



RESEARCH PAPER

**Administrative and Pedagogical Challenges in Using Aaghi LMS:
Perspectives of M. Phil and Ph. D Students at Allama Iqbal Open
University, Islamabad, Pakistan**

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ABSTRACT

Current study explored the administrative and pedagogical challenges faced by M.Phil and PhD students while using the LMS. Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU) is considered as a top ranked distance learning university of Pakistan. After COVID-19 AIU shifted many educational programs on online learning management information system known as "Aaghi Portal". Five validated interview questions was conducted from 27 M.Phil and PhD students from session 2025. From deductive thematic analysis the qualitative data were analyzed. The results obtained from the study indicated that most of the students had faced different managerial and pedagogical issues while using Aaghi LMS i.e. connecting issues with the system, unable to handle the system related problems, serious pedagogical and learning challenges due to lecture delivery, outdated course contents and lack of engagement . They demanded technical support, empathy, better communication mechanism and curriculum updates. Departments of ICT and student advisory may play their role in minimizing students' challenges.

KEYWORDS AIU, ODL, Aaghi LMS, CMS

Introduction

Distance learning education has become very popular after COVID-19 in all over the world. Different public and private sector universities are established at that time that promotes distance learning education. These universities are facilitating the students through different digital platforms. According to Urooj (2011) Allama Iqbal Open University which was a popular distance education university established in Islamabad, Pakistan in 1974 is one of the prominent university promoting distance learning education. Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU) is one of the leading university in Pakistan which was modeled on the line of United Kingdom Open University has a 1.4 million students all over the world studying in different academic programs. AIU is offering different courses from Matric to PhD level. Shah (2023) elaborated that in March 2020 during the pandemic situation was hit all over the world AIU decided to provide a digital platform named "Aaghi LMS" for its teachers and students for learning purpose. During that time, a large number of students were facilitated and taught by this LMS.

Moreover, Shah (2023) reported that Aaghi LMS is one of the modern digital learning management system through which students can listen, record and watch online lectures. Students can participate and present their ideas with the course instructors. All the students were given unique IDs and passwords in order to login the system and use the digital platform. Microsoft Teams which is a very popular video conferring tool embedded in the Aaghi LMS. After successful login with the Aaghi LMS, students can interacted with the interface of Microsoft Teams in which there are different many exciting features are available. Students can watch video lecture, listen audio lecture, participate in discussion, present and access many different learning material provided by the course instructor

Since deploying any digital system in any organization is always risky and can be challenging as the users have to shift their work on new platform. According to Shahzadi (2022) when AIOU shifted the learning process from manual system to digital system, a lot of students faced different challenges during working with the Aaghi portal.

The current study explored the different challenges faced by M.Phil. and PhD students during their course of studies while using Aaghi LMS. The study focuses on the pedagogical and administrative challenges faced by the students i.e. interaction with the system, connectivity, response time, technical issues with the system. It also covers the pedagogical challenges related with the course material, lecture delivery, teaching and course contents of M.Phil. and PhD programs.

The current study aimed to explore the pedagogical and managerial challenges faced by M.Phil. and PhD students of Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan with the digital platform during their course of studies. In the field of distance learning, AIOU has its prominent position and made many achievements in the field of educational technology. From BS level to PhD, all the students use Aaghi LMS portal during their studies. Due to diverse population of students of university from all over the Pakistan and also in foreign countries, student faced different managerial and pedagogical challenges while using the Aaghi LMS portal. The current study explored these challenges related to pedagogical and managerial contexts. It covered interaction, connectivity and other challenges about the system. It also covered the learning challenges i.e. course workload, lecture delivery, course contents and other challenges related to learning and pedagogy. On the basis of the findings, the study recommended different solutions to overcome these challenges.

Literature Review

In Pakistan, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) and the Virtual University of Pakistan (VU) are the two leading universities offering distance learning programs nationwide and also in foreign countries. Both universities developed Learning Management Systems (LMS) to facilitate online classes, workshops, and digital content delivery. Urooj (2011) conducted a comparative study of their pedagogical practices, recommending that AIOU expand its digital offerings while VU incorporate face-to-face sessions into its programs for all their students.

