

# **Barriers to Development in Open Learning and Distance Education: Bangladesh**

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## **Abstract**

Education is inevitable for Human resource development and then national development. However, in most of the developing countries, due to the limitation of resources it is almost impossible to educate all of their citizens through on-campus teaching. Huge amount of money is warranted to establish the infrastructure for on-campus teaching which is out of the reach of the developing countries. In this circumstances, to educate their huge population the developing countries are to depend on open learning and distance education system. However, a question still stands: can the educators disseminate knowledge to the learners smoothly through this new system of education? Some recent research shows that the graduates of the open and distance learning institutions in the developing countries are treated as second-grade graduates.

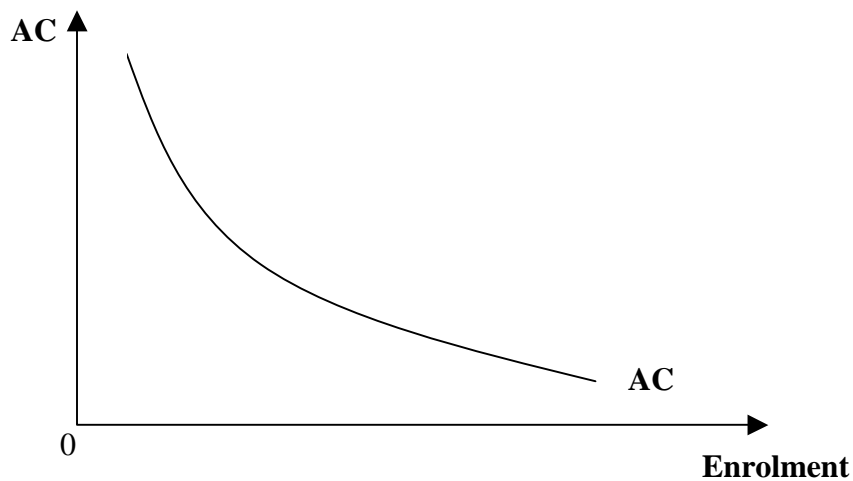
This paper aims to identify the barriers to the development of distance and Open learning system in Bangladesh and suggest possible alternatives may be followed to overcome the barriers.

**Keywords:** Barriers, Distance education, Developing countries, Motivation, Alternative solutions.

## **1. Introduction**

Bangladesh is a highly populated (128 million, 1999) small country (1,47,570 sq km) in South East Asia. Since its independence Bangladesh is suffering from high poverty (42% people are below national poverty line, 1995/96), high illiteracy rate (male 49%, female 71% among people with age 15 and above, 1998), insufficient on-campus educational facilities for the people in general, etc. Due to economic constraints, it is not possible to provide the people with on-campus education, though improving and expanding education are essential ingredients of national development. In Bangladesh, all traditional educational institutions together can enrol only a portion of the long quay of aspirant learners. Reasons are: (1) for accommodating more students, more infrastructure have to be developed, which is costly, (2) there is no external

sources of revenue, (3) limited number of trained teachers, (4) diversified preference of the students, (5) inflexibility in terms of delivery time and space, etc. Distance and open learning (ODL) plays a very crucial role in this case. In addition to allowing more students from different background, environments and geographical settings without requiring the uses of scarce on-site space, distance and open learning system also offers the educational institutions more revenue. That means, DOL system is a cost-effective and flexible way of educating mass people. In this case, the average cost (AC)/cost per student goes down as the number of enrolment goes up.



On the other hand, the students who cannot go to school due to insolvent economic condition of the parents can earn money and take courses through distance mode at their convenience. Distance and open learning systems have proven themselves a way for people to gain education, which would otherwise not possible (Dekkers, 2000). However, great concern yet remains about quality of the ODL programmes. When comparing with conventional forms of education, the provision of distance education requires considerably greater planning, larger up-front infrastructure costs and more complex student and administrative support systems (Lockwood, 1995; Rumble, 1986). Well-designed support systems facilitate the delivery of distance education

courses of comparable quality and attrition rates to those for on-campus courses (NEA, 1999).

