# PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF WEEKLY ANNOUNCEMENTS IN PROVISION OF LEARNING SUPPORT TO SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS

*Sadia Jabeen [sadiajabeen@vu.edu.pk],*
*Department of Sociology, Virtual University of Pakistan, Pakistan*

## Abstract

Announcements are considered as important source in provision of academic support to the students. Announcements assist students to get information about the university learning mechanisms, courses and other time management skills, which may help them to make their learning smooth and pleasant. In this context present study documents the perceived effectiveness of Weekly Announcements posted for Sociology students of Virtual University of Pakistan enrolled in semester Fall 2013. An online survey was conducted from the students of Sociology enrolled in semester Fall 2013. Total 399 students respond the questionnaire. For analysis purpose descriptive statistics were used. Preliminary results of the study indicate that students perceived weekly announcements favourable for their learning process. Specifically, the demos posted regarding LMS use for performing different activities in weekly announcements were considered as more auspicious element. Overall students were satisfied with the initiative of weekly announcements in Sociology courses and perceived this step helpful in their subjects' learning.

**Keywords:** Students support services, Weekly Announcements, perceived effectiveness, e-learning

## Introduction

Provision of learning support to the students in e-learning is very crucial as in e-learning mode students interact through mediated communication that sometimes restricts the students learning process due to communication gap between instructor and student (Wright, 1991; Simpson, 2000; Thorpe, 1988). In order to overcome this deficiency, student support is provided through different means such as content related tutoring, supplemental information provision, e-mail mentoring, in-time information provision and tips of learning through announcements etc. Thorpe (2001) defined 'learner support' as "all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process" (p.15). This support is specifically necessary in order to provide ease to newly enrolled students who are not well familiar with their respective learning management systems (LMS) and they face difficulty in exploring different resources, like lesson contents, PPTs, recommended books, glossary and FAQs related to their course.

Previous researchers show that in distance learning environments, students are the focus of attention not only for instructors but also for management. In order to provide them learning facilities and proper learning environment on their pace a variety of support services are provided. The purpose of providing these support services is to facilitate students in the learning and also their intellectual development and growth (Simpson, 2000; Tait, 2000).

In distance learning environment, a framework model for support must include the components of resource services, student services, faculty services and administrative services. Without coordination between these four components it is difficult for the universities to satisfy the students (Rekkedal, 2004). It is evident that support services for students are required specifically in distance learning modes but in this regard it is important to combine machine automated services with human supplied services. Moreover, technology might be used as a tool to provide students a mix of affective, cognitive and systematic learning services without human intervention (Anderson, 2004).

In order to enhance students learning, many approaches are used to provide them support; mobile learning is one of these. In order to see the role of mobile learning in paradigm shift in distance education and its effectiveness in opening the new interactive patterns for teachers and students a study was conduct by Zawacki-Richter, Brown and Delport (2009). Results of their study supported the fact that mobile learning facilitates the process of learning. Majority (61%) believe that through this support system teachers will adopt new learning methodologies continuously. Further, respondents endorse this learning support in order to maintain independence of time and access in distance learning mode. This will also offer new dimensions for learner support and content development and delivery. Researchers concluded that at the organizational level, faculty and organizations' support is of utmost importance in order to create innovative environment and in this context mobile learning system has potential to facilitate this process at different levels.

Another study (Rekkedal & Dye, 2007) conducted in NKI (Norwegian Knowledge Institute) support the assumption regarding provision of student support through mobile learning to promote flexibility and ease. The study determined that courses in distance learning must be developed for both, mobile and non-mobile learners in an attractive manner. In this regard, for mobile and non-mobile technologies content must be same. Moreover, in developing such device based support system, a standard communication pattern may be followed to ensure smooth interaction of students and teachers and course content and multi-media material for students.

