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QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SECONDARY AND HIGHER SECONDARY PROGRAMMES OF BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY – A LEARNER-BASED EVALUATION

Abstract

To materialize Bangladesh's goal for becoming a middle-income country by 2021 requires creation of techo-based large educated workforce. Due to socio-economic drawbacks a big number of students drop out from conventional system of regular education. They could be included in the stream of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) under Bangladesh Open University (BOU), which is the only authorized institution for ODL in Bangladesh. But, BOU education should be free from quality debates as against the conventional system of education. Secondary and Higher Secondary levels being the spring board for both job market and higher education are focused in this research and the improvements as regards quality and effectiveness are sought for through a learner-based evaluation. This has been a primary research based on questionnaire survey applied among a gender mix of 119 students of secondary and Higher Secondary levels. The methodology adopted both quantitative and qualitative system of analysis.

The survey was conducted on the existing system of ODL in BOU. The survey revealed weakness in BOU information dissemination system, its product delivery service and in the TV and radio programmes. The admission procedure, quality of books, management of tutorial classes and the quality of tutoring and the commitment of tutors are found to be of acceptable standard. As a whole, the quality and effectiveness of the Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes are found just satisfactory necessitating improvements.

The research identifies a strong necessity of addressing the needs of the learners and a stronger necessity of putting in concerted efforts in meeting and satisfying the diverse nature of the needs of the learners. It suggests a strategy of improvement in keeping with the motto of BOU, i.e. "We assure education at your doorstep"; making of education convenient and flexible for the learners so that no distractions can come in the way of their learning. The suggested steps are creation of a robust and proactive system of delivery of information, development of a strong and sustainable ICT infrastructure, diversification of products to make learning experience more flexible, and finally introducing accountability at all levels to ensure delivery of effective support to the learners.

Introduction

Background

Bangladesh has set its goal for a middle-income country status by 2021 (Vision Bangladesh 2021). To expedite economic emancipation Bangladesh needs to create an educated workforce for competing globally in techno-based high-income job market. But poverty compels most of the students to enter job market at early stage notwithstanding their willingness for further education. With a large youth class off the orbit of education Bangladesh's achievement of goal may quite be rendered implausible. They should be given scope for education without hampering their livelihood. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) could be the pertinent solution to this issue.

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is the only authorized institution for ODL (BOU Act 1992) in Bangladesh. Currently it has about 200,000 students at Secondary and Higher Secondary levels that are considered gateway to both techno-based job market and higher education. But the present number of students is remarkably low as against the country's total population of 160 million.

Statement of the Problem

The reasons for not being able to attract expected number of students are often attributed to the quality and effectiveness of BOU programmes as compared to conventional system of education. Besides, the socio-economic context of Bangladesh causes compulsions for the students to drop out from the main stream of education. Regular students who appeared the primary final examination in 2010 were 2,486,318, but the number of students who registered in Higher Secondary level in 2016 has been 1,173,680. That is to say, 1,312,638 students (52.79%) have dropped out to get in touch with the eleventh level from five (Shafiq Rahman, 2016). A large portion of them could be the students of BOU, which reminds to revisit BOU's existing model of Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes and take steps for improvement.

Significance of the Study

Lack of institutional capacity on one hand and socio-economic realities on the other make ODL more advantageous than that of the conventional on-campus system of education. Outcome of this study could positively contribute towards increasing the number of ODL students thus help create a larger educated workforce in Bangladesh.

Aim

The aim of this research is to seek for improvement in the quality and effectiveness of the Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes of BOU through a learner-based evaluation.

Hypothesis

Enhanced learner-based approach to ODL will significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes of BOU.

Research Questions

Primary Question: How learner-based approach to ODL will improve the quality and effectiveness of Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes of BOU?

Secondary Questions:

- What is the existing ODL model of BOU and how it is applied to the learners of Secondary and Higher Secondary levels?

- What are the characteristics of the learners?

- What is the learner feedback as regards the quality and effectiveness of Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes?

- What are the needs of the learners and what are the possible areas of improvement?

