about the broken chairs which are not affordable for the university to arrange every year they evaluate.

The main responsibility lies with the head of the examination department to ensure proper evaluative practices being carried out within the checking rooms. The head has to make it sure that the sub-examiners are checking their papers in an adequate way. For this sake, randomly papers are checked from various checkers. It is important because the head has to stand before the committee for answering any objection being raised after the result.

## CONCLUSIONS

A pro-forma was developed for the selection of paper evaluators. In this regard, the process of selection was found at faults i.e. the selection of head examiner and sub-examiners. It came to light those who have reference with the administration, they were preferred and the rest were left. It is good that an individual paper checker is allowed to check 40 papers per session but in practice, it was not properly implemented due to lapses in the check and balance system of the paper evaluation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made;

1. It is recommended that the bio-data of each evaluator may be saved for later. The selection should be careful.
2. The head examiners must be made responsible in case of the hiring an unqualified sub examiners.
3. The experience should be relevant to evaluation and not mere the years. Those teachers who deliver lecture, conduct workshops and teach in classrooms should be preferred because they can do it in better way.
4. It is recommended that different questions of the paper may be allotted to different checkers and it should be ensured that only the assigned sub-examiner is doing it. This way the process can be standardized.

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