

Learners and Tutors Perceptions Regarding the Quality of the Study Materials and Support Services: Formulate a QA Framework for BOU

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Abstract

Introduction: Quality Assurance (QA) is essential for improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness which increase public accountability. QA criterion must be clear and transparent; it should be achievable and must meet stakeholder's expectations. This study tried to explore the quality of the study materials, programs and quantify the support services of Bangladesh Open University (BOU), which leads to formulate a QA framework for BOU.

Methods: A Cross-sectional study was designed to collect data from October to December 2015 using a semi-structured separate set of questionnaire for learners and tutors. Sample frame of this study were learners and tutors. Study centers were selected randomly along with its learners and tutors, and sample size was 615. The questionnaire was designed using the 13 (thirteen) criterion which have been identified in Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open Schooling by Commonwealth of Learning. A pilot test was conducted to confirm the clarity of the items.

Result: There were 434 learners and 95 tutors responded in the study. Around halve of the learners (48.4%) and tutors (52.6%) expressed that the quality of module was easy to understand, whereas one-fourth of the learners were not interested to go through the module independently. Moreover, 50% learners and tutors thought that knowledge gained from the program might be applicable and useful for the next level of education. About half (52.8%) of the learners did not received any support services regarding tutorial and practical sessions from deferent offices. Whereas, 50% tutors did not get satisfactory level of cooperation from the Regional and Sub-regional Offices. Enthought, examination and published of result was not held timely. Quality media program need to be broadcasted in desired time and the university should adapt ICT based teaching-learning approaches.

Conclusion: This study identified some significant QA criteria at BOU, which leads to formulate a QA framework for BOU context. Results of this study may provide valuable baseline information for the policy-makers to develop a standard QA framework for BOU.

Key Words: Learners, Tutors, Perception, Quality, Framework, BOU.

Introduction

All distance educational institute should have a standard quality in terms of academic and administrative support and these qualities should be assured for the stakeholders and it must be maintaining by the providers. Open and distance learning approaches have some different modalities from the conventional education system. Moreover, the new pedagogical approach in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) raises new quality questions. To attain the optimum achievement in the ODL delivery and process, it would be essential to implement and maintain the entire criterion for quality assurance. In the lifelong learning sector, like any other educational sector, prospective learners, employees, decision and policy makers, all need clear information about the quality of courses, programs and qualifications that will be acquired.

Quality Assurance (QA) is essential for improving and sustaining organizational efficiency and effectiveness which lead to increase public acceptability and accountability. There are lots of QA criterions which have been established by the different organization according to the countries or stakeholders' demands. Different open and distance educational institutes also have developed their own QA framework for their internal and external accountability. In

these contexts, Commonwealth of Learning also developed a standard QA criterion for most of all open and distance educational institutes. There are QA frameworks and transnational qualification frameworks developed nationally and internationally to guide and regulate ODL programs and institutions. Emerging trend has been developed quality assurance toolkits (Mishra, 2006) to guide institutions to develop their quality assurance policies. QA criterion must be clear and transparent; it should be achievable and must meet stakeholder's expectations.

A specific quality assurance strategy is not universally adoptable (Olojede, 2008) because distance education delivery system varies widely from institution to institution and one country to another country. As a result, the pace of development and process of maintenance of quality assurance on open and distance learning must be flexible (Granger and Gulliver, 1995) to the extent of practices without prescriptions. Quality is an incremental process (Daniel, 2005) involving continuous development along with the development of ODL institutions.

