Opportunities and Challenges of Higher Education through ODL: A Study on the MBA programs of Bangladesh Open University

Theme: Skill Development

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ABSTRACT

To cope with the local and global changes and competitiveness, the people engaged in top level and mid-level managerial positions must be equipped with proper knowledge and skill of administering businesses. Therefore, the tertiary education programs in business management areas through ODL courses have become highly popular and important due to the flexibility constraints in the on-campus education system. However, the question of quality divide in higher education through is yet to be resolved. Bangladesh Open University (BOU) launched some professional graduate programs like MBA, Commonwealth Executive MBA (CEMBA) and Commonwealth Executive MPA. A significant number of students are attending these programs. Some students have already been graduated too. It is now important to know how these programs contribute to the professional skill development of the learners. This paper aims at identifying the opportunities and challenges with the MBA program offered by Bangladesh Open University. The paper finally recommends some strategies for overcoming the challenges with MBA program through ODL. The scope of ICT intervention, cross border collaboration and social mobilization have been discussed in the paper carefully/

Keywords: ODL, Higher education, Quality issues, Collaboration, ICT use, Social mobilization

1. INTRODUCTION

Education as we all know is a key to development for a nation as well for an individual. By the term higher education, we normally understand education at the tertiary level beyond the higher secondary level. It would, therefore, include education provided in the universities and undergraduate and post graduate colleges.(Islam.F.).

Open and distance learning (ODL) is used as a generic term to comprise all patterns of student-cantered learning process in which the teachers has only a limited role. ODL is a self-paced learning process where in the student can frame his own timetable according to the time at his disposal. This

make it possible for the people employed in full time jobs, housewives with numerous household chores and youth waiting for employment to carry on education at the leisure available to them, ODL makes use of various communication media like printed texts, broadcast, audio-video cossets and computer to carry knowledge to the students. Therefore ODL can be defined as the teaching – learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by a modern communication media.(Chander. N.J).

Higher education through ODL was first introduced by the BOU in Bangladesh. Latter some private universities were also given permission. Because of misuse of the mode, the private universities have now been barred from offering higher education through distance mode.

With the rapid changes in the global economic environment, every firm or business enterprise is facing competitiveness from the local and global rivals. To cope with the local and global changes and competitiveness, the people engaged in top level and mid-level managerial positions must be equipped with proper knowledge and skill of administering businesses. Therefore, enhancing the skill of the existing managers and increasing the availability of graduates in business administration for meeting the future demand for the managers has become a crying need everywhere in the word. It is even more important in the case of the emerging economies like Bangladesh. However, traditional on-campus education system fails to meet this growing demand for skilled business manager or business graduate. Especially the existing manager cannot be trained through on campus programs because of their job nature- they are unable to spare time MBA program usually include discussion, role playing, case analysis etc. Depending on nature of the target groups, the program sometime differ in terms of study material use, media use, delivery method, evaluation method etc. The program to be designed for the top level managers should be different from that for the desk-level managers to some extent. However, the same basic stages of curriculum design, development, evaluation and revision are to be followed in majority of the MBA education program.

Although higher education is essential for the rapid progress of the country, there are a number of challenges still remain with higher education in Bangladesh. Some of the major challenges are as follows:

> *(i) Making higher education accessible to more students (ii) Geographical imbalance in the location of universities (iii) Language of instruction (iv) Challenge of having a proper campus (iv) Challenge in research (v) Challenge of getting adequate teacher (vi) Challenge of financial resources (vi) Challenge of value education (vii) Challenge of attaining quality (viii) Challenge of employability (ix) Challenges of governance..*

Realizing the aforementioned facts, BOU launched MBA program in 1998. It was the first ever higher education program in business administration through ODL in Bangladesh. Since its inception, MBA program of BOU got popularity among professionals ranging from bankers up to army officers. In addition, BOU launched two other graduate programs such as Commonwealth Executive MBA (CEMBA) and Commonwealth Executive MPA. It is now important to know how these programs contribute to the professional skill development of the learners. A significant number of students are attending these programs. Some students have already been graduated too. It is now important to know how these programs contribute to the professional skill development of the learners. This paper aims at identifying the opportunities and challenges with the MBA program offered by Bangladesh Open University. The paper finally recommends some strategies for overcoming the challenges with MBA program through ODL. The scope of ICT intervention, cross border collaboration and social mobilization have been discussed in the paper carefully/

2. **OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of the study are to critically examine the opportunities and challenges of higher education through ODL, especially MBA program of BOU, and identify the strategies for overcoming challenges.

