

## INFORMATION NEEDS AND SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to find out the information needs and information seeking behavior of distance learning university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study used the questionnaire-based survey method. Snow ball sampling technique was used for data collection. It was found that their main information needs and seeking behaviour were related to “Lectures”, “Information relating to their programs of study”, and “Completing assignments”. The internet and library were the main channels for meeting the information needs of students; however the usage of the library was infrequent. Among various information sources available to the students, the heaviest reliance was on books and lecturers/tutors, but the usage of electronic resources such as e-journals and databases was very low. Search engines which were the most used individual tool for searching their needed information and mostly students preferred the English language when they sought information. Print format was their preferred format for the required information. Computer and information technology skills were insufficient at best they needed formal training from the institutions. A majority of the students faced barriers when attempting to acquire their needed information. The main barriers were lack of institution library for off-campus students. The outcome of this study will be beneficial to academic institutions in facilitation of information needs for students.

**Keywords:** Distance Education, Information Needs and Seeking Behaviour, User Studies, Distance Learning University Students

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### 1. Introduction

It is a common belief that the current era is the information era. Libraries have been at the hub of this information based activity. Libraries, both online and physical, have come to be considered as the main information centers. There have been great changes in the formats and availability of information during the past century which has compulsorily led to libraries becoming the main information source.

The formal system of education is squirming under rigidity regarding enrollment. To relieve the pressure on the formal system of education and the increasing demand of the community, higher education institutions have been encouraged to introduce off-campus education system. Many universities are now offering both distance and regular education programs for students around the world. Education on the basis of correspondence, more commonly known as distance learning or open learning is not a new concept. It dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, a number of changes/improvements have been seen in the methodology of this type of education. The most conducive changes have taken places in the last two centuries and even now there are a number of positive changes taking place in this area of education. The most important changes which have arisen in the last few years have been caused by the development and rush of information and web based technologies.

On-Campus students have the means to fulfill their information needs from their own institutions but there is a need to pay attention to distance learning students because their institutes provides them print and electronic materials for readings, writing assignments and preparations for final examination. However, it has not been ascertained that what are their actual or real information needs, from where they fulfill their information needs, what is their seeking behavior and which channels are used by them to satisfy their information needs. Adequate information about information needs and seeking behavior of distance learning students is helpful and essential for the administration in development of the resources, course content, services and facilities for students especially in developing countries like Pakistan.

### 2. Literature Review

The stage of information needs starts when someone feels an insufficiency of the clarity of the topic at hand. Other models of information needs contend that the information need is initiated when the subjects' plans a statement

relation to the specific information needs. Even so, at times the information need stage begins when a comprehensive and definite research statement gives rise to acquiring information. (Borgman, 2000).

Several studies have been conducted to examine the information needs and information seeking behavior. Arif and Mahmood (2009) conducted a study in order to signify the level of satisfaction with reference to distance education tutors. The areas which were emphasized were the location/physical setup, library collection and various characteristics of the regional campuses (such as the services and resources provided). The study also looked into the main library networks of Allam Iqbal Open University (AIIOU) in Azad Jammu Kashmir, Pakistan. The result shows there was a need for providing proper library building and resources. The respondents also suggested that the university should arrange information literacy trainings programs for the tutors.

Oladokun and Aina (2009) looked into the information needs of continuing students at the University of Botswana. They also highlighted the barriers in fulfilling these information needs through the available information sources. They used a questionnaire to ascertain the information needs of this group. The findings of the study showed that the main information needs of the respondents were related to: documents specifically linked to their course of study and level of study, information needs about career development and information on sponsorship of scholarships for further education. These were the important areas of their information need. Other findings of this study showed that the main barriers to the use of information are the lack of a well-equipped library and lack of time.