- What measures can be undertaken to enhance the quality and effectiveness of Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes of BOU and how to implement those?

Methodology

To objectively conduct the research both quantitative and qualitative data analysis have been made based on primary sources. Total 119 learners, a mix of Secondary and Higher Secondary students representing the whole of Bangladesh, were selected by stratified random sampling methods. They were interviewed through a structured questionnaire for collection of data. Some supporting data have also been collected from secondary sources.

While collecting data learners were asked to fill up the questionnaire one by one only in presence of the researcher so that no influence worked on them. After collection, raw data were keyed-in into the computer database and recorded properly. Data analysis was done using Statistical package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 (SPSS, Inc. Willy, 2004) ref 8.

BOU ODL Model in Retrospect

BOU follows standard national syllabus for Secondary and Higher Secondary education. Students are provided with print-based resources like books, known as Self-learning Materials (SLM). BOU supports their earning by arranging some tutorial classes at earmarked Study Centres and by making audio/video broadcasts of topics included in the syllabus. Infrastructure of existing face-to-face teaching institutions are utilized on requirement basis in weekly holidays as study centres. National radio and TV channels are used for audio and video broadcasts. Students of any age and gender are admitted through nationwide circulation at a particular time of the year for respective levels. The system of ODL in BOU basically hinges upon students to read at their own. Attendance in tutorial classes is not mandatory. But "quality and effectiveness" of ODL cannot be judged only on the quality of learning materials but also on everything from admission to certification. Therefore it should be seen through the prism of following aspects: (Robinson, Bernadette. 1995)

- Products: the learning materials and courses, media materials, the output (e.g. number of graduates, examination pass rates);

- Services: registration and advisory services, tutoring, and counselling, feedback and guidance on learning (assignments), support for progress as a learner, career advice, provision and management of study centres;

- Processes that support both of the above: delivery systems, record keeping, scheduling, quality assurance procedures;

- General philosophy: policy and mission statements, ethos and culture of the organisation, mottos, attitudes of staff and levels of commitment, self-images presented.

Learner Characteristics

Demographic Portfolio - Findings

Of the 119 respondents (learners) are 59% male, 41% female and 49.6% married, 50.4% unmarried. Religious representation are; 86% Muslims, 13% Hindus and only 1% from other religions. Age distribution is; 66% below 25, 20% within 26 to 30, 7% within 31 to 35 and the rest 7% above 35 years. Family members of 78% learners four and above. About 63% are from lower-middle-income group. Occupation wise 8% unemployed, 24% homemaker and the rest 68% are employed in different professions.

ICT Usage, Affordability by Learners and Interest

81% of the learners own mobile phones which they use regularly, 18% make irregular use of other's mobile phone and only 1% don't use any. As regards the use of internet, 18% learners use regularly, 17% irregularly and 65% of them don't use internet. Almost all of them (98 – 99%) are interested to get information from BOU or to communicate with BOU using mobile phone; either by calling any specific numbers or through SMS service of mobile operators. Though internet users are 35%, 70% of the total learners are also desirous to use internet either to better communicate with BOU or to facilitate their learning.

Analysis of Learner Characteristics

The learners represent different social strata covering both sex. They also represent different age, occupational and income groups. Despite varied demographic representations, what is particularly common amongst them is the very humble economic condition. Almost all of them also need to contribute to their total family income, as it is evident from the given statistics. Thus, the professional engagement constrained by financial backwardness is likely to work as a demotivating or distracting force against their commitment to education. They also may not be capable of possessing sophisticated modern electronic gadgets that are helpful for ODL. Again, representation of different age, sex and religion is a strong indicator of the learner' willingness to undergo education defeating the inequalities. They are ICT friendly, especially with mobile phones. Internet is becoming popular amongst them gradually. However, given the scope they have showed interest in ICT usage.

