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Tutors' Perspectives of Advancing Distance Learning Programs: A Comprehensive Understanding

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Abstract

This study critically examined tutors' perspectives on advancing the academic development of teacher education programs delivered via open and distance learning (ODL) at Bangladesh Open University (BOU). Tutors play a pivotal role as frontline facilitators of instruction, yet their experiential insights are often underrepresented in institutional decision-making. Drawing on a constructivist paradigm and grounded theory methodology, this qualitative inquiry engaged 82 tutors across eight tutorial centres using open-ended survey questions. Through classical content analysis, eleven major themes emerged, including attendance in tutorial sessions, curriculum and module design, tutorial session frequency, physical resources, tutor professional development, and supervision of practice teaching. The findings reveal that tutors emphasise the need for structured learner engagement, participatory curriculum revision, robust infrastructural support, and institutional investment in tutor capacity-building. The study also highlights disparities between current program structures at BOU and international norms, suggesting the need for extended program duration and more integrated practicum experiences. Implications are drawn for institutional policy, academic design, and participatory governance in ODL. By foregrounding tutors' voices, this study contributes to a more inclusive model of academic development and underscores what tutors perceive as the need to bridge the gap between policy directives and pedagogical realities in distance education.

Keywords: open and distance learning, ODL, teacher education programs, tutors' perspectives, academic development, Bangladesh Open University

Introduction

In contemporary higher education, the continual enhancement and restructuring of academic programs are central to aligning institutional offerings with evolving pedagogical standards and accreditation benchmarks (Klement et al., 2017). Nowhere is this more salient than in open and distance learning (ODL) systems, where innovation must be matched by responsiveness to the unique demands of distance learners and the mediators who facilitate their academic journeys. Among those mediators, tutors play an indispensable role, often functioning as the academic face of the university and embodying the bridge between institutionally designed curriculum and learner engagement (Ntuli & Gumbo, 2019; Sutherland, 2018).

While educational reforms are typically driven from the top down, research consistently suggests that meaningful curriculum development must be informed by those responsible for enacting policy at the classroom level—namely, tutors (Bascia et al., 2014; Johnson, 2001). In the ODL context, tutors serve multiple functions: they interpret course content, diagnose learner needs, deliver instruction, offer emotional support, and liaise between learners and institutions (Tait, 2000). Their role is therefore uniquely positioned to provide crucial feedback that could inform academic program improvement. However, tutors at the Bangladesh Open University (BOU)—the country's sole national provider of ODL—perceive that they have had limited involvement in curriculum decision-making processes, even though they consider their role central to program delivery.

Given that BOU's teacher education programs are designed for working professionals, particularly school teachers, there is a need to continually evaluate and strengthen the academic scaffolding of these offerings. The absence of a formal platform for tutor voices in academic development represents a missed opportunity for grounded, context-sensitive reform. This study attempted to bridge that gap by systematically investigating tutors' perspectives on how teacher education programs could be academically enhanced, asking how BOU tutors perceive and recommend academic development strategies for the teacher education programs in the context of ODL. In addressing this question, the study positioned tutors not merely as implementers of policy but as vital stakeholders in academic innovation. The aim was to provide policymakers, curriculum designers, and institutional leaders with empirically grounded insights for the ongoing enhancement of teacher education programs within ODL environments.

Tutors of Bangladesh Open University

Tutors at the School of Education (SoE) of BOU are appointed through referrals from the study centres, which serve as the university's examination and tutorial centres. Most of these tutors work as academics or regular teachers at the study centres. The university often selects the tutor if the recommendation complies with its appointment rules. Following program enrollment, learners are directed to attend tutorial sessions by the SoE. Usually, that is the first time tutors and students meet; before then, the tutors have no responsibility for those learners.

The tutorials, which generally consist of 16 sessions for each program, are scheduled by SoE. Students must turn in their assignments to their tutors. The SoE teachers determine assignment themes. Following the conclusion of the tutorial sessions, the SoE releases the exam schedule, and study centres carry out the tasks

associated with the test. This suggests that the primary function of administering examinations is carried out by the study centre tutors. Tutors and the teachers of the SoE evaluate the answer scripts, while assignments are evaluated only by the tutors. The university's exam division produces the final results for learners. Based on these tasks and responsibilities, it can be concluded that tutors' primary duties are to lead tutorial sessions and conduct examination-related activities. In the ODL system, tutors are appointed as part-time and contractual staff to deliver supporting instruction, with minimal opportunity to participate in the academic development of programs. Even though they are well-known and respected academicians elsewhere, the second-class position (Lentell, 2001) in the job can demotivate and have a long-term effect on their professional activities in the ODL system (Shelley et al., 2006).