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has been providing a wide variety of distance education programs extending learning opportunities to people across the country. To create an opportunity for huge unskilled and less educated peoples, BOU was established in 1992 as the only public university to introduce multi-dimensional education through distance mode. BOU currently serves over 410,694 students nationwide and supported by academic and administrative management system with its main campus located at Gazipur in the capital city of Dhaka and 12 Regional Offices (ROs) throughout the country. BOU offers over 350 courses delivered through 32 formal and 19 non-formal academic programs under six schools. To teach in a distance, BOU uses a combination of multi-dimensional delivery media such as print, radio and TV broadcasts, audio-cassettes and semester or year wise face to face tutorial services. BOU is emerged as a new member of the mega-universities (Daniel, 1996) for its enrollment. Numerous studies show that education system of BOU is flexible, cost-effective and comparable standard to the conventional universities (Islam et al., 2006; Islam and Selim, 2008). Generally, the infrastructure and facilities for quality control is not adequate even in conventional institutions in developing countries. However, several innovative approaches have been proposed to overcome the barrier and improve the quality of the learning which is flexible to learners (Ross and Scanlon, 1995; Casanova et al., 2006; Kennepohl, 2007; Nigam and Joshi, 2007). The aim of this study was to evaluate the quality of the program and study materials of relevant programs as well as quantify the support services of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) for the learners and tutors which would be used to formulate a QA framework for BOU.

Methodology

A Cross-sectional study was designed to collect data from October to December 2015 using a validated semi-structured separate set of questionnaire from the learners and also from tutors of BOU. Based on the current personnel record, there were 135 academics and about 280 administrative staff were working at the institution during the study period. There are more than 1300 school, college and university those are represented as study centers of BOU where a total of 22,000 tutorial facilitators are engaged. Data was collected from the randomly selected study centers along with its learners and tutors separately. The sample size of this study was 615. The instrument of questionnaire was designed using 13 (thirteen) criterions, which were identified from some studies especially QA Toolkit for Open Schooling by Commonwealth of Learning. The questionnaire was divided into 10 sections. Section 1(one) was on respondent's biographical profile; Section 2 asked respondents to evaluate their knowledge on general attributes of ODL; Section 3 was on knowledge and skills about program and course design and development; Section 4 was on knowledge and abilities on tutorial facilitation; Section 5 was on knowledge and skills on assessment and evaluation; section 6 was knowledge on research and evaluation and evidence of output; and Section 7 asked respondents to evaluate the institution in terms of motivating competency development, etc. Some sections required responses to selected items on a five-point Likert type scale and scored as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. Data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) version 21.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA). A pilot test was conducted to confirm the clarity of the items using a sample of 8 academics and 12 learners before the instrument was administered to the sample group.

Result and Discussion

This study identified the learners' and tutors' observations regarding the quality of the study materials those were provided during the time of enrollment. Moreover, it was also evaluated the quality and standard of the programs and services that were provided by the support services of BOU. After analyzing the data, this study has drawn a conclusion a cut-off point of quality of the study materials, support services and standard of the program that lead to formulate a QA framework for BOU.

In this the study, there were 434 learners and 95 tutors were responded. Amongst the respondents, 62.2% (n=270) were male learners and 75.8% (n=72) were male tutors. About 80% (n=350) of the learners were under 30 years of age and around 81% (n=77) of tutors were >35 years of age. The average age of the learners were 25.5 years and ranged from 16 to 51 years. Moreover, the average age of the tutors were 44.4 years and ranged from 25 to 65 years.

1. Quality Perspective of Study Material

Both learners and tutors were asked regarding the quality of the language of module. Most of the learners and tutors said that the quality of the text materials was understandable and easy to read. To ensure the quality of teaching and reading, study materials must ensure the standard of the quality. This study also found that around 50% of the learners had been enrolled at their program to gain knowledge and 25% of them were enrolled to get higher salary in their present job, they also wanted to earn degree and wanted to get a new job after completion of the program.

All most 75% of the learners and tutors expressed that the modules were easily understandable and readable. Table 1 shows that 25.3% (n=110) of the learners were not interested to go through the module independently. Among of them 35.5% and 39.1% were stated that subject matter of the modules was not interested and not up to the mark, respectively. Whereas about 25.3% of them stated that presentation of the module was not attractive, and 23.6% responded that there was no coordination with the subject matter.

