

Evaluating Offshore Open School Learners of Bangladesh Open University: Challenges and Problems

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Abstract

Technology has been a part of everyone's life thanks to the influx of social media. It is no longer an option. It is now essential. More people are getting connected through self-integrated technology (i.e. social and open-sourced platforms), and getting used to technology-enabled activities which has been the strength. Educational institutions capitalized on this force to address the challenges of schooling, particularly in proctoring exams. In Bangladesh, no comprehensive research actually addressed the challenges and problems related with technology-enabled exams. The current research shows feedback data gathered from an online workshop held in Qatar on 12 November 2021 on open schooling for non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) facing hardships related to their work. NRBs also have problems in using technology. In 2021, Open School of Bangladesh Open University introduced open school programmes for NRBs in Qatar and researched to explore the challenges posed by technology mediated evaluation. The data reveals that use of online platforms for delivery of classes prepared learners to support online proctoring of exams in spite of challenges and problems. Current research has depicted few outstanding arguments on recent debates about use of technology for learners' evaluation in hardship contexts.

Introduction

Use of online evaluation systems in technology-poor contexts has many challenges and difficulties, whether the institute uses a self-made learning management system (LMS) or open-sourced platforms such as Moodle, Zoom, and Google-Meet. During the coronavirus pandemic, use of these online platforms by educational institutions to support learnings (Mulyanti et al., 2020; Al-Amin, et al., 2021) has grown exponentially. Some academicians opined that using online platforms by the conventional institutions is distance education (DE); but it is, in fact, one kind of face-to-face (f2f) system because learners' engagement in technology-enabled learning (TEL) delivery is almost the same as in a classroom delivery. Online delivery is true distance education where learners' engagement is through the LMS which is capable of both teaching and evaluation (Yeasmin, 2021). Classroom delivery through an open-sourced platform is comparatively easy but there are certainly challenges of proctoring examinations to evaluate the learner. Open School of Bangladesh Open University (OS-BOU) used to proctor all examinations in-person rather than online, and recently, it ventured for a niche market in the Middle East countries. In line with this, it launched the offshore school programmes for NRBs in Asia and Middle East countries which are at par with the conventional school programmes such as Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) (2021, OS-BOU) to address the government's

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policy of skilling remittance-warriors. The countries where NRBs work are geographically diverse in nature, and working time is different from Bangladesh. Therefore, modus operandi is different from the existing onshore school programmes of OS-BOU, and the School is relying completely on information and communication technology (ICT). In the first year of the programme, Open School taught through virtual tutorials using open-source platforms like Zoom. But the School faces difficulties in completing the evaluation of off-shore students, and this paper discusses the major challenges of the evaluation system.

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Objectives

This paper achieves the following specific objectives:

- (i) to review the evaluation system of the conventional and open schooling programmes of Bangladesh;
- (ii) to ascertain faculty attitudes towards online evaluation of NRB students of Open School programmes;
- (iii) to collect feedback data from the existing open school learners in Qatar for addressing the challenges and difficulties associated with online proctoring;
- (iv) based on objectives i) to iii); to suggest an evaluation system appropriate for OS-BOU.

Methodology

The current research deployed mixed-methods to identify the challenges of proctoring examinations of the offshore programmes comprising i) desktop research, ii) interview schedule, and iii) open discussion for stakeholders' reflections. This article uses a checklist, semi-structured face-to-face (f2f) interviews with nine tutors at the Open School, as well as interviews with six students over the phone. In addition, OS Dean was exclusively interviewed on the Qatar programme. Verbal consent was taken from the respondents for recording the interviews in the mobile device, and having them used in the current research.

This article employs qualitative methods such as reviewing documents i.e., desktop study. O'Leary (2014); they are: general record, individual papers, and physical evidence. This research uses the following documents:

Table 7.1 : Document Analyzed

Public records	Individual papers	Physical evidence
◆ programme brochures	◆ tutors' WhatsApp	◆ Google tracking
◆ education ministry policies	group conversations	◆ tutors' experience reports
◆ OS regulations	with students	◆ Study Centre Coordinators' reports
◆ SSC and HSC curriculum and syllabus	◆ tutors' incident re-	
◆ CC meeting minutes	ports	

The researchers organized a two-and-a-half-hour online feedback discussion meeting with the officials of the Study Centre (i.e. the Embassy of Bangladesh, Qatar), tutors, and students through a Zoom platform on 12 November 2021. All students in Qatar (SSC – 50 and HSC – 107), 25 OS faculties (tutors of offshore programmes), 5 Embassy officials, 1 Study Centre Coordinator, and 3 from BOU administration were given Zoom link (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2 : Attendees in the discussion sessions

Participants	Number
BOU Administration	3
Open School Dean	1
Tutors from Open School	25
Embassy Officials	5
Study Centre Coordinator	1
Students from Qatar	30
Students from Saudi Arabia	2
Focal Points	2
ICT Officials	2
Total	71

First author jotted down the comments from participants while presiding over the feedback workshop where the learners were given priority to tell their personal stories in Qatar in connection to their studies under Open School. In addition, entire discussions were recorded, and feedback data was derived from the discussion. A checklist was used for constructive feedback from the tutors of the programmes, and the second author obtained feedback from students over the phone.