Literature Review

Tutors as Facilitators of Learning in Open and Distance Education

ODL programs such as bachelor's and master's degrees in education depend heavily on tutors to support student learning. As primary links between learners and institutions, tutors provide academic and emotional support in place of regular in-person instruction (Ntuli & Gumbo, 2019). Tutors mediate between course content and student needs, acting as mentors and facilitators (Sutherland, 2018). Particularly in large ODL institutions, tutors significantly shape students' academic experiences.

Tait (2000) outlined three types of learner support in ODL: cognitive, affective, and systemic. Tutors deliver cognitive support through instruction and feedback, affective support through encouragement, and systemic support by helping students navigate institutional requirements. Tutors assume multiple roles, including explaining content, moderating discussions, and motivating learners. The University of South Africa (UNISA) tutor model exemplifies this multifaceted role (Barrow & Grant, 2012). Tutors are crucial to bridging gaps between students and institutional structures (Leibowitz et al., 2015), especially in teacher education programs, where they model both academic content and pedagogical practices.

Academic Support and Development Through Tutoring

Tutors play a vital role in promoting academic development by helping students build knowledge, skills, and critical thinking. Student support in ODL comprises academic and non-academic dimensions. Tutors contribute to academic success by clarifying content, scaffolding learning, and providing timely feedback (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018).

In distance-based teacher education programs, tutors combine subject-matter expertise with pedagogical guidance. They support constructivist learning approaches by encouraging dialogue and knowledge construction (Li et al., 2017). Tutors also indirectly influence curriculum through feedback loops, identifying student difficulties that may guide content revision. Although they seldom influence curricular policy directly, they personalize the learning experience in ways static course materials cannot. Their support is linked to increased persistence and success (Mori et al., 2022; Walker, 2015).

Pedagogical Practices and Tutor Professional Development

The quality of tutoring depends on tutors' pedagogical skills, including digital facilitation and student engagement. Researchers de Metz and Bezuidenhout (2018) found that tutors often face mismatches

between institutional expectations and their actual training. While many tutors see themselves as central to student learning, they report feeling underprepared in key areas, including online teaching and technology use (Hofer et al., 2021).

Effective tutoring requires continuous professional development. Tutors trained in student-centred techniques and adult learning principles are better equipped to foster engagement. Yet some studies have revealed persistent gaps in tutors' instructional alignment with ODL pedagogical best practices (Govender, 2018). Institutions are urged to provide support that enables tutors to meet these challenges.

Collaborative learning opportunities, such as peer mentoring and communities of practice, have been found to enhance tutor effectiveness. Tutors engaged in structured peer-exchange programs have reported adopting improved instructional strategies (Muazam et al., 2021; Walker, 2015). These exchanges reinforce tutors' professional growth and align practices across programs. As ODL expands, especially post-pandemic, the need for pedagogically skilled tutors is greater than ever (Rapanta et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2022).

Institutional Roles and Policy Engagement of Tutors

Despite their instructional importance, tutors often have limited roles in institutional decision-making. Typically hired as part-time faculty, they may have minimal involvement in curriculum design or governance (Barrow & Grant, 2012; Sutherland, 2018). Felber (2020) highlighted concerns over tutors teaching courses they did not design, which limits their ability to improve content.

In many cases, tutor feedback is not meaningfully incorporated into program development. Even structured tutor models like UNISA's provide limited pathways for tutors' voices to influence policy (Ntuli & Gumbo, 2019). This lack of agency is problematic, as tutors hold valuable insights about student needs and course delivery. Yet, institutional systems often relegate tutors to delivery roles without avenues for curriculum review or policy dialogue (Leibowitz et al., 2015).

Researchers and organizations have been advocating for tutor inclusion in institutional development. The Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO stressed the need to value tutor input as part of a renewed educational social contract (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). Felber (2020) proposed practical strategies, such as involving adjunct tutors in course revision workshops. Institutionalizing tutor engagement could improve curriculum relevance, strengthen tutor commitment, and elevate student experience. Still, barriers such as limited time and institutional resistance persist. Tutors have expressed frustration with top-down decision-making that fails to reflect their frontline realities (Tait, 2018).

Tutors' Contributions to Quality and Student Success

Though often marginal in institutional structures, tutors substantially impact academic quality and student success. Studies have confirmed that strong tutoring correlates with better pass rates, retention, and satisfaction. At UNISA, e-tutors reported helping students succeed by clarifying content and maintaining motivation (Joubert & Snyman, 2020).

Tutors also contribute to the quality of the learning process, not just outcomes. Their feedback helps correct misunderstandings and ensures academic integrity. Through regular interaction, tutors foster student accountability and deeper engagement. Researchers de Metz and Bezuidenhout (2018) described e-tutors as "critical success factors" in shaping students' perceptions of online learning (para. 1).

