



OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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Summary

The future of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in developing countries will benefit from a critical analysis of its operational environment due to the belief that it might contribute substantially to poverty reduction if its potentials are recognised. It is however, observed that the demand of ODL is increasing due to the associated potentials for new innovations and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) that results to the increased demand of knowledge to both literate and illiterate.

The paper presents the solicited views of 31 students and 9 staff from the higher education sector in developing countries with Tanzania as a representative country. In Tanzania, the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is the only accredited higher distance education institution that awards various qualifications including degrees up to PhD.

Data was collected using open-ended questions in the questionnaire as well as interviews. The findings indicate that there are mixed feelings about the roles and potentials of ODL though almost all agree that absence of ICT infrastructure and services might become a hindering factor. Regardless of the challenges on the use of ICT in ODL, yet there is unanimous agreement on contribution of ODL in accelerating access to higher education.

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a viable means of supporting attainment of academic, social and economic development. The demand of application of ODL is high in the advent of the new innovations and enhanced use of information and communication technologies (ICT). As ICT continues to be more sophisticated, the demand of new knowledge is increasing for both the ICT literate and illiterates. In developing countries, where majority are not ICT literate, the challenges are much higher. Furthermore, the ICT literates will also have to be periodically upgraded and at

the same time use their new skills to educate the non- ICT literate. However, for those who are literate, if they are not careful, during the process of learning the knowledge imparted, it might even become obsolete unless they make efforts to use it sooner. The challenge for ODL is how to make education a lifelong learning process.

The context

Like other developing countries, Tanzania embraces open and distance learning. In 1992 the Parliament endorsed establishment of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) which opened the door to higher education through distance education in 1994. OUT became operational in 1994 with the first 766 students and by 2008, OUT had already admitted 40146 students in different programmes (OUT, 2009). The aim of establishing OUT was to increase access to higher education. As an ODL institution, currently, most of the courses are delivered through print-based media supported by face-to-face sessions. The use of ICT and specifically e-learning through the customised MOODLE electronic platforms is underway starting with courses including BSc. ICT, BSc(Environmental Studies), BSc.Ed and Tourism.

With the advent of globalisation, the developing countries are faced with challenges in selection of the most suitable technology as a result of its fast turnover. Sometimes, the technology selected becomes obsolete even before developing countries have put into full use. Use of ICT in higher education ODL forms the basis for this study taking the experiences from OUT. The Rationale for studying OUT to represent developing countries emanates from the fact that Tanzania is one of the least developed countries. However, OUT has in place a number of policies including those on quality assurance and the recently updated ICT policy and procedures and an ICT master plan (OUT, 2009).

Open and Distance education in developing countries

Many scholars define distance education differently. According to Sherry (1996), components that are included in a definition includes: a learning process, the teacher and the learner are separated in terms of space and time; communication between the two is mediated by print media or ICT; and learning is under the control of the learner rather than the teacher. This definition demands an effective distance learning to be supported and that learners might rely on both paper and pencil and ICT technologies, collaboration within themselves and developing their study skills (UNESCO, 2002). In developing countries with lack of or limited use of ICT due to power problems, shortage of ICT equipment and inability to use them, the sole method for most of the rural students has remained to be paper and pencil (Braumoh & Osiki, 2008).

According Mclean (2001) debate in distance education focuses on issues of equity, quality and use of ICT to support ODL. It is in this line that OUT approved the quality assurance and control policy and the ICT Policy and Master-plan to guide implementation of educational programmes at OUT and that to ensure the issues of quality, equity and proper use of available ICT infrastructure. For the case of equity, OUT has a unit attached to Institute of Educational Technology (IET) dealing specifically with technologies that are likely to support learners with disabilities and to ensure that distance learning is open to all.

In making education accessible to all, issues of planning need to be well considered. According to Gboku and Lekoko (2007) on planning programmes in adult education in

Africa, they argue that planning should focus on an African philosophy and the practical realities of day to day life in Africa. It has to be understood that, though globalisation is assumed to be good, the reality is that their ability to cope with globalisation varies a great deal with the poorer ones struggling to survive. There are many reasons provided for the observed inequity in literature and further discussions is also outside the scope of this paper. Ultimately, this makes one to erroneously think that in developing countries, most of the knowledge delivered and/or tested is borrowed from the developed countries and hence does not exactly provide solutions to the problems facing developing countries.