Learner Feedback Analysis

BOU Information Dissemination System

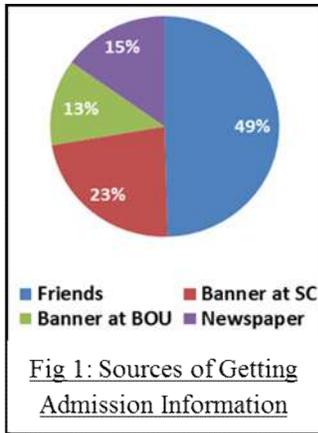Fig 1: Sources of Getting Admission Information

Fig 2: Preferred Sources for Getting Admission Information

49% learners got admission information from their friends and others got it from different sources (Fig 1). 52% learners faced problems in getting admission information and the reasons mentions are; had to collect physically in absence of any phone numbers (20%), didn't know where to get from (15%), no information at BOU website (19%), had to wait for long at Regional Centre for information (12%), unavailability of information board (8%) and had to look for information due to lack any set pattern of dissemination (20%). All these reflect system flaws in the information dissemination system of BOU.
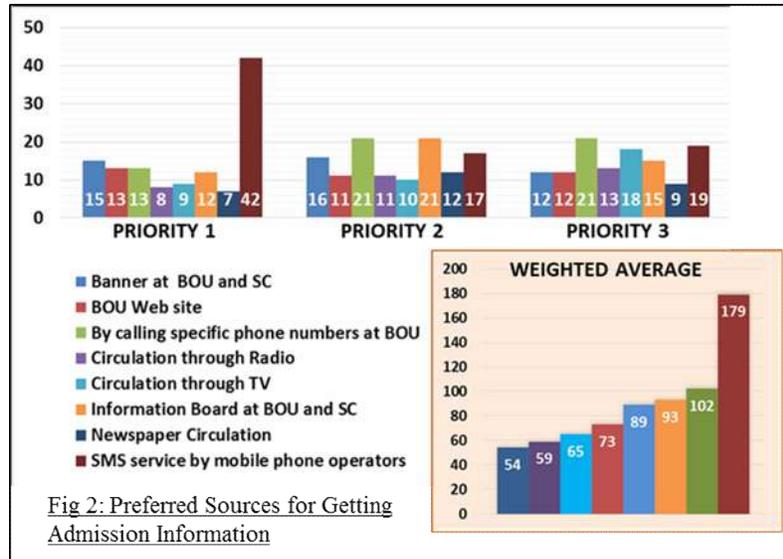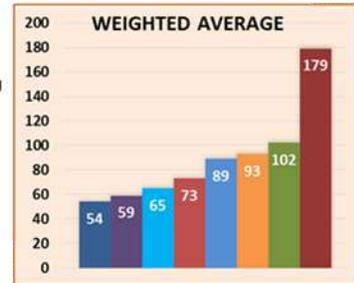
Learners were asked to give their prioritized preference for getting admission information. The top priority was given on information through SMS service by mobile phone operators (Fig 2). The second priority was by calling specific phone numbers at BOU. This indicates learners' willingness to explore ICT options, which BOU doesn't provide currently.

Admission Procedure

Most of the students (78%) didn't face any problems during admission formalities and 22% opined it as difficult (Fig 3). Of the 22% who faced problems during admission formalities reported that they couldn't choose subjects as per choice and didn't get any advice/assistance choosing the subjects, didn't understand where to submit the required documents and faced problems owing to mistakes made by the study centre.
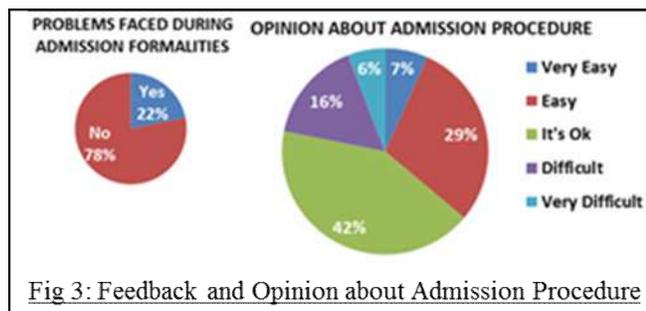

Fig 3: Feedback and Opinion about Admission Procedure

All these indicate lack of care for the students. Also, unavailability of separate counter for female candidates at some places (27%) indicates lack of consideration for female students. In general, the admission formalities are found easy by the students.