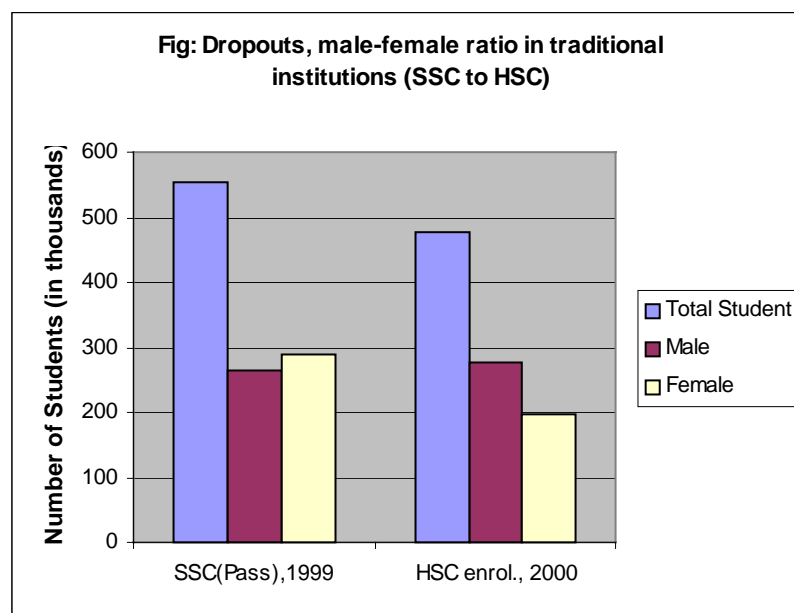
This paper briefly explains the existing barriers to the development of ODL system in Bangladesh, especially in Bangladesh Open University. The following aspects are covered in the paper:

- Media use
- Production and delivery
- ICT use
- Management structure
- Research, evaluation and improvement efforts

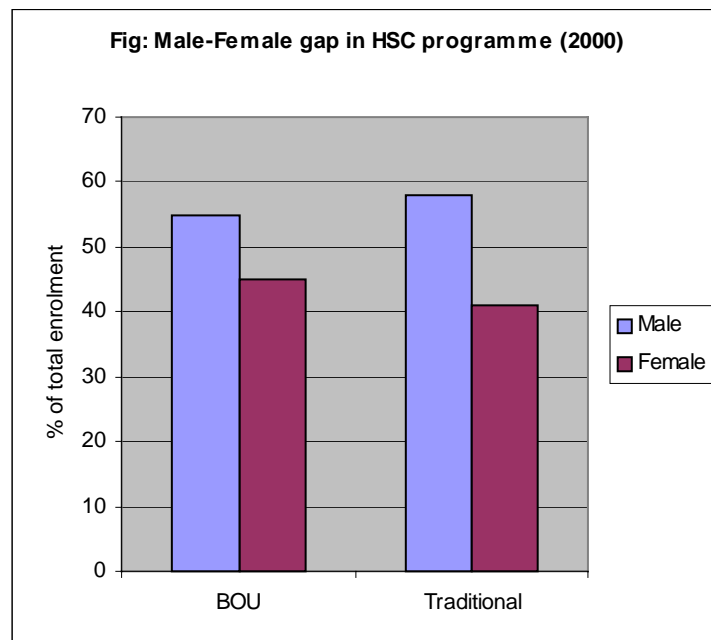
## 2. Open Learning and Distance Education in Bangladesh

### 2.1. Importance of distance education

It has been mentioned earlier that all the aspirant students cannot have education from the conventional institutions due to several reasons. For example, all successful SSC students cannot register into HSC programme. We can see this from the following figure:



We can see from the figure that all the students who passed SSC exam cannot register into the HSC programme. We can also notice that the male-female ratio is higher in HSC than in SSC. In Bangladesh, it becomes difficult for the females to have on-campus education after their marriage or after having children. Since female students (especially, in rural area) usually get marriage at early age, they can no longer go to schools (especially, at HSC level), though are very much eager to continue with their study. Distance and open learning opened a way to them for having education. We can see in figure below that male-female gap is lower in BOU than in traditional schools.



