Community perception towards integrating vocational
elements in open and distance learning in Bangladesh.

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COMMUNITY PERCEPTION TOWARDS INTEGRATING VOCATIONAL ELEMENTS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Education is considered a priority sector in Bangladesh and a means of socio-economic development by all citizens – urban and rural, rich and poor. This attitude has created a demand for education which traditional systems have been unable to cope with, mainly in three ways – they cannot reach the massive and circumstantial unreached and the associated curricula are either obsolete and irrelevant to the world of work or producing narrowly specialised graduates with limited future options. To address these challenges this paper argues that diversification of the secondary and higher secondary curricula through the introduction of vocational elements in open and distance learning (ODL), is necessary. Despite much research and literature on general, vocational and open and distance education individually, very little information is available with respect to integration of vocational and general education in open and distance learning. This paper outlines a study exploring the present scenario and assessing the need for integrating vocational elements at the secondary and higher secondary curricula in open and distance learning in Bangladesh. It is part of a larger study on distance education systems in three different countries. The research involved focus group discussions with the Bangladeshi community including students, teachers and guardians culminating a set of recommendations that may play an important role in reforming the ongoing system.

Introduction

Bangladesh ranks among the most densely populated (1033 per sq. km) countries on the globe. Its population is 160 million with the working age (15-64) group measuring 77 million and an adult literacy rate of 58.3% (BBS, 2011). More than 40 per cent of the population would be considered illiterate with most of them having limited job opportunities. About 80 percent of the 46 million employed citizens are engaged in the informal sector (agriculture, forestry and fisheries), which does contribute the country's major economic development. There are about 3 million Bangladeshi people abroad and every year about 250,000 Bangladeshis travel abroad for living or work. Much of the labour force would not come under the description of "skilled" due to lack of education or training (World Bank, 2007). Moreover, low participation rates of women in skilled areas are imposing more burdens on the economy (Begum, 2003).

Volunteers Association for Bangladesh (VAB) – A US based NGO conducted a study on ten high schools in rural Bangladesh to estimate the dropout rate and identify the reasons for dropout. The study followed students in grade-6 through to grade-10 for two academic years over the period of 2007 and 2008 as well as conducting survey of students and their parents, teachers and community leaders. It found a pattern of dropouts starting of 9-10 percent at grade-6, rising slowly to grade-9 and then culminating with a massive growth around 60-70 percent at grade-10 (Ahmed & Rahman, 2010). The Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and statistics (BANBEIS) carried out an in-depth study in 2002 revealing that over 80 percent of high school students left school without having their SSC[1] while more than a third (37%) left before completing their HSC[2]. Both studies confirmed that

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[1]SSC implies Secondary School Certificate which is an examination students have to appear at the end of secondary level of education from grade 8 to 10.

[2]HSC implies Higher Secondary Certificate which is an examination students have to appear at the end of higher secondary level of education from grade 11 to 12.

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poverty and poverty related factors are the main reasons for this alarming dropout rate with female students experiencing even higher dropout rate due to early marriage, household expectations and lack of value and recognition for female education in the society (The Daily Star, 2010).

Considering the large human resources working in the formal and informal sectors at home and abroad as the nucleus of its economy, the Bangladesh government has the taken the action plan of VISION2020 to digitalise the country and prepare its citizen for the 21st century (Bhuiyan, 2011). Education and training are seen as the key to keeping pace with the global competitive labour market. However, it is a challenging as well as risky venture through the conventional general education system. Vaz (2012) points out that at the secondary and higher secondary education (even at lower level in many cases) youths of the developing countries have to decide whether they should choose vocational trades, opt for higher education or seek employment or go abroad to serve as worker, and in absence of opportunities and alternatives, increase the number of dropouts which ultimately gives rise to the unemployment problem. To keep them in the streamline of education, policy-makers and educators are interested in providing multiple pathways at these terminal stages and giving more emphasis on integrating vocational elements with academic education to ease transition from study to work (Elbushari & Aktaruzzaman, 2012). Open and distance education with its focus on flexibility in terms of age, location or prior education, presents a unique opportunity for the self-employed workers of the informal economy and out-of-school youth and adults to pursue education and training in their respective fields (Islam & Selim, 2006; Numan & Islam, 2012; Mishra, 2004; UNICEF, 2009).