BOU Product Delivery Service

Only 18% students received all books, 21% received some books and 61% didn't receive any books. As a result, 82% of the students have resorted to reading guide books buying from the market. Though 39% of them find the guidebooks convenient for study, but the rest 61% basically didn't have any choice due to delay in delivery of BOU books (Fig 4). This is a serious flaw in the BOU product delivery service.
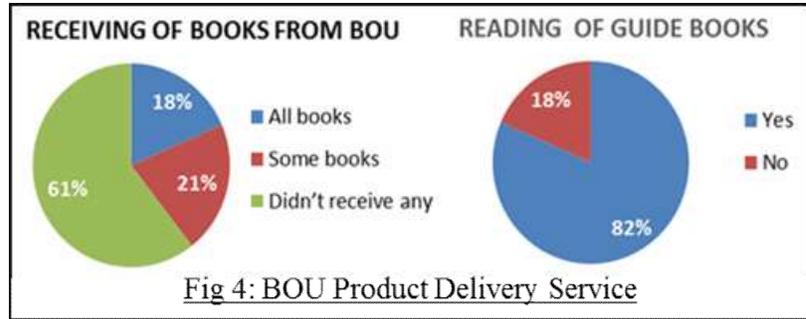

Fig 4: BOU Product Delivery Service

Quality and Effectiveness of SLM/BOU Books

Fig5: Quality and Effectiveness of the Self-learning Material (SLM)/ BOU Books/

There are hardly any observations on the quality of BOU books as regards printing quality and spelling mistakes. The BOU books are also found to be easily readable and understandable (Fig 5).

Management of Tutorial Classes

The chart (Fig 6) shows positive response in all the cases. The tutorial classes are conducted regularly with support staff remaining present. The classroom space and lighting condition are acceptable.
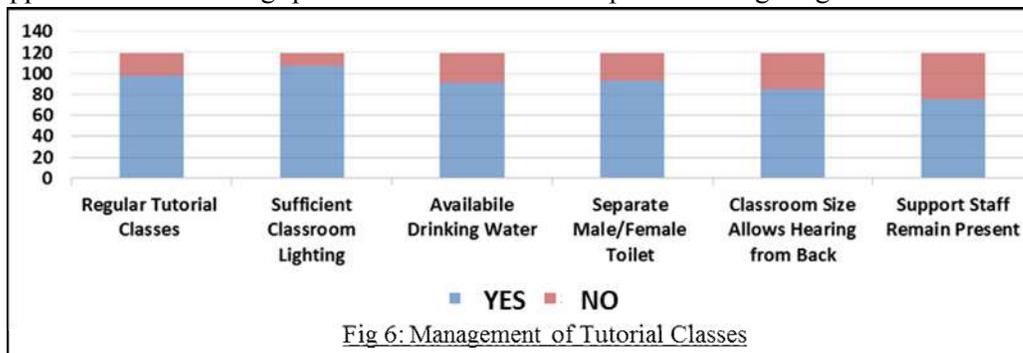

Fig 6: Management of Tutorial Classes

Availability of drinking water indicates consideration for students' basic needs. Availability of separate male/female toilets indicates gender focus. As a whole, the management of tutorial classes is found to be of acceptable standard.

