

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS: Can ODL Contribute?

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ABSTRACT

In the present era of information technology the system of education has undergone a lot of changes. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) around the world is perhaps the most important evidence to it. Despite the fact, ODL has not been popular in Bangladesh for a variety of reasons, though currently a few academics are either thinking about studying or studying on Open and Distant modes. This paper, considering Levis' (2002) opinion about the necessity of e-learning, Goodson's (2000) principles of teacher professionalism, Nordkvelle's (2006) view on the challenge of ODL-organization, Boshier's (1971) Education Participation Scale (EPS), and Houle's (1961) philosophy of six classic needs of a practicing professional, tries to find out the role of ODL in the professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh on the basis of a study. The related survey involves a sample of more than 100 teachers from a number of ten private and public universities in Dhaka. It is expected that ODL might play a significant role in the professional development of tertiary level teachers in the country.

The paper also explores the possible advantages teachers may enjoy and difficulties they may face in pursuit of these modes of education. The Ministry of Education can play a great role in alleviating the problems with and barriers to ODL. However, the academic heavyweights also have some responsibilities in this regard.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), professional development of higher education teachers, advantages and difficulties of ODL.

INTRODUCTION

Continuous professional development is a vital issue for academics, particularly for higher education teachers. This is because unless, and until, university teachers can develop themselves professionally keeping pace with the modern world, they cannot be expected to contribute well to the education of the youth. To be very straightforward, professional development of tertiary level teachers is necessary not only for the interest of the learners but also for the teachers themselves. However, developing professionally is quite a big challenge for higher education teachers. Because very often a teacher needs to go abroad for higher education which requires much time, money and sacrifice on part of him/her. A few academics can manage to do all these. Consequently professional development remains an unfulfilled dream for many. Hence, ODL can be a great tool to fulfill the professional-development-through-higher-education dream of the university teachers.

Taking this matter into consideration this paper explores the role of ODL in the professional development of higher education teachers. The article is based on the results of a survey conducted among the teachers of different private and public universities in Bangladesh. It relates the results of the survey, analyses them and tries to identify the possible advantages teachers may enjoy and difficulties they may face to pursue these modes of education. Before discussing the results of the research, the researcher will discuss in brief the concept and purpose of ODL.

THE CONCEPT AND PURPOSE OF ODL

ODL is a system of learning which delivers education to students using different means of communication like radio, television, internet, satellite, etc. and learners can enroll in and continue their studies without being physically present on campus. According to *Microsoft Encarta Dictionaries*, distance learning is "education for students working at home, with little or no face-to-face contact with teachers and with material provided remotely, e.g. by e-mail, television, or correspondence." *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia views that distance education, or distance learning, is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy and andragogy, technology, and instructional systems design that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically "on site" (2010, para. 1). From the definitions above it is clear that the purpose of ODL is to create an opportunity for working or adult students who are not able to go to campus for education but willing to study being at home. This is the point where lies the importance of ODL for professional development of higher education teachers who are unable to go to campus whether at home or abroad leaving their work and families behind.

THE RESEARCH

Purpose of the Research

The objective of the research was to find out whether ODL can contribute to professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh. To do so the study investigated:

- The main obstacles to professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh
- What higher education teachers view about the role of ODL in their professional development?
- How much interest they show in ODL.
- The advantages they may enjoy by studying via ODL.
- The difficulties they may face to pursue a degree or programme via ODL.
- Their views about the existing ODL opportunities in Bangladesh

Justification for the Research

This study was based on Houle's (1961) philosophy of six classic needs of a practicing professional. The six classic needs Houle listed for a practicing professional are: keeping up with new knowledge related to a profession; establishing mastery of the new concepts in a profession; continued study of basic disciplines which support a profession; growing both individually and professionally, keeping both a fresh viewpoint and a firm grip on detail; looking for better ideas and procedures but never abandoning essential conception or routines; and retaining the power to learn (as cited in RAGHAVAN and KUMAR, 2008, p. 85).

All of the above needs of a practicing professional listed by Houle demonstrate that a teacher should always look for new knowledge and ideas for his/her professional uplift. And if he/she fails to acquire higher education attending a school, he/she will have no other option but to opt for an ODL opportunity.

In somewhat similar manner to Houle, Goodson (2000) advocated six principles as basic to all sorts of teacher professionalism. These principles demand that teachers undertake:

- engagement with moral, social purpose and value of what teachers teach
- responsibility for making judgments concerning teaching, curriculum and care that affect students
- commitment to working with colleagues in collaborative cultures
- occupational heteronomy: ability to work authoritatively, yet openly and collaboratively with other partners in the wider community
- a commitment to active care for students, not only cognitively, but also emotionally and socially
- searching for continuous learning to develop one's expertise (as cited in Nordkvelle, 2006, p. 95-96)

Therefore, the professionalism of teachers is a very common and vital issue for Houle and Goodson. Another academic who has spoken in favour of the need for teacher professionalism is Boshier. Boshier's Education Participation Scale (EPS) has been related to many studies and has subsequently been established as a standard scale for measuring the level of participation in education.