The specific objectives are:

- To highlight the importance of professional higher education through ODL in Bangladesh;
- To evaluate the effectiveness and potentiality of the MBA program offer by BOU through ODL;
- To identify the challenges with the MBA program of BOU in terms of quality, recognition, sustainability and flexibility etc.
- To recommend some policies to overcome the challenges faced by the MBA program
- To investigate the scope of cross-border collaboration, ICT use, and social mobilization in addressing the challenges with MBA program of BOU..

3. **METHODOLOGY**

Both primary and secondary data have been used in the analysis. For primary data, structured questionnaires have been distributed among the students and tutors at two different study centers of MBA program offered by BOU. The nature of the study was basically both quantitative as well as qualitative. Quantitative research requires secondary data which are published. The requisite secondary data collected from annual reports, relevant journals, articles and research paper, website etc. The qualitative study requires direct interview for the collection of primary data. The requisite primary data to be collected under direct interview, observation and discussion method. A well-structured questionnaire developed for the purpose.

The survey was conducted on a sample of the students of MBA program of BOU.A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire were distributed among 200 students in four important regional resources centers such as Dhaka , Chittagong ,Rajshahi and Jessore of BOU, but only 150 questionnaire were received back., being filled up by the sample students. The proportion of the male and female students of the program was 65.25 percent and 34.75 percent respectively. But their age distribution was significantly different. The majority of MBA students were up to 35 years of age. The MBA students being 48% non government service holders a large portion, 22% are government service holders, 5% are from defense and rest of the regular students (who are not in service).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study suffers from the following limitations:

1. Scope of the study is limited to only 150 MBA students. The scope if extended to about 400 the finding of the study would be more representative.
2. There are four tutorial centers in the country, mainly in the city of Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Jessore. Due to the long distance of this center some delays were met delivery questionnaire to the center based respondents.
3. Since all most all respondent are jobholders; they are available only Friday in a week. Such limited availability of the students has needed difficult to explain each of the questions in detailed to each and every respondent.

4. **OVERALL EDUCATIONAL SCENARIO IN BANGLADESH**

The education system in Bangladesh is mostly dominated by the on-campus system, though the capacity is limited. Started in 1956, distance education system was running side by side with on-campus system; however, it got wider scale since the establishment of Bangladesh Open University in 1992.

4.1. **On-campus education in Bangladesh**

In the case of tertiary education, the capacity of the on-campus system is very limited. Both public (31) and private universities (51) together got the capacity to absorb only 439406 students (7.8% of the 15+ population) and also the quality is still a very big issue in the case of tertiary education provided by private universities. Figure 1 shows the enrolment and completion rates in secondary and tertiary education in Bangladesh.

Figure 1: Enrolment and completion rates in secondary and tertiary education
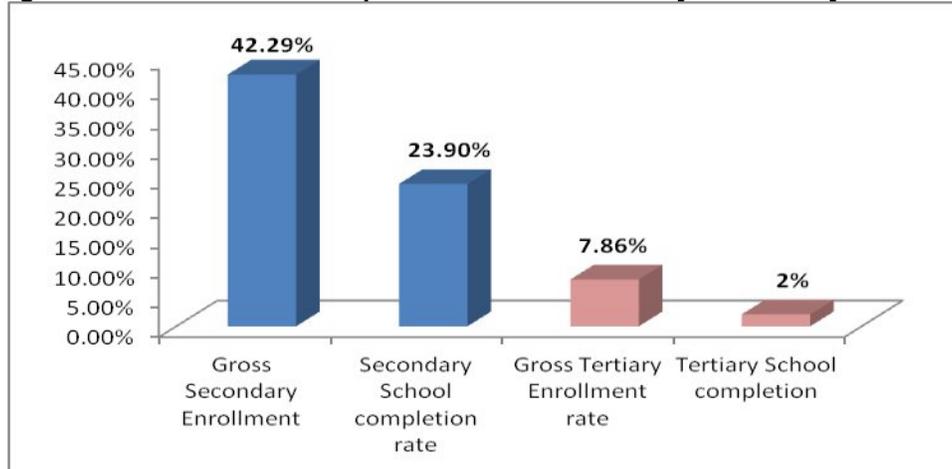
Source: World Bank, 2009-2010

