Prospect Of Distance Learning

Monsurur Rahman, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA
Reza Karim, Assistant Professor, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA
Framarz Byramjee, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

Many educational institutions in the United States are currently offering programs through distance learning, and that trend is rising. In almost all spheres of education a developing country like Bangladesh needs to make available the expertise of the most qualified faculty to her distant people. But the fundamental question remains as to whether distance learning is the right venue to achieve that goal. This paper tries to shed light on the prospects and problems of distance learning in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Distance Learning; Participants; Cost; Bangladesh

I. INTRODUCTION

Many educational institutions in the United States are currently offering programs through distance learning, and that trend is rising. In almost all spheres of education, Bangladesh needs to make available the expertise of the most qualified faculty to her distant people. But the fundamental question remains as to whether distance learning is the right venue to achieve that goal. This paper tries to shed light on the prospects and problems of distance learning in Bangladesh.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section II addresses some fundamental issues pertaining to distance learning in general. Section III enumerates the possibilities of distance learning in a developing country like Bangladesh. Section IV deals with some of the underlying problems faced by distance learning in Bangladesh. Conclusions are presented in section V.

II. SOME ISSUES PERTAINING TO DISTANCE LEARNING

In its simplest form, distance learning takes place when the instructor and the learners are not face to face in a classroom setting during a substantial part of the instructional process, and the instructional gap created by the physical separation of the instructor and the students is connected by technology.

Tools of Distance Learning

In addition to the printed materials, the non-interactive instructional tools include tapes, CDs, DVDs, short-wave radios, slides, televisions, films and videos. However, the glorious chapters of distance learning started with the rapid growth in the capabilities of computers to send and receive information electronically in a fraction of a second. Readily accessible world of information through web has made the computer the most important tool of distance learning.

Participants in Distance Learning

In the traditional face-to-face learning, the major participants are the learners, instructors and the support staff. In the distance learning, the role of all the participants increases due to the physical separation of the learners and the instructor. Both of them have to depend heavily on technology. The learners not only have to be motivated and strive to improve their critical thinking capabilities; they also have to be able to communicate through technology (e.g., Moodle, D2L, and Blackboard).

Instructors, on the other hand, have to be very efficient in technology to effectively deliver distance learning and receive inputs and materials from the learners. The success of the distance teaching depends on the ability of the instructor to choose an appropriate delivery system by focusing on the learners' needs and the content requirements.

Support staff responsibilities are also increased in the distance-learning environment. Apart from the normal responsibilities of ordering and distributing the class materials (textbook, study guide, work book), registering students and scheduling, the support staff has additional responsibilities of overseeing that the adopted technology is functioning properly, and that the problems and concerns of both the instructors and the students are addressed quickly and efficiently.

Distance learning calls for additional participants known as the facilitators who are very important to bridge the gap between the instructor and the learners. In the presence of a low level technology, the facilitators become extremely important for the successful delivery of the course. They might have to set up the technology, distribute, and collect assignments, exams and quizzes. In a relatively high level technology environment, however, the role of the facilitators gets reduced to administer and monitor exams and quizzes at distant places to ensure the validity of the evaluation system.

Costs of Distance Learning

Different types of cost that one might incur depends on the choice of technology: 1. Hardware (e.g., computers, network, televisions, videos, etc.) and software (e.g., computer programs); 2. Transmission & broadcasting (e.g., internet or telephone connections, satellite or video connections); 3. Repairing and upgrading hardware and software; 4. Teaching material development; and 5. Administrative and personnel costs (Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994). The costs of offering distance-learning courses may be high, but it is comparable to the costs of offering courses via traditional method.

III. SOME POSSIBLITIES OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN BANGLADESH

Distance learning is already available in Bangladesh. This section of the paper very briefly talks about some possible areas where Bangladesh can increase its use of distance learning.

Distance Learning for Basic Education Programs

Literacy rate in Bangladesh is currently about sixty percent. NGO's like BRAC & Grameen Bank are playing a big role in educating mostly women & children in adult literacy. BRAC has more than 40,000 schools in the rural areas. They recruit teachers from local women in the village, and provide them with 15 days of training and regular refresher courses at a BRAC Training and Resource Center. They also give training in different subject areas to enhance the capacity of teachers to teach grades four & five. Distance learning might be more cost effective in these cases.

Distance education methodology & the principles of open learning have great potential for overcoming inequalities in educational opportunity in Bangladesh. Cambridge Distance Education Consultancy Group (CEC) in their Open and Distance Learning in Southeast Asia report aptly notes : Open and distance learning approaches can be used successfully to provide routes to the completion of basic education by: (1) providing para-formal or alternative schooling systems; (2) supporting transition to and performance in formal schools; (3) raising the quality of schools by providing ready-made structured educational resources; (4) providing networking and training for intermediaries (e.g. teachers, broadcasters, mentors); and (5) providing communication for development strategies.