Shahzadi (2022) reported the effectiveness and efficiency of the Aaghi portal for different graduate and postgraduate students. She suggested that the system is very effective and has the ability to promote the higher education. On the other hand Shahzadi (2022) also reported different challenges faced by the system i.e. limited digital literacy in the students that are using the system specially in remote areas. She also reported that poor internet connectivity also has a bad effect on the system performance. She recommended the structured capacity building training program on the usability and functionality of the system.

Aaghi LMS of Allama Iqbal Open University was also examined by Shah (2023) and elaborated that it has a very modern and efficient with good screen layout. Since it was integrated with Microsoft Teams, the platform enables the students to attend live sessions, workshops. Students can also download lecture materials, notes and other supportive material. Aaghi LMS is technically advanced system but Shah (2023) emphasized that students should develop digital skills in order to fully benefit all the features of the system. Moreover, Shah(2023) also discussed the effectiveness of AIOUs' Aaghi Portal for both tutors as well as of students. According to him the LMS has playing a very sustaining role in education during different crises. His study also highlighted the relationship between efficient information sharing and ease of use for students and tutors.

Ayaz (2020) discussed the model used by AIOU adopted by e-learning. He described that AIOU has been delivering computer based education through web platforms, training modules and video confessing. He concluded that AIOU digital system was very cost-effective and efficient and providing a unique learning environment. The digital system is saving time and resources of students during students' learning achievement. While discussing the accessibility of AIOU digital plate form and specially web site of the university same kind of study was also published in 2024 when Ashfaq (2024) presented his study and concluded that the web site of AIOU was more inclusive and efficient than Virtual University web site. However, it was observed that there is more cultural and geographical diversity was seen in AIOUs' students as it is more historic and bigger university than VU.

Digital systems used in universities for higher education are not easy to implement, there are different challenges faced by the universities in this regard. Iqbal (2012) presented his study to address the different challenges in higher education while using different digital platforms. According to him poor quality textbooks, lack of classroom support and management and insufficient system for student monitoring and learning outcomes are major challenges faced by the digital systems in Pakistani universities while adapting digital systems.

Ajmal (2019) carried out a case study on AIOU's system assessment mechanisms, recommending the development of a structured framework to identify and address student needs, thereby creating new pathways for effective learning. Another study conducted by Afzal (2024) on AIOU's LMS reported the usefulness of the system but it is a matter of fact the study also identifying different gaps in student teacher interaction while conducting the sessions through Aaghi LMS. He reported that a large number of students are satisfied with the system but it was also noted that they were are depended on the familiarity with education. Without the knowledge of background technology, they were not able to work with the system.

Material and Methods

The design of research study was transcendental phenomenology. It focused on the judgment of study behavior of M.Phil. land Ph.D. students of Allama Iqbal Open University during their study in the university.

Sheehan (2014), discussed the transcendental phenomenology (TPh) in his study as it was developed by Husserl. It is a qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experiences. The approach guided us to explore human experiences and their consequences on national phenomena. The study is qualitative in nature and processed the interview data of participants.

Context: M.Phil. and Ph.D. Pedagogical and Administrative challenges in Aaghi LMS

. AIOU provides Aaghi LMS for all M.Phil. and PhD students for distance learning education. All online programs are shifted on this modern system. The basic idea of LMS is to facilitate the students and they can continue their learning process with much ease and comfort. Aaghi LMS is a modern Learning Management Information System in which students can take lectures, present, study the uploaded material and participate in workshop.

Participation

There were twenty-seven M.Phil. and Ph.D. students of spring 2025 session who participated in research study and responded on interview questions.

Data collection tool

For qualitative data collection, online interview was conducted in which five different questions were asked from the students through Google Forms. The questions were validated by five experts.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative data taken from the interview were analyzed through deductive thematic analysis. After applying the process, the data was converted into themes, sub themes and finally into a meaningful conclusion.

Procedure Used For Deductive Thematic Analysis

Maguire (2017) presented step by step procedure for analysis of qualitative data. According to authors there are five initial steps for thematic analysis of qualitative data taken from different tools:-

Step 1: Become familiar with the data

Step 2: Generate initial codes

Step 3: Search for themes

Step 4: Review themes

Step 5: Define themes

Step 6: Results

Deductive Thematic Analysis

Generating Initial codes

Following were initial codes generated after transcription of qualitative data: -

Timing and Scheduling Concerns

Several participants pointed out the need for more convenient class schedules, particularly for working students. They suggested that online sessions should be conducted in the evenings or on weekends. One participant stated, *"Classes must have been over the weekend to facilitate working students,"* while another added, *"It would be more effective if the timing were 3 PM onwards."* The remarks given by the students indicated that scheduling of lecture are not feasible and can be improved by the University Student Engagement and participation.