Table 1: The Reason why Learners did not Interest to Study

Reasons not to study independently by Learners	Yes, %	No, %
Subject Matter is not interested	35.5	64.5
Presentation of the module is not attractive	25.5	74.5
There have not any coordination	23.6	76.4
Module did not written as self-instructional style	29.1	70.9
Subject matter is not correct	14.5	85.5
Module is not up to date	39.1	60.9

This study also investigated the tutor's opinion regarding the subject matter of the program (Table 2). Amongst tutor, 57.9% of them stated that the content of the subject was correct and rest of them stated that subject matter was not written in correct way. Moreover, 71.6% tutors stated that the modules used to teach the learners were written in self-instructional module (SIM) format and rest 28.4% of them assumed that the study materials were not written as SIM format. Meanwhile, 29.6% tutors stated that the subject matter did not match logically with next and previous contents. Of them 40.7% also stated that subject was not up-to-the mark to gain proper knowledge from these modules. Whereas, nearly half (44.4%) of them directly answered that the study materials of BOU were not written in SIM format.

Table 2: Tutors opinion why Module was not Written as SIM Format (n=27, 28.4%)

Reason why not in SIM Format	Tutors Opinion	
	Yes, %	No, %
Subject matter did not matched	29.6	70.4
Module was not written as SIM	44.4	55.6
Subject matter is incorrect	7.4	92.6
Subject matter is not up to date	40.7	59.3

2. Quality of the Program

Quality of any program depends on some sensitive variables. These may be knowledge creation and its application; performance outcomes of learners and tutors related to the program; and the quality of the program where learners were studying and the way out of the improvement of that program.

This study shows that 65% learners and 51.6% tutors stated that the knowledge gained from the program might be applicable and useful for the next level of education. Whereas, 33.4% learners and 46.3% tutors expressed that acquired knowledge had no impact in their daily life. To ensure the quality of the program, BOU should offer those programs which are related to practical life and might be applicable for further studies.

3. What steps to be done to improve the programs quality?

What possible measures should be taken to improve the quality of study materials? Around 60% of the tutors were expressed that some changes could be done to improve the quality of the module. Whereas, 17.9% and 9.5% tutors were stated that massive changes should be taken and re-write all the module to improve the quality of the module, respectively (Table 3). Moreover, tutors were also asked about what measures should be taken to improve the overall quality of the programs of BOU. Tutors whom were involved in teaching and using the module have had the opportunity to explore the drawback of any courses (Table 4).

Table 3: What will be done to Improve the Quality of Study Materials?

What should be done?	Tutors Opinion	
	<i>n</i>	%
Re-write all modules	9	9.5
Massive change to be done	17	17.9
Some action to be done	57	60.0
All are OK	12	12.6
Total	95	100

Table 4 shows that about 63% tutors commented that their feedback should be incorporated if BOU authority is taken any initiative to improve the quality of any courses or program. Amongst tutors, 44.2% said that the module should be updated, 45.3% stated that BOU authority should be monitored the program throughout the year or semester wise. Similarly, 57.9% tutors were suggested that module should be distributed to the learners and tutors during the time of enrollment and beginning of the tutorials session; and 53.7% were stated that results should be published in time.

Table 4: What steps to be done to improve the program?

Steps to Improve the Program	Tutors Opinion by %	
	Yes	No
Monitoring	45.3	54.7
Regular evaluate the Text Materials	37.9	62.1
Incorporated tutor's comments on module	63.2	36.8
Include up to date information	44.2	55.8
Admission procedure should be easy	28.4	71.6
Distribute the module timely	57.9	42.1
Conduct tutorials timely	45.3	54.7
Conduct exam timely	45.3	54.7
Published result timely	53.7	46.3
Conduct regular meeting with stakeholders	18.9	81.1

To promote the currently acquired knowledge from the program and usefulness at higher level of education, BOU should be reformed and improved the quality and support services of the programs. The improvements include quality of the study materials and its presentation, overall curriculum of the program and the evaluation system.

