



Factors to improve Written Assignments in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT :

We report the findings from a survey study that aimed to investigate the practices of writing assignments among distance learners. It was conducted in Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad. The students enrolled in the postgraduate program along with their tutors were taken as a sample. A total of 500 students and 50 tutors took part in the study. Data were collected through questionnaires. The study found that distance learners were poor in writing their assignments due to difficulty in understanding the study material, a lack in guidance from their tutor, domestic/job circumstances, and their absences from tutorial meetings. The study recommended TV/CD support for writing assignments.

1. INTRODUCTION :

In distance education a number of activities are carried out that ranges from the development of course to the feedback from the distance learners. Student's evaluation is one of the important activities. It is a systematic process of collecting analysis and interpreting information to determined extent the pupils are achieving instructional objectives (Norman & Linn, 1990). With the help of evaluation the achievements of the distance learners are assessed. It tells that how much a particular activity has been mastered and how much further improvement is required to grasp the concept of that particular activity? In distance education it is the educational evaluation that identifies, diagnose and solve the educational problems (Shahid, 2004). The scope of educational evaluation is directly related with its need. Why evaluate? It used to determine the degree to which goals are being reached (Vashist, 1993). The literature review revealed that evaluation has been classified into different

types and categories. Whatever the nature and type of evaluation may be, in the system of distance education, it is carried out through external and internal evaluation. The external evaluation of distance learners is judged with the help of examination that is usually held at the end of the each semester. While, internal evaluation is carried out as a continuous assessment of the distance learners. This assessment is made through assignments, which is an important component of the distance education.

1.1 Assignments

Assignments help in bridging distance between teachers and students. If pursued keenly they provide a more effective channel of communication than the personal contact program. Distance education cannot be effective without a system of consistent and frequent assignments (Chander, 1991). Further, Satyanarayana & Sesharatnam (1992) stated that it is an important vehicle for students in obtaining feedback from and establishing a dialogue with their tutor.

A number of researches revealed that flow of assignments in distance education is very essential as it regulates the whole stream of education. Baath (1994) found that the flow of assignments between student and tutor constitutes a major teaching element in home study courses. And assignments for submission are an essential element otherwise it is not correspondence education, but something else. Similarly, Rashid (2003) revealed that assignments are of immense educational utility as they seek to demand thinking on the part of learners advance in ideas, arouse and deepen the interests, enlarge their outlook and lengthen the happy moments of their life. He further narrated that the advantages of the assignments are that they offered students an opportunity to plan and to do their work unaided, stimulate a desire for voluntary study help revision and consolidation of the work developed lasting interests, train in the profitable use of leisure, assist in resisting distraction and foster in them, the moral trade of initiation, self reliance and self direction. Rashid (2003) while considering students' assignments as an effective instrument for distance teaching-learning recommended that :

- Every distance teaching university must necessarily have a component of assignments as distance learners can progress in their studies through them. Assessment of assignments must count for final score of courses.
- Economic factors should not be the criteria to neglect the assignments component.
- Delay in the preparation and dispatch of assignments to students should be avoided. As far as possible they should be sent to students along with the first dispatch of the course materials.
- Assignments should be accompanied by tutor guides or notes to guide tutors on the ways and methods of assessment of assignments.
- Evaluators of assignments must necessarily be oriented and reoriented on the methods of evaluation.
- Monitoring on assignment evaluation is essential.

- Coordinators of study center should get deeply involved for ensuring proper assessment of assignments. They should check samples of evaluated assignments to provide feedback to the evaluators.
- Coordinators of study centre should insist on the evaluators on the need to observe time schedules for returning evaluated assignments.
- Scope for appeal to the students against the marks and grades given by teachers must be provided.
- Manuals for evaluators should be available.

However the effectiveness of assignments in distance education depends upon the type of assignment and its purposes for which it was developed. Hence without discussing the types and purposes of assignments it is not possible to assess their effectiveness.

