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## To What Extent Pakistani Citizens are Enjoying the Right of Access to Information? An Exploratory Study

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## **To What Extent Pakistani Citizens are Enjoying the Right of Access to Information? An Exploratory Study**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore and explain the provision of the right of access to information (RAI), a remarkable development particularly in the field of human rights and information management in Pakistan. This study has two objectives: (1) to track the practice and propensity of public information officers (PIOs) in providing information under the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013; (2) to examine the perceptions of information seekers in retrieving the information under the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013 (PTRIA, 2013). A mixed-method, sequential design with a parallel database variant was used to collect data. This study was divided into two phases; data of both phases were collected sequentially. The survey method was used to collect data in the first phase of this study. The questionnaire was the source of data collection from public information officers (PIOs) (n=315) working in nine divisions of the province of Punjab, Pakistan to understand their practices and preparedness level in providing information under PTRIA, 2013 with 95.5 % (n=301) response rate. Interviews were conducted to collect data for the qualitative phase of the study. The sample size for the qualitative phase was ten citizens of Pakistan who applied for information at least five times under the RAI. The study findings unwrapped a gap between the perceptions of public information officers (PIOs) and the information seekers, as PIOs claimed that all the information is organized well, and they provide the required information on time. However, they inform citizens if there were any logical delays in providing information. Vice Versa, citizens of Pakistan described that information services are not as per their satisfaction level due to the poor record management system, non-cooperative attitude of information providing bodies, unnecessary delays in retrieving required information and culture of secrecy among the government bodies.

**Keywords:** Freedom of information, Right of access to information, Human and fundamental right, Information services.

### **Introduction**

Information plays an important role to achieve the goals and objectives of society (Webster, 2014, 2020). Moreover, information is a vital source of mind mapping, problem resolving, good decision making, and knowledge updating (Selbst & Powles, 2018; Webster, 2014). It is valued for the development of economic, political, social, and environmental activities in a society (Behrens, Woolrich, Walton, & Rushworth, 2007; Webster, 2014). The importance of information in the economic, social, environmental, political development of a state had been recognized since ancient times. Based on this recognition, the right of the citizen to access government information was introduced in 1766 in Sweden. This right has different nomenclature in different states of the world such as “right to information (RTI), right of access to information (RAI), freedom of information (FOI). It is defined as the right of citizens of a country to retrieve information from government departments in prescribed ways (Fung, Graham, & Weil, 2006). Further, it is highlighted that successful information services under RAI is a method to develop transparency in government organizations, promote a sense of responsibility in the system, promote accountability, and cause good governance.

This right is also recognized as a human right and fundamental right as well and considered as a benchmark of all other human rights. It can be defined as the right of people to know about public functionaries by accessing all types of information and records kept by public functionaries. This right was a way that empowered the people of a state to choose the best government, promoted democracy, accountability, and transparency in government organizations as well. Therefore, a state without this right promotes a secrecy culture in organizations that causes corruption and corruption distresses the system of democracy in a country (Agrawal, 2012; Schedler, 1999; Sridhar & Rao, 2006).

For the practical implementation of this right, there is an extreme need for good information services provided by the government of a country. Acquiring relevant information, organization of information, storing it, and processing on demand (retrieval and dissemination of information) are big pillars in information service especially information service under the right of citizens to access the information without loss of time. On the other side, the volume of information and the diverse nature of information has made this task challenging.

Information services under RAI are defined as: accept the application of request from citizens of a state, gather requested information, organize the information, and respond to the queries of the information requesters (Kejriwal, 2006; Mendel, 2015). Moreover, it is considered that information services under the RAI can be listed as to help the seekers in writing applications for information, receive and entertain applications (manual/computerized), deliver accurate information in time, make a list of exempted information according to the law, inform the seekers if there is a delay with logics, avoid to provide confidential information, keep the record of information and applications in such a way that can access easily, and prepare an annual report of the organization (Paul, 2014; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Wyatt, 2011). Thus, grounded on the above literature, information services under RAI can be listed as receiving requests, management of requests, searching required information, acquire required information, make ready for delivery, delivery of information to requesters, and management of delivered information.

Sweden was the first country in the world that acknowledged the right of access to information (Cuillier & Davis, 2010). Whereas, in 2019, there were one hundred and forty-five developing and developed countries in the world that recognized this right (Global Right to Information Rating, 2018, 2019). In Pakistan, the history of acknowledgment of this right started in 2000 by a promulgation of the Freedom of Information Ordinance (FIO). Whereas the Provincial Assembly of Baluchistan acknowledged this right in 2005, the Sindh

Provincial Assembly recognized this right in 2006, the Punjab province and KPK provinces passed this right in 2013 (Dey, 2015; PILDAT, 2015; Sardar, 2014).

