Phenomena of Degree Completion in Distance Education: An Explanatory Case Study of Higher Education

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Abstract

The number of students being enrolled in distance learning institutes is huge, which is a token of success for this mode of education. But literature showed that many students could not complete their degrees due to various reasons. Some of the reasons are common but can vary in different regions according to resources available and socio-economic conditions of learners. This study was designed to determine completion rate along with exploring factors affecting their degree completion. Mix method approach was used to conduct the study. Quantitative data was retrieved from admission office and controller office for ten years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from those students who could not complete their degrees. The analysis showed 40 % average completion rate of distance learners for 10 years. The inductive analysis of interview data uncovered 30 factors that affected the degree completion of distance learners. The implications of the study were vibrant to utilize digital gadgets to improve communication, better academic facilities, activating student support services unit and proper dissemination of information through social media sites. There is enough evidence to bring necessary reforms in administrative and instructional framework of the university to meet the growing needs of distance learners to enhance their degree completion rate.

Keywords: distance learning, graduation rate, factors affecting degree completion

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Introduction

        Distance education is one of the alternative modes of learning replacing face to face or traditional method of learning (Taylor, 2001). It is a well-planned and well-organized teaching learning activity which is characterized by quasi permanent separation of the instructor and learner. It offers flexibility of getting education at anytime from anywhere on the planet (Nagrae, 2013), by offering the learners the courses of their choice (Barjeesh, 2017 with ease of learning and earning at the same time (Brown, 2017). It has overcome the barriers of distance (Luo et at., 2014) by widening learners' access to education (Ehler, 2011) and increasing the diversity of student population (Traxler, 2018). Distance education has opened doors of higher education to those learners who were deprived of this opportunity in formal education system (Bossu et al., 2012; Lane, 2012).

        Owing to flexibility and convenience, large number of distance learners are attracted to this mode of learning (Allen & Seaman, 2015) and enrolment in distance education is increasing day by day. Distance learning universities / institutes are facing tough target of accommodating this increased number of adult learners (Qureshi, Shah &Zaka, 2014). Covid-19 has also forced even the formal educational institutions to shift from face to face to distance mode of delivery to their students. But unfortunately, distance education courses have displayed low course completion rates as compared to traditional face-to-face educational programs (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004, Carr 2000, Holmberg, 1995).
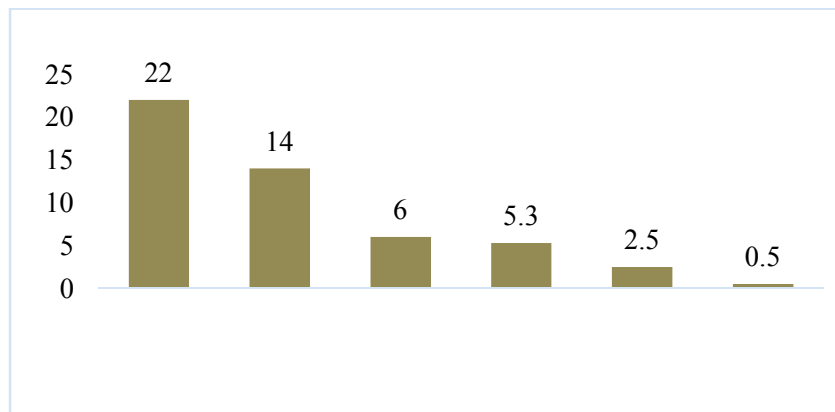

Figure 1: Degree completion rate in distance education (Simpson, 2013)

The figure 1 gives an overview of degree completion rate of different distance learning institutions which varies from 0.5 percent to 22 percent while the degree completion rate of UK full time university is 82 percent (Simpson, 2013).

High completion rate has always been a dream of every university as it is an indicator of the efficiency of the institution (Subotzky, 2003). Completion rate and study delays are not only concern of distance learning institutions but they have also become the problem of higher education worldwide (Hagedorn, 2004) because the failure of the distance learners is considered the failure of the Open University itself (Tresman, 2002). Completion rate helps students, parents and stakeholders to measure the progress and effectiveness of an institution (Hagedorn, 2004).

Literature Review

Literature has highlighted various factors that affect the degree completion rate of the distance learners. Some of these factors are family (Maxwell et al, 2015; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Morgan & Tam, 1999), employment (Maxwell et al, 2015; Pedro and Scott, 2004; Thompson, 1997), financial condition (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Peter et al, 1998), system of distance learning (Smith Jaggars and Xu, 2010; Garland, 1993), learning environment (Chyung, Winiecki & Fenner, 1999;Rovai, 2003), course content (Martinez & Munday, 1998; Galusha, 1997), inappropriate teaching (Augusta, Cota, Jayaran, & Laboisser, 2010; Martinez & Munday, 1998), lack of student-teacher interaction (Maxwell et al, 2015; Twyford, K. 2007), time management (Phillips, Chen, Kochakji & Greene, 2004), course selection (McGivney, 1996), student support services (Kamau, 2007; Zirnkle, 2001), compulsory workshops(Maxwell et al, 2015), age of learners (Xenos et al, 2002; Morgan & Tam, 1999) and lack of interest (Pedro and Scott, 2004).

