

DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY FOR ELIMINATING GENDER DISPARITY IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of distance education in addressing the issue of gender disparity in Pakistan. The study aimed to (a). analyze the present situation of gender disparity in education sector at different levels in Pakistan. (b). examine the role of distance education in eliminating gender discrimination in Pakistan. (c). evaluate the impact of distance education on gender empowerment. (d) identify the problems in addressing gender issues through distance education in Pakistan. (e). suggest an appropriate strategy for eliminating gender disparity through distance education in Pakistan. This study was conducted in Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan Regions. The study consisted on three populations: (i). B.A level female students, (ii). their parents and (iii). academicians of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad. Researchers adopted stratified sampling technique for collecting data from students & their parents and administrators/tutors. The researchers used questionnaires (for 600 students, 60 parents and 60 administrators/tutors) developed on five point rating (likert) scale and semi-structured interview schedules as research tools to collect data. Researchers interviewed 60 students, 15 parents and 15 administrators/tutors (20 students, five parents and five administrators/tutors from each region respectively). The data collected was analyzed through quantitative (mean score) as well as qualitative approaches. The data supported by the interviews were analyzed and included in the tables. The study concluded that distance education is being extensively used in Pakistan. It provides equal opportunities to all individuals of the society to "Education for All". It is feasible for female population catering their academic needs particularly those of the culturally restricted areas. It is an appropriate strategy to address the issue of gender discrimination in Pakistan.

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INTRODUCTION

Education seems one of the major enterprises of the 21st century to cater the needs of individuals in global economy and knowledge society. In 21st century's competitive environments all individuals (either male or female) of the society have to play their roles for productive life and successful survival that is likely to fit in the Darwin's theory of "Survival of the fittest" in the world at present (AIOU, 2005). Therefore, developed countries are heading the developing countries. Developing countries like Pakistan are grounded in multiple problems and issues such as; illiteracy, poverty, gender discrimination and violence of human rights.

Among others gender discrimination is the major issue of Pakistan at present. The Pakistani society is male dominated and male members are enjoying all the prestige of the society. Female population in Pakistan has been a neglected community although it is 49% of the total population. Currently the literacy rate of Pakistan is 54% of which the female literacy rate is 42% only and in rural areas the female literacy rate is 29% (Government of Pakistan, 2007-a). Same situation exists in other social and developmental sectors. Formal education cannot cope with the demand of education of rural females. Distance education may be linked to the issue of access to education in order to reduce gender disparity in the country. It gives freedom to learn to all individuals of the country on their own pace, place and choice. It is questing to eliminate the gender disparity in education sector at all levels (Rashid, 2002).

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Pakistan is a developing country confronting with a number of problems: poverty, illiteracy, intolerance, unemployment and human rights violence and gender discrimination. Among others, the problem of gender disparity and inequality seems more crucial and pressing in Pakistan. It exists almost in all sectors of society. According to Coleman (2004), "the country's skewed sex ratio of 108 men to 100 women is a reflection, in part of higher female infant mortality and the overall more privileged treatment of boys." It indicates that male babies are looked after in better way than their counterparts. They are provided proper food & nutrition, medication and other privileged facilities. It indicates the discriminatory attitude of parents and society towards children even in infancy. Male babies are looked after in better way than female babies.

It is not limited only to the children, their look after and the ways & practices of bringing them up but it is common for all age groups, at all levels and in all sectors. For example, in 1991-92 about 16% of women aged 10 years and over were in labor force. In 1997 women constituted only 28% of the country's labour force. The female labor force participation rate was 45% in rural areas and 17% in urban areas (Pakistan Integrated House Hold Surveys 1990-91). Participation of Pakistani women in formal employment sector in 1999 was reported as low as 2% (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 1999). In rural areas women work with their men in agriculture sector along with household activities. In 1980's the women's' participation rate in agriculture sector was 73% and it is unrecognized

work. Similarly, men head 90% of the Pakistani households (Pakistan Integrated House Hold Surveys 2004-05).

