A Study of Support Services Provided to the Students in Distance Learning

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Abstract
This is a generation of smart people and time is considered as a most precious commodity. These two propositions forced the people to utilize their time optimally and to stay updated with the modern economy of knowledge. An important issue that we wish to address in this study is the student support services that provided to the distance education learning students i.e. services other than actual syllabus material that a university or institute provides to the students to realize their learning aims of the course. This study is based on two methodologies, literature review and survey-based method. The basic objective of survey is to find out how much the Pakistani students are satisfied with the student support services provided by different distance learning institutes or open universities. After the keen analysis of the student responses we can make some general inferences that the Pakistani distance education institutes or open universities are far away from the other distance learning institutes around the world. The major areas where Pakistani distance education institutes are lacking are motivational student support, mental health counseling and latest innovative student portals. The majority of the students are not satisfied with the student support services that are provided by the three main distance education universities of the Pakistan like Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Virtual COMSATS Islamabad and the Virtual University of Pakistan. At somehow the Virtual COMSATS University is adopting some modern support services for the students for example online student instructor portal, provision of DVDs of lectures and high storage flash derives to the distance learners. The study also suggests some key policy implications to fill the distance gap between students and teachers.

Keywords: Distance Education, Student Support Services, Open Universities, Conventional Education, Online Support, Mental Counselling, Career Counselling
JEL Codes: A2, H75

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I. Introduction

This is an *era of information technology* and the world is finding new ways of learning with the help of technology nowadays, distance learning system is one of them. *Distance Learning* is a special type of education system which has been developed by the educationists for the purpose of providing the education facility to all those students who don't have the ability to attend the school, colleges or universities due to plenty of reasons. Some other writers explain in another way as "It is a learning system where access to a source of education and learners are far away from each other *due to time and distance*". In a concise way, we can say that the distance learning is an idyllic education system which provides the opportunity to the students who want to learn but *outside the classroom* and this system meet all requirements of the regular education system. The distance education system is being *adopted by numerous* education institutes and universities around the world including Pakistan. In the distance education learning system, the *students remain at home* while getting their formal education. This education system is perfectly suitable to those who do not want to disturb their routines, for instance, their jobs or family but have a great desire of getting a higher education. Moreover, old age people, laborers, office workers, drop out students from other regular educational institutes can get an education with the help of this distance learning system. There is a *prominent feature* of this education system is that it does not need any specific location or time and the learners or students remain isolated from the regular institute students. This education system works on a very *simple principle* where the aid of technology is used by the teachers to provide the learning material related to course and give the essential assignment to the student. On the other hand, the student completes the assignments from home and send it to the instructor with the same source or the courier services can be used to send these written works. As mentioned earlier, it is *fastest growing education* system around the world because of the *flexibility of timing* for the student and anyone can take advantage of this system of education. The Universities who provide the services of distance learning education are known as "*Open Universities*".

I.I. Distance Learning in Pakistan

There is numerous institute in Pakistan that dealing with the distance learning system. The following is the list of those Pakistani Universities or institutes that offering different educational programs for matric, undergraduate, graduate and post-graduation students. The *Allama Iqbal Open University has key importance* in the distance education learning system and recognized as a trendsetter in Pakistan.

- Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU)
- Virtual University (VU)
- Baha Uddin Zakariya University (BZU)
- Professional Institute of Pakistan (PIP)
- National Institute of Modern Language and Sciences (NIMLS)
- Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB)
- Pakistan Montessori Council (PMC)
- Pakistan Institute of Modern Studies (PIMS)

The plus point of these distance learning education institute or open universities in Pakistan is that they offer not only a wide range of courses in almost every field but also the fees structure is lower as compared to the regular universities. The purpose of these lower fees is to make the education accessible to poor as well as for the female students who want to study but unable to attend the educational institutes on regular basis. Moreover, the distance learning education is totally comparable with the regular and other formal institutes in terms of quality. The pioneer of Pakistan as well as Asian distance learning education system "Allama Iqbal Open University" founded in 1974. Also, it was the first ever Open University in Asian as well as Africa but also the second around the world where the first Open University belongs to the United Kingdom founded in the 1960s. After observing the initial successes of these open universities, numerous open institutes established around the world to provide the educational facilities to the eager students especially women at their doorsteps. The most recent University which opens in nature established in 2002 known as Virtual University. This University made collaborations with many other regular institutes and universities to expand the horizon of open education, for example, collaboration with COMSATS Institute of Information Technology Islamabad under the project name "COMSATS Virtual Campus" etc. This University is offering the courses in almost more than 100 cities of Pakistan to provide the quality education to the people.

I.II. Conventional vs Distance Modes of Education

The modern education system can be divided into two major categories, as mentioned earlier, the formal education system which is also known as the conventional education system and the other is informal or distance learning education system. The regular institutes, universities, colleges, and schools come under the umbrella of the formal education system or conventional education system. While on the other hand, distance learning educational institutes, school, colleges and open universities fall under the category of the informal education or distance learning education system. An Indian researcher Professor Kulandai explain the differences between conventional education system and formal education system comprehensively as following, "The conventional education system meets the requirement of the students from a particular groups of age, for instance, primary, secondary and tertiary system of education, and they are full-time students of the institutes and meet the particular terms and conditions set by the institutes on campus preparation. On the other hand, students who are outside the above mentioned age groups and unable to meet the campus requirements but want to get education and training to get the promotions or jobs competence or those who want to upgrade their skills, broaden and update their knowledge as the conventional education system does not arrange these opportunities to them". The literature further suggests that the distance education learning system neither complements the conventional education system nor supplement it. Furthermore, it is not an alternative of the conventional education system but it is a new mode of education which is expanding day by day and meet the new demands of the educational system and accommodate the new target groups of the country. The following table explains the difference between the conventional education system and distance learning system in an explicit way.

