

CHANGES OF LEARNERS' SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT AFTER COMPLETING A PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION FROM BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Creating same opportunity in term of social and economic context for the learners of distance education as the students from conventional education is a challenging task since professional education through distance method is a new genre in Bangladesh. This genre of professional education starts successfully with the establishment of the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) in 1992. The university creates immense opportunities to study anytime and anywhere. This paper explains what social and economic changes happened to the students who completed a professional programme like B.Ag.Ed, MBA, CEMBA and CEMPA at the Bangladesh Open University. As BOU is the first and pioneer organization, which provides education in distance mode, a study has been necessary for BOU to know what contribution it provides to the nation in social and economic aspects.

This paper should be able to elevate the morale of the organizations like BOU in involving more effort for expanding the organization and also to understand how successful these organization in imparting the knowledge and skill and how effectively the students are able to use those knowledge and skill in their professional life which in turn affects the learners' income and social esteem. The university has been established with aims to raise the standard of education and to give the people educational opportunities by democratizing education and to create a class of competent people by raising the standard of education of the people generally. The paper also shows how the professional programmes of BOU supports to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Distance learning; Contribution; morale; esteem; standard; opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Education through distance method was planned to be introduced in Asia during 1950, it was concern whether the distance learners would get the same evaluation and acceptance from the society and from the employers and whether this education would be able to change the socio-economic condition of the learners.

As the history of distance learning is not very old and distance learning has its roots in the correspondence education that developed in the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom in the mid 1800 (Horton, 2000). The reason of concern was felt since face to face traditional education had a long-term impression and people had a feeling that education meant teachers' centric education. Despite the apprehension, this essay shows you that professional education through distance learning in Bangladesh has an optimistic effect in changing learners' socio-economic condition and the concern over the education method is much minimized. This professional education also contributes to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDG)s though these programmes were started earlier than MDG set up.

Professional Education and Bangladesh Open University: Both long term and short term professional education and training bring changes into human beings. Since professional education targets at an individual's systematic development of knowledge, skills and attitudes to perform organizational tasks and functions, people expect a kind of expertise after completion of a professional course. The expectation was primarily from traditional institute or university. The same level of recognition is crucial for those learners who participated and completed a professional course from Bangladesh Open University (BOU). The history of this university is young and this university has been operating its programmes since 1992. Before establishing this university, there was a distance learning institute called Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) established in 1985 which was turned into Bangladesh Open University through Bangladesh Open University Act, 1992. The aim of establishing BOU is to provide education for the less privileged and dropout students. However, establishment of the university does not accord or share the sense as Mr. Linden of Asian Development Bank while writing about distance learning acceptance in the marketplace apprehended about distance education *as there is a general view that distance education is for the dropouts or people who have otherwise failed* (pp.9).

As such, this was a concern for me to know whether the students of BOU would not be offered the same recognition as those of the traditional public or private universities in Bangladesh. Some other researchers did conduct one or two research works like this however those didn't only concentrate only social and economic factors of programme completed students. Those research works evaluate and cover its tutorial services, tutors quality, effectiveness of the programme, and what changes happened after a completion of professional course. Thus, the information of this paper depends on my own research on *Contribution of Professional Courses on Changing Socio-Economic Condition to Learners of Bangladesh Open University*, however I reviewed those research work too.

Perspective of Introducing Distance Learning: Distance education system starts while the traditional education systems in several Asian and Pacific countries are not suitable in several cases like technological expertise needed for rural transformation or extension workers lack training in skills of teaching adults to meet challenge of economic growth (Sharma, pp 47). However, education aims at individual development and development is a process of structural change in the economic, political, social and cultural domain (Sharma, pp 45) the concern. Education infuses new knowledge and skills that an individual can view a same thing with a different light.

Professional education from distance system should bring the desired changes, because education targets to transfer information and know how technologies from a media to an individual through a course. Professional Education delivered by BOU: BOU has been delivering Master of Business Administration (MBA) from 1998, Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration (CEMBA) from 2000, Commonwealth Executive Master of Public Administration (CEMPA) from 2000, Bachelor of Agriculture Education (B. Ag. Ed) from 1996, Master of Education (M. Ed), Bachelor of Education (B. Ed), Development of Youth Programme (DYDP) and other programmes. These programmes directly are related to the job market or self-development. Completing these courses should enlighten the learners and boost up their moral in finding a new job or start a business.