All five Acts on “right of access to information” in Pakistan defined that for successful provision of the “right of access to information” there is an extreme need to provide a good information service by designated, trained, and expert information professionals and monitor their information services. Moreover, these Acts elaborated that PIOs are supposed to provide information in time and accurately. Where it is important to offer citizens the right of access to information (RAI), at the same time it is important to ensure the information service quality under the RAI. User's perceptions about products, services, and experiences value a lot (Oliver, 1980). Therefore, evaluations of user's perceptions about information services is a useful measure to understand the actual nature and extent of information service (Bali, 2018). Information service is divided into four units: (1) information providing services, (2) information retrieving services, (3) information individual services, and (4) information organization services.

Literature reports that information seekers want information relevant, and quickly (Hu, Hu, & Yan, 2014). Similarly, Pitt, Watson, and Kavan (1995) concluded that the seekers of information are expected to deliver the information quickly and effectively. Users are not concerned about the organization of information service rather they are concerned about information accessibility, usefulness, and reliability. Bali (2018) found that Iraqi media persons were not satisfied under the right of access to information. Similarly, previous researches highlighted that user of the right of access to information perceived this right has acknowledged but practically to avail information services under this right is hectic work, wastage of time due to poor record management system, non-cooperative attitude, excessive delay, untrained staff, and irrelevant information delivered (Adeleke, 2011; Chaudhary, 2016; Dhawan, 2014; Grunewald, 1987; Hashmi, 2014; Kejriwal, 2006; Leaver, 2012; Maciag, 2011; Martinez, 2014; Naeem, 2018).

It may be concluded that to make accountable and transparent government activities, acknowledgment, and the successful implementation of RAI are very important. Whereas, a successful implementation is based on good information services offered by designated information officers to the public/citizens. Consequently, it is very important to explore the nature of information services under this right to examine the real status of RAI implementation in a state.

Despite the importance of the topic, the researchers could not find a single study exploring or explaining the nature and extent of information services under this right in the Pakistani context. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate the nature of information services provided by information professionals and to explore the perception of citizens about the information services offered to them under the right of access to information in Pakistan.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To explore the nature and extent of information services offered to citizens of Pakistan by information professionals designated in nine divisions of Punjab, Pakistan under the right of access to information (RAI).
2. To investigate the perceptions of citizens of Pakistan about offered information services by the government of Pakistan under the right of access to information (RAI).

### **Methodology**

To answer the research objectives of this study a mixed methods research (MMR) approach was used. MMR design is defined as collecting and analyzing both kinds of data (Quantitative and Qualitative) which also involves the use of both methods in tandem. The logic behind mixing both types of designs were: (1) the qualitative or quantitative methods

alone was insufficient to dig out in-depth information on the topic such as issues of citizens in retrieving information under the right of access to information (RAI), and (2) combining both methods provide a complete picture of information service under RAI.

Moreover, there were listed four topologies of mixed methods as (a) purpose-based design such as “triangulation”, (b) time-based design such as “sequential”, (c) relative priority such as ‘qualitatively driven’, and (d) level of interaction such as “fully integrated” (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Time-based topology named sequential was used in this study. This typology is further divided into two variants: (1) exploratory, and (2) explanatory. In this research work second, variant named “explanatory mixed method” was used (see Table 1). This variant is defined as sequential started with quantitative data collection and analysis followed by qualitative data collection and analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Table 1. Detail of Mixed Methods Used in the Study

Methods	Detail of Mixed Methods
Design Type	Sequential design
Variant	Explanatory
Timing	Sequential: Quantitative first followed by qualitative
Weighting and Notation	Equal (QUAN + QUAL)
Merge Strategy	Summarized and interpretation of QUAN and then QUAL and discussed how the qualitative result helped to explain the quantitative result (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p.84).
The Primary Point of the Interface of Mixing	Contacting the two strands from quantitative to qualitative (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p.75).
Paradigm	Postpositivist in phase one, constructivist in phase two
Level of Interaction	Interactive
Design Purpose	Need a more complete understanding about nature of information services offered to Pakistani citizens under right of access to information by explaining quantitative result with qualitative

## Research Strategy

Sequential explanatory mixed methods are used in this study. A detail of mixed methods, sequential strategy of both phases with product and procedure can be seen in Table 2.

## Target Population, Sample, and Instruments

### Quantitative Phase

The population of the quantitative phase was all information professionals designated in nine divisions (Lahore, Rawalpindi, Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Gazi Khan, Gujranwala, Sahiwal, Sargodha, and Faisalabad) of Punjab. These information professionals were designated by the government of Punjab under the Right of Information Act, 2013, and named as public information officers (PIOs). The designation of PIOs aimed to provide all types of government information to citizens of Pakistan on demand. A total of 1794 (Punjab Information Commission, 2018) PIOs were designated until January 2020. Following the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination with the confidence interval 5% and confidence level 95%, the sample size of this research work was 315 and 95.5% was the response rate. Further, in this research work, a stratified sampling technique was used and

each division considered a stratum. Therefore, 315 was divided by 9 divisions and  $n=35$  was the sample size of each division of Punjab (see Table 2). The questionnaire was distributed to the PIOs through WhatsApp group. The self-selected procedure was adopted to select 35 PIOs from each division.