School programmes

Based on the delivery mode, school programmes in Bangladesh can be divided into two groups: ministry controlled schooling and BOU controlled open schooling. Both have different target groups and use different modus operandi. Their details are given below:

(a) **Ministerial control**

Conventional school programmes for general learners:

- curriculum and text (hardcopy) are designed by the ministry
- delivered through face-to-face (f2f) mode and
- proctored through educational boards

(b) **BOU control**

i) Open School programmes for dropouts:

- curriculum and modular texts developed by Open School of BOU
- curriculum is at par with that of the ministry
- delivered through open and distance learning (ODL) mode

- delivery portfolio: texts (hardcopy and soft copy), video lectures, and two monthly contact sessions and
- proctored through BOU
- ii) Open School programmes for disciplined forces: Army, Navy and Air Force started in 2012
 - curriculum and texts developed by Open School of BOU
 - curriculum is customized as per needs of the Forces
 - delivered through open and distance learning (ODL) mode
 - delivery portfolio: texts (hardcopy and soft copy), video lectures, and four monthly contact sessions and
 - proctored through BOU
- iii) Open School programmes for NRBs started in 2021
 - curriculum and texts developed by Open School of BOU
 - delivered through online mode
 - embassy is the focal point, and acts as a Study Centre
 - delivery portfolio: online classes, texts (softcopy only), and video lectures, and
 - BOU faces challenges in proctoring examination

Open schooling for NRBs in Qatar, launched in 2021, has been important because it complies with the government policy of skilling remittance-warriors. It is reported that Qatar is the third-largest remittance sending county to Bangladesh where most NRBs work in factories and/or in construction. Demand for Bangladeshi workers was high in the last couple of years to construct stadiums for FIFA World 2020 in Qatar. In line with this, BOU Open School designed the Open School programmes for Qatar NRBs. Fig 1) below depicts that the Embassy has been the focal point and acts as a Study Centre. Tutors of the programme have been OS faculties and lectures are being delivered online. The School identified the problem area of the programme: Conducting examinations for students located at diverse places. Their locations were checked through Google maps.

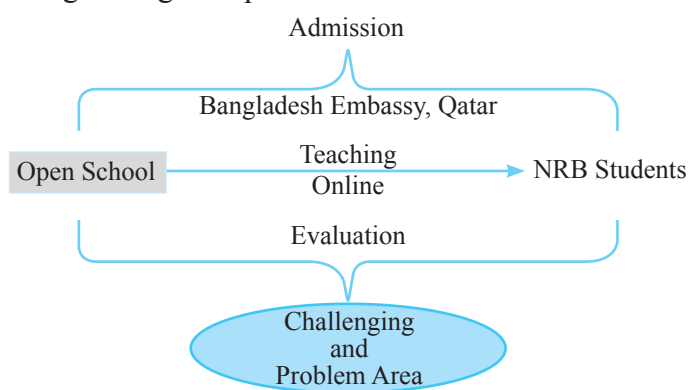


Fig 7.1 : Open School Programme for NRB

Evaluation policy during COVID-19

The pandemic necessitated school closure from March 2020 (Anik, 21) and brought with it social distancing and lockdown. This made online classes popular. As a part of the “new normal,” Government

of Bangladesh (GoB) adopted the open and distance learning (ODL) method for school learners through TV lectures, online classes, and assignments using platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and UGC-led BdRen. In order to complement the in-person classroom teaching, TV classes for school learners are centrally created and broadcasted, while online lectures are provided by the respective educational institution as per the government instructions. Bangladesh Open University already had this model of delivery, and therefore, the government's initiative is not new in Bangladesh. This became challenging as most populations cannot access ODL using digital connectivity. "About 49% of the households have no access to a computer and 54% do not have access to Internet, and 96% of rural households own a mobile phone, the majority (59%) do not have access to a smartphone," reported The Daily Star newspaper in 2020). So, the government found online delivery in Bangladesh challenging. BOU Open School faced the same issues in the fortnightly delivery of online tutorials (OS-BOU, 2020). BOU monitors tutorial sessions through its sub-regional offices scattered around the country. In view of the existing conditions, the new initiative could not bridge the shortcomings with supplements, considering the socio-economic condition of Bangladesh. Again, proctoring the public examination for SSC and HSC posed a new challenge and the government finally redesigned the policy for what may be called the 'auto-pass' system for these two exams in 2020, based on the student's past performance (The Sun News, December 2020). BOU decided the same because BOU school programmes are at par with formal school programmes. COVID-19 lingered and created mayhem in 2021, again disrupting the smooth flow of educational activities. In this situation, the government set a policy of wait and watch for proctoring the examination and finally came out with a decision to proctor public examinations in limited subjects with shortened syllabus. BOU took the same decision, which is obligatory as per the provision of the BOU Act 1991. At the same time, BOU can design its own system of evaluation as an autonomous body.