Conventional Education	Distance Learning Education
Learning is considered as a full-time education system	Learning is considered as a secondary activity and a part-time in nature
The student remains in a single role and completes the learning in the Institute	The student returns to its routine works that he had before this education
The student belongs to a school, college or university	The student has the membership of many institutes at a time
The students in the conventional education system are normally teenager or young	The students in the distance education system are normal adult or old age
The institutional source of education is easily accessible by the students	The students have infrequent contact with the institute and often have a great distance between teacher and student
The student can meet and contact its classmate on daily basis or whenever he or she wants	It is not easy to meet its class fellows or learners

Table 1: Conventional vs Distance Learning

I.III. Student Support Services

The student support services are recognized as an essential element and backbone of the distance learning education system. The practitioners and researchers brought an important component of the distance education system into forefront known as student support services. There are plenty of ways to define this idea, as per Marian Craft, "student support services mean those services which other than actual syllabus material that a university or institute provides to the students to realize their learning aims of the course". Likewise, Simpson postulates that "student support services mean all those activities outside the delivery and production of the study material to help the student progress in their studies". Moreover, Alan Taint states that "student support services mean a set of services that complement the learning process or course material and uniform for all students, mostly offered these services by the distance learning institutes and open universities". After the keen analysis of all these mentioned definitions and a plethora of literature review, we reach on the following few important aspects of the student support services that any open university or distance learning system should consider include 1) student support services are those services which are other than mass formal educational material, 2) student support services have vital importance for the delivery of successful study programs, 3) student support services also cover the pervasive learning and educational process, 4) designed to come across vast variety of the needs of learners, and 5) they are continuous exercise. In a nutshell, we can say that the support services to the distance learning education students are those services which complement the learning stuff and course material that are homogenous for all students. The fundamental students support functions are threefold including cognitive, effective, and systemic which are not dependent on each other but interrelated and essential for the quality education. In a compact way we can say that

student support services include 1) advisory services, admission and pre study enquiries, 2) tutoring services, 3) library services, 4) residential schools, 5) career counselling and guidance, 6) examination and study centers, 7) credit transferring services and assessments, 8) necessary stuff which is required for the polishing the career development, study skills, and planning skills, 9) efficient administrative system including information management and record keeping, 10) a proper focus on the students individually i.e. correspondence teaching and continuous valuation, and 11) diversified student support services on the basis of special requirements individually, for instance, prisoners and disabled students.

I.IV. Components of Student Support Services
The following are the major components of the student support services that are found after a careful evaluation of a bulk of studies includes, 1) provision of practical, 2) assignments, 3) study center support, 4) support with the help of personal contact programs, 5) library support, 6) media support services, 7) guidance support, 8) information support, 9) self-instructional materials, and 10) counselling support.

I.V. Why Student Support Services?
Proper information, right guidance, and motivational services play a key role in any support service system to the student. The basic academic materials and books in the distance education learning system have continually been in the shape of different kinds of text that may be in print form or available online or provided via televisions and radio broadcasting. But the modern open universities or distance learning institutes documented that the education deficit needs some backup or some other forms of stuff provision to the students apart from the standard text, that back up is known as "Student Support". The *basic question* that each Open University or distance learning education institute should ask is: "*What skills and qualities required by the student in order to succeed in the distance learning system or education environment*?" Different educationist has a different answer of this question, some common factors on which majority of them are agreed include, intellectual ability, sense of humor, ability to balance among job, family and study, time management skills, good learning skills, motivational material, and ability to deal with stressful situations. These all skills, qualities, and attributes fall into three main areas including organizational, cognitive and emotional which can be shown in a better way with the help of the following the figure.

Figure 1: Skills and attributes required by the distance learners

I.VI. Academic or Cognitive
This support deals with the development of students cognitive and learning skills. This does not only consist of academic or teaching but some other feedback and assessment associations. "*Teaching*" consists of activities, for instance, explanation of academic concepts, related examples, defining the course of territory, and monitoring of the progress of students. "*Assessment*" portion deals with not an only conventional assessment but also include an informal feedback system to assess the real weaknesses and strengths of the students. "*Developing learning skills*" deals with helping the learners or students with literacy and proficiency skills.

I.VII. Organizational Support
This is recognized as a non-academic support to the students. The organizational skills associated with management of studies by the students. It includes development of motivational learning, self-confidence development among students, stress management skills most probably the assessment stress, effective time management of the study, management of other priorities of life like family etc., and keep up with the pace of the course.

I.VIII. Emotional Skills

This is also recognized as a non-academic support to the students. The emotional support deals with help of the students in terms of the emotional side of their education. For instance, it includes complex area and needs. As mentioned earlier, due to geographical barriers of the distance between student and the teachers, the support services have significant importance in the distance learning and open universities education system. Allama Iqbal Open University is the 1st ever educational institute that provides education to almost 1.5 million students per annum. To increase the effectiveness and administration of this huge amount of students a modern online support system is mandatory. There is a strong positive association between the support system provide to students and their educational performance. A bulk of studies available on the explanations about this positive correlation.

I.IX. Framework for the development of a student support system

This section deals with the student support services framework for the development of planning tool. There are six fundamental elements of this framework including 1) characteristics of students, 2) program demands or course, 3) geography, 4) technology, 5) scale and 6) management system and these all elements explained below comprehensively.
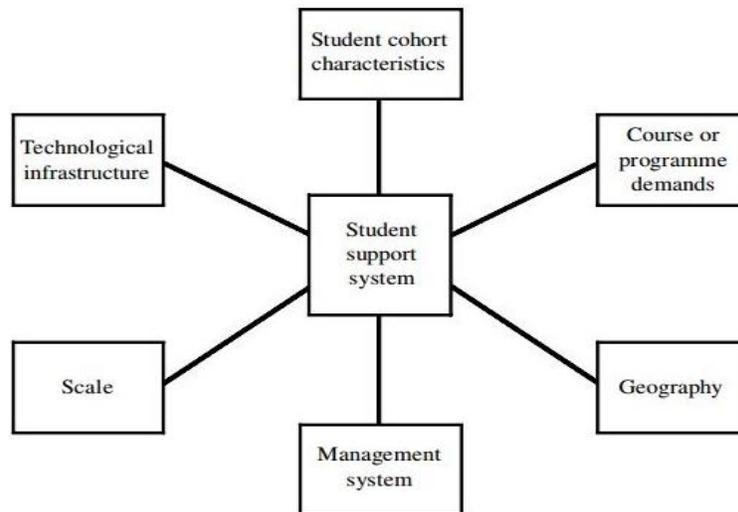
Figure 2: Student Support Services Development Framework

I.XI. Student Characteristics

According to a study conducted by Evans (1994) postulated that student body characteristics are a central and prime element in the student support system development. The significance of the student characteristics element of the student support framework can be assessed from his fact that all other elements of the planning tool are based on this element. The student characteristics include gender of the students, the age of students, employed or not, income after tax, educational qualifications, special requirements i.e. disable and special people, language, geographical situation, cultural and ethnic attributes and connectedness with technology. Moreover, these are characteristics are not described in any proper sequence i.e. a sequence of priority.