The survey method was used to conduct the quantitative phase and a self-completed structured questionnaire was the source of collected data. The survey questionnaire was developed using an extensive review of available literature, expert review, and pilot testing. The drafted questionnaire was submitted to six experts from Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Bahawalpur divisions of Punjab. The drafted questionnaire was revised many times to make it imperative. After being revised and approved by experts, the questionnaire was tested in a pilot study through 50 information officers. The respondents for the pilot study were approached through email and in-person meetings. The reliability statistic for the construct 'information provision practices' was measured through the value of Cronbach's alpha that was .870 and is considered good (Hendrickson, Massey, & Cronan, 1993; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984; Pallant, 2013).

Table 2. Research Strategy

Phase	Procedure	Product
Quantitative Data Collection	Stratified Sampling Survey Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <math>N=315/9= 35</math> citizens from each division of Punjab</li> <li>· Numeric Data</li> </ul>
Quantitative Data Analysis	Data Screening SPSS QUAN. Software v. 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Descriptive Statistics,</li> <li>· Missing data, Mean and St. deviations</li> </ul>
Qualitative Phase Case Selection Interview Protocol Development	Purposefully selection of ten citizens	Citizen ( $n=10$ ). Applied at least five times for information.
Qualitative Data Collection	Individual in-depth telephonic interviews with 10 citizens of Pakistan.	Text data, Transcribe responses, and sort responses by categories
Qualitative Data Analysis	Coding themes and analysis	Codes and themes
Integration of QUAN and QUAL Results	Interpretation and explanation	Discussion Implications Future Research Directions

### ***Qualitative Phase***

The unit of analysis was citizens of Pakistan who seek information from the Punjab Information Commission office under the RAI. There were  $N= 1430$  citizens who applied for information and there were 229 citizens who applied for information to PIC more than five times. Through convenience sampling, fifteen seekers from the Lahore division were approached and ten of them agreed to the interview. An interview protocol was developed to gain detailed information about the topic. The interview protocol was based on quantitative results to elaborate and explore the quantitative results. Therefore, three main questions were asked, (1) perception of information services provided to them, (2) perception on the organization of information, and (3) services status of information requests and information

retrieved. The interview protocol was tested from three participants from those who participate in the quantitative phase. They advised slight changes related to their syntax. As a result, the questions of the interview were revised slightly.

### Results

For demographic information, respondents were asked about training status, divisions in which the respondent was serving, experience as PIO, service scale, and the number of staff for the Right of Access to Information Activities (see Table 3).

Table 3. Demographic Information (n= 301)

Demographic Title	Status	Frequency	Percent
Training status	No	93	31
	Yes	208	69
Divisions	Bahawalpur	34	11
	Dera Gazi Khan	34	11
	Faisalabad	30	10
	Gujranwala	34	11
	Lahore	35	12
	Multan	34	11
	Rawalpindi	35	12
	Sahiwal	32	11
	Sargodha	33	11
Experience as PIO	1 year	101	34
	2 years	100	33
	3 years	66	22
	4 years	32	11
	5 years	2	.7
Scale	BPS 16	16	4
	BPS 17	180	60
	BPS 18	73	24
	BPS 19 or above	37	12
Numbers of staff for right of access to information activities	1	220	70
	2	52	17
	3	16	5
	4	11	4
	7	2	.7

Table 3 reveals that respondents belonged to all divisions (9) of the Punjab province, with variation in a few numbers (n=30, 10% - n=35, 12%). Most of the respondents (n=208, 69%) had received training relevant to the right of access to information. However, some respondents (n=93, 31%) were found to be serving without training about the Right of access to information. Moreover, about the experience, a majority of the respondents (n= 101, 34%) had one year of experience, and n= 100 (33%) had two years of experience as public information officer. This shows the sincere effort of the authority to implement the Right of Access to Information Act in the last two years. Furthermore, there were only two respondents (.7%) who had five years of working experience as PIO. A large number of respondents (n=180, 60%) serving as PIOs had a pay-scale of BPS 17. Some respondents (n=16, 4%) were also serving at BPS 16. A considerable number of respondents (n= 37, 12%)

were found to be working at BPS 19 or above, which is very encouraging. Moreover, the number of members of staff for performing activities regarding RATI Act was as follows: some respondents (n=2, .7%) state that the number of staff members serving as PIOs are seven whiles, a large number of respondents (n= 220, 70%) say that there is only one designated PIO in public functionary.

