BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY EDUCATING PEOPLE THROUGH DISTANCE MODE

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A B S T R A C T

The opportunity of education is limited in Bangladesh. Dropouts in education from primary to university level are very high. Government has taken an initiative with the assistance of national and International organizations to improve the education system. Universities are autonomous bodies administrated by statutory bodies. Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is the only public university in the country that imparts education in distance mode. Regular and dropout students and working people of any ages are eligible to study in the university. University provides education with affordable cost including the course materials. At present, BOU is providing higher education and professional training in wide areas as well as basic education at secondary and higher secondary levels. It introduces several formal academic programs from certificate to master's levels under six academic schools which have some expert faculty members. The university delivers all levels of education in different fields through tutorial services, printing materials, radio-television and using other suitable Information Communication Technology (ICT). Distance education is important for educating mass people in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Education system, Distance Education, ODL, ICT, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a developing country. The country has 160 million populations. Education for all and assurance of quality education are the prime objectives of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (Rahman, 2010). Bangladesh has ratified the Education for All (EFA) objectives, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and other international declarations. Improving the quality of education is probably the most important task facing any educational institution. Quality of education has significant impact and valuable contribution to the area of human development. Ministry of Education is the apex policy making institution of the government regarding administration and development of post-primary education sector in Bangladesh. It also formulates laws, rules and regulations for the management and administration of post-primary education sector and its institutions of the country. There are several attached bodies for supervision and management of formal education. Primary level institutions impart primary education basically. Junior secondary/secondary and higher secondary level institutions impart secondary education. Degree pass, degree honors, masters and other higher-level institutions or equivalent section of other related institutions impart tertiary education. Article 17 of the Bangladesh Constitution provides that all children between the ages of six and ten years receive a basic education free of charge. Bangladesh Open University (BOU) was established with a view to imparting education to all. In the national education arena this university therefore carries enormous responsibilities and possibilities. BOU is the only institution in the country which can contribute a lot in fulfilling the objective of the government regarding eradication of illiteracy from the country. Bangladesh needs to ensure minimum facilities for quality education. This paper, attempts to describe the processes of educating mass people in Bangladesh through distance mode. The information out lined in this article have been collected from Bangladesh Open University website, publications,

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different national & international reports, articles, journals and visiting of useful website etc.

History of distance education in Bangladesh: The history of distance education in Bangladesh dates back to 1956, when the Education Directorate was assigned with the responsibility for distribution of 200 radio receivers to educational institutions. This led to the creation of an Audio-Visual Cell, which was upgraded to Audio-Visual Education Centre in 1962. No further progress in distance education was made till 1971. After Independence, Bangladesh faced the challenge of meeting the educational needs of mass people. To meet this challenge the necessity for a new mode of education was widely felt. As a sequel to that feeling, the School Broadcasting Pilot Project was launched in 1978. The project was transformed into National Institute of Educational Media and Technology (NIEMT) in 1983. NIEMT was later replaced by the Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) in 1985. Apart from producing audio-visual materials, BIDE offered the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) program in distance mode. The success of BIDE encouraged policymakers to take up a major plan for establishing an open university. The plan became a reality in October 1992 when the Bangladesh Open University Act 1992 was passed in the Parliament. Prime objective of Bangladesh Open University is to transform the country's vast human resources into an educated and trained work force by formal and non-formal through distance education (Ali *et al.*, 1997).

Open and distance learning (ODL): The ODL refers to a method of learning and teaching activities where the learner is usually separated in physical terms from the teachers and the institution which provides the education, although, in some cases, face-to-face interaction forms an important part of it. For long time, ODL has served as an alternative method for delivering education to knowledge seekers who are unable to attend traditional campus-based classes. Distance education is considered as an important alternative for educating mass people in Bangladesh for many socio-economic reasons. In distance learning, media plays a vital role. The Role of Media (Internet, Video Lectures, Audio Lectures, Interactions and Modules on Specialized Courses, CDs, DVDs, Multimedia Projectors, Assignments, Digital Class Rooms, and Video Conferencing etc.) is an important medium of distance learning. Considering the importance of life-long learning, BOU broadcasts many non-formal programs in the field of agriculture, health and nutrition, environment, livestock and poultry, pisciculture, public laws, ethics, family planning etc. through national TV and radio-broadcast. As a distinct mode of imparting education, Bangladesh Open University relies heavily on print materials, electronic media like radio-television and audio-video cassettes and face to face tutorial services (Islam and Selim, 2006). More importantly, the opportunity for higher education is extremely limited in Bangladesh, and therefore, even students, who can afford to finance their studies, it is very difficult to get admission into the universities due to limited capacity (Sadeq, 2003). Today computer has replaced all means of traditional communication significantly. Many distant learning tools claim to be interactive, but few can offer two-way communication. Email is the most popular means of communication medium now-a-days. Therefore, it may be used as an educational tool for learning. In present socio-economic condition of Bangladesh, learners can afford computer, cell phone and Internet. We took this opportunity to investigate the prospective use of these tools for distant learning. The present survey has been carried out to understand the present status of Internet knowledge among the learners and their views for possible introduction of e-mail communication as supporting tool for learning. BOU's available infrastructural facilities for providing Internet support have been investigated. Furthermore, possible solutions have been pointed out to provide e-mail facility to the learner in a cost effective way (Rahman *et al.*, 2008). In the past decade only young generations were playing with it, but today it has been found that aged people have also gladly accepted it for communication with others. Email is the most popular means of communication medium now-a-days (Joshi et. al., 2005). Dropouts in education from primary to the university level are very high in Bangladesh, mainly due to economic and other social reasons. Distance learning is growing rapidly, not only as a supplement but also as a replacement for the traditional institutions and programs. In the world of today, the modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is playing significant role in providing facilities for the delivery system and quality education. BOU is making new strides in employing most modern communication technology for effective delivery of education. The rapid advancement in ICT has helped a great deal in