I.XII. Technological Infrastructure

In the modern world of innovations, a system cannot survive in the intensely competitive environment no matter what sector you belong. Effective modes of technologies should be used to provide the support services to the students. Before that, it is important to differentiate first between the technologies that universities have and the technologies that students have access. For instance, the areas where the post offices facilities are not available so the mail cannot be sent to the students using this mode of communication. Alternatively, delivery by truck or other similar transportation modes can be used to deliver mails in the remote villages. On the other hand, the modern world is an era of smartphones so the students can use these modes as meaningful services, for example, email or telephone etc. In sum up, the use of technology is a convenient way to develop a modern framework for student support services.

I.XIII. Program demand

The first element of the student support program is made by a course or program demand. The heart of the delivered material will determine the assessment and teaching. The most prominent question is whether the assessment will be final or continuous or the mixture of the both. The face to face element is also associated with the program demand element.

I.XIV. Scale

The scale element links to the planned activities and is a very prominent factor in the ways in which student support system should be built. For instance, a university or an institute anticipates recruiting 80 students on a subject with the help of distance learning education system will need to develop diversified systems from those which have almost one lac students.

I.XV. Geography

In order to plan the student support services delivery, the geography plays a key role within institute and students. There is a bulk of historical examples available geographically, for instance, distance education learning system in Australia and Canada was built to provide an opportunity at the school along with the secondary levels to those who are far away from the educational institutes or having massive distances between both. The modern information technological mode has key importance to remove these gaps between the students and the teachers.

I.XVI. Management System

There are plenty of student support system issues which are associated with the management systems of the distance learning. For instance, it is a noteworthy issue related to the financial models in which the money flows among the people of institute or organization and the programs associated with the student support services activities and managed. There is a strong and positive correlation between the number of students and increment of associated costs. So, the quality of the learning experiences of the distance education learning system is directly linked with the how much resources are assigned to the student support system and how effectively is the management system of these services working.

II. Literature Review

There are a plethora of studies conducted by the researchers that dealing with the distance education learning system and the support services provided to the distance learning student around the world. But there is no such a serious attempt has yet been made in the context of Pakistan distance education system. There are some key studies we will discuss in this section that deals with the distance education system and support services provided to students in this unique learning system. The distance learning education system achieve great success at the end of the 20th century but there is a famous saying about this education system is "*an elephant in the room of distance education*". To put in simple words means the dropout students in the system. According to a study conducted by Woodley & Simpson (2013) states that the distance learning system major weakness is the high dropout students. Their study is based on the United Kingdom distance learning education system and they named this problem as "distance education deficit" which means high drop out of distance learner as compared to the regular students. The following chart explains the graduating rate of United Kingdom open and conventional institutes as compared to the selective countries including India, South Africa and Netherland, a study conducted by (Inkelaar &Simpson, 2015).

This study further claiming that the highest dropout can be observed in the London University International Program. The University is offering two different modes of education, one is face to face support at local institutions while the other is based entirely on at a distance. The syllabus, exams, and content of the courses are homogenous in both modes of education but the supported option is better by sixty-one percent to sixteen percent. The research concludes that the main reason for this deficit is the isolations of the learners or students from their instructors, institutes and other class fellows. Moore (1990) named it as "Transactional Distance" among all the elements of the distance education system. Another reason for this deficit provided is the juggling and struggling of the students among part-time jobs and family dependences.

Distance learning system which is also known as distance education system has existed for many centuries but get a great pace since the 1960s. Moreover, the incorporation of the technology in the distance learning education system

has redefined the course of study. The distance learning education system involves getting an education outside the formal educational institute's venues and there is a distance gap exists between student and teacher. The recent definitions of the distance learning education system emphasis on new innovations and development in the system, for instance, technological advancements. On the other hand, some other definitions of the distance learning education system deal with the extensions of the class environment into a distance location or remote location. The following flow chart is showing the student support structure which is commonly being adopted by the universities in United Kingdom.
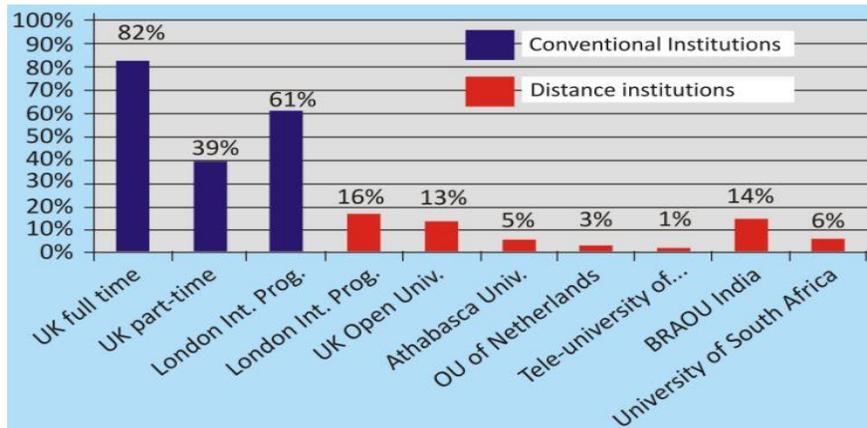

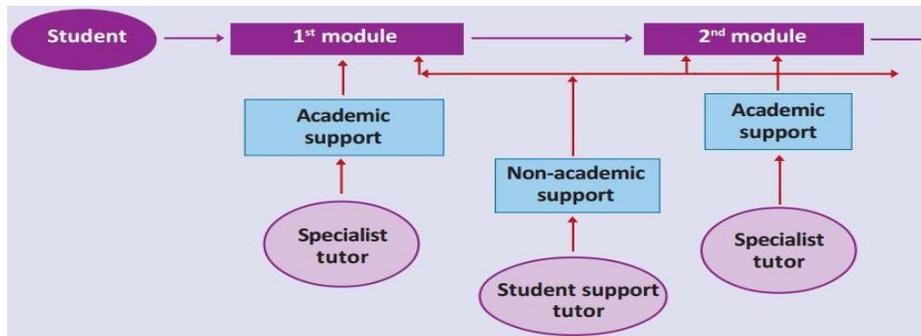*Figure 3: Graduation rates of UK vs selective Countries*

Figure 4: Student Support Structure of UK Universities

These definitions of the distance learning education system have proven too restrictive and unable to assess the real requirements of education. However, a comprehensive definition provided by the Ian Mugridge describing that "the distance learning education system is a form of education in which there is distance exists between teacher and student and in which different means of technology such as written word or printed word, computer, teleconferencing, telephone or regular conferences in order to fill the physical gap" (Mugridge, 1991). The student support services are key elements of the distance learning education system and have critical importance in it. The distance learning education students should get the same support services as provided to those who are studying in the formal education or regular universities and institutes. The real challenges faced by the open universities and distance education institutes are the delivery of these services to the distant students.