NECESSITY OF THE RESEARCH

The credibility of BOU programmes is definitely an essential factor that Mr. Rumble pointed out wide skepticism and criticism (pp.170-171) when School of Business initially started MBA programme with standard traditional text used in universities of Dhaka and Chittagong. Mr. Rumble says, "The BOU will need to address the criticism robustly, by pointing that its engagement in these activities is both justified in its own right and has no deleterious effect of the quality of what it is doing at the higher education. The sustainability of professional programmes partly depends on the ability to develop learners' capacity to develop themselves while they are undertaking the programmes and eventually the programme completion definitely impact their socio-economic status or structure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To analyze the changes of learners' socio-economic context after completing a professional education from Bangladesh Open University, the research targeted to communicate those learners who finished a profession course like MBA, CEMBA/CEMPA and B.Ag.Ed. Programmes. Three stages were in the research. One was to find the addresses of the learners, second was to collect data and finally was to explain the collected data. In this research, I collected data from primary and secondary sources. I visited the learners who lived in Chittagong, Dhaka and Rajshahi districts.

The numbers of informants were 40 who were divided on four different programmes. 13 informants were from MBA programme, 19 informants were from CEMBA/CEMPA programme and 08 informants were from B.Ag.Ed programme. Interviews were taken on based on questionnaire and unstructured method.

Though the focal points which I tried to keep in view while collecting information were social and economic factors other than course completion facilities, difficulties or their opinion about tutorial service or services from the university offered during the programme. The latter things came whenever I talked about the course in detail to make the informants comfortable with me and gradually I started to focus on main purpose. Those information might be important for the university. However, I eliminated those information for keeping a direct eye on the focal points of my research. The following paragraphs bear the information of social and economic achievement the informants gained from the professional courses of BOU.

Presentation of Data

To analyze changes of socio-economic status of the learners, it is imperative to know what learners were doing before or during studying at Bangladesh Open University. The Table: 1 explains the informants' occupation during studying B.Ag.Ed., MBA, CEMBA/CEMPA at BOU. Difference between Table: 1 and Table: 2 would provide the understanding of what professional education of BOU had actually done in changing the learners' lives.

Table: 1
Occupation of the informants during studying BOU

The number of Informant	Main occupation	Programme Wise Informants' Number
2	Government Service	1 MBA, 1 CEMBA/CEMPA
6	Private Service	2 MBA, 4 CEMBA/CEMPA
5	Banker	2 MBA, 3 CEMBA/CEMPA
4	Engineer	2 MBA, 2 CEMBA/CEMPA
3	House Wife	1 CEMBA/CEMPA, 2 B.Ag.Ed
2	Business	1 MBA, 1 B.Ag.Ed
1	Farming	1 B.Ag.Ed
9	Student	3 MBA, 4 CEMBA/CEMPA, 2 B.Ag.Ed
8	Unemployed	2 MBA, 4 CEMBA/CEMPA, 2 B.Ag.Ed

The Table: 2 below summarize informants' present occupation after completion of a professional programme from BOU. Almost 47.5% informants who were housewife, students or unemployed join to the workforce and they became businessmen, started farming of their own after completion of a programme from the university. The research data says that completing a programme from BOU has a positive impact and these programmes have brought learners' competence for becoming self-employed or getting a job or switch over to a new job.

Table: 2
Occupation of the informants after completing a programme from BOU

The number of Informant	Main occupation	Programme Completed
5	Government Service	2 MBA, 3 CEMBA/CEMPA
8	Private Service	4 MBA, 8 CEMBA/CEMPA
10	Banker	4 MBA, 6 CEMBA/CEMPA
4	Engineer	2 MBA, 2 CEMBA/CEMPA
1	House Wife	1 B.Ag.Ed
4	Business	1 MBA, 3 B.Ag.Ed
4	Farming	4 B.Ag.Ed
---	Student	---
---	Unemployed	---

Bosworth says, "Most people seem to assess the outcomes of training in terms of student success.

The forms of assessment vary, from the formal examinations of MBA courses to statements that the course was deemed successful if the firm was still in business at a given time after the completion of the course”(pp.122). The data of table 2 presents the successful story in which all informants are involved in the process of earning money. Education and Money are related to elevate one’s social status.