Quality of Tutoring and Commitment of Tutors

85% students regularly attend tutorial classes and 71% go to tutors with lesson related problems. Of the latter, 73% are satisfied which indicates tutors' problem solving ability. The reasons for irregular attendance in tutorial classes is mostly attributed to business at work.
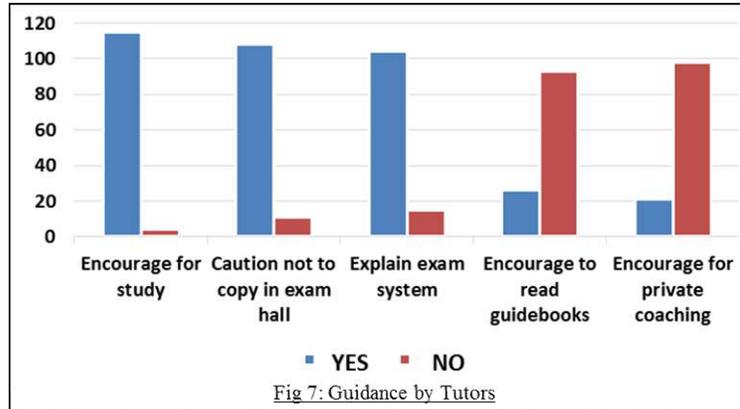
At least 95% of the students have given positive feedback about tutors' ability to guide the lessons. In most of the cases the tutors have also

Fig 7: Guidance by Tutors

encouraged to study, cautioned of examination hall discipline and explained the examination system. They also haven't encouraged the students to read other guidebooks or asked them to attend private coaching (Fig 7). The tutors' teaching ability, their guidance and attitude of taking responsibility speak of their quality and commitment.

Quality and Effectiveness of TV Programme

66.4% of the respondents were informed of the TV broadcast, 47.9% witnessed TV programme either regularly or irregularly and 31.1% have reported that their expectations were fulfilled. Of the 31.1% expectations of 16.8% learners were properly fulfilled based on their assessment, which thus can be

Fig 8: Quality and Effectiveness of TV Programme

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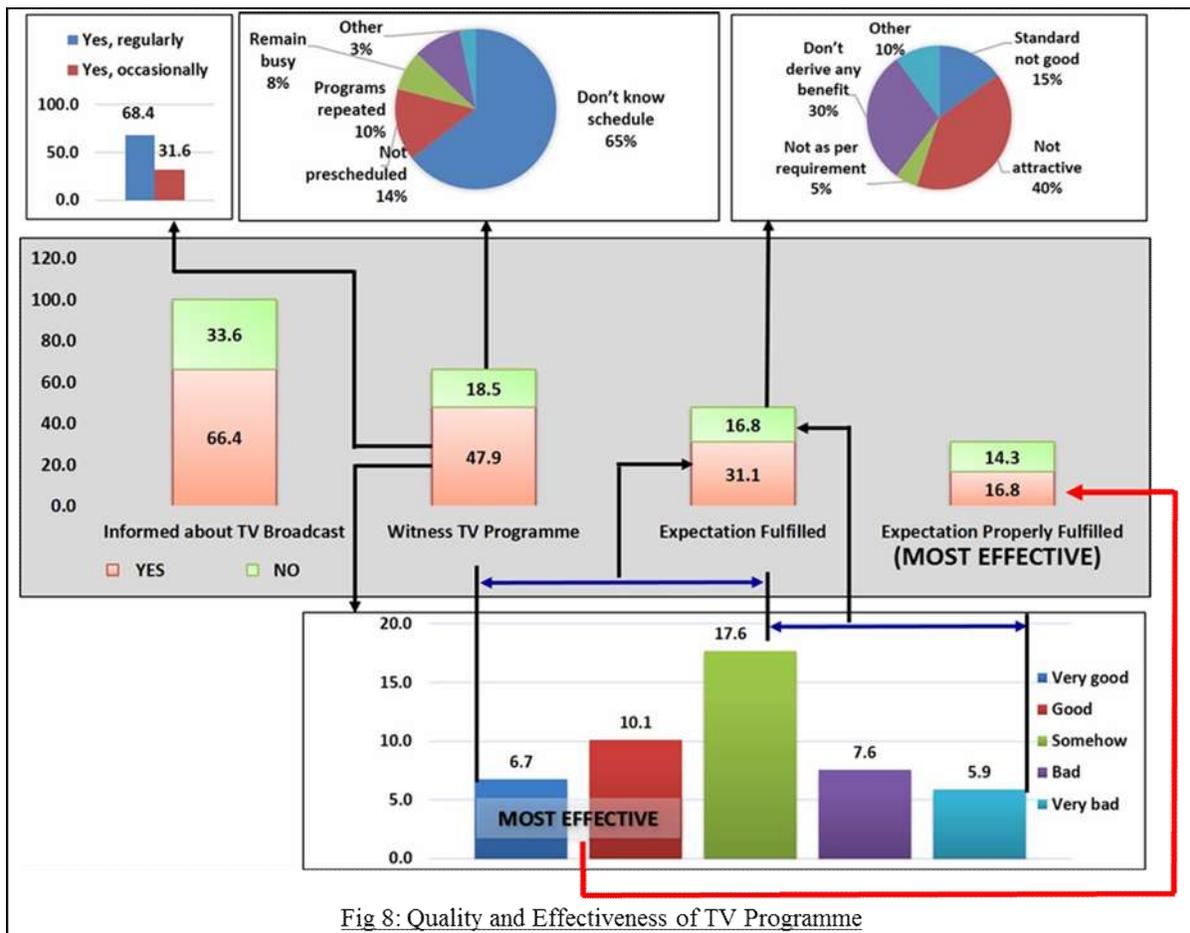
termed as the percentage of the most effective. Details are shown at Fig 8