This is an era of technology and fast innovative changes in which information technology is playing a key role in the distance learning education system. According to the economists, education is an important indicator of the economic growth of a country so a proper attention should be put in this regard to achieve higher living standards. To achieve the higher and quality education targets, the regular institutes or universities and the formal system are not sufficient. So the establishment of open universities and distance learning education system is indispensable for the higher economic growth and achievement of international standard literacy rates (Moor & Kearsely, 2005). To keep our discussion concise, there should be a systematic support system which integrates every kind of student

support under one umbrella and should be based on the latest communication and technological system. The following figure, taken from the study of (Jung and Hong, 2014), is an example systematic student support which should be adopted in Pakistan.

Figure 5: Model of Systematic Student Support

Mir (2017) states that the Allama Iqbal Open University also provided the support services to students, as suggested by Jung and Hong, but have no centralized linkages of this support system. This study further suggested that online support to the students and e-learning have great significance along with the contents of the offered course. Additionally, the implication of the study provides a suggestion that online tutors must have the special expertise of the communication and information technology so that they can provide the appropriate guides to the students. Another study Thorpe (2002) postulating that student support activities are not bound to any particular mode of services but it is provided as per the requirement and the given situation of distance learner.

Figure 6: Allama Iqbal Open University Query System

Similarly, another research analysis describing that the impact of student support services on the success and achievement of the women distance learner is very significant. A study suggesting that faculty role in the student support services is a prime contributor toward the women achievement, however, there are some other factors that also contribute in the success ratio of women include video conferencing setup and electronic portal (Idrus et al., 2015). Moreover, the overall support system of the basic entity relation can be presented with the help of the following diagram. The figure showing that the structure of the database consists of ticket management system which is open source based, for instance, HESK. The central entity is tickets which deal with all objections, queries, and complaints, moreover, each objection or complaint has its place in a problem category.
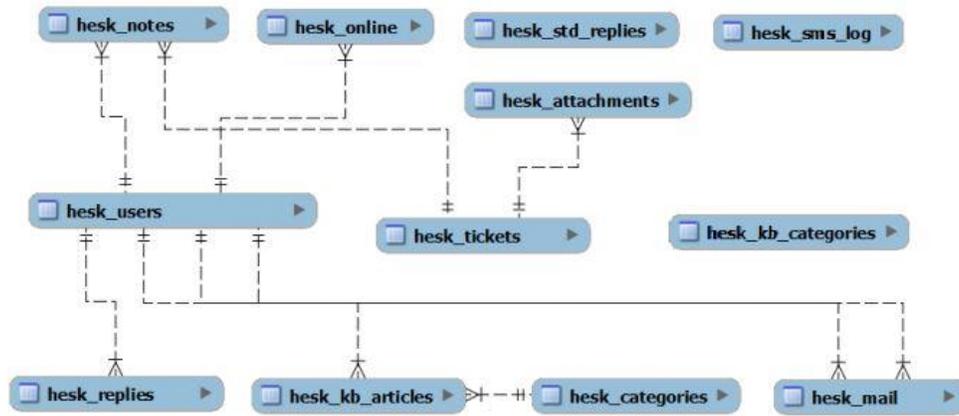
Figure 7: Online Support System entity relations

Moreover, a case study with the perspective of Indian distance learning system is conducted by Chattopadhyay (2014) that deals with the Indira Gandhi National Open University. The study claiming that student support services provided to the distance learning students should be available and responsive to every individual of the country. The implication of this study stating that accessibility of student support services to everyone can be achieved with the multiple modes of support services. Another implication of the study postulating that there should be regular monitoring of the student support services. If these support services are not monitored properly and regularly the efficiency, productivity and effectiveness of the system will decrease. The major measure in this regard should include learning support, information support, feedback support and institutional support. The following chart is providing the overview of a general student support services model and the linkages and interaction of different phases of the model.
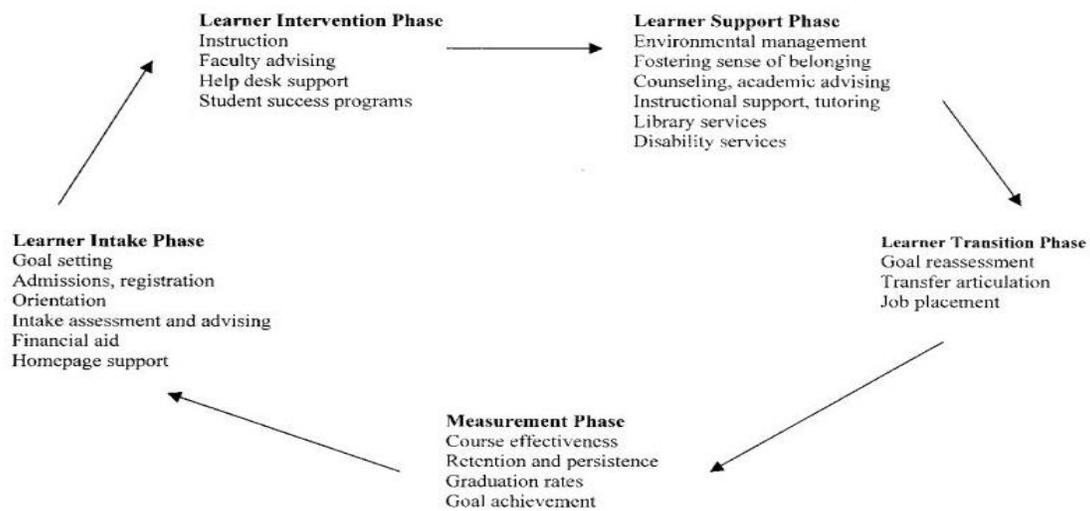