eliminating the physical distances. With latest technology, the world has become a global village where information is readily available and accessible to everyone. BOU has taken full advantage of the modern ICT to facilitate and support its students all over the country, e.g., provision of student-related information through web (with data bases at back end), Learning Management System (LMS), Interactive Virtual Class Rooms (IVCR), Mobile Technology, pre-recorded Video Programs and Live Programs (Live Streaming) through the use of National TV channel (BTV) as well as Satellite TV Channel (Sansad TV Channel), Radio Programs for both formal and non-formal academic course in collaboration with Bangladesh Radio and Video Conferencing for better quality education. BOU also use the services of expert faculty members and external prominent resource persons for conducting week-end class-lectures, workshops and Teacher-Students Dialogue. After getting education at BOU, learners will become an asset for the country and able to play an important role in accelerating the rate of economic and social development of Bangladesh**.** The University Grant Commission established a Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) that aims at improve the quality of teaching-learning and research capabilities of higher education institutions in Bangladesh. The main objective of the project was to improve the quality of teaching-learning-research and development of infrastructure such as lab equipment, classroom and library (Mazumder, 2012). Bangladesh as a developing country needs to develop and ensure minimum facilities for quality education in all the public universities without discrimination (Sarkar *et al.*, 2013).

Learners of BOU: Any person has the opportunity to be admitted irrespective of age, gender, disability or profession in any program of the university. Once they have a dream to be educated in the traditional institution which they could not fulfill due to time constrain and due to poverty. So when they got admitted to BOU, they have lot of expectation. All the aspirant students cannot have education from the conventional institutions due to several reasons. In Bangladesh, it becomes difficult for the females to have on campus education after their marriage or after having children. Since female students of rural areas usually get marriage at early age, they cannot go to school any longer, especially at HSC and graduate levels though they are very much eager to continue with their study. The

innovations in computer and communication people engaged in different jobs usually prefer to have the MBA degree from BOU. It has been found that almost 90% of MBA the learners are service holders and business persons and only 10% are the job seekers. The enrolled number of students was 517,585 in December, 2014 which is much greater than that of any other university in the country. Distance and open learning opened a way to them for having education. With high population and limited on-campus education facilities, ODL is the only alternative at the moment to Bangladesh to educate its citizens.

Academic and Administrative Setup of BOU: The University was established in the year 1992. Now, Twelve Regional Resource Centers (RRC), 80 Sub-regional Resource Centers (SRC) and 1451 study centers of BOU are located in different parts of Bangladesh.

Academic school: Bangladesh Open University offers programs through six different schools. BOU already has launched 32 formal and 19 non-formal programs. Formal programs consist of four levels under different school; Certificate, Diploma, Degree and Masters (Table 1). Interested people enrolled for the formal programs collect books, written specially for them, from Regional Resource Centers (RRC), Sub Regional Centers (SRC) or Tutorial Centers (TC). The objective of non-formal programs is to let people be conversant with modern and sustainable techniques in agriculture, poultry farming, health and nutrition, environment protection etc. Every school has a mission and responsibilities to the university and the nation (Table 2).

Administrative division: Administration is responsible to provide administrative support and to expedite the academic activities of BOU that functions in collaboration with schools and divisions. Besides these the division has to ensure the implementation of the decisions taken by the Board of Governors (BoG), Academic Council and other statutory bodies formed under the Act of BOU. The administration consists of 9 divisions and each has its own responsibilities (Table 3). The Vice-Chancellor is the chief executive and academic officer of the university. The whole administration is supervised by the Registrar of BOU.