Table 4. Serving Departments: Name and Frequency

<b>Sr. No</b>	<b>Department Name</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1.	Government Department	37	12
2.	Education	35	12
3.	Health Department	22	7
4.	Agriculture Department	18	6
5.	Social Welfare	15	5
6.	Judiciary / Labor Court	13	4
7.	Police Department	13	4
8.	Board, Commission, Council	12	4
9.	DC Office	11	4
10.	Zakat & Usher	11	4
11.	Local Government	9	3
12.	Planning & Development	8	3
13.	Environment	7	2
14.	Finance	7	2
15.	Punjab Forest Department	7	2
16.	Autonomous Body	6	2
17.	Bureau of Statistics	6	2
18.	Irrigation Department	6	2
19.	S&GAD	6	2
20.	Anti-Corruption	5	2
21.	Revenue	5	2
22.	Sports	4	1
23.	Administrator Zila Council	3	1
24.	Cantonment Board	3	1
25.	Corporation	3	1
26.	Punjab Assembly	3	1
27.	Social Security	3	1
28.	Account Office	2	.7
29.	Cholistan Development Authority	2	.7
30.	Civil Servant	2	.7
31.	Home Department	2	.7
32.	Labor Department	2	.7
33.	Municipal Committee	2	.7
34.	Ombudsman Punjab	2	.7
35.	PHA Bahawalpur	2	.7
36.	Population Welfare	2	.7
37.	Semi Government	2	.7
38.	Water Management	2	.7
39.	Punjab Employee Social Security	1	.3

As shown in Table 4, there are 39 departments from where data is collected. A majority of responses were from government (n=37, 12%) and education departments (n=35,



12%). On the other hand, the minimum number was reported from the Punjab Employee Social Security Department (n=1, .7%).

Table 5. Information Services Practices by PIOs (n=301)

Rank	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Do you verify the information before delivering it to the seeker?	3.42	.878
	Do you help (if needed) the seeker in writing an application?	3.41	.814
	Does your department keep the record in such a way that it can be accessed easily whenever it required?	3.06	.979
	Do you inform the seeker if there is any delay?	3.03	.990
	Do you inform the seeker of the reason for the refusal of application?	2.97	1.097
	Do you maintain the record of applications?	2.92	.998
	Do you inform the seeker if the application is refused?	2.81	1.159
	Do you contribute to preparing an annual report?	2.81	1.074
	Does your department make an effort for proactive disclosure?	2.78	1.002
	Do citizens use the standard format of application for seeking the required information?	2.71	1.062
	Have you listed the exempted information?	2.71	1.122
	Does your department promote RTI?	2.65	1.017
	Do you provide the required information to the seeker within time?	2.51	1.168
	Does the department use any software for processing RAI application	2.49	1.196
	Do you supply confidential information?	2.27	1.179
	Does the department publish all relevant facts about important policies and decisions that affect citizens?	1.94	1.086
	Do you use different sources of the internet for the process of retrieving application and delivering information to seekers?	1.75	.984

Scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*.

Data in Table 5 reveals the response against the 17 statements regarding the information services practices by PIOs (n=301). Table 5 revealed that PIOs moderately agreed that it is standard practice to verify the required information before delivering it to the seeker (M = 3.42) and that they help the seekers, if needed in writing an application for seeking information under PTRIA, 2013 (M = 3.41). Similarly, these two practices of PIOs have been defined as high priority exercise of PIO (Department of Child Protection and Family Support, 2015; Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2016; Srivastava, 2010). On the other hand, PIOs were found to disagree about using different internet sources (social media and email) in the process of retrieving applications and delivering information to the seekers (M = 1.75). On the other hand, in the study of Darbshire, Carson, and Humphreys (2006), it has been highlighted that receiving an application from applicants and delivery of information under the RAI Act by using different sources of the internet was very important, as it reduced costs and saved time. Furthermore, PIOs found that their departments did not publish all relevant facts about important policies and decisions that affect citizens (N = 1.94). Whereas, the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013 stated that all relevant facts about important policies and decisions that affect citizens should be published under proactive disclosure.

Moreover, it is claimed in previous literature, that the total number of applications received for information under RAIA showed the level of success of this Act, as the total response rate is a useful way to check the success level of PIOs practice (Agrawal, 2012; Awasthi & Kataria, 2000; Pande & Singh, 2014; Reynold, 2011; Salaria, 2014). Therefore, to know the numbers of applications received and entertained by the PIOs under the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013, the respondents (n=301) were asked open-ended questions: (a) how many applications did you receive up till now? and (b) how many applications have you entertained up till now? Based on the responses, both questions have been divided into seven categories (see Table 4.2).

As shown in Table 6, a large number (n=177, 59%) of the 301 respondents fall in the first category, who received 1-5 applications from seekers. While, a few PIOs (n=14, 4%) received applications ranging from 101-250. Only one PIO (n=1, .7%) received 421 applications from different seekers. Although the percentile of the number of applications is low (.7), it is still encouraging that the citizens of Pakistan are aware of their right of access to information and are willing to seek information under PTRIA, 2013.