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Quality and Effectiveness of Radio Programme

27.7% of the respondents were informed of the radio broadcast, 23.5% listened to radio programme either regularly or irregularly and 12.6% have reported that their expectations were fulfilled. Of the 12.6% expectations of 9.2% learners were properly fulfilled based on their assessment, which thus can be termed as the percentage of the most effective. Details are shown at Fig 9.
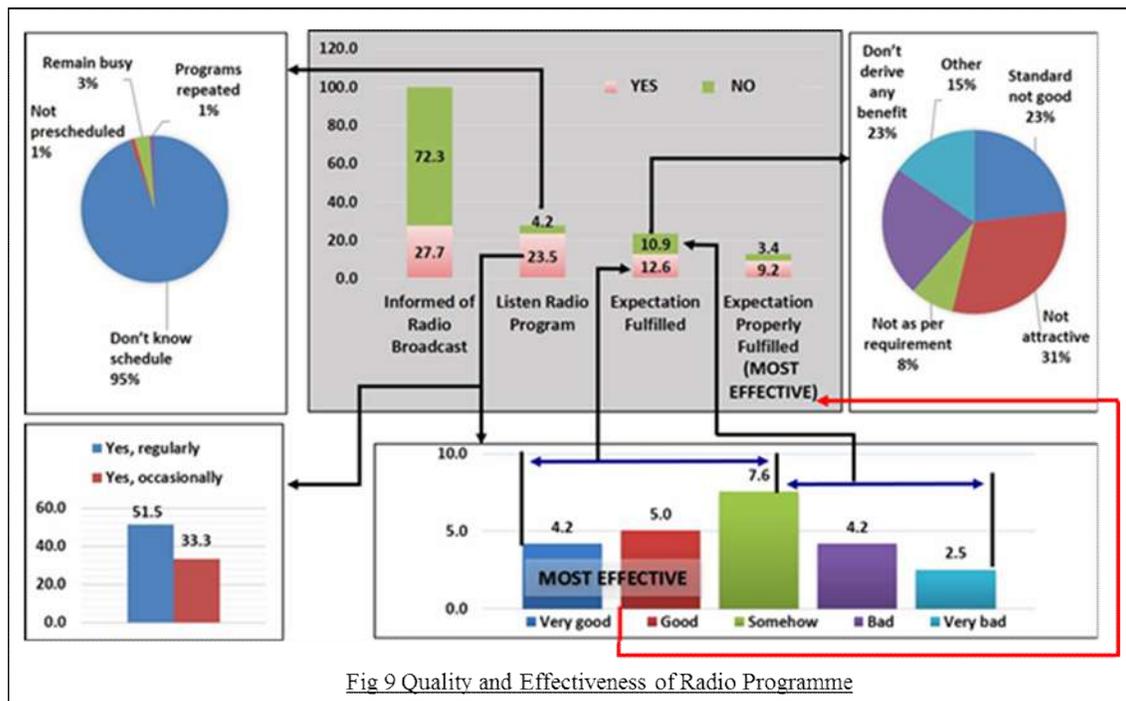