Another aspect of such support services is that these are considered important in distance educational programs to achieve the desire results from learners and to achieve learning outcomes (Alias, 2005; Ukpo, 2006). Some of the researchers (Simpson, 2000; Tait, 2000; Usun, 2004) linked the success of e-learning environment with the effectiveness of students support services provided to the students. The most common definition operationalized to describe students support service is the provision of additional help to the learners through different means which include academic as well as non-academic support and also intellectual and cognitive ability development (Simpson, 2000).

Minnaar (2011) explored the student support in e-learning in higher education institutes and found out the guideline to provide learning support to the students. His study concluded that provision of learning support is necessary to initiate in order to enhance human contact in distance learning environment, tackle the pedagogical issue student's face and to solve their technical problems of the system. Further, he emphasized on the creative solution to provide students support in e-learning environment (Rumble, 2000).

Provision of support to the learners in distance education has a fundamental importance due to several reasons such as in distance and open learning it is expected that student assume most of the responsibilities on their own. Further, it also requires media competency of the students and especial structure for faculty support to the students. The goal of student support is linked with the expression of scaffolding that means a shell is placed around students in order to promote independent and mobile learning in which they are enabled to have solution of their own problems thus, providing a platform for help in academic and non-academic issues (Zawacki-Richter, Brown & Delport, 2009).

In learning context, support can be provided through different approaches such as role playing, design-based learning, critical incidents-based, problem-based, story-centred approaches. Such type of teaching strategies along with strong faculty support would be a successful learning experience (Naidu, 2004). Johnson (2004) emphasized on developing the study skills in students though support system. In this regard he exemplified a project in UK OU where university students were offered a self-help package that served as a tool for students support.

One of the initiatives in provision of learning support to the students is learning journals (reflective writing). This program was launched in Master of Distance Education (MDE) Program by the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). The program focused on development of portfolios through leaning journals as student support. Program serves a successful tool in order to strengthen the meta-cognitive skills of the students. Further, it facilitates in building confidence among students and making them more self-reliant and independent learners (Walti, 2004).In distance education, learning culture need to be developed and it could be possible through support services. A number of strategies can be used in this context that includes contextualizing in the learning, creating safe spaces for learning, welcoming alternatives and using media effectively (Spronk, 2004).

Thompson and Hills (2005) argued that proper long term planning and careful use of resources could help out in successful implementation of students support services in on-line medium. Further, they also highlighted the need of on-going research in this area so services for students may be changed or up-dated time to time as per their needs and requirements. Provision of services can additionally help out to reduce drop-out rates in on-line institutions (Woodley, 2004).

As different distance learning institutes are focusing on students support services in order to provide students better learning opportunities and to retain them, Virtual University Pakistan has also initiated such type of activities such as mentoring, audio tutorials, on-line interaction through team view, weekly announcements etc. One of the important features that assist in providing academic support to the students is announcement. Weekly announcements provide the opportunity to the students to explore the available resources in efficient and effective manner. Weekly announcement produce academic services included brief overview of weekly lectures, upcoming semester activities like quiz, assignment or GDB, tips regarding time management and sharing of LMS related demo's links. Through these announcements, students provided tips related to preparation of assignments, quizzes and Graded Discussion Boards. Additionally support was also provided in terms of in-time intimation about the semester activities and about mid and final term exams that how they can prepare themselves for exams and get good marks. In order to assess the perceived effectiveness of this initiative in Sociology courses a survey with students enrolled in semester fall 2013 was conducted.

## Objectives

Following were the objectives of the study:

- To explore the student's view regarding role of weekly announcements in enhancing their understanding about weekly lectures before time.
- To find out the students' perception about role performed by weekly announcements in keeping them up-dated with ongoing semester activities
- To know the perception of students about perceived effectiveness of weekly announcements in Sociology courses.

