



Student Perspectives on Challenges Facing ODL Students in Bangladesh: Insights from Bangladesh Open University Learners

Tanvir Ahsan*

School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Languages
Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur-1705, Bangladesh.

Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has expanded higher education access in developing countries like Bangladesh, yet persistent challenges undermine its effectiveness for non-traditional learners. At Bangladesh Open University (BOU), established in 1992 to serve working adults, rural residents, and marginalized groups, students face barriers in academics, administration, technology, and socio-personal domains that hinder success and retention. This study aimed to identify daily problems affecting learning outcomes, explore student-proposed solutions, and assess BOU authorities' roles in resolving longstanding issues. Employing a qualitative design, data were collected via 10 in-depth interviews, 3 focus group discussions, and 5 case studies from Master's students with prior Bachelor's experience at BOU's Dhaka and Rajshahi campuses. Thematic analysis revealed patterns, achieving saturation through triangulation. Key findings include outdated curricula, result delays, unreliable digital infrastructure, work-family pressures, and gender biases, with students demonstrating resilience through peer networks. These underscore systemic gaps but highlight actionable reforms. The research contributes to ODL scholarship in developing contexts by amplifying longitudinal student voices, informing learner-centered policies aligned with SDG-4. Recommendations emphasize curriculum modernization, LMS implementation, administrative digitization, tutor training, and gender-inclusive supports to foster resilient, equitable systems, enhancing BOU's national impact.

Keywords: *Open and Distance Learning; Bangladesh Open University; Student Challenges; Tertiary Education; Qualitative Methods; Institutional Barriers; Learner Support; Curriculum Reform*

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a pivotal model in global higher education, offering flexible pathways for learners separated physically and temporally from educators. By relying on diverse media, technologies, and support services, ODL bridges educational disparities for working professionals, rural populations, women with domestic responsibilities, and other marginalized groups (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Latchem & Jung, 2009).

In Bangladesh, where population growth and geographic barriers limit conventional access, the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) was established in 1992 under the BOU Act to serve precisely these non-traditional learners. BOU integrates printed materials, radio, television, and limited online resources, enabling thousands of working adults, rural residents, and returning learners to pursue higher education (Islam & Selim, 2006).

*Corresponding author: Tanvir Ahsan, E-mail: tanvir.ahsan@bou.ac.bd
Journal homepage: <https://jssh.bou.ac.bd>

Despite its achievements, BOU students continue to face significant barriers in academic content, administration, technology, and socio-personal domains. These include outdated materials, administrative delays, unreliable digital infrastructure, work-family pressures, and gender-specific constraints—factors that contribute to lower completion rates and limit BOU's contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) (Berge et al., 2002). Although earlier studies have examined ODL benefits or administrative perspectives, few have captured the lived experiences of students who progressed from Bachelor's to Master's at BOU.

The present study therefore addresses this void by pursuing four objectives: (i) identifying daily problems affecting learning outcomes; (ii) exploring student-proposed solutions; (iii) assessing the role of BOU authorities in resolving longstanding issues; and (iv) examining self-help strategies used by learners. Corresponding research questions are:

- (1) What problems do distance learners perceive as affecting their academic outcomes?
- (2) Which issues require immediate attention?
- (3) What solutions do students propose?
- (4) What can BOU authorities do to advance students' academic success?

By amplifying these learner-centred voices through qualitative methods, the study offers practical, evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform, digital enhancement, and inclusive support—directly contributing to more equitable and sustainable ODL in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) represents a transformative educational model designed to democratize access, offering flexibility and inclusivity for diverse learners separated physically and temporally from educators. This separation is addressed through media, technologies, and support services (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Particularly beneficial for lifelong learners, working professionals, women with domestic duties, rural residents, and marginalized groups, ODL holds promise in developing nations like Bangladesh to reduce educational disparities. The Bangladesh Open University (BOU), founded in 1992, exemplifies this by targeting those excluded by socio-economic, geographic, or gender barriers via multimedia tools such as printed materials and broadcasts (Islam & Selim, 2006). However, ODL's efficacy depends on strong institutional support to overcome inherent challenges, as evidenced by global, regional, and local literature demanding ongoing scrutiny.