The seven factors Boshier established through his research as EPS were: communication improvement, social contact/social relationship, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, escapism/social stimulation and cognitive interest (as cited in RAGHAVAN and KUMAR, 2008, p. 79).

In this study only the teachers working in universities were considered as part of the sample. Therefore, Boshier's EPS has played a significant role in the formation of my research framework for measuring the adult learner participation in ODL programmes. The aspect of teacher professionalism in Houle, Goodson and Boshier has indirectly pushed the higher education teachers towards ODL.

But the opinion of Levis (2002) on e-learning maintained a link between economy and knowledge and directly pushed the tertiary level teachers towards these modes of education. He perceived,

The fundamental reason driving the [e-learning] revolution is the need in a knowledge-based economy for vastly more learning opportunities, both formal and informal, than was previously required in an industrial society, and the need for a more systematic approach to the sharing of knowledge. Knowledge workers need to process enormous amounts of information and to tap into the knowledge of others and the collective knowledge of their organisations. They also need to acquire large amounts of knowledge and skills throughout their working lives. Classroom training is often an ineffective as well as expensive way of enabling adults to acquire knowledge, however. (Levis, 2002, p. 12)

Since the theories and perceptions of Houle, Goodson, Boshier and Levis have pushed the university teachers to ODL Nordkvelle has realized the role of ODL organizations in developing teacher professionalism.

According to him, "Generally it is argued that the ODL-organization enhances teacher professionalism, because teaching and tutoring is at the heart of the activity of the ODL-organizaition" (Nordkvelle, 2006, p. 97).

The fulfillment of this role poses a great challenge for ODL organizations.

The challenge is obviously that the ODL-organization in dual-mode higher education institutions needs to develop a learning organization that can foster pedagogical professionalism both within its own realm and together with the academics and the teaching organization of the campus. Second, it needs to face the promises of ICT, and respond to it. (Nordkvelle, 2006, p. 98)

Therefore, we can say that our government need spend a lot of money for creating ODL opportunities for the professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh.

The Participants

The participants were the teachers of the Departments of English, Business Administration, Civil Engineering, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering, History, Philosophy, Anthropology, Economics and Government and Political Science from Presidency University, City University, East West University, Brac University, Stamford University, United International University, American International University Bangladesh, South East University, Dhaka University and Jagannath University.

A total number of 105 teachers willingly filled in the questionnaire. Of the participants 28 were female and 77 were male.

The Questionnaire

There were six open questions in the questionnaire. The participants noted their answers down as they intended.

They had the freedom to respond either positively or negatively and provide as much information as they knew. (For the questionnaire see Appendix)

THE SURVEY RESULTS

Discussion of the Results

The first question asked the teachers what they thought were the main obstacles (three to four) to professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh?.

In answer to this question the highest number of respondents (52.38%) said that lack of opportunities for research and publication was the severe most difficulty with professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh.

Table: 1

Question	Answers	Respondents	Percentage (%)
What do you think are the main obstacles (three to four) to professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh?	Little scope of higher education due to lack of institution-based training system like NAEM, TTC, etc.	47	44.76%
	Due to heavy work-load, it is very difficult to manage time for professional development	49	46.67%
	Low salary in comparison to others	24	22.86%
	Lack of institutional support and motivation	37	35.24%
	Lack of international exposure	53	50.48%
	Lack of opportunities for research and publication	55	52.38%

The second question asked the teachers whether they thought Open and Distance Learning (ODL) could play a great role in professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh and if yes how.

While answering to this question the highest number of teachers (34.29%) wrote that for professional development ODL could be a great solution for higher education teachers especially for those who were unable to spend money and leave home for research.

The second highest number of respondents (29.52%) viewed, "ODL is a great opportunity for higher education teachers for pursuing research or any other programme. This is because it provides teachers with flexibility in time, place, choice of courses, and most important of all in money."

Table: 2

Question	Answers	Respondents	(%)
Do you think Open and Distance Learning (ODL) can play a great role in professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh? If yes, how?	Yes. Because ODL provides them with opportunities for pursuing a programme in their chosen area which is cheap and does not require leaving home.	29	27.62%
	Yes, ODL is a great opportunity for higher education teachers for pursuing research or any other programme. This is because it provides teachers with flexibility in time, place, choice of courses, and most important of all in money.	31	29.52%
	Yes, for professional development ODL can be a great solution for higher education teachers specially for those who are unable to spend money and leave home for research.	36	34.29%
	No, I do not think so.	6	5.71%
	I have no idea.	3	2.86%

The third highest number of participants (27.62%) noted that ODL provides them with opportunities for pursuing a programme in their chosen area which is cheap and does not require leaving home. Only 5.71% respondents were negative in their answer and 2.86% were ignorant (see Table: 2).