Institutional support is essential to maximize tutors' contributions. High tutor-student ratios or limited resources can constrain personalized support. Nonetheless, many tutors adapt creatively by offering additional help or materials. Their commitment to student learning reflects a broader professional ethos. However, their limited input into policy remains a challenge. Tutors carry much responsibility for academic standards but often lack influence over institutional frameworks. This gap hinders sustainable improvements. Still, tutors take initiative to meet learning goals through supplemental practices.

In sum, tutors in ODL programs are integral to academic success, pedagogical quality, and institutional credibility. They work at the intersection of learner support and content delivery, particularly in professional programs in education. Yet their expertise remains underused in governance and curriculum design. Expanding professional development and engaging tutors in institutional processes will be crucial to realizing the full potential of ODL education.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, framed within the constructivist paradigm which posits that reality is socially constructed and contextually situated (Charmaz, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This methodological framework enabled a nuanced exploration of tutors' perspectives within the contextual boundaries of BOU's ODL system. While the study was not designed to generate formal grounded theory in the traditional Glaserian or Straussian sense, it adopted grounded theory principles—particularly from Charmaz's (2014) constructivist tradition—as an analytic orientation. These principles included iterative engagement with the data, constant comparison across participants' responses, and the emergence of inductively generated categories. However, classical content analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) served as the primary analytic strategy to identify thematic frequencies and institutional patterns. Thus, the study does not claim theory development but rather uses grounded theory concepts to deepen the interpretive process and ensure analytical transparency. This approach aligns with constructivist paradigms that value co-constructed meaning and recognise the researcher's interpretive role

Constructivism guided the formulation of open-ended, context-sensitive questions aimed at eliciting participants' lived realities rather than imposing pre-defined categories. The survey prompts were deliberately open to multiple interpretations to reflect the socially constructed nature of knowledge. This orientation shaped the design and language of data collection tools, inviting tutors to co-construct meaning rather than act as passive data sources. Grounded theory principles further structured the analytic process, allowing emergent themes to surface inductively from tutors' narratives. The iterative coding, categorisation, and constant comparison methods helped reveal latent patterns embedded within tutor perspectives, thereby grounding theoretical insights in practice-based realities (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014).

Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the selection of information-rich participants who could offer in-depth insights into the academic development of the distance education programs (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study targeted tutors from the SoE's network of 27 tutorial centres across Bangladesh, which constitutes the broader population of interest, comprising 400 tutors. From this population, 82 tutors were chosen from eight conveniently located tutorial centres based on their accessibility and operational capacity during the study period. Although tutors were selected through random inclusion within those centres, purposive attention was given to including coordinators of the programs as key informants, which tutors believed was due to their strategic roles in program implementation. Experienced tutors, who were available in the tutorial sessions during the data collection process, were prioritized for selection as sample participants, ensuring that the most knowledgeable and engaged educators informed our study. Moreover, these eight centres were situated in eight divisional cities of Bangladesh and deemed the most significant among the 27 centres for size and geographical familiarity. These eight study centres were the oldest government teacher training colleges in the country and held a leading position among all teacher training centres. Although sampling only from these centres may have restricted generalizability, the selected centres offered appropriately pertinent insights into the phenomena being examined.

The sample size of 82 participants significantly exceeds the commonly cited threshold for grounded theory studies, where 20 to 30 participants are often considered sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The relatively large sample size thus strengthens the robustness and depth of the data, enhancing the interpretive potential of the findings.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through a qualitative survey comprising both closed and open-ended questions in the written questionnaire. The survey was designed to elicit tutors' perceptions regarding factors affecting the academic development of the teacher education programs (Bachelor of Education and Master of Education). Specifically, participants were asked questions in three key areas: (a) demographic background; (b) identification of areas requiring improvement; and (c) suggestions for enhancing academic quality in the identified areas.

The open-ended questions were particularly valuable in capturing nuanced and context-specific viewpoints, which aligns with the grounded theory emphasis on inductively building theory from rich qualitative data (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Data Analysis

Upon gathering data from the participants, all information was meticulously documented and analyzed to discern themes or patterns. Thematic analysis approaches were followed to understand the underlying meaning of the data, and meaningful themes were then employed to analyze the study further, enhancing its systematic nature, rigor, and quantifiability. Classical content analysis was selected over thematic analysis due to its structured, frequency-based coding logic, which aligned with the study's aim to not only interpret emergent themes but also assess their relative salience across a large qualitative sample (n = 82). Unlike thematic analysis, which prioritises deep semantic interpretation without quantitative enumeration,

classical content analysis facilitates the systematic categorisation and quantification of textual data into recurring codes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). This method was considered especially suitable given the study's intent to highlight dominant institutional concerns based on tutor consensus.

