Capacity Building to Mainstream ODL Management
at Bangladesh Open University

Theme: Institutional Development

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ABSTRACT

As an emerging learning system, ODL requires a specialized level of skill at all spheres of its delivery and management network. Most of the teachers, tutors and officers recruited at different academic and managerial positions at Bangladesh Open University (BOU) do not have prior experience in ODL management. Therefore, it becomes crucial to enhance the capacities of the people engaged in various managerial and academic positions for the better practices of ODL. Capacity building is required not only for the newly recruited personnel and academics, but also for the existing managers and academics because they have to cope with rapid structural changes in ODL practices within the organization and around the globe. This paper aims at identifying the importance of capacity building at BOU for ODL management. Then it presents the scenario of the capacity building initiatives at BOU and their effectiveness. Finally, the paper proposes a competency based training (CBT) model for effective enhancement of capacity of the ODL managers where a logical remix of face-to-face and ICT-based interactions has been emphasized. The scope of cross-border collaboration and partnerships for promoting the capacity of the ODL personnel has also been verified carefully in the paper.

Keywords: Capacity building, ODL management, CBT, Cross-border cooperation and partnerships, ICT

1. INTRODUCTION

Availability of human capital is a pre-condition for development. Lack of human capital creates lot of distortions in the process of development of a nation. Quality education thus becomes a crying need for the nations as it is considered as the vital means of forming human capital We can recall here the the famous quote of Professor Amartya Sen (1999), 'Development is freedom and that education is the royal road to freedom. Human learning, thus, ensures freedom and freedoms reflect development'. He also opined (2003), 'if we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure'. Asian Bank (2005) defined human capital as the skill, knowledge and good health that together allow people to work and earn a living. As such, there is a pressing need for the continuous learning and knowledge acquisition of people who are widely distributed in terms of profession, geographical location, and knowledge need. With the problem of shortage of trained manpower being faced by many industries worldwide, organizations are suffering from low productivity (Chadha and Kumail, 2002). Olakulehin (2008) reviewed several studies that showed the strong positive correlation between the human capital (skills, abilities, and competencies) and the levels of social and economic performance of individuals, communities and nations.

While the expansion of the highly skilled work-force is the crying need for socio-economic progress of Bangladesh, especially to achieve the Education for All (EFA) and to meet MDGs by 2015 and the goals of Bangladesh Vision 2021, the education sector still faces a number of challenges despite few improvements in primary education during last few decades. Few of the challenges are: inequitable access, especially for disadvantaged groups such as women and disabled people and the rural people; inadequate access to high-level training and mismatch between supply of, and demand for, skilled labour; non-comparable standards and qualifications across the regions of the country; shortage of critical skills in key areas of development vital for higher productivity and competitiveness; the cost of education and required infrastructure; insufficient educated

and skilled personnel due to the 'brain drain'; political intervention on the entire education sector; and the need for the education system to prepare students for self-employment through provision of relevant technical and entrepreneurial skills. As part of the process of finding solutions to these challenges, like many other countries Bangladesh has made an effort to harness the perceived potentials of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). ODL is increasingly seen as a viable option to provide educational access to those students who, for a wide range of reasons, systemic and personal, would not pursue conventional, full-time face-to-face education. Higher completion rates at the primary level education impact on all levels within the sector, increasing demand for access to quality affordable education. Therefore, BOU got a unique opportunity to increase the stock of human capital in the country through its formal and non-formal academic programs ranging from secondary to post-graduate levels. In terms of enrolment of the students, BOU is the largest public university in Bangladesh. However, the quality of the BOU programs is still a debated issue. One of the main reasons is the lack of ODL-competency among the teachers, tutors and managers. Therefore, to ensure the best ODL practices at BOU, capacity building of its teachers, tutors and managers is a must.