## Method

In order to measure the effectiveness of weekly announcement for Sociology students, student's perception was required so, an on-line survey was conducted. These weekly announcements provided academic services such as brief overview of weekly lectures, upcoming semester activities i.e. quizzes, assignments or graded discussion boards, tips regarding time management, exams preparation guidelines and sharing of LMS related demo's links. The objective behind this activity was to enhance students' understanding about weekly lectures in advance, to familiarize students about upcoming semester activities and to encourage their active participation throughout the semester. This activity was performed during semester Fall 2013 and at the end of the semester feedback of the students was taken. An on-line questionnaire was launched with help of IT department of

Virtual University in Sociology courses. Total 399 students respond to this survey. Out of total 399 responses, 172 were females and 227 were male students. Mean age of the respondents was 25.44 years. Alpha coefficient of the scale indicated that internal consistency (.886) of the scale was significantly high (Field, 2009).

## Results

Table 1:  Descriptive statistics of dimensions of Perceived Effectiveness of Announcement in Sociology Courses

| | Variables | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I could understand course material better. | 3.43 | 1.058 |
| 2 | I found an opportunity to manage my time for studies. | 3.47 | 1.065 |
| 3 | It supported me to plan my whole semester activities well. | 3.36 | 1.073 |
| 4 | I better planned time for studies in holidays and weekends. | 3.65 | 1.003 |
| 5 | Overview of the previous week lectures was quite helpful in recalling the content covered. | 3.56 | 1.019 |
| 6 | The practical exercises enhanced my exposure to the subject topics as a whole. | 3.53 | 1.020 |
| 7 | The demos in weekly announcements facilitated me to use LMS (MDB, GDB, Quiz, and Assignment) easily. | 3.71 | 1.033 |
| 8 | I was encouraged towards additional study for in-depth understanding. | 3.37 | 1.019 |
| 9 | Tips were useful for exam preparation. | 3.44 | 1.104 |
| 10 | I never discussed topics/ content with my class fellows and friends. | 3.29 | .993 |
| 11 | It enhanced my course discussion with my instructors. | 3.12 | 1.181 |
| 12 | I have now better idea of questioning the queries to the teachers. | 3.22 | .969 |
| 13 | I am satisfied with the weekly announcements. | 3.73 | 1.005 |

Data in Table 1 explains the enrolled students of Sociology views regarding effectiveness of Weekly announcement activity initiated in semester Fall, 2013. All the items have mean value more than (3.00) which shows that students perceive all the mentioned factors favourable their learning process. Specifically, the demos in weekly announcements are considered as more favourable element of weekly announcement the highest mean value of (3.71) and standard deviation (1.033). Overall students are satisfied with this initiative of weekly announcement and mean value of (3.73) and standard deviation (1.005) shows its effectiveness from students' perspective.

Table 2:  Inter Correlation of Scores on 13 Items of Perceived Effectiveness of weekly Announcements

| Items | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | --- | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | .524** | --- | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | .471** | .585** | --- | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | .415** | .472** | .404** | --- | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | .469** | .547** | .466** | .447** | --- | | | | | | | | |
| 6 | .501** | .492** | .454** | .412** | .591** | --- | | | | | | | |
| 7 | .368** | .348** | .389** | .305** | .406** | .389** | --- | | | | | | |
| 8 | .397** | .404** | .450** | .354** | .429** | .492** | .395** | --- | | | | | |
| 9 | .441** | .440** | .475** | .381** | .444** | .480** | .349** | .454** | --- | | | | |
| 10 | .545** | .534** | .537** | .360** | .454** | .496** | .529** | .426** | .573** | --- | | | |
| 11 | .193** | .133** | .060 | .067 | .171** | .148** | .151** | .126* | .070 | .164** | --- | | |
| 12 | .288** | .323** | .333** | .195** | .368** | .387** | .293** | .319** | .425** | .358** | .149** | --- | |
| 13 | .403** | .386** | .348** | .309** | .425** | .462** | .370** | .355** | .391** | .453** | .158** | .519** | --- |