Jumani and Bhatti (2012) in their study on “Use of libraries in open and distance learning system Barriers to the use of Allama Iqbal Open University libraries by tutors and students” surveyed 4606 tutors and students. The results of the study indicated that both kinds of respondents, both on campus and distance learning students, faced various issues like inappropriate library timing, distance between library and their residence, unavailability of the latest journal, lack of required material and the latest books and inadequacy of the library staff. They suggested that library timings be increased, latest books and journals be made available as well as computer and internet services. They also proposed inter library loan and resource sharing services with other academic libraries.

A study was carried out titled “Information needs and information seeking behavior of social science graduates students in Malaysian Public Universities by Thani and Hashim (2011)”. The study aimed to find out graduate students real information needs and their seeking behavior. In this study data was collected through questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions. A total number of 400 questionnaires were distributed of which 354 (89%) respondents completed the questionnaire. The study’s results showed that the majority of the graduates seek required information on the spot for filling in their knowledge gap.

Qureshi and Khan (2008) surveyed the information needs and information seeking behavior of Pakistani university students. Data was collected through a questionnaire. Educational and cultural background, the environment and the participatory nature of the students were the main factors which brought about specific information seeking behavior in the students.

Oladokun (2010) focused on finding out the “Information seeking behavior of the Off-Campus students at the University of Botswana: a case of two satellite centers”. Data was collected from two centers of the university 100 out of 274 students were selected through random sampling technique. The result of the study showed that most of respondents (71%) preferred printed format of information rather than electronic, audio and video formats. Other findings showed that (90%) of students considered the lecturer to be the most important information source for acquiring information, (71%) followed their colleagues, (58%) students used reference and text books, (50%) used library resources, (43%) gather information from TV and radio, (25%) searched the internet, (16%) obtained information via telephone call, (10%) via e-mail and (1.3%) used other sources for the above discussed purpose.

Mahajan (2009) investigated the information seeking behavior of students and researchers at of Punjab University, India. The purpose was to examine the kinds of academic information needed by respondents, the sources they preferred, satisfaction with the collection of the library and the general information about searching for study related activities. A questionnaire-descriptive survey method was used for data collection. Data gathered from 250 users consisted of one hundred undergraduates, the same number of postgraduates and 50 researchers. The study found that books were the most preferred information source among the students but journals were the major source of information for researchers due to their research related information needs. Further, this study highlighted the fact that the internet and current journals were more preferred sources for researchers than students. The response of the

users about the preferred information format were also analyzed, electronic sources were ranked higher than print sources by the users. The users proposed training programs and orientation sessions for appropriate usage electronic resources.

Bukhsh (2010) surveyed the Allama Iqbal Open University student perception regarding teacher education through distance learning in Pakistan. A questionnaire was used for data collection. The research was conducted to highlight the barriers faced by distance students during teacher education programs in Pakistan. The findings of the study showed that teacher education students were satisfied with their institutions regarding admissions, materials/course books delivery system, tutors meetings, material quality, examination and the result system.

Oladokun and Ain (2009) found that distance students faced barriers during use of information. The results showed that the lack of a well-equipped library was the main barrier faced by 55% of the respondents. A similar study titled "Meeting the needs of distance learner" was presented by Sampson (2003). The respondents emphasized that limited books and old literature were the main problems for them. These problems were especially faced by students who did not have access to their institute library and other resources.

Khan and Shafique (2011) conducted a study on "Role of departmental library in satisfying the information needs among two departments of the Islamia University of Bahawalpur Pakistan". The study aimed to determine the students' information needs and available library services. A close-ended questionnaire was used to collect the data from 150 students of MBA and LIS regular students. The findings of study showed that the majority of the respondents agreed that well equipped and modern departmental libraries in each university department should be provided; it was also concluded that such endeavors would prove to be helpful in academic activities and for fulfilling the information needs of the students.

A study "*The role of academic libraries in facilitating postgraduate students' research*" was conducted by Rasul and Singh (2010) in order to examine the role of academic libraries in research and post graduate student and ascertain their views about their institute/university library. Four Malaysian public universities were selected for this study. The total population was 437 researchers and students of which 375 respondents returned the questionnaire, the response rate 85.8% was very good. With reference to questions about the use and access of library resources, the research findings indicated that most of the 247 (65.9%) respondents preferred to go to the library physically and some of them 44 (11.7%) fulfilled their information needs through online or remote access. At the end the researcher mentioned that overall the respondents were satisfied with the current library resources and service.