One may see many similarities and contrasts & differences in Pakistan: in its geographical conditions, economy, land and culture. Each of the four provinces of Pakistan is unique with cultural climate, language and norms, values & traditions. There are plains, deserts, rivers, mountains and seaports in the country. All these would have an impact on the life of people and reflected in the temperament, traditions and living styles of the people living in different parts of the country. For example, “the women in NWFP are backward because of conservative social set-up” (Nadeem, 2003). The same conditions may be seen in other provinces like Sindh, Balochistan and southern Punjab.

In education and literacy the situation is much serious and needs immediate attention to take initiatives to check the disparity. At present the literacy rate of Pakistan is measured 54% of which the female literacy rate is 42% only and in rural areas the female literacy rate is 29% (Government of Pakistan, 2007-a). However, according to UNESCO (2007), “the gender disparity is extremely wide with male literacy over 65%and female lagging far behind with less than 40%.” Similarly, the overall literacy rate for 15 and plus age group is measured to be 52% indicating disparity between male (65%) and female (38%) literacy rates (Government of Pakistan, 2007-b).

The female literacy rate in Balochistan and NWFP is as low as 20% and 26% respectively (Government of Pakistan, 2007-a). It is the case with educational institutions, physical facilities in these institutions, ratio of male & female teachers’ job opportunities qualification of teachers.

Table-1
Sex-Wise Number of Educational Institutions and Enrolment for 2005-06

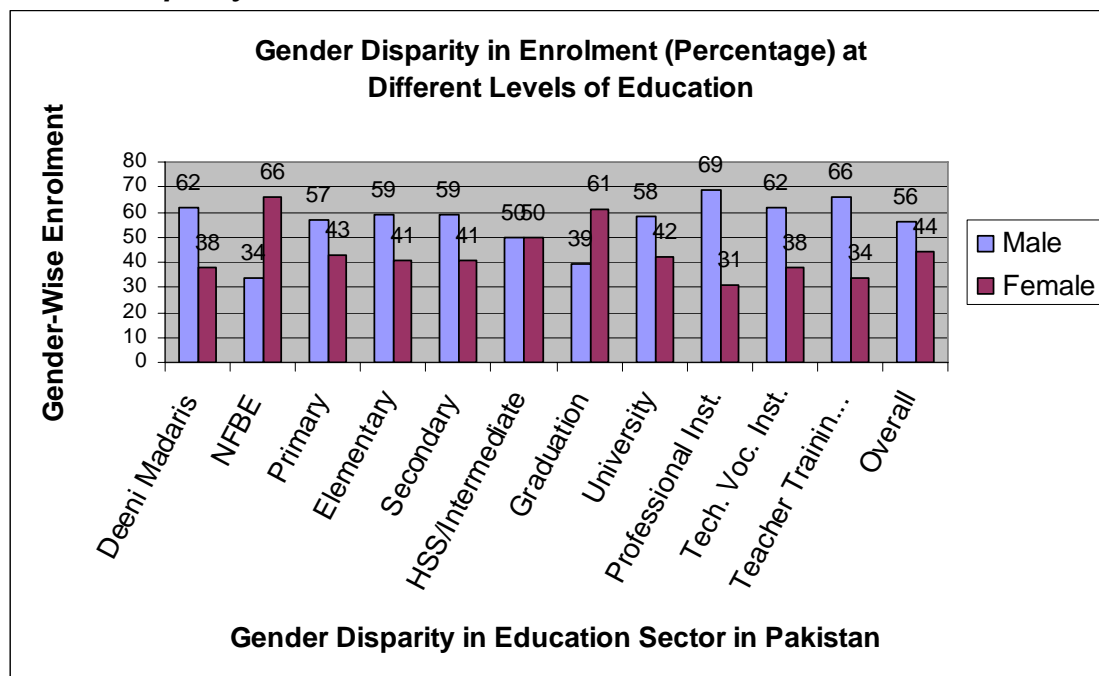
Category of Institution	Number of Institutions		Enrolment	
	Total	Female	Total	Female
Primary	1,57,600	45,900	2,52,26,000	1,09,44,000
Middle/Elementary	39,400	7,800	53,18,000	21,89,000
Secondary Schools	22,900	3,900	21,81,000	9,02,000
Higher Secondary/Intermediate	2996	1132	853,535	427,803
Degree Colleges	1135	438	325,993	198,208
Secondary Vocational	643	258	1,81,000	39,000
Arts & Science colleges	1,208	529	10,47,000	52,2000