1.2 Types of Assignment

The various types of assignment include the following.

Subjective Type Assignments : These are also called open or tasks assignments. Subjective or open tasks mean tasks that require the students to construct the answers in their own words, numbers, etc. A major form of subjective tasks is the essay question, where the student has to demonstrate knowledge and insights by means of fairly extensive writing, from one to several pages. An especially interesting variation of the essay question is tasks which require the student to make an own investigation, an experiment or some practical work and to report the plan and procedure as well as the results to the tutor (Baath, 1994).

Objective Type Assignments : Objective tasks mean questions that require the student to choose, in one way or another, between suggestions given. One major and most useful form is the multiple-choice question, where the designer provides a number of possible answers between which the student has to choose (Baath, 1994).

Preparatory Assignments : Preparatory assignments are used for circulation purpose. The student can prepared this for the work which is to be followed on the next

day. After this preliminary pilot work, the teacher can lead the class with ease and understanding. In distance education it means that learners are given homework type task, and they prepare their work which is to be assessed by their tutors and they follow this learning on the next participation in tutorials or through correspondence with their tutors (Raza, 2006).

Study assignments : These assignments are designed according to the individual differences and profile of distance learners. These assignments are either launched individually or in groups, but in accordance with the need and capacity of the learner. Like subjective type assignments as mentioned by (Baath, 1994), it comprised from a page or paragraph assignments to a chapter, topic, project, exercise etc. In such type of assignments the tutors guide the distance learners in their assigned work.

Re-visional Assignment : This type of assignment given for the checking of student's comprehension. In view of Kocher (1990, p.358) revisional assignments having these qualities ;- (a) Providing drill to the work done by the students, (b) Checking their retention and reproduction of facts, incidents etc of the topic, and (c) For checking to understanding of the topic. These assignments are worked out in advance keeping in view the specific objectives of subject matter being tested.

Remedial Assignments : The purpose of these assignments is to remove weak and clear misunderstandings.

There is another classification of assignments, common assignments, small group assignments, and individual assignment Kochar (1990). Assignments are prepared according to the level of learning so that objective of the curriculum can be achieved.

1.2 Practices of Writing Assignments

The practices of writing assignments mean to make use of ways and means adopted by distance learners in writing their assignments. Usually there are two types of assignments writing practices. One is called fair writing practice and the other is called

unfair writing practice. Unfair writing practice can also be named as malpractice in writing assignments.

Fair Writing Practices

When distance learners write their assignments according to the preset criteria of the organization in which they are studying, then their assignment writing practice is called as fair writing practice. This type of assignments has a set of criteria/instructions for writing. These instructions are mentioned in the assignment paper. Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, also has preset criteria mentioned in the assignments paper of the postgraduate program. The main points of the criteria are :

- Response to each question should not be less than 1200 words failing which marks will be deducted accordingly.
- Write assignment in own words after reading the study guide and related material.
- Avoid irrelevant information and render a critical analysis of the questions asked for.
- No marks will be given for reproduction from the text material or from elsewhere.
- Give source in case of quoting any material.
- Assignments should be submitted on or before the specified date.
- Late assignments will not be accepted in any case.

It may be concluded that the above mentioned criteria not only ask distance learners to produce quality assignments but also make an assurance of their punctuality throughout their study program. Kochar (1990, p.360) described that assignments develop the following skills amongst the distance learners :

- They develop self study and writing habits.
- They provide interest and guidance in an expert way, prevents failure and ensures success.
- They emphasize individual work and in this way pupils learn at their own pace.

- They give enough writing practice.
- They provide the best possible mind set which is a prerequisite for effective learning.
- They enable the tutors to know the difficulties and interests of their pupils in a particular subject area.

It may be summed up that assignment writing is very important component of distance education and it enhances capabilities and potentials of distance learners. It keeps distance learner busy in writing activities. It is also a source of contact between learners and tutors. It counteracts possible feelings of loneliness and isolation for learners in their study situation.

