

Contribution of one mode of delivery and training towards capacity building in ODL and alleviation of poverty through expanded education. Context: An Open univ in South Asia (Bangladesh)

Manzurul Islam, Adviser, Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur, Bangladesh

Abstract

Achieving development goals, particularly through massively expanded education, can be much accelerated through open, distance and technologically mediated learning. Some conventional modes of delivery cannot be ruled out altogether. Print media continues to be one such mode, alongside the use of television, video, radio and the like. Most tutors and learners in remote areas do not have easy access to the ICT-aided courses. Inadequate provision for electricity and infrastructural facilities and absence of trained tutors make it all the more necessary to prepare and distribute speedily produced quality publications – study materials for learners and guidebooks for tutors. Over half a million learners in Bangladesh, being a part of the whole for the country, enrolled for secondary and higher secondary level education, some for higher studies, is catered through ODL. To contribute further towards alleviation of poverty via mass education, Bangladesh has gone one step further, by launching also lower secondary level courses for over a million intakes annually. In such gigantic tasks, collaborative efforts from neighboring and other countries are suggested. The paper explores areas and means of participatory works, policies and practices for capacity building also through training and research, leading to a more stable and prosperous world.

INTRODUCTION

The society at large has to reap benefits of education through its massive expansion. One of the most effective means of achieving development goals, including alleviation of poverty, would be possible by removing illiteracy and making everyone educated. It has never been an easy task. Developing countries had to come a long way in attaining literacy to the extent of half their population, not to speak of educating them properly even up to the lower secondary school level. In recent years, since the late sixties and early seventies of the past century, it has been through innovative modes of teaching and learning, such as through technology-mediated open learning and distance education, that significant progress has been achieved. However, this must grow speedier to cater to the ever-growing population in the less literate world.

ICT AND MODES OF DELIVERY IN LESS DEVELOPED WORLD

The very effective latest ICT-aided modes of learning in distance education could not be adopted for the maximum beneficiaries in most part of the less advanced countries like Bangladesh. While exploring expeditious and feasible efforts by all means, it has been advocated simultaneously that conventional modes of delivery like the print media must be in wide practice in open learning. Instructional materials in print thus being fundamental to open and distance education, countries directly concerned have to take special care for the production of these in high quality. Whether such production is carried out in-house or externally, the job would entail specially briefed and trained writers, capable editors and skilled publishing professionals in greater numbers. Suitable and quality study materials for learners and supplementary guidebooks for tutors have to be published as part of a teamwork by writers, editors and designers. These instructional materials, in turn, should be effectively handled for

proper distribution, making those timely and conveniently available to the learners even in the somewhat inaccessible remote areas.

The Print Media

Audio, video cassettes, CD-ROMs could be comparatively expensive and difficult to use in the large absence of cassette players, television screens or computers, in addition to inadequate connectivity, insufficient and irregular supply of electricity in the far-flung corners. Hence, instructional materials through print media have been reaching the target users in large quantity. How wide such production, distribution and use could be, can be gauged from Table 1, as an example. In the 22 formal programmes in continuation now in the six of the seven Schools at Bangladesh Open University (BOU), size of course materials would reveal that a major part of the delivery mode in the country is the print media and it is huge by local standards.

Table 1. Volume of printed study materials (2001 - 2005)

Year	No. of copies printed	Titles	Schools / Faculties
2005	1,961,500	137	06
2004	1,550,400	205	06
2003	966,800	126	06
2002	665,350	75	05
2001	785,600	88	05

Source: Author's survey with BOU Publishing, Printing and Distribution Division (2006).

Fig.1 Volume of printed study materials at BOU.

On the other hand, not all 12 Regional Resource Centres of BOU across the country are fully equipped with required functional computers and television sets. Only an insignificant part of the over 1050 tutorial or learning centres that are spread all over the country have the facility for such tools which could complement effective distance mode education. All these are mainly for lack of sufficient funding. As a result, tutorial centre-based face-to-face teaching (which is provided twice a month now on alternate Fridays for every programme in any six-month semester), also turns out to be similar to those offered in the conventional method. This cannot help achieve quality for distant learners unless the tutors themselves innovate and practise special care and measures.