Literature also highlights certain factors that play a positive role in the degree completion of the distance learners. These are good and positive relation of the students with faculty and other staff members (Flint, 2005), motivation of students, their positive attitude and clarity in learning goals (Golladay, Prybutok & Huff, 2002), students' self-motivation and self-discipline (Li, 2002), students' interest in study and a strong academic self-concept (Dabbagh, 2007), the access of students to tools, their experience of technology, learning preferences, personal traits and characteristics (Schrum & Hong (2002), students belief in their own ability (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Kleemann, 1994), students' time management skills (Lahmers & Zulauf, 2000), the quality of

teaching (Bartz & Miller, 1991), teaching approach and relationship of students with their teachers (Killen, 1994; Jacobs & Gravett, 1998) and students' approach to studying (Meyer, 1990).

Literature showed that family, employment, financial condition, course selection, time management, students support services and lack of student-teacher interaction are the factors that have a strong effect on the degree completion of the distance learners. The existing review is mainly associated with countries where provision of resources, student support services and socio-economic background of the distance learners is different. So there is need to explore factors affecting the degree completion in own context with comparatively limited resources, lack of student support services and variety of other issues for the distance learners. The current study was meant to determine the degree completion rate along with exploring factors affecting degree completion in AIOU, which is a prestigious distance learning institute in Pakistan with 1.4 million annual students.

Objectives of the Study
The objectives of the study were to:
1. Determine the completion rate of the distance learners for ten years
2. Explore factors affecting the degree completion rate of the distance learners

Research Questions
Following research questions were designed to achieve the objectives:
1. What was the completion rate of students of M. Phil education for ten years since 2002 to 2011?
2. What were the factors affecting the degree completion of M. Phil students at AIOU?

Methodology
The ontological underpinning of the study was based on constructivism. Constructivism school of thought believe that reality is the construct of human mind. Individuals interacting with real world develop a subjective meaning to their experiences which are varied and multiple in nature. The objective of the researcher is to interpret their views and inductively produce a theoretical knowledge (Creswell, 2014).

Design of the Study: The study was based on both quantitative and qualitative data, so explanatory sequential mix method were used to

address the problem. It was explanatory as the results of quantitative phase are further explained in the qualitative phase. It is sequential as the first phase of the study is followed by second phase. A case study design of inquiry was used by focusing students of higher education to explore factors affecting degree completion of distance learners.

Population and Sample: The population of current study was the students of M.Phil. education enrolled since 2002 to 2011 at AIOU. The first phase (quantitative) of the study included all the students enrolled from the years 2002 to 2011 in M. Phil education. The second phase (qualitative) of the study included those students of M. Phil education enrolled during the years 2002 to 2011, who failed to complete their degrees. Since distance learners were dispersed and difficult to find, snowball sampling technique was used to approach the learners and they were interviewed till saturation of information.

Instrument of the Study: Semi-structured interview was scheduled to explore factors affecting degree completion of the distance learners. Initial questions were developed in the light of literature review. Keeping in view the individual differences of respondents, follow up questions were asked to explore the genuine reasons affecting their degree completion.

Data Collection Procedure: Data were collected in two phases. At first phase, quantitative data were collected from admission and examination offices of the university. Since students' data was confidential, so approval of competent authority was obtained for acquisition of data. Admission office/data center provided details of 1288 students enrolled in M. Phil programs of DNFE and STED since 2002 to 2011. Examination office shared data of students who completed their degrees enrolled during above mentioned period.

At the second phase, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews from those students of M. Phil education programs who could not complete their degrees. The interviews were conducted face to face and through telephone due to the constraints of time, money and distance. Brief notes were maintained during conduct of interviews. Audio recordings of the interviews were made to preserve data for its further use. On average each interview took twenty two minutes and fifty two seconds (22.52 minutes) consuming a total time duration of eighteen hours, forty six minutes and thirteen seconds (18:46:13).

Transcription of Data: To ensure the appropriateness of the transcription, it was scrutinized and processed through four. At the first step, recorded interviews were transcribed into textual / hand written form on paper. Secondly, hand written data was matched with the original audio files. Missing data was identified and incorporated to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed data. Thirdly, these transcribed files were typed for further use. Again to see any discrepancy the typed data files were read and matched with manual verified files. Fourthly, proof reading of the typed data was made to maintain accuracy and avoid discrepancy.
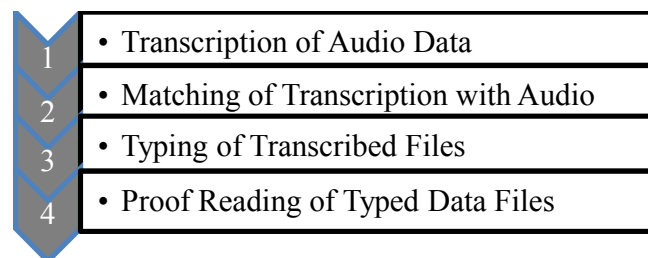

Figure 1: Transcription of data

Ethical Considerations: Research ethics were considered throughout the study. An informed consent of the each participant was taken before conduct of interview. The objectives and scheduled questions were shared with each participant. Personal details of the participants were kept confidential by giving the mpseudo names and codes were used against their names in the data. Participants of study were ensured that their interviews shall be used only for research purpose.