4. Tutorial Facilities

To ensure the quality of teaching-learning process and levels of support services those were provided for the tutors and learners by the BOU were explored in this study. Amongst tutors, 78.9% stated that the university appointed qualified subject matter specialist as tutors; whereas only 25.6% tutor received training on open ODL system (Table 5). Moreover, 83.2% learners were communicated with the tutor to get help about their study but 15.8% tutors were not sincere to complete their courses at the stipulated time. Amongst the tutor, 67.4% were received appointment letter timely but it was very much unfortunate that 65.3 % of them faced lots of problem to receive their honorarium, and 84.2% were not satisfied with the amount of honorarium. To achieved an optimum level of outcome in tutoring BOU should careful about the support services to the tutors, Because in DE, tutors played a vital role to disseminate the education at the door steps of the learners. So, role of tutors and its facilitating factors would be a major issue to formulating a QA framework at BOU.

Table 5: Tutor Comments on Different Situation of DE

Tutors Perception on BOU	Tutor Comments by %	
	Yes	No
Did qualified tutor appointed?	78.9	21.1
Did tutor trained?	25.6	74.4
Did learner communicate with tutor?	83.2	16.8
Course content finished within time frame	15.8	84.2
Did you receive appointment letter timely?	67.4	32.6
Had any problem to get honorarium?	34.7	65.3
Did honorarium is satisfied?	15.8	84.2

Tutors were also asked regarding reasons why they did not complete the course within the time frame? About 46% tutors stated that the content of the course was more and 74.7% stated that the number of tutorial sessions were less (Table 6). They also pointed out that 16.8% of the learners were unable to understand the course materials and 15.8% were not interested to learning their course content during the semester.

Table 6: Reasons why did not Complete the Content within Time Frame

Reason why did not complete the content	Tutors Opinion by %			
	Yes	No	no response	Total
More content	46.3	42.1	11.6	100
Learners are unable to understand	16.8	71.6	11.6	100
Learners are not interested to learning	15.8	72.6	11.6	100
Few tutorial classes	74.7	13.7	11.6	100

5. Quality of Support Service

The success of any programs through distance education system depends on how much quality services have been provided to the stakeholder such as learners and tutors by the BOU.

Learners Attitudes towards Students Support Services

Study showed that 36.8% learners were expressed that tutorial services was good and 41.5% expressed that these were as usual, while 8% stated that these were not up to the mark (Fig. 1). Similarly, the quality of the services that provided by the sub-regional centers and regional centers of BOU were good and as usual while nearly 15% of the learners have had bitter experiences (Numan, 2007).



Figure 1: % Distribution of Students Attitudes Regarding BOU Services

Quality of Services of Study Center, Sub-regional Centers and Regional Centers

This study showed that 47.2% (n=205) learners were expressed that they have had received all types of suggestion, information and cooperation regarding tutorial session and practical session etc. from the study centers (Table 7). On the other hand, 52.8% learners stated that they have had not received some or no cooperation from the study center.

Table 7: Learners Opinion about the Cooperation of Study Center Services

Cooperation of study Center	Learners	
	<i>n</i>	%
Get all types of cooperation	205	47.2
Received some cooperation	203	46.8
Did not get any cooperation	26	6.0
Total	434	100

All the programs of BOU have been supported by the sub-regional center and regional centers. So, the support services of sub-regional center and regional centers are the key support to promote the activities of the university.

Similarly, nearly half of the tutors received sufficient support from the study center, sub-regional centers and regional centers. Moreover, 52.8% tutors did not receive any suggestion, information and cooperation regarding tutorial and practical sessions from the sub-regional centers and 50% tutors did not receive satisfactory level of cooperation from the respective RCs.