MASS EDUCATION AND ALLEVIATION OF POVERTY

As accomplishment of mass education contributes to alleviation of poverty, Bangladesh has taken up a daunting and challenging task, through various governmental and non-governmental organizations and programmes. With those has joined the country's only Open University (BOU), to educate in a short time, maximum number of the deprived people – who could not continue education in the traditional system. In addition, BOU, like any other university, offers courses for higher education in many disciplines, through ODL, by all Schools or Faculties of this 14-year old institution. One School – the Open School of BOU – imparts distance education exclusively at the secondary and higher secondary levels, upto 12th grade or pre-tertiary / pre-university level. And this is greatly being done through wide use of study materials in print which are also 'taught' and made easy by part-time, but dedicated ODL tutors. These tutors act as intermediaries between knowledge in the study guides and the learners.

Expansion of Education at Different Levels

With popularity growing faster, higher secondary level (HSC) and secondary level (SSC) certificate courses are being further supplemented by a lower secondary level course – junior secondary certificate (JSC). This last one is now being experimented for large scale introduction from 2007. Once implemented, these three levels together would educate over one million learners every year, rising to 1.5 million in two to three years. The current number of learners enrolled in the two levels of HSC and SSC is around

four hundred thousand (Table 2). For all levels at BOU, the total number is nearly six hundred thousand (2005) thus making BOU also a mega university.

Table 2. Enrolment at different levels of open learning under BOU (2005)

Level	Enrolment
Secondary	267,493
Higher secondary	130,112
Certificate	63,988
Undergraduate	80,452
Graduate / Masters	25,600
Total	567,645

Source: BOU Student Support Services data (2005).

Fig.2 Enrolment.

What is needed most now is maintaining quality along with fast expansion. In the case of the print media, for instance, selected and trained specialists must write the study materials which may be quite different from the traditional ones in approach and style, if not much in content compared to that for similar levels in the conventional system.

ON STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Quality in open learning will also depend on how field-level Tutors are inducted to be more effective, how they become dedicated ODL careerists or ODL-oriented Teachers. ODL-respecting Teachers of outstanding calibre are to be hired from those who are not the ones otherwise extremely busy --- be it in the conventional mode of teaching or in other educational activities--, nor even those who take up this Tutoring as a casual, non-serious, mere extra-income generating occupation.

Institutions must increasingly embrace ODL methodologies; they have to commit themselves to ongoing staff development programmes that include not only practitioners, but senior managers, decision makers and politicians.

Furthermore, they must deploy a range of delivery methods and technologies, using similar learning strategies to those they advocate for their own learners.

COLLABORATION

To maintain quality, expand education to the mass level helping eradication of poverty, and to create sufficient strength of trained tutors and skilled staff – all to build capacity for serving ODL, efforts by a single developing country would be a far cry and extremely slow. Hence, collaboration in different forms would be required from outside the country, regionally and internationally.

A REGIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY

For the latter, specific areas of cooperation could be extended, among others, to the setting up of one more OU in Bangladesh. This should also serve the region, managed preferably by the private sector.

The proposed university could be for South and South East Asia (as 'Regional Open University for South and South East Asia' or 'Commonwealth Regional Open University for South and South East Asia' with the help of SAARC and / or COL).

If in Bangladesh, this could be planned either by the public sector or by the private sector. Similar universities could be established in other regions of the world (already there have been some for the Caribbeans, the South Pacific and South Africa) which would act as model institutions of higher learning through ODL. These would offer quality and competitive education, inviting learners and tutors from different countries of the region ---thus also encouraging multiculturalism and understanding for peace and stability through educational interaction.

Government funding being limited and slow, such projects are to be executed desirably through the private sector with support from industrialists, philanthropists and NGOs.