The third question asked "Would you enroll for a research programme, if there was opportunity of ODL for you in Bangladesh?" To answer this question most of the teachers (51.43%) said that they would enroll for a research programme via ODL mode whereas only 41.9% participants were negative.

Table: 3

Question	Answers	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Would you enroll for a research programme, if there was opportunity of ODL for you in Bangladesh?	Yes, I would do.	54	51.43%
	No, I would not.	44	41.9%
	I have no idea.	7	6.67%

An insignificant number of teachers (6.67%) said that they had no idea about the matter (see Table: 3). The fourth question asked the teachers what they thought were some of the advantages of ODL. In answer to this question the highest number of teachers (64.76%) commented that one could work and study at the same time for professional development if enrolled in an ODL programme. The second highest number of participant teachers (56.19%) wrote that teachers of the remote areas are greatly benefitted by doing ODL courses. The third highest number of participants (51.43%) viewed that flexibility of time, place and courses was a great advantage of ODL. The other advantages mentioned by the respondents were 'cheap and affordable' (noted by 25.71%) and freedom of learning (mentioned by 22.86%) (see Table: 4).

Table: 4

Question	Answers	Respondents	Percentage (%)
What do you think are some of the advantages of ODL?	Flexibility of time, place and courses	54	51.43%
	Cheap and affordable	27	25.71%
	One can work and study at the same time.	68	64.76%
	One can enjoy the freedom of learning.	24	22.86%
	Teachers of the remote areas are greatly benefitted by doing ODL courses.	59	56.19%

The fifth question asked, "Are there any difficulties you may face to pursue a degree or programme via ODL?" In reply to this question unavailability of media like radio, television, computer, satellite, internet, etc. was mentioned as the key difficulty by 45.71% teachers. The second highest number of teachers (44.76%) wrote that limitation of IT facilities was crucial. The third critical problem (mentioned by 42.86% teachers) was identified as interruption or lack in the power supply.

Two other difficulties were no face to face interaction with teachers (viewed by 31.43% participants) and poor knowledge in computer and internet (observed by 27.62%). However, only 6.67% teachers had no idea about this subject (see Table: 5).

Table: 5

Question	Answers	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Are there any difficulties you may face to pursue a degree or programme via ODL?	Limitation of IT facilities	47	44.76%
	Unavailability of media like radio, television, computer, satellite, internet, etc.	48	45.71%
	Interruption or lack in the power supply.	45	42.86%
	Poor knowledge in computer and internet.	29	27.62%
	No face to face interaction with teachers	33	31.43%
	I have no idea.	7	6.67%

The sixth question asked the teachers what were their views about existing ODL opportunities in Bangladesh.

To answer this question the highest number of participant teachers (37.14%) commented that there are few institutions which offer higher education or research programme via ODL mode. The second highest number of teachers (33.33%) observed that ODL facilities in Bangladesh are very poor. The third highest number of respondents (25.71%) pointed out that due to poor IT facilities and limited access to electronic media our ODL is very backward. Only 3.81% of the participants indicated that they had no idea about this topic (see table 6).

Table: 6

Question	Answers	Respondents	Percentage (%)
What is your view about existing ODL opportunities in Bangladesh?	ODL facilities in Bangladesh are very poor.	35	33.33%
	Due to poor IT facilities and limited access to electronic media our ODL is very backward.	27	25.71%
	There are few institutions which offer higher education or research programme via ODL mode.	39	37.14%
	I have no idea.	4	3.81%

ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY

The answer to the first question indicates that most of the tertiary level teachers (52.38%) find lack of opportunities for research and publication as a barrier to their professional development followed by lack of international exposure (50.48%) and heavy work load (46.67%).

The results exemplify that higher education teachers in Bangladesh face a lot of problems with their professional development.

The most common drawbacks include deficiency of research and publication opportunities, insufficiency of global experience and excess work load. Therefore, we should not perhaps blame our university teachers should they fail to work for their professional development. The second question about the role of ODL in professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh brought forth three major answers. The majority (34.29%) wrote that for professional development ODL could be a great solution for higher education teachers especially for those who were unable to spend money and leave home for research.

The second highest (29.52%) viewed that ODL was a great opportunity for higher education teachers for pursuing research or any other programme since it provided them with flexibility in time, place, choice of courses, and most important of all in money and the third highest (27.62%) noted that ODL provided them with opportunities for pursuing a programme in their chosen area which was cheap and did not require leaving home. All the above roles of ODL mentioned by teachers are very important.