This paper identifies the importance of capacity building of BOU teachers, tutors and officers to mainstream ODL management. Then it presents the scenario of the capacity building initiatives taken at BOU so far and their effectiveness. Finally, the paper proposes a competency based training (CBT) model for the enhancement of capacity of the ODL practitioners at BOU where a logical remix of face-to-face and ICT-based interactions has been emphasized. The potentials of cross-border collaboration and partnerships for promoting the capacity of the ODL practitioners and managers have also been carefully verified in the paper.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1. **General objective:** The general objective of this study is to identify the role of existing capacity building initiatives to address the skill gaps among the teachers, tutors and managers of BOU and to formulate a comprehensive strategy for further reinforcement of ODL-competencies among the academic and non-academic staffs of BOU.

2.2. **Specific objectives:** The specific objectives of the study are -

- To identify the skill gaps among teachers, tutors and officers engaged at BOU;
- To assess the capacity building initiatives taken at BOU so far and their effectiveness;
- To propose a comprehensive capacity building model for reinforcing the ODL-competency among BOU teachers, tutors and officer; and
- To explore the potentials of cross-border collaboration and partnerships for promoting the capacity of the ODL practitioners and managers.

3. METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary data have been used in the paper. For secondary data, BOU database – especially the database of student support services division, exam division, administration division and training section - have been used. In addition, the educational database of BANBEIS has been used in the paper. For primary data, an online survey has been conducted among the Commonwealth MBA students through a structured questionnaire. Simple descriptive statistics have been used in the analysis of findings.

## 4. BRIEF OVERVIEW ON BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY

4.1. Academic programs
Bangladesh Open University is the only public university in Bangladesh which offers mainly ODL programs. The aim of the university is to transform the country's vast human resources into an educated and trained work-force by extending to them a wide range of academic programs, both formal and non-formal. BOU`s

programs target every citizen who is interested to learn, particularly working people and women and the socially disadvantaged groups who cannot enroll into the academic and training programs offered by the on-campus universities. BOU has already set up 12 Regional Resources Centers (RRCs) and 80 Local Coordinating Offices (LCOs) as well as 1350 tutorial centers in different parts of the country.

Six academic schools of BOU offers 23 formal programs (March, 2013). Almost half of the programs are undergraduate programs, few are graduate programs and others are certificate programs, though the certificate programs are at the top in terms of student enrolment.

Figure 1: Enrolment in BOU programs
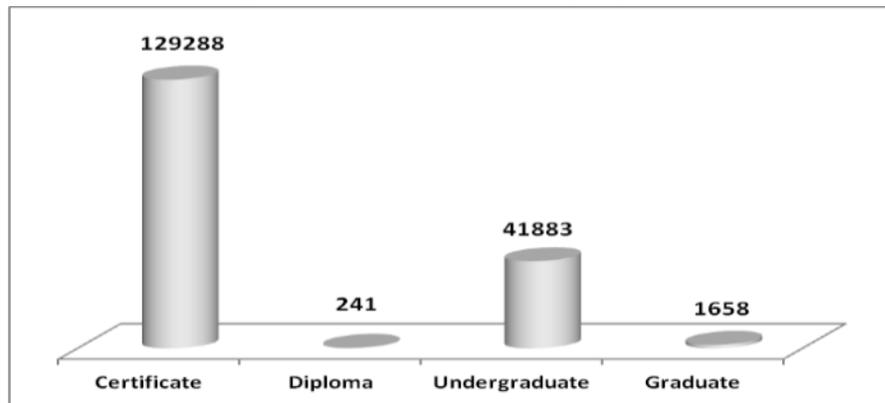
Source: Exam division, BOU (2010)

As of December, 2010, the total enrolment in the undergraduate programs was 41883, graduate programs 1658, diploma 241 and certificate programs 129288. One most important feature of BOU study programs is that most of the students in these programs are working people. They come to attend these programs to get a rise in their current job or to get a better job.