Results of the Study

Both types of data were analyzed separately and the results were given on the same pattern. Desk review was conducted to analyze quantitative data based on numeric details of students' enrolment and degree completion during ten years. Excel sheet was used beside manual analysis of quantitative data. An inductive analysis of qualitative data based on students' interviews was conducted. Codes were used against their names to save the identity of the respondents. Codes were assigned like, AMD-1; A for name, Ali; M for gender; Male and D for department, DNFCE and 1 for serial number of interviewee. Data was coded and themes were generated through NVivo 10 software.

Quantitative Data Analysis: Quantitative data were based on the numeric details of the students enrolled in M. Phil programs of DNFE and STED from 2002 to 2011. Data obtained from admission office/data center and examination offices regarding enrolment and graduation was analyzed and shown in table 1.

Table 1
Enrolment and Degree Completion of M. Phil Education since 2002 to 2011

Year	Total Enrolment	Graduates	Non Graduates
2002	275	114	161
2003	201	99	102
2004	172	73	99
2005	144	65	79
2006	95	44	51
2007	131	54	77
2008	135	58	77
2009	37	13	24
2010	5	5	0
2011	93	50	43
TOTAL	1288	575	713

Table 1 shows combined data of M. Phil programs of DNFE and STED. Data shows that total 1288 admission were registered in M. Phil programs of DNFE and STED; 575 students completed their degrees while 713 could not complete their study programs and thus failed to get a degree.

AIOU is an institution of distance and continuing education. The students get admission many times in different semesters of a program of study till degree completion. University's admission data repeats a student's name each time the student is enrolled in a new semester. This exaggerates the real data of enrolment and degree completion in the university. To avoid confusion, all the data were screened against students' registration number and roll number and each student was counted only one time in Table 2.

Table 2
Accumulative Analysis of Enrolment and Degree Completion Rate

Program	Enrolment	Graduates	Non Graduates	Pass Percentage
DNFE	273	111	162	40.66%
STED	271	107	164	39.48
Total	544	218	326	40.07

Table 2 shows accumulative data of students' enrolments and degree completion in M. Phil programs of DNFE and STED. The analysis of quantitative data shows that total 544 students were enrolled in M. Phil programs of DNFE and STED during ten years of study period. The students who successfully completed their degrees were 218 which were 40.07% of the enrolled students while 326 students failed to complete their degrees which were 59.93% of enrolled students.

Qualitative Data Analysis: Qualitative data was based on interviews with the students who failed to complete their degrees. Semi structured interviews were conducted based on some generic questions from literature review. During interview, the students shared their experiences contributing reasons to not complete their degrees. The interviews were extended upto maximum retrieval of information which the respondents shared the problems and barriers they faced during education as reasons not to complete their degrees. The recorded data of interviews, when transcribed and analyzed inductively, exposed thirty factors that affected the degree completion of the distance learners. The summary of factors and sub-factors is shown in table 3.

Table 3
Identification of Factors Affecting Degree Completion through Inductive Analysis

Sr.#	Factor	Sub-factors
1.	Financial Issues	Financially Weak Background, Distance of students form university, Family Restrictions
2.	Distance	Lack of Coordination, Travelling Issues, Accessibility Issues, Time Management, Employment Issues, Rise in Cost, Time Wastage, Accommodation Issues, Family Issues, Communication Barriers
3.	Lack of Interest	Behavioural issues, Lack of Coordination, Lack of time Management, Lack of Guidance, Delay in Feedback, Failure in Exams, Employment Issues, , Delivery of Content, Disappointment with the System of University, etc. etc.
4.	Lack of Support Services	Correspondence issues, Mismanagement of workshops, Unprepared resource persons, Behavioural Issues, Limited access to library, No borrowing facility, Centralization, Computer were out of order, etc. etc.
5.	Selection of Course	Outdated Books, Copied from Intl Content, Irrelevant Material, Unfamiliarity with distance learning system, Do not meet local demands, Lengthy Syllabus, Handwritten Assignments, Mistakes and Errors, etc. etc.
6.	Communication	Difficulty in physical contact, Communication Gap,

