

Setting Quality Guidelines In E-Learning (A Learner Support Perspective)

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Abstract

Purpose/Objectives: The idea of the distance learning was traced to provide the educational opportunities to those who were unable to approach the conventional institution and it getting started as the rapid development of information communication technology and changes of the economic and social structure was observed. The recent researches have proven the strength of distance learning when the study results were significantly increased through technology assisted instruction especially by adopting the integrated learning systems known as blended teaching but it should also be kept in mind that the benefits of e-learning can be only obtained if all educational resources are well designed and embedded within rich learning atmosphere.

Methods/Analysis: To incorporate the customer perspective in designing e-learning solutions a qualitative study was conducted. By using the 'purposeful sampling technique' 10 participants were selected from the Virtual University of Pakistan for in-depth interviews. The resultant transcripts were analyzed through NVivo 12.

Findings: A learning environment can only be enriched if the support services provided to students are fulfilling the demand of student and requirement of study. It was found that Virtual University learning environment is missing important services which are known as life blood of support services like face to face tutoring, library services, retention programs for unsuccessful students, student placement cell and academic counseling. It is suggested if the missing services are not made available to students in near future, the need for e-learning will diminish and google generation in Pakistan will not be in a position to take advantage of information communication technology.

Introduction

The Virtual University of Pakistan was established in 2002 on modern communication system within the aim of meeting the growing need of social and economic structure. For imparting the knowledge it uses different instructional tools like audio and video tutorials, reading material, video lectures and e-class rooms. For the assessment and evaluation purpose it follows the policies and practices of conventional higher education institutions. Virtual University is providing 180 campuses as lab facility to its students all over the country. The mission statement clearly describes that the main objective of the institution is becoming a pioneer institution of e-learning and to provide affordable education at the door step.

This Research examines the inclusion of student support services offered to the students of Virtual University. The University focuses particularly on learning experiences of e-learners. The study explores how e-learners perceived studying in e-learning environment, how they experience e-learning and how they consider the nature of learning environment at study time.

The distinct nature of e-learning is that, the learners and instructors are usually separated through time and space, on the contrary to the conventional system and the only mode of interaction is via e-mail and moderated discussion board. Martin, Wang, and Sadaf (2020) explicate e-learning as:

“Forms of organized learning which are based on, and seek to overcome, the physical separation of learners and those (other than the learners themselves) involved in the organization of their learning. This separation may apply to the whole learning process or only to certain stages or elements of it. Some face-to-face contact may occur, but its function will be to supplement or reinforce the predominantly distant interaction. A good deal of private study will typically be expected of the student”

E-learning is different in many aspects from the traditional educational practices where interaction is face to face and administration is present to reply promptly. Roopnarinesingh and Whiteman (2020) State that e learning has unique nature of troubles in contrast to traditional educational set up. Firstly, the curriculum development, its presentation and evaluation is entirely different from traditional set up and when interactive elements used to communicate the teaching material for e-learners are insufficient according to the emerging needs of students which ultimate has negative influence in the flow of learning process. Secondly, e-learners belong to diverse age groups, previous learning experience, geographic areas, culture and traditions that is why it is very important to formulate such policies for rich learning environment which can collectively enhance the “motivation of students” for their success (Worrell, 2020). Thirdly, the complexities of E learning encountered by e-learners may be invisible due to student and teacher distance; instructors are required to follow the standard operating procedure which are provided as institutional guidelines by the administration (Sohrabi, Vanani, & Iraj, 2019). Due to less interaction and communication, e-learners’ needs and requirements are under-addressed. While designing the teaching material the instructors follow the institutional policies with perceived needs of e-

learners, when the perceived curriculum is delivered to student the questions regarding the expectations of students arise (Livengood & Anderson, 2019). Finally, relationship between student and teacher and peer contacts are on temporary bases and limited (Baker, Unni, Kerr-Sims, & Marquis, 2020). Due to the dynamic approach of e-learning, there is continuous improvement requirement in strategies, approaches and processes (Tanis, 2020). Similarly, due to speedy, continuous improvement and availability of communication methods, the gap between the instructors and e-learners has been bridged.

The most debatable aspect of e-learning is for those students who are completing their education are entering professional life (Eden, Latorre, & Chen, 2020). When the name of the institution does not appear in the list of accredited organization then it comes in mind that may be this institution does not meet the academic guidelines set out by the Higher Education Department (Milakovich & Wise, 2019). It is the responsibility of state departments to check a learning institution's academic excellence. It also means that e-learning institution which is not included in the list of accredited institutions has underperformed. The low academic quality can pose problems when an e-learner pursues to change or transfer credits from one institute to others, completes his/her education and is in search for a job and feels a sense of inferiority among those who graduated from accredited institutions (Thorne, 2019). Another shortcoming to e-learning is that it can be difficult for individuals who are not mainly self-driven.