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

The prime aim of this study is to present a comparative analysis of information needs and seeking behavior, however some of the specific objectives of the study are outlined.

1. To find out the information needs and seeking behavior of the distance learning university students in KPK.
2. To identify the information sources, information channels and methods used by the students for finding and getting their required information.

### **4. Research Methodology**

The methodology employed in this study was the survey research method. It was used to gather demographic information of the respondents, their educational level and information needs and their specific information seeking behavior. The questionnaire was chosen for the study as it is more suitable for this kind of survey. It enabled the researcher to collect data from a targeted number of post graduate distance students of Allama Iqbal Open University and Sarhad University of Science and Technology Peshawar within a short period time.

Before the construction of questionnaire for the study, the researcher consulted and analyzed various research studies which were carried out on similar topics. Keeping in view the objectives of the study a structured questionnaire was developed for data collection which consisted of fifteen (15) questions. A pre-test was arranged for actual data collection to ensure that the questions were understandable and fit in with the purpose of the study. The pre-test was conducted in order to pinpoint the difficulties that may be faced by the researcher during the data collection. A pilot study which consisted of 10 postgraduate students 5 each at the SUIT Peshawar and AIOU was conducted. The results showed that no student encountered any difficulty in filling the questionnaire.

A total 200 hundred Master level distance students participated in this study from two universities one public and one private sector offering distance learning programs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Different possible techniques have been followed in data collection from distance students. Data was collected by using convenient sampling technique. Permission was sought from the Management where necessary. Questionnaires were filled in various vocation self-administrated through visits to the institutions during classes, meeting in the departmental libraries and during workshops. Total 200 questionnaires were distributed and 194 completed questionnaires were collected. The data was analyzed by using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analyzed data was showed in the form of tables and charts which was further interpreted. The researcher then presented findings on the basis of analyzed data and pointed out some recommendations.

## 5. Result and Discussions

### 5.1 Respondents Demographics

#### Gender Information

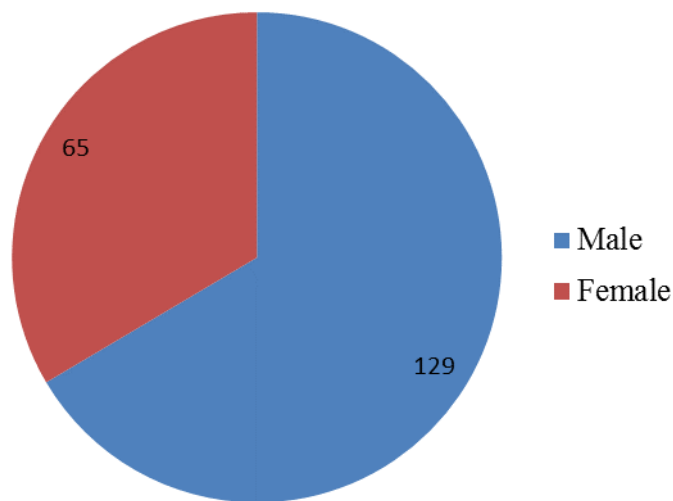


Figure: 5.1 Shows gender information of student (N=194)

Table 5.1 Respondents Age Information

Variable	F	%
Age		
<21	46	24
21-31	108	56
31-40	31	16
>41	9	.05

Table 5.1 shows that of 194 respondents 46 (24%) were below 21 years of age whereas the majority 108 (56%) were between 21-31 years and above followed by 31 (16%) in the age group of 32–40 years, and 9 (4.9%) were in the age group of 41 and above years.