Sr.#	Factor	Sub-factors
	Barriers	Mobile Calls remain unattended, Delay in feedback, One way communication, Poor response through emails, Forced visits to university, Change of Supervisor, etc. etc.
7.	Age Factor	Diversity of age groups, Memory issues, Unawareness with latest technology, Decreasing capabilities
8.	Employment Issue	Main hurdle, Leave related issues, Time Management, Posting, job insecurity, Job commitments / busy schedule, Restriction on NOC, Double standard for education, Victim of professional jealousy, Discouragement, etc.
9.	Family Issues	Family Restrictions, Family Commitments and Responsibilities, Single family system, Children Issues, Lack of family support, Engagement of family in a case,
10.	Compulsory Workshops	Distance Related Issues, Employment Issues, Family Issues, , Correspondence Issues, Consecutive Workshops, Extension in workshop's duration, Behavioural Issues, Dissatisfied with evaluation system, Long duration of Workshop
11.	Lack of Coordination	Lack of Guidance, Behavioural Issues, Change of Supervisor, Pattern of Synopsis changed several times, Poor Response on Calls and Emails, Family and job related commitments, Delay in Feedback, Mental Disharmony, etc.
12.	Health Issues	Accidents, Prolonged Illness, Mental Disturbance
13.	Behavioural Issues	Insulting, Discouraging, Non Cooperative, Take students as burden, Likes and dislikes, Immature behaviour, Careless, Unpleasant, Non Serious students
14.	Lack of Guidance	Students are trapped, minimum exposure with university and tutors, No rectification of mistakes, weaknesses in selection process of topic for research, Poor delivery of content
15.	Failure in Exams	high expectations from students, careless attitude, students weaknesses in research and statistics
16.	Gender related Issues	Field Work is Tough for Female, Females Dependent on Husband, Females more affected by the distance, Pregnancy Issues, Male students neglected
17.	Lack of technological awareness	Unawareness, Inability to use computer, problems in communication, dependency upon others
18.	Lack of Time Management	Unawareness, Burden of responsibilities, Employment factor
19.	Isolation of Distance Learners	Lack of support, Lack of contact, Lack of guidance, Self-paced learning
20.	Delayed Feedback	Respond after Months, slow processing, forgetfulness of students, loss of interest and motivation, Time wastage

Sr.#	Factor	Sub-factors
21.	Lack of teachers' training	Lack of command over subject, Teachers bring student in their own area of interest
22.	Lack of research knowledge	no previous knowledge, lack of understanding
23.	Allotment of supervisor	Unfamiliarity with teachers, Unwilling supervisors, excess of students,
24.	Lack of Encouragement	Careless attitude
25.	Unprepared students	Dependency on teachers
26.	Inability of self-study	Lack of self confidence
27.	Examination system	Judgment of speed
28.	Plenteous admissions	Failure in accommodating students
29.	Lack of confidence	Hesitation, Isolation
30.	Lack of Information	Unawareness about coming events

Table 3 shows the brief overview of factors and sub-factors affecting degree completion rate in distance education. Majority of factors affecting degree completion have many sub factors which reflect the cause and effect of the main factors. These factors have affected differently to the different participants of the study. A deeper analysis of the factors shows that they are interlinked and have much in common with each other. Time management, lack of guidance, behavioural issues, lack of coordination and delay in feedback are the factors which have appeared not only as main factors but they have also been repeated time and again as sub factors of certain other factors of the study.
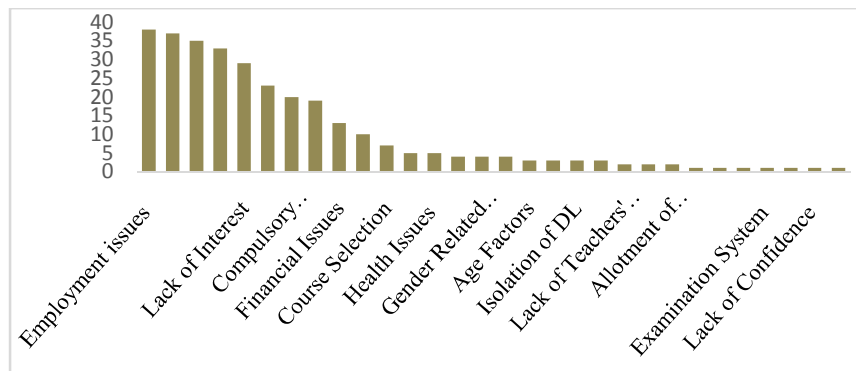