However, despite all these initiatives, the challenge still remains as the population size continues to increase and consequently, the demand for university education is rising. The on-campus educational set-up is not growing with the growth in the demand for education. It is not unrealistic too in this resource poor developing country. The establishment of the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) was thus an appropriate step to complement the gap.

4.2. **ODL Practices in Bangladesh**

4.2.1. *Evolution of ODL in Bangladesh:* Distance education in Bangladesh started its journey in 1956.Bangladesh Open University is the only public university in Bangladesh which offers mainly ODL programs. The aim of BOU is to transform the country's vast human resources into an educated and trained work-force by extending to them a wide range of academic programs both formal and non-formal. BOU`s programs targets at every citizen who is interested to learn, particularly working people and women and the socially disadvantaged groups who cannot enrol into the academic and training programs offered by the on-campus universities. BOU has already set up 12 Regional Resources Centers (RRCs) and 80 Local Coordinating Offices (LCOs) in different parts of the country. There are about 800 study centers all over the country.

4.1.1. *MBA Program*
MBA Program is the second largest program of the school of Business of BOU in terms of the enrolment. Enrolment rate is increasing gradually. Figure 2 shows the trend in the enrolment in MBA program for last few years.

Figure 2: Enrolment in MBA Program
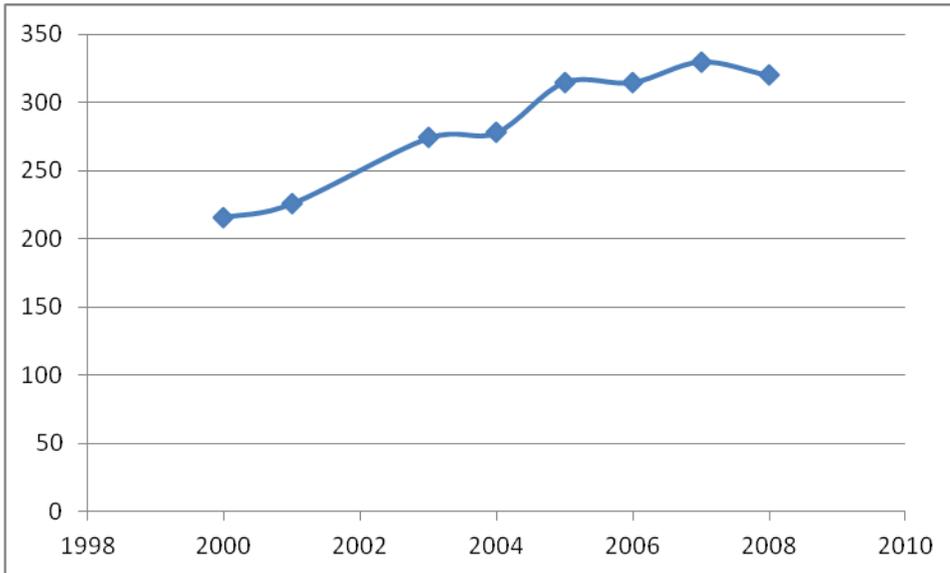
Source: Exam division, BOU (2013)

Figure 2 shows that the enrolment into MBA program of BOU is growing over time though growth rate is low because of the seat limitations. The people engaged in different jobs usually prefer to have the MBA degree from BOU. In our random sampling, it has been found that almost 90% of the learners are service holders and business persons. Only 10% are the job seekers. Among the learners, 90% are males and rest is females. Figure 3 shows that.