## 5.2 Respondents Information Needs and Information Seeking Behavior

### 5.2.1. Main kind of information required by distance students for their study

Table 5.2 *Frequency of main kind/source of Information (N-194)*

Source of Information	Mean	SD
Lectures	4.14	1.163
Course books	3.88	1.063
Others books	3.55	.927
Previous lectures notes	3.28	1.005
Others	3.25	1.174

Table 5.2 shows that distance students participating in the survey were asked to indicate what their main kind/source of information is. It was found that the highest demand was for “lectures” (mean score: 4.14), closely followed by “course books” (mean: 3.88). Other kind and source of information sought by distance students were: “others books”, “previous lectures notes” and others kind of information.

Table 5.3 *Distance students main information needs*

Students main information needs	Mean	SD
Information on subject relating to their study	4.14	1.163
Information on job opportunities	3.88	1.063
Information on career development	3.55	.972
Information on scholarship for further education	3.28	1.005
Information on further education after post graduate program	3.25	1.174

Table 5.3 The students participating in the survey were asked to indicate what they looked for and what their main information needs is, using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 was ‘Never’ while 5 was ‘Always’. It was found that the highest demand was for ‘Information on subject relating to their study’ (mean score: 4.14), followed by ‘Information on job opportunities’ (mean score: 3.88). Other types of their main information needs often sought by the students were: information on career development, scholarship for further education and information on further education after post graduate program.

### 5.2.2 Purpose of seeking information by distance students

Table 5.4 *Purpose of seeking information (N=194)*

	N	R	O	F	A
Purpose of seeking information	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Completing assignments	5	6	8	21	55
For updating knowledge	3	2	5	38	52
Preparation for exams	2	1	14	22	61
Solving a problem at hand	6	15	43	15	21
Entertainment	27	29	23	14	7

Table 5.4 presents that the participants were asked how frequently they use resources for different purposes. It was found that 76% of the respondents were 'Always' or 'Frequently' using library and other resources for completing their assignment. Three other popular purposes were to for updating knowledge, preparation for exams and solving a problem at hand. The survey students were infrequently using library and other resources to get information about entertainment.

Table 5.5 *Preferred Language, distance students while seeking information*

Languages	F	%
English	142	73
Urdu	41	21
Others	10	5

Table 5.5 highlights the distance learner' preferred language of required information. The analysis of data shows that the majority of respondents 142(73%) preferred the English language and 41(21%) students preferred Urdu. Only 10 (5%) students preferred some other language for their needed information.

The result indicates that distance learners' preferred English language for their needed information.