Figure 8: Student Support Services Model

III. Methodology

There are so many studies are available that deals with the distance education learning system and the support services that are provided to the students. These all studies are related to developed countries like United Kingdom, USA and other European countries but there is no such a serious attempt has yet been made with the perspective of Pakistan distance learning education system. This research is an attempt to analyze the modern trends in the student support services sector around the world as well as in the domestic country. So, the methodology of this research study consists of two parts, first is literature review method and the second is survey-based research. The first method is theoretical in nature and belongs to the past studies and keen review of latest researches on the distance learning education system and the student support services in this regard. While in second approach a survey type

study is conducted in order to assess the student support services quality and availability to the students of Pakistan as compared to the other countries.

III.I. Methodology 1: Literature Review Based

This methodology deals with the review of the literature i.e. past studies related to the distance education system and the student services provided to the distance education learners. As mentioned earlier, this research method is based on the theory and provide us the subjective views related to the issue. The researchers are using this technique in order to assess the problem and available solutions provided by the other researchers. In the modern world of information technology, everyone wants to upgrade the education level or sharp their academic skills. The distance education system provides this opportunity to these eager people to fulfill their desires of knowledge. There are so many studies are available for distance education system and the student services. Some prominent studies related to this issue are reviewed comprehensively in chapter two of this research. We have reached some common findings from these reviews which is applicable in almost every open education or distance education system more specifically related to the issue of student support services. Some common findings from these literature review methodologies are discussed in this section. For instance, the fundamental students support functions are threefold including cognitive, effective, and systemic which are not dependent on each other but interrelated and essential for the quality education. In a compact way we can say that student support services include 1) advisory services, admission and pre study enquiries, 2) tutoring services, 3) library services, 4) residential schools, 5) career counselling and guidance, 6) examination and study centers, 7) credit transferring services and assessments, 8) necessary stuff which is required for the polishing the career development, study skills, and planning skills, 9) efficient administrative system including information management and record keeping, 10) a proper focus on the students individually i.e. correspondence teaching and continuous valuation, and 11) diversified student support services on the basis of special requirements individually, for instance, prisoners and disabled students. Furthermore, the literature review method suggests that the student support services are key elements of the distance learning education system and have critical importance in it. The distance learning education students should get the same support services as provided to those who are studying in the formal education or regular universities and institutes. The real challenges faced by the open universities and distance education institutes are the delivery of these services to the distant students.

Another important finding of this methodology is the identification of the online student support services that are categorized in three main types, first is academic or career counseling, second is mental health or personal counseling, and the last is services that stimulate a wisdom of the community. Some Pakistani Universities and institutes were seen as very innovative in terms of providing the student support services online to campus student as well as to the distance learning students, for example, Virtual COMSATS, Islamabad. The literature suggests that the following are the common online services that are being provided by the universities to its students. The most prominent student support service in this regard is the *career counseling or academic* advising which helps the students to choose the most suitable fields according to their intellectual levels in order to attain the life goals. A study claims that the campus student should not assume that the distance learner is in a better place of their career and have a better-developed plan than on-campus students. Moreover, the review suggested that there are some online services that must be offered by almost every university or institute, for instance, access to the career advisor, self-help pointers and online availability of the faculty members. Likewise, students must be groomed online with the perspective of interests, career topics and studying styles.

The second common practice which is being done around the world but missing in the Pakistani institutes is *mental or personal health counseling*. The review of the literature revealed that there are very limited facilities are available to the distance education learning students related to health counseling. A proper focus should be given in this regard because it is very essential part of the student support and quality educational experiences. Moreover, this type of counseling is very effective for the students in order to get the self-understanding and adjust with the environments. A study suggesting that email therapy is also an option, however, it does not substitute the face to face health treatment but at somehow support the students in terms of personal advice. In sum up, the universities and institutions should follow the footprints of University of Chicago and Columbia University and provide these health counseling services with the help of a website. These universities websites include the editorials and pamphlets related to depression, anger management, anxiety, sexual orientation, stress, cults, substance abuse and alcohol addictions.

Last common practice which is going on is that support services which *promote the sense of community*. The distance education learner should make sure by the open universities and distance institute that they are not isolated in terms of institutions, other students, and instructors. Some prominent studies and institutional personal experiences demonstrating that quality education output, retention of the students, and completion of degree highly associate with the attachment and sense of connection with the university. An innovative online student support plate form can help in this regard to develop a sense of community for all student i.e. formal and informal students. British Open University and Washington State University are the best examples of online plate forms. These universities develop online student governments which deal with the welfare, requirements, specific and exclusive interests of the distance education learners. One other study suggested that a "weekend College" initiative should be taken by the distance learning institutes and open universities. This initiative means to develop a sense of community among the campus and distance learning students via some get together on the weekends. If weekends are not possible then at least once in month option is also available in this regard. The study concluded that these initiatives will highly affect the academic performance among the students and distance learner will get motivations while the on-campus students will get the exposure of the market from the on job distance education students.

In a nutshell, the purpose of a keen review of the literature was to assess what institutions including Pakistan providing the student support services to the distance learning education. Majority of the studies reviewed in this methodology are taken from some prominent research journals while some other information and studies were gathered from the internet websites of the open universities and distance educational institutes. The bulk of the research studies of this methodology emphasis on the online provision of the student support services. These online services include career counseling, course content, orientation, admission and pre-study inquiries, credit transferring services and assessments, the efficient administrative system including information management and record keeping. This is an era of technology and fast innovative changes in which information technology is playing a key role in the distance learning education system. So, this technology can be adopted in order to improve the distance education sector of Pakistan.

III.II. Methodology 2: Survey-Based

In this second methodology, we conduct primary data-based study i.e. a student survey. The basic aim of this survey is to find out how much the Pakistani students are satisfied with the student support services provided by different distance learning institutes or open universities. Moreover, the survey is finding the answers to how good the online portals of these universities are helping the students in order to get the quality education and support. Additionally, the reason of this survey is to evaluate the performance of distance education universities and institutes in terms of student support services and then to suggest some suitable policies or inputs in order to improve the system.