Unfair Writing Practices

According to the BBC Dictionary (1993, p.679) malpractice is defined as, “a behaviour in which someone breaks the law or the rules of their profession in order to gain some personal advantage.” In distance education this malpractice is exercised by majority of distance learners who do not follow the terms and conditions prescribed by the university under rules. In this regard they presents a number of lame excuses, which are harmful not only for them but for the prestige of the university. As a result of making malpractice the skill achievements of such students always remain below expectations. Distance learners make malpractice in writing assignments by the following means.

a. By Plagiarism

Plagiarism is basically a process of recreating the thoughts or wordings or statements of other person and wrongly pretends that it is the original creation of his own thoughts without due acknowledging the original creator. James (2006) defines plagiarism as “the deliberate or reckless representation of another’s words’ thoughts, or ideas as one’s own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise.” In distance education, the distance learners plagiarize in writing assignments without mentioning the reference. A majority of the learners may blindly or unintentionally copy

the material from the study material without giving the source which is entirely against the prescribed criteria of assignments writing practices. Hinman (2000) suggested three possible approaches to minimize the cheating and plagiarism. First approach is the virtues approach. This approach seeks to develop students who do not cheat. Second is the prevention approach, which seeks to eliminate or reduce opportunities for students to cheat. Finally there is a police approach which seeks to catch and punish those who do cheat.

b. By Fabrication

The BBC Dictionary (1993, p.392) defines fabrication as inventing evidence to deceive people. In distance education the distance learners fabricate their assigned work by representing false data that is usually not the original one but their self created data. According to the Wikipedia, fabrication is the falsification of data, information, or citation in any formal academic exercise. This includes making up citations to back up arguments or inventing quotations.

c. By Deception

The BBC Dictionary (1993, p.280) defines that it is something that one say or do in order to deceive someone. In distance education most of the students exercises such type of practice to make short cuts in writing assignments. They do not concentrate on their assigned work in due dates and often present false excuses to their tutors to accommodate their late assignments. Some time majority of them pretend that they have already submitted that assignment to their tutor but due to flaws in the delivery services of post office their tutor did not received. They claim all this without any documentary proof.

d. By Cheating

James (2006, p.1) described that academic cheating occurs when one copies the work of another and submits it as one's own ; or when one uses unfair means to appear more accomplished than one really is. In distance education system there are normally two types of academic works i.e. assignments and final examination. Assignments are an external source of student’s assessment, which are completed

by the distance learners at their homes. Those learners who are not dedicated towards their studies and they are likely to get a university degree, often involved in cheating the assignments prepared by their native fellows.

e. By Copying

Copying is another type of malpractice in writing assignments in distance education. Copying is something that has already been written, and it has been made to look exactly the same as something else (BBC English Dictionary, 1993). Distance learners often copy the assignments prepared by their fellow learners like cheating the assignments, but copying is slightly different than cheating the assignments. In copying the distance learners produce the same text as it is already written by their fellow learner.

f. By Purchasing

Purchasing is the act of buying something.” This is a unique form of malpractice in writing assignments in which distance learners are not involved only, but some professional and business minded people are also involved. These people offer readymade assignments to the busy distance learners (in jobs, in house hold circumstances) at reasonable price (BBC English Dictionary, 1993).

g. By Sabotage

Although, sabotage is not a common form of malpractice in distance education like other forms of malpractice, it is found to be exercised amongst those distance learners who regularly visit and search worthy books which are very helpful for the preparation of their exams and often found in a form of single volume or a few in a whole library. “If something is sabotaged, it is deliberately damaged or destroyed” BBC English Dictionary (1993, p.984). In this situation when distance learners find some text very important to him/her, makes shortcut in the form of sabotage.