Global Challenges

Worldwide, ODL grapples with barriers spanning situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and cultural dimensions (Berge et al., 2002). Situational obstacles, including work and caregiving demands, hinder engagement, leading to dropouts as learners struggle to balance life and studies (Kember, 1989; Garland, 1993). Psychological issues, intertwined with these, manifest as isolation, demotivation, and performance anxiety, eroding community sense and requiring self-regulation for persistence (Rovai, 2002; Artino, 2007). Institutionally, inadequate administrative and academic support—such as delayed feedback and bureaucracy—exacerbates attrition (Zirnkle, 2001). Technologically, limited internet, devices, and literacy in developing areas, alongside usability issues in advanced contexts, impede participation (Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014; Parkes et al., 2014). Pedagogically, "transactional distance" demands independent navigation of often outdated, standardized materials lacking engagement (Moore, 1993). Socially, weak presence diminishes interaction, fostering disengagement and disconnection (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Simpson, 2008). Critically, this literature reveals ODL's

growth masks persistent inequities, with early categorizations (Berge et al., 2002) still relevant but underscoring the need for holistic interventions beyond access.

South Asia and Bangladesh Specifics

In South Asia, ODL challenges are amplified by socio-economic inequalities, cultural norms, and infrastructure deficits, widening the digital divide (Latchem & Jung, 2009). In Bangladesh, despite BOU's reforms, systemic issues persist. Gender disparities burden women with domestic roles, restricting mobility and support, thus limiting ODL's empowering potential amid patriarchal constraints. Rural learners, a key BOU demographic, face power irregularities, poor internet, and device shortages, excluding them from full engagement. Administrative inefficiencies, like delayed communications and inflexible scheduling, deter interaction. Instructional materials, predominantly text-based and outdated, lack multimedia and interactivity, mismatched to diverse needs. Tutor support is inconsistent, with low interaction frequency and inadequate training in digital pedagogy, disadvantaging vulnerable students (Chowdhury, 2013). Critically, while global literature generalizes barriers, regional studies highlight context-specific exacerbations, such as cultural gender norms and infrastructural gaps, calling for localized adaptations to realize ODL's equity goals.

Student Support Services

Learner support is pivotal in ODL, encompassing academic, personal, and administrative pillars to alleviate isolation and confusion (Tait, 2000). Effective systems provide advising, counseling, technical aid, and interactive platforms. Yet, in developing countries such as Bangladesh, learner support systems continue to face significant challenges. Studies of Bangladesh Open University have reported student concerns regarding the adequacy of academic support services and learning resources (Sultana et al., 2011). Counseling for stress and transitions is scarce, while absent real-time feedback and progress tracking lowers completion rates and satisfaction (Simpson, 2008). Critically, this underscores a mismatch: while high-functioning ODL emphasizes comprehensive support (Tait, 2000), resource-constrained contexts like BOU reveal gaps in awareness and delivery, perpetuating inequities and highlighting the need for proactive interventions.

Coping Mechanisms and Student Resilience

Amid barriers, ODL learners exhibit resilience through self-directed strategies, including motivation, goal-setting, and monitoring (Garrison, 2003). Informal structures like peer groups, WhatsApp circles, or community networks often compensate for institutional shortcomings, aiding resource sharing and exam preparation. However, these are unevenly accessible, relying on location and networks. Critically, while such agency is admirable, it exposes institutional deficiencies: universities should formalize mentoring and learner-centered platforms for equity (Garrison, 2003). Literature thus critiques over-reliance on individual resilience, advocating systemic enhancements.

Research Gaps

Despite abundant ODL literature, key voids exist, particularly for BOU. Most research is cross-sectional, lacking longitudinal views on evolving challenges from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. Insider voices from dual-degree students are missing, denying comparative insights. Institutional responses and accountability are underexplored, as are in-depth gender narratives and postgraduate foci, which overlook heightened demands on mature learners.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on BOU Master's students with prior Bachelor's experience and by incorporating gender narratives and solution-oriented recommendations.

In conclusion, this research contributes rich, contextualized data on challenges, barriers, and strategies, offering actionable reforms for BOU to enhance ODL equity and policy in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by Master's-level students at Bangladesh Open University (BOU) who had previously completed their Bachelor's degrees at the institution. The design facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies within BOU's Open and Distance Learning (ODL) framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and case studies, ensuring a multifaceted understanding of the phenomena.

