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"Assessing the Perspective of Distance and Online Learners about Institutional Support for the Learning Process"

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Student support, distance learners, instructional process, academic competency support, higher education institutions, distance and online learning

ABSTRACT

This study was aimed to analyze the perspective of distance and online learners about the institutional support for their learning process. Quantitative survey design was used to conduct this study. All the graduate students studying in the distance and online learning programs were the population for this study. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the respondents from different degree programs, semester, geographic area, age group, status of students (working or full-time students), and gender. In total, 518 students submitted their response to the research instrument. There were four factors covered in the 7-point scale: tutors' characteristics, academic competency support, use of technology in instruction and teaching practices. The study concluded that there was a statistically significant difference among students' responses from various semesters on tutors' characteristics, academic competency support, use of technology in instruction and teaching practices. The gender wise statistically significant difference was also noticed for the study variables. The study recommended to analyze the needs and preferences of students from various backgrounds to make the teaching-learning process more inclusive and welcoming for students.

Introduction

The diversity of students in higher education institutions and their learning needs demands a robust and in-time support for their learning. It ensures the participation, retention and success of the learners thus providing them quality education while fulfilling their learning needs. This support is crucial in an online and distance learning system where students are learning independently for a considerable time of a semester. The demographic characteristics of students in open, distance and online learning system are more diverse than that in traditional higher education system.

Students consider various factors while selecting online courses for learning. Institutional support and student satisfaction affected their decision to opt for online courses. Use of technology in instruction, teachers' connection with students and feedback to students can be helpful to enhance their satisfaction (Maheshwari, 2021) with the learning system. Learning support by higher education institution positively contribute to the satisfaction of students with the online learning (Khong, Seow & Lam, 2023). A positive association of student support services exists with student success and persistence (Chithira, Rizwan, Abdel-Salam, Ahmed, Radwa, Rusol, Michael, Batoul, Khalifa, 2022), and engagement (Azila-Gbettor, Abiemo & Glate, 2023).

While students generally feel supported by their universities, still several students lack necessary support to succeed academically in the online and blended learning courses (Tuiloma, 2022). Due to low achievement in the area of student support, restructuring the support system and the allocation of sufficient resources is required in Pakistani universities (Jumani, Bhatti & Malik, 2013). In addition to allocation of sufficient resources and a proper system ,timeliness and relevance of student support is critical in the online learning system (Rotar, 2022). There is a difference of student support services between public and private higher education institutions (Kruja, Ha & Tabaku, 2021). It depicted that student support system is not uniform across various institutions.

It would be helpful to make the institutional efforts relevant and need-based for the learning progress of their students. Collecting data about the needs of students from various groups such as area of study, age, gender etc. may be helpful for students to know about their particular needs and support to be provided by the university (Tuiloma, 2022). Keeping in view the increasing diversity of students in term of characteristics such as fresh and adult students, work status, learning motivation, it is vital for the higher education institutions to collect responses from their students about their experience of university support (Lim & Ho, 2022) for their learning and adjusting the institutional support according to the need. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess the perspective of distance and online learners about the institutional support they receive for their learning.

Review of Related Literature

Support services for student learning encompass that help and guide students in their learning process and ignite their enthusiasm for learning (Sewart, Keegan & Holmberg, 1988: as cited in Zhao, Shao & Su, 2022). Student support in online and distance learning system includes the support provided to students online and off-campus. It encompasses academic, social, and retention support, learning skills and delivering support through distance and online modes (Simpson, 2002). Student support must be individual, local, source of social learning and a continuous concern for student, and having a teaching and support

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role in continuous assessment (Tait, 2004). There are five different domains of conceptual systemic student support (Jung & Hong, 2014), as given below:

1. Cognitive support: It involves the availability of appropriate content, resources, tutorials and assessment for effective and efficient learning experiences of students.
2. Affective Support: It involves connection and motivation of the distance learners during studies and help them to become successful in learning.
3. Reflective Support: It involves reflecting on academic and non-academic processes of the teaching-learning process.
4. Systemic Support: It involves institutional policies for general students and customized support for specific personal needs of learners.
5. Gender-considerate Support: It involves dealing with socio-emotional, learning and cultural factors that may hinder the access and success of the females in higher education. (Jung & Hong, 2014)