Fig 9 Quality and Effectiveness of Radio Programme

Learner Need Assessment and the Possible Areas of Improvement

Based on Learner Characteristics

The analysis of learner characteristics leads to following deductions:

- BOU should be able to reach out to the learners proactively. So, there is a need for robust system of dissemination of information.
- Provision of counselling the students is a must to keep them motivated towards learning.
- There should prevail a harmonious learning environment that encourages bringing together cross sections of the society.
- The students displayed interest in ICT, but most of them could ill afford internet connectivity. However, the majority were found in possession of mobile phones. Their interest in ICT indicates

that ICT usage can be introduced, at least initially by leaps and bounds. Some pragmatic thoughts can carry this venture a long way towards the full use of ICT in ODL in course of time.

Based on Learner Feedback

To assess the need of the learners and to identify the possible areas of improvement based on learner feedback an overall analysis of the quality and effectiveness of the Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes is necessary first. In so doing, the learner feedback on the items discussed ante are put together in one table under four aspects of quality (Table 1). To make a quantitative analysis, 5 points are allotted for each cell except those not relevant are kept blank and shaded grey. Points given against each item under the four aspects of quality are based on the learners' feedback. Points are given on the scale of 0–100 where 0-20% is graded Very Bad, 21%-40% as Bad, 41%-60% as Satisfactory, 61%-80% as Good and 81%-100% as Very Good. Cells with of 60% and below, i.e. of satisfactory level and below, are shaded yellow and cells with of 61% and above are shaded blue for easy understanding of weakness and strength.

Given the points it seen that admission procedure, quality of books/SLM, management of tutorial classes and quality of tutoring and commitment of tutors are above satisfactory level, thus special attention on these issues may not be necessary. On the other hand, information dissemination system, delivery of books/SLM, TV and radio programmes fall within or below satisfactory level, thus require special attention. Joining the cells vertically, i.e. column wise, it can be seen that all four aspects of quality (product, services, process and general philosophy) fall within satisfactory level. Hence, attention and improvement are required in all these aspects of quality.

Item	Product	Services	Process	General Philosophy	Total	Total %
Information dissemination system		3/5	3/5	3/5	9/15	60%
Admission procedure		4/5	4/5	4/5	12/15	80%
Delivery of books/SLM		1/5	1/5	1/5	3/15	20%
Quality of books/SLM	5/5				5/5	100%
Management of tutorial classes		4/5	4/5	4/5	12/15	80%
Quality of tutoring and commitment of tutors		4/5		5/5	9/10	90%
Effectiveness of TV program	2/5	2/5	2/5	2/5	8/20	40%
Effectiveness of radio program	1/5	1/5	1/5	1/5	4/20	20%
Total Points	8/15	19/35	15/35	20/35	62/115	
Total %	53.33%	54.28%	42.86%	57.14%	53.91%	

Table 1: Overall Assessment of Quality and effectiveness

Suggested Measures for Improvement

Strategic Approach

BOU being the sole provider of education through ODL in Bangladesh is honour-bound not only to maintain quality in education but also is responsible for expanding the scope for education to the unreached. The National Education Policy 2010 emphasizes on generating skilled manpower to support the need for expanding workforce both at home and abroad. Secondary education works as spring board for entering the job market and Higher Secondary education works as spring board for both higher education and job market, and so are their importance.

Understandably there are certain major weaknesses which have become rather explicit. Thus, Miller and Prince's (1976) learner development process model, which was intended to "meet the needs of all learners, to plan for change rather than react to it, and to engage the full academic community in this collaborative effort" holds strong till date, especially for BOU. Because, there is a strong necessity of addressing the needs of the learners and there is a stronger necessity of putting in concerted efforts in meeting and satisfying the diverse nature of the needs of the learners.