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Qualitative methodology was selected for its exploratory and interpretive strengths, focusing on "how" and "why" participants experience challenges rather than quantifiable generalizations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). BOU's diverse student body—comprising working adults, caregivers, rural residents, and those with infrastructural barriers—demands nuanced inquiry that quantitative methods, such as surveys, cannot adequately address (UNESCO, 2022). This approach captures the contextual complexities of non-traditional learners in ODL, prioritizing depth over breadth.

Study Locations

Data collection occurred at two purposively selected BOU sites: the Dhaka Campus and the Rajshahi Regional Centre (located at Rajshahi University Campus). These locations were chosen for their active postgraduate programs, demographic diversity, and geographic contrast—a central urban hub versus a regional setting. This selection enabled comparisons of institutional support, access issues, and coping mechanisms across socio-spatial contexts (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Sampling Strategy and Sample Composition

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify information-rich participants aligned with the study's objectives (Patton, 2015). The sample targeted Master's students with prior Bachelor's completion at BOU, emphasizing diversity in gender, age, and professional status.

- In-depth Interviews (IDIs): 10 participants (5 from Dhaka, 5 from Rajshahi), selected for their longitudinal BOU experience.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): 3 groups (2 in Dhaka, 1 in Rajshahi), each with 6–8 participants, balanced by gender, age, and academic stage.
- Case Studies: 5 individuals (3 in Dhaka, including at least one female; 2 in Rajshahi, including at least one female), representing unique cases (e.g., single mothers, visually impaired students, or rural learners).

The sample size supported data saturation, typically achieved after 12 interviews in homogeneous groups (Guest et al., 2006). Triangulation across methods enhanced credibility (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Pre-piloted instruments ensured consistency:

- IDI Checklist: Open-ended questions covered educational backgrounds, ODL transitions, challenges (academic, technological, psychosocial), support systems, and improvement suggestions. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, conducted face-to-face or online, and audio-recorded with consent.
- FGD Guidelines: Facilitated interactive discussions on peer support, course delivery, work-family balance, and gendered issues. Moderated by the researcher with note-takers capturing verbal and non-verbal data (Krueger & Casey, 2015).
- Case Study Protocol: Explored life histories, socio-economic backgrounds, digital literacy, ODL adaptations, and intersections of gender/disability/rurality through prolonged engagement and follow-ups (Yin, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018). Informed consent was secured via clear explanations of objectives, methods, and rights, including voluntary withdrawal. Consent forms used accessible language. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonymization, with data encrypted and accessible only to the research team. Special care addressed vulnerable groups, using gender-sensitive approaches and safe settings to minimize power imbalances and ensure participant well-being.

Data Analysis Plan

Interpretive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: data familiarization, initial coding (inductive/deductive), theme searching, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Themes linked to objectives and literature. Trustworthiness was bolstered by triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity via a reflective journal. NVivo software aided data management (Paulus et al., 2014).

Limitations

The study's qualitative focus limits generalizability beyond the Dhaka and Rajshahi campuses, potentially overlooking experiences from other regions. The small, purposive sample may exclude marginalized voices due to resource constraints and the digital divide. Data collection timing might miss seasonal variations, and self-reported biases could influence responses. The absence of institutional and tutor perspectives narrows the scope to student voices only; future research could address this by incorporating interviews with BOU administrators and tutors to provide a balanced multi-stakeholder understanding. Despite these, methodological triangulation ensured robust insights.

Findings

This section presents the results from the qualitative data analysis, drawing on transcriptions from 10 in-depth interviews (IDIs), 3 focus group discussions (FGDs), and 5 case studies involving Master's-level students at Bangladesh Open University (BOU) who had completed their Bachelor's degrees there. An interpretive thematic analysis was applied, following open and axial coding to identify patterns. Data saturation was achieved after approximately 12 interviews, with triangulation across methods enhancing credibility. Five major themes emerged: Academic

Challenges, Administrative and Institutional Barriers, Technology and Access Issues, Personal and Socio-Cultural Constraints, and Student-Identified Solutions and Coping Mechanisms. These are detailed below with representative quotes and patterns.

Academic Challenges

Participants frequently highlighted issues with curriculum quality, tutor engagement, feedback, and assessments as primary barriers. Outdated materials were a common complaint, with students noting that textbooks and readings lacked revision and relevance to current trends. A female student from Dhaka (FGD) stated, “We are studying from the same books my elder brother used ten years ago. How can this prepare me for today’s world?” This led to reported disillusionment and concerns about employability.

