

Study on Predicting ‘at-risk’ Female Learners in BOU-Open School: Who succeeds and Why?

Md. Mizanoor Rahman, Bangladesh Open University
mizan2006@yahoo.com

Santosh Panda, Indira Dandhi National Open University
pandasantosh@hotmail.com

1 INTRODUCTION

The Open School of Bangladesh Open University (BOU-OS) launched, using self-learning materials (SLMs), tutorial support services (TSSs), and ICT (radio-TV broadcasts- RTVs), its operation in 1995 through enrolling learners in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) programme – Grade: 9-10 – which is considered at par to the conventional SSC. In Bangladesh, up to Grade 6-10 is called secondary education also known as school education and then Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) – Grade: 11-12 – is known as ‘college education’. Bangladesh’s education system included of 5 years of Primary education (Grade: 1-5), three years of Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) – Grade: 9-10 – and two years of senior secondary education ‘known as SSC’. 2011 National Education Commission study reports that Bangladesh’s basic education program is now comprised of the primary and junior secondary levels (MoE, 2010; Rahman et al, 2013). Learner’s dropout rate in the primary level is about 40% and above 50% at the secondary level. In fact, this is very high rate and it costs lots of money to the government. That’s why; this has been very big educational problem and dropouts are termed as ‘at-risk’ learners. Educators and policymakers agree that failure to adequately prepare for the growing numbers of at-risk students may leave the nation with severe educational problems that could ultimately threaten country’s social and economic stability. Female learners are found to have higher ‘failure’ rate than their male counterparts; that’s why – they can’t be the partners in development (Ahmed et al., 2010). From grade 9, BOU-OS takes eighth-graders under the open schooling provision; but some of the predisposing characteristics also influence them to be dropout again. Therefore, there is a need for a comprehensive approach taking into account all the experiences of distance learners as well as the unique aspects of the distance learning environment in Bangladesh where female students face more factors leading to course withdrawal from their programme than male students. The current research explores the predictive capability, ie “predisposing characteristics” in regard to their chances of successfully completing their programme delivered through distance learning (DL). This research is descriptive in nature and follows a systematic empirical investigation. It explores the predictive capability of female students in regard to the chances of successfully completing their studies. The current research has implications in both national and BOU policy formation and practice as it identifies girls’ access and opportunities to ICT vis-à-vis open and distance learning.

2 STUDY OBJECTIVES

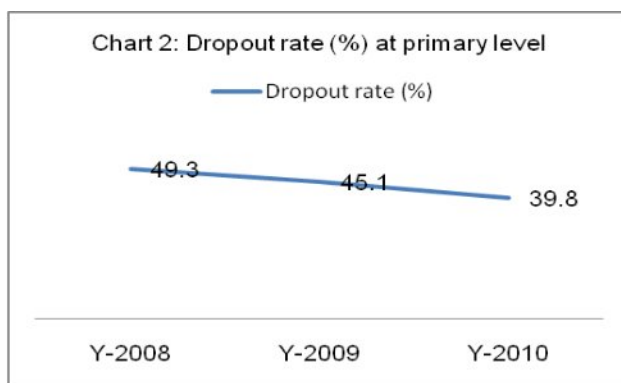
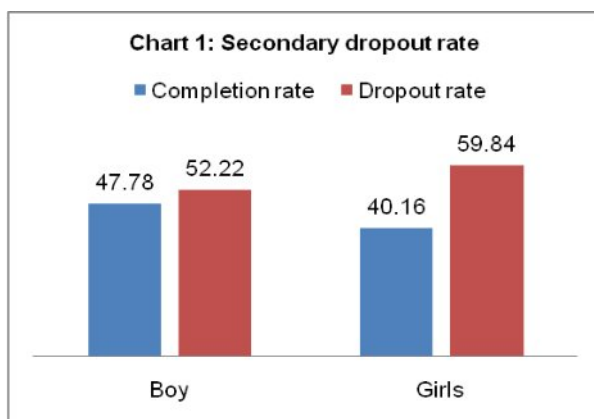
Eighth-graders - leaving school without a high school diploma - have negative effects on the individual socially and economically, causing severe disadvantages entering into adult life (SSC Student Guide, 2012). They use open schooling as an alternative route to have diploma. The current research explores the predisposing characteristics in regard to their chances of successfully completing SSC delivered through DL. Questions related to why some female students succeed and others fail are of both theoretical and practical significance, as DL moves from a marginal to an integral role in the educational provision in Bangladesh. The purpose of this article is two-fold. The first goal is to examine factors thought to be associated with school failure and highlight the relative risk that they pose to learners’ educational outcomes. The second objective of this article is to highlight the range of variables in the OS data set that can be used to explore the issues surrounding the education of at-risk female students. To this end, this article presents a wide range of factors thought to be associated with failure at the BOU-OS that contributes the actual dropout status as of the 9-10 grades.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research is descriptive in nature and it explores the predictive capability of female students in regard to the chances of successfully completing their studies. The survey was conducted on 300 SSC newly-enrolled female students by using questionnaire comprising statements on predisposing characteristics and a selected case study is used. In order for understanding students' success and persistence in OS's SSC, a five-point Likert scale questionnaire is used as Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neither Agree nor Disagree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). Most of the OS learners are from similar demographic background that's why; only a range of variables are chosen to measure factors predisposing students toward success or withdrawal/failure in their first SSC programme. In Bangladesh, the socio economic risk factors have a large importance for school dropout rates. The survey questionnaire was constructed by including items formulated to assess this main correlates of OS dropout. A Research Associate collected data through interviews at the Regional Resources Centre (RRC), Dhaka of the BOU as learners from the entire country comes there and they are requested to provide feedback on this survey.

