THE NEED FOR PARTICIPATION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION:
The Open University Bangladesh Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of adult learner participation in open and distance education by focusing participation needs based on selected socio-demographic variables such as age, years of working experience and monthly income. The related study involved Open University Bangladesh students from a number of learning centre’s located in different parts of the country.

The study found that adult learners are generally below the age of 39, relatively not affluent, have less than 20 years of work experience and have a high need for participation. The highest need is professional advancement, followed closely by cognitive interest, and communication improvement while the lowest reported need is escapism/social stimulation. Age and work experience exhibited negative regression coefficients, indicating inverse associations with participation need. These results are comparable to the findings of previous research on the role of age, work experience and monthly income as factors determining participation in adult higher education.

Keywords: Adult learners, Learner needs, Participation, Open and Distance Education.
INTRODUCTION
Open and distance education is increasingly seen as a powerful vehicle for delivering educational opportunity to adults from all walks of life. As practiced in Open University Bangladesh, open and distance education is best referred to as an educational process where learners take responsibility for their own learning. Instructional delivery relies on a combination of face-to-face interaction, which offers the opportunity to deliberate on concepts, ideas and thoughts related to course content, and on the use of educational media such as print modules, audio and radio broadcasts as well as computer supported interaction.

Recent developments in education have seen the advent of distance learning in both traditional universities as well as in open and distance learning institutions. The major difference between traditional on-campus programs and open and distance education programs lies in the mode(s) of instruction being used to instruct students, the degree of maturation of the two learner groups, the physical location of the students, and the degree of responsibility placed on the students to master and demonstrate understanding and competence in the content of courses and curricula.

Today, after 25 years, interest in distance education has grown and its use has expanded in Bangladesh. To establish socio-economical credibility, programs offered through the distance education mode are similar to those available in the formal public university education system. Course delivery, however, is tailored to suit the demands of the home-based learner. Most local public universities in provide distance learning programs.

ADULT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Open and distance learners in all parts of the world are often challenged to perform amid difficult circumstances. Their learning endeavors are often influenced by a myriad number of determinants such as type of vocation, job sector and discipline.

These factors have the potential for influencing an individual’s perception of what motivates or hinders success in distance education. The effects of social and psychological forces, i.e. variables that include marital status, number of dependent children and occupation, can undermine learner motivation and persistence. For these reasons, open and distance educators should assist learners identify sources of power and factors
that will support persistence in open and distance education. Today, a high percentage of individuals attend college and participate in supplementary courses or seminars in order to acquire better jobs, as well as to improve their skills. Various organizations and universities support the education industry by providing educational programs. Sometimes, government entities mandate that their employees participate in training programs conducted by agencies. As older, working adults now form the majority of students in Bangladeshi higher education institutions it is axiomatic that traditional programs that cater for youth education do not fully prepare a person for the challenges of adult life.

**THE STUDY**

The study aimed to examine the socio-demographic profile of students who participate in open and distance education, as well as to determine the reasons for participation by the workforce. For these reasons, the study employed survey methodology to reach out to adult distance learners enrolled for study at BOU Learning Centers in Bangladesh. To determine the needs of adult students to participate in distance education at the university level, the study utilized an established education participation scale by Boshier called the Education Participation Scale (EPS).

The dependent and the independent variables adopted in this study were need for participation and socio-demographic variables, respectively. The participation needs variables consisted of Boshier’s EPS seven factors, which were: communication improvement, social contact/social relationship, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, escapism/social stimulation and cognitive interest. The socio-demographic variables examined were: Age, work experience and monthly income. For these reasons, only working adults were considered as part of the sample for the study.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study are presented as follows. First the socio-demographic profile of the Bangladeshi adult-learner participating in BOU is described. Second, the levels of participation according to socio-demography are determined.