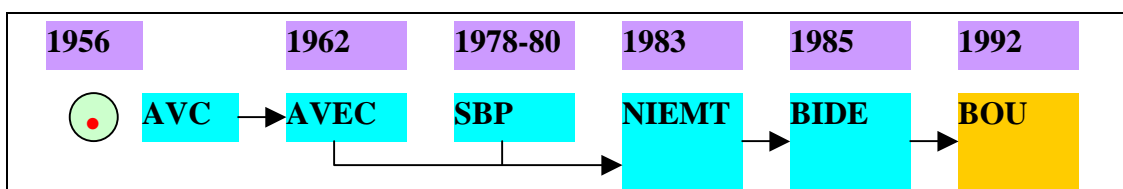
Similarly, we can see that diverse sections of people can be offered education through ODL system in a cost effective way, which otherwise is impossible. With high population and limited on-campus education facilities, ODL is the only alternative at the moment to Bangladesh to educate its citizens.

## ***2.2. History of ODL in Bangladesh***

Distance education in Bangladesh started its journey in 1956. It began with distribution of 200 radio receivers throughout the country, which led to the creation of

an Audio-Visual Cell (AVC) and later the Audio-Visual Education Centre (AVEC) in 1962. In 1978-1980, a pilot project entitled ‘School Broadcasting Programme (SBP)’ was undertaken. In 1983, the SBP and EVEC were merged to form National Institute of Educational Media and Technology (NIEMT). In 1995, Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) was established and NIEMT was incorporated into BIDE. In 1989, as per the request of the Government of Bangladesh, Asian Development Bank (ADB) sent a ‘fact finding mission on open university’ to Bangladesh. Then a feasibility study on open university has been conducted through a ‘Technical assistance Project (TAP)’ under the assistance of ADB. At the end, Bangladesh Open University (BOU) was established in 1992 by an Act passed in the Bangladesh National Parliament (BOU Act – 1992, No – 38). BIDE merged with it. BOU came under government budget in 1999 with a condition that it will generate sufficient revenue for its survival.

### **Evolution of Distance Education in Bangladesh**



Bangladesh Open University is now the only university in Bangladesh that offers a number of distance and open learning programmes. This paper discusses specifically the problems with BOU programmes in general, identifies the prospective threats to the programmes and finally recommends the possible remedial measures.

### **2.3. Bangladesh Open University**

#### **2.3.1. Objective**

The main objective of BOU is *to expand all levels of education, knowledge and science by a diversity of means, including the use of any communication technology to*

improve the quality of education and to provide opportunities for education to the general public through mass-orientation of education and to create efficient manpower by improving the quality of education in general [BOU Act-1992, No-38, 3(5)].

### 2.3.2. BOU programmes: formal and non-formal

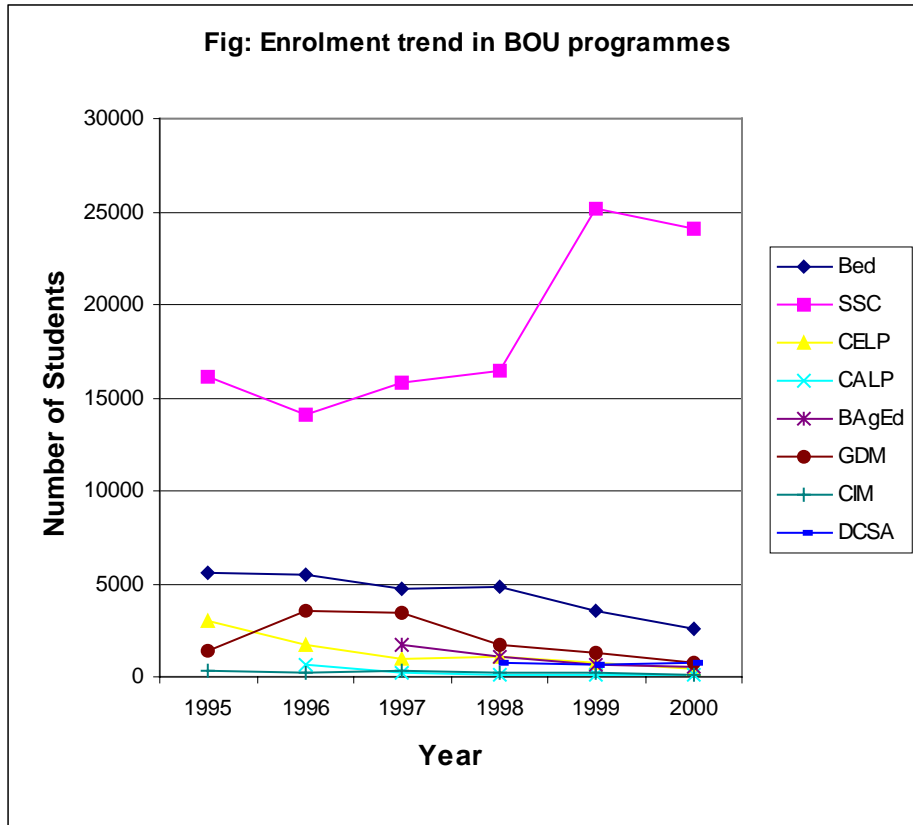
BOU offers 18 formal and 19 non-formal programmes ranges from secondary to post-graduate level through six academic schools. The programmes have been designed particularly for the rural disadvantaged groups like rural women, agricultural workers, unemployed youths, uneducated adults, health and family planning workers etc.