The third question, "Would you enroll for a research programme, if there was opportunity of ODL for you in Bangladesh?" produced three traditional answers.

The majority (51.43%) responded that they would enroll for a research programme via ODL mode. However, only 41.9% participants were not interested in ODL and a few numbers of teachers (6.67%) were in the dark about this matter. The interest of university teachers in ODL courses is really remarkable and praiseworthy. The answer to the fourth question about the advantages of ODL shows that most of the teachers (64.76%) are aware of the fact that one can work and study at the same time for professional development if enrolled in an ODL programme.

The second highest number of participants (56.19%) thinks that teachers from the remote areas are greatly benefitted by doing ODL courses and the third highest (51.43%) view that flexibility of time, place and courses is a great advantage of ODL. The results prove that ODL is very important for higher education teachers.

The fifth question "Are there any difficulties you may face to pursue a degree or programme via ODL?" generated three major answers. The majority (45.71%) recorded that unavailability of media like radio, television, computer, satellite, internet, etc. was the key difficulty followed by the limitation of IT facilities (44.76%) and interruption or lack in the power supply (42.86%). It is clear that ODL requires the facilities of electronic media, IT and power supply. In answer to the sixth question about existing ODL opportunities in Bangladesh, the majority (37.14%) observed that there are few institutions which offer higher education or research programme via ODL mode.

The second highest number of teachers (33.33%) realized that ODL facilities in Bangladesh are very poor.

The third highest number of respondents (25.71%) pointed out that due to poor IT facilities and limited access to electronic media our ODL is very backward.

These results illustrate that the existing ODL opportunities in Bangladesh are very inadequate for higher education teachers.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- **The results of the survey show that most of the university teachers in Bangladesh face numerous problems with their professional development. The most common difficulties comprise deficiency of research and publication opportunities, insufficiency of transnational experience and excess work load. Therefore, opportunities for research and publication and wages of teachers should be augmented and their work load should be reduced. Otherwise, the nation cannot expect university teachers better contribute to the nation building.**
- **The results of the survey also show that ODL can play a great role in the professional development of our university teachers. Hence, our tertiary level teachers should think seriously of the issue of availing themselves of the opportunity of education via ODL modes. The academic heavyweights and the employers can influence their juniors and employee teachers respectively in this regard.**
- **The results of the survey also demonstrate that most of the university teachers are willing to enroll for courses via ODL mode. This indicates that our tertiary level teachers are becoming more acquainted with and fonder of ODL day by day. This is obviously a good sign for ODL institutions.**
- **The results of the survey prove that ODL is very beneficial to higher education teachers who are not able to spend money and leave work and home for going abroad for higher degrees. Such teachers can do research via ODL modes for their professional development. It is wonderful that ODL allows a teacher to work and study at the same time staying at his/her home.**
- **The results of the survey also justify the arguments that availability of modern communication, easy access to IT and uninterrupted power supply are urgent and imperative for the smooth operation of ODL institutions. Therefore, the government should work to improve the country's communication, IT and energy sectors.**
- **The results of the survey also exemplify that ODL institutions offering research programme or higher education for university teachers are very rare in our country. This slows down the status of professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh. Therefore, both the Ministry of Education and academic titans should work in collaboration for improving the country's ODL sector.**

CONCLUSION

ODL can go a long way to assist tertiary level teachers in their professional development. However, ODL institutions are very few in number in Bangladesh. The reasons are perhaps the underdeveloped communication system, limited access to IT and lack and interruption in the power supply. Though ODL is becoming popular to our academics day by day surprisingly some teachers are not acquainted with this mode of education. Again many do not show interest in studying via these modes of education perhaps because they fear the lack of accreditation. Whatever, it is beyond doubt that ODL can lend a great hand in the professional development of higher education teachers. The academic heavyweights and government should collaborate to popularize and make the best use of this system of education for the interest of the teachers and the students.

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APPENDIX

This questionnaire is part of a research. Your response will contribute greatly to the research.

Gender:..... Teaching Experience:.....

Please answer the following questions briefly:

- 1. What do you think are the main obstacles (three to four) to professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh?**
- 2. Do you think Open and Distance Learning (ODL) can play a great role in professional development of higher education teachers in Bangladesh? If yes, how?**
- 3. Would you enroll for a research programme, if there was opportunity of ODL for you in Bangladesh?**
- 4. What do you think are some (four to five) of the advantages of ODL?**
- 5. Are there any difficulties you may face to pursue a degree or programme via ODL?**
- 6. What is your view about existing ODL opportunities in Bangladesh?**

Thank you.