It is interesting to note that in Bangladesh, for example, as many as 54 new traditional private universities have been established in less than 15 years, since the first one was founded in 1992, that is, about four universities per year, whereas only 24 universities have been existing in the public sector in over 85 years (since establishment of the first public university in Dhaka in 1921, that is, one in every four years). This simple contrast would encourage setting up seats of higher learning by the non-governmental sector. But since education is a national, regional and global issue for development, and since open learning and distance education is yet a new concept that would help contribute to achieve millennium development goals, this would require external support specially in the areas of academic, technical and professional expertise for less advanced countries.

Private Partnerships for Running an Open University

Besides, an additional private sector university for ODL would minimize the load, and improve quality, create some competition, and break monopoly of a single national open university.

In some areas, the public open university would be performing better, in others, the private university would strive for better standards and services for their own survival. Services to the learners by the public universities may often prove relaxing, lethargic, optional and even non-caring. What would be needed by a private sector regional open university, as one of its objectives, would be to create an academic and working environment-- facilities-wise and talent-wise --- where best of the academic faculty and professional staff would be drawn on merit from as many countries of the region as possible and from as many cultural backgrounds as available.

Regarding the medium of instruction, some courses and programmes may be run exclusively in the major national languages of the area. A regional private university must have the major section in English medium – encouraging all those who wish to make a career abroad or in multinational companies and in the multilingual region. Also for better understanding, fellowship and regional cooperation, a regional open university offering some courses of common interest as well as some exclusive courses would benefit all. This would also minimize expenses and resources by avoiding establishment of another public open university at the national level in any developing country.

Why Regional Universities

Such a regional university with international quality will stimulate timely and due recognition or accreditation of the diplomas and degrees through ODL. It is hoped that graduates of such regional institutions – in which greater opportunities would exist for interaction and knowledge-sharing --- will be in a better situation in the enhancement and expansion of their capability effectively and promptly. Universities of this kind will also be better placed:

- i) in finding access to a range of internationally recognized learning materials;
- ii) in the adoption of educational methodology which has proved successful anywhere in the world, and
- iii) in avoiding high start-up production costs of universally useable instructional materials at the time of initiating operation of such a project
- iv) in innovating more ways and means to increase access or openness or make room for flexibility of distance learning programmes.

Areas of Collaboration

Advanced countries could come forward with an active and generous collaborative gesture in the form of advice, guidance, technical participation specially in the application of ICTs and other specialties including :

- i) making maximum possible use of on-line learning, wherever this is introduced
- ii) increasing the use of virtual presence through video and voice communication --- all these to bring new challenges
- iii) in improving the standard of course design and study materials, with both content expertise and processing professionals

iv) offering and coordinating advisory services by deputing trainers and adjunct faculty drawn from several countries in the region as well as from other countries who have established ODL strongly in their own countries.

Actual areas of cooperation may vary from programme to programme, course to course, place to place, year to year.

Countries nearby (for instance, Japan) where technologies like telecommunication systems, plus computer networks have been in wide use, in addition to usual communication through correspondence and air or television, can be approached for collaboration.

More collaboration

Specially in the area of Teacher education or Tutor training --- in the present BOU system, senior teacher trainers or tutorial / learning centre Coordinators (who are normally, full-time Principals or Headmasters), otherwise rendering part-time / weekly coordinating services among their tutor colleagues, chosen from their own institution for a Centre, should be awarded brief trainings as an incentive as well as for capacity-building. Some of them might turn to ODL for their career or inspire their junior colleagues to take up tutoring as a part-time career.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Specially when in face-to-face teaching once every alternate week, they become familiar with the BOU system, they can act as guides to their colleagues.

i) In the fulfillment of expanded mass education, learners could be involved and invited to participate in make-shift tutorial centres, for example, in market place where the villagers gather weekly or biweekly or in and around mosques where a large number of villagers congregate weekly (in addition to other times of a day).

ii) Involvement of the local community this way and by other practices would help achieve minimum education for all and through open universities, higher education for many.

iii) For certain topics, even for face-to-face tutorials, a proper classroom is not required; open-air lectures by way of easily comprehensible explanations or presentations could add to the understanding of the topics, whenever needed, supplemented by audio-visuals through large screens in public places (as are used during world cup football !). Such efforts will ultimately alleviate poverty. A large number of villagers would attend this kind of additional gatherings at convenient times; they would motivate others to take up open learning; they would encourage many others to observe, feel and widen their scope for further enhancement of knowledge and income.