#### BOU academic programmes

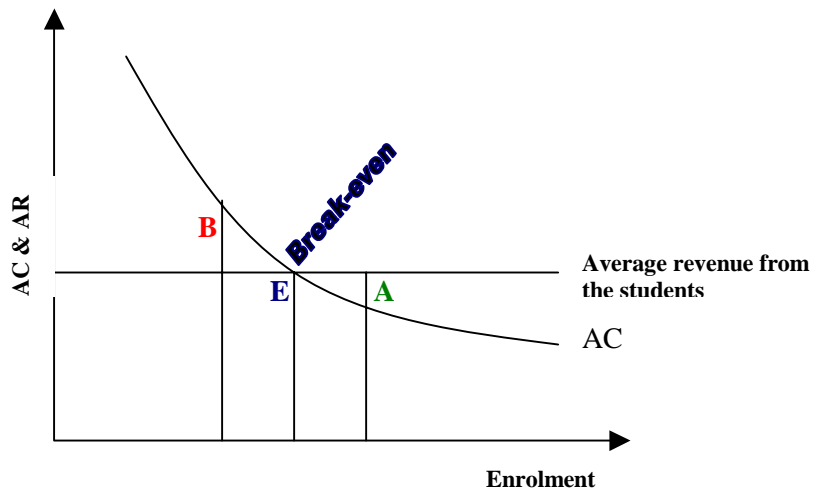
Schools	Academic programmes	
	Formal	Non-formal
Open School	SSC (Secondary School Certificate) HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elementary Mathematics</li> <li>• Bank Services and Marketing management</li> </ul>
School of Education	CEd (Certificate in Education) BEd (Bachelor of Education) MEd (Master of Education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Population and Gender Issues</li> <li>• Irrigation</li> </ul>
School of Business	CIM (Certificate in Management) GDM (Graduate Diploma in Management) MBA (Master of Business Administration)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water Management</li> <li>• Horticulture</li> </ul>
School of Social Science, Humanities and Language	CELP (Certificate in English Language Proficiency) CALP (Certificate in Arabic Language Proficiency) BELT (Bachelor in English Language Teaching) BA (Bachelor of Arts) BSS (Bachelor of Social Science)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Animal Nutrition</li> <li>• Pest Management</li> <li>• Use of Aquatic Weeds</li> <li>• Preparation and Preservation of Food</li> </ul>
School of Agriculture	BAGEd (Bachelor of Agricultural Education) CLP (Certificate in Poultry and Livestock) CPLP (Certificate in Pisciculture and Fish Processing) DYD (Diploma in Youth Development)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environment</li> <li>• Basic Science</li> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Nutrition</li> </ul>
School of Science And Technology	DCA (Diploma in Computer Applications Programme) BSc in Nursing	

### 2.3.3. Enrolment in BOU programmes

Most of the programmes of BOU are recently suffering from low rate of enrolment. In the beginning year all the programmes are with high demand, but after two or three years the enrolment falls. The figure below explains this.