Figure 2: Factors affecting degree completion of distance learners

Figure 2 shows the factors affecting the degree completion of the distance learners and their intensity of effect. It shows that different factors affected the degree completion of the distance learners differently. Similarly the effect of each factor, whether it affected great number of students or in small number, had been different on each participant of the study. Out of total 30 factors, there were 22 factors namely financial issues, behavioural issues, course selection, lack of guidance, health issues, failure in examination, gender related issues, technology related issues, age factor, time management, isolation of DL, delay in feedback, lack of teachers training, lack of research knowledge, allotment of supervisor, lack of encouragement, unpreparedness of the DL, inability of self-study, examination system, plenteous admissions, lack of confidence and lack of information affected almost one fourth percent of the total participants. Eight factors namely employment issues, lack of coordination, distance from the university, communication barriers, lack of interest, family issues, compulsory workshops and lack of support services played relevantly more significant role in low degree completion of the distance learner by affecting greater number of learners. A brief description of each factor is as under:-

Employment Issues: *Literature review shows that employment related issues had a great effect on the degree completion of the distance learners. Majority of respondents (96%) in current study were employed, earning something to support themselves financially. But employment of the distance learners emerged as major barrier affecting their degree completion in the current study. The problem was further intensified by issues like leave for educational purpose, time management between job and other commitments, posting to far off places, job insecurity, job related commitments / busy schedule, restriction on NOC, double standard for education, professional jealousy and discouragement. "Obtaining leave for education remained major concern during studies" (AMS-7). "After my posting to the other province, my education was badly affected" (QMS-33). "I was a victim of professional jealously" (TMD-19).*

Lack of coordination: Lack of coordination between the students and the teachers/university emerged as second powerful factor which affected the degree completion of the majority of the distance learners. There were many issues which caused lack of coordination between students and teachers. Some of these issues reported by respondents were lack of

coordination were lack of guidance, behavioural issues, change of supervisor, pattern of synopsis changed several times, poor response on calls and emails, family and job related commitments of the students, delay in feedback and mental disharmony. "*When something was sent to supervisor for feedback, the supervisor would response after months*" (HMD-20). "*The students were not given proper time individually due to enrolment of large number of students*" (AMS-31)

Distance from the University: *The distance of the learners varied from 1 to 1400 kilometers from the university. Male respondents were settled at a longer distance from university as compared with female respondents. Settlement of students at a distance from the university affected their education by causing issues like lack of coordination, travelling issues, accessibility issues in attending workshops and utilizing library, time management, employment issues, rise in cost due to travelling, accommodation and food charges, time wastage in travelling, accommodation issues, family issues and communication barriers. "Distance definitely affected the studies as it wasn't possible for me to visit university each time for each issue" (SFS-32). "Due to distance it was difficult for me visit university time and again as it increased the cost of education" (AFD-44).*

Communication Barriers: Communication barriers also emerged as a strong factor in affecting degree completion of distance learners. The students failed to establish good contact with the university and their supervisors due to issues like communication gap, behavioural issues and delay in feedback. The students were forced visits to university to solve their issues in person. They could not make an effective use of communication technology."Communication gap was a major barrier in my degree completion" (NFS-24). "*The students had to visit university in personal to solve their issues otherwise they didn't receive any positive response on mobile phone or internet*" (AMS-31).

Lack of Interest: Students' self-motivation and interest in studies are conducive in the achievement of their goals. Lack of interest contributed in the incomplete degrees of the distance learners. Students lost their interest in studies mainly because of the behavioural issues, lack of coordination, lack of time management, lack of guidance, delay in feedback, accessibility issues, failure in exams, employment issues, poor delivery of content and disappointment with the system of university. "*The major factor which affected my interest was that the university staff*

did not care for the students" (AMD-21). "*The major reason behind my incomplete was that I totally lost interest in studies. The supervisor neither gave timely respond to my work nor provided any guidance to move forward*" (MFS-48).

Family Related Issues: *The respondents of currents study were adults and majority of them (88%) were married. Family has its own commitments. Many students failed to complete their degree as they were entangled in family related issues. The sub factors of family issues that further intensified the problem were family restrictions for making expenditures and travelling alone (for female), family commitments and responsibilities, single family system, children issues, lack of family support for getting higher education, registration of FIR on family in a criminal case, illness of spouse which consumed time and money. "I had zero family support for education" (NMD-29). "Family issues were a major hurdle in the way of my studies" (BFS-45).*

Compulsory Workshops: *Workshops were a compulsory component of M. Phil program which are organized to familiarize the students with different aspects of a particular subject. Many students failed to attend them in time and thus wasted their time. The students reported many issues related workshops that added in the problems of students. These issues were distance from the university, employment issues, family issues, correspondence issues regarding intimation letters for workshops, consecutive workshops which required long leave, extension in workshops duration during workshops, behavioural issues and long duration of workshop. "I faced difficulties due to my family and job related commitments during workshops" (KFS-17). "The duration of a workshop was extended while it was in progress" (MMD-46).*

Lack of Support Service: *Support services facilitate the distance learners in achieving their educational goals. Many distance learners could not complete their degrees due to scarcity of these services. The students suffered mainly because of correspondence issues regarding timely delivery of letters and books, absence of resource persons during face to face sessions, unprepared resource persons, behavioural issues, limited access to library, no borrowing facility of books, centralization of support services in main campus and out of order computers in the library which were allocated for M. Phil students. "Due to poor delivery system I often received my letters for workshops late" (SFD-5). "The facility of library was good but students could avail it only in university"*

(AMD-21).