- **Participant**

The questionnaire survey is distributed among total fifty-one participant which are selected on the principle random sampling method. In these fifty-one distance education learning student, thirty-eight students are male while thirteen are female. These students belong to major distance education universities or open institutes of Pakistan. All students have its place in three main distance learning institutes, Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Virtual COMSATS Islamabad and the Virtual University of Pakistan.

- **Procedure**

The distributed survey among participants deals with two main issues of the student support services in the distance education system. The first segment deals with how much they are satisfied with the support services like library access, textbooks, registrar, financial aid, admission services, academic advisement and technical assistance. Students are asked about these issues in terms of staff knowledge, attitude, and helpfulness of the staff, application procedure easiness, responding time to the queries, service quality, and other issues related to student support services. Different questions have different choices for the participants to reply, for instance, Yes or No, Always seldom or never, yes sometimes or no etc. Another part of the survey deals with online services provided by understudy institutes or open universities. The participants are asked about what type of services they want in the online university websites are student portals. More specifically they are asked about four main online services, for example, mental health services, technical assistance, academic advising, and social services. After distributing the questionnaire survey among the participants they are given one week time to fill them and handed over to the

researchers. As mentioned earlier, the participants belong to the three main distance learning education universities of Pakistan so the research will provide the insights about the student support services quality in Pakistan. Moreover, this study will be helpful for the distance learning institutes and open universities in order to get the views of the students about the system and their suggestions in this regard.

IV. Estimations and Results

There is two type of methodologies we used in this study 1) Literature Review based and 2) Student Survey. The literature review study findings already presented in the previous two sections. This section exclusively deals with the estimations and findings of the student survey-based methodology. The most prominent finding of the survey demonstrates that the students are not satisfied with the support services that are provided by these three universities Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Virtual COMSATS Islamabad and the Virtual University of Pakistan. However, the students of Virtual COMSATS show somehow satisfaction with the support services, for example, provision of DVDs of the lectures, portable flash drives and online question and answers portals. We will discuss the responses of the participants to each questionnaire inquiry one by one in this section. All the responses can be shown explicitly in form of graphs, for example, pie chart, bar chart etc. The first question of the distributed questionnaire belongs to find out the gender of the participants. There are 38 male participants while the 13 female participants out of total 51. The following chart is showing the gender of the participants in a better way.

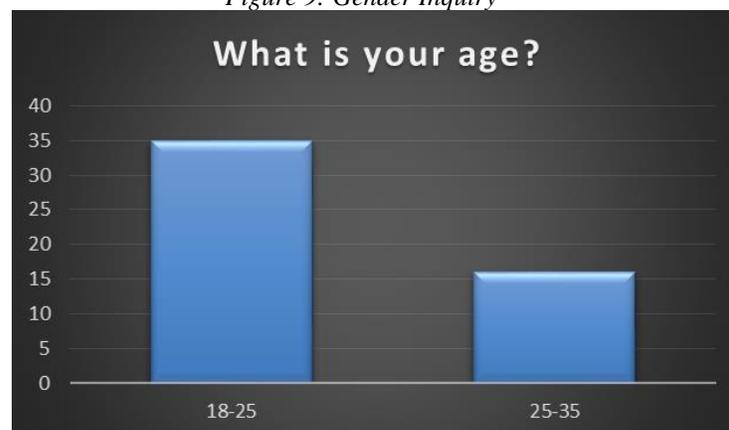*Figure 9: Gender Inquiry*

Figure 10: Age Inquiry

The second question of our survey belonged to the age of the participants. The bar chart is the best way to describe the age range of the students. There are 35 out of 51 participants belongs to the age limit of 18 to 25 years. While the remaining 16 belongs to the category of 25 to 35 years of age. So the sample range 18 to 35 years is claiming that the distance education learning is not only for the teenager but also for the people who want to get the education but

doing their jobs in Pakistan or the housewife women. The following bar charts are giving us the overview of both categories.

The next question of the survey belongs the main issue of this research is: Are you satisfied with the student support services provided by your university? The majority of the participants checked the category of no. This is described with the help of bar chart in the following figure.
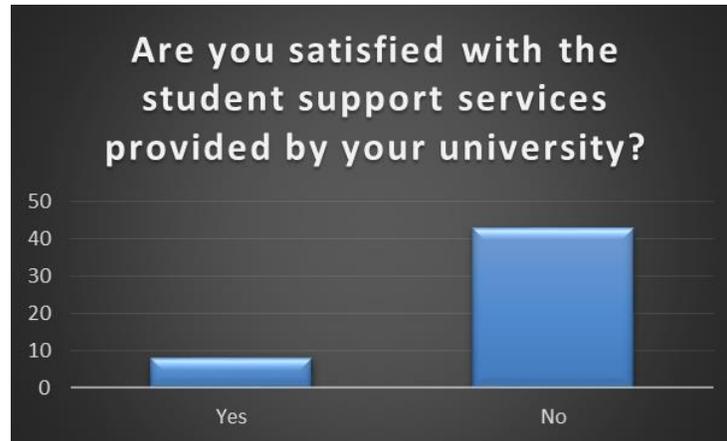

Figure 11: Student Support Services Satisfaction

The next question of the survey was related to the online support services by the distance education learning institutes or open universities. Majority of the participants click the always nonavailability of the online support. There are 45 participants who say that the online services were never available to them in terms of student support services. While the four participants said that there were the rare chances of the non-availability and two participant claims that the online support from the universities always available to them. The following bar chart is describing the responses of the participants in a compact way.
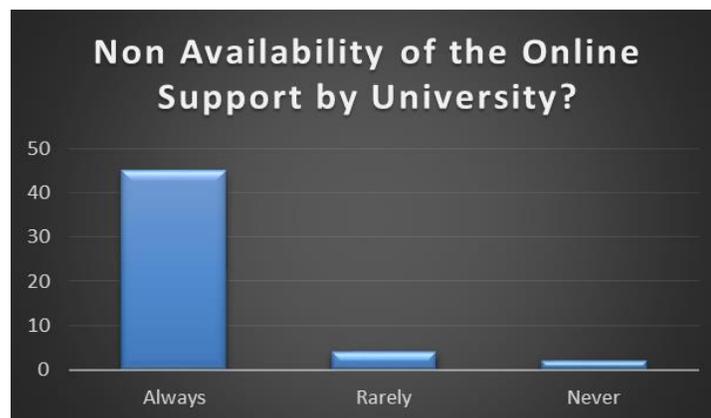

