

# Open and Distance Education in a Deltaic Nation The Case of Bangladesh

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## **The Epilogue:**

Had Professor Walter Perry been alive today, the founder architect (VC) of the first Open University in the world—the UK Open University—would have been astonished to see the worldwide expansion of open and distance learning (ODL) despite numerous doubts and attacks from some conservative educationists. Around sixty open universities with only one mode—distance mode—are now reigning the education sector globally through providing education to those who need it but could not afford it due to a variety of reasons, including lack of time, accommodation scarcity and costs in the conventional educational institutions, hassles of going to urban areas for admission, poverty, lack of security, inadequate transportation facilities, and many others. Seeing the success and understanding the tremendous potential of ODL, the campus-based universities and institutions are in large number in different parts of the world are coming forward with distance mode education. The tremendous advancement in ICT has further boosted the progress. Thus, we see many organizations are now offering MOOCs and online courses for the benefits of the hither-to-deprived population. Recent evidence indicates that more and more traditional universities in the USA, UK, Australia, and Africa are offering ODL programs—examples include UNISA, Athabasca, MIT, Boston, Charles Sturt University, just a few of the hundreds.

Where does Bangladesh stand? ODL first took off the ground in 1956 in a lukewarm way in the form of radio broadcast of nonformal programs. Over the years, it has taken a solid ground at the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) that began its journey in 1992 with the passing of the BOU Act, 1992 in the Parliament. Very slow beginning, but now it is the seventh largest teaching university among all the universities in the world in terms of total enrolments that crossed five hundred fifty thousand and now is approaching six hundred thousands, with a vision of upscaling it to one million by 2025. BOU is the only ODL university in the country with no other institutions embarking on distance education in the true sense of the term.

## **The Transition and Transformation:**

Capitalizing on the initial development, the rapid transformation began in 2013 with the assumption of office by the present administration. The new administration carried out a 'situation analysis' of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) by using SWOT Framework for identification of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and thereafter established evidence-based goals in consultation with the internal stakeholders, and then adopted a 'Turnaround Strategy' for revival. The SWOT analysis identified several challenges in the areas of administration, infrastructures, human resources, examination system, academic management, media operation and field management. The rejuvenation of the situation warranted a well-articulated 'big push' with a carefully prepared master plan following a result-based MBO approach. A multi-pronged salvation strategy was adopted based on the inputs put forward by the internal stakeholders. They were given absolute freedom to set pragmatic and achievable goals and strategies for their work-places.

All working in the university gradually passed through a planned transformation process resulting in converting the 'analogue' mentality into 'digital' mentality. The paradigm shift led to the creation of a strong sense of ownership among all staff who received appropriate need-based training and enjoyed adequate freedom in the workplace. A well-planned team management system was introduced along with systematic process reengineering. The cross-functional work—teams worked relentlessly with enthusiasm and a love for their own institution. This led to the development of a 'family concept'—a BOU-Family (*Baubi Paribar*). Nobody now talks of "I did it"; everybody talks of "we did it". They have developed in themselves the attitude of 'together we can do everything that we need to do'. This positive attitude has created proactive mentality, which is very essential for marching ahead in any endeavor, big or small.

Along with a total overhauling of the Media Center with infrastructural renovation and establishment of new digital studios, academic programs were revitalized with the assistance of the full-time faculty members and external resource persons from other universities. Extensive training programs were organized for the faculty members in e-learning, ODL, Learning Management System, operation of Interactive Virtual Classrooms and digital content development.

A sea-change is now evident in the examination system which was necessary for replacing the traditional system of result-processing and publication. A crash program was undertaken for the use of appropriate software for online registration and tracking of the tutors/examiners as well as distribution of exam scripts, processing of results, entry of marks in the software directly by the examiners, decentralization of the script collection & distribution system, fixing up the time period for results publication at maximum 60 days (in reality it could be done in 40 days in 2015 and 2016), establishment of one-stop service center and Student Lounges for the learners, installation of high speed Litho machines for result processing and last but not the least, consolidation of over 500 exam centers into around 300+ exam centers for better conduct of exams. This organizational restructuring has yielded tremendous positive outcomes—only a few exam-related complaints are now coming to the head office compared to the thousands every year in the past.

The unique endeavor for ‘spot evaluation of scripts’ in the examination hall is a grand success at the pre-tertiary programs (called Niche Program) developed for the new recruits of the Army, Navy and Air Force. Under this system, it is now possible to publish results for the niche program in just one week. Plans are underway for the replication of the spot evaluation system in the other public examinations.

Human resource development is the top priority at BOU. The training system has itself been redefined – only need-based training approach is followed—the trainees determine what and how they would be trained. The Institutional Quality Assurance Cell is working for ensuring quality of education and management. Organizing and participating in national and international seminars on current academic issues is now a common phenomenon. The e-Learning Center of BOU has a total of four Interactive Virtual Classrooms (IVCRs) embedded with Learning Management System/e-Platforms, supplemented by the web TV and web Radio in the media center. The ‘Mock Village’ in the campus - a unique artificial village having the traditional touch of the typical villages – is a popular destination for those who have the urge for a serene stay out of hassles of the busy cities. One will see here the cow-driven cart, deep-dug well of water (*Indira*), cottages made of mud and hey, tin-shed small houses, ‘*dhenki*’, rural kitchen, a small pond with small fish and wood-built ‘*ghat*’, cow-shelter (*goal ghar*), gate with banana plants, corner pitha shop, and many more. You can sleep here in the cottages with the touch of serene breeze and wake up with the ‘*kichirmichir*’ of the humming birds and the ‘*kuk kuruk ku*’ of the awesome red-feathered cocks.