Support, Communication, and System Improvement

Most of the participants were addressed the support and communication mechanism during the sessions in Aaghi LMS. From these participants several felt that their problems were not addressed and resolved quickly by the university. One of them suggested, *"There is a need to develop a centralized notice board or announcement board by the university in order to place university policies deadlines and academic updates for all the students."* another emphasized on the support mechanism, *"There is significant room for improvement in user support and communication for post graduate students in order to fix their issues."* Students also noted delays in feedback and marks updating, due to which their motivation was highly affected. As one remarked, *"Delay in updating marks should be addressed by the university."* These remarks indicate that improved IT support and continuous communication could increase the overall digital experience.

Curriculum and Content Quality

A lot of students also criticized the curriculum and content relevance in M.Phil and PhD course of studies. Some felt the syllabus is outdated and need to be upgraded: one of them reported that *"The University is offering very old and outdated curriculum which should be revised and updated according to the latest needs of the time. It is more theory based... Practical application of theories is missing."* Another student suggested that lecturers sometimes merely read slides and do not provide new insights, making lectures. The student answered with the single word *"boring."* But on the other hand several students also praised the curriculum and materials: *"The lectures are given by subject experts... Materials are advanced topic related,"* and another student remarked *"Lectures and curriculum of AIOU is not replaceable it's really amazing,"* these remarks showed that the lecture and curriculum and content quality are quite good in higher studies.

Teaching Methods and Lecture Delivery

There is a variable in remarks of students while discussing teaching methods and lecture delivery among the students. Positive feedback was given by the students for those tutors who were given the course easy to download, use, and interact with. A student reported, *"I am highly satisfied because it was easy to download learning content, submit assignments and to interact with teachers via online class and using chat box. I never felt any difficulty"* However, there were some students who reported negative comments on the teaching methods and lecture delivery that that: *"Few lecturers prefer to read from slides and explain only what is written on the screens it very strange for me"* and *"Many teachers were really outstanding... but a few of them didn't take classes seriously, they assigned the work and disappear and students were searching them all the time"*. The mixed remarks indicated that students satisfaction depends upon their individual experiences.

Learning, Pedagogical, and Conceptual Difficulties

Lot students expressed different challenges in understanding complex or technical concepts through online learning. One of them reported, *"Difficulty to understand high-end concepts,"* while another described, *"Most importantly, technical concepts of research were difficult to understand in online class whereas teachers had too high expectations."* These remarks indicated that that the subjects involving research demand focused teaching and real-time support than current digital settings offer. Additionally, the lack of feedback was also a prominent theme: *"No feedback about class performances and exams,"* and *"After exams, it was difficult to challenge the numbers awarded by teachers and no discussion opportunities regarding assessment."* These remarks indicated that there is a gap in communication and evaluation within AIOU's online environment. This indicates a gap in academic communication and evaluation within AIOU's online environment using Aaghi LMS.

Interaction and Communication Barriers

There are many students who reported limited and ineffective interaction with the teachers and other students with in the session results in making the experience less engaging. One respondent explained, *"No bond between students and teachers during the session,"* while another said, *"It's difficult to make a relation with teachers and leave an impact as a good student, although few teachers responded better."* Some of respondents demanded the faster communication from departments: *"Communications by the concerned departments of education should be fast and timely."* These remarks indicated that there is a desire need of better communication and interaction between students and teachers.

Adaptation and Training Challenges

There are some participants that described the unfamiliarity with the LMS and reported that they are not gripped with the system. One shared, *"The main challenge I faced during study is lack of training for use primarily but after one or two meetings, I enjoyed and found it very helpful in learning."* Another said that, *"Firstly, I found it difficult to use it but gradually, with time being, I became familiar with it."* These responses showed that there is a need of orientation and capacity building training on digital literacy and functionality of the system for better understanding of the system.

