**History of distance education in Pakistan present, past and future**

**Introduction**

According to Shahzad (2017),Role of AllamaIqbal Open University and Virtual University of Pakistan has been discussed in particular which are using complete mode of distance education. Virtual University of Pakistan has fully adopted the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Online Distance Education (ODL) through the use of state of the art software like Learning Management System (LMS). Few other universities have also started private and distance education. Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) has an active collaboration with The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) for promoting new trends in distance education. Quality assurance and development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) can uplift their standards. All this has facilitated the adult learning, job holders, people of remote areas etc. with relatively lesser cost of education. Possibilities for future have been discussed as well.

World is moving fast towards the innovative modes of education and distance learning is getting greater popularity especially in developing countries like Pakistan. It is mainly because it is cheaper and convenient mode of learning which facilitates adult learning and working professionals as well. Higher education is a key to the success and development of nations. It is mainly because of the reason that research and development is primarily done in higher education institutions which often helps in policy formulation for institutions and for nations as well. Many developed and developing countries have started distance learning through the use of traditional methods like occasional workshops and assignments. Along with that, use of ICT is also emerging quickly in distance education by different means. Jumani and Khan (2009) conducted a study on M Phil and PhD level scholars in Pakistan about their views regarding distance education. Most of the scholars were of the view that distance learning is more of a challenging task as most of the scholars in distance learning also happened to be working professionals. But those respondents were also of the view that distance learning is equally compatible as compared to traditional institutions’ learning provided the workshops are attended whenever required which greatly helps in the final assessment. Study revealed that the respondents were well aware of the equivalence of distance education with formal education in Pakistan. As two main distance education universities are well recognized by Higher Education Commission (HEC) and Government of Pakistan. So the prospects of higher education are bright in Pakistan. According to Wedemeyer (1983, p.140), distance education is a mean of teaching in which teacher and learners are at the distance and means of communication are through indirect channels like correspondence through different sources as internet, letters etc.. Isani (2005) while quoting a World Bank Report, titled ‘Higher Education: The lesson of experiences (1994)’ stated that higher education is of paramount importance for social and economic development of a country and it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to equip the citizens of the nations with the latest and up to date knowledge which should be useful in individual and collective framework. Jumani and Khan (2009) stated that with large population sizes in many developing countries like Pakistan, it is difficult to educate whole population with formal system of educations. That is the reason why many countries like Pakistan have adopted distance education and Open Distance Learning (ODL) systems along with formal education. But still, in Pakistan formal education of face to face learning dominates and constitutes about ninety percent of the university education enrollment. Distance learning is cheap that’s why it is more attractive for population with financial constraints and working class of the society which does have the time to attend regular class in traditional universities. Economic growth and higher education of a country are interlinked. Trend of higher education through distance learning is increasing in Pakistan. Currently there are two main government owned and HEC recognized universities in Pakistan. These are

1. AllamaIqbal Open University, Islamabad and

2. Virtual University of Pakistan.

Siddiqi (2015) argued that a major chunk of Pakistani students are enrolled in higher education institutions of formal universities where face to face mode of education is implemented. But due to lower cost and governmental recognition for distance learning institutions, more and more people are getting attracted to distance education universities in Pakistan. Author is of the view that it is the high time to bring in distance education universities of foreign and developed countries in Pakistan. But their curriculum and degree should be recognizable by government and should be internationally acceptable as well. This will not only create jobs for educated class of people but will also give students the opportunity to avail better options of distance education that would be internationally recognized as well. Gone are the days when universities only offered face to face learning. Now millions of learners are getting their education through distance learning and Open Distance Learning (ODL) universities across globe. Sabe (2005) named this new introduction of distance education as historical evolution. In Pakistan, Virtual University of Pakistan and AllamaIqbal Open University are fully involved in online distance learning (ODL) and distance learning respectively. Other than these two universities, Comsats Institutes of Information Technology has partially started offering distance learning. There are many scholars working for distance learning in the world. However, very little research work has been done in the area of distance learning in Pakistan. There has been a record boom in distance education in the last one decade in Pakistan mainly because of the governmental support. Distance learning jumped from 0.75 million in 1998 to 1.5 million (According to U.S. Department of Education 2003). Romero as cited by Jumani and Khan (2009) explained that the field of distance education started in seventies and initially had a lot of criticism. Critics were of the view that how can a degree be awarded to an individual with just the home work and without face to face presence of class rooms. But things have changed entirely now with the advent of telecommunication and Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Higher education Commission in Pakistan ranks universities on the basis of three factors. These include 1. Research output 2.Quality assurance and 3. Standard of teaching practices. Although with respect to quality assurance both Virtual University of Pakistan and AllamaIqbal Open University fall in the highest “W” category of HEC. But perhaps teaching standard and research output of the universities still needs to be improved. Other than this, many universities are offering blended mode of education, some are offering part time / weekend programmes and distance education services at international level as well. But there is quick growing trend towards online distance education in the world along with speedy introduction of massive open online courses “MOOCs” by some of the universities. Even some top ranked universities have made ODL very popular in the world. A list of ODL universities / institutions is given in the URL given below, which identifies 887 institutions of ODL in the world, <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/courses/search?m=Distance%2Fonline>Importance of distance education is great for the people in remote areas, working class and for those segments of the society who cannot attend regular universities due to their high fee structures. So the distance learning universities in Pakistan are providing equal opportunity of education and then the employment to poor segments of society becomes possible. Distance education is supportive and helpful as an idea of education for all. Therefore universities offering distance education have been established by the government of Pakistan and some other universities have started offering blended mode of education as well. A list of universities can be viewed from following link. http://www.pakistaniuniversities.info/2014/06/pakistani-universitiesoffering-distance-learning.html) Many of the developed countries of the world are offering distance and online education primarily at tertiary level / university level of education. Therefore, the trend is diverging from developed nations to developing and under developed countries of the world as well. Just for example England, USA and Canada have been discussed here from developed countries list.