Tutor irregularity was another recurrent issue, with classes often canceled without notice or conducted in a disengaged manner. A male student from Rajshahi (IDI) said, “I went to the center three times and found a notice on the door: ‘Tutorial cancelled.’ It’s demoralizing.” Limited feedback on assignments compounded this, as a female student from Dhaka (IDI) explained, “I submitted my assignment, but I never got any feedback. I don’t know what I did wrong or right.” Examination uncertainties, such as misaligned questions, were also noted across data sources.

Administrative and Institutional Barriers

Students described bureaucratic delays and communication failures as systemic obstacles. Result publication delays were prominent, affecting career opportunities. A male student from Rajshahi (FGD) reported, “I waited seven months for my results. I lost a job opportunity because I couldn’t submit my transcript on time.”

Poor communication from authorities was widespread, with notifications often inaccessible. A female student from Dhaka (IDI) noted, “I missed my exam because I didn’t know the date had changed. No SMS, no email—nothing.” The absence of a grievance mechanism left complaints unresolved, as a male student from Rajshahi (FGD) described, “I visited the regional center four times, but no one could tell me when my result would be published.”

Technology and Access Issues

Technological shortcomings were evident, despite BOU’s distance learning focus. The Learning Management System (LMS) was criticized for unreliability and limited content. A female student from Dhaka (IDI) said, “Even when I can log in, I find only old files. There’s nothing new or interactive.”

Lack of digital training affected both students and tutors, particularly during shifts to remote modes. A male student from Rajshahi (IDI) stated, “I have a smartphone, but I can’t join Zoom classes because the network drops every 5 minutes.” Connectivity issues, including low bandwidth and network disruptions, were more acute in rural areas, exacerbating the digital divide.

Personal and Socio-Cultural Constraints

Diverse backgrounds led to personal barriers, with many juggling multiple roles. Work-family-study pressures were common, as a female student from Dhaka (Case Study) reported, “By the time I finish work and take care of my kids, I’m too exhausted to study.”

Gender-based challenges included familial opposition and mobility limits. A female student from Rajshahi (Case Study) said, “My husband doesn’t like me attending classes on weekends. He

says I already have a job and a family—why study more?” Financial hardships, such as affording materials or devices, further impeded participation.

Student-Identified Solutions and Coping Mechanisms

Students showed agency through informal strategies and reform suggestions. Peer networks via WhatsApp or similar platforms provided support. A male student from Dhaka (FGD) noted, “We can help each other through group chats and meetups. BOU should just help us organize better.”

Preferences for multimedia materials, like Bangla video tutorials, were expressed for accessibility. Proposals included student councils for advocacy and accountability tools, such as anonymous evaluations and feedback portals.

Patterns Across Campuses

Comparative data showed shared themes like outdated curricula and delays, but variations existed. Dhaka students exhibited higher digital literacy and internet access but reported greater frustration with coordination and tutor absenteeism. Rajshahi learners faced logistical issues, including poor roads, electricity, and networks, relying more on printed materials and in-person interactions. Female students across sites encountered amplified barriers, such as mobility restrictions and childcare lacks, compared to males.

Case Study Summaries

Case Study 1 involved Rina Begum, a 33-year-old working mother pursuing a Master’s in Development Studies at Dhaka. She described juggling bank work, childcare, and studies amid sleep deprivation. Tutorial cancellations forced reliance on printed modules, while poor internet limited digital engagement. She suggested recorded Bangla videos, an online help desk, and female peer groups for retention.

Case Study 2 featured Mohammad Shakil, a 29-year-old Public Administration student at Dhaka. After private secondary education, he chose BOU for accessibility but faced result delays, sudden viva schedules, and unresponsive centers. Feeling “institutionally invisible,” he lacked feedback channels. He proposed a digital portal with grievance tracking and cohort advisors for guidance.

Case Study 3 centered on Sultana Yasmin, a 35-year-old mother studying Gender Studies at Rajshahi. After an eight-year gap, in-law resistance and mobility limits confined her to weekend classes. Gender-insensitive infrastructure, like absent childcare, discouraged her. She recommended a women’s help desk, child-friendly spaces, and female-only tutorials for empowerment.