There are various reasons for change of practice of student support at open universities such as scale, information management and its relation with quality, advancements in ICT, and the place of student in distance education (Tait, 2004). Student support service may be affected by the group of people targeted, employed package, delivery mechanism, university and the cultural factors of the area (Sewart, 1993).Learning support for online education must involve cognitive, emotional and management aspects of learning in order to meet students' needs and improve the quality of student learning (Zhao, Shao & Su, 2022).Student support is critical to resolve issues related to student motivation, engagement and success in higher education (Muljana & Luo, 2019: as cited in Rotar, 2022).

Institutional representatives such as faculty members are crucial agents to impart intellectual and institutional resources to students for navigating higher education environment thus contributing to their success (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). To provide integrated student support services, three measures are important: (1) professional development opportunities for staff for essential knowledge and skills (2) formal and informal communication routes for collaboration among different types of services (3) formal procedures for effective collaboration among services (Power, Partridgea, O'Sullivana & Chyn A. Kek, 2020).

Research objectives

1. Examine the experiences of distance and online learners with the characteristics exhibited by their tutors for their learning process.
2. Interpret the perspective of distance and online learners about the institutional support for developing their academic competency.
3. Analyze the perspective of distance and online learners about the use of technology in instruction.
4. Assess the experience of distance and online learners with the teaching practices of their tutors.

Research Methodology

Quantitative survey method was employed to analyze the perceptive of distance and online learners about the institutional support for their learning process. The population of the study was the students studying in graduate and postgraduate programs in distance and online

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learning system. The sample of the study consisted of 518 students.

Institutional Support Questionnaire (ISQ) (developed by Lim & Ho, 2022) was used to collect the responses of the students. It was a seven-point scale. There were four factors in this research instrument: Tutors' Characteristics (TC), Academic Competency Support (ACS), Use of Technology in Instruction (TII) and Teaching Practices (TP). ISQ consisted of 47 statements. There were seven options against each statement: strongly agree (7), agree (6), somewhat agree (5), neutral (4), disagree (3), somewhat disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1).

The reliability of the instrument is given in table 01. The response of students was collected on this research instrument through Google forms. The data were collected by approaching the distance learners through online sources (WhatsApp/LMS/Email). SPSS was used to analyze the responses of students through mean, standard deviation, Kruskal-Wallis Test, Spearman correlation co-efficient and Mann-Whitney U test.

Table 01

Reliability Value for Factors of Institutional Support Questionnaire (ISQ)

S#Factor	No of items	Cronbach's alpha value for ISQ
1 Tutors' Characteristics (TC)	20	.93
2 Academic Competency Support (ACS)	11	.96
3 Use of Technology in Instruction (TII)	07	.90
4 Teaching Practices (TP)	09	.94
5 Overall value for ISQ	47	.97

Findings

This portion presented the results of responses of distance and online learners about the institutional support received by them for their learning process.

Table 02

Descriptive analysis of responses of students on Institutional Support Questionnaire (ISQ)

Factor	Sample (N)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Tutors' Characteristics (TC)	518	6.26	.63
Academic Competency Support (ACS)	518	6.03	.88
Use of Technology in Instruction (TII)	518	6.19	.68
Teaching Practices(TP)	518	6.06	.84

Table 02 presented the descriptive analysis of the responses of the students about the institutional support received by them. The experience with the tutors' characteristics and use of technology in instruction was higher than the academic competency support and teaching practices. It depicted that distance learners perceived the characteristics of their tutors and use of technology in instruction more helpful for their learning.