**Distance Education in Pakistan (Past, Present and Future Possibilities**

AllamaIqbal Open University, Islamabad Siddiqi (2015) explained that AllamaIqbal Open University was established by government of Pakistan in May 1974. At that time, it was the only second distance education university of the world and first distance education university of Asia and Africa. There is no age limit for getting education from this university and it has been cost effective, government recognized and providing education to masses from matriculation (SSC exam) to PhD level study in different fields. At present AIOU has the major chunk of distance education enrolled students in Pakistan. At present students of the university are 1.3 million which is a figure that has surpassed any other university of Pakistan. According to university’s website (www.aiou.edu.pk), university is offering wide range of degrees and courses including technical short courses for skill enhancement and self-employment of un-educated class of the society. University has now started active progress in the area of research and conferences etc. which would ultimately help it in getting higher ranking of HEC Pakistan. According to website, university has state of the art facilities including its own campus in Islamabad, labs and experimental equipment, library, access to HEC digital library for students and few of its own HEC recognized journals as well. Along with that AIOU has played a major role in the empowerment and education of women in the society. Most of the students of university are females. “Currently more than 2000 courses are being offered, the University has 9 regional campuses, 33 regional centers, 41 approved study centers (for face to face sessions) and 138 part time regional coordinating offices. It has the largest publishing house in Pakistan with over 1.8 million books printed annually”. Students from all over the Pakistan even from the remotest areas are getting education from AllamaIqbal Open University. University follows semester system of education in most of its degrees. Noreen, Z. (2013) conducted a research on M Phil and PhD scholars in AllamaIqbal Open University, Islamabad and strongly emphasized the use of technology for higher degree education such as for M Phil and PhD. SMS alert, use of Skype, LMS system etc were recommended for better communication between peer scholars and tutors. It was also recommended that use of face book page dedicated for each class and use of Linkedin can be of great advantage for the research scholars of the university. In this regard, ODL of Virtual University of Pakistan has certain advantage over AllamaIqbal Open University with respect to its state of the art softwares and total ODL mode of education. Siemens (2005, p 13) emphasized that it is the connectivism that is required for better learning rather than just giving individual tasks to the students. This argument of Siemens supports previous finding.

**Virtual University of Pakistan**

The second major institution of distance education in Pakistan is Virtual University of Pakistan. It has second major chunk of distance learning students’ enrollment after AllamaIqbal Open University. It follows online distance education system. It was established in 2002 with a federal charter and is recognized by Higher Education Commission. VU used ODL method through the use of internet and television channels. Ever since its inception, VU has shown a massive growth in students’ enrollment. According to university’s website (www.vu.edu.pk) university uses state of the art softwares including Learning Management System, exam software, virtual information system and many other softwares for students’ record and for interaction with students through the softwares particularly through LMS. According to website of the university, it has presence in all the four provinces including Azad Kashmir and GilgitBiltistan. University has its own campuses and it also has private affiliated campuses. Currently according to website link (http://vu.edu.pk/PVCs/Default.aspx) university has 133 campuses all over the country. Therefore, students from all over the Pakistan are getting education particularly the remote areas’ students are great beneficiaries of VU as they can easily interact with the teacher of each subject through emails, LMS and Moderated Discussion Board (MDB, which is an in built feature of Learning Management system). Students can send their queries through LMS and course emails which are promptly replied by dedicated teacher for each subject. All the course record of student is maintained in the LMS. All the assignments and quizzes etc are submitted online. University follows semester system and student just has to appear in the campus for midterm and final term exam. One major advantage of Virtual University is that it allows admission to overseas students as well. This is perhaps the major competitive advantage of Virtual University of Pakistan over other universities. Virtual University is offering wide range of courses including under graduate and post graduate courses ranging from biological sciences, computer sciences, management sciences, education, psychology etc. According to website of VU, of late it has also started PhD in Computer Sciences and Biological Sciences. Remote learners and working professionals are getting great advantage for enhancing their education through Virtual University in Pakistan. Virtual University has achieved many milestones being the pioneer ODL institution.. According to website of Virtual University of Pakistan (http://vu.edu.pk/AboutUs/Milestones.aspx), it has achieved great milestones ever since its inception in 2002.

