

INTERVIEW WITH Dr. MUSSARAT ANWAR SHEIKH ON THE ROLE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN FOR WOMEN

Distance education is a powerful and growing force in education system of any country and especially in developing country. It enables a large number of populations to access educational opportunities which might be not possible through conventional system of education. Dr. Mussarat Anwar SHIEKH, Ex professor at distance learning institute in Pakistan, was interviewed to have their views on distance education in Pakistan. Purpose of this interview was to explore her experience, feelings, perception about distance education. For this purpose semi-structured interview was constructed to have the complete and in-depth and valid information regarding phenomena.

WHO IS Dr. Mussarat Anwar SHIEKH

Currently, Dr. Mussarat Anwar SHIEKH is acting chairperson of education department at Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. She has done her Ph.D (1985) & M.S. (1985) degree from Indiana University, USA. Her professional & administrative experience is as below:

- Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Additional Charge Controller Examination (2005 - To Date).
- Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Chairperson (2003 - To Date).
- Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Adjunct Faculty (Feb., 2002 to 2003).
- AIOU, Pakistan. Director: Institute of Mass Education (1998 – Apr, 2002).
- AIOU, Pakistan. Additional Charge: Director Women Studies (1997 – 1998).
- Allama Iqbal Open University (Interim position). Registrar (1989).
- Allama Iqbal Open University (Interim position). Director: Population Education Project (1989).
- Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Chairperson (2003 - To Date).
- Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Adjunct Faculty (Feb., 2002 to 2003).
- AIOU, Pakistan. Director: Institute of Mass Education (1998 – Apr, 2002).
- AIOU, Pakistan. Additional Charge: Director Women Studies (1997 – 1998).
- In charge: Distance and Non-formal Education Department (Interim position), 1987.
- Head Examiner, various teacher-education programmes (1987-92).

PUBLICATIONS

- Foundation Reader 8 for Class VIII English (Editor) National Book Foundation Islamabad 2004.
- Foundation Reader 7 for Class VII English (Editor) National Book Foundation Islamabad 2004.
- Foundation Reader 6 for Class VI English (Editor) National Book Foundation Islamabad 2003.
- Status of Teachers in Pakistan (2002) Published by UNESCO Islamabad.

- **Open and Distance Learning in South Asia and Pacific Regions Pakistan Chapter Published by Open University Hong Kong (2001).**
- **Class VI Everyday English School textbook and workbook prepared for the Middle School textbook Project of MOE & ADB. (2000).**
- **IME Achievements 1975-99 (1999).**
- **M.Ed. (829) Teacher Education in Pakistan: Units 5-9 & Allied material Book. (1998).**
- **Modules for UNESCO Islamabad: Role of Assessment and learning achievement (2003), Instructional Objectives and Assessment (2003).**

INTERVIEWERS

Interview was conducted by two interviewers: **Miss Misbah MUZAFFAR & Miss Sabahat USMAN**. Miss Misbah MUZAFFAR is currently MS (Edu) research scholar at International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. She has done her Master's in Education from Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. Her area of specialization is teacher Education and Leadership & Management. She is the person with good analytical, communication, interpersonal skills and has self motivation. She is interested in exploring/researching new phenomena's in the field of education. Her Masters level research was on Action Research while Ms Level research is on distributed Leadership.

Mrs. Sabahat USMAN is doing MS Education from International Islamic University, Islamabad. She has done her Master in Education from Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad and Masters in Economics from Punjab University, Lahore. Her area of specialization is teacher Education and Leadership & Management. She is the person with good analytical, & communication skills.

Misbah: Madam! How are you?

Dr. Mussarat Anwar Sheikh: I am fine. I am glad to share my experiences about distance education.

Misbah: What are your views/perceptions about distance education?

Dr. Mussarat: Distance education is a good system of education. It was a good decision of the government to introduce this as a second chance to those people who could not go to formal institutions. It was a very good innovation and especially benefited the females. It also provided an avenue for those who could not study due to their jobs.

They could do both; things work at their job and additionally study through the distance education. AIOU was the second university in the world to use distance education. UKOU was the first in the world and AIOU first in Asia. The formal education system cannot meet the needs of everyone. Distance Education can serve the masses through its non formal approach. Therefore its outreach is tremendous.

Misbah: Why you choose distance education institute for career?

Dr. Mussarat: I did not choose it as a career. My area was education and I came into the system on the merit seat of Education. When I joined, it was my first exposure and I wanted to excel in this so I was sent on to UK on three months course of Distance Education. This course in particular and the UNESCO and British Council in-service trainings in the form workshops at AIOU were a great learning opportunity as well. Having joined the system it created more interest and enthusiasm in me for writing courses for our learners who are not in face to face situation with us. The role of a course coordinator was very important it started from the time you conceive the course to actually taking it through the statutory bodies and finally to unit writing.