Table 03

Relationship among factors of Institutional Support Questionnaire (ISQ)

Factors	M[6]	SD[7]	N	TC[1]	ACS[2]	TII[3]	TP[4]	ISQ[5]
TC[1]	6.26	.63	518	-	.696 (.000)	.665 (.000)	.736[8] (.000)	.846[8] (.000)
ACS[2]	6.03	.88	518	.696 (.000)	-	.721[8] (.000)	.751[8] (.000)	.881[8] (.000)
TII[3]	6.19	.68	518	.665 (.000)	.721[8] (.000)	-	.761[8] (.000)	.841[8] (.000)
TP[4]	6.06	.84	518	.736[8] (.000)	.751[8] (.000)	.761[8] (.000)	-	.917[8] (.000)
ISQ[5]	6.13	.65	518	.846[8] (.000)	.881[8] (.000)	.841[8] (.000)	.917[8] (.000)	-

TC[1]= Tutors' Characteristics; ACS[2]= Academic Competency Support; TII[3]= Use of Technology in Instruction; TP[4]= Teaching Practices; ISQ[5]= Institutional Support Questionnaire; M[6]= Mean score; SD[7]= Standard Deviation; x[8]= strong relationship

Table 03 showed the relationship of four factors of ISQ with each other and with the ISQ. All the four factors had a strong positive correlation with the Institutional Support Questionnaire (ISQ). 'Tutors' characteristics' depicted a strong positive correlation with 'teaching practices' whereas 'academic competency support' had a strong positive correlation with the 'use of

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technology in instruction' and 'teaching practices'. Tutors' characteristics had a moderate positive correlation with 'academic competency support' and 'use of technology in instruction'. It showed that the experience of distance learners with one aspect of the institutional support for their learning had a direct influence on their experience with other aspects.

Table 04
Responses of students on institutional support questionnaire with respect to the degree program (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

Factor	Program of Study	N	Mean	SD	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	Sig value
Tutors' Characteristics (TC)	BS/BBA	38	6.05	.77	219.71	6.298	3	.098
	BEd (1.5/ 2.5/4 years)	433	6.28	.62	263.56			
	MA/MSc	31	6.34	.61	282.26			
	MS/MPhil	16	6.05	.58	200.03			
Academic Competency Support (ACS)	BS/BBA	38	5.69	1.2	222.32	7.136	3	.068
	BEd (1.5/ 2.5/4 years)	432	6.06	.83	260.13			
	MA/MSc	31	6.17	1.0	312.77			
	MS/MPhil	16	5.87	1.0	227.66			
Use of Technology in Instruction (TI)	BS/BBA	38	5.84	1.0	218.18	8.237	3	.041
	BEd (1.5/ 2.5/4 years)	432	6.21	.63	259.48			
	MA/MSc	31	6.39	.76	318.82			
	MS/MPhil	16	6.20	.53	243.25			
Teaching Practices(TP)	BS/BBA	38	5.78	1.1	220.30	5.850	3	.119
	BEd (1.5/ 2.5/4 years)	432	6.08	.80	261.39			
	MA/MSc	31	6.13	.99	299.35			
	MS/MPhil	16	5.96	.62	224.22			

Table 04 showed the analysis of responses of distance and online learners on four factors of ISQ with respect to the degree program they are enrolled in. there was no statistically significant difference among distance learners of various degree programs in their experience with tutors' characteristics, academic competency support and teaching practices. However, there was a statistically significant difference among distance learners of different degree programs for their experience with the use of technology in instruction (Chi-square= 8.237; sig value= .041) with the highest mean score of masters' degree programs. It indicated that there was a more use of technology in instruction for better learning of students in the masters' degree program as compared to other degree programs.