4 'AT-RISK' LEARNERS

An 'at-risk' student is defined as who is affected by environmental conditions that negatively impact the student's educational performance or threaten a student's likelihood of promotion or graduation (Martin, 2006). Over the last decade there has been a growing realization that students from low-income families those students most likely to be "at-risk" - are rapidly assuming an unprecedented share of the student population. Current situation of the proportion of Bangladeshi secondary children who are at-risk for school dropout range from about 50 percent to 60 percent (see chart 1), depending upon which indicators are used to define at-risk children (BANBEIS, 2013). The girls' dropout rate is higher than boys; this is maybe of early marriage, maternity, childcare, and negative attitudes towards girl's education by the religious activists. For instance, Hefazat-e-Islam chief Shah Ahmed Shafi, in a speech, made indecent remarks about women and likened women to the "mouth-watering fruit" tamarind. There was a big protest on this comment. He said, referencing the holy Quran, women should stay at home... Your duty is to stay inside your husband's house and safeguard his property. Your primary duty is to stay home and look after your family and children only. Do not go out even for shopping." Shafi asked men to educate girls only up to class four or five. He said the girls need only as much education as to be able to handle the accounts of their husbands' earnings.' (Chumki, 2013).



Chat 2: Primary dropout

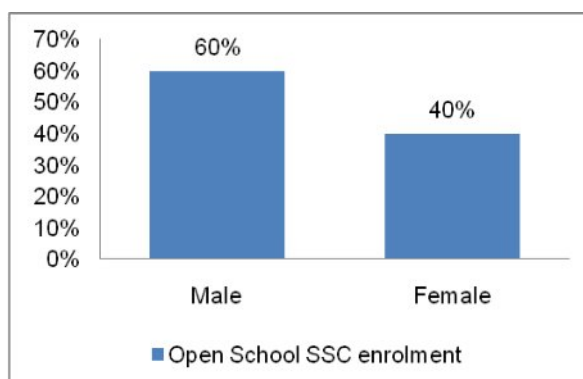
This kind of attitude also predisposes the girl's dropout from the secondary level. In spite of that, overall dropout rate at the primary level is declining from about 50 percent to 40 percent over the years (see chart 2). The primary girls' dropout rate is very high; but lower than boys (see table-2).

Table 1: Primary dropout rate by grade (%), 2010

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Total
Boys	9.70%	3.70%	8.50%	11.10%	8.50%	40.30%
Girls	7.30%	2.30%	7.00%	13.20%	10.40%	39.30%
Average	8.50%	3.00%	7.70%	12.20%	9.50%	39.80%

Situation improved because of intervention by the government and international agencies. But secondary sector has still huge at-risk female learners who get enrolled in the BOU-OS to continue their studies. OS system is already girls friendly; but girls in Bangladesh do face challenges to graduate from the BOU too. That why; a central task of the research is to identify those factors that lead female students to be at-risk of the SSC programme and to identify interventions are to effective in dealing with at-risk female learners because the open schooling has been the integral role in the Bangladesh. The OS has been one of the alternative route available to students that dropped out of formal schools and have made the decision to return to complete the credits required to receive a diploma.