ESTEEM Bangladesh: Effective Schools Through Enhanced Education (ESTEEM) is a key component of the Government of Bangladesh Primary Education Development Program. Its purpose is to strengthen institutional capacity to manage educational resources in the primary sector and convert them efficiently into learning outcomes for all children. CEC developed a package, which was 'custom made' for the needs of individual schools and

delivered it through a variety of media, including school-based mentors, self-access training materials on CD-ROM, dedicated website and an email support system (ESTEEM, 2004).

Role played by the Universities

Both public & private universities can play a bigger role in offering & receiving degree & non-degree programs/courses at a distance. The higher academic institutions are pioneers in adopting and using Information and Communications Technologies (Lentell, 2012). At present, there are 32 public and 54 government approved private universities in Bangladesh, All of them have Internet access. Some have VSATs, some are connected to the Sustainable Development Networking Program (SDNP, a specialized project of United Nations Development Program (Rokunnuzzaman, 2006).

Open University of Bangladesh: One of the principal aims of the Bangladesh Open University project is to tackle inequality in the educational system of Bangladesh. The program offers a range of part time degree, diploma level courses. In addition, a course is provided to adults who were unable to complete secondary education & therefore did not attain a school-leaving certificate. Consultants were fielded to work in collaboration with local staff at improving a range of areas including curriculum, administration & delivery systems (www.cec-worldwide.com,)

Mymensingh Agricultural University: Most of the people in Bangladesh depend on agriculture. Educating through non-interactive television sponsored by the government is going on for a long period of time. Mymensingh Agricultural University can play some active role in offering agricultural outreach program through distance learning to make it interactive.

Executive Development Programs: There are several organizations like GTZ based in Germany, and locally based institutions like Center for Management Development (CMD) who are involved in executive development in Bangladesh. Some of their courses pertain to different aspects of Industrial Engineering issues, TQM, Kaizen, Personnel, and Entrepreneurship. CMD has some classrooms equipped with multi-media projection units that can be used for distance learning.

Teachers' training colleges: The teachers' training colleges can use distance learning to train primary, secondary and grade 11and grade 12 schoolteachers using distance learning. At the district level, public schools have resources to offer some form of distance learning. These schools can be used as co-ordination centers from where the programs can be received and offered.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN BANGALDESH

Even though there is unlimited potential, the country has not been able to derive much benefit from distance learning. They are still following the traditional way of doing business, which is mainly face to face interaction in a classroom setting. Some of the underlying problems facing distance learning in Bangladesh and their solutions are discussed below.

Limitations of Telecommunication System

The main obstacle in offering distance learning seems to be the country's outmoded telecommunication system. Bangladesh is in the process of installing high speed ISDN telecommunication system. Even though total number of telephone lines available in the country is only about 900,000. There are more than 100 million active cell phones. The cell phone companies are providing Internet Connectivity in many areas.

Computer Literate Support Staff

Another problem that Bangladesh is facing now is lack of computer literate professionals who can help in designing and supporting computer based distance learning. However, recently, hundreds of small schools have cropped up in big cities to teach usage of computers. In the Nilkhet area of Dhaka, a technology village has emerged. These small shops are equipped with computers, printers, and fax machines. Many young college going

kids from the nearby University of Dhaka can be seen working on their papers, theses, and dissertations. These kids can answer many technology questions that one may have.

Cyber-Security Measures

A significant part of the distance learning is imparted through the electronic media. Electronic media is prone to attack by hackers. Hackers and Cyber criminals are always looking to prey on unsuspecting people using the internet. Countries that are taking e-commerce and distance learning seriously have taken measures to tackle security problems. Developing countries like Bangladesh can learn from Singapore that recently passed the Electronic Transaction Act in 1998 (Aziz, 2000).

Availability of Computers and Multi-media units

Total number of computer in Bangladesh is unknown but we can estimate on the basis of internet users in the country. The number of Internet users in the country touched the 33.43 million mark at the end of April in 2013 (The Independent, May 30, 2013). It is heartening to know that taxes on personal computers have been eliminated and anyone coming into the country from outside can bring a laptop computer. Multi-media projection units are still very expensive in Bangladesh; minimum cost for one unit is still at least hundred thousand taka, which is about two thousand U.S. dollars.

Fiber-Optics link with the outside world and Internet Service Providers

Fast internet service requires Fiber-optics links. Bangladesh recently acquired this resource and is implementing the technology at a gradually rising pace. Internet came to Bangladesh in the early 1990s mostly via Bulletin Board System. On June 6, 1996, the VSAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal, a satellite based communications system) data circuit was commissioned for the first time in the country. Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board granted licenses to two Internet Service providers (ISP). Information Services Network (ISN) and Grameen Cybernet to install VSAT (Azam, 2007). Just within a year number of ISPs increased to twelve. There are about forty ISPs in Bangladesh. (See Table 1 for a partial list of ISPs in Bangladesh.). About 95 per cent of the users use the Internet through mobile phones, while the rest use broadband Internet from Internet Service Providers (ISP).