Professional Colleges	431	24	2,07,290	50,500
Universities/Degree Awarding Institutions	116	4	4,24,012	1,78,983

Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2005-06; & Economic Survey of Pakistan 2006-07

Table-1 depicts the picture of educational opportunities that formal system of education offers to the female population that is almost half of the total population of the country (Government of Pakistan, 2007-a). The number of female institutions in Pakistan is obviously low than their counterparts even at primary level. There may be different reasons behind the phenomenon. These may include the unawareness about the importance of education particularly female education, poverty, lack of facilities and infrastructure, lack of trained manpower, lack of continuity of the policy/ policies, political instability and above all the rigid cultural & value system. Therefore, it calls to address the issue on war footing basis to transform the society in terms of culture and values through education and literacy empowering women by raising their socio-economic status in the community. It seems appropriate and feasible through distance education system that would support the formal system of education.

Graph-1
Gender disparity in education sector



Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2005-06

Education may be used as catalyzing agent for social change and development and it can bring about such changes through the full participation of both the sexes eliminating gender gap. But unluckily, gender gap is wide and demands immediate attention to address the issue. This gender gap is obvious from the enrolment of male and female students at various levels. The total male enrolment is 57% whereas the total female enrolment is 43% and it is same for primary education. There may be different factors that contribute towards low enrolment of females but poverty, lack of facilities and socio-cultural norms are most pertinent.

People living in rural areas give less importance to female education and they prefer educating their sons than daughters. In some cases they send their daughters only for primary education to facilitate **Quranic Literacy**. Therefore, an increase of two percent in boys' enrolment and decrease in girls' enrolment is obvious at elementary and secondary levels with 59% and 41% enrolment of male and female students respectively.

After matriculation, parents consider it important to continue their daughters' education. Sometimes girls may insist their parents to continue education, which they accede & allow them, continue education. On the other hand educated parents want their daughter learn to live a prosperous and productive life. Therefore, enrolment at intermediate level is 50%: 50% and 61% & 39% at degree/graduate level for male & female respectively. But at university level male participation is greater than female as it is 58% for males and 42% for females. It is the case with professional institutions with 69% male enrolment and 31% female enrolment, but in technical vocational institutions it is 62% for males and 38% for females, in teacher training institutions it is 66% and 34% for male and female respectively. NFBE male 34%, female 66%, Deeni Madaris male 62% and female 38% (Government of Pakistan, 2007-a & b).

It can be seen that the situation of gender discrimination in education sector particularly at secondary level and beyond is serious and disappointing. It is alarming for national development. It calls for an alternate strategy to address the issue in an appropriate way and bring the neglected population in the mainstream of development.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

Distance education seems appropriate to address the issue of gender discrimination and to provide opportunities of equal access to quality education at all levels to all individuals in developing countries like Pakistan. It seems feasible for providing education to female population even in culturally restricted areas where women are not allowed to go out of their homes; like tribal areas of North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Balochistan, Sindh and southern Punjab. It can cater educational needs of the society at the doorstep on equal basis and frees learners from time and place restrictions through its unique instructional strategies.

ESTABLISHMENT OF ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY

Keeping in view the above characteristics of distance education, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad was envisioned and established in 1974. The university is offering different programmes through distance approach. It is addressing the issue of limited access for unprivileged and neglected population of the country catering their educational needs. The university is gender friendly accommodating both the sexes throughout the country in all disciplines and programmes. According to AIOU (2006) "distance education in Pakistan is particularly suited to female population as it affords them an opportunity to study at home".

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY

AIOU adopts distance-teaching approach with various instructional techniques. These include learning packages; self-instructional material, face-to-face tutorials, assignments writing, radio and television broadcasts, workshops etc (AIOU, 2005, Iqbal, 2007).