Chart 3: OS's SSC enrolment



Interestingly, in the formal system, girls drop out of the secondary school at a 10 percent higher rate than boys; but opposite happens to the enrolment in the OS enrolment. This shows that there are some predisposing characteristics affect to discontinue their studies; in addition, enrolled female learners do have completion rate less than male. This problem is closely identified with SSC learners. It is vitally important to understand why this is happening and to identify specific strategies that will alleviate this problem.

5 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This study examines the characteristics of female students in the Grade-9 cohort of 2013 who were at-risk for failure from the OS's SSC. Four sets of variables and a case are examined, they are:

5.1 Satisfaction with programme

Programme satisfaction is positively correlated to the risk of dropout. Controlling for satisfaction characteristics, female students were found to be more likely to interest in programme tended to be happy what they are doing at the OS.

Table 2: Learners' satisfaction to progamme

Item	No.	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
I am doing the course I want	251	35.1	34.1	21.1	8.4	1.2	3.94
I am glad to be studying in the Open School	273	45.8	23.4	16.5	8.4	5.5	3.97
I particularly like the structure of SSC programme	254	33.1	33.5	24.8	3.9	4.7	3.86
I like my tutorial centres	254	16.1	46.1	19.7	10.2	7.1	3.56

Four items was presented to students representing satisfaction related to the programme and the results are presented in Table 2. The scale was tested for reliability. About 70% of the cohort was agreed they were doing the course they wanted and that they liked their course. Although 66% of the cohort liked the tutorial centres (TCs) where are attached that means more than two third of students did think facilities at BOU is adequate to learn. Mean value of items of the variables of the programme satisfaction group is of nearly 4; this indicates that females are satisfied to the programme.

5.2 Learners' family environment (LFE)

Eighth-graders dropouts had poor basic skills and they are more or less likely to drop out of OS again and therefore, family environment is highly correlated to continue their studies at the BOU.

Table 3: LFE

Item	No.	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
My family is able to bear study expense at the OS	241	25.3	42.7	22	8.3	1.7	3.82
My family encourages me to graduate from OS	264	74.9	9	4.9	7.5	3.7	4.1
My family supports married woman to do OS programme	267	2.9	88	6.2	1.4	1.4	4.83
My family possess positive attitude to female education	276	63.4	10.2	9.9	4.6	12	3.89
My family power over to help studies for woman with maternity	284	46.5	20.9	20.2	5.7	6.7	4.08

Family income and attitude towards girls' education are directly related to at-risk phenomenon. Respondents were presented with five items that referred to their perceptions of the family environment ranging from the capacity of their family to provide them with good facilities, social contact with fellow students, a high standard of education and friendly, assuring approach from members of the family (see table 3). A general pattern emerges for which new students tend to rate their experiences of family life in positive terms. Those aspects most highly rated was the cost of education received and the capacity of the family to encourage to study at OS with 80% and 85% of students in agreement with each item respectively (strongly agree or agree). Only a very tiny minority disagreed with these propositions. Over three-quarters of the cohort agreed that their family had very good facilities for married women and with maternity and child care although there was a large proportion (20%) that did not express any opinion. Over a 10% of the cohort did not agree when prompted to do so on whether or not students had family environment is congenial for studies. Mean value of the family inspiration, studies with womanhood difficulties are above 4 and attitudes towards female education and financial support are less than 4. This signifies that there are negatives within families towards female education with compare to national commitment of achieving the MDGs.

5.3 Learners' learning environment (LLE)

BOU-OS creates learning environment for distance learners through extensively using SLMs, RTBs, and TSSs.

Table 4: LLE

Item	No.	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
I understand the self-learning materials (SLMs)	282	46.5	20.9	20.2	5.7	6.7	3.95
My SLMs are almost enough to prepare for final exam	271	57.2	1.8	27.7	10.3	3	4
I get learning supports from tutorial sessions	269	9.7	56.9	0.7	23.4	9.3	3.34
I get administrative support from the TC	272	8.1	50.4	0.4	19.4	22.8	3.03
My tutors encourage me to continue studies	270	8.9	8.5	13.7	6.3	62.6	1.95
I understand and use BOU radio-TV lessons for learning	262	15.3	6.5	1.5	65.3	11.5	2.49
I take shadow teaching facility such as private tutor, and/others	270	28.1	27.8	33.3	4.8	5.9	3.67

Respondents were presented with seven items that correlated to their perceptions of the learning environment. These perceptions range from the capacity of their SLMs, RTBs and TSS to provide them with exam preparation, learning/social/administrative support from the tutors, a standard of educational facilities from the electronic lectures (see table 4). From this data relating to the entire sample, a general pattern emerges for which new students tend to rate their experiences of learning in mix terms. Mean value of the respondents' rate on the adequacy of SLMs for exam preparation is 4; that signifies that in-house prepared SLMs are of good quality and understandable to the learners. Respondent moderately rated tutors' academic supports (mean value 3.34) and their administrative supports (mean value is 3.03). The tutors' social role has been found very inadequate (mean value is 1.95) and the radio-TV lectures has also minimal impact on creating learning environment for the OS learners. This could be one of the reasons for shadow teaching at the OS; the average response is 3.68 – that means learners get helps from the private tutors what is absolutely expensive for them and family supports could be at stake.