Teaching materials and mode of delivery: The method of distance learning is quite different from on campus face to face mode of education. BOU produces its course materials and runs its tutorial services by both print and electronic media.

Table 1. Programs of different schools of Bangladesh Open University.

Name of School	Name of Program (Academic and Professionals)
School of education (SOE)	Master of Education (MEd), Bachelor of Education (BEd), Certificate in Education (CEd)
School of Business (SOB)	Certificate in Management (CIM), Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), Post-Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM), Master of Business Administration (MBA), Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA
Open school (OS)	Secondary School Certificate (SSC), Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS).
School Social Science, Humanities, Langue's (SSHL)	Bachelor of Arts (BA)/Bachelor of Social Science (BSS), BA (Hons.)/Bachelor of English Language Teaching (BELT), Certificate in Arabic Language Proficiency (CALP), Certificate in English Language Proficiency (CELP).
School of Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD)	Bachelor of Agricultural Education (B. Ag. Ed), Diploma in Youth in Development Work (DYDW), Certificate in Livestock & Poultry (CLP), Certificate in Pisciculture & Fish Processing (CPFP).
School of Science and Technology (SST)	Diploma in Computer Science and Application (DCSA), B.Sc.-in-Nursing (BSN), B.Sc. (Hon)-in-computer Science & Engineering (BCSE).

Table 2. Mission/ responsibilities of different schools of Bangladesh Open University.

Name of School	Mission/responsibilities
School of education (SOE)	To develop teaching capacity of the teachers providing effective teacher education and training for all levels of education.
School of Business (SOB)	To create educated and skilled manpower throughout the country by making business education available to a large number of populations.
Open school (OS)	To make the nation free from the curse of illiteracy and create an educated and skilled manpower.
School Social Science, Humanities, Langue's (SSHL)	To make educated and skilled manpower in different disciplines.
School of Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD)	To impart education through distance mode comprising formal and non-formal programs in the field of agriculture and rural development.
School of Science and Technology (SST)	To create scientific and technically skilled manpower in the country. The extended activities of this school on scientific awareness, degree awarding and advance research programs.

The print media (books, readers guide books, journals, students hand book etc.) plays a vital role in distance learning. The learners of all academic programs of BOU are provided with a complete set of text books written in modular form. Preparation of modular form of text books is a long drawn process. A draft curriculum is prepared by faculty members. It is then placed before the Curriculum Committee and which is finally approved by the Academic Council. The course material production team then does the job of preparing the text and finally hands over the final manuscript to Publishing, Printing and Distribution (PPD) Division. The last phase of printing of materials is taken care of by the PPD Division. The study package including modules and other printed materials are dispatched to Regional Resource Centers (RRC) and Sub Regional Centers (SRC) for distribution among the students. BOU is now using the latest information technology like Internet, GIS and is soon to start tele and video conferencing for interactions between the learners and the teachers. The Media Centre provides all modern facilities for production, and broadcast of multimedia educational materials. The Centre is equipped with most modern technological devices like silicon graphics, digital editing suites, electronic preview theaters, micro-wave communication link and full-fledged audio-video studios. The learning procedure also includes tutorial supported audio and video programs (Kirkwood, 1998). In reality, these are not enough for learners to complete the whole course successfully.

Table 3. Responsibilities/ mission of different Division of Bangladesh Open University.

Name of Division	Mission/Responsibilities
Student Support Service Division (SSS)	Involves in supporting as a whole to mitigate the problems of the student and overall supervision of field activities in accordance with local coordination.
Media Division	Support is also given to learners of BOU through radio and television programs.
Publishing, Printing & Distribution (PPD) Division	To publish and print all course materials of various programs and to distribute the same to the enrolled students through RRC, SRC and Study Centers.
Library	To provide the latest reading materials to right person to the right time.
Examination division	Processes and published the results of its academic programs.
Planning & Development Division	To make the university as a Center of Excellence in education through effective planning and development of suitable infrastructure.
Finance and Accounts division	Plays of a vital role to solve the financial matter or claim as early as possible according to the respective Gov't and BOU act rules and regulation.
Computer Division	To establish an efficient and effective ICT infrastructure that will ensure ICT enabled working environment, effective Students support services.
Information & Public Relations Division	To enhance BOU activities in the media and concern sector and there by develop the image of the University.
Engineering & Estate Division	To provide all sorts of supports for technical and utility services for the smooth running of the university to reach its goal.