As mentioned, open schooling programmes for the target group is categorized into three types, and among them, evaluation of offshore programmes has been very challenging because:

- (i) students are factory hands in different construction companies in Qatar
- (ii) work stations are diverse and traveling to the examination centres is difficult
- (iii) handling the examination answer scripts is unsafe for the Controller of Examinations

Online Proctoring

Recently, online delivery has been adopted in many educational institutions. This is challenging in maintaining academic integrity in proctoring examinations. In order to address the challenges, the institutions use an online proctoring and remote invigilation solution and camera to watch student activity during examinations to help the instructor whenever unfair means are taken by the students (Rutgers, 2020). Rutgers also identifies some problems of online evaluation. They found that students prefer in-person examinations. They find online tests stressful and this adversely impacts performance. Online proctoring requires well-established ICT infrastructure which may malfunction at any time for various reasons. In addition, a student can face technical problems in the system at the time of examination, supporting students and fixing their technical problem through online is not easy (Rutgers, 2020). In

connection to online assessments, educational institutions have encountered another challenge during the ongoing coronavirus incident owing to lack of preparation of institutions, teachers, and students. To handle the academic integrity in remote proctoring, an investigation is carried out to identify and line up the proper assessment type for various modules in Middle East College (Guangul et al., 2020).

Findings and discussion

In this section, feedback from the online workshop with the BOU authority, tutors, NRB Open School students, and the Bangladesh Embassy, Qatar held on 12 November 2021 was analyzed in relation to Communication and Social Networking, Collecting and Sharing Information, Using Learning Materials (Texts and Videos) to find out the preparedness of proctoring online examinations. In conducting tutorials for onshore and offshore students, the use of online platforms, especially Zoom, became powerful during the lockdown although this was new to BOU students and teachers. Interview extracts from the students' and tutors' attitudes towards the preparedness for online remote proctoring for NRB students (OS-BOU, 2021) show:

Students are attending classes using smartphones and tutors use laptops. One respondent (reported as Student Case 1, 2, 3 & so on) said:

I mostly use my smartphone for communication like most of my friends use for Facebook, WhatsApp and other social apps. [Student Case 1]

Each morning, I browse Bangla newspapers using my Smartphone. [Student Case 2]

Smartphone-based communication, particularly through WhatsApp and Facebook, are impacting NRB students in Qatar in developing their course of studies and course-related information. As one tutor said, students benefit from social media network-based communication:

WhatsApp group has been developed for my subject and I certainly enjoy sharing ideas and reading the posts of group members during leisure time. [Tutor Case 1]

Proper communication and engagement are key to success in classroom teaching, and these two variables play in a different way than they might in an in-person setting. Effective tool communication enhances student engagement in online settings. In online settings, instructors can use a range of strategies to both communicate with and support online students (DeBruler and Harrington, 2020). BOU Open School engages students through two types of technologies: Institutional integrated (virtual classrooms, and OER-based print and video lectures) and self-integrated (Social media). Integration of technologies enhances learners' qualitative and quantitative participation which, in turn, impacts learners' engagements. Two students said:

I use my spare time to study, and during study time, I myself watch videos on BOUTube. I have downloaded some videos on my smartphone, and found they are too extended. [Student Case 3]

For all my queries regarding my studies, I use my smartphone. [Student Case 4]

As we see, the smartphone has been an effective device in learners' engagement in the Open School programmes in Qatar. Tutors observed:

I rely a lot on my smartphone in sharing course-materials with my students as it combines facilities like scanning texts, recording lectures, and sometimes has the opportunity of accessing online platforms when I stay on the outskirts of the city. I regularly share my lecture notes and announcements with my students. I also share links of original YouTube videos to help them understand the difficult concepts covered in the class through WhatsApp. [Tutor Case 2]

BOU Open School uses Zoom platforms because UGC-commissioned BdRen provides unlimited access and I have sufficient skill in using the app. I deliver lectures through BdRen. I generally access it using my smartphone to share course-related information and use a laptop for class delivery. [Tutor Case 3]

I create a WhatsApp group for each of the courses I teach. It is a really convenient and efficient medium for communicating with my students and very handy indeed. [Tutor Case 4]

I generally encourage my students to communicate using email because proctoring examinations needs the email ID for accessing the system. I can check and respond to their emails conveniently from anywhere using my smartphone, but the use of emails by the students is very low. [Tutor Case 5]

Internet connectivity on my smartphone is normally very active; and sometimes very problematic because of network problems. [Tutor Case 6]

Most students use smartphones as it is a very handy device to attend classes and other administrative information, and sharing materials. I personally asked them to procure laptops for examinations, and they reported handling laptops may be difficult for them. [Tutor Case 7]

The study has vexed to identify various aspects of online delivery of open school programme in Qatar. The research results show that students are well prepared in terms of a device to join online examinations.