I have played my role as course coordinator, unit writer and of course as head of department of teacher education which has the highest enrolment and female enrolment is even more. My last tenure at AIOU was as director of IME. IME is again very important institute as it served the rural population with basic education courses and Matric education. It was during my tenure that Middle Education Program was started for the first time through distance education. Both experiences in leadership position were very satisfying as the population being served was like doing a noble cause or sadqa jaria.

Misbah: How distance education supports Pakistan's education system?

Dr. Mussarat: The formal education system is unable to serve everybody. Distance Education, Non-formal delivery mode is very flexible enough to suit the needs of the masses or who cannot afford to leave their homes and jobs. It is complementing the formal education by reaching to those who were deprived. Females are benefitting more from it. It is like a national institution serving all the regions of Pakistan having regional campuses and study centers spread over whole of Pakistan.

Misbah: How was your job experience at Allama Iqbal Open University? What are the major differences you perceived during the job in distance and formal learning institute?

Dr. Mussarat: The experience at AIOU is quite different from the formal system. In the formal system you have face to face set up. In distance education your learner is not in front of you. He/she may be from a very remote area and you interact with them through written units only or for some practical component you have face to face contact. Then instructional material is to be in such form that it gives the learner the impression that you are talking to her/him. Great care therefore is taken in the writing material. In fact it demands more from the instructors or unit writer. Self assessment and activities are put in at appropriate places so that the learners get immediate feedback.

In the formal set up you teach a class and then it is over. The interaction is through questioning or assignment both oral and written. In distance teaching, you interact with the student through detailed comments so that they do not face any more problems. Self assessment key are also prepared. Moreover you have to be very punctual with your assignments so that the students have feedback on their work and can rectify it on their further assignments. The detailed comments on each students assignment is like giving individualized instruction. And this does take a lot of time.

As far as my personal experience is concerned it has helped me grow professionally by nominating me for Ph.D studies through COT scholarship of the government. My high academic achievement in the Ph.D studies is my reward and it is with this feeling that I have served it to the best of my ability.

Misbah: What was the nature and burden of the job at AIOU? Were work and domestic responsibilities affected by each other?

Dr. Mussarat: AIOU as the name suggests, the university is open throughout the year and you do not have vacation as in the formal system. The holidays were the public holidays or your personal leave. The working hours were also long. Coping with domestic responsibility and university work was challenging. AIOU work entailed coordination of courses and communicating with unit writers both within the university and outside. Getting the units in time for editing was the most difficult one as after unit writing it was to be sent for reviewing and finally to the editors and graphic designers for editing and illustration, and the printing, proof reading of the manuscripts before final printing of the book. AIOU work is both administrative and academic as compared to the formal institutions.

Misbah: Did you ever face gender discrimination at AIOU?

Dr. Mussarat: Yes, I did face gender discrimination at the hands of male chauvinists. This discrimination carried through out and it affected me very badly. I had applied for the post of professor and for three years Selection Board was not scheduled. Soon after my retirement the selection board was called. Whatever I have achieved at AIOU was my own persistent effort. At one time I was both member of Executive Council and Academic staff Association office bearer. AS such I used to bring in the notice of the Administration the issues and problems of the Academia for consideration in the working papers of the Executive Council. Comments like tell her to keep out of it otherwise she will face the consequences were written on my correspondence.

I have suffered in this and the consequences have been far reaching that interview for professor post was not scheduled until after I left. How I was removed from one of the donor funded project coordination is also an example of gender discrimination of the highest order. The book working with the Sharks by Fouzia Saeed has eleven cases of gender discrimination and harassment.

Mine could easily have become the 12th one. The discrimination continued when delaying tactics were used in the processing of my pension. My son's pursuing it got it done in two months.

Misbah: Distance Education is being criticized that it does not take care of quality? What are your views about it?

Dr. Mussarat: Distance Education courses writing is a very systematic process. If the course books are reviewed every three years as laid down in the course development process, the quality element could be taken care of. Some of the books are very outdated. New procedures like online courses and videoconferencing are good additions and quality in these is there. Radio and TV programmes also need to be reviewed and old programmes be discarded. So many new techniques and the animation effect and Flash use have made a significant impact.

Misbah: Do you think that instructors at AIOU are enough competent (both technologically and academically) to teach in distance education institute (AIOU)?

Dr. Mussarat: The instructors are academically sound. The only thing lacking is that the subject specialists need to be given an intensive workshop on unit writing for distance education. Writing for distance education is not easy. It needs the skills of writing as if you are in dialogue with the learner. As far as technology is concerned, AIOU IET institute had the latest technology with the sponsorship and aid of JICA. Even at that time PTV did not have that equipment.

