CHALLENGES IN PROVIDING SUPPORT SERVICES TO THE DISTANT LEARNERS OF THE SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY AT BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Introduction: Open and distance education is the alternative educational process where learners take responsibility for their own learning. Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has been providing a wide variety of distance education programs extending learning opportunities to people across the country. School of Science and Technology (SST) is to create scientific and technically skilled manpower in the country. SST has developed its own specially designed text materials for Diploma in Computer Science and Application (DCSA) and Batchelor of Nursing (BSN) Programs. Distance education can be more learners centered if distance educators are aware of the problems, needs, attitudes and characteristics of their learners. This on going study tried to find out the learner's need, problem and their attitudes towards the open learning. And also find out the way of the decision maker's how they solve the problem and improve the quality of the distance learning programs in Bangladesh.

Methods: A cross-sectional study design was used. A multistage stratified proportionate to size sampling technique was used to select the sample from the learners' of SST. Data is collecting using a structured pre-tested questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS.

Results: In this ongoing study, 244 learners were responded, among them 88.9% were female and the mean age was 35.2 years (minimum 23; maximum 52). On average total monthly family income of the adult learners was US$ 223 and had completed 16.9 years of study and residing around 32.4 km from the tutorial centers and more than 50% were from urban areas. Amongst the learners more than 80% expressed that SST programs were as usual but 13.1% expressed that difficult to understand where 94% were responded that text materials were up to the mark. Regarding the media programs, 72.4% of the learners gave their opinion that TV programs were at the level best but they wanted to watch these at the evening or night schedule. More than 90% learners' were doing group discussion at the time of study and TMA preparation where 60% learners did not communicate with faculty of SST, BOU.

Conclusion: This study would like to find out the learners view on different study materials, learners attitudes towards the support services which they are provided time to time from tutorial centre, regional centre as well as the SST and BOU. We are expecting that the findings of this study will give some valuable information from the learners for the policy maker and future researcher.

Key Words: Learners, Attitudes, Challenges, SST and BOU.

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INTRODUCTION

World population in 2015 will be 7.2 billion, up from the current 6.1 billion. Ninety-five percent of the increase will be in developing countries. People in most countries will live longer, which will add to the demand for access to education as well as for health care and other services. Bangladesh is one of the developing countries of the world. Whose per capita annual income is US$ 487, the total population is near about 143 million and expectancy of life is only 61 years (BBS, 2004). There are highly unsatisfactory situation to fulfill the basic needs of the population in the country. To enhance development and continuation of its development, there should be fulfilling the fundamental needs for every citizen of the country in time. The fundamental needs are basically Food, Shelter, Wear, Education and Health. When such demand is not fulfill properly for the citizen, the progress of development of the country will be hampered. Illiteracy is considered to be one of the important parameters causing socio-economic backwardness. Approximately 42% of the population is illiterate (BBS, 2004). Illiteracy minimizes skill manpower and lake of educational infrastructure minimizes human resource personnel (Numan, 2001). As a result, about one-half of the population of Bangladesh cannot contribution to the countries development efforts.

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has been providing a wide variety of distance education programs extending learning opportunities to people across the country. School of Science and Technology (SST) is one of the seven schools of Bangladesh Open University. To create scientific and technically skilled manpower in the country is the main objective of this school. The extended activities of this school on scientific awareness, degree awarding and advance research programs for M.Phil. and Ph.D. are on process. In near future, SST wishes to provide facilities like Tele-conferencing, Video-conferencing, multi-media and Web based education system (Islam et. al. 2006). To provide student support services BOU has a network of 12 regional, 80 local centers and selected tutorial centers all over the country.

At present, SST is offering Diploma in Computer Science and Application (DCSA) and B.Sc.-in-Nursing (BSN) program which facilitates learners' pursuit of knowledge relevant to their life and career. DCSA program and BSN program was launched in 1998 and 2003 respectively. In both programs, admission takes place once a year. SST has developed its own specially designed text materials. Presently, learners are enjoying tutorial services to solve their problems while studying learning materials and/or while preparing assignments. To help understand the difficult sections of the text, a number of video programs have already been developed, and some are currently under development.

DCSA program consists of 33 Credits and duration is 3 semesters. The main objectives of this program are to use a computer and its areas of application, to know the use of computer in office environment, to know the use of databases, Computer programming and software development and to learn maintenance and troubleshooting a microcomputer. BSN program consists of 100 Credits and duration is 6 semesters. The main objectives of this program are to provide higher educational opportunities to diploma holder nurses, to develop clinical competence for quality assurance of nursing care services, to develop teaching, management and research skills and abilities.

Distance education can be more learners centered if distance educators are aware of the problems, needs, attitudes and characteristics of their learners. The present study was tired to find out the learners' opinion on study materials such as print materials and audio-video media those are broadcasting along with the formal programs. This study also tries to seek the learners' attitudes towards the support services provided by BOU.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional study was carried out from randomly selected tutorial centre of School of Science and Technology (SST) in Bangladesh Open University (BOU). The entire list of learners of SST served as sampling frame. The total (2800) number of students has enrolled and completing their study in 2006/2007 session. The size of the sample depends on the level of precision required. Final sample size of this study would 633. This sample size was base on within 95% confidence level where expected frequencies were 24% and worst accepted was 21%.

Data was collected from August 2007 and ended on December 2007. A structured pre-tested self administrated bilingual (both Bengali and English) questionnaire was used to collect the data. Before distribution of the questionnaire amongst students to the randomly selected respondents of a TC, prior consent and permission was sought from the respective tutor from the specific TC. Raw data was keyed-in into the computer database and coded and recoded carefully. Data was analyzing using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12.0 (SPSS, Inc. Willy, 2004). The central tendency and dispersion test was used to measure the descriptive statistics. For all the outcomes, p value of 0.05 or less will consider to indicate significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Open and distance education is increasingly seen as a powerful vehicle for delivering educational opportunity to adults from all walks of life. As practiced in Bangladesh Open University (BOU), open and distance education is best referred to as an educational process where students take responsibility for their own learning. Instructional delivery relies on a combination of face-to-face interaction, which offers the opportunity to deliberate on concepts, ideas and thoughts related to course content, and on the use of educational media such as print modules, audio and radio broadcasts as well as computer supported interaction (Raghavan and Kumar, 2007).

The findings of the study are presented as follows. First the socio-demographic profile of the BOU learners. Second, find out the perception of BOU students regarding the students support services. Subsequently, the attitude towards the BOU support services those were provided for them from time to time. Finally, this information could serve as a baseline data for university authority for the plan of action for learners support within the university's students and academics.

Socio-demographic Profile

Table 1 shows the composition of respondents by the demographic status. As the study was carried among the Bachelor of Nursing Program and Computer Program offered by SST most (90%) were female those who ware enrolled to study in these nursing (71.1%) programs and computer program. It was found that 72.3% of the respondents are young adults below the age of 40. The mean age of the respondents was 35.6 years and ranged from 23 years to 52 years. Our results corroborate those of Valentine & Darkenwald (1990), MacBrayne (1995) and Johnstone and Rivera (1965), which show that adult learners who choose to enroll in distance education programs are those aged between 18 and 40.

In this study, 73.3% ware Muslim, 20.6% ware Hindus and 5.6% ware Christian participated as respondents. However, it is important to remember that this is not a true reflection of how the major religion are represented-population wise - in Bangladesh. The study also found that the

majority (85.9%) of the learners are married adults. Of the rest, 12.9% of the respondents are single, 1.9% widowed or divorced.

This study also showed that most of the learners were come from urban (43.1%) and suburban (40.2%) areas those who are living and travel on average 29.6 km (minimum 1 km and maximum 307 km) surroundings from the tutorial centers where the tutorial and practical sessions performed. In comparison to (Raghavan and Kumar, 2007) a Malaysian study it was too far away for the Bangladeshi learners, where most of the learners (89.2%) travel less than 100 km to their learning centers.

As the respondents were working population and adult learners, 55.3% were having total monthly family income was BD Tk10000 to Tk20000. About 16.7% have incomes of less than Tk 10000 while 16.7% have incomes that range from 20 to 30 thousand Taka and rest 9.3% were having monthly family income was moderately high that is Tk 30 thousand or more. (1$USD = 70BD TK).

Table 1: Demographic Description of the Respondents

Variable		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	31	10.0
	Female	280	90.0
Age Groups of Respondents	Age below 25 years	4	1.3
	25 years to 30 Years	43	13.8
	31 Years to 35 Years	88	28.3
	36 years to 40 Years	91	29.3
	> 40 years	85	27.3
Marital Status	Single	40	12.9
	Married	267	85.9
	Divorced / Widowed	4	1.9
Study Level of Students	Diploma in Nursing	221	71.1
	HSC	61	19.6
	Bachelor	17	5.5
	Masters	12	3.9
Place of Residence	Urban	134	43.1
	Suburban	125	40.2
	Rural	52	16.7
Distance from Residence to TC	Minimum	1	KM
	Maximum	307	KM
	Mean	29.6	KM
Total Monthly Family Income	< 10000 TK	52	16.7
	10000 TK to 19999	172	55.3
	20000 to 29999 TK	52	16.7
	30000 TK to 39999	18	5.8
	> 40,000 TK	11	3.5
	Info Not Available	6	1.9
	Total	**311**	**100**

Evaluation of Text Materials

The study showed in Figure 1 that more than 90% of the students expressed that the quality of BOU text materials were satisfactory, acceptable and as usual. Only 3.2% of the students stated that it was low quality. Islam and Numan (2005) also stated that 93.5% of the text materials were easy to understand and average quality.
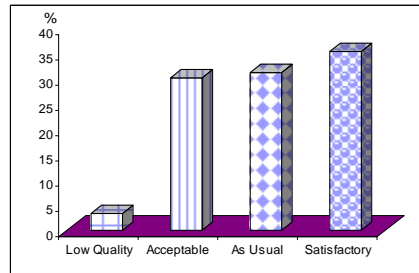
Fig 1: Respondents evaluation on Text Materials

Students Opinion on TV Program Schedule of BOU

Figure 2 showed that 60% of the students desire that BOU's TV program should be broadcast on 6 to 9pm, and 33% were expressed that it should be at evening schedule. This study also expressed that BOU TV Program should be enjoyable and informative.
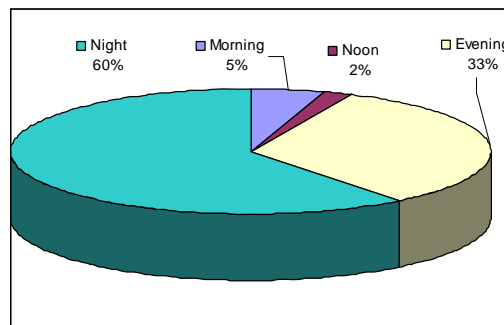

Fig 2: Respondents evaluation on Text Materials

Students Attitudes towards Students Support Services

Table 2 shows that present status regarding the quality of BOU's TV program, tutorial services, local center services and RRCs services. In Present status, 28.6% students expressed that TV program was excellent, 39.5% expressed that it was good and 29.9% said that it was as usual. Table 2 also shows that 36% students were expressed that tutorial services was good and 40.5% expressed as usual, while 6.1% stated that it not up to the mark. Similarly, the quality of the services that provided by BOU's local centers and regional centers were good and as usual while nearly 10% of the students has had bitter experience.

Table 2: Students Attitudes Regarding BOU

Sl. No	Items	% Distribution of Responses				
		Excellent	Good	As Usual	Not Good	Very Bad
1	Quality of TV Program	28.6	39.5	29.9	1.9	0
2	Quality of Tutorial Services	17.4	36.0	40.5	4.5	1.6
3	Quality of Local Center Services	11.3	39.9	40.8	6.4	1.6
4	Quality of RRC Services	6.8	40.8	40.5	9.3	2.6

Students Perception Regarding Students Support Services

Students different activities regarding the study process and their opinion were seek by using thirteen factual questionnaires. Study revealed in Table 3 that nearly 60% students did not communicate with the main campus teacher to clarify their any quires. More than 90% of the students have had discuss as a group with their peer students regarding the courses. It was surprising the all most all the students attend the tutorial (94.2%) class with joyfully (97.7%). It

was also demanded that all most all the student gave their opinion to increase the tutorial class duration (92%) and tutorial class number (83.9%) while 16.1% students expressed that duration of tutorial class should not be increased.