Table 05
Responses of Students on institutional support questionnaire with respect to their age group (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

Factor	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	Sig value
Tutors' Characteristics (TC)	16-20 years	41	6.16	.72	245.12	8.064	4	.089
	21-25 years	298	6.30	.58	270.12			
	26-30 years	130	6.21	.73	254.64			
	31-35 years	28	6.28	.47	249.29			
	36-45 years	21	6.03	.49	180.50			
Academic Competency Support (ACS)	16-20 years	41	5.68	1.2	217.24	5.413	4	.247
	21-25 years	298	6.09	.80	266.26			
	26-30 years	130	6.02	.86	261.17			
	31-35 years	28	6.01	1.1	269.52			
	36-45 years	21	5.86	.99	222.33			
Use of Technology in Instruction (TI)	16-20 years	41	5.93	.87	215.52	6.298	4	.178
	21-25 years	298	6.24	.60	266.77			
	26-30 years	130	6.17	.72	258.06			
	31-35 years	28	6.33	.51	280.73			
	36-45 years	21	5.97	1.0	222.79			
Teaching Practices(TP)	16-20 years	41	5.69	1.4	232.21	7.042	4	.134
	21-25 years	298	6.14	.73	270.27			
	26-30 years	130	6.02	.86	253.14			
	31-35 years	28	6.09	.72	262.09			
	36-45 years	21	5.79	.84	195.93			

As there is no age limit for enrolment in the distance and online education degree programs, the students of various age groups are enrolled in these programs. Table 05 displayed the analysis of students' responses on institutional support questionnaire with respect to their age group. It was important to notice that there was no statistically significant difference among the response of distance learners on factors of ISQ. It depicted that students of the given age groups experienced he institutional support for their earning in the same way.

Table 06
Responses of students on institutional support questionnaire with respect to semester of the study (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

Factor	Semester of the program	N	Mean	SD	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	Sig value
Tutors' Characteristics (TC)	1st	272	6.35	.59	283.66	25.590	6	.000
	2nd	40	6.05	.69	209.58			
	3rd	71	6.15	.59	220.27			
	4th	65	6.23	.71	259.53			
	5th	36	6.13	.58	218.90			
	6th	15	5.88	.78	178.03			
	Alumni	19	6.44	.50	306.47			
Academic Competency Support (ACS)	1st	272	6.16	.80	285.45	30.405	6	.000
	2nd	40	5.64	1.2	206.41			
	3rd	71	5.92	.73	216.36			
	4th	65	6.07	.82	262.62			
	5th	36	5.72	1.0	208.97			
	6th	15	5.64	.93	178.20			
	Alumni	19	6.18	1.0	310.16			
Use of Technology in Instruction (TI)	1st	272	6.26	.60	272.62	17.411	6	.008
	2nd	40	5.88	.90	212.05			
	3rd	71	6.17	.50	241.09			
	4th	65	6.30	.49	274.90			
	5th	36	5.94	.97	216.71			

Table 06 displayed the analysis of responses of students enrolled in various

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semesters of the distance and online education programs. It showed that there was a statistically significant difference among students of various semesters on all four factors of ISQ. It indicated that their experience with tutors' characteristics, academic competency support, use of technology in instruction and teaching practices, varied across various semesters of their study program with comparatively lower mean score in later semesters.

Table 07

Responses of students on institutional support questionnaire with respect to the performance (percentage of marks) in their previous semester (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

Factor	Percentage of marks	N	Mean	SD	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	Sig value
Tutors' Characteristics (TC)	31%-50%	15	6.36	.42	267.27	9.496	5	.091
	51%-60%	53	6.19	.55	234.27			
	61%-70%	131	6.28	.62	262.53			
	71%-80%	199	6.18	.67	244.00			
	81%-90%	96	6.37	.62	291.79			
	91%-100%	24	6.38	.59	293.21			
Academic Competency Support (ACS)	31%-50%	15	6.02	.61	235.07	4.849	5	.435
	51%-60%	53	6.08	.66	256.50			
	61%-70%	131	6.06	.90	266.71			
	71%-80%	199	5.98	.90	246.71			
	81%-90%	96	6.08	.98	283.69			
	91%-100%	24	6.06	.81	251.33			
Use of Technology in Instruction (TI)	31%-50%	15	6.15	.55	239.87	3.959	5	.555
	51%-60%	53	6.18	.49	242.06			
	61%-70%	131	6.20	.66	258.03			
	71%-80%	199	6.15	.72	253.60			
	81%-90%	96	6.26	.74	282.32			
	91%-100%	24	6.27	.69	275.96			
Teaching Practices(TP)	31%-50%	15	6.02	.65	235.03	7.487	5	.187
	51%-60%	53	6.01	.81	247.49			
	61%-70%	131	6.06	.77	254.31			
	71%-80%	199	5.99	.93	249.51			
	81%-90%	96	6.19	.79	295.28			
	91%-100%	24	6.17	.75	269.38			