5.4 Learners' social environment (LSE)

Respondents were presented with a five-point likert scale comprising four items that correlated to their perceptions of the learners' social environment what comprises the on-campus security at the TC arising from peer group, tutors and et al. and the social financial benefit for female students.

Table 5: LSE

Item	No.	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
I feel secured to attend tutorials in the weekend	279	68.5	2.2	6.5	15.8	7.2	4.09
I see, my tutors are friendly	274	4.4	40.9	21.9	15	17.9	2.99
I can easily to form peer group with boys	300	14.7	7.3	68.7	2	7.3	3.2
I get stipend as female learners	223				9	91	1.09

70% girls responded that there is little likelihood of security problem; but they do have inadequate friendly approach from the tutors and experiences difficulties in forming peer group with boys (mean value 3.2) and as a matter of fact no female learner get stipend from the government scheme what is only available for the formal stream. The OS learners also rated negatively (mean value is 1.09). At-risk learners develop their own definitions of self-identity and scholarship through challenges and obstacles. Although these challenges persist, at-risk learners experience success because of self-identity and their willingness to reach their goals and aspirations. Once students are provided opportunities to experience success, they are afforded the opportunity to be unique individuals (Sagor & Cox, 2004). Through motivation and determination, at-risk students control themselves and made meaningful choices (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003; Reglin, 1998; Pianta & Walsh, 1996).

5.5 Case: Jamila Akter

Jamila was an excellent student. During the time of this study, she told the Research Associate she was used to attend formal school and got married for a family pressure while attending Grade-9. She stopped her studies and at present, she runs a boutique house and cares for three babies. Jamila credited herself

as a hard worker with goals and aspirations. "I'm a hard worker. I want to make a career out of what I do and enjoy what I do. I own my own boutique clothing store what sells and supplies anything to deal with boutique." (Jamila Akter, June 2013). Jamila appeared to be very motivated and goal oriented. She is very confident about her future. Throughout the interview with Jamila, the Research Associate noticed that she was very independent. Her independence may have meant that she is working hard on her own. As stated, some students from BOU-OS work at her boutique factory; having listening to them she got motivated to accomplish and pursue her interests in further studies at the OS. After a long span of time from her marry, she also found her family changed the negative attitudes towards girls education. She found tutors, sometimes, show dissatisfaction in working with the BOU and they discourage the learners saying 'Friday (Weekend) Learner' and question for quality assurance. Jamila stated her self-esteem was shy when she first entered OS with her employees.

The findings in this study revealed that these at-risk students are able to turn their performance around because of self-identity, support from families, tutors, role model of open schooling. On the other hand there is likelihood of dropout from the open schooling system. It is likely to be reduced if they are provided with the stipend same as the formal female school learners.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The study provided valuable research-based evidence that identify factors that contribute to the high female dropout rate from the OS system, implying that no single risk factor can be used to accurately predict who will drop out of the system. Dropouts face a competitive and hostile labor market environment. As efforts to understand and combat the dropout crisis advance, there must be a commitment from the BOU policymakers, students, parents, and the public to create a community participation in distance education system in which earning a high school diploma is the norm for all female students and dropping out is a rare exception. To recap, we aimed to better understand the challenges and satisfactions of students with ODL as well as the benefits they drew from earning their diplomas. From our results, we identified three types of difficulties that respondents encountered in their studies: technical, infrastructural, and pedagogical. It appears that infrastructural problems and certain pedagogical problems (e.g., shadow teaching) generally posed substantial challenges. Nevertheless, the respondents overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction with their ODL programme, and reported that they gained specific benefits in terms of greater feelings of competency, and more generally, that they benefited from tangible improvements in their learning environment. We may conclude that ODL programmes are useful for dropout learners in Bangladesh. It is recommended that OS learners needs to be provided with the stipend so that they retain with the programme and do not get dropout again. Tutors are also recommended to provide with trainings.

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