2. METHODS :

The method used was survey study. It was conducted in Allama Iqbal Open University. The study was also limited to the

university postgraduate program. The objectives of the study were to :

- Identify the nature of malpractices in writing assignments among learners.
- Find out the causes for malpractices in writing assignments.
- Identify writing difficulties of distance learners in assignments.
- Examine the role of tutor in discouraging malpractices in writing assignments.

In this study students enrolled in the master of education program were included in the sample. A total of 310 students and 321 tutors participated in the study.

The instrument of the study was questionnaire. Two separate questionnaires were developed for students and tutors. Each questionnaire was constructed on five points rating scale (likert scale) with one open ended question in students’ questionnaire. Student questionnaire comprised of 25 items and these items were related to causes & types of malpractice in writing assignments; writing difficulties of distance learners in assignments; role of tutor in discouraging malpractice in writing assignments. While the tutors questionnaire comprised of 15 test items that covered the aspects like: role of tutor in tutoring; criteria for valuating student’s assignments; comments of tutors, and some possible ways of discouraging malpractices in assignments writing.

3. RESULTS :

The responses were coded as strongly agreed = 5, agreed = 4; uncertain = 3, disagreed = 2, strongly disagreed = 1. The data obtained was organized and tabulated in terms of percentage and mean score. The details of data analysis are shown below in Table 1 and Table 2.

The findings shown in Table 1 can be summarized as follows :

- Distance learners copy the assignments of other distance learners.
- Distance learners make shortcuts in writing assignments.
- Distance learners influence tutors for the award of high marks.

- Distance learners make malpractice in writing assignments through plagiarism.
- Distance learners were busy in their domestic/job circumstances that compel them to make malpractice in writing assignments.
- Overloaded simultaneous study schedule of distance learners compel them to make malpractice.
- Hardworking distance learners whose assignments were not properly evaluated by tutors try to adopt the norms of those distance learners who use unfair mean in writing assignments.
- students do not participate in tutorials
- tutors just superficially skim over the assignments without judging the quality of students responses in writing assignments and academically poor students get high marks from their tutors.
- Casual attitude of tutors is responsible for discouraging the hardworking distance learners.
- Distance learners find difficult to understand the study material of the university due to poor learning skills in English.
- quality of assignments evaluation can be improved if professional training is provided to the tutors,
- Learners need TV/CD support for writing assignments.

Table 1 : Analysis of Findings from the Questionnaire to the Students

Statement	frequency and percentage					
	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	m
The tutors come for the tutorials regularly.	60 12%	140 29%	105 21%	130 26%	65 13%	3.0
Distance learners copy the assignments of other class fellows.	165 33%	230 46%	15 3%	70 12%	30 6%	3.9
Distance learners develop relationships easily with the tutors who belong to local area.	160 32%	200 35%	30 6%	80 16%	30 6%	3.8
Distance learners try to make shortcuts in writing their assignments.	105 21%	235 47%	35 7%	105 21%	20 4%	3.6
Learners want that their tutors award them high marks on substandard assignments.	110 22%	175 35%	65 13%	115 23%	35 7%	3.4
Distance learners influence tutors through friends, colleagues and relatives for the award of high marks.	135 27%	195 39%	40 8%	75 15%	55 11%	3.6
Distance learners often ignore the instructions for writing assignments.	90 18%	175 35%	55 11%	110 22%	70 14%	3.2
Distance learners prepare assignments on payments.	105 21%	175 35%	95 19%	75 15%	50 10%	3.4
Domestic/job circumstances compel students to make malpractice in writing assignments.	150 30%	275 55%	25 5%	35 7%	15 3%	4.0
Distance learners prepare their assignments by family members and friends.	75 15%	255 51%	45 9%	85 17%	40 8%	3.5
Students are usually habitually depending upon other's assistance in writing their assignments.	100 20%	200 40%	50 10%	95 19%	55 11%	3.4
Overloaded simultaneous study schedule compels distance learners to make malpractice.	90 18%	230 46%	45 9%	115 23%	20 4%	3.5
Hard working distance learners whose assignments are not properly evaluated try to adopt the norms of those who used malpractices in writing assignments.	130 26%	210 42%	55 11%	95 19%	10 2%	3.7