In 2012, total enrollment of students crossed the level of 100,000 for the first time which was a landmark achievement for the university. University has collaborations and MOUs with many other national and international universities. Recorded video lectures of the university are available free of cost at www.youtube.com and open courseware website of OCW. University is now offering studies up to PhD level in few of its disciplines.

**Learning Management System (LMS)**

LMS is the primary software for online distance education. For VU, it is a source of student teacher interaction, course announcements, section and students’ detail, student demographics, student’s queries are addressed though it’s in built feature of Moderated Discussion Board. Record of entire course is maintained by teachers (semester wise) and students can view all of their record from students’ view of Learning Management System.

**Traditional Universities of Pakistan That Offer Private/ Distance Learning**

1. University of Punjab, Lahore (offers admissions for private candidates too)
2. NUML, Islamabad (offers private admissions to external candidates on language and literature course)
3. University of Sargodha (offers private admissions in some courses)
4. Aga Khan University
5. AllamaIqbal Open University (Fully in distance mode of education)
6. BahauddinZakariya University Multan
7. COMSATS IIT, Virtual Campus
8. Gomal University Dera Ismail Khan
9. Government College University Faisalabad
10. Islamia University Bahawalpur
11. Sarhad University of Science and Information Technology
12. University of Engineering and Technology Lahore
13. University of Peshawar
14. University of Sindh
15. Preston University
16. Virtual University of Pakistan (Fully in distance mode of education)

Source:http://www.pakistaniuniversities.info/2014/06/pakistaniuniversities-offering-distance-learning.html

**Emerging Trend of Massive Open Online Course (MOOCS)**

In the developed countries the trend of MOOCs is increasing. MOOCs are normally online offered courses through website without restriction on the limit of participants. (Kaplan, 2016). According to Lewin and Tamar MOOCs were first introduced in 2006 and became a popular mode of learning till 2012. The term MOOC was introduced in 2008 by Dave Cormier of the University of Prince Edward Island. Now many universities in the advanced countries are offering massive open online courses (MOOCs) independently and also in joint collaboration with facilitators for MOOCs like Coursera and edX etc. But it is notable that most of the MOOCs are being introduced by the universities of the developed countries. Distance learning and online distance education universities from developing countries like in Asia are lacking behind in this regard. Development of MOOCs is an approach that can facilitate the lifelong learning. This can be especially helpful developing countries like Pakistan where skill oriented education is the need of the era for self-employment. That is where Virtual University of Pakistan and AllamaIqbal Open University need to step up (as both are distance universities). Synchronous learning is a synonym for online distance learning. In this mode of learning, participants are dispersed in different locations but they get connected to the source through different means like online radio, Skype, Adobe softwares, internet radio, live streaming telephone etc. It is an effective way of learning in the distance education mode (Lever Duffy et al, 2007). Past research has proved that synchronous learning is helpful for students of distance education mode.

**Possibilities for Remote Learners in Pakistan**

Distance learning provides a lot of opportunities for remote learners living in remote areas of Pakistan such as Baluchistan, South Punjab etc., for whom access to regular universities with live classroom learning is not possible. AllamaIqbal Open University is perhaps the biggest university of Pakistan with respect to its enrollment of students. Its enrollment as has been already mentioned is more than one million. And most of the enrolled students are from remote areas. Similarly, Virtual University of Pakistan is totally based on online distance education mode of learning. Its enrollment is touching almost 150,000 and most of the students are from remote areas. Just with the facility of internet at home, the students of Virtual University of Pakistan can get in touch with the university. On same mode, other universities are evolving ODL programmes such COMSATS IIT. Some of the traditional universities have started enrolling the students as private candidates and some have started weekend programmes. All these steps Pakistani universities would prove to be a great help for the remote learners, job holders, poor and remote segment of society and females who are house wives.

**Some Future Possibilities for Pakistani Universities**

Few of the possibilities for Pakistani universities in the new arena of evolving distance education around the world are following.

1. Introduction of free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is of pivotal importance for Pakistani universities in general and for distance education universities of Pakistan in particular. This will not only help the universities in forming a reputation at national and international level but will also give an opportunity to less privileged people of society to gain tacit knowledge at their doorsteps.

2. Quality assurance and standard of education should not be compromised in distance education institutions of Pakistan. Just as HEC has emphasized greater need of teaching quality and research for traditional universities, same standard should be applied for distance education universities so that, their graduates may have worth in the market.

3. There is need for governmental facilities regarding ICT infrastructure in remote areas of Pakistan, so that, distance education trends may be increased in the country.

4. AllamaIqbal Open University needs to establish more centers at district and tehsil level.

5. Virtual University of Pakistan and AIOU should arrange regular conferences and seminars for other universities to train their manpower for enhancing the distance education trends and opportunities for other universities in future.