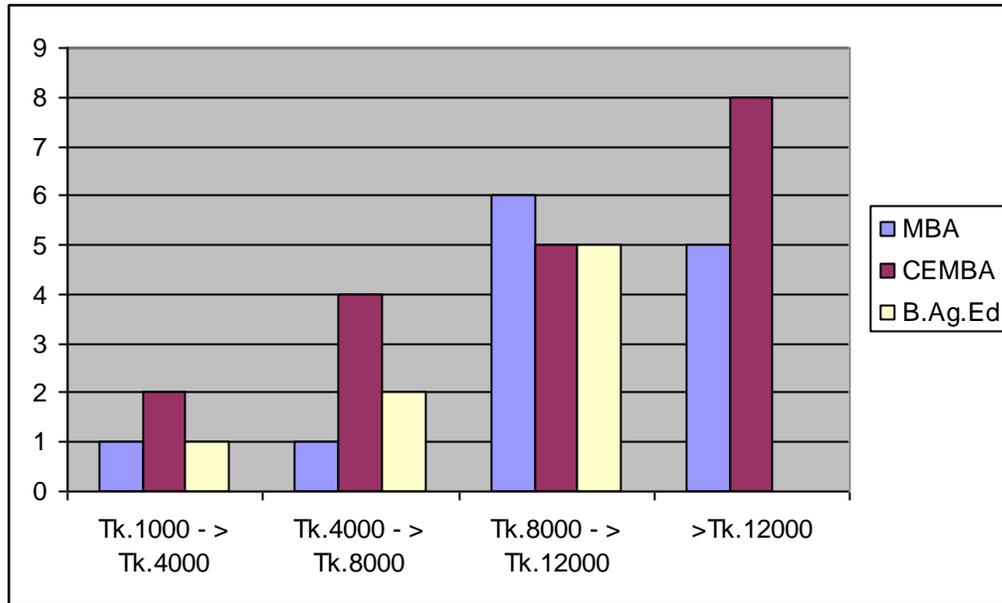


Chart: 1
Increase of month income in BDT (Bangladeshi Currency)
after completion of a programme

The Chart: 1 shows that the informants were benefited from doing a professional course from BOU. This chart also demonstrates “if one accepts that different salaries are exact measure of each individual’s contribution to the social product, the comparison of “rates of return” (Debeauvais, 1974). This indicates that BOU has started to return service to society and to state which already lot of money for the development of BOU. The change also relates with individual’s career and future prospect. Simultaneously, an expectation came into the individual learners that he or she deserved raise in position.

In such implication, the informants replied with an affirmative gesture, “if you achieve expertise, know-how technology and competence, promotion at least in private sector is a natural consequence and in my case, I can assure that CEMBA programme offered by BOU is very worthy for imparting knowledge and information about developing individual’s proficiency and ability”. Those who are working in government sector got 1 or 2 increment on their salary and they are getting more opportunity in involving money earning project after the usual office hour or on holidays. In the private sectors, the informants got the more rise in salary. Thus, chart-1 displays a picture of income variation.

