

eLearning in Developing Countries: Challenges and Opportunities Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract

ICT has become an important enabler to facilitate open education and distance learning at broader communities. eLearning ensures access to information about education, training and lifelong learning through the use of multimedia technologies. The recent growing trend of eLearning is mostly benefiting the developed countries due to some predominant facilities like infrastructure, technology, relevant content and responsive learner community. The beauty of eLearning is anyone can avail himself of the service i.e. learning/teaching aid from anywhere, as there is no geographic barrier among the learners. So, a global participation can be ensured through the system. Internet has made the process much easier and comfortable.

The eLearning scenario in developing countries is still a new era for the learner communities. Due to reverse economic and social conditions of developed countries, countries like Bangladesh could not yet establish a reliable eLearning system or institution. The acceptance of such learning facilities is not yet accredited or even accepted by the local authorities in most of the times. Few initiatives like Open University and National University, in addition to the international organizations like COL, is trying to create the eLearning program as a widely accepted tool for learning for wide varieties of community. Simultaneously, the local communities of developing countries can obtain the eLearning facilities from their existing

locations. But the majority of the local communities are out of the facility.

There are few major issues like national strategy, connectivity, accreditation, acceptability, quality of the learning materials, and relevant contents that have to be considered for any eLearning program for Bangladesh. Simultaneously, setting priority of the learning systems, developing countries like Bangladesh are based on traditional learning mechanism and the market for eLearning has not yet become an important agenda for the government. to address. Another critical concern raised on the eLearning activities is the cost perspective. Learners of the developing countries have financial constraints to participate in the program which is costly for them and they have limited scopes to get the learning facilities as it relates with high tech equipment, in many cases.

So, for the developing countries we need to reframe the eLearning mechanism to reach the communities.

Introduction

The introduction of new technologies like eLearning into Bangladesh education system will itself create many challenges, including financing, skills, capacity and many others. Though the goal of introducing eLearning system is to reach to all communities of the society but in reality only the privileged community of the society will benefit from such learning mechanism due to the existing national strategy, infrastructure & social condition.

Bangladesh Perspective

ICT is the emerging sector in Bangladesh. The government has declared it as thrust sector and the overall education sector is in the priority list of the government. However, these two sectors have lot to develop in terms of reach, quality and contribution to the development process. In fact, though the challenges facing Bangladesh are significant, the challenges of old, low and uneven education participation, poor quality education, low per capita incomes, and a rapidly growing population have been joined by new and more daunting challenges, including corruption, globalization, lack of political commitment, and rapidly advancing technology. The size of this challenge is clear. In the area of introducing eLearning in Bangladesh, a small number of initiatives are already in action and most of the learning materials are developed in western countries with limited relevancy in terms of content and language. We need local, relevant and user friendly eLearning system, not only high tech solutions. In consideration of the recent growth in the ICT sector, the opportunities are now promising to introduce eLearning programs in Bangladesh at broader aspect.

Challenges and way out

To bring the eLearning benefits to the people of developing countries like Bangladesh, some important issues to be addressed and the key role of the players are identified as follows –

1. National strategy and plan for eLearning where government has to play the lead role in partnership with academician;
2. Ensuring access to the local communities i.e. development of ICT infrastructure, both government and private sector have to contribute in the process;

3. Developing expertise on eLearning teaching modalities for professional development, require more integrated approach & support for different stakeholders;
4. Building partnership and cooperation among the stakeholders like academician, promoters etc. and between the regional & international networks to share the best practices, challenges and explore solutions;
5. Ensuring quality of the eLearning materials, government institutions and academicians have to play an important role;
6. Certification of the programs, academicians and government has to set the national strategies & criteria;
7. Developing local relevant contents for local communities, government and development partners have direct role to play;
8. Ensuring copyright and IPR issues;
9. Promotional campaign to make aware of eLearning facilities among the learners;
10. Developing organizational capacity of the developing countries, all stake holders have to contribute in the process.

Moving ahead with eLearning

To overcome the challenges mentioned above and move ahead with the eLearning initiative, we have to set priority based steps. Primarily the learning environment has to be established, only setting the enabling environment will ensure proper advancement in the field of eLearning system. This should cover the modification of the existing legal framework of education systems, designing national eLearning strategy etc. Then few issues have to address like accreditation, certification, content development, awareness building, capacity building at 2 levels (trainers and institutions), and many more.

Opportunities

The demand for higher education is increasing day by day and students are looking for alternate options to choose but the service is not available at present. eLearning can meet the demand for enrolling these groups of students and professionals. As already mentioned, the infrastructure and primary awareness among the policy makers have already been developed, and we need to enforce the eLearning issues from the competent authorities. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has set another opening to introduce such initiative to ensure building information society in the developing countries. Once the eLearning system can be introduced in developing countries like Bangladesh, there will be a breakthrough in the education system. More students will be enrolled, outreach will go further, better learning material will ensure quality output, ICT based technology will be adopted in the process of and finally bring an integrated benefit to the society.

Exchanging Best Practices

The best practices in the area of eLearning need to be documented and shared with the countries that are interested to introduce the same system in their countries. Development partners, particularly, organizations working in the field of promotion of eLearning can come up with this process for documentation and organize events to share the best practices.

A Multi Stakeholder Strategy

The experience of developed countries clearly shows that the eLearning mechanism involves various actors in the process including academia, infrastructure, social entrepreneur, private sector, also the development partners. Major categories are government, private sector, academia and development partners. Initially, introduction of eLearning will require huge efforts from all these stakeholders. An integrated

approach will ensure the proper implementation of eLearning in countries like Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The transformation of the education sector generally, and the eLearning sector specifically, is being driven by a number of broad economic, technological, and social trends that have accelerated in recent years. One of the key ones is the significant increase in the demand for higher education in both developed and developing countries. Bangladesh is always keen on introducing new learning media like eLearning and working to come up with specific forward-thinking mechanism. To capitalize the benefits of this learning system, any sorts of joint efforts will be welcome to introduce the system at the national educational and professional learning system.