GENDER PARITY AT AIOU

Gender parity at AIOU can be seen from the enrolment data as given in the AIOU Vice-Chancellor's Report 2005-06 as:

Table-2
Course and student enrolment at AIOU for the year 2005

Region/ Province	Male		Female		Total	
	Course Enrolment	Student Enrolment	Course Enrolment	Student Enrolment	Course Enrolment	Student Enrolment
NWFP	124590	40959	10521	30207	230411	71166
Balochistan	19521	7390	10628	3673	30149	11063
Sind	76868	30958	34070	12806	110938	43764
Punjab	532859	199507	598046	218179	1130905	417686
AJK	61025	24240	87589	33216	148614	57456
Northern Areas	12278	4843	12590	5062	24868	9905
Federal Capital	55847	20444	43276	15893	99123	36337
Total	882988	328341	892020	319036	1775008	647377

Source: AIOU Vice-Chancellor's Report 2005-06

The course and students' enrolment in different programmes and courses of the female students is less than their counterparts; male students. However in culturally restricted areas and regions such as Balochistan, rural Sindh, Northern areas and NWFP it is encouraging. It seems that people prefer education of their females (daughters, sisters) through distance education mode rather keeping them illiterates.

Table-3
Course and student enrolment at AIOU for the year 2006

Region/ Province	Male		Female		Total	
	Course Enrolment	Student Enrolment	Course Enrolment	Student Enrolment	Course Enrolment	Student Enrolment
NWFP	198566	58752	183996	47926	382562	106678
Balochistan	25232	9534	14373	4791	39605	14325
Sind	84266	33313	38931	14094	123197	47407
Punjab	656675	243443	775686	265772	1432361	509215
AJK	88117	31506	113191	38262	201308	69768
Northern Areas	13777	5277	14561	5423	28338	10700
Federal Capital	60014	21877	48638	16970	108652	38847
Total	1126647	403702	1189376	393238	2316023	796940

Source: AIOU Vice-Chancellor's Report 2005-06

It is clear from table-2 that there was a significant increase in the course and students' enrolment of female participation from all areas and regions particularly culturally restricted areas and regions of Pakistan in 2006 than the previous year 2005 (table-3). It is very pleasurable thought provoking that distance education can address the issue of gender disparity in an effective way in developing countries like Pakistan where formal system offers limited access to learning for female population.

It is clear from the data/enrolment that course-wise female participation rate is 51% and that of the male participation rate is 49% at AIOU (AIOU, 2006). It is greater than formal system and proves that distance education in Pakistan can cater all individuals of the society irrespective of their sex and age, cast or creed.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Pakistan is a developing country facing different problems in all developmental sectors. But the problems of poverty, illiteracy and gender disparity are serious and affecting the nation in deteriorating its image in International community at a large scale. The formal system of education provides limited access to education particularly to the disadvantaged people living rural areas (Iqbal, 2007) with all miseries of their lives. There may exist gender inequalities in terms of educational facilities for female population: compromising and living with such miserable conditions.

It is likely to call for an alternate strategy and system to address the issue providing the neglected population (females) opportunities of education through flexible approach in wider context. Therefore, distance education may be used (and is being used in Pakistan) to supplement the formal system providing

learning opportunities to all through its multi-media approach and democratic philosophy grounded in the slogan, “ Education for All”.

Objectives of the Study

Researchers conducted the present study with objectives to (a). analyze the present situation of gender disparity in education sector at different levels in Pakistan. (b). examine the role of distance education in eliminating gender discrimination in Pakistan. (c). evaluate the impact of distance education on gender empowerment. (d) identify the problems in addressing gender issues through distance education in Pakistan. (e). suggest an appropriate strategy for eliminating gender disparity through distance education in Pakistan.

Methodology of the Study

The study was descriptive in nature and the researchers adopted survey approach. The study was conducted in Punjab province. The study consisted on three populations: (i). B.A level female students, (ii). their parents and (iii). academicians of Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad. Researchers adopted stratified and convenient sampling technique for collecting data from students & their parents and academicians respectively. The samples of the study comprised of 600 students, 60 parents and 60 academicians as given below:

Table-4
Population and sampling

Region/Area	Students	Parents	Administrators & Tutors
Bahawalpur Region	200	20	20
Multan Region	200	20	20
Deera Ghazi Khan Region	200	20	20
TOTAL	600	60	60

The researchers used questionnaires developed on five point rating (likert) scale and a semi-structured interview schedules as research tools to collect data from the respondents (students, their parents and administrators & tutors). Researchers interviewed 60 students, 15 parents and 15 administrators/tutors (20 students, five parents and five administrators/tutors from each region respectively). Similarly, researchers personally administered the finalized (through pilot testing) questionnaires to the respondents to collect the data.

