

Socio-Cultural Aspects of Quality Issues : A Case Study of BOU's SSC Programme

By

Monzur-e-Khoda Tarafdar*
Ms. Sadia Afroze Sultana**
Mostafa Azad Kamal***

Abstract

Quality assurance in distance education is a focal point of discussion now a day. Though quality is a relative phenomenon, there are some indices to measure it. These indices include mainly the standard of curriculum, mode of delivery etc. However, in practice we find that having same standard of curriculum and same programmes delivered through different modes or delivered by different institutions using similar mode of instructions differ in terms of demand and recognition. It signals that the quality of an academic programme should be measured not only in terms of the standard of curriculum or the mode of delivery, but also the recognition and demand for the outputs of that programme. That means some socio-cultural and behavioral factors (which are not considered generally in the existing quality indices) are needed to be considered very important when evaluating the quality of a programme of an institution. Sometimes quality issues are limited with brand name or trademark. If the programme is not socially accepted it matters little that the curriculum of a programme is most modern or time befitting. This paper aims at discussing the quality issues of BOU's S.S.C. programme in comparison with traditional S.S.C. programme in terms of flexible delivery modality of distance education and its social acceptability.

Key Words

Quality refers to social recognition; Quality is some time culture bias, Quality is branded or Trade Marked.

This paper was presented on Hyderabad Conference held in January 2001]

Introduction

The history of distance education in Bangladesh dates back to 1956 when the Education Directorate was assigned with the responsibility of 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 entitled School Broadcasting programme (SBP) was taken up. In 1983 the SBP and erstwhile AVEC were merged and the National Institute of Educational Media and Technology (NIEMT) was set. In 1985 Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) was established and NIEMT was incorporated in BIDE. In 1989 at the request of the Government of Bangladesh an Asian Development Bank (ADB) fact finding mission

* The writer is working as Registrar in Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh.

** The writer is working as Lecturer, Department of Physics, Open School, BOU, Bangladesh.

*** The writer is working as Assistant Professor, School of Business, BOU, Bangladesh

on open university visited Bangladesh. Consequently under ADB assistance another feasibility study was made on open university through a Technical Assistance Project (TAP). The objective of TAP was to formulate a comprehensive project proposal for Bangladesh Open University (BOU). BOU scheme is majorly financed by ADB. An agreement has been reached between ADB and Government of Bangladesh (GOB) on 1992 in this respect and as per the agreement ADB has provided 34.33 million US dollar to this scheme, which is 80% of the total project cost.

After having completion of the above mentioned initialization, the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has been established in 1992 by an Act of Parliament (BOU Act-1992 No-38). Unlike conventional universities, Bangladesh Open University will not only serve the higher education sector, but it will also cater to the needs of a wide range of other education and training requirements, covering the whole spectrum of human resource development from basic education to secondary education. The main objective of BOU is to provide flexible and need based education for greater access to education and training to the masses, particularly to the rural disadvantaged groups like rural women, agricultural workers, unemployed youths, uneducated adults, health and family planning workers etc. by introducing courses/ programmes of studies more compatible with social and development needs of the country. It will also provide opportunities for non-formal education. BOU is now offering 18 formal and 19 non-formal programmes through six academic schools.

Historical background of SSC programme of BOU

In the loan covenant signed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Government of Bangladesh (GOB) there is a specific directive that BOU will provide secondary education for greater access to the people those are unable to access in the conventional system. A Need Assessment Survey (NAS) was conducted in 1993 (July-December) to address the identification of courses/programmes of BOU in the initial stage. In that survey amongst other programmes Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) programmes were considered to be the one of the priority programmes. The findings of the survey was placed before the National Steering Committee (NSC) and the committee recommended that SSC and HSC programmes can be launched in distance mode through the Open School of BOU. The recommendation was duly passed through by the Planning Commission, Executive Committee for National Economic Council (ECNEC), and finally approved by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In 1995 the SSC programme has been launched and the programme earned a lot of interest and attention of the learners who have no access to the conventional SSC programmes for its flexible learning features in respect o learners own pace and time, age, gender, occupation etc. The minimum completion time of the programme is 2 years comprising of 10 courses of which maximum 5 courses can be taken each year and students have a flexi-time of 5 years to complete the programme.