Table 6. Frequency: Number of Applications Received & Entertained (n=301)

Statement	Category	Frequency	Percent
Number of applications received	1-5	177	59
	21-50	38	13
	6-10	28	9
	11-20	27	9
	51-100	16	5
	101-250	14	4
	421	1	.7
Number of applications entertained	0	2	1
	1-5	196	65
	6-20	43	14
	21-50	31	10
	51-100	18	6
	101-250	10	3
	400	1	1

Table 6 revealed that a very small number of PIOs (n=2, 1%) were found who did not deliver the required information to the seekers till then. Nevertheless, (most PIOs) n=196, (65%) out of the 301 respondents, fall in the second category, who entertained 1-5 applications till then. These findings are very encouraging, as they showcase the willingness and punctuality of PIOs in providing information under PTRIA, 2013. One respondent (1%) of 301 claimed that his department had entertained 400 applications of different seekers till then.

To study the practice of PIOs in providing information under PTRIA, respondents were asked different questions relevant to practice like the time frame of providing information, accepting channels, the form of responding seekers' requests, and ways of handling frivolous applications (see Table 7).

As shown in Table 7, the time frame of providing information has been divided into six categories. The majority of respondents (n=140, 47%) specified that they have provided the required information to the seeker within 7 to 14 days, which is impressive as different researchers from the world recommended 20 days' time frame for the response of an application (Banisar, 2006; Birkinshaw, 2010; Darbshire, Carson & Humphreys, 2006;

Freedom of Information Ordinance, 2002; Mendel, 2008; Organization of American States, 2010; Simi, 2010).

Table 7. PIOs Practice in Providing Information (n=301)

Statement	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Time frame to entertain the application	7 - 14 days	140	47
	14 - 21 days	105	34
	14 - 28 days	14	5
	14 - 40 days	8	3
	Depends upon application type	20	6
	Depends upon the volume of information required	14	5
Accepted channel for receiving requests from seekers	By hand, by Mail	32	10
	By hand	209	70
	By hand, by Email	26	9
	By hand, by Email, by Mail	25	8
	By hand, Email, Mail, Social Media	9	3
Form of responding to seekers' request	Print	262	87
	Print & Soft form	39	13
Channels used for sharing information in soft form	None/Nil	262	87
	Email	22	7
	CD, USB	9	3
	Mobile (Whatsapp, text message), social media (Facebook)	8	3
How do you handle frivolous applications	Reject the application	94	31
	Guide the seekers	181	60
	Entertain the application	26	9

Moreover, Table 7 showed the responsible nature of designated public information officers toward their duty of entertaining the seekers. A small number of PIOs (n=8, 3%) stated that they delivered information within 14- 40 working days. Some PIOs (n=20, 6%) claimed that the time frame for providing information to seekers depended on the type of application, while others (n=14, 5%) said that it depended on the volume of information required by the seekers.

To know the practice of receiving an application from the seekers, a question was asked with four options: (a) by hand, (b) through the mail, (c) through email, and (d) through social media. A large number of respondents (n= 209, 70%) claimed that they accepted the application from seekers by hand, whereas a small number of respondents (n=9, 3%) were receiving applications from seekers through all four sources. Furthermore, the practice of delivering information to seekers has been divided into two categories; namely, print and print with soft copy. Most respondents (n=262, 87%) specified that they provided the required information to the seeker in print form, which is very critical, as it showed the extreme need for electronic implementation in the process of seeking and delivering the information under the right of access to information which is the recommended model by the most researchers (Taylor, Lips & Organ, 2006; Vivak Bhatnagar, 2016). Some PIOs (n=39, 13%) claimed that they delivered information in both hard and soft forms. Moreover, to find

out about the kinds of soft mediums of delivering information, respondents were questioned regarding the channels they used for sharing information in the soft form, to which a majority (n=22, 7%) responded stated that they did so through email (see Table 7).

To study the practice of PIOs in dealing with erroneous applications from seekers, a question was asked with three options: (a) to reject the application, (b) to guide the seekers, and (c) to entertain the application. The majority of respondents (n= 181, 60%) claimed that in such cases, they guide seekers. This was positively reflecting the dutiful nature of PIOs (see Table 4.3).

Table 8 shows twenty-eight types of information required by seekers under the Right of Access to Information Act.

Table 8. Type of Information Demanded by Seekers (n= 301)

Sr. No	Type of Information	Frequency	Percent
1.	Budget/Account, pays allowances of officers.	115	38
2.	Inquiry, complains, or case details	22	7
3.	Appointment matters like criteria/ rules, merit list of recruitment, vacancies, position	20	7
4.	Departmental proceedings	20	7
5.	Personal issues to satisfy grudges	16	5
6.	Service matters & promotion of staff	14	5
7.	Admission	10	3
8.	NGO record decision, an order of application, the registration process of NGO	10	3
9.	Educational (EDO) like school activities, teacher vacancy, and duties	9	3
10.	Expenditure, use of vehicles, fuel	8	3
11.	Data regarding the progress report	6	2
12.	Details of disbursement of zakat funds	6	2
13.	Public related	6	2
14.	Health facilities	6	2
15.	Maintenance of places, recovery of dangerous building/places	4	1
16.	Procurement Plans, Tender detail	4	1
17.	FIR copy, report copy, FIR detail proceeding	3	1
18.	Public welfare	3	1
19.	Security issue	3	1
20.	Agricultural loan detail and recovery of loan process	2	1
21.	Child labor, agreements between labor	2	1
22.	Data relating to crime, inquiry decisions	2	1
23.	Development projects detail	2	1
24.	Formal agricultural land water distribution details, water supply system detail, lazier land detail, Budget, Tender	2	1
25.	Information regarding property ownership and notifications	2	1
26.	Recruitment purchase audit	2	1
27.	Minutes and report of different committees	1	.3
28.	Livestock details	1	.3