In addition, Bangladesh Open University provides some face to face classes for learners called 'Tutorial classes' in some selective institutions outside of Bangladesh Open University main campus. An institution selected by Bangladesh Open University for tutorial service is called a 'Tutorial Centre'. Learners come to the tutorial center to solve their course related problems, get necessary information and acquiring knowledge. In conventional system of education, learning is greatly influenced by the dynamic interaction process that goes on between a teacher and his/ her students. In distance education system such face to face interaction is almost absent. Bangladesh Open University provides face to face interaction providing some tutorial classes. Infrastructure, class room and laboratory facilities, availability of qualified teachers are the main criteria for the selection of a tutorial centre. Actually tutorial centers are the well-reputed institutions located outside of Bangladesh Open University main campus. There is a memorandum of understanding between Bangladesh Open University and the said institutions for tutorial services. Remuneration is paid to the tutorial centre for tutorial services. According to the Bangladesh Open University concept, a teacher who is appointed for delivering lectures and giving tutorial services in a particular tutorial centre is called 'Tutor'. For each course there is a tutor in a particular course which is selected by the Bangladesh Open University authority. Academic qualification and experiences are taken under consideration for selection of a tutor. Indeed, tutorial services play an important role for obtaining knowledge in-depth. The quality of education depends on what goes on in the tutorial centers and class room (Jawahir, 2006). A number of barriers hinder the progress of BOU's programs in Bangladesh. Research and evaluation activities are very limited in BOU. As a result, not much revision is being made with the study materials. Sometimes few corrections are made with some course materials, which do not improve the contents of courses at all. Recent explosion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Bangladesh offers tremendous opportunities for electronic delivery of course materials for open and distance learners. In spite of some socio-economic constraints, ICTs are expanding

fast in the developing countries and thus offer a new scope for the promotion of open and distance learning.

Collaboration: BOU is now working in collaboration with The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), SAARC Consortium on Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL), Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), International Council for Open and Distance Learning (ICODL), Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), Commonwealth Educational Media Center for Asia (CEMCA), Association of SAARC Universities (ASU), Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE), International Research Foundation for Open Learning (IRFOL), Commonwealth Open Schooling Association (COMOSA), International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). Recently, BOU developed one E-Learning Centre at main campus and three Interactive Virtual Class Rooms at main campus, Dhaka and Mymensingh RRC supported by Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). BOU completed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Open University of United Kingdom, China, Malaysia, and Sri-lanka.

Opportunity of BOU learners: University programs target for every citizen who is interested to learn, who cannot enroll into the academic and training programs offered by the on-campus universities. The Open School of BOU provides two vital programs SSC and HSC for the students of secondary and higher secondary level who had not the privilege to complete it through the conventional system. Through these programs of Open School is supplementing the initiative of the govt. to achieve the goal of EFA and MDG. Most of the SSC, HSC and BA/BSS passed students were simply students before admitted to BOU and rest were either service holder or in small business. After completion of the certificate/degree program, most of the students got better job or got promotion in the department. BOU should take a conscious step towards fulfillment of its constitutional commitment of providing educational opportunities to the underprivileged population of the country. Due to financial insolvency most of the students work in agricultural field or small business and simultaneously they completed their degree from BOU. The equivalency of the certificate of BOU enhances almost the same possibility of getting jobs with the other candidate who passed from traditional educational institution. The certificate of BOU ensures the eligibility of applying for higher studies in any reputed public or private university. The enrolment into MBA program of BOU is growing over

time though growth rate is low because of the seat limitations. Among the learners, 90% are males and rest is females. BOU launched MBA program in 1998. It was the first ever higher education program in business administration through ODL in Bangladesh. Since its inception, MBA program of BOU got popularity among professionals ranging from bankers up to army officers. BOU Serves another target group who wishes to continue to update their knowledge by becoming a life-long learner.

CONCLUSION: BOU`s programs targets at every citizen who is interested to learn, particularly working people, who cannot enroll into the academic and training programs offered by the on-campus universities. At present, university is providing higher education and professional training in wide areas such as agriculture, business, education, arts, science and technology as well as basic education at secondary and higher secondary levels. Most of the students have to take the responsibility of their family either doing job or helping in household activities or in agricultural field. It intends to provide opportunities of education to all classes of people and create efficient and skilled manpower by improving the quality education. By improving knowledge and skills of them, university is contributing to human resource development in the country. Ensuring quality of the programs, BOU should emphasize on research and evaluation and regular revision or updating the study materials. Considering the rapid expansion of computer and internet facilities in Bangladesh, it is now appropriate time to consider inclusion of some interactive ICTs i.e. e-learning in delivering course materials. BOU has a modern electronic media center and a teleconferencing unit to communicate with the learners. The equivalency of the certificate of BOU enhances almost the same possibility of getting jobs with the other candidate who passed from traditional educational institution. After completion of the degree, learners got better job and promotion for professionals due to improvement of skills and knowledge. So, learners will able to play an important role in accelerating the rate of economic and social development of Bangladesh.

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