Financial Issue: *Though none of the respondents of current study complained about the expensiveness of distance education, yet the financial constraints also affected the degree completion rate of distance learners at AIOU. The students faced financial issues mainly because of poor financial background, distance from the university which increased the cost of education for the learners and family restrictions on making expenses for education. "I suffered from severe financial problems due to repeated visits to university" (TMS-37). "I wasn't financially strong enough and faced financial issues during my studies" (SMS-8).*

Behavioural Issue:. *The behaviour and attitude of both teacher and students, towards each other as well as towards studies, matters a lot in successful degree completion. Many students could not complete their degrees as they were affected by behavioural issues. Some negative tendencies of behaviour reported by learners were insulting and discouraging attitude of teachers, non-cooperative attitude of supporting staff, having likes and dislikes for students, immature behaviour, careless and unpleasant attitude towards students. Non-serious attitude of the students towards their studies was also reported as barrier in their degree completion. "University neither takes the responsibility nor owns its students. It just enrolls them and sets them free" (AMS-31). "Certain teachers in the university had likes and dislikes for the students" (HMD-20). Distance learners' "non-serious attitude and lack of interest in studies was a major hurdle in their way to degree completion. They did not fully devote their time for studies" (SMS-8).*

Course Selection: *Selection of a particular program of studies for M. Phil also affected the education of some students and they failed to complete their study programs. They were of the view that had they got admission in another discipline of education, they might have completed their degree. The issues reported regarding course that disturbed the students were outdated books, copy-paste material, irrelevant content, unfamiliarity of students with distance learning mode, handwritten assignments, lengthy syllabus which was full of mistakes and errors. "Books' editions were old and lack updated knowledge" (HMD-20). "I wasn't clear about distance learning mode of education in the beginning and took time to adjust myself" (SFD-3).*

Lack of Guidance: *The students of all age and all levels seek guidelines from their tutors and supervisor to complete their assigned task. They look forward to their teachers when they are trapped or when they find themselves in a fix. The respondents of current study made complaints about lack of guidance and counseling in the university. Some students failed to complete their degrees as they were not provided proper guidance. The sub-factors that caused the lack of guidance were students' minimum exposure with university and tutors, no rectification of mistakes, weaknesses in the process of topic selection for research and poor delivery of content. "The students were not provided proper guidance. The teachers generally found fault with their work and provided them no guidance" (TFS-16). "The quality of guidance and counselling was poor at M. Phil level" (SMS-22).*

Health Issues: *"Health is wealth" is a well-known proverb. Human beings do suffer from health issues off and on due to some negligence or carelessness. Though majority of the students remained safe and sound during studies yet health issues also affected the degree completion of some of the students. These students suffered from some temporary as well as prolonged illness. A few of them met with accidents during studies and sustained serious injuries which took time to recover. Resultantly they failed to complete their degrees. Mental disturbance also caused nuisance for the students. "I got ill with fever during my studies. The illness was prolonged which badly affected my education" (SFD-3). "I met an accident during my education. It took a lot of time in healing the wounds" (SFS-18).*

Failure in Exams: *Failure of students in examination had also been a serious issue which restricted them to complete their degrees. Some of the students got repeatedly failed in exams. They attributed their failure to high expectations of teachers from the students, careless attitude of teachers towards students and students' poor understanding of subjects like research and statistics. "I got failed twice in research paper which wasted a lot of my time and increased my financial worries. It had become difficult for me to continue my education" (MMS-26). "I could not pass my research paper in spite of my repeated attempts" (SFD-5).*

Gender Related Issues: *There wasn't any typical gender discrimination reported during the study. Some of students attributed incomplete degrees of the students to issues that were related to a particular gender only. The issues for female were field work for collection of data for*

research, dependency of female students on husband after marriage, distance from the university, pregnancy issues and the issue reported for male students was that the male community was neglected in the university. "The females student who get married during studies, completely depend upon the attitude of her husband" (SFD -1). "Male community was neglected. The main focus remained on female students. To take a supervisor was a tough task for the male students" (JMS-34).