As shown in Table 8, most seekers (n=115, 38%) sought out information regarding the budget and inquiries, and complaints or case details (n=22, 7%). Respondents claimed that they had received the smallest number of applications on agricultural loan detail and recovery of loan process (n=2, 1%), child labor, agreements between labor (n=2, 1%), data relating to crime, inquiry decisions (n=2, 1%), development projects, transfer data (n=2, 1%), formal agricultural land water distribution details, water supply system details, lazier land detail, tender (n=2, 1%), information regarding property ownership and notifications (n=2, 1%), recruitment/ purchase audit (n=2, 1%), and minutes of different committees, reports of standing committee audit (n=1, 1%), livestock details (n=2, 1%).

Table 9 shows the sixteen consulting authorities by respondents while furnishing doubtful information or information fall under the exemption.

Table 9. Authorities for Consultation to Furnish Doubtful Information (n= 301)

Authorities for consultation	Frequency	Percent
Colleagues	77	25
Custodian of information	38	13
None/Nil/ No need to consult	37	12
Boss/Head of department	29	10
Seniors	29	10
Concerned staff member	24	8
Secretary	16	5
Administrator	13	4
Chief executive of department (DHA, Health)	12	4
Head office	6	2
Record Manager	6	2
Punjab information commission	5	2
Head Quarter	3	1
P.A	2	1
Regional director	2	1
Registrar	2	1

Most respondents (n=77, 25%) stated that they preferred to consult colleagues whenever they have to furnish applications demanding: (a) doubtful information, or (b) exempted information. On the other hand, a minimal number of respondents (n=2, 1%) claimed that they prefer to consult their P.A, Regional director (n=2, 1%), and registrar (n=2, 1%). However, a considerable number of respondents (n=37, 12%) reported that they handled doubtful applications and applications that required exempted information, without any consultation (see Table 9).

### ***Qualitative Phase***

Based on the quantitative phase, qualitative data about three main themes were collected. The themes were: (1) perceptions of information services provided to them, (2) status of information requests and information retrieved, and (3) and the perception of the organization of information services.

### **Perceptions of Information Services Provided to Citizens**

In the majority of the transcription, interviewees said that: *They are not satisfied with the information services provided by the designated PIOs to them.* For example, the interviewee 1, 5, 7 highlighted that *information services are not good due to the poor record management system. They suggested that there must be proper information record*

management in all public functionaries for smooth information delivery under RAI. One interviewee highlighted that due to the non-cooperative attitude of information providing bodies information services are not admirable. Further, a respondent stated that *information services are not appreciable due to unnecessary delays in retrieving required information* and thought that it may be due to a culture of secrecy among the government bodies.

One interviewee highlighted that *I have applied many times for information under RAI but did not receive proper, relevant, and accurate information from the PIOs...this illustrated poor information services of PIOs and highlighted the extreme need to improve the information services*. Another respondent said *information services are not up to mark due to lack of monitoring the information system and secondly, designated public information officers did not verify the relevancy of the information before delivering to the citizens. These two aspects need to improve by designated trained staff*.

The remaining interviewees specified that *information services are not good due to improper infrastructure in the delivery of information, colonial nature of information providing bodies, secrecy culture, information services can be avail after frequent visits to the concerned person, designated public information officers did not inform the citizens if there is a delay in response against the application, citizens did not receive information in time*. Further, they suggested that information services can be improved by:

- a) *follow the clause of proactive disclosure,*
- b) *designation of trained staff,*
- c) *use of computer technologies,*
- d) *change colonial nature among staff, and*
- e) *abolish secrecy culture.*

**The number of Information Requested and Retrieved Information.** As shown in Table 10, the number of requested information ranged from 7-200.

Whereas, the number of received information ranged from 1- 85 only. This response rate was only 26.56% of the total requested (320) applications. This showed the non-professional practice in providing information services by the information officers.

**Perception of Organization of Information Services.** This theme was further divided into three sub-themes and defined as: (1) Organization of request and delivery of information: time frame, (2) sources of receiving responses against information requests, and (3) sources of retrieved of information and organization.

**Organization of Request and Delivery of Information: Time Frame.** About the time frame of delivery of information, all interviewees stated that: *Although providing information on request within a defined time frame (14 days) is essential to make the “right of access to information” effective yet time frame did not follow*. One interviewee said that he did not receive information on his majority of information applications even the first application was applied six months ago.