Figure 12: Online Student Support Services in Pakistan

The next question is asked to the participants about the online library access provision by the distance educational institutes. The majority of the participant highly go against this support provided by the Pakistani universities and 45 out of 51 participants click on the no option. This is the segment of distance education system where a lot of work is needed to be done in Pakistan. The libraries and international research journal access to the students play a key role in the quality education goals. The following chart is presenting the participant's responses to the question of online library access facility by the universities.
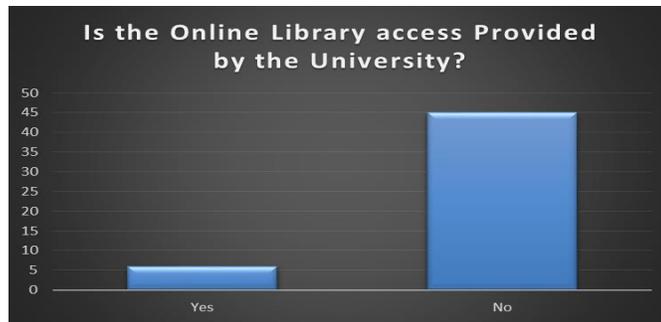
Figure 13: Online Library Access

The next question deals with the distance education institute provision of the books to the students. However, the Pakistani distance education universities remain somehow satisfactory in this regard because the majority of the participants endorsed the universities. 45 out of 51 participants said that the universities always provide the books and other academic stuff on time. The following chart is giving us the overview of this question.
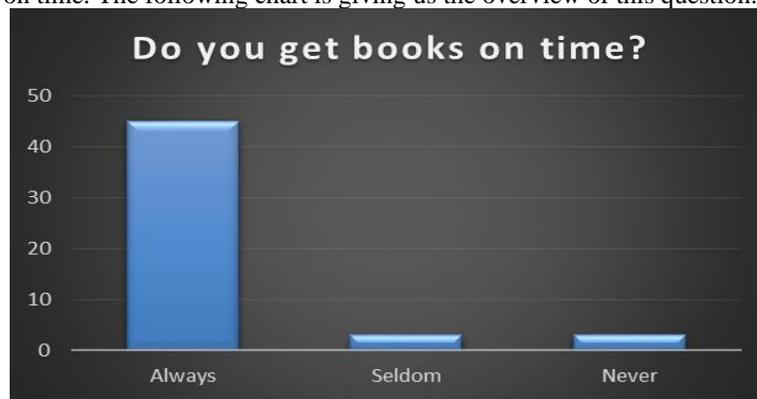

Figure 14: Provision of Books

The most prominent student support service that is required in this modern world is mental counseling of the students. The young generation of Pakistan is suffering from the depression, anxiety and other mental problems due to high unemployment in the market and pessimistic future prospective. We asked the students about mental and health counselling support provided by their universities and majority of the students go for no reply. The survey claiming that there is a lot of work needed to be done in this regard too and special attention should be put by the institutes for mental grooming of the students. The following bar chart is explain the results that we obtained from the question "Is the university provide mental counseling support?" 46 out of 51 respondent checked the no answer to this question.
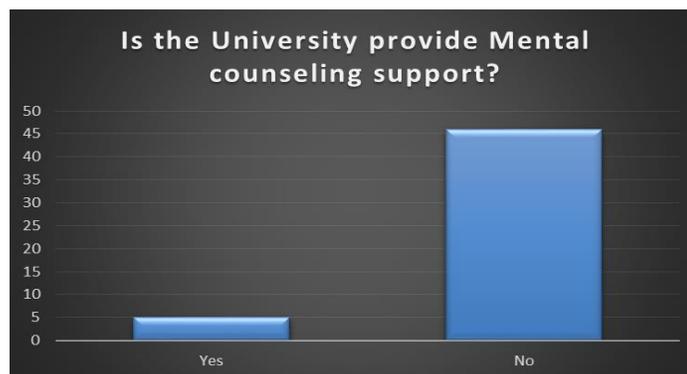

Figure 15: Mental Support Services

The next question deals with the online technical support provision by the staff to distance learner students. 30 out of 51 respondents said there is no technical assistance provided by their university while the remaining 21 respondents said a proper assistance being provided by the university. The following bar chart is explaining the results in explicit way.
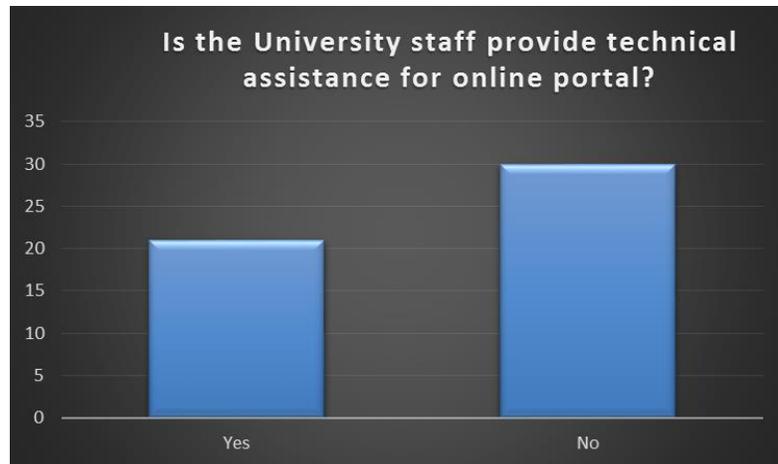
Figure 16: Online Portal Assistance

According to some leading psychologists of the world, the motivational support i.e. motivational lectures or documentaries sessions etc. to the teenager students have significant effects on their efforts to attaining the life goals. Some American and European universities often arrange these type lectures for the students. In Pakistan there are no such trends of motivational support to the students. We set a question in the survey to ask the views of the students in this regard. There is no satisfactory responses provide by the students and majority of them checked the seldom provision of the motivational support by the Pakistani universities.