Integrating vocational and academic education is not an easy task to accomplish. It requires not only an approach of recognising work-oriented applications of academic skills and knowledge but also doing learners' engagement in a better way which can easily be attained by the modern technologies. This integration may be at the school level, programme-oriented or at the courses/unit level depending on the context and challenges faced (Hoachlander, 1999; Islam & Numan, 2012; NCRVE & RAND, 1993; Schmidt et al., 1995). Often the integrated education system at the secondary and higher secondary level equips students with a set of soft and hard skills commonly known as foundation or employability skills. Evidence suggests that soft skills contribute to 85 per cent of one's success while only 15 per cent is made by hard skills (Wats & Wats, 2008). Soft skills are a subset of generic or inborn abilities that incorporate people oriented skills and expertise, for example customer service skills, personal and interpersonal skills, teamwork, negotiation abilities, communication skills as well as a set of individual attributes such as a sense of time management, resourcefulness, motivation, responsibility and flexibility (CPSC, 2010; IYF, 2013; McMurtrey et al., 2008; Treese & Park, 2012). In order to be successful youth should have the necessary foundation consisting of personal qualities, basic knowledge and thinking skills upon graduation from school (Chinien & Boutin, 2011; Mayer, 1992; US DOLETA, 1992). There is much greater likelihood of these foundations being developed by carefully integrating vocational and academic learning in the classroom, as it is generally not possible to nurture either of them individually (US DOLETA, 1992).

Within Bangladesh in the case of higher education (Bachelor program), less than 10 percent of aspirant students get the opportunity (Islam, 2011) while the school leavers at the secondary and higher secondary level make a living either in the informal economy or in foreign countries or in the country's large industry sector primarily in the garments industry (Mia & Mian, 2004; Rashid & Rahman, 2010). In many cases it is observed that the general education system is providing very little for the school leavers in particular, being nothing more than a gimmick that boost the issue of not just the unemployed educated but also the high-impact underlying problem of the 'unemployable educated' (Vaz, 2012). On the other hand, the old model of narrowly specialized vocational education aiming to produce students to step straight into industry, no longer works (UNICEF, 2007). The cost associated with a graduate of a VET institution is three times higher than that of a traditional system; therefore, it is not feasible and not recommended to the highly populated developing countries (Islam & Numan, 2012; World Bank, 2007). To address today's challenges and tomorrow's need in the context of Bangladesh, integration of vocational elements with academic programmes at the secondary and higher secondary curricula in open and distance learning is necessary.

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Review of Literature

There is a dearth of literature focusing on community perception towards integrating vocational elements with academic programs in open and distance learning either in the Bangladeshi or international context. However, a number of studies have been conducted to examine community perceptions about distance education, integration of vocational elements with academic programs or the testing of an integrated model in open and distance education, some of which relates to the current study.

For instance, most of the programs operated by Bangladesh Open University (BOU), which is sole provider of distance education in Bangladesh, are now suffering from low rates of enrolment though initially the programs had high demand (Numan, Islam & Sadat, 2007; Sultan & Miyoshi, 2006). Kamal and Sultana (2002) conducted a study that revealed that graduates of ODL institutions in developing countries are considered as second-grade performers and therefore, not getting jobs or opportunities for higher studies. Since those programs do not have much social value, while learners initially enrolled they were not motivated to complete the programs. Out of 21 formal programs, only 4 – namely SSC, HSC, MBA and BA / BSS – had rising enrolment figures, while the trend for rest of the programmes was declining (Numan, Islam & Sadat, 2007). Alongside this core problem there are a number of external and internal issues and challenges that hinder the growth and development of ODL programmes at BOU such as limited use of media, discontinuation of the need assessment survey, delay in production and delivery, lack of staff development and capacity building, access to ICT, ODL knowledge of the decision making level, lack of coordination in management, political influence and nepotism, lack of research and evaluation, no short-term or long-term vision (Kamal & Sultana, 2002; Sultan & Miyoshi, 2006).