Case Study 4 highlighted Asaduzzaman, a 40-year-old high school teacher in Education at Dhaka. As a long-term BOU student, he noted declining tutorial quality, with half canceled or rote-based. “Learning has become a ritual,” he said. He advocated biometric tutor monitoring, student evaluations, and performance incentives.

Case Study 5 involved Nurul Alam, a 31-year-old NGO coordinator studying Sociology at Dhaka. Isolation challenged him, with no university platforms for collaboration. He created a WhatsApp group growing to 40 members for sharing resources. He urged formal support for moderated peer networks as part of the ecosystem.

These cases illustrate intersectional challenges and student innovations across demographics.

Summary Table of Themes, Key Problems, and Proposed Solutions

Theme	Key Problems	Proposed Solutions
Academic Challenges	Outdated modules, poor tutor feedback	Curriculum reform, tutor evaluation system
Administrative Barriers	Delayed results, no grievance channel	Online portal for results/complaints
Technological Constraints	LMS failures, low digital literacy	Recorded classes, mobile-based apps
Socio-Cultural Constraints	Family obligations, gender bias	Women-friendly campus policies, flexible deadlines
Student-led Initiatives	Isolation, lack of communication	Peer forums, WhatsApp learning groups

Discussion

The findings from this qualitative study provide a nuanced portrayal of the challenges encountered by Master's-level students at Bangladesh Open University (BOU), who have experienced the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system across both undergraduate and postgraduate stages. Through thematic analysis of interviews, focus groups, and case studies, the results reveal interconnected barriers that hinder academic success, while also showcasing student resilience and proposed solutions. Interpreted thematically below, these insights are compared and contrasted with existing literature to underscore their relevance. The discussion further examines implications for ODL in Bangladesh and developing countries, addresses study limitations, and highlights the research's originality, before linking to actionable recommendations.

Academic challenges, such as outdated curricula and inconsistent tutor support, emerged as central, reflecting students' frustration with materials lacking relevance and depth. This aligns with Moore's (1993) concept of "transactional distance," where pedagogical gaps in ODL require learners to independently bridge psychological and communicative spaces, often exacerbated by standardized, obsolete resources. In the Bangladeshi context, participants identified outdated, text-heavy learning materials and the lack of multimedia resources as barriers to meaningful learning and skill development. A female student highlighted this concern by noting that the course books had remained unchanged for over a decade. Tutor irregularity and minimal feedback, as described by Asaduzzaman in his case study, contrast with Bolliger and Inan's (2012) emphasis on social presence for engagement, highlighting how BOU's blended approach falls short of fostering interactive learning. Globally, these issues resonate with Berge et al.'s (2002) pedagogical and epistemological dimensions, but the findings here emphasize their persistence in resource-limited settings, differing from developed-country focuses on advanced tools (Parkes et al., 2014).

Administrative barriers, including delays and communication failures, evoked feelings of disempowerment, as illustrated by Mohammad Shakil's sense of "institutional invisibility." This echoes Zirnkle's (2001) observations on bureaucratic processes demotivating ODL learners and leading to attrition. Regionally, students' concerns regarding administrative and learner support

services at Bangladesh Open University (Sultana et al., 2011) parallel the result delays reported in the FGDs, where participants described missed employment opportunities due to the late publication of examination results. Campus patterns show Dhaka's coordination issues versus Rajshahi's logistical hurdles, aligning with Latchem and Jung's (2009) South Asian bureaucratic inefficiencies but extending to specific transparency deficits absent in grievance mechanisms. In contrast to Tait's (2000) administrative support pillar, which advocates responsive systems, the findings reveal a gap where notifications fail rural students, contributing to educational inequities.

Technological constraints, like unreliable LMS and connectivity, underscored access disparities, particularly in Rajshahi's rural areas. Students' demands for a functional LMS and training reflect Mtebe and Raisamo's (2014) warnings on digital literacy barriers in developing worlds, where low internet penetration excludes participation. Rina Begum's case study of smartphone limitations during network drops aligns with Chowdhury's (2013) critique of inadequate tutor digital training at BOU. Globally, this contrasts Parkes et al.'s (2014) usability concerns in advanced contexts, as BOU's issues stem more from basic infrastructure, echoing Latchem and Jung's (2009) regional digital divide. The theme highlights how these barriers intersect with others, such as administrative delays in digital notifications, differing from Berge et al.'s (2002) technical dimension by emphasizing equity in low-resource environments.