In the meantime, the total students of the programme is 1,00,000 (one lac). There is a very interesting statistical report on the enrollment of SSC students of BOU. The following data will show the index of sex, age group and profession of the SSC students of BOU SSC programme :

Sex	%	Age Group	%	Profession	%
Male	54	14 - 20 years	68.73	Job seeker	0.8
Female	46	21 - 25 years	16.94	House wife	6.4
		26 - 30 years	06.95	Businessman	0.8
		31 - 35 years	04.54	Students	24.0
		36 - 40 years	02.58	Service Holder	0.8
		41 - above	00.26	Others (dropouts)	67.2
Total	100%	Total	100%	Total	100%

- *data obtained from BOU Controller of Examinations' office. - 1998*

The above scenario depicts that dropouts and occupied learners are maximum of the total students quantity of the programme and female participants are almost close to male participants, which is very much important to signify the role and objectivity of the delivery system of BOU and also commensurate with the mandate of the BOU Act-1992.

But it is a matter of great regret that after passing out of three batches of SSC programme BOU has to encounter the equivalence problem of the programme with the conventional SSC programme. In an announcement Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education of the country refused of the BOU SSC passed students to register in their HSC programme and deferred them to get admission in the colleges. The implication of the announcement is very much directive towards the question of quality of BOU products / programmes. This led a student to the court for the demand for justice according to the law of the land. The interesting part is that there is a verdict of the hounorable court in favour of the BOU's student, against the Education Board's decision of refusal of registering the BOU SSC passed students in the traditional HSC programme. The Education Board made a petition for appeal for reconsideration of the verdict, which is still awaited. The irony of fate of BOU as an institution is that even having the government recognition her students are not eligible to go for higher education in the conventional institutions. This indifferent treatment has plunged BOU in to a great challenge to encounter, which may jeopardize the existence of BOU's other academic programmes also.

Since the students who obtained certificates from BOU's SSC programme, are not allowed to get into the HSC programme offered by he conventional colleges, raises two burning issues: 1) Is BOU's programmes are inferior to those of conventional institutions in terms of quality? 2) Is it the reflection of the conservative (culture bias) attitude of the conventional institutions or educationists?

In the circumstances stated above we have sufficient reason to believe that there is a room to see what exactly the problem is? This paper aims at scanning both BOU and conventional institutions SSC programmes through recognized quality index and reviewing whether is there any external factor(s) which makes the programme different from each other in terms of acceptability or quality.

Towards the Concept of Quality in Education

Defining quality in any manner is a very difficult task when it becomes an issue of education. Starting from the founding of Open University in the United Kingdom in 1969, the quality issue became an obstacle to the general recognition of Open University degrees. But it is also true that when we think about a degree of Harvard or Oxford or

even MIT or Cambridge we generally bear in mind that it is a world class degree and others degrees are not as equal as to those even though the latter's belong to the same conventional education system. Even if we think an institution or university goes for the same syllabus of Oxford or MIT with the same methodology of teaching and environment could that institution/ university claim of the same quality as to that of Oxford or MIT? The simple answer is no. So it can be argued that some institutions have achieved to be branded or trade marked by setting of its won quality at a certain level of standard. From this we see quality varies even in the same arena, in the same set of system or sub-system.

Quality as a whole is a very complex concept to define. There exists no universally accepted, agreed, adequate and comprehensive definition of quality in education. Logically a certificate has only decorative value until it is tested in the job market. The focal point is the level of understanding, which should really be taken for the quality education received. Numerous approaches have been made to quantify the quality of education by the educationists, researchers and specialists in the arena of education.

In case of comparability in evaluation of quality in DE and open learning the following are the approaches according to Professor B.N. Koul:

QUALITY IN EDUCATION ~ CLASSICAL APPROACH

QUALITY ~ Not Well-Defined In Education

QUALITY in CONVENTIONAL EDUCATION

QUALITY in DISTANCE EDUCATION

INFRASTRUCTURE

QUALITY OF FACULTY

ENTRANCE STANDARDS

➔ STUDY TIME

COURSE CONTENT

ASSESSMENT SCHEMA

INSTITUTIONAL RANKING

QUALITY OF GRADUATES

QUALITY of LEARNING MATERIALS

➔ SUITABILITY of DE FOR THE SUBJECT TAUGHT

PROVISION for TRUE/ ACTUAL* EDUCATION (INTERACTION)