Setting quality guidelines in student support services is very important for the recognition of e learning in Pakistan. In present research, minimum set of quality determinants are required to be proposed for e learning in higher education in the context of student support services in Pakistan because the student support services play an important role in e learning success by retaining the e-learner and controlling dropouts. There are several studies that have highlighted the quality enhancement of student support services by establishing "bench marks" as valuable methods of performance evaluation (Trespacios & Lowenthal, 2019). The need to propose the minimum set of quality determinants with reference to student support services is observed for the very first time because the pioneer public e-learning University of Pakistan (Virtual University) is continuously failing in achieving desirable higher education ranking for availing accreditation even after 18 years of its inception. An effort is needed to bring the University from transitional phase. The emerging dimensions of student support services will help the "Directorate of distance learning working under Higher Education Commission of Pakistan" to set performance evaluation determinants separately for e learning (currently not available).

The research objectives which guided the study are as follows:

1. To explore the students' perceptions about the importance and position of their participation in support services considered as indicator of success.
2. To explore the important factors which can be set as elements of intensive quality determinants for self-study?

3. To explore the relationship between minimum quality determinants for support services and controlling student dropouts.
4. To develop a preliminary conceptual model linking the student support services as minimum set of quality factors or determinants to student retentions in degree programs in such a way which can pull the e-learning institution from transitional to developing phase.

Literature Review

In this highly competitive world and the age of the survival of the fittest, educational institutions are now well aware of the significance of improvement in the first year of learning experience which can be beneficial in enhancing the student satisfaction and retention (Ali & Mohammad, 2019). This implies that educational institutions need to work continuously to improve the quality of their services in order to survive in the competitive world. In this regard, Richardson, Sheeks, Waller, and Lemoine (2020) indicate that numerous determinants and practices have been created to evaluate and promote the quality in distance learning with expansion of online teaching. The main fields that are open to improvement are; orientation, library resources, computing and technology resources, career placement, communication, learning support and communication as primary need for retaining students (Walton & Fowler, 2020). Fowler and Watson (2020) worked on benchmarking for online education learning and revealed that it is a learning process, which requires trust, understanding, selecting and adapting good practices in order to improve (Lew, Nelson, Shen, & Ong, 2020).

In another study, Vytasek, Patzak, and Winne (2020) use the term customer focus in “Education Criteria for Performance Excellence” and suggested the idea about the improvement of quality of educational institutions especially online and distance education. Similarly, Lee, Steer, Jimenez, King, and Erikson (2020) state that no doubt a lot of work has been done in formulating the regulatory frameworks for quality assurance yet there is a need to develop sufficient common ground to formulate some general characteristics on scholarly approach in distance learning (p.305). Students support was selected as one of the services as an indicator of quality in online teaching on the basis of preliminary evidence in empirical work by Williams and Glisson (2020). Some other authors have also used the concept of support for both the learners and instructors in slightly different ways as; “support” for student services, (Gupta, Loiacono, Dutchak, and Thatcher (2019), “learner support”(Fields, 2019), “tutor support” (Saha & Cutting, 2019) “student support”(Lambert, 2020) Lange and Costley (2020) agree that the learner support services and accessibility of students at desirable levels are two important points among eight broad determinants. Hanif (2019) published 24 criteria as benchmarks to encourage the policy work on post-secondary education among which the “student support services” is at seven number. Similarly Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter, and Kerres (2020) published best practices for online learning and among them “student support services” are included in five institutional level activities among 27 principals across 51 activities. The learning support system and institutional structures should be designed in such a way which could be appropriate for meeting

the diverse needs of heterogeneous learners. Maulana et al. (2020) indicate that the students who are busy and can't give more time in educational institutions than their class mates faced specific issues and it is very important that alternative approaches must be utilized such as email, mentoring, collaborative learning groups and peer groups along with proper academic advising which can contribute to enhance the learning environment of distance learning students. Keeping in view the limited resources of an institution, some of the institutes are trying to improve their support services by recognizing the heterogeneity of learners' intake.

Talking about the need of constant help required by the students, Seo and Um (2019), state that the students get frustrated and confused quickly if they feel that they are not sufficiently provided the platform where they can communicate face to face with faculty and assessed throughout the course. They further indicate that communication and interaction among the students via team discussion board and student groups have been identified as important and unique aspects of online learning. Similarly, Cummings (2019) indicates that theoretical and technical richness in e-learning are fundamental to organization, he further demonstrates that learners' support services in e-learning can be easily identified and analyzed by developing the grid of headings using clusters of tools such as integration phase, help desk, information phase, guidance phase, learning phase, registration phase and final result phase.