4.2. BOU Nonformal Programs

Non-formal education (NFE) is linked to the BOU schools; but its condition is not well-developed, given focus on academic programs. Electronic broadcast is the only platform to implement the NFE. As of today, 19 NFE programs have already been launched at the BOU since its inception in 1992. But these programs suffer from problems as it is understandable that conventionally trained university teachers are in the position of the policy-makers and their primary role is teaching students at the tertiary levels to obtain accredited degrees and conducting subject-related research. This is the traditional view of university higher education (HE). The view among university staff is that NFE programs are not the business of a higher education institution like the BOU although this is not said directly. BOU-CS2 (1997) states that the people of Bangladesh are not interested in NFE – there is no real demand for NFE; the concept of NFE through distance education is unclear in Bangladesh and few people understand it; most of the BOU staff have no experience of planning and designing non-formal programs; BOU staff have not been trained to plan and develop NFE programs; there is no clarity on the NFE program like the formal program; NFE learners are invisible – they are not registered –their voices are seldom heard; the NFE program is highly dependent on access to adequate broadcasting time –time the university does not have access to. NFE lacks status. Rumble (1994) comments that 'the NFE is divorced from the university's main academic structure. I am concerned that it will lack a voice in the University's decision making structures'. Therefore, still the same thing is grounded at BOU. During the project period, BOU (1992-2000) tried to implement these NFE programs through partnering with NGOs; but failed because BOU and the NGO's were both relatively new to the field. Finally, BOU made joint venture with the NGO coalition, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) for Junior School Certificate (JSC) program (Grade: 6-8) for the NFE graduates because of their considerable depth of experience in the area of ODL. Now there are number of NGOs and the Bureau of NFE available in the country. The BOU needs to collaborate more effectively with the agencies who have experience of developing NFE programs and the access to the delivery networks to deliver them. The University

needs to combine its growing ability to produce good quality distance learning materials with the undoubted strengths of the NGO delivery structures. BOU requires adequate capacity building training on these issues.

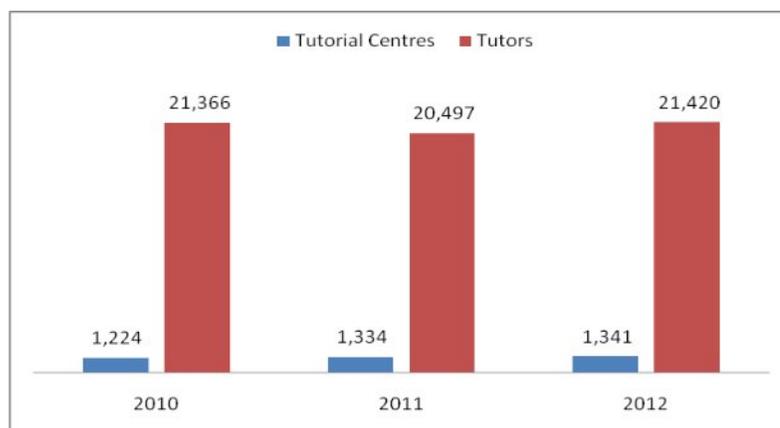### 4.3 BOU academic and non-academic staffs

Two categories of staffs are working in the university. The permanent staffs include teachers, officers and employees. In addition, BOU has a large number of contracted people including writers, editors, reviewers, illustrators, tutors, coordinators, and office/lab assistants (Figure-2).