* DIRECT DIALOGUE
OR
INTERACTION



SOCIALIZATION
INVOLVEMENT in LEARNING
SHARING OF EXPERIENCES.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION ~ BEYOND THE CLASSICAL APPROACH

SYSTEMIC CONCERNS

➔ *PROCESS Based*

- ϕ Course structure
- ϕ Course preparation
- ϕ Developmental testing

- ϕ Monitoring of distance teaching transactions
- ϕ Assignment handling
- ϕ Student support service including feedback etc.
- ϕ Evaluation [*Relevance, Process, Effect*]

PPHILOSOPHIC CONCERNS → *VALUE Based*

- ϕ ACCESS + EQUITY
- ϕ IMPACT on Educational Systems
- ϕ RELEVANCE - EXPECTATIONS, NEEDS
- ϕ ACCEPTABILITY - Status, etc.
- ϕ GENERATION of KNOWLEDGE

PEDAGOGIC/ANDRAGOGIC → *TRANSACTION (INPUT-OUTCOME) Based CONCERNS*

- ϕ COGNITIVE dimension
- ϕ PSYCOMOTOR dimension
- ϕ AFFECTIVE dimension
- ϕ DROPOUT rate(s)

QUALITY ASSURANCE ~ EMERGING CONTEXT (Socio-political)

FINANCIAL STRINGENCY

*(National Issues
⇒ So they must
influence
Education*

- **Return on public investment**
- **Management requirement**
(that national resources be managed efficiently)

MARKET ORIENTATION

*(Fast changing
scenario in
Education
as well)*

- **Competitive markets**
- **Shrinking markets**
- **Expanding markets**

ECONOMIC UTILITY

*(Emphatic demand
on Education
Systems)*

- **Education for economic growth**
- **Accountability in economic and temporal terms**

DEMOCRATIZATION OF EDUCATION

(Education as
a Right

- **Education for ALL - demand for ACCESS**
- **Equal opportunities for Education - issue of EQUITY**
- **Issue of Standards in Education**

Some changes in the basic assumptions of educational scenario have taken place during the last 3 decades in respect of quality issues. It is because open learning and distance education (DE) are getting a very forceful status as a methodology of teaching with its learner centric self-directive and IT mediated flexible characteristics. Since education is a sub-set of social system, democratization of education leads to a three dimension approaches namely: i) education for all - demand for access; ii) equal opportunity for education - issue of equity and iii) issue of standard of education. With the increasing changing environment more variables are need to be assessed in a definite set of assumptions. Nevertheless the socio-cultural aspect in the issue of quality is a very important, pragmatic and result oriented index of quality irrespective of mode of delivery, standard of curriculum and process of evaluation.

But in the case of educational programmes, it is really a tough job to establish any rod to measure quality. Though, educationalists already offered some quality indices, they are not still beyond disputes. However, one thing is unanimously accepted to all that since output is nothing but the processed from input, the output quality depends on input quality and also on the process quality.

The relationship between output quality with input quality and process quality can be shown as follows:

$$OQ = f(IQ, PQ)$$

Where,

OQ = Output quality

IQ = Input quality

PQ = Process quality

Input quality : Here 'input' means the 'students' just entered into the programme. The entry qualification of the student is considered as the measuring rod of the input quality.

Process quality : The word 'process' indicates all types of efforts and methods implemented to achieve the objectives of an educational programme. In the 'process' course contents, course books, tutoring, necessary supports by other media, etc. are involved. This phase is mostly the delivery phase of an educational programme. This phase is very much important in determining the quality of output of a programme.

This paper emphasizes on the *process quality* of the SSC programme of BOU assuming that the input quality of the programme is almost same as that of the conventional SSC programme. Comparing with the process/delivery methods of the conventional SSC programme, we have tried to see whether there is any factor other than academic for which the BOU's SSC programme is considered to be different from the conventional SSC programme in terms of quality.

Methodology

Database: Secondary sources of information have mainly been used in this work. We have used the data from the reports of the surveys conducted to evaluate the BOU's SSC courses. In addition to that we interviewed the experts, guardians, teachers/tutors involved both in BOU & conventional SSC programmes, higher secondary school/college heads and secondary and higher secondary education board officials.