While the coding process was influenced by grounded theory's iterative logic and constant comparative methods, the study primarily employed classical content analysis to categorise and quantify recurring themes (Charmaz, 2014; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The coding process followed a multi-step procedure. First, both authors independently engaged in open coding of a shared subset of responses (25%) to develop an initial codebook. Codes were refined through iterative discussions to achieve conceptual clarity and alignment. Intercoder reliability was established by calculating agreement on the application of codes across three rounds of coding, yielding an average agreement rate of 88%, which exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 80% for qualitative studies (Miles et al., 2014). The final codebook was then applied to the full dataset using manual coding. Codes were grouped into higher-order categories, which formed the basis for the 11 emergent themes. This analytical rigor has ensured transparency, reproducibility, and validity in capturing tutors' perspectives across diverse institutional settings.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the researchers engaged in prolonged engagement within the study sites. Time was spent at each tutorial centre to observe contextual dynamics and build rapport with participants, facilitating a richer understanding of the educational phenomena under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Further, reflexive practices were employed to minimise researcher bias, and member checking was performed informally through follow-up communication with selected tutors to verify the accuracy of interpretation and thematic classification. These procedures enhanced the validity and authenticity of the findings, ensuring that they faithfully represented participants' perspectives.

The first author is an academic staff member at the School of Education, Bangladesh Open University (BOU), the institution under study. This insider status provided privileged access to participants, an in-depth understanding of institutional structures, and nuanced interpretation of tutors' experiences. However, acknowledging the risk of role duality and potential bias, several measures were adopted to uphold analytical objectivity. These included maintaining professional-researcher boundaries during data collection, ensuring participant anonymity through written surveys, and adhering to a consistent coding protocol. The second author—who is affiliated with a Canadian university and holds no professional ties to BOU—brought an external, critical perspective to both data analysis and interpretation. The collaborative coding process, undertaken jointly, served as a methodological check to enhance interpretive neutrality. Such reflexive practices are consistent with established qualitative research standards that emphasise positionality awareness and researcher transparency (Berger, 2015).

Theoretical Integration and Analytical Framing

The constructivist paradigm not only framed the study's epistemological stance but also guided the interpretive process by foregrounding tutors' situated perspectives as co-constructors of knowledge. Grounded theory, used not for theory generation in its purest form but as a methodological guide, allowed

for concepts to emerge organically through systematic data engagement. The authors resisted imposing theoretical models at the outset, instead letting patterns and categories emerge from tutors' voices. This inductive process reflects the bottom-up ontology of grounded theory and constructivism, privileging tutor agency and meaning-making. For example, themes such as professional development and curriculum co-design emerged not merely as procedural gaps but as indicators of unequal power dynamics within ODL governance. These dynamics resonate with broader theoretical critiques of institutional control in distance education (Barrow & Grant, 2012; Tait, 2018), where tutors are often relegated to delivery roles without substantive input into curriculum or policy.

Ethics Statement

All procedures adhered to the ethical standards established by the Research Evaluation Committee of the School of Education, BOU. The approval (Ref: BOU/SOE/1(64))/13/99) was obtained from the committee, and no risks connected with this research were anticipated or foreseen.

Findings and Discussion

The thematic categories presented in this section are not just descriptive classifications but reflect deeper socio-institutional dynamics embedded in the ODL context. By applying a constructivist lens, tutors' narratives have been treated as interpretive acts shaped by institutional cultures, personal teaching histories, and pedagogical ideologies. Moreover, the emergent themes provide an empirical basis for theorising power relations, voice, and governance in distance education. For instance, tutors' appeals for curriculum inclusion and supervised practicum mirror tensions between top-down educational design and bottom-up experiential expertise. These findings critique the asymmetry between institutional authority and tutor agency—a theme underexplored in much of the existing ODL literature.

Demographic Characteristics of Tutors

A total of 82 tutors—50 from the Bachelor of Education and 32 from the Master of Education programs—participated in this study. The majority of tutors were male (76%), with females comprising 24%. Tutors possessed substantial professional experience, with an average of 19 years in the teaching profession and approximately 14 years of affiliation with BOU. This depth of experience provided a valuable lens into the academic and operational strengths and shortcomings of the teacher education programs. Their sustained association with BOU lends credibility to their insights regarding program enhancement and innovation.