While making strategies for addressing the issues of student retention, Jamil and Isiaq (2019) maintain that the admission policies such as course specific orientations, preferred entry courses at initial level, entry test to advanced level courses, proper guidance and screening from beginning must be closely monitored. It is also desirable that institution must ensure that learners are not inclined towards a level of learning which they cannot properly manage. It is also viewed that issues of work load, extensive and broad course boundaries being taught in limited period of time and manageability of different study programs are main factors that may lead the students towards dropouts. It is suggested that issues of work load should be re-examined and realistic demands should be placed on the learner in such a manner that it may not affect the learning outcomes of the program.

The main purpose of the Cognitive apprenticeship theory is to promote the culture of sharing knowledge among the learners for better understanding by interacting with each other (Benjamin, 2020). It is also evaluated that by including student-student interaction, teacher-student interaction and proper use of appropriate teaching material in e-learning, similar learning outcomes can be achieved as in the conventional education mode. Stergiopoulos (2020) determines that in order to retain the e-learners there is a need to use blended teaching in any form. Now it is clear that interaction with new e-learners through face to face teaching in the start of their degree program and course specific orientation played very important role in retaining the students of distance learning. Dealing with the initial anxieties of students through different sources, it must also be ensured that courses must be selected by the student with proper care. It is also observed that face

to face teaching is a motivator for e-learners whether they avail this facility or not. In case of blended learning, face to face teaching helps the students in enhancing their sense of confidence and protection among e-learners.

Similarly talking about blended learning, Krise Jr (2020) maintains that students report that they miss blended teaching especially face to face meetings. He also finds that blended teaching especially face to face teaching is the most motivating and satisfying factor in e-learning. (Weismann, 2020) suggests that absence of the face to face contact with the tutors and other students is found as the greatest element of attrition in e-learning program. McGhee (2020) confirms that stronger sense of community is observed in the students of blended education rather than traditional and fully e-learning setup.

Austin and Hunter (2020) determine that students rated e-learning less highly than conventional system and revealed that they learn and earn more respect in conventional system. The validity of the educational process is guaranteed through the structure of interpersonal-communication and response from students in distance learning (Boice (2020). In accreditation process of e-learning courses, student support services, degrees, training certifications for different studies play crucial role. Face to face meetings is life blood of e-learning system which provides facility to arrange online or face to face consultation in meeting the learning objectives of student support services. Self-assessment is an online facility through which the students can check their learning progress during the semester and the results of these activities are not included in their final grade. It provides the exam confidence to students and help them to continue their studies. In his study, Stephen (2020) found that 90% of the students of Open University of United Kingdom want to interact with other students due to the demand of time and place prevalent in the learners' adult lives. Tutor support, student guidance through advising activities, counseling support, effective information and administrative processes provide a range of services that played important role in reinforcing the student self-esteem, sense of confidence and progress.

Research Propositions

Proposition 1: Student expectations for successful degree program have significant relationship with the perceptions of the tutors in understanding the needs for fulfilling the core educational expectations.

Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) consider the student expectations as an important factor in designing the student support services in e-learning. These may include past knowledge, work, mode of education, strong communication with institution and reputation of institute and which turn into expectations of student from institute. He further states that all these expectations should be internalized as set of quality guidelines for their success and retention in institute. In their study the top three student expectations highlighted by Canty et al. (2020) are strong

communication, immediate response and satisfaction in teaching material which have strong association to needs identified by tutors working on curriculum development and delivery modes.

Proposition 2: Tutors perceived that the needs of the students are expressed by delivery of curricular activities like course contents and its delivery styles, mode of communications which are significantly associated with the student's perception regarding rich learning environment. Asún, Chivite, and Romero (2020) agree that tutors perceived the needs of the student because they follow the institutional guidelines normally known as standard operating procedure. The institutional policies mainly cover the contents of performance evaluation determinants published by Higher Education Commission and if these performance evaluation determinants are not regularly compared and changed with the emerging dimensions of e-learning then it will become impossible to deliver the tutoring services according to student perception regarding the rich learning environment. Winterer, Froyd, Borrego, Martin, and Foster (2020) suggest that the importance of scaffolding for learning is an important factor for bridging the gap between tutors' perception regarding the needs of students and perception of e-learners regarding rich learning environment.