Strategy for improvement, therefore, should be formulated in keeping with the motto of BOU, i.e. "We assure education at your doorstep". However, it should not be confined to reaching out to the doorsteps only, rather it should make education convenient and flexible for the learners so that no distractions can come in the way of their learning.

Suggested Measures for Implementation

Following measures are suggested:

- **Robust and Proactive Delivery of Information**
  The information delivery system of BOU is not learner-friendly and is devoid of technological interventions. The present system is not sufficient to knock the majority of the population. Other than the newspaper circular for admission, there are no other scopes for both BOU and the learners to communicate with each other at ease. The information delivery system should be developed in a manner that it facilitates the followings:

  o   BOU is able to deliver its admission information to the entire population of the country.
  o   BOU can at any time able to communicate with any of its learners and pass down instructions or circulars.
  o   Any learner is able to get any information or be able to clarify any queries from BOU at any time of the day, i.e. on 24/7 basis.

- **ICT Infrastructure**

  The increasing popularization of ODL makes use of ICT obvious. BOU is far from any acceptable standards. Creating a strong and sustainable ICT infrastructure can contribute significantly towards the followings:

  o   Delivery of information
  o   Delivery of education
  o   Regulating financial transactions
  o   Examination management and result processing

- **Product Diversification**

  Books/SLM are the only useful and effective product for learning. TV and radio programmes are found to be very less effective in the learning process. Besides making definite improvements of the existing system it is strongly suggested that variations in the product could ossibly make the learnig experience more flexible.

- **Accountability**

  BOU management is highly decentralized at the execution end. Many a wrongs may go unnoticed if a proper system of accountability is not set forth. Thus, accountability at all levels should be introduced to ensure delivery of effective support to the learners.

Conclusions

BOU programmes are debated on quality disputes with on-campus education. This research aimed at assessing the quality and effectiveness of the Secondary and Higher Secondary programmes of BOU through a learner-based evaluation and suggest measures for improvement. It has been a primary research focused and adopted both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis.

A total of 119 students covering participated in the research through questionnaire survey. They represented all social strata, both sex, different ages, religions and income groups. Most of the participants came from lower-middle-income group and almost all of them were engaged with different types of work. A large number of the participants had their own mobile phones for voice call but they didn't have any access to internet. As they were familiar with using cell phone, almost all of them showed interest to get information by making calls to BOU and a good number of them (69.8%) showed interest to get information through internet. Around half of the participants got information about admission from their friends and majority of them initially contacted the study centre for getting admission. Half of the participants wanted the information regarding admission directly from BOU authority. Most of the participants were satisfied with the procedure of admission of BOU and they found it to be easy. Regarding study materials, most of the participants didn't get books in time but they graded the quality of the material as good. It is a positive sign for BOU that most of the participants opined highly about the quality and competency of the books of BOU in preparing lessons by self-reading. Almost all the participants attended the tutorial classes regularly and most of them were found very satisfied with the teaching ability of the tutors.

Analysis of the participants' characteristics revealed due considerations for developing a robust system of dissemination of information, provision for counselling of students, and creating a harmonious learning environment. Analysis of the students' response, identified circulation of admission information, use of ICT, timely delivery of books and addressing students' needs, student monitoring and counselling as the areas that warrant definite improvement.

Considering BOU's commitment to ODL in Bangladesh, the need for developing the quality of education and expanding the ambit of ODL towards the larger section of the population becomes evident. This requires a strategy. The research identifies a strong necessity of addressing the needs of the learners and a stronger necessity of putting in concerted efforts in meeting and satisfying the diverse nature of the needs of the learners. Strategy for improvement thus should be in keeping with the motto of BOU, i.e. "We assure education at your doorstep". It should make education convenient and flexible for the learners so that no distractions can come in the way of their learning. The steps, therefore, should be creation of a robust and proactive system of delivery of information, development of a strong and sustainable ICT infrastructure, diversification of products to make learning experience more flexible, and finally introducing accountability at all levels to ensure delivery of effective support to the learners.

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