If this downward trend continues for long, some programmes will not remain cost-effective, which will make it difficult for BOU to be self-sufficient. Since up-stream huge infrastructure cost is necessary for opening up the ODL system, the average cost decreases as the number of enrolment increases. Therefore, if the enrolment is going down in a programme, the average cost for that programme will go up and the



programme will lose its profitability. Most programmes of BOU are losing (like at B in the Figure above) and only few programmes are profitable (like at A). Losing programmes are cross-subsidised by the profits from other programmes, which must not be the long-term solution. Necessary improvements in the production and delivery system have to be made for making the programmes profitable. However, a number of barriers hinders or stops the improvement efforts, which needs to be identified and corrected. The paper briefly discusses the barriers and recommends some remedial measures.

### **2.3.4. Barriers to the development of BOU programmes**

There are a number of internal and also external factors hinder the growth of ODL programmes of BOU. Some important factors are discussed below.

**2.3.4.1. Limited use of media:** For better delivery of the courses, ODL system has to use both synchronous and asynchronous media. The table below (adapted from Dekkers, 2000) provides possible combinations of different teaching/learning methods and media that can be used in open and distance education programmes.

**Open Learning Delivery Matrix**

<i>Teaching/ Learning Method</i>	<b>Type of Media</b>							
	Synchronous			Synchronous/ Asynchronous	Asynchronous			
	<b>Face-to- Face</b>	<b>Video</b>	<b>Audio</b>	<b>Online</b>	<b>Tape</b>	<b>Email</b>	<b>Print</b>	<b>CD Room</b>
<b>Lecture</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X		
<b>Tutorial</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
<b>Seminar</b>	X	X	X	X	X			
<b>Independent Study</b>				X	X		X	X
<b>Group</b>	X	X	X	X		X	X	

Only 'online' media can be used both for synchronous (such as, live interactive tutorials) and asynchronous (like a chat group) delivery.



However, BOU mostly use few asynchronous media along with some face-t-face tutorials. Due to lack of availability and affordability of modern technology in Bangladesh, BOU cannot use all necessary media in delivering its programmes. Table below explains it.

**Use of media in ODL programmes at BOU**

Teaching /Learning Method	Type of Media							
	Face-to-Face	Video (TV, VHS, VCon)	Audio (Radio, ACasst, TelCon)	Online	Tape	Email	Print	CD Room
Lecture		TV	Radio					
Tutorial	X							
Seminar								
Independent study			ACasst		X		X	
Group								

- VHS = Video home service (video cassette), VCon = Video conference, ACasst.=Audio cassette, TelCon = Teleconference

**2.3.4.2. Incorrect identification of needs:** Curriculum must be designed carefully. Needs are to be identified correctly before designing a programme. In some programmes of BOU, initial enrolment rate was very high, but after 2 or 3 years the enrolment fell dramatically. Since those programmes have not much social value, in the beginning learners enrolled conspicuously but they were not motivated to pursue the programmes eventually.

**2.3.4.3. Delay in production and delivery:** Due to the delay in production and delivery, BOU programmes loose the credibility. Sometimes students have to wait 1 month more to have the study package in their hand. For this, once students become frustrated even if the programme is with high social demand, which affect the inflow of the prospective students.

**2.3.4.4. Lack of proper coordination in management:** Proper coordination is necessary for smooth functioning of ODL system. BOU management structure is not ready for proper coordination. For example, during designing and delivering an academic programme,

academic schools and divisions (especially, student support services division, publishing, printing and distribution division and examination division) are involved. The following factors can be liable for weaker coordination among schools and concerned divisions at BOU:

- (a) **Horizontal integration:** Since the divisions are not vertically integrated with the academic schools, there is no built-in device for better coordination among schools and divisions.
- (b) **Existence of different associations:** Academics and the officers belong to different associations, which sometimes affect the coordination between school and divisions.
- (c) **Infrequent meetings, workshops, seminars, etc.:** Less initiatives for organising frequent meetings, discussions, workshops, seminars, etc., do not let the academics and officers share their ideas. It frequently creates misunderstanding among them.
- (d) **Otherwise motivation:** It sometimes seems that internal and external lobbying more attractive to the staffs for their upgradation, which demotivates them to be more attentive in their work.