Proposition 3: The delivery of Institution's role meeting the expectation of the student by providing curricular and extra curricular activities is strongly associated with student perception of rich learning environment.

Addressing this proposition, Richardson et al. (2020) indicate that numerous determinants and practices have created to evaluate and promote the quality in distance learning with expansion of online teaching. They suggest advising, orientation, library resources, computing and technology resources, career placement, communication, learning support and communication not only with tutor but also with administration as primary need for retaining students in e-learning. If the delivery of curricular and non-curricular activities is learner oriented, it will be helpful for students to retain and successfully complete their degree program.

Proposition 4: Student perception regarding the reputation and image of institute has strong association with the quality evaluation for student support services done at the institutional as well as national level.

In support of this, Fernandez and Burnett (2020) state that accreditation is a process in which certification, authority, or credibility is presented. Accreditation aims to evaluate whether an institution is credible enough to be accredited and to ensure that the institution meets the quality and determinants, builds confidence, helps customers (students) to identify acceptable institutions for enrolment, quality graduates for certificate examinations, change of self-evaluations and self-improving. And to engage stakeholders in evaluation processes for certificate examinations, change of self-evaluations and self-improving and to engage stakeholders in evaluation processes.

Research Design

Philosophy of Research the Student as a Reflective and Participatory System Designer

John Dewey brought the idea of participatory learning approach. It is considered that e-learning can produce better results, if the provider or supplier and the e-learner “co-produce value” working on parallel grounds. There are two types of participatory learning, one is offline and other is online. The success of e-learning is to create a platform of study for the students who due to time, cost, culture, geographic and demographic constraints could not continue their education via the traditional mode of learning (Odunaike, Olugbara, & Ojo, 2013). This platform provided them with the opportunity of furthering their education without these obstacles. Different researchers worked on e-learning and are of the point of view that it is participatory approach which can help this mode of education to spread the objectives to learning community (Islam, Beer, & Slack, 2015). The role of instructors or lecturers in e-learning is different as compared to conventional educational institution; here they have to act as a connector or facilitator along with teaching (Islam et al., 2015). Tutors are responsible to provide material related to course, advise, listen, motivate, guide and advise the e-learners. Tutors also try to use such teaching techniques, which motivate the students to participate in learning, give them feedback and discuss the overall performance in their course (Pereira, Dias, Carvalho, & Noronha, 2021).

This research clarified the issues related to student participation in student support services by proposing critical determinants which can be used as minimum set of quality guidelines to help the students in satisfying with their mode of education and complete their degree program instead dropping out. So, this is an exploratory research which contributed in theoretical development of emerging dimensions in student support services.

Population and Sample Frame

The population of the interest for this study consisted of students of a public university of Pakistan that has adopted the virtual mode of education.

Sample Size

The suitable number of participants for qualitative study is ten or less according to Cresswell (2006). In-depth interviews were conducted and each session lasted for two hours. The perception regarding rich learning environment and expectations of e-learners were analyzed in interviews based with a number of [n=10] having e-learning experience.

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed for this study. The main feature of this mode of data collection is that it allows more discussion and deep in sights than traditional structured interviewing and reflects the importance of co-creation between the researcher and interviewee. The interview protocol was designed according to the expectations of e-learners regarding the

student support services and their perception in getting their services from e-learning institute. The matrix coding of the results is presented in the figure below:

Matrix Coding Result												
No. of Student	Academic Advising	Academic Counselors	Course Contents	Course Delivery Modes	Face to Face Tutoring	Grading System	Impact of Orientation programme	Lab Support	Library Support	Retentions Programme	L: Technological Support	
1: Student	1	1	1	2	4	6	3	1	4	3	1	
2: Student	1	1	1	2	5	5	2	1	4	2	1	
3: Student	1	1	1	2	5	6	2	1	4	3	1	
4: Student	1	1	1	1	4	2	2	1	3	3	1	
5: Student	1	2	1	1	7	5	2	1	3	1	1	
6: Student	1	1	1	1	8	6	2	1	2	3	1	
7: Student	1	2	2	1	3	3	1	0	3	2	1	
8: Student	1	1	1	1	3	6	2	1	3	2	1	
9: Student	1	2	1	2	4	3	3	2	4	3	2	
10: Student	1	2	1	1	5	4	4	1	4	2	1	
Total	10	14	11	14	48	46	23	10	34	26	19	