Emergent Themes

To systematically capture tutors' perspectives on the academic development of teacher education programs, qualitative responses were subjected to classical content analysis. Recurring patterns were thematically coded, yielding the frequency-based categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes Identified by Bangladesh Open University Tutor Participants

Theme	Frequency
Attendance in tutorial sessions	21
Curricula and modules	14
Tutorial sessions	12
Physical resources	12
Professional development of tutors	12
Academic and practice teaching supervision	12
Role of coordinators	3
Assignments, research, and assessment	2
Co-curricular and extracurricular activities	2
Examination and scheduling	2
Program duration and structure	2

In the sections that follow, a critical synthesis of the findings based on the tutors' perspectives concerning the academic development of the teacher education programs offered through BOU is presented, organized by theme. Each theme has been elaborated upon with theoretical grounding and contextual insight.

Attendance in Tutorial Sessions

Tutor responses strongly emphasised the need for mandatory attendance in tutorial sessions, which was the most recurrent theme in the dataset (n = 21). Although the ODL model traditionally allows flexibility, tutors underscored that teacher education programs require active engagement through regular in-person interaction to develop pedagogical competence. This demand reflects the practical nature of teaching, where tutorial sessions function as essential spaces for modeling classroom practices. One of the participants said: "In the case of [the Bachelor of Education program], practical learning is not possible without a face-to-face class. Moreover, 70–80% of students did not attend the tutorial sessions. Therefore, the objective of [the Bachelor of Education degree] is not achieved without class attendance. The SoE should look into the matter for the development of the program."

Empirical studies support this claim, suggesting a positive correlation between attendance and academic performance in blended and distance modalities (Nkolo, 2021). However, this position is problematised by research indicating no direct correlation in purely distance contexts (van Zyl et al., 2012). Moreover, Olivier (2016) observed that well-designed instructional modules can sometimes reduce learners' motivation to attend tutorials. Hence, while tutors advocate attendance-based assessment mechanisms, this raises broader questions about balancing learner autonomy with pedagogical accountability in ODL frameworks.

Curricula and Modules

Tutors identified outdated and rigid curricular materials as a barrier to meaningful learning (n = 14). Their suggestions included periodic revision, increased digital integration, and open calls for module development involving practitioners. One participant stated, "Transparency should be incorporated into the writer selection process through an open advertisement when developing modules. The instructional resources contain a significant amount of outdated information that should be removed." Another participant suggested "conducting workshops with concerned tutors of related subjects before developing the modules of that subject. SoE should include tutors from different study centres in the curriculum committee of the programs."

These highlight a tension between top-down curriculum design and the lived realities of those who deliver instruction. Scholars have argued that static printed modules can stifle pedagogical responsiveness (Woo, 2011). In ODL contexts, module quality directly impacts learner outcomes (Sembiring, 2020). Tutors' exclusion from curriculum development processes echoes broader critiques of centralised educational governance that marginalises implementers. The call for decentralised, participatory module design aligns with contemporary instructional design principles emphasising contextual relevance and tutor autonomy (Conole, 2013).

Tutorial Sessions

The limited number of tutorial sessions was viewed as insufficient for supporting learners' pedagogical development (n = 12). Tutors proposed increasing frequency, even suggesting bi-weekly formats. One participant commented:

> In the case of the Bachelor of Education program, the School of Education should enhance the total number of practice teaching sessions. More emphasis must be placed on practical sessions (practice teaching) rather than theoretical ones. It is also necessary to expand the number of tutorial sessions in the Master of Education program.

The tutorial was seen not just as a problem-solving platform but a space for learner-tutor bonding and motivation. This reflects the tutorial's broader pedagogical function, as tutors serve not merely as content facilitators but as affective and cognitive mediators (Segoe, 2014). The findings support Sembiring's (2020) view that tutorial support is a primary driver of academic excellence. However, contrasting findings (McAndrew et al., 2010; Sembiring, 2017) have suggested that learner independence and access to digital resources may offset limited tutorial access. Thus, expanding tutorial frequency should be evaluated alongside complementary strategies such as blended learning and peer-supported environments.

Physical Resources

A consistent concern among tutors was the lack of infrastructural support in tutorial centres (n = 12). Recommendations included developing dedicated academic buildings, libraries, computer labs, and multimedia support. One participant discussed the difficulties of having too many students in a tutorial session: "For the tutors to conduct class in a planned way, the student-teacher ratio shouldn't be greater than 1:40." While modern learners increasingly access e-resources (Olaniran et al., 2017), the absence of physical infrastructure in rural and semi-urban contexts perpetuates inequity. The international literature

has acknowledged that localising resources and decentralising access points are key strategies to managing resource constraints in ODL (Lentell & O'Rourke, 2004). This issue raises broader concerns about digital inequality and institutional readiness in distance education ecosystems.