The data collected was analyzed through quantitative (mean score) as well as qualitative approaches. The data supported by the interviews were analyzed and included in the tables. Data is given in annexure at the end. The data collected through questionnaires and results drawn out are given below:

Results of the Study

Following results were drawn out from Interview and the data analysis:

1. The admission in different programmes at Allama Iqbal Open University is open to all individuals of society promoting opportunities of “Education for All” irrespective of their cast and creed. According to the respondents admission is advertised in the media and prospectus are available at the regional campuses/centers, which facilitate the students particularly females of rural areas. Females of all age groups can get admission in any programme according to their eligibility (Annexure-A).
2. The system of distance education promotes equal access to learning resources; however, some female students reported difficulty to have an access to the regional campus and /or study center. Similarly, Tutorials for different courses are arranged at study centers that are far from the student’s homes and it creates difficulty particularly for female students of culturally restricted and poor areas to go out of their homes and attend the tutorials. It was also reported that study centers and regional campuses/centers are not appropriately equipped with proper library facility. Students face difficulty and fell embarrassment in searching some additional material or reference books (Annexure-A).
3. Allama Iqbal Open University develops and uses correspondence material for teaching through distance approach. The respondents reported that the language of the material is easy and the concepts are understandable with logical sequence. The material is self-instructional & self-explanatory supported with self-activities to develop skill and competencies in the learners. It is prepared to address the learner’s needs in 21st century. The format of the material/books is appropriate with suitable font size for learners of different age groups (Annexure-A).
4. Allama Iqbal Open University mostly uses the print media and material therefore, it encompasses and relies mostly on correspondence teaching engaging learners in self-directed study at their homes or the place of work. However, it supports the distance teaching with face-to-face tutorial for each course. The medium of instruction (Urdu except English language) at graduation level suits the learners (Annexure-B).
5. Allama Iqbal Open University adopts multi-media approach for effective teaching of the learners. Currently, it is using appropriately the electronic media to supplement the print material/media such as radio, television, Internet. University also prepares Cassettes and CDs of different programmes/ lectures, which are mailed to the learners for their help in studies at home. The respondents reported that timings and duration of the telecast are appropriate. Presenter uses easy language. Such

- programmes/telecasts are helpful for the learners in understanding different concepts and preparing for the examination (Annexure-B).
6. Students support services is one of the basic components of distance education. AIOU has set up a network of regional campuses/centers to provide such support services. However, respondents reported that study centers were away from their homes and they faced problems in having an access to attend the tutorials. They also faced problems in seeking individual help from tutor(s) or regional campus/centers for their studies or choice of courses/programme. Regional campus did not maintain a proper library or resource center for students help (Annexure-B).
 7. The respondents reported that guidance and counseling cell is established at regional campuses/centers, but counseling sessions at regional campuses were rarely arranged for individual or group counseling. Counseling creates and sustains motivation but appropriate counseling sessions regarding the selection of programme or courses are not organized (Annexure-C).
 8. Learner's performance is evaluated through continuous assessment of the assignments during the semester but tutors do not give their comments on the assignments to improve the standards. Assignment writing encourages learners developing in them skills and competency of learning. AIOU holds an appropriate examination system that relates to the study material. Respondents seem satisfies with evaluation system of Open University but they are not satisfied with tutors (Annexure-C).
 9. Respondents reported some problems that they are facing at present. According to them they face problems in receiving study material from the university and intimation about tutors. Tutors do not bother to return back the marked assignments therefore; they face problems in gaining guidance from the tutor's comments and to improve their studies for the next assignment(s) or final examination. Facility of proper library is not available at the regional campus and study centers to cater the academic needs of the learners because of which they face problems to go to other cities with some relative. They were also of the view that tutors were unaware of the distance education system therefore, they are unable to guide distance learner in a proper way rather they need training (Annexure-C).