One interviewee stated that *I applied 200 applications for information to avail my “right of access to information” as a citizen of Pakistan but only 55 applications were entertained its only 27.5% response rate. Whereas, although remaining applications were applied before three months to one year ago yet did not receive any response from the information officers. I think it’s due to the colonial nature of public officers and secrecy culture in government organizations*. A respondent highlighted that he applied 23 times to seek information and received only 6 times (26.1%) responses and the remaining were still pending. This poor percentage of non-delivery of information showed that PIOs did not follow the time frame of fourteen days.

Table 10. Status of Applications: Applied and Entertained

Sr. No	No of application applied	No of applications retrieved information	Percent
1.	07	03	42.9%
2.	09	02	22.2%
3.	17	04	23.5%
4.	13	03	23%
5.	16	05	31.3%
6.	20	02	10%
7.	09	04	44.5
8.	200	55	27.5
9.	06	01	16.6
10.	23	06	26.1%
Total	320	85	26.56%

The fourth interviewee said that the time frame is not followed due to the secrecy culture in public organizations. To obtain the information I applied 13 times whereas received only three times and waiting for a response from PIOs on my remaining ten requests. Three interviewees (5, 8, and 9) stated that the *time frame is not followed, and its due to (1) designated public information officers used delaying tactics, poor record management, secrecy culture in government organizations, and ignoring the rules of record keeping*. The number six interviewee highlighted that *although a time frame of fourteen days for delivery of information was followed yet received information was not relevant, improper organized, or uncomplete, and remaining applications are still pending*. Further, some organizations designated information officers for the delivery of information but they did not take serious steps to provide information in time and accurately.

**Sources of Receiving Responses Against Information Requests.** This question has five options: (1) hard form, (2) by email, (3) by mail, and (4) through social media. Interviewees (n= 5) stated that designated information professionals received information requests by hand only. Remaining stated that PIOs received the application for information under RAI by hand and through mail also (n=1), hand and email (n=2), hand, mail, and even through email (n=1), hand, email, and even through social media (n=1), and hand, email, and through WhatsApp (n=2).

**Form of Information Retrieved.** About the form of information received by the citizens, the researcher further divided into two options: (1) print form, (2) electronic form (email, USB, Mobile (WhatsApp), and social media). Four interviewees stated that they retrieved information in print form only. The remaining stated that they received information in (1) print form and soft form in USB by two interviewees, (2) soft form through email by one respondent, (3) soft form through WhatsApp by one respondent, (4) soft form by using social media and in USB by two respondents, (5) received information in the soft form in USB and print form as well.

### Integration of Findings

This sequential mixed-methods study focused on the nature of information services offered to citizens of Pakistan under the “right of access to information”. For a richer understanding of the topic, both stakeholders (information providers and the public as seekers) were targeted samples for the study. Quantitative data were collected from

information providers named as public information officers (PIOs) and qualitative data collected from citizens who requested information under RAI. Both phases were weighing on an equal base to develop a complete picture of the topic. The findings of this study were divided into three parts that emphasized its value.

### ***Information Services Provided***

In the quantitative phase, 17 statements were asked from the PIOs and found that the majority of them highlighted that it's their regular practice to verify the required information before delivering to the seeker, they help the seekers (if needed) in writing an application for seeking information under RAI, their department has managed the record in a way that can be easily accessible, and they have a practice of informing the seekers if there were some delay in providing information. On the other side in the qualitative phase, it has found that citizens of Pakistan as a seeker of the information under RAI were *not satisfied with the information services of PIOs and most of them stated that information services were unsatisfactory, not up to the mark, and need to improve due to underprivileged management of information, a non-cooperative attitude of information providers, unnecessary delay in retrieving required information, lack of monitoring the system, PIOs did not verify the relevancy of the information before delivering to the public, the designation of untrained information providers, an inappropriate system of delivery of information, colonial nature of information providers, irrelevant information received, information services can be avail after a frequent visit to the concerned person, and information officers did not inform the public if there is a delay in response against the application.*

Both types (information providers and seekers) of respondents highlighted that there was extreme need of: (1) utilizing of information communication technologies in the information providing services and in information organization services as well, (2) regular annual reports about information services must be published by the government bodies, (3) there must be proactive disclosure of information that relevant to citizens of Pakistan under the law, (4) list down the exempted information in detail to avoid any ambiguities in information providing service, and (5) there was an extreme need to publish all relevant facts, important policies, and decisions of government organizations on its website.

### ***Status of Applications of Information***

In the quantitative phase, a large number of information officers stated that they received applications from seekers ranged from 1-5. Whereas some were received information requests ranged in one hundred one to two hundred and fifty, and one PIO (n=1, .7%) claimed to receive four hundred and twenty-one requests of information from different requesters of the country. Whereas, about the delivery of information, only 1% of the respondents found who did not deliver the required information. further, most of the PIOs entertained 1-5 applications. One respondent highlighted that his department has entertained four hundred requests of information from different seekers. Vice versa, in the qualitative phase, all (n=10) interviewees applied 320 total applications for information and retrieved only 85 (26.56%) information from the PIOs.