### 5.4 Information Channels and Sources

*Most important information sources for distance students*

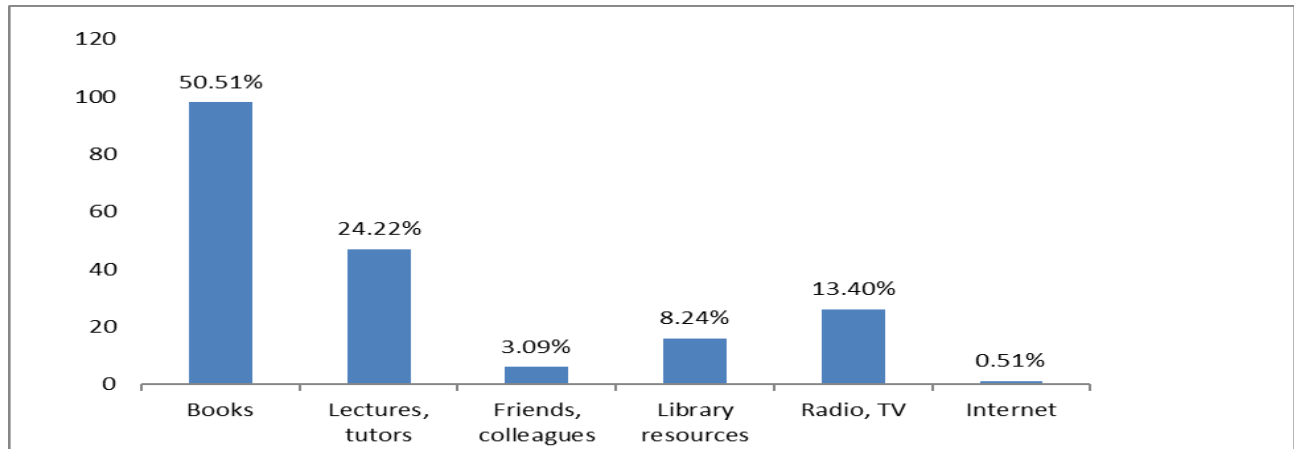


Figure 5.2 presents the distance student most important information channels/sources they prefer for their needed information. Respondents were asked to indicate the main information source they use for their information needs. A majority 50% of the students reported using books for their needed information. Another 24% of the participants said they use lectures and tutors, 13% Radio/TV, 8% library resources, 3% Friends/colleagues.

Table 5.6 Preferred information formats for distance students

Information formats	L	LP	S	P	M
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Printed material	15	5	3	22	55
Electronic/Digital material	1	6	29	40	23
Audio-Visual material	3	9	47	29	13
Others	12	19	40	23	7

L=Least, LP= Less Preferred, S= Somewhat Preferred, P=Preferred, M=Most Preferred

In this age of internet and advancement in technology still printed materials popular in the students. It was found that majority of the students 77% 'most preferred' or 'preferred' printed materials' for their study. Another 63% of the students 'most preferred' or 'preferred' electronic /digital materials, 42% Audio-visual material and only 30% of the students 'most preferred' or 'preferred' others information formats for meeting their information needs.

*Preferences of Information channels used by distance students for meeting their information needs*