The formal economy of Bangladesh cannot offer large scale job opportunities as required to its huge population and most of the dropouts of the formal education system tend to fit themselves in the informal economy. For example, Bangladesh is highly dependent on agriculture and about 80 percent of the population live in rural and remote areas and are involved in different agricultural activities (JICA, 2007). Therefore, the majority of the out-of-school youth and adults have to become involved in agriculture. It thus mandates a well thought out plan for the usage of both non-formal and formal education and training when reforming the total education system, especially at the secondary and higher secondary level (Mia & Mian, 2004). However, this population is not easily able to access goods, need-based education, up-to-date practical information and contemporary technical solutions.

Open and distance education with its focus on flexibility and potentiality, presents a unique opportunity to reach the massive numbers who have dropped out or not taken up educational opportunities scattered throughout the country with need-based integrated vocational and academic program (Islam & Numan, 2012). According to Rashid and Rahman (2010), Bangladesh Open University operates 10 non-formal programmes through its School of Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD). These are –

> production and storage of healthy seeds; cultivation and management of field crops; nursery, gardening, forestry and irrigation management; crop diseases and insect pests; pisciculture and fish processing; fish diseases and control; poultry and livestock husbandry; livestock diseases and their prevention; role of agri-involved female in the context of family and social welfare activities; and role of religious leaders and teachers in agriculture and rural development (pp. 99-100).

These programs may encourage the general mass of agri-based Bangladesh, particularly the young who have dropped out of formal education to learn and adapt vocational expertise along with academic programs thereby providing them with the requisite skills to be able to contribute significantly to the country's overall development, as is happening in other developing nations.

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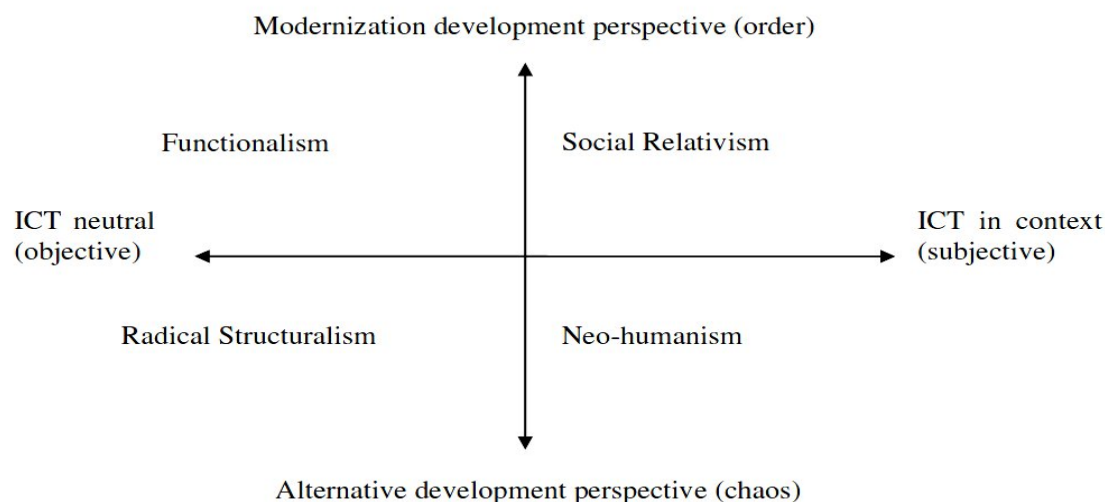Contact Email: md.aktaruzzaman@monash.edu

Within Mongolia, the Gobi Women's Project in Mongolia is a valuable example of a needs-based program that used radio to deliver instruction including livestock rearing techniques, family care, income generation, and basic business skills to 15,000 nomadic women in Mongolia (UNESCO/UNICEF, 1997). Two hundred and thirty-two IT oriented social enterprises were developed through the Kudumbashree initiative, each of which consisted of approximately 10 unemployed women trained in IT (Heeks & Arun, 2010). Another example was an ICT based Micro-enterprise - the Nigerian video-film industry, which not only produced films but also engaged in distribution of locally-made video-films, religious cassettes and music to the large audience of consumers (Foster & Heeks, 2010). These initiatives are not only contributing to social and economic development but also play a decisive role in the creation of a knowledge-based society that does not depend on others for jobs but rather creates jobs for others. It clearly indicates that the educationist and policy makers have to think of new ways of reforming traditional academic programs in light of the needs and demands of the world of work.