** p<.001
*p<.005

Table 2 illustrates the correlation matrix of 13 questions for measuring perceived effectiveness of weekly announcement in sociology courses. The table shows that there is a significant correlation between opportunities to understand the course material better and

time management for studies. Significant correlation was also found between understanding of course material in context with services to apply knowledge at practical side. Significant correlation was also found between time management, lecture overview and overall satisfaction from weekly announcements. Help provided by weekly announcement in overall semester activities is strong correlated with overall satisfaction from this learning support activity. Facilitation provided through demos is also having strong correlation with overall satisfaction from learning support provision through announcements.

## Conclusion

Announcements serve as effective tool in guiding students and keep them up-dated about their courses and studies. Present study by focusing on this feature of e-learning was intended to measure the perceived effectiveness of weekly announcement in Sociology Courses. As one of the objectives of the study was to see whether weekly announcements have facilitate students in understanding lectures and related study material, it was found that these announcements proved to be successful in enhancing students' understanding of course. Students are well guided through these announcements about previous lectures, up-coming lectures overview, practical exercises and useful links to enhance their subjects understanding. The most profound element perceived effective by students was the links of demos shared with students regarding Moderated Discussion Boards, Graded Discussion Boards, Quiz, and Assignments. In these demos students were guided about how to attempt any assignment and graded activities as per requirement of the subject.

Results of the study reveal the fact that different dimensions of perceived effectiveness of weekly announcements were strongly correlated in terms of academic support. It was found that time management tips provided to the students had a strong correlation with overall satisfaction. Similarly, guideline provided in the form of lecture overviews, practical exercises and useful links of different lectures enhanced students overall satisfaction about this students support service. Thus, weekly announcements have provided academic as well as non-academic support to the students. It keeps students updated about the course and also facilitates them in managing their study related issues such as time management. But at the same time, these weekly announcements remain restricted towards interactivity pattern of students with students and students to instructor. These announcements failed to initiate useful debates on the subject between students and teachers.

This study has highlighted the perceived effectiveness of students support services particularly weekly announcements for students in e-learning environment. Results show the effectiveness in terms of understanding the course better as well as managing time for study along with practical application of the subjects. It is anticipated that the findings of this study would provide useful information to practitioners who need to develop the strategies to support especially newly enrolled students and will also be helpful in retaining the students at institution (to decrease the drop-out rate).

## Limitations and Suggestions

Singly source bias might be occurred as the questionnaire used in this study was self-reported measure. The problems of social desirability and reactivity might be occurred as students reported regarding their subject of the study and social institution directly. Thus, rating can be biased. This study has limits as it focuses on only one dimension of the Student Support Services i.e. weekly announcements that cannot be generalized on all types of support services provided by institutes. In order to gets multidimensional view regarding student support, future researches may also focus on mobile learning, content related tutoring, supplemental information provision, e-mail mentoring and other important related dimensions.

## References

1. Alias, M. (2005). Assessment of learning outcomes: validity and reliability of classroom tests. In *World Transactions on Engineering and Technology Education, 4(2),* (p. 235).

2. Anderson, T. (2004). Student services in a networked world. In J.E. Brindley, C. Walti & O. Zawacki-Richter (eds.), *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments,* (pp. 95-108). Retrieved from: http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/c3l/bachelor-master/master-programmes/mde/asf-series/volume-9/

3. Brindley, J.E. (2004). *Learner support in open, distance and online learning environments.* Bibliotheks-und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg.