Professional Development of Tutors

Tutors reported limited institutional support for continuous professional development (n = 12). They advocated for regular workshops, research support, and opportunities to pursue higher education (e.g., PhD or MPhil). This reflects a broader discourse on professionalization in ODL, where tutors often face professional isolation. ODL tutors occupy multiple roles—facilitators, mentors, assessors—and require context-specific training (Segoe, 2014; Xiao, 2016). However, institutional structures often fail to recognise or remunerate this complexity. Becher and Trowler (2001) argued that professional identity in higher education is co-constructed through communities of practice, which are largely absent in ODL environments. Institutional investment in tutor development is thus critical not only for academic outcomes but also for staff retention and morale.

Academic and Practice Teaching Supervision

Supervised practice teaching conducted by learners emerged as a key concern (n = 12). Tutors proposed doubling the number of sessions and ensuring institutional linkage with practice schools. One participant emphasized the importance of practice teaching: "There should be an opportunity to supervise the teaching practice activities of the learners at the schools where they are practicing. This initiative could improve the quality of the learners." The current ad hoc approach, lacking field supervision, undermines one of the core goals of teacher education: developing classroom competence. This concern aligns with studies that highlight the centrality of experiential learning in teacher training (Sahoo & Chandra, 2014). While logistical challenges are real, some institutions have responded by incorporating peer teaching and simulated teaching exercises to compensate (Mokoena, 2017). Without adequate field support, the teacher education program risks becoming overly theoretical and disconnected from practical realities.

Role of Coordinators

Although mentioned by only three tutors, the role of coordinators emerged as strategically significant. Coordinators are essential in aligning tutorial schedules, resolving administrative challenges, and serving as communication bridges between institutional leadership and ground-level tutors. One participant noted, "Coordinators should be empowered to align the academic calendar more realistically." Their marginalisation in current institutional structures undermines responsiveness and continuity in program delivery. Felber (2020) also stressed the importance of mid-level academic actors in improving instructional quality. Enhancing coordinators' capacity through formalised roles and decision-making authority can facilitate more coherent academic planning across tutorial centres.

Assignments, Research, and Assessment

Although mentioned by only two respondents, the issue of assignment and research contextualisation signals deeper pedagogical misalignments. Tutors recommended aligning tasks more closely with learners' instructional realities to foster relevance and engagement. One tutor suggested making assignments "more relevant to students' teaching contexts," a view supported by Jegathesan et al. (2018), who found that

situational tasks improved knowledge application and learner retention in Malaysian ODL institutions. Sembiring (2017) also reported that students perceived assignments as more impactful than exams in promoting reflective learning. These insights collectively point to the need for a restructured assessment model that favours authentic, performance-based tasks and better supports learner agency.

Co-Curricular and Extracurricular Activities

The emphasis by two tutors on co-curricular and extracurricular activities reflects an emerging concern about holistic learner engagement in ODL contexts. One participant suggested the university "assign marks on extracurricular activities and make it mandatory," highlighting a perceived void in learner motivation and community building. Though infrequently mentioned, such suggestions align with contemporary educational theories promoting socio-emotional learning and peer bonding (Rapanta et al., 2020). Incorporating co-curricular initiatives could mitigate learner isolation—an often-cited barrier in ODL—and promote academic perseverance through identity formation and inclusive learning environments.

Examination and Scheduling

Although only two tutors raised concerns about examination management, their feedback highlights administrative challenges that can erode student trust. One respondent suggested "exam schedules should align with weekends and be announced earlier," reflecting the unique needs of working learners enrolled in BOU's ODL programs. These concerns echo Nkolo's (2021) findings, which identified assessment scheduling and communication gaps as significant barriers to student satisfaction. Addressing such logistical issues through learner-informed timetabling and grievance mechanisms can significantly enhance the credibility and transparency of the academic process in ODL systems.

Program Duration and Structure

Tutors recommended extending the current duration of teacher education programs at BOU from 1 year (two semesters) to 2 years (four semesters). One participant stated, "Increase the time duration of both programs to 2 years or four semesters," underscoring the concern that the existing timeframe constrains pedagogical depth and practical exposure. To further investigate this concern, we conducted a comparative analysis of teacher education program durations across a strategically selected set of international ODL institutions. These universities were chosen based on three key criteria: (a) the provision of distance-delivered teacher education programs comparable to BOU's bachelor's and master's degrees in education; (b) geographic and economic diversity, including both Global South and Global North contexts; and (c) institutional maturity and recognition in the field of open and distance education. Institutions such as Indira Gandhi National Open University, Allama Iqbal Open University, and Open University Malaysia represent South and Southeast Asian models that, like BOU, serve large numbers of in-service teachers through blended and distance modes. Meanwhile, universities such as The Open University (UK), Athabasca University (Canada), and Charles Sturt University (Australia) offer relevant insights from more mature ODL systems with longer-established academic frameworks.