Figure2: matrix coding result from NVivo 12 plus

Graphical Representation of Matrix Coding Result

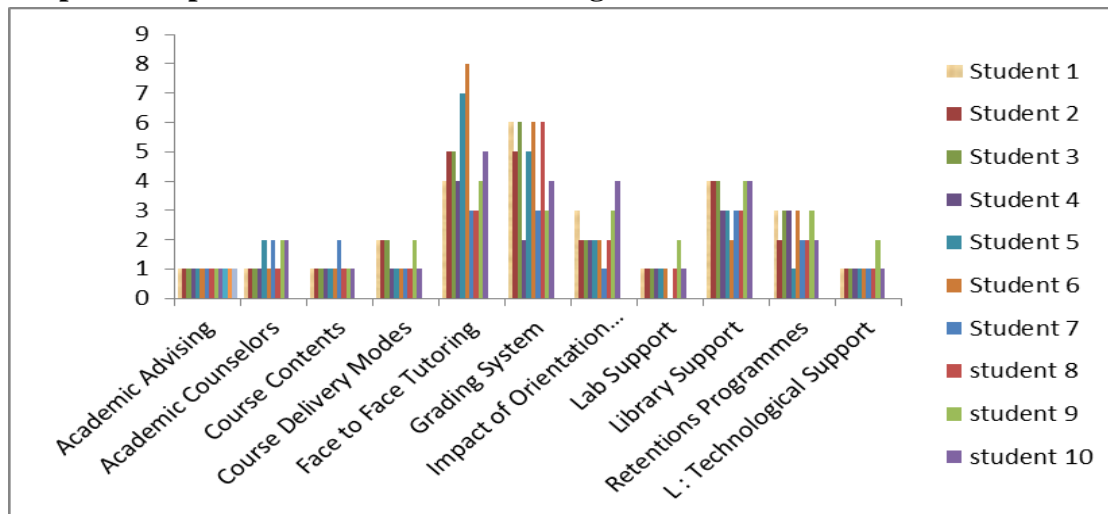


Figure 3: Graphical representation of matrix coding table

The initial analyses focused on students' expectations keeping their past learning experiences in mind, their perceived support services and expectations of e-learning environment. Eleven main themes namely; academic advising, academic counselors, course contents, course delivery modes, Face to Face tutoring, grading system, impact of orientation program, lab support, library support, retentions program, technological support were identified and their relative strength were extracted by using matrix coding query (Botelho, Gao, & Bhuyan, 2020). The results of the research were presented in chart and matrix forms.

Data Analyses

The data collected from interviews were analysed by using qualitative software NVivo QSR Qualitative Solutions and Research Software; 12 plus Version while the phenomenological procedure (Deng & Zhu, 2020) was followed. The interviewees' responses were transcribed and rechecked then entered into rich text word files and uploaded in NVivo (Shiny, Karthikeyan, & Barman, 2020). These were complete transcription files from interviews. After importing word files in NVivo, word files were converted into series of case nodes by using coding facility of NVivo. The expectations of e-learners regarding rich learning environment, their perceptions, Ideas, previous learning experiences and concepts about the student support services which reflected the questions asked in interviews, their themes and objectives of research were embedded using coding facility of NVivo. The coding facility helped in organizing data into respective themes so all the data can be sorted, grouped and retrieved more appropriately whenever required (Shiny et al., 2020). The nodes were refined and main themes became more apparent when the data analyses progressed through iterative process. As more data was grouped, more node categories developed in hierarchical layers.

Interpretation of Themes and Topics Extracted from Study

Gaps identified in theoretical frame work and themes identified using qualitative software helped us in locating the areas which need more understanding with respect to student support services. In order to understand the expectation of e-learners for completing the degree program and perceptions of students resulted in creating dissatisfaction regarding e-learning quality. In the analysis the dissatisfaction expressed by the students were on the poor quality of services which means student expectations regarding rich learning environment were not met. It was also found that there is a gap between tutors' perceived needs of students and students' perception along with it administration is not delivering the services which were actually required by e-learners. Ultimately, when institute services to support students were not e-learner oriented, it affected student retention rates which reduced the speed of development and hindered the performance evaluation of the institution required for accreditation purpose.

Related to e-learning and supportive services for the learners, this study examined several propositions which are discussed one by one below:

Proposition 1: Student expectations for successful degree program have significant relationship with the perceptions of the tutors in understanding the needs for fulfilling the core educational expectations.

Communication Gap between Student and Tutor

Communication between tutor and student is very important due to the difference in time zones and geographical distances. Two way communications help the learner in fulfilling his or her expectation and student may benefit by initiating the discussion for learning purpose. A variety of means are used for interaction purposes which definitely vary on the basis of their effectiveness and purpose of use. In Virtual University tutor controlled communication is in practice which does

not fulfill the requirements of interaction between tutors and the students. Many students feel difficulty with respect to their e-learning experience in first semester and they want to interact with their tutors but the denial of this facility creates dissatisfaction and students feel helpless to keep up with distance learning.