Training and Orientation for Teachers and Students

Majority of students reported that there is a need orientation sessions for both teachers and students before the start of academic semesters for better understanding and usability of system. Most of the participants that new users often struggled to understand the online system at first. One of them reported, *"on-site training for new students on how to use this online platform"* and stressed that *"teachers and students must be trained before starting academic sessions."* Several respondents also advised uploading tutorial videos on the AIOU website and social media, explaining step-by-step procedure of online system. Few respondents suggested a *"Digital Skill Course in the first semester"* so that learners are well-prepared for digital learning. The theme indicated the need of orientation and training sessions on the digital system for students and as well as of teachers.

Enhancing Teaching Methods and Content Delivery

A lot of student showed dissatisfaction with the lecture format, noting that sessions were often limited to reading static PowerPoint slides. They demand more interactive, engaging, and learner-centered approaches. Participants demanded that *"lectures should move beyond static slides and include info graphics, interactive quizzes, simulations, and videos."* They also demanded that teachers should use *"interactive ways to deliver their lectures"* by integrating quick quizzes, discussions, polls, and practical examples. A lot of students reported that teachers are not allowing opening question answers during presentation of students and also of course coordinator. It must be allow for all sessions. As participant suggested, *"Teachers should play a motivating role during lectures and make sessions interesting for effective learning."* These responses indicated that the teaching methods and content delivery must be revised and updated.

Curriculum Revisions and Updated Content

Most of the participants criticized that the university is providing out of date courses and need to upgrade the courses with adopting new trends. They stressed the need for syllabus revision to align with current scenarios. Following comments showed the need of updated and revision of curriculum: *"update the outdated curriculum"* and *"lectures should be designed to meet current academic needs globally"*. Some participants demanded to provide recorded lectures, extending the duration of workshops, and ensuring that reading materials are relevant and manageable for working students. One respondent said that *"teachers upload a large number of readings which becomes difficult for working students to go through"*. These remarks indicated that a lot of students are on demand for revision of course contents.

Search for themes

Braun and Clark (2006) described the procedure to convert initial codes into the themes. According to them, initial codes can be taken as border sense, and these codes can be converted to themes under similar ideas. Again, the process is conducted manually in Microsoft Excel environment.

Based on above procedure, following themes were created along with codes: -

Theme-1: Administrative challenges faced by students

1. Communication and Institutional Support
2. Training and orientation for teachers and students
3. Adaption and training challenges
4. Interaction and communication barriers
5. Support, communication and system improvement
6. Scheduling and time concerns.

Theme-2: Pedagogical challenges faced by students

1. Curriculum revisions and updating contents
2. Enhance teaching methods and content delivery
3. Learning, pedagogical and conceptual difficulties
4. Teaching methods and lecture delivery
5. Curriculum and content quality

Theme-3: Mixed and personal reflections

1. Personal and Contextual Constraints
2. Mixed and Historical Reflections

Theme-4: Suggestions for improvement

1. Suggestions for Improvements

Reviewed themes

According to Braun and Clark (2006) initial themes needed to be the be reviewed and converted into refined themes due to many different reasons. After reviewing themes in previous sections i.e. the initial may be logically not connected, the language and codes may be irrelative with the themes. Similar ideas were there under different themes. Due to these reasons, it was important to review the themes. Following were reviewed themes: -

Theme-1: Administrative challenges faced by students

2. Adaption and training challenges
3. Interaction and communication barriers
4. Support, communication and system improvement
5. Scheduling and time concerns.
6. Training and orientation for teachers and students
7. Communication and institutional support

Theme-2: Pedagogical challenges faced by students

1. Curriculum revisions and updating contents
2. Enhance teaching methods and content delivery
3. Learning, pedagogical and conceptual difficulties
4. Teaching methods and lecture delivery
5. Curriculum and content quality

Theme-3: Suggestions and personal reflections

1. Personal and Contextual Constraints
2. Mixed and Historical Reflections

3. Suggestions for Improvements

Defined Themes

The final list of themes was as follows: -

1. Communication and system support
2. Scheduling and time constraints
3. Training and orientation
4. Curriculum revisions and updating contents
5. Teaching methods and content quality
6. Learning and conceptual difficulties
7. Suggestion for improvements