Lack of Technological Awareness: *Distance learning system uses technology to impart education to the distance learners at their door step. Technology is used as a mode of delivery for education. It is also used as a tool of communication to bridge the gap / distance between the distance learners and the university. But the same technology becomes a barrier in education when the learner is not familiar with its use in education. Unawareness with the technology also affected the degree completion of the distance learners. Technology related issues mainly raised from unawareness of distance learners, inability to use computer which caused problems in communication and made them dependent upon others to complete the given tasks. "Many distance learners suffered due to lack of requisite technological awareness" (AMS-12). "Students who could not operate the computer were completely dependent upon others for the development of assignments and thesis. They failed to do their work satisfactorily" (RFS-28).*

Age Factor: *The respondents of current study were adults having age from 25 to 54 years. About 60 percent of the respondent belonged to the age group of 30-40 years. Growing age definitely affects the mental and physical capabilities of the man. A small number of students had shown the effect of age on their degree completion due to the factors like diversity of age groups in the class, memory issues, decreasing capabilities with the growing age. Lack of awareness with latest technology and delayed response also intensified the age effects on the students. . "Age do has its affects, especially when there is an unnecessary delay in response, things do not remain fresh in memory" (BFS-45).*

Lack of Time Management: *With the passage of time, people are more and more engaged in the daily routine businesses of life. They have to take care of multi-dimensional work at the same time. That requires good time management skills. Time management among the work, family and education related commitments had been a serious issue for the distance*

learners. Majority of the students raised the issue of time management but only a small number of them showed the direct effect of time management on their degree completion. The issues came from the unawareness of students with time management strategies, burden of responsibilities at home and in the office. "Most of the students were adult learners who were married and had the responsibilities of their families. It was difficult for them to spare proper time for studies" (AMD-50).

Isolation of the Distance Learners: *Quasi separation of the tutors and the students is a characteristic of distance education. Distance learners normally remain away from the university and work in isolation except for a short period of compulsory workshops. Some of the students in current study suffered due to their isolation from the teachers and the university. Due to this separation, the students could not get adequate support and guidance from their tutors and supervisors. "The distance learners are set free to take their own course except workshops. University does not take their responsibility" (NFS-13). "University do not own the problems of the distance learners. The students struggle in isolation" (SMS-22).*

Delayed Feedback: *Timely feedback plays an important role in rectifying students' mistakes and helps them to move forward without wasting their time. Unnecessary and prolonged delay keeps the students in the dark and affects their interest and motivation also. It was explored during study that a few students could not complete their study programs due to prolonged delay in provision of feedback. This delay was caused due to responding the students after months and slow processing of the study matters in the university which resulted in forgetfulness of students, loss of interest and motivation and time wastage. "Many supervisors didn't respond to their students work even after many months" (SFS-18). "The working process of the university is too slow. It takes about 4 to 5 months in receiving reply of a work submitted in the university" (QMS-33).*

Lack of Teachers' Training: *The teachers and other supporting staff working in distance learning system should have specialized training to address the needs and demands of the distance learners. A few students attributed their incomplete degrees to lack of teachers training which caused their lack of command over subject. Instead of supporting students' perspective, they tried bring the students in their own area of interest and specialty. "The teachers who are Ph. D degree holders and*

whose responsibility is to teach the students must have a comprehensive knowledge of research mechanism. The teachers should have basic training on it. A trainer should be well-trained first" (NMD-29).

Lack of Research Knowledge: Thesis is a compulsory component of M. Phil degree which is purely a research work. A few students could not complete their degrees as they failed to develop good understanding of the research due to having no previous knowledge of research and their lack of understanding of the subject. *"One of the reasons behind my incomplete degree is lack of research knowledge"* (KFS-17). *"Many students who did not have previous research background, or failed to comprehend research mechanism at this stage, could not move forward to degree completion"* (AMD-21).

Allotment of Supervisor: *A small number of students were directly affected due to the allotment procedure of the supervisor as they were unfamiliar with teachers except those who belonged to their own educational department. Moreover some of the teachers were also unwilling to supervise the students. Plenteous admission also caused problems for students as well as teachers in the allotment process. "Many distance learners suffered just because their selected / chosen supervisor did not show willingness to supervise them. So many learners quit just because of the non-availability of the supervisor"* (RMD-6).

Lack of encouragement: *The encouragement and motivation of the students cast a positive effect on their studies. It stimulates them to work hard to complete a program of study. A few students suffered due to absence of encouragement and motivation from the teachers as they exhibited a careless attitude towards the success or failure of their students. Distance learners "always look for some sort of appreciation and encouragement which is missing. They are not motivated…. They are rather discouraged"* (RMD-6).

Unprepared Students: *Distance learning puts more responsibility on the shoulders of the distance learners. If they are non-serious and do not come well-prepared, they might fail to achieve their goals. The degree of a few students remained incomplete due to their own unpreparedness as they remained largely dependent upon their teachers and did not bother to work on their own. "The students didn't come well prepared. They were totally dependent on teachers"* (BMS-10).