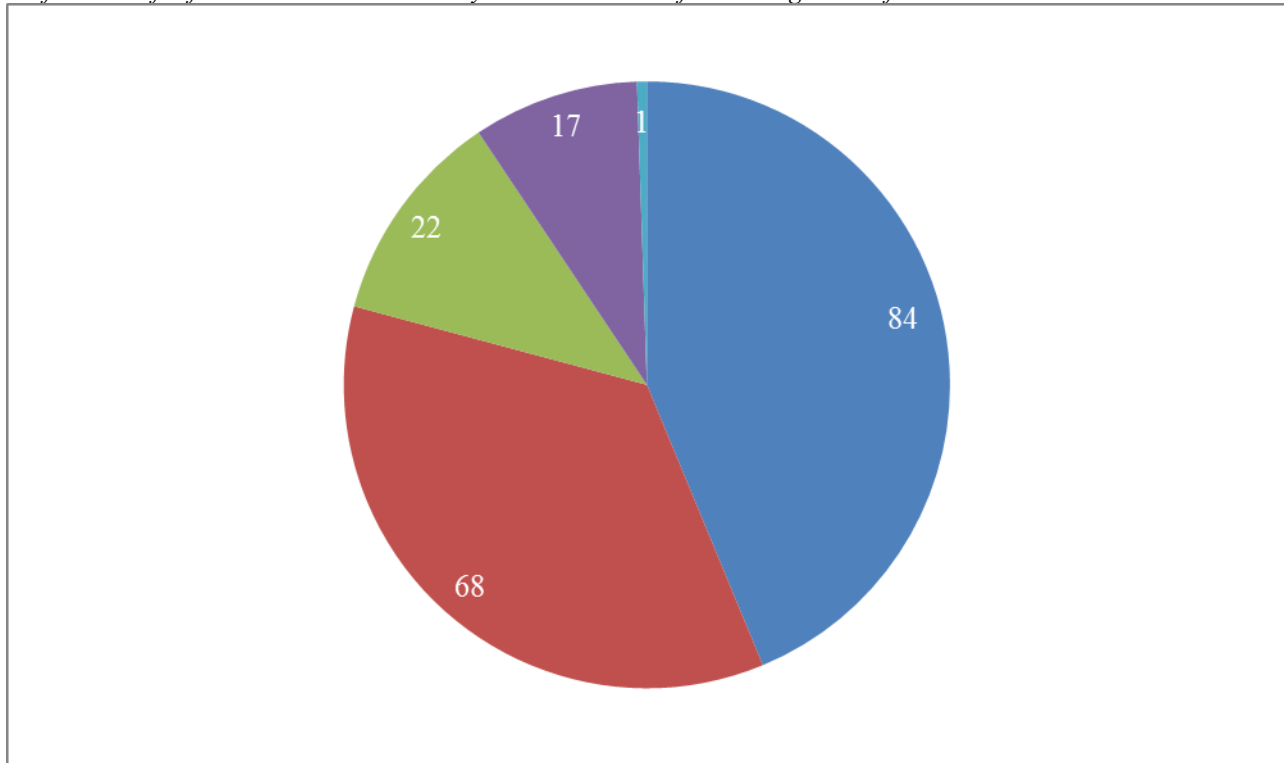


Figure 5.3 shows distance students were asked about which information channel they use first while meeting their information needs. The result indicates that most of the students 84% used library followed by Internet 68%, bookstore 22 and consulting knowledgeable person in field 17% respectively, they used first for meeting their needed information..

*Table 5.7 Tools used by distance students to search out information (N=194)*

Tools used to search	f	%
Library website	80	41.23
Search engines	88	45.36
Journals	12	6.18
Research repositories	14	7.21
Magazine	0	

Table 5.7 show the importance of different tools of information sources for searching out information. Search engines came at the top with a 45%, closely followed by library websites 41%. Use of different tools among students, search engines and library websites were the most important individual tool for searching information.



Table 5.8 *Methods for getting required information from the library*

Methods	F	%
Going to library personally	88	45.36
Calling the library	19	9.79
Sending Emails to the library	32	16.49
Other	34	17.52
Total	194	100

Table 5.8 shows methods for getting information from library by distance students. Most of the students 45% prefer going to library personally, 17% using other methods, and 16% sending emails to the library respectively. This figure is a big evidence for the concerns that distance students prefer going to library personally for getting information than other methods.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Academic libraries usually spend a significant amount of their budgets each year for acquiring a variety of information sources including online databases, books, journals, reports and reference sources, both in print and electronic formats. Emergence of new information formats and delivery channels are resulting in a rapid transformation in the information landscape. Although the surveyed students preferred lectures and using digital information sources, the low use of online databases was a matter of concern. There is a need for libraries to strengthen their promotion and user-education programmes to create more awareness about information resources available to students and instructors. It was also noted that the students were frequently using library, web search engines etc. for getting study-related information. Although the Internet provides fast and easy access to innumerable information sources, not all these sources are comprehensive, current, authentic and reliable. Academic libraries and business schools can collaborate to develop basic information literacy skills among their students which will be useful in the proper identification, selection, acquisition, evaluation and use of high quality information. This knowledge will also be useful for these students at their workplace as the use of quality information will help them undertake their responsibilities more effectively.

This study has been conducted in order to pinpoint information needs and information seeking behavior of distance students. The following recommendations could be of great use to policy makers and library/university management in providing quality library services.

1. The result of this study clearly showed that the majority of students need lectures as main kind of information. Off-Campus students faced obstacle regarding lectures that are required for their study and related activities. This suggests that distance students need to be provided online or web based lectures related to their programs, to help them and enable them to fulfill their educational needs.
2. The majority of students' data showed that the library as well as the internet was an important information channel they mostly used for meeting their needed information. Both information channels are easily accessible for regular students but distance students may not be able to access these channels. It is suggested that IT centers/internet cafes should be provided for distance students in each district.
3. The study result clearly showed that most of the students go to the library personally. It may be due to lack of library remote services. Therefore, it is imperative to start some online chat services, following the format of commercial companies call centers, through the library website or other social networks.
4. Remote online access to HEC digital library databases related to the study program should be provided to all students.
5. Modern, well established libraries and high quality library services successfully support the education programs. It is recommended that well established and comprehensive libraries should be providing in each and every city at a central point.

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