



Information Needs and Seeking Behavior of Distance Learning University Students of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Information is a major element for development of human society. Human being is able to get power with the help of thinking and decision making and ultimately ruling the universe, but it is possible only if he is empowered with information. Information also provides center for growth of knowledge and a basic key for improvement of society. This study was carried out to find out the information needs and information seeking behavior of distance learning university students. A focus group was arranged in this regard. There were nine members in a focus group. There were three tutors currently teaching, one representative of university and four students enrolled in post graduate programme at different levels. The duration of the session was 120 minutes. The author and coauthors of the study conducted the focus group themselves. The environment of discussion was very pleasant. Majority members of focus group were agreed that the main information needs and seeking behaviour were related to "Lectures", "Information relating to their programs of study", and "Completing assignments". The internet and library were the main channels for meeting the information needs of both groups of students; however the usage of the library was infrequent. It was also concluded that among different information sources available to the students, the main reliance was on books and lecturers/tutors, but the usage of electronic resources such as e-journals and databases was very low; there was no significance difference between the groups in their usage. The participants agreed that print format was their preferred format for the required information. Computer and information technology skills were insufficient. The majority of the participants of the group opined that distance students face barriers when attempting to acquire their needed information. The main barriers were lack of institution library for distance students.

KEYWORDS: Information need seeking Behaviour, Distance Learner, Barriers in distance Learning

1 INTRODUCTION

Information is a major element for development of human society. Human being is able to get power with the help of thinking and decision making and ultimately ruling the universe, but it is possible only if he is empowered with information. Information also provides center for growth of knowledge and a basic key for improvement of society.

The present era is called the "information era". Information has become the most important resource for improvement of the society. To thrive in this modern era, one needs a variety of information, no matter how well versed one is in a field or profession (Tahir, Mahmood, & Shafique, 2008). The Pakistan National Education Policy document recognized the significance of information and noted:

The future belongs to countries whose people make the most productive use of information, knowledge and technology. Knowledge has become the most important economic resource. Knowledge and information will be the engines to drive the country in the 21st century. (National Education Policy, 1998-2010).

Acknowledging the significance of information in national development, it is pointed out that "it is not an accident that the developed nations are those in which information products and services have been brought into being and are widely exploited, first in conventional forms and late through computer intervention" (Wasserman, 1991).

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Information seeking behavior and distance education: Many universities are offering distance learning education programs for students over the world. Distance education and open learning is not a very old system of education as compared with conventional on-campus education system. It came in practice since 19th century. However, a number of improvements have been come forth with distance education system in last 2 centuries and still improvement efforts are going on with this system. The most significant and robust improvements have come in last few decades with the development of information and communication technologies.

On-Campus students filling their information needs from their own institution but there is need attention for distance learning student because their institute provides them print and electronic materials for readings, writing assignment and preparation for final examination, that what is their actual or real information need, from where they fill their information need and what is their seeking behavior and which channel they use for their searching information need. Adequate information about information need and seeking behavior of distance learning students is helpful and essential for their administration in development the resources, course content, services and facilities to students especially in developing countries like Pakistan.

(Josiah, 2007) stated that information seeking behavior is the way of individual's for meeting and selecting the sources of information for personal use, knowledge growth and development. Information seeking behaviors consider an important research area. The aim of this study is to explore information needs of distance learning students of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) students enrolled in management science department at different levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been a series of studies conducted regarding open education system, and information seeking behavior of distance learning students. (Ahmad, 2004) stated that distance education getting fame day-by-day and spreading over the world. That's mode of study usually without direct face-to-face interactions and for making this education system more beneficial and qualitative it is important that quality library services should provide. In 2003 a study found that distance students were following the same trends that had been experiential in the traditional student population; namely, that "part-time students' usage patterns have changed and now favor the use of electronic resources (the Internet, in particular) and also mirror trends observed in traditional student behavior toward libraries and library resources in many important respects." In this study of distance education student search behavior, (Kelley & Orr, 2003) also noted that, "the technologies may change but, at the same time, students overwhelmingly prefer to have instruction delivered in a format that is accessible off-campus and offers them flexibility in when they receive instruction."