It is suggested that the university should at least provide telephone and skype facility for one year and by allocating at least 2 hours on alternate days so students can interact with the tutors.

Student – Student Interaction

Peer interaction plays very important role in the cognitive development of e-learners. Student to student networks help the e-learners in combating the sense of isolation and loneliness. It was found that the university is not providing official services of peer support except for those students who are regular and on-campus students but not those who do not join campus due to their tight job schedule, living in remote areas, cultural barriers for female students. During interview sessions a student shared her experiences.

“university management should realize the importance of collaborative learning and assigning the students to their same course groups ... because when student failed to approach tutor due to controlled communication system he or she must want someone with whom useful discussion or issues being faced in learning can be discussed... a week ago, a student of business studies came on campus and asked if there is anybody from management studies but he didn't find any other and got disappointed and never joined campus ... so my point to tell you that students come on campuses and find their course or class fellow to cooperate with each other in studies ... university should realize the importance of students needs and rights”

Another student gave her point of view and said:

“I am student of mass communication and look! here there is no student of mass communication except me, I want many things to discuss with my tutor but unfortunately I have no sufficient access to them ... I am thinking I should leave this university because the subject which I am studying needs proper attention along with exposure ... last week I sent my assignment and tutor marked it zero, when I asked he replied that the contents of the solution were not asked ... I tried my best to do it ... here is nobody to whom I can first discuss the given assignment and then solve to achieve good grades. .

It is suggested that administration should understand the rights and important services to be provided to students. They must form student forums, blogs or chat groups which can be made on the basis of semester or course.

Obsolete Courses

The interviews also revealed that there are many courses which have become obsolete especially the courses of computer sciences, taxation management courses. The students of the university are feeling difficulty in attaining latest information.

Lack of Moral Support

Due to the non-availability of important services which are required for retention, the students are getting disappointed and many a times they have requested in “Survey Form” received from university that they are feeling difficulty in continuing their studies but all in vein. There are many students who are not satisfied by text based communication and are not good in studies. These students need moral support and encouragement from their tutors along with other services which can enhance their motivation towards studies by giving them training of “How student can become Self Driven in distance learning.”

Insufficient Teacher Guidance

Due to limited interactive services in the university, the role of the tutors is not like “mentor” as found in conventional system. Similarly due to the lack of understanding and interaction, students do not feel confident in discussing personal, occupational and situational problems with their tutor as they experienced in the past or even if they asked, they did not receive a satisfactory solution. It is very important to understand that the e-learning institution should take such measures through which the expectation of the students and perception of the tutors regarding student needs should be relatively comparable in order to access the quality evaluation of e-learning. Due to the common maturity level of the students and the level of degree program, the tutors of this institution had high expectations and perceived mature needs from e-learners. Second important point is that this institution follows the policies for preparing the student guidelines which are provided by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan time to time. Perceived needs of tutors and actual or ground realities of student needs is a great challenge for the tutors.

Proposition 2: Tutors perceived that the needs of the students are expressed by delivery of curricular activities like course contents and its delivery styles, mode of communications which are significantly associated with the student’s perception regarding rich learning environment

Face to Face Tutoring

Students get frustrated and confused quickly if they felt that they are not sufficiently provided the platform where they can communicate face to face with faculty and assessed throughout the course. It is also observed that face to face teaching is a motivator for e-learners whether they avail this facility or not. No doubt face to face teaching helps the students in enhancing their sense of confidence and protection among other e-learners. Loderer, Pekrun, and Plass (2020) suggest that absence of the face to face contact with the tutors and other students is found to be the greatest element of attrition in e-learning program.

“No ... seniors are providing and trying to help at their own to juniors but only in computer sciences subject and that’s all ... I am a student of management sciences I extremely feel the need to contact my tutor on campus so I can perform in studies better than at present situation (Student)

“No, face to face contacts are not available at this moment in my campus which is required for desirable results I am in 5th semester, there is a group of seniors who provide their services to students in computer science subjects ... I just come here to take their guidance but now they are leaving because they have completed their studies ... I don't know what I will do ... today I have sent an email about our needs regarding face to face education to management but I know nothing will be done in this regard” (Student).

It is strongly suggested that Virtual University should work on providing blended learning. Study conducted on this campus has also cleared and justified that it is the requirement of students that they be provided blended teaching if the institution wants to retain students and control dropouts. They must have to find ways of integrating and orienting the face to face service for the upcoming e-learners on priority basis. Along with this service, the tutors will also be able to identify whether the student has selected course according to his or her capacity.