Notably, differences in program duration across these institutions are shaped by contextual factors including national teacher certification standards, curriculum design mandates, practicum integration requirements, and broader labour market expectations (Rapanta et al., 2020; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). For example, while shorter durations are common in

some South Asian contexts due to flexible delivery for working professionals, extended formats in Australia, the UK, and Canada often reflect more intensive practicum demands and layered academic progression. Tutors believe that as a result, while absolute duration varies, the overall trajectory suggests that BOU's 1-year model may lack the necessary structural depth and experiential scope observed internationally—particularly in areas such as field supervision, coursework sequencing, and student support mechanisms.

Comparative analysis (see Table 2) confirms that BOU's program duration is shorter than those at comparable institutions, such as Indira Gandhi National Open University and Charles Sturt University, where 2- to 3-year programs are standard. Longer durations allow for expanded practicum experiences and reflective learning, as supported by Sahoo and Chandra (2014), who emphasised the value of experiential learning in teacher education. Extending the program would also enhance academic parity and facilitate international credit recognition.

Table 2

Comparative Duration of Teacher Education Programs by Institution and Region

Region	University	Bachelor of Education program duration (years)	Master of Education program duration (years)
Asia	Indira Gandhi National Open University, India	2	2
Asia	Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan	1.5	Not offered
Asia	Open University Malaysia	Not offered	2
Africa	Open University of Tanzania	3	2
Europe	The Open University, UK	6 (part-time)	3
North America	Athabasca University, Canada	Not offered	4 (part-time)
Oceania	Charles Sturt University, Australia	3	2

Note. Data sourced from: Indira Gandhi National Open University (2023, n.d.); Allama Iqbal Open University (n.d.); Open University Malaysia (n.d.); Open University of Tanzania (n.d.-a., n.d.-b.); The Open University (n.d.-a., n.d.-b.); Athabasca University (n.d.); and Charles Sturt University (n.d.-a., n.d.-b.).

This comparison suggests that the current duration of the teacher education programs at BOU could benefit from further alignment with international practices. Expanding the program structure has the potential to enhance academic rigour while better supporting learners in achieving comprehensive professional development outcomes.

Study Implications

The study's findings yield multiple interrelated implications for institutional policy, pedagogical practice, and future reform strategies within ODL-based teacher education. By linking tutors' grounded experiences to systemic structures, the study extends Tait's (2000, 2018) learner support framework. While Tait

categorises tutor roles into cognitive, affective, and systemic support, this study reveals the constraints tutors face in fulfilling these roles due to their marginal position in governance. The results advocate for expanding Tait's model by integrating into it dimensions of power, voice, and institutional participation, which tutors believe will result in a more critical understanding of tutor roles within the governance of ODL. Tutors are not just support agents; they are epistemic actors whose exclusion undermines program effectiveness and equity. The implications of this study are detailed in the sections that follow.

Rethinking Engagement Policies

While learner autonomy is a hallmark of distance education, the demand for compulsory tutorial attendance reveals an urgent need to balance flexibility with structure. Institutions could consider hybrid attendance policies—combining face-to-face sessions with digital engagement metrics—to ensure pedagogical consistency without undermining learner autonomy.

Participatory Curriculum Development

Tutors' exclusion from curriculum design suggests a top-down model of instructional governance. Establishing tutor advisory boards, conducting consultative curriculum reviews, and implementing open calls for module contributors would foster shared ownership and contextual alignment of learning materials.

Institutionalisation of Professional Development

The ad hoc and inequitable nature of tutor training warrants a formalised, institutionally funded professional development framework. This could include regular seminars, pedagogical certifications, and financial incentives for higher studies, enabling tutors to remain academically and technologically agile.

Structuring Supervised Practicum Models

Unsupervised or poorly managed teaching practice weakens the pedagogical foundation of teacher education programs. BOU should institute supervised practicum models in partnership with local schools and incorporate blended practicum approaches (peer-teaching, video portfolios) to overcome logistical constraints.

Strengthening Academic Infrastructure

The lack of physical and technological infrastructure—especially in rural tutorial centres—exacerbates inequalities in the ODL system. Policy reforms must allocate decentralised funds for infrastructural development, including information and communication technology (ICT) tools, libraries, and multipurpose academic spaces.

Feasibility and Implementation Considerations

While these recommendations are theoretically robust, their implementation faces practical challenges. Notably, the enhancement of infrastructure, including ICT resources and library facilities, demands significant financial investment. For BOU, which operates under public funding constraints, such expenditures must be aligned with national budgetary allocations and external donor support. According to the tutors, institutional prioritisation of infrastructure should therefore be phased in and needs-based,

focusing initially on tutorial centres with the most acute resource deficits. Additionally, the proposed extension of program duration and restructuring may require regulatory approvals from oversight bodies, such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Education, thereby introducing bureaucratic timelines into academic reform cycles.