Sabahat: What are the advantages of distance mode of learning over traditional mode of learning?

Dr. Mussarat: Same as listed in Q.1 box.

The learner can precede at his/her own pace depending on her/his job work load and house responsibilities of the housewives. Its media related component supplements the course work.

Sabahat: Why people go for distance education instead of traditional education?

Dr. Mussarat: People go for distance education because its convenience to them as under:

- They do not have to leave their jobs
- They can proceed at their own pace
- Housewives can avail this mode of learning by staying at home
- It is comparatively cheaper than the tradition or conventional mode of learning.
- Tailor made courses can be made for the people

Sabahat: With the passage of time, distance education is becoming dependent of technology. Do you think that AIOU taking care of it?

Dr. Mussarat: Open Education and technology go hand in hand. Previously, the Basic Education courses for the rural areas were tailor made and low cost technology of audio cassettes was used. Now there are so many technology innovations. The mobile is the cheapest source.

I am not aware if AIOU is using it. Students can easily get in touch with their tutors rather than going to study centers which at times are not easily accessible due to bad weather, rain and no transport available. I know it has started on line course in some of the disciplines. I do not know about its cost effectiveness and cost utilization.

Skype is also another source, but again I am not aware if it is using that with its overseas students. I do not know if the learning package contains CD'S instead of audio cassettes.

Sabahat: How distance education contributes for the welfare of the women in the Pakistan? What other measures AIOU has to take for women development?

Dr. Mussarat: I have partially addressed it in Q.10.

It has served women very well through its Matric programme with special programmes for the girls of backward and far flung areas. Conservative families like their daughters to avail this mode of learning as they can study from home. Matric programme was initially started with the Netherland government funding. When the project finished, it became a university program and opened for male students as well. With British Government funding it was run in northern areas districts of Diamir and Ghanchi in the first phase with 200 girls and later for 400 girls. These two districts were also conservative but the Matric was a success. The programmes for rural women were a success and based on it got the UNESCO Noma Award. Health programmes, income generating skills are already there but, computer programmes for parents for cyber space safety of children can be developed as malpractices are being adopted by the young by going to internet cafes. Dress designing is another area which women can benefit from as dress making by the tailors has become very expensive. Special religious education programmes for rural women so that they can inculcate the correct values in the children. Programmes on women's rights as ordained by Islam are known to them. The inheritance aspect is unknown to the rural women. They forego their share to the men of the family.

Sabahat: Which aspects of distance education in Pakistan need to be improved?

Dr. Mussarat: All the programmes need to be reviewed and revised keeping in mind the need of the time. Teacher Education programmes need to be specifically revised and reviewed. Diploma of Education was a good innovation but it never took off. All old teacher Education Programmes below B.Ed level need to be phased out. Technology use of mobile may be cashed on. The mailed package in the form of CD's may be introduced.

Sabahat: What are your suggestions for distance learners, teachers and administrators?

Dr. Mussarat: For distance Learners:

- Study regularly on daily basis by making a personal schedule
- Do the assignments themselves and do not have others do for them
- Regular Study Habit will help them in their exams
- Attend tutorials where possible

For teachers:

- Update your courses.

- Introduce the concept of portfolio for assessment.
- The assessment must address the higher order thinking and Assignments must therefore be aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy

Sabahat: How instructional design of AIOU can be improved? What do you suggest?

Dr. Mussarat: I have following suggestions:

- AIOU should see the best practices of open Universities and adopt in own context.
- The Open schooling concept should be adopted in true spirit.
- Women courses may be increase
- Courses for parents should be made with reference to the trends and issues in the country.
- Assignment must be returned in a timely manner. Assignment forms must have carbonized forms to save the triplicate process of filling forms. These forms can also be a check on the grading of students.
- The tutors must be facilitated with self address envelopes for students to return the assignment. Each envelope should identify the assignment number and its submission date. The assignment envelopes may be pre-stamped.
- Drop boxes may be arranged in the local regional campuses to facilitate students. A pickup time must be identified on drop boxes.
- The printing and paper must be of good quality.

Sabahat: Any other suggestion about distance education in Pakistan? If any.

Dr. Mussarat: Same as conveyed in the previous question. Training of tutors may do regularly.

Sabahat: Thank you so much for your time.

Dr. Mussarat: Not at all. My respects go intWOJDE readers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We highly acknowledge the guidance, motivation and facilitation professor by our research supervisor Prof. Dr. Nabi Bux JUMANI, Chairman, Deptt of Education and Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan.