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Information Resource Centre: Mainstream for the Flow of Information for Lifelong Learning

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Introduction

Distance education is a slogan, a form of teaching in new shape, a system that implies commitment to shared educational beliefs. "The most widely agreed beliefs are about opening up learning opportunities to a wider range of people and enabling them to learn more congenially and productively. This involves reducing barriers to access and giving learners more control over their own learning" (Rowntree, 1992:13). "Open learning is not just about access alone, it is also about providing people with a fair chance of success" (Holt & Bonnici, 1988, quoted in Rowntree, 1992:14).

Trained and qualified teaching staff

"Good education demand good teachers. Over the course of twentieth century, as the teaching profession has grown, so have its standard risen" (Perraton, 1995:1). In this context and keeping Bangladesh and other Third World countries in consideration, it can be stated that most teachers who are engaged in teaching in distance education are not sufficiently trained, even in conventional education. To run open learning and distance education effectively and to achieve the targeted goal, distance education deserves specially qualified and trained teachers. But unfortunately, the developing countries are to depend on the teachers of conventional education the maximum of whom are less qualified, and many of them do not have sufficient training on teaching in the concerned educational system. Under the distance-education programme, the planners, designers, and directors of the concerned courses stay in the headquarters. They do not teach learners directly. The reality is that the teachers who are engaged in tutorial centres, who take classes and participate in interactions with learners, who exchange ideas and views, are not even properly acquainted with the systems and desired aims and objectives of open learning and distance education. It is also true for most tutors and coordinators. So, effective result from their teaching and from their service cannot be expected. As there is no alternative in hand and the whole system and structures cannot be changed in a day, all are to be dependent on existing situations. Necessary steps are to be taken to employ selected high-caliber teachers and make sufficient scope to train them in the concerned system and field. In this process, though it will take time, it is expected that, in the long run, the whole system, the whole student

community, and ultimately the nation will be benefited, and the open-learning system will achieve the desired goals.

Quality education

Virtually, not only in the open learning, the conventional system of education deserves optimum standard of education, and to achieve this goal, not quantity but quality education is to be ensured. Therefore, it is to be considered that to make the open learning system effective and to achieve the desired goals, quality and trained teachers are very much essential and inevitable. So, there is no alternative of taking long-term programme and plan to do so.

In 1969, when an open university was established in Britain, they had to take necessary steps for teachers' training to have effective result and to achieve the desired goal of their plan and programmes.

Communication media

The major attraction of distance teaching is the use of communication media technology for catering millions of students irrespective of location of residence. Taking opportunities of media communication, a university can meet educational needs of all types of students of a country, although there may be some practical constraints. Easy use of communication media and their faster speed help quick dissemination of desired information. "In its initial years broadcasting contributed only ten percent of a student's time, printed text being the main medium of instruction" (Chander, 1991:53). During the early days of the Open University of the UK, there was tremendous and widened use of "audio and video cassettes, video discs, cable and satellite TV, telephone and telex, and micro computers" (Chander, 1991:53) in addition to traditional TV and radio. In the UK, all citizens have access to radio and TV today.

Cost effectiveness of media communication

The cost of media production is coming down whereas the cost of print is going up. This means that even institutions with low budgets can hope to produce and distribute some non-broadcast audio-visual media. The new types of media give students greater control over the learning process and interaction. While students cannot interrupt broadcasting for purposes of revision and integration, they can do so with the new media.

Role of electronic media in dissemination of information

Broadcasting by TV and radio is a popular means of communication in open learning/ distance education because of their worldwide accessibility. Although some restrictions are there, telephone is an effective means of communication. It can be applied only in a society wherein most people own this facility. "Telephone helps reduce the sense of isolation a distance student may feel; it can make the contact with the tutor speedier avoiding problems of travel and terrain. Teleconferencing has developed as an effective means of interaction which can be exploited for educational purposes. It is a sort of simultaneous telephone calls arranged for communication between teacher and several students. ...but not suitable medium for lecturing or for courses in which visuals are necessary. It is suitable for limited groups and for specialist needs in education"

(Chander, 1991:55-56).

In the last few years, distance-teaching institutions in the industrialized world have set up telephone conferences to link students and have taught them through computer networks. In the developing world, the universities of the South Pacific and of the West Indies have used satellite communication to reach students across their scattered territories (Perraton, 1995:3).

Media in open learning

The role of media in open learning and distance education is vital in imparting information and dissemination of knowledge to a large number of students in the widened field and of different disciplines. Therefore, the use of communication technologies, especially in modern days, becomes the integral part of open learning and distance education. It is also a widely accepted and recognized truth that there is a significant positive relationship between the revolutionary advances in communication and information technologies and the phenomenal growth of distance education.

Internet for open learners

Computer-based education and training might have to create scope and allow learners to have open access to Internet, so that they can make them able to use Internet at any time and at any place especially during their leisure time. Without Internet and online facilities, learners will straightway be unable to keep close contact with their teachers, programmes, latest developments and happenings in the courses of their concern. So, for the following reasons, learners will have to be given scope of easy use of Internet :

- to strengthen their ability to work on course/lessons at their convenient time and place;
- to avail of online facilities either to download a course material or components to be worked on; and
- to acquaint themselves with the latest news, course design, instructions, other related programmes, etc.

Open learning in Bangladesh

For obvious reasons, the overall situation of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) cannot be compared with other universities of this kind in other countries. BOU is the first university of its kind in Bangladesh. The need for an open university in Bangladesh was felt long ago. The history of distance education in this country 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 and later the Audio Visual Education Centre (AVEC) in 1962. In 1978-1980, a pilot project titled School Broadcasting Programme (SBP) was taken up. In 1983, the SBP and the erstwhile AVEC were merged, and the National Institute of Educational Media and Technology (NIEMT) was established and developed.

In 1985, Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) was established, and NIEMT was incorporated in BIDE. Apart from producing and supplying audiovisual materials to educational institutions, BIDE organized a Bachelor of Education (BE. d) course, using the distant-teaching mode for untrained secondary school teachers. As per the Bangladesh Open University Act,

1992, the Government has merged BIDE with the Bangladesh Open University (BOU, 1997:2-3). Bangladesh joined the world body of open learning/distance education in 1981.

After the emergence of Bangladesh, the very concept of distance education was first conceived in 1974 in the report of Kudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission. Its relevant section says, "With the present education system there should be ample scope for part-time, drop-out and irregular students, so that they can receive higher education. All the irregular students should have been given scope to sit for the examination, in this case, evening course can be started. To achieve this goal, an Open University can be started like that of U.K." (Kudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission, 1974:88)

The aim of launching the distance-education programme was "to expand all levels of education, knowledge and science by a diversity of means, including the use of technology. It intends to provide opportunities of education to all classes of people and create efficient manpower by improving the quality of education." (BOU, 1999:1). By this time, Bangladesh has achieved a literacy rate of 48.7% (*Bangladesh Statistical Yearbook* 1999:493).

The BOU organizes its educational programme through 12 Regional Resource Centres (RRCs), 80 Local Centres (LCs), and more than 800 Tutorial Centres (TCs). Each regional and local centre is equipped with a PC, but each regional centre has TV, VCP, VCR, etc. By this time ideas are matured and programmes are chalked out, so that the RRCs are equipped with related necessary items for allowing modern facilities of the networking system in the long run and that enrolled students can use the library and multimedia facilities of the regional centres, although the local centres are yet to be equipped.

Quality of any education largely depends on the facilities offered to students. Among other things, access to information and information resources are very much important. Although there are limited and controlled library facilities in the regional centres, these are not sufficiently organized and are not also networked. The course participants do not get access to the central library of BOU from their own environment or from the access centre, as there is no online facility here and for the same reason all the RRCs and LCs are out of reach. But the BOU has plans to facilitate access of course participants to information resources from its headquarters in Gazipur, about 30 km from the capital city. This programme could not be implemented mainly due to financial constraints. To facilitate and ensure an effective and appropriate online distance learning, online access to information and information resources is essentially needed.

Prospect of open learning in Bangladesh

Open learning/distance education (OL/DE) is widening rapidly throughout the world. The teaching methodology is quite different from that of conventional teaching and education. In the OL/DE system, the scope is wider, and an expert teacher can teach millions of students with the help of electronic media. In the OL/DE system, both learners and participants have better scope of learning, viz. modular guidebooks, audio-video tapes, television, radio, teleconferencing facilities, Internet, and also direct interactions from tutors in the tutorial centres. So, in developing countries, like Bangladesh, OL/DE has a great potential; it is, thus, very much prospective and lucrative. In Bangladesh, distance learners come from different spheres of life—towns and rural areas. In other words, learners belong to three different levels: (i) economically sound and employed, (ii) under-employed and aspires to be more educated and more skilled, and (iii) jobless and economically poor rural people.

Although the teaching system in the BOU is technology-based, it still has several limitations or constraints. Some examples are: the rural areas do not have the facilities of digital phones and computer-networking system. The distance learners are required to be dependent on the RRCs of BOU. The LCs of BOU are also not yet properly set up and equipped.

In the conventional system of education, teacher-student interactions take place in classrooms only. But in open learning/distance education, it is done through tutorial centres and other media. The RRCs are also termed as community centres/relay stations for distance learners. These centres can relay all the programmes to the LCs, and after transmitting the programmes from the main campus, the RRCs can receive and store them in the resource centre/e-library. The distance learners visit the RRCs during their leisure time and use these programmes as and when required.

In Bangladesh, the LCs of BOU are located mainly in the rural areas where cable television facilities, dish antenna, and digital phones are not available, and there is no scope to establish an e-library which is very much essential for an online-teaching. So is the truth for RRCs also, because the distance learners depend on printed media only. On the other side, the RRCs are situated far away from the rural areas where the LCs are located. It is cumbersome and difficult for rural jobless learners to visit the RRCs and avail of facilities from these centres. If all the LCs could be developed with e-library facilities, it would be very much helpful for the rural jobless and economically downtrodden distance learners.

- Total enrollment in all programmes (upto June 2000): 2,43,782.
- Total Students number of students passed: 49,882.
- This statistics received from Examination Division on 15-7-2001.

In open learning/distance education, the role of e-library is always positive. In this system, all books, guides, and modular lessons prepared by expert teachers are put into the memory of computer and website in the Internet. During leisure time, learners use computers and access their desired and related topics and lessons.

Establishment of e-library in Bangladesh for the learners under the distance-education programme will be very much fruitful. Initially, it may be expensive, but in the long run it will indeed be cost-effective and useful like anything. In the existing system, quality education is always not ensured. But in OL/DE, which is based on media technology, each learner can get uniform education.

Growth of population is a threat to any developing country like Bangladesh. To meet the demand and to ensure education of an increasing number of population, the Government has to manage the situation and chalk out appropriate plans. Hence, it would be an absurdity to think that more educational institutions will be set up to meet this need. Rather it would be wise and realistic if mode of education is changed, and then only within the limited scope and resources, maximum result can be achieved.

Open learning is the only mode of education to tackle such a situation, create sufficient scope for the deprived, offer facilities, and overcome all the arising problems. The number of population in Bangladesh is still growing in an alarming rate, and in this circumstance, OL/DE must be implemented to meet the need of the society, and also to meet the increasing demand in the 21st century. Under this mode of education, a less number of expert teachers are needed, and in the age of technological development, only one expert teacher is sufficient to teach a subject for disseminating the contents for thousand learners.

Table 14.1 Enrollment and the status of success students since the launching of the distance education programme in Bangladesh Open University

Name of Programmes	Students enrolled									Total enrolled upto June 2000	Total passed upto June 2000	Remarks
	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000			Course yet to be completed
M.Ed	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1106	1312	2418		-
B.Ed	5075	6121	5571	5575	5443	4761	4804	3506	2593	43449	24990	Course yet to be completed
C.Ed	-	-	-	-	-	-	1812	2098	2039	5949		Course yet to be completed
H.S.C	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12006	25694	37700		Result of 1999 batch yet to be published
S.S.C				16168	14111	15803	16427	25114	24107	111730	21524	
BA/BSS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7352	7352		Course yet to be completed
CELP			3039	3007	1767	922	1117	787	435	11991	2358	-
CALP	-	-	-	-	601	228	158	98	118	1203	302	-
BELT	-	-	-	-	-	1073	607	345		2025		Course yet to be completed
B.Ag Ed	-	-	-	-	-	1735	1079	646	522	3982	371	
CPFP	-	-	-	-	-	-		44	30	74	66	
CLP	-	-	-	-	-	-		59	44	103	94	
DYD	-	-	-	-	-	-		150	-	150	37	
GDM	-	-	-	1375	3518	3470	1705	1239	711	12018	31	
CIM			-	294	242	320	204	207	83	1350		
MBA	-	-	-	-	-	-	196			196		Course yet to be completed
DCSA	-	-	-	-	-	-	720	624	748	2092	109	
Total:										243782	49882	

Role of IRC in open learning

The aim of Information Resource Centre (IRC) is to provide information and cater services to all. Its one of the main objectives is to ensure services and make liaison with learners, knowledge seekers, and other potential clienteles with that of its own information-dissemination programme. But when the open learning or distance education is concerned, as because, it is for the drop-outs, women, housewives, jobless, less-privileged, physically handicapped, financially unsound, unemployed and under-employed people, career developers, unskilled workers. They will have to consider more and more to create better scope for dissemination of information, appropriate technology for proper utilization, and provide facilities, so that the IRCs can attract open learners easily than other conventional libraries. The IRCs are also to keep into consideration why people are moving from conventional to flexible learning. Taking all these reasons into consideration, the following are to be analysed:

- IRCs are to be the centres of knowledge and learning for proper education.
- They will have to ensure the availability of all sorts of informative materials required by the learners and appropriate knowledge seekers.
- IRCs are to be able to cater more flexibly for a wide variety of learner needs and expectations.
- Resource-based learning provides an easier basis to learn and earn knowledge. IRCs should ensure this type of facilities and services.
- Distance learners are considered to be irregular students, jobless people, or engaged in different professions, unemployed or under-employed people, rural people, women, less privileged, or financially unsound people. So, they should be given better scope and facilities and multiple choice of learning, and vis-a-vis significant help should be extended to them.

Keeping the BOU and its learners into consideration, it is essential that the traditional library system is converted to become an e-library system. For the last few years, the price of IT equipment has gone down. So, the developing countries, like Bangladesh, can smoothly go for the introduction of electronic and media technologies for OL/DE. Librarian or information resource manager should remember that their learners are mainly aged workers, service holders, women, housewives, physically handicapped people, and jobless urban and rural people. Sitting at home or at any suitable place, or in the working station if one can make linkage with the learning process, i.e. online system of learning, will greatly be benefited. In this process, learners will have access to the facilities, resource materials, lecture notes, suggestions of teachers, and other relevant materials. In this course of action, place and time are not at all barriers. In the online process, satellite-based television, CD-ROM, Internet, website, and multi-media facilities can be used. During leisure, students and learners will take advantage and opportunities to use different media for their linkage and learning. Therefore, for obvious reasons, distance learning is quickly becoming 'Internet learning' in the most popular form of non-traditional education delivery.

Librarians and the Internet in open learning

It is believed that the 21st century will be the age of electronics and media technology. By this time, this concept is widely recognized and accepted to the information seekers. Virtually, academic librarians are on the front lines of making new technologies accessible and useful to scholars, teachers, and students. But the pedagogical responsibility of a librarian is to ensure essential flow of information and relevant services to all information seekers, especially to students. In

other words, computer and the Internet are recognized as useful tools—and only tools. If one can use them successfully, one can complete an assignment on the desired topic, gather knowledge on the desired subject, and develop skills on desired discipline.

It, however, obviously depends on how skillfully a librarian has designed his/her information management system, and on the other hand, the students or the concerned people do operate it. Thus, the use of computers and access to the Internet are always given importance in open learning and distance education.

"The implications for education and training are immense. Learning can be independent of time and place, and available at all stages of person's life. The learning context will be technologically rich. Learners will have access not only to a wide range of media, but also to a wide range of sources of education.

The challenge for educators is how to utilize this power, so that education and training meet the needs of individuals and society at large" (Bates, 1997:229).

Technology and open learning in the 21st century

Although it is the age of electronic media, print items still play a great role in the dissemination of information and also in distance teaching. The print items are the only items with which students and learners can interact repeatedly and conveniently within their available time. In the past days of open learning/distance education, all concerned had to depend on printed materials (books, modules, etc.) only. Later, one-way communication was introduced—radio and audio-cassettes were used as additional tools for education. With the technological advancement, two-way communication, i.e. telephone teaching and audio-graphics, computer-based learning and use of multimedia, computer-mediated communication, etc. gradually replaced the previous conventional and early systems and tools. In true sense, "developments in multimedia that give teachers and learners the tools to reconstruct and personalize knowledge, the development of computer-mediated communications, and the eventual integration of multimedia with electronic networks suggest the essential function of computers in education in moving away from the notion of the computer as substitute teacher toward that of a 'true' technology, a set of tools to be used by teachers and learners, to facilitate the task of learning and understanding" (Bates, 1997:227).

Conclusion

Although, with the facilities of the electronic age and modern communication technologies, most distance learners of urban area are heavily dependent on online services, the utility of the old print-based education and face-to-face tutoring cannot be denied. Despite this, online systems carry more learning advantage for students, and, therefore, are set to gradually replace the paper-based delivery of learning material and face-to-face tutorial to other old systems and services. It is true that the advantage of online education over print-based distance education lie in the following:

- Quick and loss less home-delivery of learning materials.
- Quick tutor feedback on assignments.
- Quick and much expanded and two-tier interactivity: student-student and tutor- student.
- Quick updating of learning materials.

- Quick acquaintance with latest information regarding open learning and distance education.
- An overall time saving learning system.

The key to the widening participation also depends on affordability. Reduction of tuition fees, extending helps for less-privileged groups, allowing interest-free loan to the poor, and extending financial supports to the students taking assistance schemes in hand are also important factors in open learning to be considered in the perspective of developing countries. The education policy of the Government of Bangladesh should, thus, focus each of the above characteristics, so that target groups could avail advantages of it.

All these also demand organization of efficient and effective electronic information resources centres to facilitate provision of the needed support and flow of information for lifelong learning by those who could not avail of normal education due to constraints beyond their control.

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