(Bremner, 2001) conduct a research on "Meeting the information needs of distance learners-The open university's response" survey determined more than half of the students who had used other information were obtaining it using public libraries and a third of the students in the survey overall had used the public library to obtain materials, or as a silence place to study. Only 15% of OU students had used academic libraries, partly because they were unaware that the majority of UK academic libraries can used for reference purposes for free by students at other institutions. Many students facing difficulties in finding a library that had a good collection of relevant materials, and better access to other academic libraries would help in this regard, but the OU Library realizes that arranging borrowing rights for OU students at other institutions is problematic.

Rationale of the Study: Pakistan is a highly populated lower income country struggling with huge poverty, which creates lots of confusion in the social, political and economic environment. To survive with the present economic backwardness and to avoid prospective fears of severe socio-economic crisis, it needs a big push toward better socio-economic performance of the country, which is not possible without improving the human capital position of the country.

Distance learning system of education has become an important method of teaching and learning around the globed. Open learning can play vital role in improving education of working peoples and female who are having problems in getting formal educational degrees. However, it is very important to study their information needs and their ways to fulfill such needs. This study will help to explore information needs and seeking behavior of management science students of AIOU.

Objectives of the Study: The focus of this study is distance learning students of AIOU enrolled in management science department. The main objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the information needs and seeking behavior of the masters class students of AIOU.
2. To analyze the information sources preferred and information channels used by the distance learning students in finding out their required information.
3. To examine the methods employed by the distance learning students in finding their required information.
4. To find out the major constraints and challenges being faced by distance learning students.

Research Design: The study is based on qualitative approach. In this study a survey method will be used. A focus group was arranged in this regard. There were nine members in a focus group. There were three tutors currently teaching, one representative of university and four students enrolled in post graduate programme at different levels. The duration of the session was 120 minutes. The author and coauthors of the study conducted the focus group themselves. This method is more feasible to complete the study as it is less time consuming and economical for a scattered population.

Delimitations: The study will be limited to masters and research students enrolled in Allama Iqbal Open University, Lahore campus. Undergraduate students have not been included in the study.

FINDINGS

Kind of Information: The participants agreed that the main kinds of information required to the students for their educational and information needs were lectures and other face to face discussion. Therefore it is clear to judge that lectures are the main source of information continuously required to the students. Course books, other books, previous lectures notes and other kinds of information are also other information sources required by them.

Main information needs: The discussion also concluded that the main information needs of both always were "Information on course of study". Distance students ubiquitously require information about their concerned course, followed by information on career development, job opportunities, scholarships of further education and opportunities of further education.

Purpose of seeking information: A question was put to the students to find out the purpose of seeking information. The majority shared that they seek information for "Preparation of exams", followed by "Completing assignment", for "Updating knowledge", "Solving problem at hand" and only some students for "Entertainment" respectively.

Preferred language: In the questionnaire a question was presented to find out the preferred language of both types of students to acquire the needed information. It was found that majority of the students preferred information in English language. Some students also mentioned Urdu for getting the required information.

Preferred information channel. Respondents were asked to indicate the information channel that they mostly consult while confronting an information need. Results showed that the majority of students consult "internet" as the primary information channel, followed by "library", and "Book store". They also consult their tutors and knowledgeable persons in the field.

Methods of getting information: It was found from the discussion that the majority of students showed that "Visit to Library Personally", followed by "Calling the Library", and "Other" methods such as asking their friend or family members.

Problems and Barriers of regular and distance students: The study result showed that most of distance students did not opt for material not being available, library staff is not competent, lack of digital resource in the institution library, lack of internet facility in the library, lack of library guidance and orientation. It was observed that distance students face problems regarding their own institute library.

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