Yet there are expected benefits of distance education for the learners which include the increased flexibility, access to the learning, choice of institution, access to remote experts, performance, compensation, better marketability and lifelong learning opportunities (Belanger and Jordan, 2000). It is this flexibility and access to remote experts that might be encouraging most of the learners to join in distance learning institutions. Despite the above listed expected benefits, distance higher education institutions face many challenges. The challenges include; increased number of learners from different backgrounds, the workers, the elite, the young and those with disabilities have a chance to be enrolled. Other challenges include competitive advantage where the institutions need to provide services to the learner and develop courses that are likely to attract learners to learn and make those who have completed the programmes more marketable to the society compared to graduates from other conventional universities. This competition is even enhanced when most of the employers require their employees to take courses in ODL institutions, thus making ODL mode the most viable means towards lifelong learning (Kurasha, 2003, Rena, 2007).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted in gathering data in this study in order to capture the views on higher distance education delivery in Tanzania from students and staff at OUT. The use of a qualitative approach helps to provide readers with a real-life translation of what is being conveyed (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). In this context, interviews can be effectively employed to understand people's individual experiences and to suggest useful explanations or interpretations of collected qualitative data. However, interviews have other problems, in the sense that the researcher might not capture the views of those who are unable to speak. In that the researchers employed an open-ended questionnaire to complement information which might have been missed from the interviews, a written questionnaire tends to capture their unarticulated thoughts about the issue under discussion.

Fifty questionnaires were distributed in January 2009 to randomly select OUT students and of these, thirty one were returned. The questionnaires were geared at collecting written accounts of students and later on; 20 students (10 males and 10 females) were interviewed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. However, the data analysis did not take sex into account as the aim of the study was in collecting views on ODL in Tanzania without any emphasis of gender distinction. Apart from the students, 9 academic staffs were interviewed. The interviews for students and staff used a similar interview guide as all had a mutual interest in knowledge production (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Interviews often enable the participants to freely discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live and to express how they regard situations from their own points of view.

For those who participated in the interviews, the interview sessions lasted for 30 to 40 minutes. To safeguard the identities of participants, code numbers rather than names appeared on the interview transcripts and the research report. The transcript of each interview was given to the interviewee for validation. Dependability in this study involved respondents validation and debriefing by the researchers. The transcripts were coded, based on emergent themes and categories. The responses were sorted into conceptual categories on the basis of similarities and differences. The analytical process was iterative and the data analysis involved a number of readings of transcripts and progressive refining of emerging categories. The researchers analysed the data independently before comparing with the notes, discussing and reaching consensus on emergent themes.

Findings and discussion

The focus of the study was to establish views on the performance and suitability of delivery of higher education through the ODL mode in Tanzania among students and staff of OUT. It was in this line the researchers anticipated to get views for improving the delivery through the ODL mode in Tanzania. A wide range of issues was identified from participants' responses, which revealed the various challenges students and lecturers at OUT encountered during the course of implementing the ODL delivery mode in Tanzania. The following section presents and discusses some of the major findings from this study, focusing on the participant's.

Resistance to change

Change takes time. When changes are introduced, initially, they might be viewed in different perspectives. For example, when OUT changed the manner of conducting examinations by introducing the examinations syndicate and use of ICT in controlling exam halls entry as well as in many of its programmes and databases, students and staff had different feelings. Students had a view that the ODL in Tanzania might turn to Conventional system. As one respondent says:

The future of ODL in Tanzania is doubtful it seems administration tries very hard to convert OUT to conventional university without students' participation. There are sudden and abrupt changes that may discourage current students in their studies

This indicates resistance to change. The belief that there were "abrupt and sudden changes" while information was given to students six months earlier gives an erroneous picture that students are not involved while the truth is that such students do not attend face-to-face sessions and have not accessed the OUT website in order to get current information. Moreover, introduction of the examinations syndicate also meant one now has to observe more closely the hitherto semi-forgotten examinations rules. As some responded said

I am interested with registration of examinations before actual doing.