Personal and socio-cultural constraints, including work-family pressures and gender biases, revealed ODL's flexibility as insufficient for non-traditional learners. Sultana Yasmin's experiences of familial opposition and restricted mobility illustrate how patriarchal structures constrain Bangladeshi women's participation in ODL, despite its potential to promote educational empowerment. Financial hardships and exhaustion, as in Rina's narrative, align with Garland's (1993) situational stress and Kember's (1989) dropout models, where balancing roles erodes persistence. Gender patterns across campuses, with women facing amplified barriers such as childcare responsibilities, extend the understanding of gendered challenges in distance education, contrasting global psychological challenges such as isolation (Rovai, 2002; Artino, 2007) by highlighting cultural discouragement in conservative societies.

Student-identified solutions and coping mechanisms, such as peer networks, demonstrated students' agency in addressing institutional gaps. Nurul Alam's initiative to create a WhatsApp group illustrates how informal peer support can compensate for limited institutional services. Participants' proposals for multimedia learning resources, stronger student advocacy, and structured support mechanisms also reflect efforts to address pedagogical monotony and learner isolation (Simpson, 2008), while aligning with Garrison's (2003) emphasis on self-directed learning. However, the findings also suggest that excessive reliance on individual initiative is insufficient without formal mentoring and institutional support.

These themes have significant implications for ODL in Bangladesh and developing countries. In contexts like Bangladesh, academic and technological barriers perpetuate exclusion, undermining access for rural and female learners. Administrative reforms could enhance retention, as inefficiencies mirror broader South Asian issues (Latchem & Jung, 2009), while gender-sensitive policies are vital for equity under SDG-4 (UNESCO, 2022). For developing nations, student coping strategies suggest integrating informal networks with digital enhancements to bridge divides, but without infrastructure investment, ODL risks reinforcing disparities (Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014). Overall, the findings advocate learner-centered approaches to foster sustainable, inclusive education.

Limitations must be acknowledged. The focus on Dhaka and Rajshahi campuses restricts generalizability to BOU's wider network, potentially overlooking remote experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). The small purposive sample, while achieving saturation (Guest et al., 2006), may exclude highly marginalized voices due to the digital divide. Short data collection timing risks missing seasonal variations, and self-reported biases could influence responses (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Absent institutional perspectives narrow the scope, though the student-centered intent justifies this.

The study's originality lies in its focus on Master's students with prior Bachelor's experience at BOU and in highlighting student-suggested solutions.

These interpretations inform the following recommendations to advance resilient ODL frameworks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shed light on the daily challenges confronting tertiary-level students in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs at Bangladesh Open University (BOU), particularly those with longitudinal experience from Bachelor's to Master's levels. Key findings reveal interconnected barriers across academic, administrative, technological, and socio-personal domains. Academically, outdated materials and inconsistent tutor support stifle engagement and relevance. Administratively, delays in results and poor communication foster frustration and hinder progression. Technologically, unreliable infrastructure and digital divides exacerbate exclusion, especially in rural areas. Socio-personally, juggling work, family, and financial pressures, compounded by gender biases, undermines motivation and retention. Despite these hurdles, students demonstrate resilience through informal peer networks and propose innovative solutions like multimedia resources and advocacy structures.

The contributions of this research are substantial, filling gaps in learner-centered empirical work by amplifying insider voices often overlooked in administrative-focused studies. By drawing on qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and case studies, it offers a roadmap for institutional enhancements, empowering BOU to better serve its diverse, non-traditional student body. These insights not only highlight systemic shortcomings but also underscore student agency, paving the way for more participatory ODL models.

Looking ahead, the broader implications extend to advancing equitable education in Bangladesh and similar developing contexts. By addressing these challenges, BOU can strengthen its role in national development, aligning with SDG-4's emphasis on inclusive, quality lifelong learning. Modernized ODL could bridge urban-rural divides, empower marginalized groups like women and rural learners, and foster digital transformation, ultimately contributing to sustainable socio-economic progress. As Bangladesh pushes for educational equity, implementing these findings will create resilient systems that translate access into meaningful outcomes, inspiring optimism for a more inclusive future.