Operationalising Tutor Advisory Boards

To actualise participatory curriculum development, tutor advisory boards must be formalised with transparent criteria for tutor selection—such as years of experience, subject-matter expertise, and regional representation. These boards should convene biannually, both virtually and in person, and be anchored within BOU's existing academic governance structures. Their mandate should include reviewing new module drafts, recommending revisions based on tutorial feedback, and participating in consultative curriculum retreats. Institutional buy-in is essential; thus, advisory board outcomes must feed into SoE's Academic Committee with formal channels for policy consideration and adoption.

Strategic Program Revision

The comparative analysis makes a compelling case for revising the duration and structure of BOU's teacher education programs. A transition toward 2-year models, aligned with global standards, could improve academic depth, international compatibility, and overall program credibility.

Role Reconfiguration of Academic Coordinators

Coordinators are crucial academic intermediaries. Their role should be institutionally clarified, formalised, and capacitated with adequate decision-making power, budgetary authority, and academic oversight responsibilities to enhance responsiveness across tutorial centres.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Tutors serve as the principal academic interface between learners and institutions in ODL environments, particularly in professional teacher education programs. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and guided by grounded theory methodology, this study explored the perspectives of 82 experienced tutors from BOU to identify key strategies for advancing academic development in its education degree programs. The findings reveal eleven interrelated themes requiring institutional attention—most notably learner attendance, curriculum revision, tutorial session structure, physical infrastructure, tutor professional development, and supervision of practice teaching. Together, these themes expose persistent gaps between policy formulation and ground-level realities.

A critical insight emerging from the study is the inherent tension between ODL's emphasis on learner autonomy and the structured, interactive engagement necessary for professional teacher preparation. This necessitates the recalibration of current policies—for instance, by promoting incentivised tutorial attendance rather than mandatory enforcement, thereby balancing flexibility with pedagogical rigour. Likewise, the call for participatory curriculum design underscores the importance of institutional responsiveness. Enabling tutors to co-create instructional materials and engage in curriculum revision processes not only enhances contextual relevance but also strengthens professional identity and pedagogical alignment.

The practical implications of these findings are multidimensional. Institutions should formalise hybrid attendance models, establish tutor advisory boards with clear selection criteria and periodic meetings, and decentralise curriculum review processes to ensure equity and inclusion. The study also highlights the urgency of institutionalising professional development as a structured, ongoing endeavour through regular workshops, certifications, and incentives for advanced study. These measures would enable tutors to remain pedagogically agile and professionally engaged. Moreover, a supervised practicum model—developed in collaboration with local schools and supported by blended modalities such as peer teaching and video reflections—would reinforce experiential learning in teacher preparation. Decentralised infrastructure funding is equally vital to ensure equitable access to ICT resources, libraries, and tutorial centre facilities across geographically diverse contexts.

Even the themes that emerged with lower frequency—such as assessment redesign, co-curricular activities, and examination scheduling—offer early signals of systemic inefficiencies. Addressing these areas proactively may prevent future erosion of academic quality and learner trust in institutional processes.

Given these concerns, structural reform is indispensable. Revising the current 1-year program model into a 2-year structure, in alignment with international benchmarks, could significantly enhance academic depth, learner support, and global competitiveness. The role of academic coordinators, too, must be clarified and capacitated to function effectively as liaisons between institutional goals and field-level implementation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the broader discourse on learner support and academic governance in ODL by integrating a constructivist and grounded theory-informed approach to tutor narratives. Tutors' reflections illuminate not only operational insights but also the latent power asymmetries and marginalisation within institutional design processes. This necessitates a shift in how tutors are perceived—not merely as peripheral service providers but as legitimate partners in institutional learning and reform. Such a reconceptualisation calls for future research grounded in critical-pragmatic lenses to interrogate the intersection of pedagogy, policy, and professional agency.

Future research should also adopt longitudinal and comparative designs to assess the impact of tutor-informed reforms. Mixed-method studies could further disaggregate insights across tutor categories (e.g., subject specialists, coordinators) and tutorial centres. Cross-institutional comparisons in the South Asian or Global South contexts may offer valuable lessons for building equitable and contextually attuned ODL systems.

In sum, academic development in ODL is a dynamic, context-sensitive process that demands both top-down vision and bottom-up engagement. Tutors, as frontline academic actors, possess experiential knowledge essential for meaningful reform. Recognising and integrating their perspectives into policy discourse is not only a matter of institutional efficiency but also an ethical imperative for inclusive, sustainable educational development.

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