All most all the students stated those tutors were taken tutorial class regularly (92.6%) with full length of session (95.2%). The knowledge of the respondents towards smoking and its health risk was assessed by the use of 10 statements. It was also stated that 69.5% students received the tutor mark assignment (TMA) in time while 30.5% were stated that they did not received TMA in time. Table 3 shows the distribution of the respondents responds regarding knowledge related items. It was due to lack of communication between the faculty or RRCs and the respective tutorial centers. Whereas most of the students prepare TMA with peer discussion and send the TMAs in time for final evaluation.

Table 3: Percentage Description of the Respondents Perception

Sl. No	Items	% Distribution of Responses	
		Yes	No
1	Do you communicate with the BOU Teacher for your program?	41.5	58.5
2	Do you discuss with the pear students for your program?	91.6	8.4
3	Do you discuss with group for your program?	90.7	9.3
4	Do you attend the tutorial call regularly?	94.2	5.8
5	Have you Enjoyed the Tutorial Classes?	97.7	2.3
6	Do you feel it is better to increase Tutorial Classes?	92.0	8.0
7	Do you feel it is better to increase Tutorial duration?	83.9	16.1
8	Have your tutor teach you regularly?	92.6	7.4
9	Have your tutor teach you full time?	95.2	4.8
10	Have your tutor keep your attendance?	93.2	6.8
11	Have you get the TMA in time?	69.5	30.5
12	Do you submit the TMA in time?	97.7	2.3
13	Do you discuss with fellow student regarding the TMA in time?	97.7	2.3

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has been limited in terms of the number and disposition of the respondents as well as the methodology employed during data collection. Respondents who frequently attend classes and are active students may have formed the larger part of the sample since attendance to tutorial class is not compulsory in Bangladesh Open University. The quantitative measures also may not have captured all facets of participation in distance education. Nevertheless, the study has been useful in highlighting a number of points that may be worthy of mention for the purpose of program planning and policy development in open and distance education. In justifying the findings above where the highest reported need was professional advancement, education planners will do well to link open and distance learning programs with the professional needs of the labour force, and with the needs of the working adult.

RECOMMENDATION

This study has been conducted to get an overview of the students' perception and attitude regarding BOU programs. The findings of this study have important implications for research and it could be used as a basis for improving programs regarding student support services at BOU. Social, political and economic situation of the country also play vital role to provide support for the students in distance education. Several factors could be considered which enhanced the students' achievements (Numan et al. 2007). To strengthen the existing program in the university and to maintain quality education, following recommendation could be suggested:

- Prior to offering programs, University should conduct need assessment survey.
- University should conduct need assessment survey at a regular interval during the program to justify the program's need.
- University should develop programs which are in job demand list.
- There should be strong coordination between academics and administrative staff.

- University should be more sincere in arranging examination and publishing result so that these tasks could be completed in optimum time.
- Academics of BOU can organize seminar, symposium and produce leaflets with the up to date content of the specific program.
- RRC's staff should be more active in promoting different programs and carry out motivational activities among the students.
- BOU media center can broadcast promotional activities to reach distant viewers which may help increase the students.
- More research should be done in this area to get ideas of the students, tutors and administrative staff.

We need to investigate on above issues and should try to set an inexpensive strategy to meet new challenges which will help achieving BOU objectives.

CONCLUSION

Education is closely related to human life and is practice-oriented, and distance education requires much care and devotion. Bangladesh is a developing country; it is faced with low socio-economic status and lack of infrastructure and communication technology. This study revealed that factors related to professional and personal self-development for students' needs to more support from students support services in open and distance education. Further, the need for professional advancement, cognitive interest, communication improvement, educational preparation, social contact, family togetherness and escapism/social stimulation cannot be ignored in the planning, designing and implementation of open and distance education programs. Further research should be done in this area to get ideas of the students, tutors and administrative staff in distance education in Bangladesh.

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