The regional study of UNICEF in 2007 indicated that if an integrated education was provided to all learners in a certain secondary and higher secondary school, the poor students would have a chance to get the relevant expertise necessary to change their societal status and better their conditions at a lower cost. A study by Guilherme Vaz (2012) explored a matrix framework to include academic and vocational education in commonwealth Open Schools in Bangladesh, Botswana, Tanzania, India, and Trinidad and Tobago. The study revealed that technological readiness and its appropriateness and low cost and language independent content development with high impact on learning should be prioritised. He pointed out that a commonwealth of content repository could enable the infancy open learning institutions to move into the sectors by bypassing several initial stages, often called leapfrogging, to design academic education with vocational components and a suitable up-to-date protocol on skill migration to avoid the disastrous effect on several developing countries, thereby establishing a long-term benefit for all.

Theoretical Framework

Theorists and educationists frequently use more than one theory to defend their work. Absence of it often results in a space of potential misunderstanding and ill-perceptions, not different in case of distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Community perception is considered as an integral part to develop a sustainable and strategic policy framework for distance education in developing countries (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2009; Gulati, 2008). Based on the underlying objectives and literature reviews of the study, it was clearly found that there is scope to work on an array of theories to cover different areas of community perceptions towards distance education and this study used the theoretical triad to explain the development perspective, structural changes in social, cultural, pedagogical and curriculum aspects, and policy design and development so that an integrated and multidimensional approach can be adopted to combat the issue of community perceptions under study.

Development perspective: Different forms of education exist as well as various notions of what development is and therefore, it is important to make explicit stance about these polymorphic ideas and views. For those believing in the ideology that education is the key for development it is essential to study different developmental ideas and analyse their relationships so that one can determine the type of education required for that particular category of development (Anderson, 2010a). In his paradigm of ICT in development (figure 1) Sein (2005) argues that modernisation development perspectives believes that the West (Europe, later USA) is the role model and for development to take place in developing countries need to change their ways and attitudes. An alternative to this viewpoint is the human development approach (Sein & Harindranath, 2004) that entails the nurturing of a habitat in which individual can explore the full potential they have and try to live in a creative, productive lives based on relation to their interests and what they need in life (UNDP, 2007). Sen (1999) views freedom as the "the ends and the means of development" (p. 35) and the freedoms discussed were: economic facilities, political freedom, transparency, social opportunities and protective securities.

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Modernization development perspective (order)

Functionalism   Social Relativism

ICT neutral   ICT in context
(objective)   (subjective)

Radical Structuralism   Neo-humanism

Alternative development perspective (chaos)

Figure 1. Paradigms of ICT in development (Sein, 2005)

This ideology is similar to the neo-humanism stance which often includes initiatives such as locally produced software for local needs (e.g., Kudumbashree social outsourcing project in the Indian state of Kerala, mentioned in Heeks and Arun, 2010), knowledge networks (e.g., SchoolNet project in Thailand aiming to develop quality educational resources in local language, mentioned in NECTEC, 2002), boat school for women and girls brings education in Bangladesh (Mahmud, 2006), etc.

Structural changes: In order to determine whether the use of technology and model is able to make a change towards a more constructive and engaged educational structure, some of the concepts in this research have been borrowed from structuration theory (ST) (Giddens, 1984). In this case, it is realized that human action (e.g. learning practices) and its existing relation with social structures (e.g. pedagogical cultures) tend to be at the core of ST. Sociologist Anthony Giddens proposed structuration theory in which he views study on the basic dimensions of social sciences as not the reality of any societal totality or the experience of the individual actor, but the communal practices that are preordained across time and space (Giddens, 1984). This is a social theory based on the concepts of structure and agents that creates and reproduces social system without offering either primacy. These structures are made up of rules and resources where these rules are usually the formulas for action residing inside people's heads and the available resources are what they bring into action such as knowledge, abilities, among others. (Anderson, 2010b; Anderson, Hedström & Grönlund, 2009). The ability to make a change also referred to as 'transformative capacity' is what scholars have come to understand as the capacity of human agency (Giddens, 1984). According to Giddens, human agency also gives us the ability to change the very structures acted in by ignoring them, replacing them or reproducing them differently. Human agency and social structure are closely related and it proves to be hard to understand them in isolation, as referred by Giddens to be 'duality of structure' – which implies that structures do not only shape what we do but rather it is shaped by our actions and practices (Giddens, 1984).