Table 1 : continued

Statement		frequency and percentage					m
		SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	
	Learners adopt malpractices in writing assignment as they do not participate in tutorials	55 11%	180 36%	70 14%	160 32%	35 7%	3.1
	Tutors assess properly the assignments of learners	80 16%	175 35%	60 12%	150 30%	35 7%	3.3
	Tutors just tick over the assignments without judging the quality of student's responses.	200 40%	155 31%	45 9%	70 14%	30 6%	3.9
	Casual attitude of tutors is responsible in discouraging the hardworking learners.	185 37%	175 35%	45 9%	70 14%	25 5%	3.9
	Tutors mentioned appropriate remarks on the evaluated assignments.	30 6%	175 35%	40 8%	205 41%	50 10%	2.9
	Tutors provide appropriate guidance to writing assignments.	60 12%	165 33%	65 13%	170 34%	40 8%	3.1
	Distance learners need TV/CD support in writing assignments.	260 52%	170 34%	20 4%	35 7%	15 3%	4.2
Distance learners make malpractice in writing assignments ;							
i	By plagiarism (the adoption of ideas or statements of another person without due acknowledgement).	45 9%	295 59%	60 12%	70 14%	30 6%	3.5
ii	By fabrication (the falsification of data or information in assignments).	50 10%	270 54%	70 14%	75 15%	35 7%	3.5
iii	By deception (providing false information to a tutor concerning assignment e.g. giving a false excuse for missing a deadline or falsely claiming to have submitted assignment s).	65 13%	235 47%	60 12%	80 16%	60 12%	3.3
iv	By cheating (any attempt to give assistance in preparing without due acknowledgement).	85 17%	240 48%	25 5%	85 17%	65 13%	3.4
v	By sabotage (acting to prevent others from completing their work).	25 5%	100 20%	145 29%	130 26%	100 20%	2.6
Remarks given by the tutors about the student's performance ;							
i	Positive	70 14%	310 62%	30 6%	80 16%	10 2%	3.7
ii	Negative	10 2%	70 14%	270 54%	125 25%	25 5%	2.8
iii	Constructive	65 13%	280 56%	75 15%	65 13%	25 5%	3.6
iv	Supportive	50 10%	245 49%	105 21%	75 15%	25 5%	3.4
v	Discouraging	15 3%	25 5%	265 53%	155 31%	40 8%	2.6

Table 1 : continued

Statement	frequency and percentage						
	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	m	
Distance learners find difficulty to understand the study materials because ;							
i	Material is very small in size.	15 3%	100 20%	150 30%	180 36%	55 11%	2.7
ii	Irrelevant	15 3%	70 14%	195 39%	170 34%	50 10%	2.7
iii	Wording is difficult	60 12%	200 40%	65 13%	155 31%	20 4%	3.2
iv	Poor learning skills in English	160 32%	230 46%	20 4%	80 16%	10 2%	3.9
The quality of assignments evaluation can be improved if ;							
i	Professional training is provided to the tutors	210 42%	255 51%	10 2%	15 3%	10 2%	4.3
ii	Double marking scheme is introduced	95 19%	215 43%	60 12%	120 24%	10 2%	3.5
iii	Administer code of conduct effectively	75 15%	310 62%	85 17%	20 4%	10 2%	3.8
iv	Ethics are developed in tutors	115 23%	285 57%	60 12%	25 5%	15 3%	3.9