**Figure 3: Categories of the learners of MBA program**
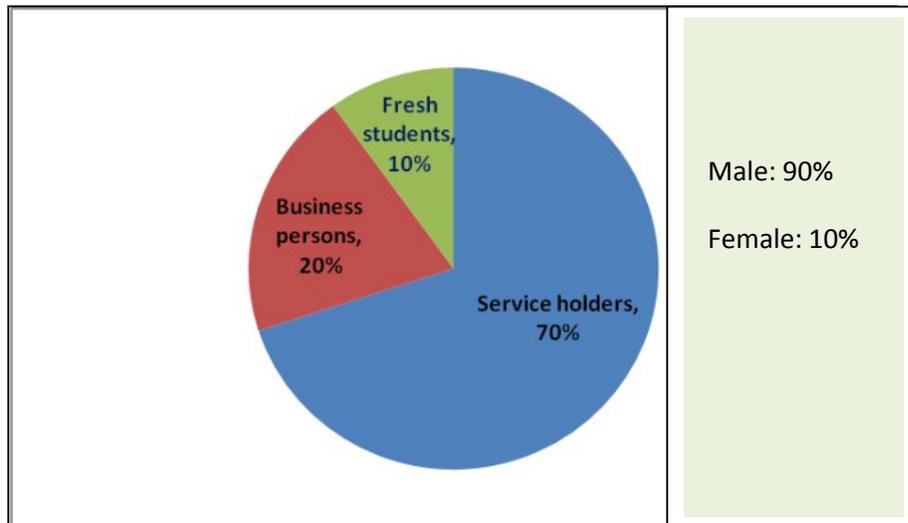
5.   OPPORTUNITIES WITH MBA PROGRAM THROUGH ODL IN BANGLADESH
As the demand for the manpower with business management skills is growing fast and the on-campus system is not able to produce business graduates sufficiently, the role of ODL is sky rocketed in Bangladesh. The following opportunities have been identified with the MBA program offered by BOU through ODL:

5.1. Tutorial sessions on Fridays: The tutorial sessions of the MBA program iare organized only on Fridays. At specified study centers, he learners can meet with their fellow learners and tutors to discuss the concepts and theories that he/she cannot understand by himself/herself. Usually, the learners remain free on the weekends. So, the learners do not need to hurt their works for attending the tutorial sessions. In our study, we found that most of the learners have chosen the MBA program of BOU because of Friday only tutorial sessions. Figure 4 shows that.

