Analysis of Tutorial Services for Distance Learners: A Case of Bangladesh Open University

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Abstract

Besides the use of electronic media for delivering lectures, Bangladesh Open University supports with face to face interaction between learners and tutors at the tutorial centres located outside of the main campus. Several factors like conditions and infrastructure of the tutorial centres, tutor's qualification, experience and training in distance learning, teaching style and strategies are of importance in the process of acquiring education through distance mode. Present study describes about the tutorial services of Bangladesh Open University. Some suggestions have been made for improving Bangladesh Open University tutorial services. In addition to tutorial classes, use of educational technologies for delivering lectures has been recommended.

INTRODUCTION

Prime objective of Bangladesh Open University is to transform the country's vast human resources into an educated and trained work force by formal and non-formal (Ali, Haque & Rumble 1997) through distance education. Bangladesh Open University fulfills their needs by offering 21 formal programmes in various disciplines. Bangladesh Open University provides with printed materials (Islam, Morshedur & Rezanur 2006) the learners prepared in a self-learning style of distance education. The learning procedure also includes tutorial supported audio-video programmes. In practice, these are not fulfilling for acquiring knowledge. In addition, Bangladesh Open University provides to learners by arranging some face to face classes called 'Tutorial classes' in some selective institutions outside of Bangladesh Open University main campus. An institution selected by the Bangladesh Open University for tutorial service is called a 'Tutorial Centre'. Learners come to the tutorial center to solve their course related problems, get necessary information and acquiring knowledge. In deed, tutorial services play an important role for obtaining knowledge in-depth. The quality of education depends on what goes on in the tutorial centres and class room (Rabi 2006). Therefore, face to face interaction is significant. Conditions and infrastructure of the tutorial centre, tutor's qualification, experience and training in distance learning, teaching style and strategies are of importance in the process of acquiring education through distance mode of delivery. To the best of our knowledge, there is yet no report on assessment and analysis of tutorial service factors of Bangladesh Open University programmes. Present study describes about the tutorial service of Bangladesh Open University. Some suggestions have been made for improving tutorial services of Bangladesh Open University. In addition to tutorial classes, use of educational technologies for delivering lectures has been recommended.

METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

Bangladesh Open University comprises many tutorial centres and tutors for different programmes. During this study almost 80% learners and tutors were available. A structured questionnaire was constructed separately for the learners and tutors of Bangladesh Open University. The questionnaire was two separate parts in accordance with the objective and significance of the study.
Part-1: contained personal information about the respond.
Part-2: contained a close-ended question that was constructed on a five-point scale from 5 to 1. The attitude scale is followed by five responses such as 5(Strongly agree) = SA, 4(Agree) = A, 3(Undecided) = U, 2(Disagree) = D, and 1(Strongly disagree) = SD. The questionnaire was presented to know the opinions of learners and tutors about the tutorial. We have used data for analysis from the work (Rezanur, 2007)

PROCESS OF TUTORIAL SERVICE
In conventional system of education, learning is greatly influenced by the dynamic interaction process that goes on between a teacher and his/ her students. In distance education system such face to face interaction is almost absent. Bangladesh Open University provides face to face interaction providing some tutorial classes. Infrastructure, class room and laboratory facilities, availability of qualified teachers are the main criteria for the selection of a tutorial centre. Actually tutorial centres are the well-reputed institutions located outside of Bangladesh Open University main campus. There is a memorandum of understanding between Bangladesh Open University and the said institutions for tutorial services. Remuneration is paid to the tutorial centre for tutorial services. According to the Bangladesh Open University concept, a teacher who is appointed for delivering lectures and giving tutorial services in a particular tutorial centre is called 'Tutor'. For each course there is a tutor in a particular course which is selected by the Bangladesh Open University authority. Academic qualification and experiences are taken under consideration for selection of a tutor. Besides delivering lecture, they evaluate assignments called tutor marks assignments prepared and supplied by the tutor twice in a semester and conducts the examinations. The tutorial classes are conducted as per academic calendar for respective programme prepared and supplied by the respective school of the Bangladesh Open University. Laboratory based classes are conducted separately and there is a schedule for it. Although, tutorial centres are at different places in the country, tutorial class begin and end according to the uniform schedule. There is a tutorial centre coordinator for each tutorial centre. The coordinators are responsible for monitoring the whole academic process throughout the semester and conduct examination. In deed, learners depend upon the tutorial services. Performance of the tutorial centre is therefore very important to evaluate. The survey shows that it also impacts on the learners' performance.