### ***Practice in Dealing with a Request for Providing Information Services***

In the quantitative phase, about the practice of receiving the application, a large number of PIOs stated that they accepted applications from seekers by hand, whereas a small number of respondents were found practicing receiving an application through all four sources (by hand, through email, by mail, and through social media). Similarly, in the qualitative phase, five out of ten interviewees stated that PIOs received the application for information by hand only.



About the time frame for a reply to an information request, in the quantitative phase majority of respondents, stated that they provided the information to the requester within seven to fourteen days. A small number of PIO specified that they delivered information within fourteen to forty days. Some PIOs claimed that they did not specify the time frame for providing information to the information requester as it depended on the type of information required. Whereas some PIOs said that time duration depended on the volume of the required information. Vice versa, seekers of RAI stated that they did not receive information in a set time frame of fourteen days from PIOs.

On account of the form of information provided to seekers, most of the respondents in the quantitative phase respondents agreed that they provided the required information in print form only. Some PIO claimed that they delivered information in print & soft form as well. Similarly, it has found in the qualitative phase that four interviewees gained information in print form. Remaining retrieved information in the soft form in a C.D, in USB, through email, and by social media.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The “right of access to information” is valued for citizens of a state. For the successful implementation of this right, good information services are valued a lot. On the bases of the results, it can be discussed that:

Information officers claimed that they provided information after inspection about the relevancy, authenticity, and reliability of the information. All the information is organized well and it's their practice to help the seekers (if needed) in writing an application for an information request. They inform the citizen if there were any logical delays in providing information. Similarly, these steps of information service defined as high significance for the successful implementation of RAI (Department of Child Protection and Family Support, 2015; Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2016; Srivastava, 2010). Vice Versa, citizens of Pakistan described that information services are not good due to the poor record management system, non-cooperative attitude of information providing bodies, unnecessary delays in retrieving required information, and culture of secrecy among the government bodies. Moreover, the results of both phases highlighted that there was no use of internet sources (Social media and email) in the process of receiving information requests and delivering information to citizens. Whereas, it was highlighted that the use of different internet sources found very important in receiving requests of information and delivery of information as it reduced cost and save time (Darbishire, Carson, & Humphreys, 2006).

It has been highlighted in previous studies that total applications of request for information under RAI presented the awareness level about this right among citizens of a state and reply rate was a method to check the success level of information service provided by PIOs (Agrawal, 2012; Awasthi, & Kataria, 2000; Pande, & Singh, 2014; Reynold, 2011; Salaria, 2014). This research work found that the range of applications of information received by information professionals was significant. Whereas respond on it was not admirable as narrated by citizens of Pakistan.

Information officers stated that they provided the required information in a period ranged 7- 40 days but the majority of citizens of Pakistan narrated that they did not receive information against their request even after 3-6 months. However, in previous researches, it has recommended twenty days to reply to an information request under RAI (Banisar, 2006; Birkinshaw, 2010; Darbishire, Carson, & Humphreys, 2006; Freedom of Information Ordinance, 2002; Mendel, 2008; Organization of American States, 2010; Simi, Sharma, & Cheriyan, 2010). Therefore, this result endorsed the failure of information services under RAI.

The majority of both types of respondents highlighted that source of receiving an information request and delivery of information was manual (by hand in print form). While only a few from both respondents stated that electronic sources like email, social media, transferred data through USB, CDs were also used. This result was very critical, and it necessitated the electronic implementation in the process of seeking and delivering information under RAI. Similarly, studies of Taylor, Lips, and Organ, 2006; Vivak, 2016 recommended electronic implementation in information services under RAI.

Therefore, it can be concluded that information services under the “right of access to information” are at the developing stage. The “Citizens of Pakistan” were facing many challenges in retrieving the required information. Furthermore, despite the confidence of public information officers, the citizens were not satisfied with the available information services.

### Implications and Recommendations

The study suggests several practical implications, for example, the government of Pakistan should take strong steps in making good information services under RAI. For the said purpose trained and experienced persons should appoint as an information provider or training should be offered to the existing PIOs. For a proper check and balance, a complete report of information services should be published yearly by the concerned departments. Furthermore, serious steps should be taken to use information communication technologies in delivering and disseminating the information under RAI. The government should try to abolish the rigid approach; the colonial mindset of public functionaries. Serious steps should be taken to remove the secrecy culture in a public organization.

There should be a constitutional guarantee of (a) there is no denial in the delivery of information from public functionaries and (b) citizens of Pakistan obtain the relevant information within the time frame and in the appropriate format. It is recommended that the public department should receive an online application under the “right of access to information”. The web page should be designed in a user-friendly way. Since the librarians are expert information service providers, therefore, it is suggested that the government of Punjab, Pakistan should engage professional librarians for the purpose.

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