Figure-2: BOU Academic and Non-academic Staffs
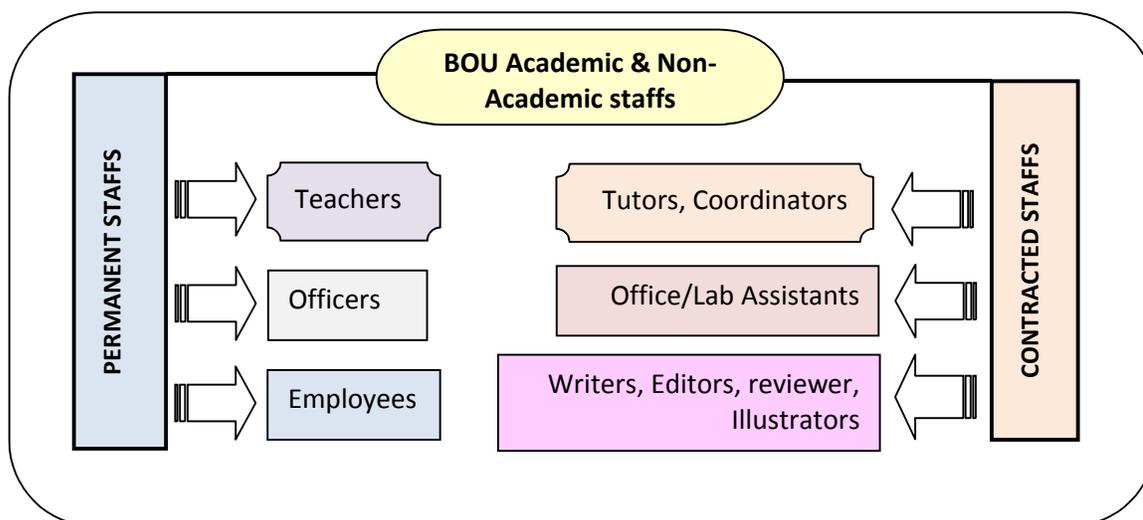
The tutors, coordinators and office/lab assistants, course writers, editor, reviewers, and illustrators are contracted by BOU. Currently, huge numbers of tutors are working at different tutorial centers of BOU on contract basis. Figure-3 shows the trends in tutor appointment by BOU in recent years.

Figure 3: Number of Tutorial Centers and Tutors

Source: Student Support Services Division, 2013

5. SKILL-GAP ANALYSIS AND ESSENTIALITY OF CAPACITY BUILDING

5.1. Analysis of skill gaps among BOU staffs on recruitment

Although a huge number of academic and non-academic staffs are engaged in ODL management in Bangladesh, most of them do not have any prior experience in working with ODL. They are usually from conventional educational system. Naturally, a mismatch occurs as ODL requires a specialized type of skills and engagement. Table-1 shows the skill gaps among the academic and non-academic staffs identified by comparing their experiences/background/orientation on recruitment with the ODL requirements.

Table 1: Analysis of skill gaps among the BOU staffs on recruitment

Recruited staffs	Background/ experience	ODL requirements	Skill gaps
Teachers	Graduates from on-campus institutions with an excellent academic performance	• Excellent academic performance • Media (A-V) expertise • Skill in computing • Student counseling – online and face-to-face • Online content development skill • Dealing with adult learners • Instructional design in ODL • Knowledge in adult learning theories	• No prior media expertise • No prior skill for online course development • No prior experience in module writing • No experience in dealing adult learners • No prior knowledge on adult learning theories • No prior knowledge in instructional design
Officers	Graduates from on-campus institutions	• Skill in computing • Student counseling – online and face-to-face • Dealing with adult learners • Online student management	• No or insufficient skill in computing • No experience in dealing with adult learners • No experience in online student management system
Tutors	• Graduates from on-campus institutions • On-campus teaching	• Skill in computing • Student counseling – online and face-to-face • Dealing with adult learners • Tutoring instead of teaching • Encouraging group works • Encouraging self help learning • Assessment – online and face-to-face • Communication – online and phone • Patient and real-time response to the learner's queries	• No or insufficient Skill in computing • No skill in online communication with learners • No experience in dealing with adult learners • More teacher, rather than tutor/facilitator • Lack of real-time response and patient listening to the learner's queries
Coordinators	• Graduates from on-campus institutions • On-campus teaching • Managing on-campus students • Holding administrative position	• Skill in computing • Student counseling – online and face-to-face • Dealing with adult learners • Encouraging group works • Encouraging self help learning • Communication – online and phone • Patient and real-time response to the learner's queries	• No or insufficient Skill in computing • No skill in online communication with learners • No experience in dealing with adult learners • Lack of real-time response and patient listening to the learner's queries
Writers, editors, reviewers	• Expertise in textbook writing, editing and reviewing	• Skill in computing • Skill in instructional design in ODL • Knowledge in adult learning theories	• No or insufficient skill in computing • No prior skill in instructional design • No prior knowledge in

			adult learning theories • Skill in task sharing through base-camp or any other platform • No prior experience in using OER
		• Skill in task sharing through base-camp or any other platform • Experience in using OER	
Illustrators	• Expertise in illustrations	• Skill in computing • Skill in task sharing through base-camp or any other platform • Experience in using OER	• No prior skill in task sharing through base-camp or any other platform • No prior experience in using OER