Figure 17: Motivational Support by the University

After the keen analysis of the student survey responses we can make some general inferences that the Pakistani distance education institutes or open universities are far away from the other distance learning institutes around the world. The major areas where Pakistani distance education institutes are lacking are motivational student support, mental health counseling and latest innovative student portals. The majority of the students are not satisfied with the student support services that are provided by the three main distance education universities of the Pakistan like Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Virtual COMSATS Islamabad and the Virtual University of Pakistan. At somehow the Virtual COMSATS University is adopting some modern support services for the students for example online student instructor portal, provision of DVDs of lectures and high storage flash derives to the distance learners.

V. Conclusion and Suggestions

In this study we comprehensively examine the student support services via using two different research methodologies first is review of the past studies i.e. literature review based findings about the subject and the second is student survey based findings. The first methodology, literature review method, examined the different student support services models and common practices being done around the world. The review found that modern emphasis of the distance learning institutes and open universities is on the mental health student support and motivational grooming. Moreover the study found that information technology is playing the key role in provision of student support services by the universities around the world. On the other hand second methodology is specifically

deals with the support services provided to the students in distance learning in Pakistan. A random sampling principle is sued for sample selection of 51 respondents. These all respondents belongs to one of the following three main distance education universities of the Pakistan for instance, Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Virtual COMSATS Islamabad and the Virtual University of Pakistan. The key findings of this survey claims that there is no serious attention is being put by the distance institutes in mental health counseling, career counseling and motivational grooming of the Pakistani students. In order to enhance the quality of distance education learning system and students support services, following are some suitable recommendations that should be considered by the open universities in Pakistan.

- The student center is the best way to fill the distance gap between students and teachers. The open universities and distance education faculty should be supported with these types of education centers. The prime focus of these student centers should be on increasing the productivity and efficiency while reducing deficiencies of the students rather than just introducing new syllabus, outline or courses to them
- In the leisure time of the semester, the students should be provided with career counseling and employment advising sessions. Furthermore, the entertainment activities like sports gala, drama, and concert etc. should also be accessible to the students in leisure time. A major suggestion in this regard is the establishment of a cultural education center for the students to utilize their leisure time
- If distance educational institutes already established then the open universities faculty should cooperate with these distance institutes in order to attain the national and international targets of the educational department
- The education sector budget is a key deriving force of the economic growth of any country. The government should allocate a major share of income to the education department. Also, these educational budget should be reallocated to the open universities and distance education learning institutes in order to provide the quality student support services to distance learning educational students
- A nation cannot generate the innovators or great policymakers without the trends of research and development. A very few literatures are available with respect to the provision of quality support services to the distance education learning system and to explore the opportunities in this regard. The open universities faculty should pay special attention in this regard
- There is no trend of research paper publications among distance education learning system students, especially in Pakistan. The students just get admissions only to get the degrees. The open universities should provide student support services in order to increase the quantity as well as the quality of the research publications among students.

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Appendix

The following table is explaining the importance of students in different source levels. In other words, it is describing the sources of support in terms of importance.

Table 1: Sources of support in terms of importance

Following is a flow chart which is explaining the student support services (SSS) structure commonly used in the United Kingdom before 2000. This model is divided into two module, the module one is dealing with the academic and non-academic support via tutor counsellor while the module two is also dealing with the academic and non-

academic support via specialist tutor. Moreover, the latest student support services (SSS) structure of the United Kingdom universities is explained comprehensively in the literature review section.
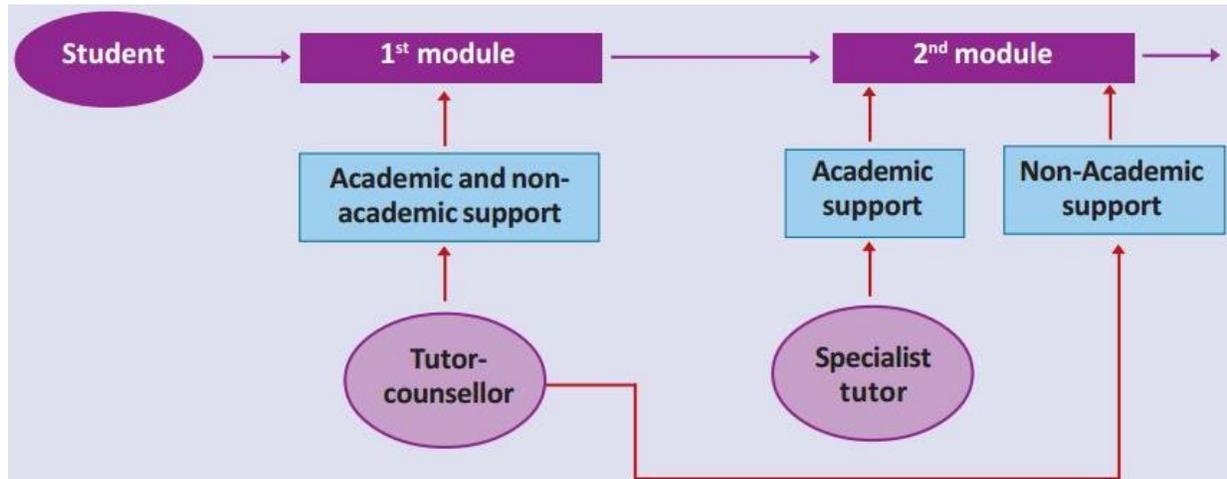

Figure 2 : Student Support Structure of UK Universities up to 2000

Developmental support	Problem solving support
• Course choice advice • Careers advice • Help with skills development • Identifying and reinforcing motivation • Post-graduation support[1]	• Solving problems with the student's institution • Overcoming study problems such as stress, loss of concentration, getting behind and so on • Sorting out personal problems affecting study • Dropout support[2]

Table 3: Development and Problem Solving Support

The following table is explaining the environmental student support effects on the performance of student outcome.

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDENT SUPPORT INFLUENCES ON STUDENT OUTCOMES		
Institutional practices that:	Support Social/Emotional Needs	Support Academic Needs
Aid integration	Enrolment processes Social networks	Pre-enrolment advice Academic counselling Student/teacher relationships Quality of teaching Academic Success (GPA)
	Orientation/Induction Learning communities	
Provide services	Health & counselling Advisory services Recreational services Campus facilities Placement services	Supplemental instruction
	Peer tutoring Mentoring	
Adapt to accommodate student differences	Absence of discrimination Feeling safe Valuing minorities	Learning preferences
	Cultural capital Fairness	

Table 4: Environmental student support influences on student outcomes