Table 1 : Analysis of Findings from the Questionnaire to the Tutors

Statement	frequency and percentage					
	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	m
Tutors intimate their students well in time.	27 54%	18 36%	2 3%	2 4%	1 3%	4.4
Tutor feels difficulty in assessment of late assignments.	4 8%	24 49%	9 17%	11 23%	2 3%	3.4
Students feel difficulty in preparing the assignments from the study material.	26 52%	12 25%	5 10%	5 10%	2 3%	4.1
Tutors write comments on students' assignments.	15 33%	25 50%	6 11%	2 3%	2 3%	4.1
Course coordinators give instructions to tutors about marking of assignments.	2 3%	3 5%	14 29%	25 51%	6 12%	2.3
There is a uniform assessment procedure amongst the tutors for evaluating assignment.	1 2%	2 3%	8 15%	17 35%	22 45%	1.9

Table 2 : continued

Statement	frequency and percentage						
	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	m	
There is a need to provide proper tutor training to tutors before the start of tutorials.	9 18%	20 40%	13 26%	6 12%	2 4%	3.6	
A transparent marking scheme needs to introduce for each type of assignment.	13 26%	19 39%	14 28%	2 4%	2 3%	3.8	
In tutor training events like briefing meetings, the tutors should be provided opportunities to make marking practice based on marking scheme.	10 19%	31 63%	5 11%	2 4%	2 3%	3.9	
The quality of assessment of assignments is much more important than quantity.	14 29%	25 50%	7 15%	2 3%	2 3%	4.0	
Majority of the distance learners plagiarize un intentionally, because they do not know proper ways of quoting, paraphrasing, citing and referencing the assignments.	10 21%	24 49%	10 19%	4 7%	2 4%	3.8	
Distance learners make malpractice in writing assignments because there is lack of deterrence.	6 13%	22 44%	18 36%	2 3%	2 4%	3.7	
To what extend do you agree that majority of distance learners enter in open learning education system just to get a degree rather getting education through it?	2 3%	18 36%	25 53%	3 5%	2 3%	3.3	
Coordinators of the study centers need to check the samples of evaluated assignments to provide feedback to the tutors.	11 21%	18 37%	8 16%	7 14%	6 12%	3.4	
Comments by tutors to enhance the student's performance should be ;							
i	Positive	14 27%	22 44%	10 20%	2 4%	2 5%	3.9
ii	Constructive	12 25%	24 49%	10 20%	2 3%	2 3%	3.9
iii	Supportive	9 18%	25 52%	12 24%	2 3%	2 3%	3.8

The suggestions from the responses by students in Table 1 can be summarized by the following ;

- Tutors should guide about how to write and search answer of the question asked in the assignments.
- Tutors may be well prepared for tutorials.
- Tutors may guide the students to
 - produce quality assignments in their own.
 - Tutors may evaluate the assignment with uniform assessment criteria.
 - Tutors give appropriate comments on the assignments.
 - Tutors may send back the first assignment in time after the evaluation so that improvements can be made in the second assignment.

The findings shown in Table 2 can be summarized as follows :

- Tutors intimate their allotted students well in time after receiving their tutorship bags.
- Students feel difficulty in preparing assignment from study material.
- Tutors positive, constructive and supportive comments facilitate the students in improving their assignments writing skills.
- Course coordinators ever gave any instruction/instructions to tutors regarding marking of assignments.
- There is no uniform criterion for evaluating assignment amongst tutors.
- A transparent marking scheme needs to be introduced for each type of assignment.
- In tutoring training events like briefing meetings, tutors need to be provided opportunities to make marking practice based on marking scheme.
- Quality of evaluation of assignments is much more important than quantity.
- Distance learners plagiarize unintentionally, because they do not know proper ways of quoting, paraphrasing, citing and referencing the assignments and there is a lack of deterrence also.

The suggestions from the responses by tutors in Table 2 can be summarized by the following ;

- A uniform procedure may be adopted for assessment of assignments.
- Proper training may be arranged for tutors.
- TV/CD support may be provided to distance learners for writing assignments.

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