Evidently, almost all the staffs of BOU – permanent or contracted - do not have ODL-competency on recruitment. A huge skill gaps are noticed among them. So, there remains an unavoidable scope for capacity building of the staffs of BOU just after their recruitment/appointment to ensure the best ODL practices.

5.2. Learners' expectations and supports from BOU – A case of Commonwealth MBA program

From a study conducted recently on the learners of Commonwealth MBA program, it has been observed that most of their expectations from the program are not met due to the lack of real-time communication, delayed information transmission, insufficient learner supports from the tutorial centers and other service points, delayed or no feedback from the concerned schools and offices, etc. Tables 2 & 3 summarize some of their views regarding the learner support services and study material deliveries.

5.2.1.   Learners' readiness and BOU supports

As evident from Table 2, most of the learners have access to modern technologies; however, the BOU supports are mostly manual. The main barrier to accelerate technology-based supports is assumed to be the lack of skill in using modern technologies among BOU staffs. Mostly, the people in the managerial positions have lacking in lack of technology know-how and hence they do hesitate to promote technology use in the academic programs.

Table 2: Learners' access to modern technologies and BOU supports

Technologies	% of learners got personal access/ endowments	Learners' expectations from BOU	Learners' views on BOU supports
Personal computer	70%	• Online course content	• No computer labs for learners at tutorial centers
Internet	70%	• Online course content • Online feedback • Online lectures • Online assessment • Online assignment submission • Audio conference • Video conference • Online learners' forum • Learners' blogs	• No online course offered • Insufficient online feedback • No online lectures • Not online assessment yet • Manual assignment submission • No audio conference • No video conference • No online learners' forum • No learners' blogs
Smart phone	50%	• m-learning content • SMS service	• No m-learning content offered • No SMS service yet for the learners

Survey: September, 2013

5.2.2.   Learners' perceptions about BOU support services

Table 3 reveals the perceptions of the learners regarding the services from BOU at different levels. It is evident that BOU services can not meet the expectations of the learners, which they viewed as one of main causes of dropouts from the program.

Table 3: Learners' perceptions regarding BOU support services

Support services of BOU	Learners' expectations	% of learners consider the service as	
		Best	Not satisfactory
RRC service at front desk	• Prompt response • One-stop service	7.81%	92.19%
RRC program officer	• Prompt solution to administrative problems • Real-time and asynchronous communication	15.63%	84.37%
RRC director	• Prompt administrative support • Sincere and patient cooperation	6.25%	93.75%
Dean's office	• Real-time and asynchronous communication • Easy transmission of information • Monitoring the learner support systems • Prompt action for solving academic and administrative problems	4.69%	95.31%
Local coordinator's office	• Prompt solution to the problems • Real-time and asynchronous response by phone or email • Information and material supply on demand	9.38%	90.62%
Joint coordinator (Central)	• Prompt solution to the problems • Real-time and asynchronous response by phone or email • Information and material supply on demand	56.25%	43.75%

Survey: September, 2013

Sections 5.1 and 5.2 clearly reveal the skill gaps among BOU staffs and justify the needs for capacity building initiatives for the betterment of ODL practices. The following section reveals the capacity building initiatives undertaken so far by BOU authority and their effectiveness in enhancing the ODL practices in Bangladesh.

6. CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVES

Since its establishment, BOU had undertaken several initiatives for its staff development. In the beginning, the staff development initiatives were mostly confined in familiarization visits to Canada, the UK, Australia, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Later, a number of training workshops were arranged locally with the leading international experts on different areas ranging from basic computing to instructional design. Table 4 summarizes the categories of the capacity building initiatives undertaken by BOU so far.

6.1. Categories of the capacity building initiatives

Table 4 shows that the capacity building initiatives were a bit scattered and mostly confined in instructional design and familiarization visits. Few training programs were arranged for the tutors on effective tutoring. Some were on computing skills where the participants were the senior officers/managers of BOU.

Table 4: Categories of capacity building initiatives (1997-2013)

Categories	Local/ International	Main Focus	Participants (number)	Mode
Familiarization visits	International	• Content development • Learner support system • Distribution of study materials	Teachers & Officers (130)	Face-to-face

Training Workshops	Local & International	• E-content development	Teachers (80)	Face-to-face
		• Instructional design	Teachers (190)	Face-to-face
		• Multimedia content development	Teachers & Officers (80)	Face-to-face
		• Mixed Media Courseware for ODL	Teachers & Officers(40)	Face-to-face
		• VIC Orientation	Teachers (40)	Face-to-face
		• Effective tutoring	Tutors	Face-to-face
		• Computing skill	Officers	Face-to-face

Source: Training division, BOU, 2013

6.2. Spending on capacity building

BOU follows July-June budget year. The university allots a separate budget for the manpower development for each budget year. The allotted budget in last few years has been reviewed and it is found that fund for manpower development has not been fully spent over the years. A recent initiative taken by the current administration is to ensure that the fund for manpower development is spent fully to harness the skill enhancement of its academic and non-academic staffs. In addition, a handsome allocation for manpower development has been introduced in the current budget (FY2013-14). Moreover, a provision has been created in the budget that the university authority will be able to cross subsidize the expenses for manpower development if it exceeds the current allocation.

## 6.3. Effectiveness of the capacity building initiatives

Although BOU had several capacity building initiatives, the impact of the training on ODL practices did not seem to be significant. Survey results mentioned in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 justify that. Many reasons may be attributed to this failure. Few important reasons are as below:

6.3.1.   *Unplanned training:* The training initiatives were not goal oriented. Most of the training programs were unstructured and scattered. Therefore, the training outcomes were not further implemented for strengthening ODL practices.

6.3.2.   **No follow-up monitoring and evaluation:** There were no provisions to follow-up the implementation of training take-aways. Once the training is over, the trainees do not feel any pressure to implement the learning from the training. There is no assignment or project imposed on the trainees following the training.

6.3.3.   *Cross-division mobility:* It has been noticed that the trainees move frequently to another division or section where the job descriptions and concomitant responsibility are changed. For example, one computer operator received training in desk-top processing and then he/she has been transferred to a division or section where he/she only to type the letters. Therefore, the training in that case doesn't have any further implication.

6.3.4.   *Turnover rate of the faculties:* Most of the intensive training programs were received by the faculties at the earlier stage of the university. However, most of them left the university afterwards. Therefore, the mobility of the faculties minimizes the impact of the training on ODL practices.

6.3.5.   *Lack of logistic supports:* It is always unexpected that the trainees are not getting logistic supports immediately after the training. Lack of logistic support slows down the implementation of newly attained skills or know-how.

6.3.6.   *Rigid conventional mentality:* Training cannot create any impact if the trainees are not willing to be changed. Rigid conventional mentality sometimes makes the training useless.

6.3.7.   *Wrong identification of training needs:* Identification of wrong people for the training always a burdensome matter. Training must be need based. Otherwise, it will be just a resource wasting venture.