There were also indications of misconception about ODL mode of delivery. Some assumed that to be open means to have no control and to have no rules to guide the learning and assessment as some respondents pointed out

.....I think open learning in Tanzania will involve few students because of the given directives and too many regulations to the learners....

Others worried about the efficiency of the OUT in relation to the number of students admitted as well as the available academic staff

...teachers now have too much to do. Learn about the technology, prepare study materials, grade students work, record in a new system, put materials in electronic form, read students mails and answer.....but there are few staff. (According to OUT, 2009 by 2008 there were 207 full time academic staff and up to 200 part time staff whereas had admitted a total of 40146 students including 4164 postgraduates).

The lack of or limited knowledge of ICT by academic staff and students and the high workloads of staff is claimed to have proliferated the problems on how to manage students' records. Apart from these challenges respondents agreed OUT to have made progress in its delivery systems as some said

.....open learning in Tanzania is improving as large volumes of electronic materials are available to supplement the study materials.

The problem might be faced by most of the students joining ODL institutions like OUT is lack of skills in studying in ODL and that the quality of both primary and secondary education is questionable (Kyando, 2007; Sumra, 2000). Thus ODL system in developing countries has to tackle diligently problems in academic and administration. Academic issues are concerned with how to help learners not used to the ODL system to learn and administration on how best to allocate resources to support the ODL learning system. To deal with these problems, knowledge and skills in the use of ICT is imperative.

Access to higher education

Some of the respondents viewed ODL system in Tanzania to have had a good start to contribute towards development and poverty reduction. They argued that ODL accelerates access to higher education which is believed to have both personal and social benefits.

...the future of ODL is good as every one who qualifies will join...and there are also means to enable those who have low qualifications to attain higher education for example the Foundation Courses run by ICE at OUT that might lead into getting a good job ..

There are short courses at OUT leading to acquisition of knowledge and skills in ICT for students, staff and the general public. At degree level, OUT awards a Bachelor's degree in ICT. OUT also awards a foundation course lasting between one up to a maximum of two years that guarantee graduates in this non-degree course an admission into University degree programme. By 2008 OUT had admitted 9306 students in the foundation course from its inception in 1994 (OUT, 2009). In short, ODL education remains the sole means of reducing income inequality through increasing access to higher education (Olubor and Ogonor, 2008; Varghese, 2007; Kurasha, 2003) and providing professional development to those whose knowledge in use of current technology is becoming obsolete.

Face-to-face contact sessions

With the current innovations in distance education where electronic platforms like the OUT customised MOODLE that provide an extended forum for exchange of ideas, face-to-face sessions are vital. In the face-to-face sessions students are trained on the use of ICT. Respondents indicated the importance of face-to-face sessions as they said:

I think there is a need for the University to allow lecturers twice or more a year to visit the regions and assist students in their learning.

I face a lot of difficulties as I have no possibilities of contacting my lecturers and that internet is not enough as some of the materials need explanations from the lecturers.

The respondents did not indicate for how many days the lecturers should be available in the regional centres (Jakobsdóttir, 2008). With the implementation of ICT Master-plan at OUT there are possibilities of requiring more face-to-face contacts to orient students on the use of ICT.

Conclusion

The future of ODL in developing countries, including Tanzania, is an important matter for discussion. However, the key resource for the prosperity remains to be knowledge itself (Ng'wandu, 2006) and that ODL has the possibility of accelerating access to education making knowledge available to many through changing ways of managing ODL institutions from traditional to more effective and efficient ways of operating competitively.

Challenges on ODL are the modern distance learner will have to learn how to use ICT and that ICT is not taught in many places (and where it is taught it is relatively expensive) and also there are other problems in developing countries including unstable power supply (Braithmoh & Osiki, 2008). OUT has introduced compulsory ICT and Communication skills courses to counter the two skills problems. However, the challenge is to decide how to deal with students who have passed their degree subjects but they have failed communication skills and ICT skill-courses.

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