CONCLUSION

Gradually, the ODL qualified people will develop professional skill, earn more confidence, receive more paying jobs and thus contribute to the income generation and overall development.

By expansion of education in the above way or by educating the masses comprising mainly the less privileged, like women, adults and those living in remote areas, poverty can be minimized, if not eliminated altogether.

REFERENCES

Islam, M. (2005). "Open learning: Its acceptability through innovative evaluation and research in the less developed world". Paper presented at the 11th Cambridge International Conference on ODL, 20-23 September. Cambridge, UK.

Islam, M. (2004). "Spreading quality education for the deprived in our millennium: Latest developments and a proposal for South Asia." Paper presented at the 3rd Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, July. Dunedin, New Zealand.

Islam, M. (1988). "Higher education in Bangladesh: Open University as an innovative supplement to resolving some problems". (in Bengali) In: *Major Issues in Bangladesh and Their Solution*. Dhaka University Alumni Association, Dhaka.

Lentell, H. & Tyrer, R.(2004). " ODL and developments". *Proceedings of the 3rd Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning*. Dunedin, New Zealand.

Lockwood, F. & Latchem, C. (2004). "Enhancing the provision of ODL within the Commonwealth: insights into staff development obtained from the COL training impact study". *Proceedings of the 3rd Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning*. Dunedin, New Zealand.

Peraton, H. (2003). *Teacher Education and Training In: Models For Open And Distance Learning*. IRFOL / COL, Cambridge, UK.

Thorpe, M. (2003). "Collaborative on-line learning". In: *Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education : Change and Continuity in an International Context*. Alan Tait & Roger Mills (eds).RoutledgeFalmer, London.

Figures

Figure 1: Volume of printed study materials at BOU.

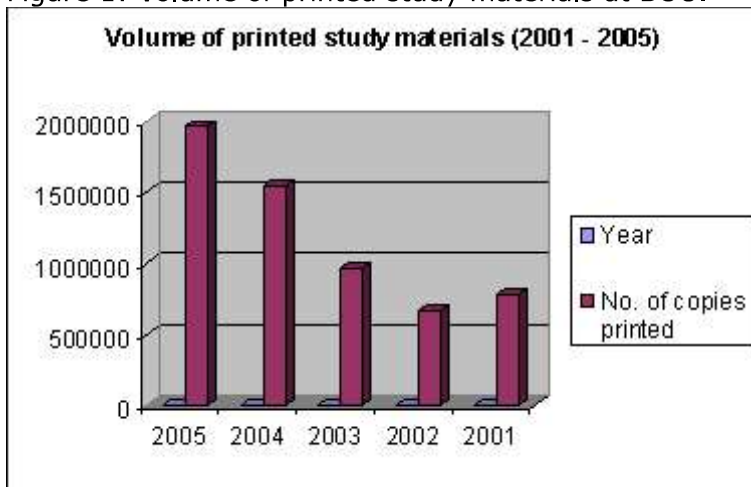
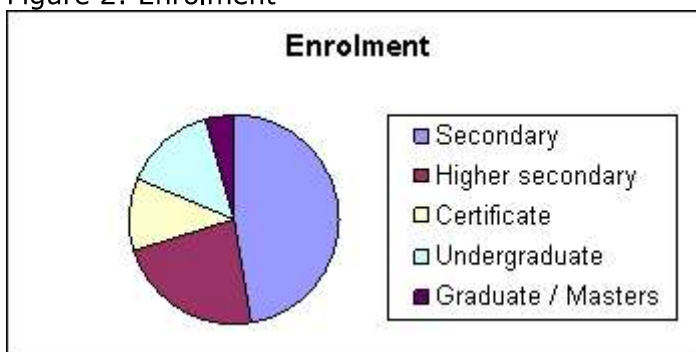


Figure 2: Enrolment



[Back to Papers](#)