On a more critical analysis Giddens notes three major perspectives of structure – signification, domination and legitimation - which correspond to three relevant agency standpoints - communication, power and sanctions. Domination through manipulation of material relates to power, signification relates to meaning while legitimation highlights moral structure for example standard, rules and norms (Anderson, 2010a; Anderson & Hatakka, 2010; Giddens, 1984). Figure 2 indicates the way such complex relation involving structure and agency has been inter-linked by use of modalities known as interpretative schemas, norms and facilities. It is in this place where the interaction involving actors and structure occurs, for example, visibility and interlink of the duality of structure become obvious (Giddens, 1984).

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Both the social structure and human interaction perspectives tend to be essentially interrelated and any separation that is to take place between them is only for the purpose of analytical standpoints.
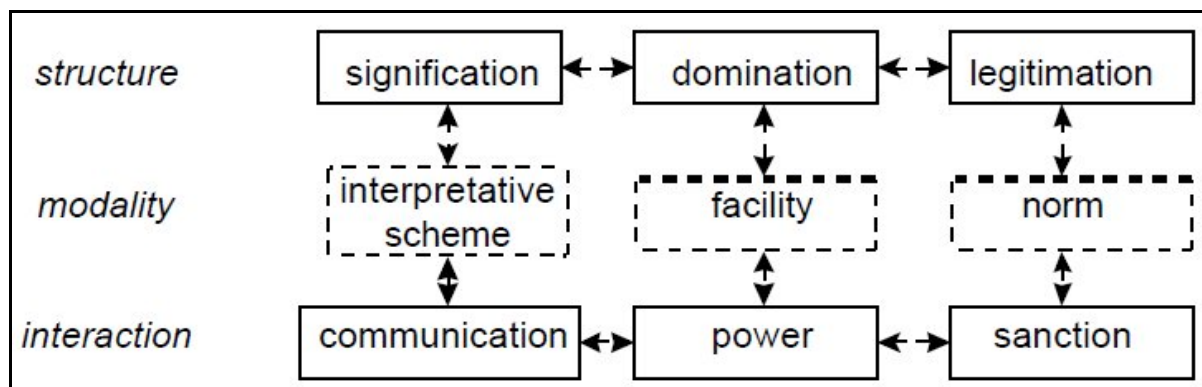

Figure 2. Perspectives of the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984, p. 29)

Halperin and Backhouse (2007), describes interpretive schemas as the actors assumptions and beliefs that they draw upon whenever they are using the technology and/or some of its properties or not using the technology at all; facilities refer to the technological artefacts with built-in functions and properties and norms refer to the accepted behaviour- formal (for example, the official rules as well as guidelines that are documented in the form of writing) and informal (for example, conventions that are reflected within familiar behaviour) (Giddens, 1984). There is communication aspect in the human agency, they tries to draw on interpretative schemes in order to assist them in making sense of the interactions; similarly, such interactions modify and/or reproduce those embedded interpretative schemes in social system (e.g. structure) as signification or meaning. Rose (1998) explains that the existing capability of distributing resources has been integrated within the power wielding and production and reproduction of social structures of domination, and the aiding norms that regulate what in human interaction be able to sanction, which produces legitimation structures iteratively.