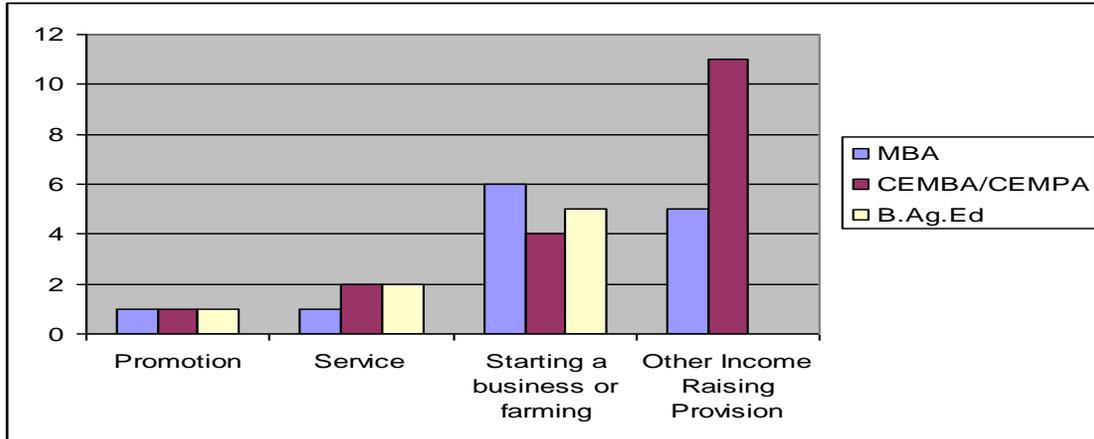


Chart: 2
Promotion and other opportunities
after completion of a programme

Since the research was enthusiastically related with economic condition, I tried to find out difference happened in term of creating new opportunity and promotion in the job. Chart-2 presents the informants' success indicators using the programme they achieve from BOU. It could be inferred that the programmes of BOU are offered in the way it should be. One bright perspective is that none of informants did show any sign of frustration as he/she did a course in distance method. One of the informants told while she appeared for job interview as marketing manager, the employers tried to know the depth of her knowledge and asked her on the basis of case study. She also said that the primary concern of the interview board was to know whether she had the marketing knowledge and skill. Even they were not concerned about the method of learning. Other informant, who tried for a position of project manager, was asked about project evaluation and implementation related question. He faced the interview confidently. In both cases, they were appointed to the jobs, they sought for.

Discussion on the Informants

While talking to the informants, one factor was always introduced whether the informants felt a respect for the course which he/she finished. This aspect actually is influenced or comes into being when other people in the society admire him/her for completing the course or when the educational programme. One informant who did MBA programme from BOU told that he gained much knowledge from the programme and I thought I could manage a new job if he wanted. I asked the housewife why she was not working outside the household. She replied that she had to manage my family; however she gained skill from the B.Ag.Ed. Programme, so she was experimenting her on gardening for flower and fruit on the roof top of her house which might bring financial prospect for her family. One informant said the employers thought about the course contents of professional academic programmes of BOU are upgrading students' knowledge, skill and brighten their future prospect. He added the courses, CEMBA/CEMPA, which was actually programmed developed by Commonwealth of Learning (COL) got recognition to the learners as well as to the employer.

Even the courses were successful in raising learners' income and ultimately social esteem. As education, position at job, individual's income and social status are all related factors in gaining organizational and social respect. Contribution to Millennium Development Goals from Bangladesh Perspective: The study explains that students who completed professional programmes have been able to raise their economic as well as social status which in turn to eradicate poverty and contribute in empowering women since the financial condition is very much inevitable to change women in family and in society. When women informants were asked about their roles in their respective family, they said "if we can query after our household matter and family expenses since we ourselves are earning our livelihood". Before the completion of the programme, most of the informants didn't ask or even bother with financial matter as the bread earners were male population of their family.

The reason of providing those information which comply with the MDG is that BOU works in the same line. The obligatory duty of the Bangladesh Open University is to enhance the skill of manpower intended for the total welfare of the country and economic advancement for development (Tarafdar, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Human Resource Development is a crucial aspect of education and also is a consequential phase of an academic programme. This research demonstrates education through open and distance method has been able to bring change in HR Development. The indicator is that the programme completed student didn't show any sign of weakness or regretting and they have the confidence level of holding duties and responsibilities for their jobs as other employees who completed their professional courses from other public or private universities of Bangladesh. Thus, Professional courses through distance education of Bangladesh Open University have the same impact on occurring changes relating to socio-economic aspects of learners as other public or private universities who delivers education through conventional method. The study also says distance education can contribute for the betterment of individuals and the society as well since the learners got new job or started a business, generated increment in salary, had promotion and made them feel socially high or superior after completing a professional course from Bangladesh Open University.

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I, A.K.M. Iftekhar KHALID, am working as Assistant Director (Training) at Training and Research Section in Bangladesh Open University since 10 May 2005. I am responsible for maintaining international communication. On every week or in a month, there are some issues like writing something which incorporates with international policy and decision making. I am also responsible for looking after study leave and duty leave for higher studies, training, seminar, conference in home and abroad. So, I have to communicate the national and international organizing bodies.

Data Collection for Open and Distance Learning and eLearning researches and writing reports for those research works are additional jobs I usually do. Previously, I was a faculty of NIIT, an IT institute based on Delhi, India for more than four years. I usually taught programming language and networking.

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