Teacher Qualification, Experience and Tutor's Duty
The tutor's qualification, training especially training in distance learning and experience play an important role in the learning process. Tutors who teach in undergraduate and post-graduate levels possess at least masters' degree. Tutors who engage in secondary and higher secondary level programmes possess at least a graduation. We collected data from the tutor of the under graduate and post-graduate programmes only. We have found that almost 90% tutors have experience in teaching but none of them have experience and training in distance learning. A few numbers of tutors possess training in education. Tutor's involvement in tutorial service activities apart from usual teaching shows their interest in distance education and distance learners. An efficient tutor is one who prepares lessons according to a precise plan and in a well-structured manner (Rabi 2006). Tutor should prepare assignments, evaluate and arrange special test for evaluating learners' performance. Also they should communicate results to the learner in time. The extent to which tutors are not engaged in tutorial centre related activities after tutorial hours is a poor indication of tutor commitment to their learners, tutorial services and their profession. In Bangladesh Open University case, a few numbers of tutors continue their activities after tutorial hours.

ANALYSIS
The data were tabulated in the form of frequency distribution, percentage and weighted average. Analysis has been done only quantitatively. Two separate analyses were presented on the basis of opinions of the respondents: learners and tutors. The weighted average was calculated by using Likert scale for each item of the questionnaire of 23 items for learners and 13 items for tutors respectively. Gay & Peter's (2003, p.131) formula has been used for this purpose.

$$WA = \frac{N_1 + 2N_2 + 3N_3 + 4N_4 + 5N_5}{N_1 + N_2 + N_3 + N_4 + N_5}$$

Where N_1, N_2, N_3, N_4 and N_5 are respondents of strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree and strongly agree respectively. The weighted Average (WA) values were considered on the basis of the decision as: WA **>** 4 = Strongly Agree, 4 ≥WA>3 = Agree, 3≥WA>2 =Undecided, 2≥WA>1=Disagree and 1≥WA>0 = Strongly Disagree.

Analysis on the basis of learner's opinion
The opinions of the learners regarding tutorial service are presented below. Majority of the respondents in percentage "Strongly Agreed (SA)" on the following items of the questionnaire is stated below

Q3. I enjoy learning at tutorial centre because it serves my purposes. (85%)
Q4. I learn a lot at tutorial centre. (90%)
Q7. Course module is difficult to understand so I depend on tutorial centre. (75%)
Q8. Tutor's critical thinking and analysis is encouraged. (75%)
Q14. Standardized tests and examinations developed by the Bangladesh Open University. (95%)
Q15. I watch audio-video programme but I can not follow the lesson. (85%)
Q19. Condition and infrastructure, lab   equipment impact on my study (85%)
Q23. Combination of self-learning module, audio-video support and stronger tutorial services make a possibility for learning in a better way. (85%)

Majority of the respondents in percentage "Agreed" (A) on the following items of the questionnaire concerning are shown in the parenthesis against each item

Q1. I like distance education system. (75%)
Q2. I like to go to tutorial centre (75%)
Q5. Objective for the course is made clear to learners. (85%)
Q6. Lecturing is well planned and organized. (80%)
Q9. Tutor's understanding of subject matter is clear and throughout. (75%)
Q10. Examination and other evaluation methods are fair. (75%)
Q16. I prefer to go the tutorial centre then study self-learning module at home. (65%)
Q21. Location of tutorial centre impacts on your study. (75%)
Q22. I am happy with tutors' attendance, cooperation and overall quality of the tutorial service. (85%)

Majority of the respondents in percentage "Disagree"(D) on the following items of the questionnaire concerning are shown in the parenthesis against each item
Q11. Sensitive to feeling of learner. (65%)
Q13. Test & examination developed by the teacher's themselves. (85%)
Q17. Self-learning module serves the purpose of learning material as well as instructor. (65%)
Q18. Observations of learner's participation in the class are maintained. (75%)
Q20. Teaching style and method of   delivery of lecture are acceptable. (75%)

According to the weighted average (WA) majority of the respondents "Strongly Agreed"(SA) on the following aspects of the questionnaire are shown in the parenthesis against each item.

Q1. (4.0) Q3. (4.85)   Q4. (4.0)   Q5. (4.0)
Q6. (4.0) Q7. (4.8)   Q8. (6.9) Q14. (4.95)
Q15. (4.82)   Q16. (4.05) Q17. (4.8) Q19. (4.8)   Q21. (4.1) Q22. (4.05)   Q23. (4.82)

According to the weighted average (WA) majority of the respondents "Agreed"(A) on the following aspects of the questionnaire are shown in the parenthesis against each item.

Q2. (3.85)   Q9. (3.8)   Q10. (3.65)   Q12. (3.35)

According to the weighted average (WA) majority of the respondents "Disagreed"(D) on the following aspects of the questionnaire are shown in the parenthesis against each item.