Subject related Seminars, workshops and training Program

Student's sense of isolation and loneliness can be decreased if the institution arranges different workshops, seminars and training programs. It is also suggested that the organized workshops and seminars should be on varied topics. Introduction of these type of activities will enhance the young students' interest, increase their exposure, satisfaction on quality services and support their sense of uniqueness.

Orientation

Orientation is considered as a primary need of the student. “The New Student Orientation” should include a variety of workshops and activities to address the needs of incoming students, including campus tours, opportunities to meet faculty and staff, numerous campus resource presentations, and other social events. The existing orientation program of the university is not sufficient for all types of students. There is a need of specific orientation related to different services that are in demand. Course specific orientation is very important to be developed. All orientation programs should be designed to ensure that students are familiar with the available resources and tools in the learning environment.

Improving Grade Curves

The Virtual University has adopted “Grading Curve” in 2013 According to prior approval of Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and the students seem satisfied with it. According to one of the Student's point of view:

“I am so happy that university has changed its grading curve because this system is very difficult for us and due to previous grading scheme lots of students have left university ... now this grading system is more justified but the curve will foster unhealthy competition ... change in marking scheme has a positive effect in retaining the students in university ... I am observing that the number of students in my campus is also increasing” (Student).

Another student maintained that this is system will prove good for retention of students in the university. According to him:

“The Higher education Commission of Pakistan has given different methods to assess the student performance and it is now up to the choice of the institution whatever it considers appropriate for its system ... I think relative grading curve is more appropriate in distance learning Justified. One of the drawbacks to this grading system is that students who perform slightly above or below the average can often miss out on a better grade...now university is getting benefit and I told my friends about it who have left it due to poor grades they got in first semester ... they are willing to join and want to complete their education”

“Yes, University has opportunity to retain new admissions because many students join university but when they start getting lectures they don't understand the method of education which is totally different from other modes of education ... in our education system maximum students have no skill of self – learning which is the most desirable skill required in distance learning ... when they can't perform well and get bad grades they left it So if they succeed in getting even ‘B’ grade instead of ‘C’ they will definitely stay”

It was observed that no doubt students are very happy after the amendment in the grade curves yet the consequences of its application will not benefit the students. It is suggested that rather than just changing the grading system, the administration of the institution should provide complete set of services as required by this mode of education.

Retention Program for Unsuccessful Candidates

Students' affiliation and connection with institute and interaction with institute system, faculty and personnel have significant positive relation with student satisfaction and their success.

What Student of Virtual University says about the retention program?

“No, we are not provided ... many of my friends got disappointed and left the university after the announcement of first semester result. I strongly believe that confidence is enhanced when distance students have access to resources that are available to on-campus students such as tutors or study programs, are offered instruction in time management and stress management, and participate in orientation sessions offering direct contact with the instructor. We should also have facility to approach the tutor and it is observed that successful tele-class learners spend more than double the amount of student-initiated contact time with their instructor than unsuccessful ones”

Similarly, another student states:

“No I am a student of computer sciences and in my degree program the university has provided us different supplement material which can improve our understanding but they didn't provide us a platform which can be declared as retention services program... three of my friends left the institute when they couldn't pass their courses”

The orientation program for upcoming students is considered as one of the most effective tool to connect the student with organization. It also effects the e-learner imagination to

which he or she joined the University. It is also a time when student should come to know about how to take further steps in order to move forward and what is a straight road to their career with the help of teachers telling student how they can take maximum benefit from not only from faculty but also from institutional resources. The practical exposure is very helpful for the new students because in telling them about how they can move forward and leave all ambiguities behind because that are usually in the mind of thinker are not physically apparent. Conversation regarding rules and regulation and their impact on students' smooth activities also brings the concept of pro-active approach.

Proposition 3: The delivery of Institution's role meeting the expectation of the student by providing curricular and extra curricular activities is strongly associated with student perception of rich learning environment.

Accreditation and Ranking Problems

The Higher Education Commission has not devised a consolidated and specific institutional policy for student support services in e-learning. The guidelines for student support services along with its procedures especially at the commencement of e-learning should be issued at the level of individual disciplines/faculties. The pioneer e-learning institute in Pakistan, Virtual University was established on 2002. Since then it is working without providing "key performance measures" important for its operations and quality evaluation. It is suggested that "Higher Education Commission of Pakistan" should work on these guidelines. The students feel dissatisfied and embarrassed and said that:

"We are much dissatisfied with the University effortswhen we didn't find my University name in Higher Education ranking this year..." (Student)

"I felt so embarrassed this year, even after 12 years of its inception it has failed in recognition from accreditation counsel"

"I often felt sense of inferiority when mess created after the issuance of HEC ranking in social media"

Proposition 4: Student perception regarding the reputation and image of institute has strong association with the quality evaluation for student support services done in institutional level as well as national level.