7.   MODEL FOR CAPACITY BUILDING AT BOU: PROPOSED

A comprehensive model for capacity building is essential for sustainable impacts of the training initiatives. The following model may be used at BOU for capacity building of its staffs. The model is based on the **Competency Based Training (CBT) Model for Capacity Building in ODL** designed by M A Kamal and R I Bhuyan (2013). The underlying assumption in the model is that the training must make the staffs competent as per the core ODL standards and must have a sustainable impact on the ODL practices. The model consists of 7 interlinked components. Figure-4 presents the sketch of the model:

Figure-4: CBT Model for capacity building
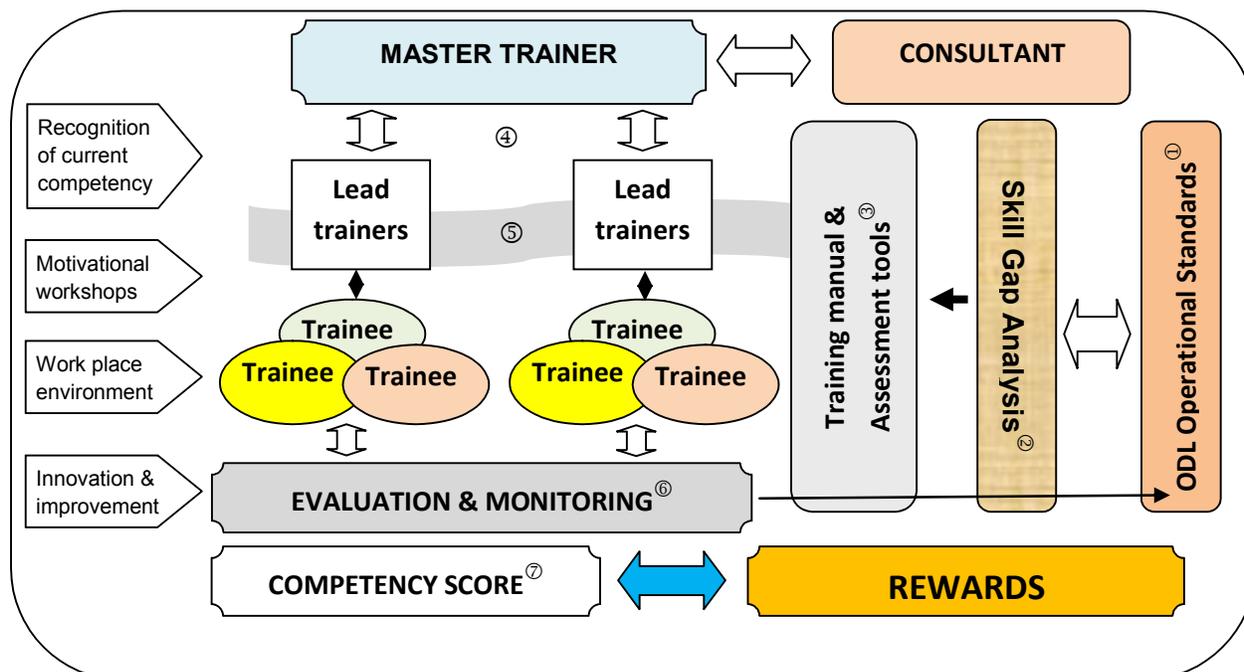
The components of the CBT model for capacity building in ODL shown in Figure 4 are summarized briefly in Table 5.

Table 5: components of CBT model for capacity building

Steps	Components	Description	Action
Step-1	Identification of ODL operational standards	Review of the best ODL practices and learners' expectations will help the consultant or the master trainer develop a set of standards will be developed. In this case, multi-stakeholder approach will be applied.	Consultant and/or Master trainer
Step-2	Identification of the skill gaps	Putting the trainees' current profile or skill against the ODL operational standards, skill gaps/training needs will be identified.	Consultant and/or Master trainer
Step-3	Development of training module and assessment tools	After identification of the skill gaps, the training manual and assessment tools will be developed. In this case, existing manuals or OER may be used directly or may be used after some revisions.	Consultant and/or Master trainer
Step-4	Orientation workshop with lead trainers	Consultant and/or master trainer will arrange an orientation workshop with the lead trainers to let them understand the training objectives and delivery mechanism.	Consultant, Master trainer & lead trainers **Mode:** Face-to-face