**2.3.4.5. Access to ICT:** Use of ICT is very crucial in ODL system for better delivery of the courses, better coordination among student-student, student-teacher/tutor, tutor-staff, etc., extracting more knowledge, perfect and fast flow of information, etc. However, use of ICT is very limited in Bangladesh. Many students even do not have access to electricity, telephone, radio and television (shown in table below), which made the use of ICT still a dream to the students. For many students, access to a PC at the workplace or at home is not viable at the present time.

**Table: Distribution of radio, television, telephone, electricity connection per household**

Residence	Radio	Television	People per telephone	Electricity connection
Bangladesh	17.68%	3.84%	380.0	
Rural	16.04%	1.71%	-	7.23%
Urban	31.42%	21.61%	-	68.31%

**2.3.4.6. ODL knowledge of the decision making level:** Since ODL is relatively new in Bangladesh, not many experts are available in this area. Most of the key positions at BOU are occupied here by the persons came from conventional institutions. A tendency toward ‘conventionalisation of the ODL system’ is being noticed sometimes.

**2.3.4.7. Research, evaluation and revision/improvement**

Research and evaluation activities are very limited in BOU. As a result, not much revision is being made with the study materials. Once it is produced, reprint of the same dummy is going on year after year. Sometimes few corrections are made with some course materials, which do not improve the contents of courses at all.

**3. Summery and conclusion**

Although a number of barriers hinder the progress of BOU’s programmes and the ODL in Bangladesh in general, appropriate plan and proper implementation can let ODL programmes go ahead significantly. BOU and Bangladesh Government can take initiatives to ensure the following for the enhancement of ODL programmes in the near future:

- (1) Extended public support in audio-visual media use. Presently, BOU has access to national radio and TV channel only for 30 and 40 minutes a day respectively, which is almost negligible for 18 formal and 19 non-formal programmes. Government can allow BOU to use a separate television channel or a big chunk (4-5 hours a day) in the national TV channel. The same thing can be done in case of radio.
- (2) Priority in using telecommunication facilities: Although telecommunication is a precondition for having access to ICT, BOU students and staffs have very limited access to telecommunication facilities. For the enhancement of ODL,

Government can let BOU students and staffs have easy access to telecommunication facilities on priority basis.

- (3) Proper curriculum design: Some programmes of BOU stated suffering from low enrolment just after two or three year of launching. Proper identification of needs and contexts can lead a good curriculum design that may help the programmes survive.
- (4) Professional honesty: Professional honesty is crucial for the sustainability of DOL programmes. BOU authority must monitor and ensure the accountability of its staffs. If any coordination problem arises in the system, authority should resolve it immediately.
- (5) On-time production and delivery of study packages: Delay in production and delivery of study materials discourages students to pursue with the programmes for long. BOU must ensure on-time production and delivery. BOU authority has to give extra effort to make all the study packages ready before the semester starts.
- (6) Access to ICT: Although ICT is crucial for effective and efficient delivery of ODL courses, due to limited and expensive access to up-stream facilities for ICT use students cannot use ICT viably. BOU can establish necessary infrastructure for ICT at its regional centres and can provide students access to ICTs – audio and video conferencing facilities, computers and CD-ROMs.
- (7) Better coordination among schools and divisions: Horizontal integration among schools and the concerned divisions creates coordination problems. Academic schools and at least three divisions such as Student Support Services Division, Printing and Publishing Division and Exam Division must have strong coordination among themselves. If necessary, the said divisions

can be put under direct command of the schools. On the other hand, frequent workshop, seminar, discussion, training, etc. may motivate them and enhance coordination among them.

- (8) Research and evaluation: Lack of research and evaluation makes BOU programmes very much static and backward as times goes ahead. No improvement is made with the courses. For ensuring quality of the programmes, BOU should emphasize on research and evaluation and regular revision or updating the study materials.

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