Policy development: Based on the empirical and ideological standpoints of the transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993) and theory of instructional dialogue (Gorsky, Caspi & Chajut, 2008) in relevance to this study, the key tautologies are, therefore, dialogue and transactional distance are inversely proportional and specific and situated dialogues (intrapersonal and interpersonal) correlate learning outcomes (Gorsky, Caspi & Chajut, 2008; Moore, 1993) where transactional distance is "a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner" (Moore, 1993, p. 22). Purposeful and increased dialogues decrease transactional distance and contribute significantly to the learning outcomes (Moore, 1993; Shearer, 2009). Inadequate and outdated policies in distance education provide opportunity for misunderstanding and possible friction; this in turn ends up in transactional distance (Moore, 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Hence, appropriate policies and procedures must be devised in terms of engaging purposeful dialogues that include dialogue types, course material design, instructional pattern, use of technologies and so forth to overcome this distance (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2009). In developing countries non-existent or misinformed DE policies as explained by Gulati (2008) creates several problems, such as resource diversion from teacher training, ICT infrastructure and educational setup as well as negative perceptions towards distance education and socio-cultural inhibitor placed on the female group of the society. Institutional and national policy deficit at an individual level implies that learners do not know the impact of the offerings presented by DE and its flexibility to function around their lives and not vice versa (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2009). Therefore, institutional policy and more importantly national policy development may be seen as a roadmap to establish a vision for education in future. For operationalization and maximum effectiveness, a national policy should highlight a clear vision of the country and it should be the model from which institutional policy is derived and ought to be progressively practical and applicable (Honig, 2006).

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Methodology

The objective of this part of the research was to examine perceptions of different communities within Bangladesh including students, teachers and guardians towards distance education. As the nature of the study sought to have data about the perceptions and experiences of the participants, it required an in-depth and thorough investigation of the phenomena. Qualitative case study methodology was determined as the best option to elicit rich insights into people's "experiences of the world" (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 49; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006) and to examine complex perceptions of the community within its real-life context where boundaries are not clearly evident (Yin, 1994).

In an attempt to develop an ICT based distance education framework for a developing country based on different policies and practices prevailing worldwide in the DE arena and requiring the opinion, perception, intricacies and values of different groups of the society including students, teachers, guardians, DE experts, etc., a constructivist paradigm and its associated methods were suited for this study (Creswell, 2009, Crotty, 1998). Knowledge produced within this paradigm is often presented in the form of case studies or rich narratives that includes enough contextual detail and sufficient representation of the voices of the participants (Hatch, 2002), thus providing deeper insights into the phenomena. Qualitative strategies of inquiry and its associated methods and techniques are usually followed in the constructivist paradigm. Interviews and focus group discussion were used as research approaches commensurate with the strategy and paradigm of the intended research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2007).

The current research study involved case studies of the participants of the open and distance education system in three different countries of the world. Interviews were conducted with fifteen experts from Open Universities Australia, Bangladesh and the UK and four focus group discussions with different Bangladeshi community including students, teachers and guardians. This paper reports on part of the study involving perceptions of the Bangladeshi community about the distance education system. Ethics approval was granted from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee plus approvals were obtained from the four distance education providers as well as the local centre of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) in Jhikargacha Thana. As only one local centre of BOU was considered in the study, it was not possible to guarantee anonymity regarding the centre but a guarantee was provided that through de-identification of data, individuals would not be identifiable.

An advertisement (Bangla version) for participation of BOU students, teachers and guardians in the focus group discussion was pasted at the notice board of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) regional office at Jhikargacha. Participants who responded to the advertisement were given a copy of the explanatory statement and consent form (Bangla version) via return mail or email. This voluntary participation was initially considered by a return mail and a signed consent form. Interested individuals were selected for participation using random ballot, then groups of 5-6 were invited to participate in a semi structured focus group discussion at a time and place mutually agreed upon. Prior to conducting the focus groups, a preliminary discussion was arranged with each group to clarify the research, objectives, and their role in the discussion. The male and female students groups were formed separately considering the objection of some of the participants and social context.

Data was analysed using NVivo10, however, the focus of this paper will be on the initial qualitative aspects of the findings from the focus group discussions. Data from the students, guardians and teachers group discussions were analysed using constant comparison and inductive analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to extract patterns and emergent themes. Constant comparison (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002) was the most commonly used tool in examining descriptive data. Representative quotes were drawn from the discussion after repeated reading and re-reading of the data. This formed the first order analysis, which showed thematic descriptions of areas that were perceived as either a factor that students, guardians or teachers felt positively about or saw as challenges (Plunkett, Dyson & Scheider, 2013) to the ongoing distance education in Bangladesh.