Inability of Self-study: *Distance learners are mostly self-paced. A few students took the responsibility of their incomplete degrees to their own as they failed to move forward on self-pace basis. They failed to seek the guidance of their teachers due to lack of self-confidence and observing manners and antiquities for the tutors/supervisor."I myself was responsible for my incomplete degree in M. Phil. When my supervisor didn't give me enough time to supervise and provide guidelines, I failed to move forward by studying on my own" (NFD-11).*

Examination System: *A few students left their degree incomplete as they were annoyed with the examination system of the university which, according to students, judged the writing speed of the students, not their concepts. They also expressed their disapproval for the handwritten assignments. "The examination system was so poor which judged the writing speed of the students instead of checking their concepts. I failed to write so many pages in that limited timeframe and quit university" (KFS-49).*

Plenteous Admissions: *Universities enroll increased number of students to project it as their success. But this high enrolment becomes troublesome for the students when they are not accommodated properly. Plenteous admissions in the M. Phil programs of the university was also taken as a strong factor affecting the degree completion of the some of the distance learners as university failed to accommodate/facilitate the increased number of students. Some of the students even expressed their reservations that increased number of admissions were offered only to generate funds."The department admitted too students and they failed to accommodate and facilitate them properly. The related faculty and facilities were not sufficient" (MMS-26).*

Lack of Confidence: *Confidence level of the students also determines their success or failure.A few students failed to move forward with their studies as they lack in requisite level of confidence. They were hesitant and could not build confidence due to their isolation from the university and other fellows."The students suffered from lack of confidence. They hesitated to face the class and present their topic" (RFS-28).*

Lack of Information: *A few students failed to complete their degree due to their lack of information. These students failed to keep themselves up-to-date after they missed a workshop or got failed in the examination. Resultantly they remained unaware about the coming events as when to*

attend a workshops or when and where to take an examination. "University does not provide any follow up information to those who had missed an event like missed a workshop or failed a paper. The students generally remain unaware about when to attend a workshop or when to appear in a paper" (YMS-40).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the graduation rate as well as the exploring factors affecting degree completion rate of the distance learners. Analysis of quantitative data showed that degree completion rate of the students of M. Phil education remained 40.07% during ten years from 2002 to 2011. Analysis of qualitative data showed that distance learners faced a lot of barriers during their education that affected their degree completion rate. Some of these factors were highlighted in literature review like family (Maxwell et al, 2015), employment (Pedro and Scott, 2004), financial worries of the learners (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014), student support services (Kamau, 2007) etc. which were identified in current study also. It also reflects that certain issues of distance learners are common which affect their studies. Current study highlighted many other factors that played significant role in incomplete degrees of the distance learners. Inappropriate teaching (Augusta, Cota, Jayaran, & Laboisser, 2010) was also found as a barrier for degree completion. Current study also highlighted issues like poor delivery of content and lack of teachers' training.

There were some similarities, but generally the cause and effect of each factor also varied from student to student. For example, behavioural issues were the major sub factor that affected the interest of distance learners in their studies. But at the same time the students reported many other sub factors that affected the interest level of the students i.e. lack of coordination, lack of time management, lack of guidance, delay in feedback, failure in exams, delay in development of synopsis, poor learning, isolation and assessment system. A few factors were strong enough to be the sole cause of students' incomplete degrees i.e. employment issues and examination system. Unexpected emergencies like accidents or other health issues also had a strong impact on the degree completion of the students. But generally many factors work simultaneously behind students' decision to withdraw from a course of studies before its completion. These factors may be grouped into three major categories. First: student related factors i.e. lack of interest, course selection, failure in examination, unpreparedness of the distance learners and lack of confidence. Second: University related

factors i.e. compulsory workshops, lack of support services, behavioural issues and lack of teachers' training. Third: External factors i.e. employment issues, distance from the university and health issues. This diversity in the nature of factors and sub factors reflects that a single measure would be quite insufficient and inadequate to overcome the problems faced by the distance learners. A multi-dimensional approach is required to address the real nature of the problem.

The results of the study suggest that the higher education of the employed persons should be encouraged by facilitating them accordingly. There is need to improve coordination of distance learners with university/tutors/supervisor by enhancing frequency of students' contact with them. Good and positive relation of the students with faculty and other staff members would be conducive to the persistence of the distance learners. Lack of faculty – student interaction results in isolation of the distance learners and affects their motivation for studies. Distance education faculty requires specialized skill and training to handle the distance learners. The quality of students' support services should not only be improved but they may be extended gradually from central level to regional and to the doorstep of the distance learners to help them complete their study programs in a student-friendly environment.

Keeping in view the nature of problems affecting the degree completion rate, following is recommended to improve the degree completion rate of the distance learners.

1. All available technological gadgets and social media sites should be used to fill the gap caused by physical distance between the university and the students.

2. E-learning should be promoted. Workshops held at university should be displayed/shown virtually at regional campuses to facilitate the distance learners. Recorded lectures of workshops may be uploaded to university's website for the students who cannot afford to attend workshops. An assessment test may also be taken from such students to assess their performance.

3. Distance learners should be provided access to digital data of library from home. Special IDs may be provided to distance learners till stipulated time for the degree completion to access library from home/office. They should have the facility of borrowing books from library till stipulated time for degree completion on submission of required security amount for books.

4. Feedback to distance learners should be provided at its earliest to save their time and interest level. Prolonged and unnecessary delays should be avoided.

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