Academic Reform and Curriculum Development

BOU should prioritize regular syllabus revisions every 3–5 years to incorporate contemporary knowledge and local contexts. Integrate multimedia like video lectures and interactive quizzes. Develop short, Bangla-language recorded content accessible via mobile or DVD for low-connectivity users. Train tutors in adult learning and inclusive methods, with anonymous semester evaluations to ensure accountability.

Digital and Technological Interventions

Introduce a robust Learning Management System (LMS) featuring forums, lecture recordings, assignment tracking, and tutor messaging. Launch a mobile app for calendars, notices, modules, and support chats. Provide optional digital literacy orientations for students and tutors to maximize tool utilization.

Administrative and Institutional Improvements

Automate result publication within 60 days of exams. Digitize registration, fees, and complaints via a centralized portal. Establish a Student Support Cell with toll-free lines and tracking for grievances. Assign academic advisors per cohort for personalized guidance on progress and issues.

Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Policies

Enhance facilities with women-specific washrooms, consultation rooms, and safe spaces. Introduce on-site childcare for weekend classes. Conduct gender awareness training for staff and tutors to address unique concerns effectively.

Student Engagement and Peer Support

Foster official study circles and moderated online groups. Recognize leaders of peer initiatives through rewards. Involve student representatives in curriculum, planning, and technology decisions to build ownership.

Policy and Structural Recommendations for BOU

Perform bi-annual assessments of services and satisfaction. Collaborate with national and international ODL bodies for best practices. Seek public-private partnerships to expand digital libraries and regional hubs.

Empowering Students for Self-Improvement

Offer orientations on time management and self-study techniques. Promote self-discipline via success stories and mentorship for paced learning.

Future research should widen to remote centers for location-specific insights. Longitudinal tracking could reveal evolving challenges across programs. Mixed methods would validate trends quantitatively. Including administrators' views would balance perspectives. Dedicated studies on marginalized groups—like disabled or low-income learners—could inform inclusivity. Evaluating LMS adoption would refine digital strategies. Comparative analyses with South Asian ODL institutions could adapt effective supports to Bangladesh.

References

- Berge, Z.L., Muilenburg, L.Y., & Haneghan, J.V. (2002). Barriers to distance education and training: Survey results. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 3(4), 409–418.
- Bolliger, D.U., & Inan, F.A. (2012). Development and validation of the Online Student Connectedness Survey (OSCS). *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13(3), 41–65.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- British Educational Research Association (BERA). (2018). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (4th ed.). <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416.
- Garland, M. (1993). Ethnography penetrates the "I didn't have time" rationale to elucidate higher-order reasons for distance education withdrawal. *Research in Distance Education*, 8(2), 181–198.
- Garrison, D.R. (2003). Cognitive presence for effective asynchronous online learning: The role of reflective inquiry, self-direction, and metacognition. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(1), 1–17.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Islam, T., & Selim, A.S.M. (2006). Current status and prospects for e-learning in the promotion of distance education in Bangladesh. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 7(1).
- Kember, D. (1989). A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 60(3), 278–301.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Latchem, C., & Jung, I. (2009). Distance and blended learning in Asia. London: Routledge.
- Moore, M.G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education* (pp. 22–38). Routledge.
- Moore, M.G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). *Distance Education: A Systems View of Online Learning*. 3rd Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Mtebe, J.S., & Raisamo, R. (2014). Investigating students' behavioral intention to adopt and use mobile learning in higher education in East Africa. *International Journal of Education and Development using ICT*, 10(3).
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Paulus, T. M., Lester, J. N., & Dempster, P. G. (2014). *Digital tools for qualitative research*. Sage.
- Rovai, A.P. (2002). Building sense of community at a distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 3(1).
- Simpson, O. (2008). Motivating learners in open and distance learning: Do we need a new theory of learner support? *Open Learning*, 23(3), 159–170.
- Sultana, M. S., Jahan, T., & Numan, S. M. (2011). A Study of Learners Perception and Attitude towards BA/BSS Program of SSL of Bangladesh Open University. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 12(3), 181–189.
- Tait, A. (2000). Planning student support for open and distance learning. *Open Learning*, 15(3), 287–299.

- UNESCO. (2022). *Global education monitoring report 2022: Technology in education – A tool on whose terms?* Paris: UNESCO.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Zirnkle, C. (2001). Access barriers in distance education. *Contemporary education* 72 (2), 39-42.