As discussed above, student gave comments on their expectations of rich learning, perceptions about student support services and their experiences during study in Virtual University. It is suggested that administration of Virtual University should thoroughly understand the requirements of e-learners and their importance of implementation especially for accreditation purpose.

Findings of the Study:

On the basis of student responses from interviews it was found that commencement policies lack some important features in the Virtual University and these policies must be redesigned in order

to retain its students. It was also found that there is a need to formulate key performance measures for student support services.

The first year of experience of e-learning plays an important role in developing a sense of self driven learning which should be completely assisted by tutor's help. It should be the responsibility of the tutor to ensure the element of active participation of students in e-learning environment by dividing the students in small groups from the very beginning so students can talk and understand each other. The basic purpose of conducting initial orientation sessions for students will help then in identification of their roles, redesigning their expectations, clarifying their perceptions regarding e-learning and understanding what tutors want/expect from them. It will also help in developing an informal relation between the students and teachers which will become strong in later semesters when student will be complete "e-learners". All the students except those who are not in country should be invited to their nearest campus for orientation purpose. It does not mean that online orientation program has no importance but it can serve as general introduction program of online visitors.

Similarly, in the first year, on campus tutoring especially for undergraduate students must be considered as important factor of student participation. Tutoring services for post-graduate students can be organized on their request. The rules of tutoring services for post-graduation may include the factor of interest in meeting with tutor by applying through proper application form. The tutor has to contact all his/her allocated students and minimum one call per week till mid semester exams should be made.

Pre-course identification of student's proficiency in technology and writing skill need to be investigated as early as possible in order to avoid any mismatch between student perceptions and tutor's perceived needs of students.

Comparison With Other Studies: Ellahi and Zaka (2015) conducted a study in which they tried to match the e-learning policy issued by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan against literature. They found that a very large scale technological initiative of the Government of Pakistan is incomplete and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan has failed to provide policy guidelines on e-learning as yet. Talking about interaction, Uden, Liberona, and Welzer (2015) suggest that the overall quality of online education depends upon the interaction and communication with lecturers, administration, and with peers. In order to enhance the strategies for expansion, bringing innovations and concentrating on monitoring and control along with taking feedback or quality review from stakeholder, it is a co-creation approach which played an important role.

Conclusion, Recommendation, and the Line of Future Research:

No, doubt to meet the evolving needs of e-learners in conjunction to course designers, instructors, service professionals and education experts, the development of e-learning is and will be an

ongoing and continuous process. It means the institute is continuously identifying and adding the emerging dimensions of e-learning in its support services to meet the expectations of e-learners. The Virtual University of Pakistan as a pioneer university in this mode of learning is struggling to meet the expectations of e-learners with very reasonable fee. Since its inception, thousands of students have benefited and completed their education especially those females who belonged to rural areas and did not have to access conventional institution due to cultural barriers. The more successful the commencement policies are, the more students will be satisfied with the institution. Provision of some important services like student organizations, retention program for unsuccessful students, student counseling, face to face tutoring, student forums, communication through phone or skype in the first year, minimum one training in the form of workshop or seminar every semester must be included in student support services. The basic objective of providing all mentioned services is to provide a sense of belonging which is the only way to maintain interaction between student and the institution in the long run.

It is also suggested that in order to build strong, efficient and result oriented “student support service,” the institute should identify the requirements of online students with proper research, and make them available when e-learners need them rather than when institute is willing and feel comfortable to provide.

In this study the researchers tried their best to collect important services through literature review and interview responses which can prove to be the game changers. These collected services can serve as “minimum criteria” for student support services before allowing any institute to start e-learning because it is a continuous process and continues to stimulate the ever changing role of student affairs and support services.

However, further research is required to improve the outcomes of this study, and explore the relationship of ‘student satisfaction’ with the ‘student participation determinants’, the ‘overall participation’ and the ‘Overall Quality Enhancement in e-learning’ in the context of e-learning students.

De-limitations of the study

This study accounts for the student support services as a set of student participation determinants in e-learning. The students of Virtual University should have been provided access to quality education by meeting the emerging dimensions of e-learning. Its primary focus is on learner centered student support services and does not take into account other performance evaluation criterion necessary for online development and success.

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