Subsequently, the strength of the relationship between selected socio-demographic variables and participation needs is determined. Finally, the contributions of the selected independent variables to participation needs are presented.
Level of Participation Needs. Participants were asked to indicate needs levels on a seven point scale, ranging from (1) 'It is not a need at all' to (7) 'It is a very strong need'. The data were subsequently recoded as Low for responses on the lower end of the scale (1.0 - 3.0), Moderate for responses on the Centre of the scale (3.1 - 5.0) and High for responses on the higher end of the scale (5.1 - 7.0).

Our findings show that younger adults (ages < 39) have higher needs than those in any other age group. Older adults (ages >40) participate with moderate needs. This does not appear to have anything to do with the education level, income difference, or labor status of older adults. Rather, it is more likely to do with the interests of older adults or of the attractiveness of the program being offered.

In this study, more women responded to the questionnaire (55.5%) in comparison to men (44.5%), a figure that does not reflect the national female-male ratio.

In Bangladesh, men actually outnumber women (Population and Housing Census, 2000), with more women than men in the managerial, professional, executive and teaching vocations. In relation to this, the current study found that men participate in open and distance education with high needs (mean=5.23) while women participate due to moderate needs (mean=5.02).

In contrast to this finding, MacBrayne (1995) reported that women had higher needs to participate, due in part to goal attainment, seeking information, seeking degrees and location/circumstantial reasons.

It is of interest to note that middle-aged and older adults (ages 40-49, 50-59 and >60) have moderate needs (5.01, 4.83 and 3.98 respectively) towards participation, needs that seem to decline as they get older. The findings also show that all ethnic groups have almost similar needs for participation. Malays (mean=5.15) and Indians (mean=5.06) have slightly higher needs compared to the Chinese (mean=5.02) and others (mean=5.01). Both married and single respondents have high participation needs (mean=5.12 and mean=5.12). It was also found that both widowed and divorced respondents had moderate participation needs with means of 4.91 and 4.80, respectively. Participants with or without dependents have a high level of needs. Interestingly, we detected a decline in the level of needs as the number of dependents got smaller.

**IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has been limited in terms of the number and disposition of the respondents as well as the methodology employed during data collection. Respondents who frequently attend classes and are active learners may have formed the larger part of the sample since attendance to lectures is not
compulsory in Bangladesh Open University. The quantitative measures also may not have captured all facets of participation in distance education. Nevertheless, the study has been useful in highlighting a number of points that may be worthy of mention for the purpose of program planning and policy development in open and distance education.

In justifying the findings above where the highest reported need was professional advancement, education planners will do well to link open and distance learning programs with the professional needs of the labor force, and with the needs of the working adult.

Secondly, adult development training involves learning for the purpose of self-fulfillment, social roles and assigned roles or vocations. Often, a working adult tries hard at the workplace to fulfill his or her intrinsic and extrinsic need as suggested by Maslow in his hierarchy of basic needs. The integration of these roles is likely to bring about positive changes and further development between the worker and his boss.

The finding that escapism/social stimulation demonstrated a moderate level of needs (52.2%) warrants further investigation. A study that more thoroughly examines this need in relation to participation would provide important information about the nature of the learner who is drawn to open and distance education. It may well be the case that opens and distance institutions ought to provide more non-credit bearing and non-academic courses, such as those with aesthetic appeal, in order to cater to the need for recreational and therapeutic fulfillment of the socio-emotional self. In a similar vein, the finding that family togetherness and social contact recorded moderate levels of participation draws attention to the fact that education carries a strong group-oriented and communal bearing. While this appears to be in sync with the traditional Asian value-system, it also underscores the need for professional networking and establishing new contacts in the working arena. Thus, it is incumbent upon educators and policy developers alike to consider these factors during program planning, and in the implementation of courses.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that factors related to professional, organizational and personal self-development define adult learners' needs to participate in open and distance education. Further, the need for professional advancement, cognitive interest, communication improvement, educational preparation, social contact, family togetherness and escapism/social stimulation cannot be ignored in the planning, designing and implementation of open and distance education programs. Further research on the dependent and independent variables explored in this study is necessary to establish a pattern of needs for adult learner participation in distance education in Bangladesh.
REFERENCES