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Findings and Discussion

Students (female)

Preliminary findings of the focus group conducted with five female students of the Bangladesh Open University representing different programs, suggest a mixed level of opinions for and engagement with the BOU programme. In particular, they were very positive about the opportunities provided to pursue education through BOU alongside their household work and even after marriage, which is not possible in the traditional system of education. Participants expressed their concerns about getting new jobs, social recognition, gender issues, equal opportunities and even positive attitudes of their own teachers towards BOU graduates. However, they expressed optimistism about overcoming the situation by exhibiting good performance in different levels of society in near future. Findings strongly support the notion of integrating vocational courses with the existing curriculum so that they do not have to rely on government and non-government jobs but rather can be self-employed and make their respective homes a source of income generation.

Jayeda, a widow and student at the BOU local centre at Jhikargacha, was found very deterministic to continue her studies until getting a job. She completed the secondary school certificate (SSC) and was doing higher secondary (HSC) and sadly pointed out *"...in case of marriage if people know that the girl passed from BOU, they think that she may be a dropout and often cancel marriage"*. It is clearly ill-practice and social discrimination can be addressed through human development approach (Sein & Harindranath, 2004) and by providing them the opportunity to develop themselves (Sen, 1999). She further added, *"in BOU programs we read only theoretical aspects if the practical things like computer, mechanical activities, etc. can be incorporated in the BOU program, its acceptability will definitely improve. VET education should be introduced in BOU program"*, which suggests the long-established traditional curriculum structures need to be reformed in light of development and current practices as supported by Giddens (1984). This is in line with the comments of another participant, Parvin, *"... We do not have any ICT related courses and also we do not know how to operate computers. We need to know all these new technologies as course in each programme"*, and both acknowledged the distance education of BOU as the only alternative for the dropouts in Bangladesh.

According to the interpretive schemas of the structuration theory, it is completely based on the individual or organisation how do they see the benefits of distance education system. While most of the participants were intending to get job through distance education, Doly's view is quite meaningful, *"… I am doing education not only for job but also tell my children that I have Bachelor degree. Education is not only for jobs, it has other benefits also. I want to build up my kids with this knowledge"*. She was interested to see the BOU program like agriculture, fisheries, sewing, etc. at Bangladesh Television and guessed that, *"i*f we get this type of training at the local centres, we can do small and medium type of business sitting at home and at the same time take care of our children"*. It indicates the neo-humanism approach of development (Sein, 2005) that gives the opportunity to the indigenous people to be skilled and knowledgeable to develop their own SME business and create alternative income source. Another participant who was healthcare worker and students of Bachelor programme at the BOU, Farzana exhibited her annoyance by expressing, *"... We are studying in the BOU courses, not buying certificates"*. Another view of her, *"… when my son will get married and his wife will come to know that her mother in law is educated, she will obviously give value and respect to me"*, resembled with the beliefs and assumptions of Doly.

Students (male)

Findings of the focus group conducted with five male students of Bangladesh Open University representing different programmes, suggest a little bit of frustration for and engagement with the BOU programme, though they accepted its usefulness to their life. All the participants agreed the BOU courses required more practical orientation and to be more computer and mobile based. Sobur pointed out, *"... Each of the local centres of BOU should be equipped with modern ICTs so that the students*

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can get benefit of it", and Milon opined for Mobile based application development to make education anytime anywhere and it was agreed by other participants in the group, which clearly indicates students are in favour of changes from traditional one way learning to more effective ICT based system to engage themselves that commensurate with the notion of Giddens (1984) theory.

At the same time most of the participants wanted to have more face-to-face classes to complete the courses that imply their unwillingness to come out of the traditional pedagogical structure and ignorance about potential benefits of new DE methods and its flexibility. They were particularly frustrated about the job prospects of BOU graduates but they do not have clear idea how to improve the situation. One of the students, Sobur who is senior among them and a school teacher mentioned the need of VET in ODL programme but not in details. A sound policy framework for distance education (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2009; Gulati, 2008) may fill the knowledge deficit in this regard.