Step-5	Delivery and assessment	Once the training delivery is completed, the lead trainers will use the assessment tools to assess the actual training outcomes. Recognition of current competencies (RCC) will be considered carefully during delivery.	Lead trainers or independent assessors **Mode:** Face-to-face and/or online
Step-6	Follow-up evaluation and monitoring	• Periodic evaluation and monitoring will be conducted on continual basis following the training delivery. • Some follow-up motivational workshops may be organized and steps are to be taken to create a congenial workplace environment for the trainees. It will maximize the impacts of the training.	Lead trainers or internal/external teams assigned by the organization. **Mode:** Face-to-face and/or online
Step-7	Competency score and reward [Case sensitive]	During follow-up periodic evaluation and monitoring, a competency assessment will be done and a score will be given on the basis of the best efforts towards the operational standards. For any further reward (upgradation/promotion/ position/increment/further assignment) or recognition, the competency score may be used.	internal/external teams assigned by the organization. **Mode:** Face-to-face and/or online

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although distance education is not a panacea, it does offer a range of opportunities that can be used to enhance the education sector in a resource-poor developing country like Bangladesh if quality can be ensured. A well planned and coordinated capacity-building strategy may result in more effective and efficient use of distance education methods, could significantly help to maintain and improve the human resources in the country. A well planned capacity strategy for ODL will primarily benefit staffs and the learners and will derive benefits to other stakeholders too. They are: the people responsible for designing and implementing ODL, people who set policy frameworks within which ODL programs operate, institutional decision-makers, education practitioners, program planners and managers, materials developers, content experts, lecturers and tutors, administrators, and development partners engaged in human and economic development in the country.

The paper explained carefully that existing capacity building initiatives at BOU are not sufficient compared to the demand. A well planned capacity strategy is essential for the enhancement of ODL quality. The proposed *CBT Model for capacity building in ODL* can have an effective and sustainable impact on the ODL practices in Bangladesh.

Capacity building is a continuous process. Continuous improvement of the skills of the ODL practitioners is highly required to cope with rapidly growing ODL technologies. For having the maximum benefits from the capacity building initiatives, the following factors must be ensured:

8.1. **Recognition of current competencies (RCC):** During the training or other capacity building initiatives, the current competencies of the trainees must be assessed and recognized. It will make the capacity building initiatives enjoyable to the trainees.

8.2. **Better workplace environment:** For having better impact of the capacity building initiatives, the work place environment should be congenial. If the trainees get support at the workplace to practice the training outcomes, they will get more competencies and will be able to contribute more to the organization. Moreover, better workplace environment will reduce the turnover rate among the core faculties. Migration of the core/experienced faculties from BOU to other organizations is detrimental for the organization as it slows down the competency spill-over in the organization.

8.3. **Using OER for capacity building materials:** Using Open Educational Resources (OER) may reduce the burden and cost of capacity building initiatives. Sometimes it may take time to develop the capacity building materials by the organization itself. In that case, the organization can adapt existing OER after required customization. It will reduce cost and the quality can be ensured as well.

8.4. **Cross border collaboration:** Cross boarder collaboration within the same region (for example, SARRC) may help BOU to ensure better quality training to its staffs. It will reduce cost as well as enhance quality. BOU may form a consortium with OUSL, IGNOU and AIOU for sharing the capacity building materials and other resources.

8.5. **Mandatory foundation training:** Just after the recruitment, every staff must have foundation training on ODL management. BOU should establish a full pledged training institute where capacity building training will be continued on regular basis. The training institute may be responsible for follow-up evaluation and monitoring of the compliance status of the staffs with the ODL operational standards.

8.6. Competency based rewards: BOU should initiate a competency based reward system (CBRS) for its staffs. All kinds of upgradation, promotion, increments, and positions should be determined based on the current competency score (CCS). In this system, a staff must sit for a competency test (face-to-face or online) and should have a current competency score well above the threshold level.

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