6. Examination System

An examination is an assessment to measure a test-takers knowledge, skill, aptitude, or classification in many other topics. This is usually shortened to 'exam' and is thought to be the best way to determine a person's progress in a certain area or subject. Exams can be written, oral or even physical and they normally result in a grade or percentage being given. Schools, colleges and even workplaces use examinations to try and put some kind of order of skill and intelligence. The university conducted its exam at the end of the semester or year.

Is the exam held and result published timely?

This study investigated that the university whether followed the schedule of examination or not. Nearly half (49.5%) of the learners and 20% tutors stated that the exams were held on due time. Whereas, 33.6% learners and 65.3% tutors expressed that exams were not conducted timely. Usually to publish any results take minimum two to three months. This study stated that 40.6% learners and 7.4% tutors have had gave their opinion that result was published at due time. Whereas, 51.8% learners and 43.2% tutors stated that result was published after five to six month later after completion of exam. Moreover, 49.5% tutors pointed out that it takes one year to publish some result. Moreover, more than 60% of learners and 63.2% tutors said that there have had some errors in the published result. Some suggestions were also given by the tutors to solve the error on the published results (Table 8). About half (50.5%) of the tutors stated that it would be wise to solve the queries as much as earlier. Nearly 49% tutors stated that all the information of learners should be written and documented properly. Moreover, 41.7% of them stated that they did not receive certificate and marks sheet easily.

Table 8: Opinion of Tutors to Published Result Correctly

Result Published Correctly by	Tutors Opinion	
	<i>n</i>	%
Information written properly	29	30.5
Document recorded properly	18	18.9
Solved queries shortly	48	50.5
Total	95	100

7. Quality of the BOU's Media Program

The inclusion of video materials in teaching is also another way to get learners engaged and arouse their motivation about what they are learning. Visual stimulants can easily excite the brain cells and thus generate attention, an element which every teacher struggles to meet in their teaching objectives.

In this study, about 57.7% (n=157) learners stated that the TV program broadcasted by BOU were relevant topics and more appropriate to their learning processes (Fig. 2). Amongst the learners, 30.5% (n=83) were expressed that the TV programs were very good in quality, 34.2% (n=93) expressed that it was good and 33.1% (n=90) said that it was moderate.

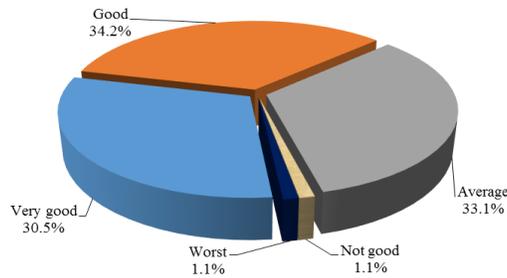


Figure 2: Opinion regarding the Quality of TV Programs by Learners

8. Adaptation of ICT and Uses in Education

Several studies revealed that adaptation of ICT can help learners and teachers to teach more effectively. ICTs have the potential to innovate, accelerate, enrich, and deepen skills, to motivate and engage learners, create economic viability for tomorrow's workers, as well as strengthening teaching and helping schools change (Yusuf, 2005). To know the effectiveness of mobile application regarding educational resources or activities; 33.9% (n=147) learners and 17.9% (n=17) tutors were responded that they have had seen educational document via mobile phone. This study also showed that, about 85% (n=369) learners and 96.8% tutors were interested to receive BOU's or any other educational program through mobile phone. Getting result via the mobile phone was the top priority for both the learners (57.6%) and tutors (69.9%). The second top priority was to get the tutorials routine and exam routine.