Teacher Tutors

Findings of the focus group conducted with five teacher tutors of Bangladesh Open University in Jhikargacha Sub-district, suggest a positive attitude towards distance education and its impact on society. The comment of Jahangir is highly relevant to the emergent theme of integrating vocational courses in ODL programmes:

Now the BOU program is mainly syllabus based theoretical education. There is no vocational education and training courses available in the BOU program. Therefore VET can be introduced.... If people think about BOU graduate as second category, then it is their problem and they should change their attitude ... the subject matters should be revised in terms of familiar topics and practical orientation ... I think ICT should be added to every courses of BOU.

The above representative commentary of Jahangir suggests a needs-based practically oriented curriculum with familiar topics, a sharp change in the existing theory based system that can be explained through structuration process by Giddens (1984). However, he opined that perception about BOU graduates type is not a social problem, it is individual comment only. Another teacher, Nawab made an interesting point, "… t*o survive and support their family people have to join in the job at early age and with less educational qualification"* which indicates the suitability and necessity of introducing VET oriented programme at particular age and education with respect to the context suggesting the neo-humanism approach of development (Sein, 2005).

Guardians

Findings of the focus group conducted with five guardians in Jhikargacha Sub-district, suggest a positive attitude towards distance education. They expressed their views about the quality of the BOU programme and its graduates, their job prospects and social recognition but they did not have much knowledge about the vocational education system and how the integrated system might play an important role in rural Bangladesh. However, one guardian, Anwar who graduated from the open education system completed 3 months youth development programme and got a NGO job in fisheries, therefore it resembles with the neo-humanism approach (Sein, 2005) of preparing oneself to the local job market and also Sen's (1999) work of having freedom to make choices in own life. His emphasis on the importance of incorporating practical oriented courses in the BOU programme suggests long-established structural changes among the individual and organisation (Giddens, 1984).

Another guardian, Nice opined that the job prospect of BOU graduates is equal to the general education in paper but they face difficulties in getting new jobs and quite often they cannot compete with the general students in the job place. According to her, social recognition is not a problem but technology based learning should be introduced to provide flexibility to the students. It indicates changes in the traditional transmission structure of learning usually from teacher to students to a more technology based constructive structure of learning through the structuration process (Giddens, 1984).

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Recommendations

Based on the focus group discussions, the review of literature and context of developing countries, the following recommendations emerged as worthy of consideration:

- Students, guardians and even the teacher tutors indicate a preference for on-campus general education over vocational education as well as distance education. The preferred strategy therefore would be to adapt currently academic-focused curricula to embrace vocational or practical subjects and develop integrated course materials as self-instructional modules, which are delivered in multiple formats (e.g. print, web and mobile apps based) with on demand support (synchronous and asynchronous) provided for better learning.

- Generating skills (soft and hard skills) appears to be the key to the new global agenda of the 'green economy', where individuals from all walks of life and in all countries would no longer depend on exploiting natural resources but rather concentrate on sustainable competencies for the future workplace (e.g. ecotourism, renewable energy). Therefore reform needs to support convergence in content of general and vocational education aimed at new skills development through ODL.

- Promoting cooperation and collaboration among institutions operating through ODL is a viable and cost-effective method of imparting quality education at all levels. Therefore, the activities of the SAARC Consortium on Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) in South Asian countries and Commonwealth Open School Association (COMOSA) in Commonwealth member states should be revised and further strengthened.

A well-structured policy framework would be important in assisting with the development and implementation of the above recommendations. Industry and community participation should also be integrated in the process at all levels**.**

Conclusion

The integration of vocational and academic education in open and distance education, particularly in developing nations, should not be seen as an option but rather as a necessity. Such an integrated curriculum will motivate changes in attitudes towards self-employment and further education and ease the transition from study to work. The typical student in an open school is already disadvantaged and facing many barriers in breaking into the job market. Such a student will be at a high risk of unemployment if the ODL system does not equip them with the skills and knowledge required by the job market. Findings of the focus group discussions with students, teachers and guardians in Bangladesh revealed support for integration of vocational and academic education. The concerns of participants regarding job prospects of distance education graduates and their social recognition could be eased through an integrated education system, which empowers young people to engage in productive and sustainable livelihoods. Therefore, the educationists and policy makers of developing countries need to consider short term and long term plans to put an integrated system into practice, to hopefully assist communities to become better equipped to deal with 21st century issues.

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