Table 07 depicted the analysis of students' responses with various academic performance (in terms of their percentage of marks in previous semester) on their experience with tutors' characteristics, academic competency support, use of technology in instruction and teaching practices. There was no statistically significant difference among distance and online learners of various academic performance groups on four factor of ISQ.

Table 08

Responses of students on institutional support questionnaire with respect to their employment status (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

Factor	Employment Status	N	Mean	SD	Mean rank	Chi-sq.	df	Sig value
Tutors' Characteristics (TC)	Full-time Student	259	6.19	.67	243.93	5.386	4	.250
	Part-time employee in government institution	35	6.26	.45	244.40			
	Part-time employee in private institution	86	6.40	.46	285.22			
	Full-time employee in government institution	62	6.23	.76	258.62			
	Full-time employee in private institution	65	6.27	.56	253.58			
Academic Competency Support (ACS)	Full-time Student	259	5.97	.89	239.66	9.245	4	.055
	Part-time employee in government institution	35	5.91	1.0	237.46			
	Part-time employee in private institution	86	6.26	.57	290.42			
	Full-time employee in government institution	62	6.05	1.0	270.83			
	Full-time employee in private institution	65	6.08	.83	255.80			
Use of Technology in Instruction (TI)	Full-time Student	259	6.16	.70	246.92	2.827	4	.587
	Part-time employee in government institution	35	6.22	.63	259.40			
	Part-time employee in private institution	86	6.33	.44	276.58			
	Full-time employee in government institution	62	6.14	.82	251.64			
	Full-time employee in private institution	65	6.19	.76	251.68			
Teaching Practices(TP)	Full-time Student	259	6.01	.89	248.71	6.940	4	.139
	Part-time employee in government institution	35	5.93	.89	222.89			
	Part-time employee in private institution	86	6.25	.63	286.67			
	Full-time employee in government institution	62	6.04	.93	261.48			
	Full-time employee in private institution	65	6.07	.74	241.47			

Table 08 showed the analysis of responses of distance and online learners with various work status (such as full time /part-time, employed in

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government/private sector) on four factors of ISQ. There was no statistically significant difference in the experience of distance and online learners with various factors of institutional support for their learning.

Table 09

Gender wise analysis of response of students on institutional support questionnaire (Mann-Whitney U)

Factor	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. sig.
TC[1]	Male	112	6.33	.63	281.17	31490.50	20085.50	-1.826	.068
	Female	404	6.24	.63	252.22	101895.50			
ACS[2]	Male	112	6.19	.84	298.09	33386.00	18190.00	-3.206	.001
	Female	404	5.99	.89	247.52	100000.00			
TI[3]	Male	112	6.29	.69	291.48	32645.50	18930.50	-2.693	.007
	Female	404	6.17	.67	249.36	100740.50			
TP[4]	Male	112	6.10	.98	284.79	31896.50	19680.00	-2.125	.034
	Female	404	6.05	.79	251.21	101490.00			

SD= Standard Deviation; TC[1]=Tutors' Characteristics; ACS[2]=Academic Competency Support; TI[3]= Use of Technology in Instruction; TP[4]=Teaching Practices

Table 09 showed the gender wise analysis of responses of distance and online learners for their experience with different aspects of institutional support for their learning. There was a statistically significant difference in their response on academic competency support, use of technology in instruction and teaching practices with higher mean score of male students. It indicated that the experience of male students was more positive of the institutional support for their learning as compared to that of female students.