4. Field, A.P. (2009). *Discovering statistics using SPSS.* SAGE publications Ltd.

5. Johnson, M. (2004). Enhancing study skills: Developing self-help materials for distance learners. In J.E. Brindley, C. Walti & O. Zawacki-Richter (eds.), *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments,* (pp. 117-124). Retrieved from: http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/c3l/bachelor-master/master-programmes/mde/asf-series/volume-9/

6. Minnaar, A. (2011). Student support in e-learning courses in higher education – insights from a metasynthesis "A pedagogy of panic attacks". In *Africa Education Review, 8(3),* (pp. 483-503), DOI: 10.1080/18146627.2011.618664

7. Naidu, S. (2004). Supporting learning with creative instructional designs. In J.E. Brindley, C. Walti & O. Zawacki-Richter (eds.), *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments,* (pp. 109-116). Retrieved from: http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/c3l/bachelor-master/master-programmes/mde/asf-series/volume-9/

8. Rekkedal, T. (2004). Internet based E-learning and support systems: The growing importance of support for learners and faculty in online distance education. In J.E. Brindley, C. Walti & O. Zawacki-Richter (eds*.), Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments,* (pp. 71-94). Retrieved from: http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/c3l/bachelor-master/master-programmes/mde/asf-series/volume-9/

9. Rekkedal, T. and Dye, A. (2007). Mobile Distance Learning with PDAs: Development and testing of pedagogical and system solutions supporting mobile distance learners. In *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 8(2).* Retrieved from. http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/349

10. Rumble, G. (2000). Student support in distance education in the 21st century: Learning from service management. In *Distance Education, 21(2),* (pp. 216-235).

11. Simpson, O. (2000). *Supporting Students in Open and Distance Learning.* London: Kogan Page.

12. Spronk, C. (2004). Addressing cultural diversity through learner support. In J.E. Brindley, C. Walti & O. Zawacki-Richter (eds.), *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments,* (pp. 169-178). Retrieved from: http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/c3l/bachelor-master/master-programmes/mde/asf-series/volume-9/

13. Tait, A. (2000). Planning student support for open and distance learning. In *Open Learning, 15(3),* (pp. 287-299).

14. Thompson, J. and Hills, J. (2005). Online learning support services for distance education students: Responding to and maintaining the momentum. In H. Goss (ed.), *Balance, fidelity, mobility: Maintaining the momentum? Proceedings of the 22nd ASCILITE Conference,* (pp. 661-665). Brisbane, Australia: Queensland University of Technology. Retrieved from http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/brisbane05/blogs/proceedings/76_Thompson.pdf

15. Thorpe, M. (1988). *Open Learning, Module 2 of the Post-Compulsory Diploma in Education.* United Kingdom. Open University.

16. Thorpe, M. (2001). *Learner support: A new model for online teaching and learning.* SCROLLA Networked Learning Symposium, University of Glasgow, Nov. 14, 2001. Retrieved July 6, 2004, from http://www.dice.education.ed.ac.uk/scrolla/resources/s1/thorpe_paper.html

17. Ukpo, E.O. (2006). Support for distance learners in a Nigerian distance education programme. In *Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning, 21(3),* (pp. 253-261).

18. Usun, S. (2004). Learner support services in distance education system (a case study of Turkey). In *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education(TOJDE), 5(4),* (pp. 31-39).

19. Walti, C. (2004). Implementing web-based portfolios and learning journals as learner support tools: an illustration. In J.E. Brindley, C. Walti & O. Zawacki-Richter (eds.), *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments,* (pp. 157-168). Retrieved from: http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/c3l/bachelor-master/master-programmes/mde/asf-series/volume-9/

20. Woodley, A. (2004). Conceptualizing student dropout in part-time distance education: pathologizing the normal? In *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 19(1),* (pp. 47-63).

21. Wright, S.J. (1991). Research on Selected aspects of learner support in Distance Education Programming: A Review. In *Selected papers, Part 1: The Second American Symposium on Research in Distance Education.* Pensylvania State University.

22. Zawacki-Richter, O.; Brown, T. and Delport, R. (2009). Mobile Learning: From single project status into the mainstream? In *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-learning, 2009/I.* Retrieved from http://www.eurodl.org/index.php?p=archives&year=2009&halfyear=1&article=357.