CONCLUSION

Distance education is being extensively used in Pakistan. It provides equal opportunities to all individuals of the society to "Education for All". It is feasible for female population catering their academic needs particularly of the culturally restricted areas. It is an appropriate strategy to address the issue of gender discrimination in Pakistan.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure-A

Opinion of the respondents about admission, access to learning resources and correspondence material

S. No	Domain	Theme	Students	Parents	Administrators & Tutors
1	Admission	Timely advertisement about admission	3.8	4.1	3.8
		Easy process	4.1	3.9	4.2
		Availability of prospectus at regional centre/campus	3.9	3.8	4.3
			3.7	3.5	3.9
		Flexible criteria	4.1	3.9	3.7
		Variety of programmes	4.2	3.8	4.1
		All age groups	4.00	3.9	4.00
		Open to all	4.1	4.3	4.00
2	Access	Equal opportunities	3.7	3.9	4.4
		Regional office	3.5	3.00	4.00
		Study centers	3.6	3.1	3.8
		Tutors & tutorials	2.1	1.9	3.7
		Library	2.2	2.00	2.5
		Examination centers	3.7	3.9	4.1
3	Correspondence Material	Easy language	3.8	3.4	4.1
		Understandable Concepts	4.00	3.5	3.9
		Logical sequence	3.6	3.2	4.00
		Self-instructional	3.8	3.5	3.9
		Activity-based	4.2	3.7	4.00
		Reasonable font size	3.4	3.1	3.8
	Caters the needs of learners	3.9	4.2	4.1	

Annexure-B**Opinion of the respondents about instructional methodology, media and students' support services in distance education**

S. No	Domain	Theme	Students	Parents	Administrators & Tutors
4	Instructional methodology	Medium of instruction is suitable	3.9	4.1	4.3
		Correspondence teaching	4.1	3.9	4.2
		Face-to-face teaching	3.4	3.7	3.9
		Self directed study	3.8	3.8	4.0
		Home study	3.7	4.2	3.8
		Flexible learning	3.4	3.8	3.9
5	Media Support	Appropriate media used are:			
		Radio	3.9	4.0	4.2
		Television	4.0	3.9	4.0
		Internet	3.5	3.1	3.5
		CDs & cassettes	3.9	3.5	4.0
		Appropriate timings of telecast	4.0	3.6	3.9
6	Support Services	Easy language of presenters	3.7	3.7	4.2
		Duration of programmes	3.9	3.6	3.9
		Programmes are related to the material	3.8	3.2	4.1
6	Support Services	Regional office	3.0	2.9	3.9
		Study centers	2.9	3.2	3.5
		Tutors & tutorials	2.5	2.8	3.6
		Individual help	2.1	1.9	3.8
		Media support	3.7	4.0	4.2
		Library facility	2.2	2.2	3.5

Annexure-C***Opinion of the respondents about guidance & counselling services, evaluation and other problems in distance education***

S. No	Domain	Theme	Students	Parents	Administrators & Tutors
7	Guidance & Counselling	Counselling cell at regional office	3.2	2.9	3.9
		Counselling sessions at regional office/study centre	2.8	3.1	3.7
		Provision of individual counselling	2.6	2.9	3.5
		Expertise of counsellor	2.8	2.5	3.5
		Effective counselling techniques	3.0	2.8	3.8
		Suitable timings of counselling	2.2	2.9	3.9
		Counselling in programme/ course selection	2.3	2.7	3.8
		Counselling creates & sustains motivation	3.6	4.0	4.1
8	Evaluation	Evaluation through continuous assignments	4.0	3.9	4.2
		Tutors give comments on assignments	2.5	3.0	3.3
		Writing assignments is encouraging	3.8	3.7	4.0
		Appropriateness of examination system	3.9	4.0	4.3
		Relevance between material and examination questions	4.1	3.8	4.1

9	Problems	Difficult language	4.1	3.9	3.5
		Difficulty in receiving study material	3.9	4.0	3.2
		Delayed tutor's intimation	4.1	3.9	3.2
		Difficulty in receiving back marked assignments	4.1	3.8	3.6
		Non availability of library at regional office	4.1	4.2	3.6
		Delayed result intimation	4.2	3.9	3.2
		Lack of competent tutors during tutorials	4.0	3.8	3.2