Table 10

Analysis of response of students on institutional support questionnaire with respect to their status as differently-abled person (Mann-Whitney U)

Factor	Sample	N	M	SD	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. sig.
TC[1]	Do you consider yourself a differentl y- abled person?	77	6.26	.66	266.30	20505.00	16455.00	-.434	.664
	Not consider yourself a differentl y-abled person	441	6.26	.62	258.31	113916.00			
ACS[2]	Do you consider yourself a differentl y- abled person?	77	6.11	.74	264.49	20365.50	16594.50	-.320	.749
	Not consider yourself a differentl y-abled person	441	6.02	.91	258.63	114055.50			
TI[3]	Do you consider yourself a differentl y- abled person?	77	6.14	.80	253.14	19491.50	16488.50	-.411	.681
	Not consider yourself a differentl y-abled person	441	6.20	.66	260.61	114929.50			
TP[4]	Do you consider yourself a differentl y- abled person?	77	6.12	.74	274.79	21158.50	15801.50	-.979	.328
	Not consider yourself a differentl y-abled person	441	6.04	.86	256.83	113262.5			

SD= Standard Deviation; TC[1]=Tutors' Characteristics; ACS[2]=Academic Competency Support; TI[3]= Use of Technology in Instruction; TP[4]=Teaching Practices

Table 10 displayed the analysis of responses of distance and online learners on four factors of ISQ with respect to their status as differently-abled person or not differently-abled person. It was important to notice that there was no statistically significant difference in the experience of differently-abled/not differently-abled distance and online learners with the institutional support for their learning.

Discussion

Distance learners perceived the characteristics of their tutors and use of technology in instruction more helpful for their learning whereas their response for academic competency support and teaching practices was comparatively low. However, there was moderate to high correlation among various factors of institutional support as reported in the findings. Academic support environment affect student affect immediately as reported by Voisin, Phillips and Afonso (2023). It also contributed to improve students' self-efficacy by providing them professional learning, feedback on their work and designing the environment to reduce the student anxiety (Voisin, Phillips &

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Afonso, 2023). Teacher and peer support was indirectly influencing student satisfaction of their learning ability (Wang, Chen, Wu, Lu, Xu & Wang, 2023).

The gender wise difference was reported on three factors of ISQ: academic competency support, use of technology in instruction and teachers' practices (table 09). There was a gender wise difference in the student support services as reported by the distance learners (Jung & Hong, 2014). There was also a difference of help-seeking beahviour among male and female students (Voisin, Phillips & Afonso, 2023). There was statistically significant difference between students of various semester on all four factors of ISQ: tutors' characteristics, academic competency support, use of technology in instruction and teachers' practices (table 06). The students of various degree programs differed on their response on use of technology in instruction (table 04). It was reported that learner interaction and the teacher presence had a positive effect on perceived student learning whereas course structure and instructor presence directly affected student satisfaction in online environment (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016).

Conclusion

As all the factors of ISQ had a positive moderate-to-high correlation with each other and with ISQ, it can be inferred that in order to provide a holistic positive experience to distance learners, it is important to give due weightage to all the four aspects of ISQ. As there was a statistically significant difference among students of different semesters on three factors of ISQ, it is vital to adjust their experience with their needs in various semesters. As the experiences of male students were more positive of the institutional support for their learning as compared to that of female students, there is a need to provide an open and inclusive institutional support for student learning for all genders. No statistical difference was observed among students on four factors of ISQ with respect to the academic achievement group (based on their performance in previous semester), employment status, age group, and their reporting about their specially ability status. It is a positive indication of the inclusivity of the system for various groups of students. However, there is a need to improve the various aspects of institutional support for the learning of students from various degree programs, semesters and genders. For this purpose, effort at institutional level may be appreciated where faculty members and students are continuously engaged with each other to share their perspective, experiences, concerns and challenges to find mutually agreed upon solutions to the challenges. Interaction among teachers and students may be encouraged by the institutions to meet the learning needs of the students. For this purpose, the management may arrange professional development workshops for the faculty members. The future studies may analyze the association among institutional support, learning needs and assessment experiences of distance learners, and the perspective of faculty members about it.

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