Proposed Quality Assurance Framework for BOU

With the above findings and discussion, this study tried to propose a conceptual framework for the QA of BOU. The major components are: 1. Quality Perspective of Study Material, 2. Quality of the Program, 3. Tutorial Facilities, 4. Quality of Support Service, 5. Examination System, 6. Quality of the BOU's Media Program, and 7. Adaptation of ICT and Uses in Education

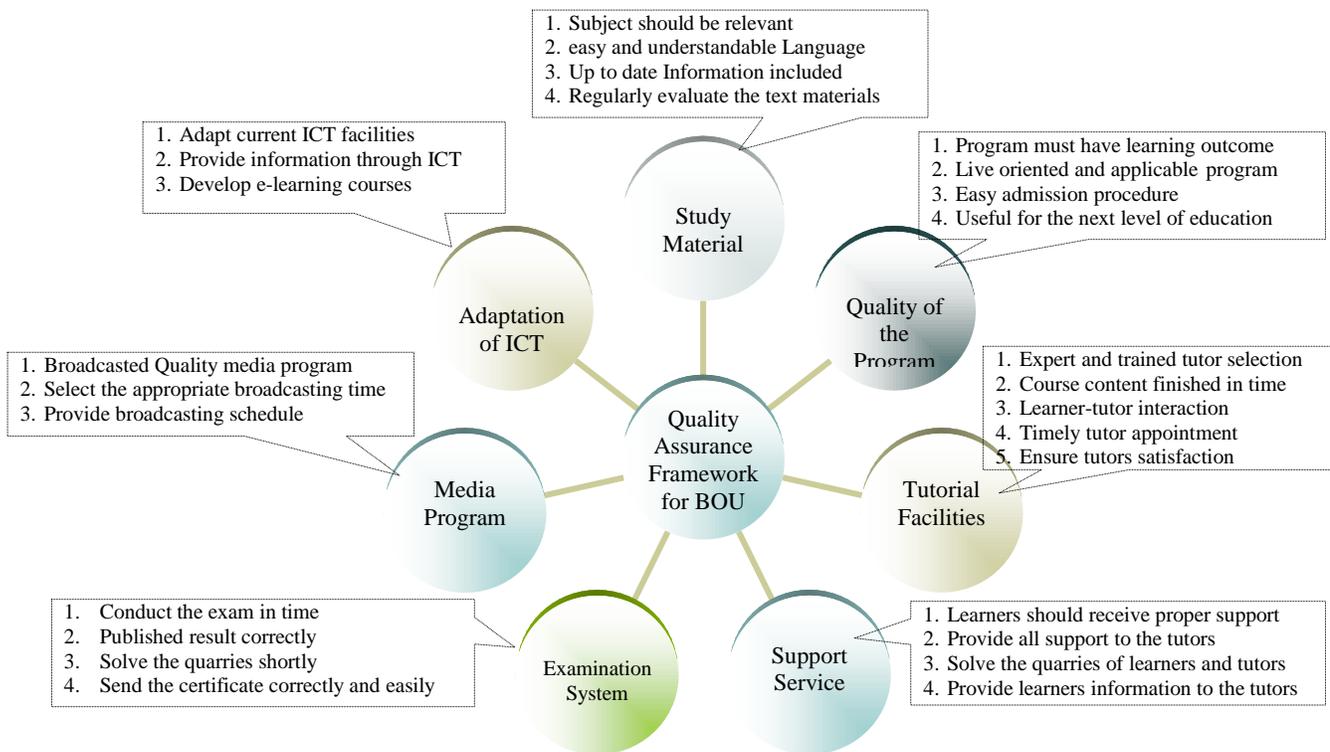


Figure 3: Proposed Quality Assurance Framework for BOU

Conclusion

This study identified the levels of the study materials, quality of the curriculum of the programs, facilitating and satisfaction level of tutors, quality of support service those were provided to the learners and tutors. This study also explore the examination system and result publishing time schedules, as well as the quality of the BOU's media programs and adaptation of ICT and uses in education. All these factors are the significant quality assurance (QA) criteria for BOU, which leads to formulate a proposed QA framework for BOU context (Figure 3). It was expected that the findings of this study may provide valuable baseline information for the policy-makers to develop a standard QA framework for BOU.

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