Figure 4: Factors that attract learners to MBA program of BOU
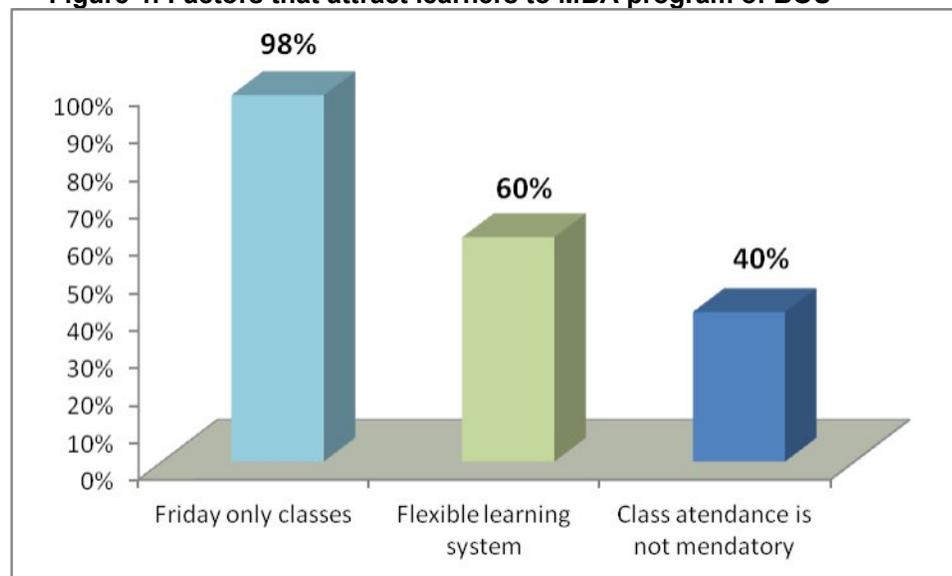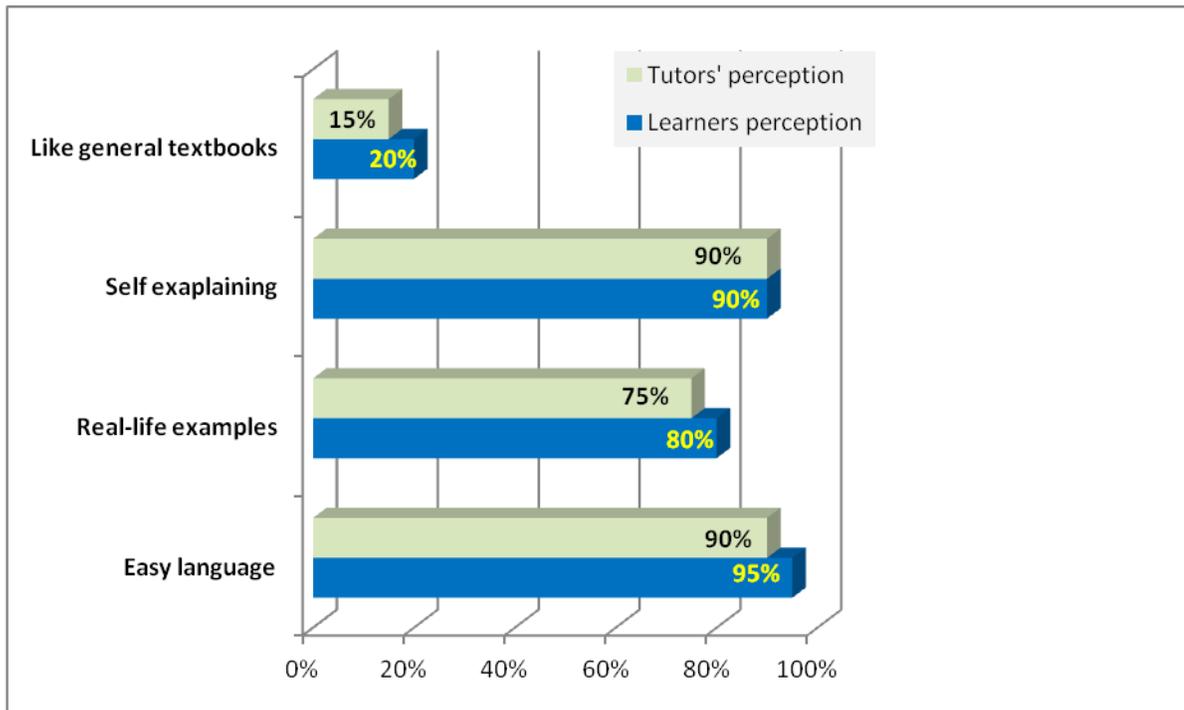

Source: Personal survey, 2013

Figure 4 shows that learners usually prefers BOU's MBA program because the classes are arranged only on the Fridays. As most of the learners are service holders, it is convenient for them to pursue the program as the classes are on Fridays.

5.2. Decentralized tutoring systems: The tutorial sessions are conducted at different regions simultaneously. Therefore, mobility of the learners due to job assignments cannot bar their study as they are free to attend the tutorial sessions anywhere. In our survey, we found 15 learners who registered into other study centers are attending the tutorial sessions at Dhaka study center as they have been transferred to their Dhaka offices. This scenario is mostly for the learners working at banks, public services and defense.

5.1.   **Self-learning materials (SLMs):** The busy learners do not manage time to come to the library. They like to have the study materials in a format so that they can understand the concepts and theories by themselves. The SLMs designed for MBA learners are very easy to understand and the real-life cases and examples in the SLMs help them comprehend the application of the concepts and theories. Figure 5 below shows the perception of the learners and tutors regarding the SLMs for the MBA learners.

Figure 5: Perceptions of learners and tutors on SLMs of MBA Program

Source: Personal survey, 2013

5.2. ***Audio-visual supports:*** There are some audio-visual supports are provided to the learners through radio and TV broadcasts. Although the supports are not sufficient to cover all the topics of the courses, the programs are considered as helpful for the learners. They can have an explanation on the difficult parts of the courses, which sometimes works as substitutes for the tutorial sessions to the busy learners. Figure 6 shows the perceptions of the learners regarding the TV and radio programs relating to their courses. In our survey, it has been found that the learners in general endorse the excellence of the BOU's TV programs. They believe that the TV programs are highly effective. But in the case of the radio programs, learners are not that much interested. Although they think that the radio programs are complementary to the printed textbooks, they don't find these programs effective for their study.