Technique used in the analysis : The analysis is mainly qualitative in nature. We compared the delivery tools used in BOU's SSC programme with those used in the conventional SSC programme.

Course content: The contents of BOU's SSC courses are similar to those of the conventional SSC courses approved by National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). About 100% of the teachers in the secondary schools in Dhaka city opined that the contents of BOU's SSC courses are similar to the contents of the corresponding conventional SSC courses. Even a committee formed by the Ministry of Education for submission of recommendation regarding the equivalent issue of both the SSC programmes has opined that both the programmes are equal in quality. The committee's special observation in drawing conclusion of the report was that BOU students-teacher contact hours are not as much as conventional students.

Textbook: Textbooks for the BOU's students are written in modular form so that the students can learn the concepts in the course by themselves. Most of the respondents think that the concepts and theories are presented in the BOU textbooks very well understood in comparison with the textbooks followed by the conventional S.S.C. students.

Teaching method: In the conventional system, teacher stands in front of fifty or more students and delivers lecture what is largely an uninterrupted discourse for 45 minutes or more.

On the other hand, in BOU's programmemes, the teacher takes a much more subsidiary role. Here students ask the teachers to solve the problem they have faced in the courses. Tutors are here just facilitators. Students not only talk to the teachers/tutors to get answer of their queries, but also they discuss the complex concepts in the courses with the weaker students. In that case, teacher help the students start the discussion, maintain the discussion and conclude the discussion.

Therefore, BOU's method of teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction is more effective way of learning than conventional pedagogical method of teaching.

Performance of Tutors of BOU: BOU uses the conventional school buildings as tutorial centers and teaching staffs as tutors. Therefore, there is no difference between the performance of teaching staffs of conventional schools and BOU's tutors. They are the same persons.

Other Media uses: In conventional system, only two media such as print and lecture are used to disseminate knowledge to the students, whereas BOU uses more media such as print, audio, video, post, tutoring, radio and television to help its students learn effectively. Though in BOU direct

teaching is absent, the use of technologies i.e., different form of media's self directed learning and tutoring can be considered as good substitute for student-teacher and student-student interaction. In that sense, there is no much variation in the effectiveness of the delivery of knowledge both in BOU and in conventional schools.

Evaluation: Like the conventional system BOU evaluates their students by the end-of-course through written examination. The questions are set and exam-scripts are evaluated mostly by the teachers of the conventional schools. So, evaluation processes are same in both conventional schools and BOU.

Summary of Findings

From the above analysis, it is clear that :

- The contents of the BOU S.S.C. courses are similar to those of the, corresponding conventional courses,
- The text books used by BOU students are more informative than those used by the conventional students,
- BOU students also learn by themselves through self-directive learning. They can enjoy flexibility in receiving education, which is almost absent in the conventional system,
- Tutors of BOU are hired from the conventional schools. So, the persons who teach in the conventional schools are providing tutorial services to BOU students,
- BOU uses a combination of different media to help its students learn more effectively, whereas conventional schools relies on only printed textbook and class-room lectures with black boards and dusters,
- Evaluation technique and the persons involved in the evaluation process are mostly same in both BOU and conventional schools.

Therefore, it can be firmly said that BOU's S.S.C. programme is in some cases better than conventional S.S.C. programme. The only difference is the mode of delivery, which cannot be the major means of comparison between the performance of the students in this age of information super highway. So BOU students should not be treated in an indifferent manner so that they cannot go for higher education in any institution where they want to educate themselves.

Conclusion

Since open learning and distance education is a new concept in Bangladesh, the people involved in the traditional system of education cannot come out of their orthodox thinking. Not giving emphasis on the availability of messages and the capacity of receiving the messages, they worry about the way of transmitting messages. This happens because they do not use to modern technologies and that's why they do not know the advantages and the blessings of modern technologies. This classical attitude of questioning the performance of BOU students may continue until the people in the conventional system of education are not used to conceptualize the philosophy of DE and open learning system of education and uses of modern technologies. And thus the social

acceptability of quality may suffer. However, in the long run, this backward attitude will be changed. Due to the prejudiced idea and culture bias attitudes amongst the educationists the BOU's programmes may have to suffer much.

References

Project Proforma of BOU 1993 & 1997. BOU Act 1992.

Professor B.N. Coul's lecture of Quality Issues on DE at BOU 2000.