A well-planned waste management system is conspicuous by the presence of the 'Green Man' having two bins in his bicycle, driving around the campus round the clock, picking up anything that he finds on the campus-streets. The Green Man is now the clean-icon of the campus. Combined with the beautiful gardens all over the campus, the newly built main gate has enhanced the real beauty of the campus.

The totally overhauled recruitment and selection system at BOU is the role model for many educational institutions. Candidates for teaching positions are required to appear at four consecutive tests of different types—Written Test for assessing language proficiency; Computer Literacy Test for assessing knowledge in using Microsoft Office and Internet; Video Screening Test for assessing verbal communication capability in studio environment; and lastly, Interview for assessing the candidates' grooming, teaching aptitude and personality. The candidates for the officer positions appear at three tests (excluding the video screening test). This reformation of the recruitment system has become a boon to the university—'*tadbir*' (undue influence) has now been reduced down to the nil, and consequently, competent and meritorious candidates are being recruited without any nepotism and favoritism. Candidates' background checking and verification of the academic documents are a part of the recruitment process. Similarly, the provision of transfer from one working place to another has been made employee-friendly. Transfer is resorted to only for the best interest of the university. Prior to any transfer, the incumbents are consulted, their voices are heard and final decision is taken usually after taking into account their expectations and opinions. Gone are the days of so-called 'punishment transfer.'

### **The Revolution:**

Management in the university has been redefined. Immediately upon assumption of the office of the vice chancellor, the first task that I thought to be the most important was to bring about a fundamental change in the existing management system in the university. The first thing that we did was university-wide consultations in a participative manner with all the employees, including academic staff, from the top administrators down to the janitors with the purpose of gleaning what was actually happening in this nationwide multi-center, multi-program university. Several challenges appeared as the culprits to the further development of the university: acute inter-and-intra-group rivalry,

unhealthy academic environment, strained interdepartmental and interpersonal relationships, weak linkage of the headquarters with the field offices (regional and sub regional centers), absence of performance monitoring and evaluation, undue interference of a section of academic and non-academic staff in administration, deadlock in media production, poorly designed website, non-existence of the use of ICT in university management and other related areas. In response to the situations, a number of cross-functional 'work teams' were developed, for example, technology team for developing Education Apps, website reformation team, media production team, video set design team, video editing team, mobile technology innovation team, LMS development team, Virtual Classrooms operation team, e-Learning Center development and management team, content development team, separate technical teams for creation of Web Radio and Web TV channels, ERP development team, OSAPS development team, teams for developing e-books, BOUTube, video streaming of live classes, Open Education Resources (OER) repository, online admission and result management system, tutors and coordinators management system, certificate inventory system, online program development, and many more). All this efforts have resulted in a revolution of the entire management system of the university. Monthly/bimonthly general assembly of all employees/teachers has been made a regular phenomenon for exchanging views, generating new ideas, identification of potential problems, soliciting suggestions for improvement and above all, for ensuring sustainable qualitative improvement, a pragmatic mechanism was instituted for building rapport among the employees. We value the voices of the employees. It works; works tremendously. Now none will see in the campus any conflict, any muddling, not to speak of non-cooperation and negligence to work.

Academic Programs have been re-energized through launching several market-oriented new academic degree programs including MPhil and PhD programs. Unique niche-based pre-tertiary programs, for the first time, have been launched for the Army, Navy and Air Force. We have made education absolutely free for the children and grand children of the freedom fighters. All textbooks (over 450) have been uploaded to the university website, in addition to uploading of all the video/audio lectures/presentations in the BOUTube and YouTube. Digital content is being supplied to the selected learners in micro-SD cards for use in the cell phones without using the Internet. Students now have free access to

our IVCRs, web TV and web Radio as well as to the e-platform/Learning Management System. The education delivery system has found a new definition at Bangladesh Open University.

### **The Challenges:**

Several challenges are apparent for ODL in Bangladesh. First, media literacy for teachers/instructors and learners. Second, absence of the culture of content sharing among the educational institutions. Third, inability of learners in using OER books available in English. Fourth, difficulty in learner-friendly content development. Fifth, traditional mindset of external resource persons/tutors. Sixth, language deficiency of learners, both in vernacular and English. Seventh, shifting from graduate-oriented teaching-learning to competency-oriented teaching-learning for producing graduates with wisdom and creativity. Last but not the least, putting the learners at the heart of the education system.

### **The Aspirations:**

Our destination is still a few steps away from where we stand now. Our journey for reaching everyone at an affordable cost by using information technology is continuing. In this journey, we have a number of aspirations: first, BOU has a dire need for an independent Education TV channel. Second, Our plan includes establishment of Interactive Virtual Classrooms in all the regional and sub-regional centers. Thirdly, exploration of Niche Markets for the hitherto neglected sections of people such as women entrepreneurs, village farmers, *confined and deprived Chitmohal* residents, public administrators and so on. Fourthly, fully online academic programs at the postgraduate level. Fifthly, establishment of international study centers, for serving the migrant workers.

### **The Dreams:**

Dreams should never stop. We all at BOU are dreaming–dreaming for a better future for our children, a glorious future for our next generations, an educated youth force for sustaining our development endeavor, and a *vibrant* Bangladesh free of poverty and mismanagement.