Figure 6: Perceptions of the learners regarding A-V programs
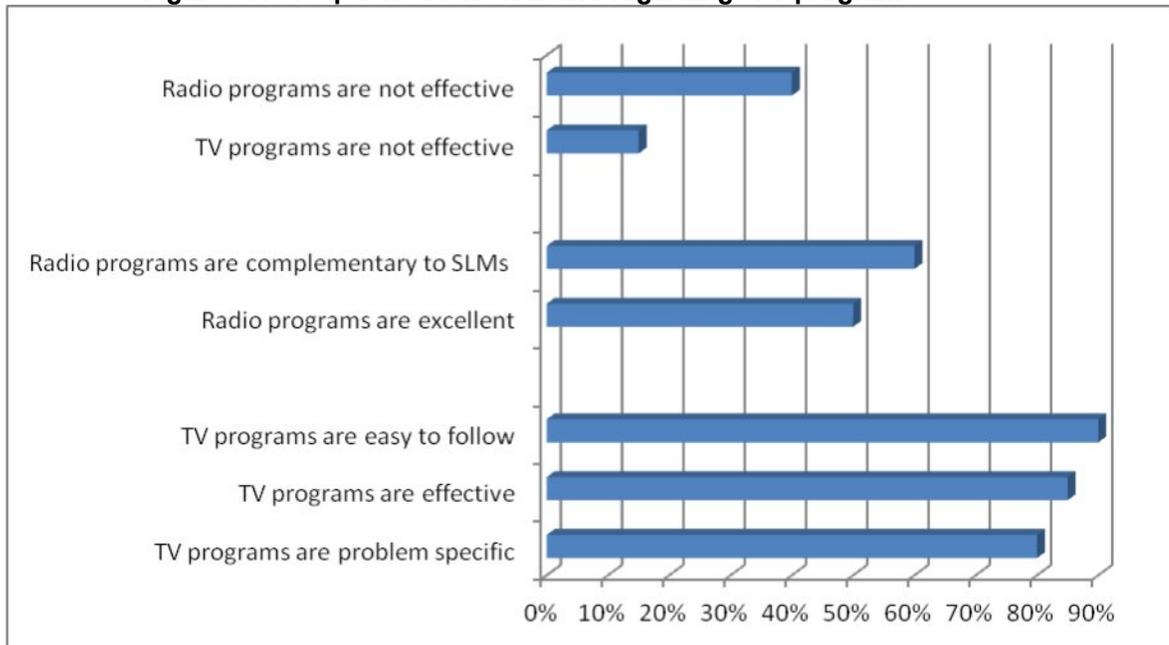
5.3. ***Learning at any age:*** MBA learners are usually 30+. Therefore, it becomes difficult for them to attend the regular on-campus programs. So, they feel much comfortable with BOU's MBA program as it is flexible in terms of age. Here the learners get the scope to have people from same age groups with whom they feel comfortable. As they are self-learners, doesn't matter even if there is any age-divide.

5.4. ***Rapid increase in the human capital:*** In the face of MDGs and Bangladesh Vision 2021, availability of skilled manpower is highly required in Bangladesh. By expanding the business management programs through ODL, it is possible to increase the number of skilled people in the country rapidly.

5.5. ***Lower use of resources:*** since ODL programs usually enjoy economies of scale and also economies of scope, the cost of education can be reduced a lot by using appropriate technologies. Therefore, a large number of people can be trained in a very affordable way. As the cost declines as the enrolment rate increases, highest number of graduates can be produced through ODL by using minimum resources, which is really crucial for a developing country like Bangladesh.

6.   CHALLENGES WITH MBA PROGRAM OF BOU

Although MBA program through ODL is highly important in enhancing the skills of the current and prospective managers in a developing country like Bangladesh, there are some challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the quality and efficiency of MBA program offered by BOU:

6.1. ***Periodic revision of the study materials:*** The study materials of MBA program of BOU are undoubtedly of high quality; however, the time-to-time revision is missing. As a result, learners sometimes are missing the latest developments in their field of study and thus they fail to have desired knowledge and skills.