Internet Service Providers Association of Bangladesh described the spurt in the number of Internet users as a positive one. According to them, dependence on mobile phones for surfing the Internet has increased sharply. Number of Internet users has been increasing rapidly since six mobile phone companies and two Wimax operators across the country have started offering different Internet packages. Of the telecom operators, Grameenphone is leading the sector with 10 million Internet subscribers, followed by Banglalink's 9.7 million, Robi's 4.4 million, Airtel's 2.8 million, Citycell's 0.3 million and Teletalk's 0.255 million. Internet service providers (ISPs) and PSTN (public switched telephone network) operators have around 1.22 million users, while two Wimax operators - Banglalion and Qubee - have 0.49 million customers with Internet connectivity.

V. CONCLUSION

Bangladesh is faced with a daunting task in educating its people. One fast and fairly cost effective way could be the use of distance learning. Bangladeshi educational institutes can reap benefits from distance learning using appropriate distance learning technique.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Monsurur Rahman, DBA, CPA, CMA, is a Professor of Accounting at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He received his doctorate from Southern Illinois University -Carbondale. His research has been published in International Business & Economics Research Journal, The National Accounting Journal, and many national and regional conference proceedings. His research interests are in the area of Financial and Managerial Accounting. Email: mrahman@iup.edu (Contact author)

Reza Karim is an assistant Professor of Management at the Eli Broad College of Business, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA. He earned his PhD in strategy and organization from SUNY Albany. His current research interests are in area of vertical alliances, value co-creation, supply management, and entrepreneurship.

Framarz Byramjee is an Associate Professor of Marketing, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. He has a Ph.D. in Business Administration from Florida Atlantic University. His teaching and research activities pertain to marketing research, business logistics, and strategy. Email: byramjee@iup.edu

REFERENCES

Azam. M. S. (2007). Internet Adoption and usage in Bangladesh. *Japanese Journal of Administrative Science,* pp. 43-54.

Cambridge Distance Education Consultancy. Open and Distance Learning in Southeast Asia.. www.unicef.org/rosa/ODLReport_(Final version), December, 2009.

ESTEEM (2004). Effective Schools Through Enhanced Education. ESTEEM Research Series 5. Government of Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh, Department for International Development (UK).

Lentell, H. (2012). Distance Learning in British Universities: Is it Possible. Open Learning. Vol. 7, No. 1., Pp. 23-36.

Rokunuzzaman, M (2006). A Survey of Internet Access in a Large Public University in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Education and Development Using ICT.*

Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP). Internet Service Providers in Bangladesh. http://www.sdnbd.org/sdi/issues/IT-computers/isp-bd.htm. Downloaded on 9/14/2013.

The Independent (May 31, 2013). 33 Million Internet Users in Bangladesh, Print Edition.

Threlkeld, R. and K. Brzoska (1994). Research in Distance Education. In B. Willis (Ed.), Distance Education: Strategies and Tools. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, Inc.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Intenet Service Providers in Bangladesh

Internet Service Providers	Website
AB Network Limited	http://www.abnetbd.com
Access Telecom Limited	http://www.accesstel.net/
Aftab IT Limited	http://www.aitlbd.net/
Agni Systems Limited	http://www.agni.net/
Asia Online (BD) Ltd	http://www.bdinside.com
Bangladesh Online Ltd.	http://www.bol-online.com/
Bangladesh T&T Board	http://www.bttb.net/
Bdcom Online Limited	http://www.bdcom.com/
Bijoy Online Limited	http://www.bijoy.net/
Brac Network System	http://www.bdmail.net/
Drik Online Limited	http://www.drik.com/
E-Net Communications Ltd.	http://www.bdfast.com/
Global Information Services Ltd.	http://www.globalctg.net/
Grameen Cybernet Ltd.	http://www.citechco.net/
Information Services Network Ltd.	http://www.bangla.net/
KLBd Online	http://www.klbd.net/
Link3 Technologies Ltd.	http://www.link3.net/
NCLL	http://www.ncll.net
Pradeshta Network Limited	http://www.pradeshta.net/
ProshikaNet Online Limited	http://www.bdonline.com/
Shapla.net	http://www.shapla.net/
Span Internetworks Ltd	http://www.spanin.com/
Spark System Ltd	http://www.sparkbd.net/
SpectraNet Limited	http://www.spnetctg.com/
Square InformatiX Ltd	http://www.e-home2u.com
Trans-net System Ltd	http://www.transbd.net/
Vas Digital Communications Ltd.	http://www.vasdigital.net/
Westec Limited	http://www.bdlink.com/

Source: Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP). http://www.sdnbd.org/sdi/issues/IT-computers/isp-bd.htm. Downloaded on 9/14/2013.