Student Support in Higher Education: Lessons Learnt and Challenges Ahead

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ABSTRACT

Today every country is striving to enhance higher education qualitatively and quantitatively, because the economy of any country is directly influenced by the “intellectual capital” of that country. An important factor affecting the quality and quantity of higher education is the support that an institution provides to its students. The present study is an attempt to find the achievements of as well as challenges to the student support services in higher education institutions [HEIs] of developing countries with particular example of those in Pakistan. Employing the Delphi technique, the study explored the (a) achievements, (b) the problems and issues, and (c) means to address problems and issues in the student support services in HEIs of Pakistan. It was found that the HEIs in Pakistan were facing many challenges as the achievements were less than the requirement. Allocation of proper resources and restructuring the system of support are the most important means to address the challenges.

Keywords: Available Services, Challenges, Delphi Technique, Developing Countries, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Intellectual Capital, Student Support

INTRODUCTION

The higher education institutions [HEIs] are the “gatekeepers, disseminators and creators” of knowledge (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.2). The most important pillars of HEIs are research, teaching and student support services (Berlin Declaration on the Social Dimension, 2011, p.1). However, the lack of students support services by the institutions of higher education has been one of the major barriers for many students to achieve higher education (Dennis, 2011). Therefore, the world community in article 10 of the 1998 World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century recognized the satisfaction of students’ needs as a vital instrument for effective delivery of quality higher education (World Conference on Higher Education, 1998). The rapid increase in enrollment as well as diversity of students,
competition among institutions to attract more students, and focus on students’ retention forced the higher educational institutions to provide all-embracing student support services (Ar-ambewela & Maringe, 2012; Morgan, 2011). These services contribute well in the national development by increasing the students’ retention (Trainor, n.d., p.4) as well as the success rate (UNESCO, 2002, p. 2) of students in higher education. Therefore, the students’ affairs in higher education have been hotly debated among the scholars and practitioners (Fried, 2011).

Student support services are crucial for the success of students (Howell & Wilcken, 2009). It entails a continuous role of student support services professionals to ensure active learning of each and every student getting higher education (Creamer, Winston, & Miller, 2001). Sewart’s (1993) apt suggestion, that student support in distance education must admit and address the countless needs of the learners, is equally applicable to all the institutions of higher education. Students are the central figures of the educational institutions as these institutions are established for the students. However, the academic institutions direct modest efforts for supporting their students (Haddad & Altbach, 2009, p.xii). Therefore, greater efforts are needed to facilitate students in their cognitive as well as emotional growth. The HEIs must act as loco parentis (a parent to its students) for all-embracing development of the students.

Pakistan is striving to become a knowledge based economy by upgrading its HEIs. The 21st century has witnessed massive changes in higher education sector of Pakistan. The Higher Education Commission [HEC] in Pakistan has been making hard efforts to enhance the standard of Pakistani HEIs to make them at par with the world’s leading institutions. However, the area of student support services provided by these institutions has not got as much importance as needed. Most of the universities do not have “official, designated student affairs offices” (Notta, 2009, p.251). Even, in the ranking process of universities by HEC of Pakistan, the student support services (except provision of library books and computers) are not included in the ranking criteria (Higher Education Commission, 2012).

In Pakistan, there has been much work on the student support services provided by Allama Iqbal Open University [AIOU] (For example, Wattoo, 2003; Iqbal, 2004; Awan, 2006; Farooq, 2006; Nasima, 2009, Hashmi, 2010). Nasima (2009) evaluated the student support services provided by the regional offices of AIOU. She found that majority of tutors, students and regional directors were satisfied with the student support services provided. However, she also suggested enhancing individualized attention, number of tutorials, and timely rate of return of assignments would improve the student support services at AIOU.

However, the area of student support services provided by the formal HEIs of Pakistan has not been extensively explored. The few studies conducted in Pakistan (Isani, 2001; Iqbal, 2004; Khan, 2006) have emphasized on need of better student support services in HEIs of Pakistan. A. Iqbal (2004), in his doctoral research, found limited access for the students, lack of effective academic and administrative support, scarcity of physical resources, and lack of university-industry linkage as major problems of higher education in Pakistan. Isani (2001) suggested that, providing loan facilities for the students to get higher education, sufficient infrastructure for physical education, facilities like computer and internet, and support for the research as well as enhancing the university-industry partnership was essential for improving quality of higher education in Pakistan. Khan (2006, p. 34) considers “inadequate funding” for student support as one of the main reasons of low quality of higher education in Pakistan.

Therefore, this study was undertaken to explore the challenges and issues relating to student support services provided by HEIs in Pakistan. The main focus was to find out; (a) the available student support services provided by HEIs in Pakistan, (b) the student support services still needed in HEIs in Pakistan, (c) the problems and issues of the student support services in HEIs in Pakistan, and (d) measures to address problems and issues in the student support services in HEIs in Pakistan.
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