6.2. ***Poor learners support services:*** Trained manpower is essential for effective management of the learner support in ODL, BOU is still suffering from the lack of skilled manpower due to the limited training and development initiatives. Most of the support staffs and officers are with traditional on-campus mentality and they can't realize the learners' needs. So, the learners do not get real-time supports from them. As the learner supports are only face-to-face, very few number of staffs and officers face difficulties to provide their learner with desired supports.

6.3. ***Frustration due to delayed decisions:*** The decision making process at BOU is sometimes very much bureaucratic, which creates unnecessary delays in making and implementing decisions relating to learner support and examinations. This kind of delay makes the learners frustrated and they cannot maximize their learning outcome.

6.4. ***Disparity among the rural and urban learners in ICT use:*** ICT use can make the MBA program of BOU more efficient and flexible. However, there exists a digital divide among the learners of the urban areas and the rural areas. So, online courses cannot be launched due to the lack of e-readiness and poor access to ICTs.

6.5. ***Lack of incentives for the innovative ideas and works:*** Engagement in internal group politics sometimes becomes more preferred and rewarded than the academic excellences and innovative works. As a result, required innovations are missing in higher education programs of BOU, which hurts the overall performance and popularity of BOU higher education programs in general.

6.6. ***Inflexible learner management system:*** In most cases, BOU uses the face-to-face and print based learner management system. Learners are always bound to come to the regional or local centers to have learner supports. For a single task, they some need to come several times, which is truly difficult for them. This difficulty is very high for the female learners.

6.7. ***Consideration of Gender needs:*** Right now BOU doesn't have any gender policy. As a result, gender needs in learner support system, tutoring and other administrative activities cannot be cared properly, which sometimes makes the female learners frustrated.

7. **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Higher education through ODL is certainly an important means of developing human capital in the resource poor developing country like Bangladesh. MBA program offered by BOU got popularity in the recent years, but it is essential to ensure the quality and efficiency of the program for the betterment of the nation. It is true that we need quantity, but not at the cost of quality shirking. If ODL can be practiced properly, we can have both quantity and quality simultaneously. Below are some of our recommendations for the enhancement of the quality, efficiency and recognition of MBA program of BOU:

7.1. **Using ICT:** For ensuring flexibility and quality in the delivery of MBA program, use of ICT is a must. BOU may use ICT in its learner support system and course deliveries depending on the access, affordability and readiness of the learners. It seems that the country is now in a better position in terms of access to ICT. A significant increase in the use of cell phone, internet and computer has already been occurred in last few decades. Our survey findings shows that most of the MBA learners have access to computer and internet. So, it will be useful if some courses can be offered online and the learner support system should be to some extent online too.

7.2. **Sharing resources with others:** For enhancing the quality and efficiency of the MBA program, sharing of the educational resources is a must. It reduces the cost as well as enhances the quality of the program. BOU must design and implement OER policy soon. It will help BOU use the quality materials with relatively low cost.

7.3. **Reinforcing the real-time interaction:** To enhance the confidence of the learners, BOU must initiate real-time interaction with the learners. Effective use of ICTs will be useful for ensuring the real-time interaction.

7.4. **Guidelines for peer-to-peer interaction:** Since the learners remain isolated, it is essential for creating an environment where peer-to-peer interaction is possible. It will reduce the learners' feeling of isolation. A set of guidelines must be designed and implemented for encouraging the peer-peer interactions at the study centers.

7.5. **Making BOU a best place for work:** BOU authority must provide incentives to the teachers and officers so that the quality teachers and officers remain with the university. Innovation and sincerity must be given highest weight to attract the quality people to BOU.

7.6. **Consideration of gender needs:** ODL got high potentials to include the female population who cannot have education from on-campus system due to a number of social, cultural and economic barriers. BOU should formulate and implement a gender policy where gender needs will be addressed in all spheres of ODL practices.

7.7. **Cross border cooperation:** To enhance the quality of the MBA program, BOU may go for collaboration with some leading foreign universities. The cross-border cooperation in regional and global levels may be formed for sharing the quality education and minimizing the cost of education, which is crucial for the developing countries like Bangladesh. To meet the high demand of human capital in the emerging developing countries like Bangladesh, cross-border cooperation in education can be a good solution.

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