I have downloaded e-books of the subjects that I teach and e-copy as piecemeal on their smartphone which is very effective as it is difficult to download the whole book on the phone. [Tutor Case 8]

Any student can communicate his queries anytime via SMS, email or WhatsApp and I try to respond to them as soon as possible. [Tutor Case 9]

Dealing with technologies

The analysis focuses on learners' perceptions of how the technology can be used to complete the evaluation of their learnings. Bangladesh Open University used to rely on broadcast technology from the beginning and it is using Web technology. I reveal that BOU is adopting technology-enhanced learning (TEL). Programme for NRBs has been a TEL-based programme launched in 2021.

Making changes in student's attitudes

Another commonly recurring phrase was, "We would use before ... now we use ..." and variations of this (Table-7.3). This has been used for showing the variations of using technology in education, and it contributes to changing the attitudes of the learners.

Table 7.3 : Change in practice for NRB students

We would use before	We use now
Hard Copy of books	Soft copy of books from BOU OER Repository
We still prefer hard copy as it is difficult to get prints	Collect through relatives and BOU officials
In-person visit to Embassy	Telephonic information

Benefits of using smartphones:

- with tutorials – teachers, tutors, and peers
- with materials – videos and texts; download and use anytime

Selected case studies related to with-classes as under:

I took online classes delivered by teachers from the Open School. I studied at home as well, and then I browsed the Internet to get the soft copy of my textbooks from the BOU website. Google helps me a lot. Then the teachers help me through WhatsApp groups. If I don't know something, I write it in the group and get the solution. Almost all the teachers from the Open School have provided the classes on different subjects through Zoom. I have full confidence about taking the examinations online just as I am about online classes [Student Case 5].

The biggest problem for me is to afford a laptop but I own two smartphones, so it won't be a problem attending classes. But there may be a problem attending examinations through smartphones. I never visit the Embassy; I communicate through smartphone [Student Case 6].

In view of the online feedback workshop, the Dean of Open School declared online proctoring for the Open School programme in Qatar. She also opined addressing the students as under:

You are doing courses online, and your assessment will be undertaken through online. Therefore, you need not to attend the examination centre [Dean, OS-BOU].

Challenges and problems

- ◆ Open School provides learners with a structured textbook which has specific objectives. Assessment is done based on the learning outcomes and accordingly, assessment methods are designed for in-person proctoring. Online assessment is technical and therefore, designing questions for online proctoring has been a big challenge for the Open School.
- ◆ The utmost crucial issue in online evaluation is ensuring academic honesty. This has been the main challenge to make assessment free from cheating through both preventive and curative measures in the software to be used in online platforms.
- ◆ In online evaluation, there is no in-person communication and no scope for learners to clarify, if any, because learners are not used to the new assessment method, and in order to clarify the procedures, online discussion is needed with sample questions.
- ◆ In online examination, the invigilator will not be in a position to solve the student's problem related to technology malfunctions, or owing to lack of sufficient knowhow on the supporting

materials by the students. Computer department needs to jot down the possible problem and make a demo for this to the students.

Conclusion and recommendation

If an examinee faces technical problems at the time of examination, fixing the problem remotely seems to be difficult. Therefore, piloting is recommended through a mock test. Mobile technologies have been an integral part of teaching learning. COVID-19 made it obligatory, whatever the cost. Evaluation of learning has still been challenging through technology as a smartphone has difficulties providing full integrity in proctoring an examination. The smartphone has been found an effective and appropriate medium for the Qatar programme, and networking with peer students because they are connected with social media. It is considered suitable for explaining topics to their students as both audio and video content available on the web can easily be shared (Iqbal and Bhatti, 2020). Self-integrated technology, say, smartphones can assist students at the point of need and in ways that fit in as this has been their part of life. Technology facilitates learning activities in a technology-poor context as well (Shohel, 2012). The research focused on the challenges of online assessment in general and academic integrity in particular. The key strength recognized is that the students are enthusiastic and committed to submit assignments online. They were also found committed to appear at the online examination and BOU needs to capitalize on this commitment.

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