Results and Discussion

The last step of deductive thematic analysis of qualitative data is to writeup all the discussion and presents the interpretation of the findings in a short way. The findings of the data may be short but comprehensive. The study was related to managerial challenges faced by the students of M.Phil. And PhD about digital platform, the findings of the study was as under:-

“According to the responses of students of AIOU who are completing their M.Phil. and PhD program and using Aaghi portal for their studies, “According to the responses of M.Phil. and Ph.D. students of AIOU, the digital plate form i.e. Aaghi LMS is very effective and fulfill their needs. The learning contents uploaded on it are very modern, updated and engaging students of all levels. However, it is also a fact that there are some serious pedagogical challenges facing by the students while using this plate form. It is a need of time to train the students as well as teachers of AIOU on the LMS. Students demanded the modern teaching methods, as well as the revision of course contents. Most of the students faced connectivity issues with the digital platform due to poor connectivity and system delayed responses. In short students were facing serious pedagogical and managerial issues with the system”

Discussion

After COVID-19 world started thinking to shift educational system to distance learning paradigm, for this objective, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad and Virtual University of Pakistan, Lahore started working on it. Both universities were now providing online distance learning education by using their modern LMS. Since Virtual University is an IT based university its LMS is more different than AIOU which is providing Aaghi LMS for its students. It facilitated its students by providing the facility of live lectures, workshops notes, books and other contents. It is embedded by Microsoft Teams which is also a very modern system.

A study conducted by Urooj (2011) discussed the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities and recommended integrating online teaching in AIOU and face-to-face lectures in VU. Since AIOU introduced a modern digital platform in 2019, marking a significant shift in its educational approach. Another study conducted by Shah (2023) acknowledged that while AIOU's digital system faces several challenges, it still offers notable advantages. The system is more flexible for students as well teachers.

Since AIOU is very committed with the quality education in higher level and claimed that it is providing a quality education for research based degree programs, Sardar (2021) explored M.Phil. and Ph.D. students' perceptions of higher education at AIOU and concluded that for obtaining high quality education students must also enhance their academic standards. Although the university provides high-quality learning content through its digital

platform, but without the efforts of students in learning digital skills, no one can achieve strong performance and potential without its personal learning motivation. While discussing the importance the role of ICT in today's world it is a matter of great concern that ICT has become essential for both students and teachers in digital world and through the use of digital media the quality of education has been improving day by day. A study conducted by Iqbal (2015) indicated that there is an urgent need to develop the ICT skills among teachers that are teaching in Pakistani higher education. The research showed a great concern of teacher involvement and learning skills on digital platforms.

Another study conducted by Ahmad (2024) on digital systems and concluded that without proper training and evaluation the digital system are not fully fruitful. He explored the importance of orientation and capacity building training programs on digital platforms provided by AIOU. Although they has many challenges, but their importance and effectiveness could not be ignored.

Conclusion

On the basis of results obtained from deductive thematic analysis of interview responses, it was revealed that M.Phil and PhD students were facing serious managerial and pedagogical challenges while using Aaghi Portal. Since the Aaghi LMS of AIOU as reported by M.Phil and PhD students is a moderating and very engaging platform that meets all the basic requirements of the students. Although it is very effective, however it is compromised by different unresolved pedagogical challenges, missing proper orientation training of students, outdated course contents and technical connectivity issues during sessions. Without a proper capacity building for students and as well tutors of the university, curriculum revision and technical improvement in the system, this modern digital system will continue to pose serious pedagogical and managerial challenges for research scholars.

Recommendations

Following were the recommendations of the study: -

- AIOU may setup a dedicated helpdesk and live chat bots within its web sites so that the support and communication system may be speedup and become more efficient.
- Most of students complained the tight scheduling during their course of study. AIOU may consider its time constraints and scheduling mechanism and may facilitate the students by providing flexible scheduling of lectures in courses.
- A capacity building training program on basics of Aaghi LMS may be mandatory for all students who enroll in the university so that they can learn the technology and their challenges may be overcome.
- The curriculum offered by the university may align with international standards and emerging trends. It may also incorporate with multimedia, gamified learning and real world applications.
- The university may encourage integrative teaching approaches like flipped class rooms and peer learning. Continuous monitoring content delivery and consistency may also be required.
- Course coordinators may provide supplementary materials, concept videos and discussion forums, they may use AI based analytics to identify and support struggling learners for better goal oriented teaching.

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