Q11. (2.6)   Q13. (2.15)   Q17. (2.65)
Q18. (2.15)   Q20. (2.45)

Analysis of on the basis of tutor's opinion
Majority of the respondents in percentage "Strongly Agreed"(SA) on the following items of the questionnaire.
Q1. Infrastructure and classroom of tutorial centre facilities are quit suitable for teaching (61.9%)
Q7. There is no specific training policy adopted by Bangladesh Open University for improving teaching skills (90.4%)
Q9. A tutor needs to improve his teaching skills. (83%)
Q10. Training in distance education supports one to teach the learners in a better way. (71.4%)
Q11. I prepare myself before lecture. (71.4%)

Majority of the respondents in percentage "Agreed (A) on the following items of the questionnaire concerning are shown in the parenthesis against each item

Q3. I conserve positive attitude towards distance learning. 50%

Q4. Written form of assignments is given. (85.7%)

Q8. The training in distance education is helpful for the teachers (50%)

Q12. Do you think that course module does not give enough support to learners for acquiring knowledge? (76.1%)

Q13. You think that combination of self-learning module, audio-video support and tutorial services make a possible way for better learning in distance mode. (50%)

Majority of the respondents in percentage "Disagreed"(D) on the following items of the questionnaire concerning are shown in the parenthesis against the item

Q2. Laboratory facilities are suitable and applicable for distance learners. (83%)

According to the "Weighted Average"(WA) majority of the respondents "Strongly Agreed"(SA) on the following aspects of the questionnaire are shown in the parenthesis against each item.

Q1. (4.54)   Q4. (4.0)   Q7. (4.83)   Q8. (4.26)
Q9. (4.78)   Q10. (4.66)   Q11. (4.66)
Q12. (4.14)   Q13. (4.30)

According to the weighted average (WA) majority of the respondents "Agreed"(A) on the following aspects of the questionnaire are shown in the parenthesis against each item.

Q3. (3.40)   Q5. (3.09)

According to the "Weighted average" (WA) majority of the respondents "Disagreed"(D) on the following aspect of the questionnaire.

Q2. (2.26)

DISCUSSION

There is strong variation in the quality of tutorial centre infrastructure, equipment and laboratory facility in distant learning. According to our survey, it is found that more than 99% of the tutors have reported to have a class room for their learners. But the condition of the classroom varies from tutorial centre to tutorial centre. Almost all the tutors and learners have stated their dissatisfaction regarding laboratory facilities, conducting laboratory classes and mismanagement of the tutorial centres. The characteristics of the tutorial centre and in particularly the tutor and coordinator have a consistent influence on performance of the learners. More than 90% tutors have at least completed post graduation. But they have no experience in distance learning. In some tutorial centres authority changes course tutor frequently. As a result, it impacts on the learning process negatively. Undoubtedly, experience tutors are found to be more efficient than novice tutors. Those tutors having experienced have performed better. On the other hand many tutors have not clear concept about distance teaching methods. Majority of the tutors conduct class and assessments according to the calendar supplied from Bangladesh Open University. Observation of learners' participation in class is not regularly maintained. It is found with satisfaction that learners have positive attitude towards tutorial and distance education in general. They mentioned that only course module and audio-visual support do not support their purpose. More than 80% of the surveyed learners reported that they liked to go to tutorial centre and they recommended for increasing contact hours. Assignment or homework is a determining factor in learning achievement and it is found from the result of this study that the learners are given assignment regularly. They liked to involve in laboratory and other activity seriously. Tutor and tutorial centre factors are the main factor causing significant variation in the performance of the learners. Those tutors possesses negative attitude towards the distance education and open learning are not serious in teaching. Therefore ensure proper tutorial services, attention of tutors in teaching, sensitive to feeling of learners, active interaction between tutors and learners may impact on acquiring solid knowledge and good performance of learners.

RECOMMENDATION

According to the results of the present work, the following recommendation would be made.

i)To help Bangladesh Open University tutors in developing and acquiring rich distance learning knowledge, teaching methodology and skills, which paramount for the effective teaching, attendance of training, workshop and conference in distance learning is recommended. Therefore Bangladesh Open University authority and policy makers should think over the necessity of training in distance teaching methodology for tutors.

ii) It suggested that active counseling be provided instead of face to face teaching in the tutorial centres with tutors charged with responsibility of sensitizing, educating and encouraging learners in developing positive attitude towards distance learning. In addition and more importantly, there should be mutual cooperation and collaboration among tutors and Bangladesh Open University faculties of the respective programme so that they share common goal.

iii) Tutors are indispensable factors in the achievement of education goals and objectives (Cwikla 2004). Distance learning tutors should develop and acquire innovation skills and strategies of teaching in distance mode to obtain meaningful learning. For this purpose, active monitoring in the teaching process at tutorial centre is highly recommended.

iv) Number of contact hours at tutorial centres should be increased. It is very required to overcome existing weakness and lacking. It should be also strengthened tutorial supports and developed strong infrastructure with solid laboratory environment.

v) Bangladesh Open University is spending lot of money for providing tutorial service. To reduce cost, it is suggested to use electronic media and advanced educational technologies for providing lectures and conducting practical lessons. For this purpose it should be strengthened media centre of Bangladesh Open University. Hence of judicious combination of the self-learning module which is play role as a teacher, audio-visual support with active tutorial supports (Counseling) for the learners, which is play an important role for acquiring knowledge is advisable. The above combination may build up a unique way of learning in distance mode for better performance of learners.

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