IMPLIED BENEFITS OF OPEN AND
DISTANCE LEARNING IN TANZANIA:
A QUALITATIVE APPROACH ON ITS BENEFITS IN TANZANIA

Dr. Kezia H. MKWIZU

Prof. Dr. Deus D. NGARUKO

The Open University of Tanzania, TANZANIA

ABSTRACT

This paper assists to provide information on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in relation to its benefits in Tanzania particularly during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic which can be used by stakeholders in the education sector to value and support ODL institutions in enhancing access to higher education for graduates. An unstructured questionnaire with open-ended questions was distributed to postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania using Google form via their group emails. The findings showed that benefits of ODL institutions include affordability in terms of low tuition fees, flexibility for students who wish to study while upgrading skills, interactive mode of learning, personal study skills, self-directed learning skills, friendly in terms of costs, time and pace as well as provision of services even during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings suggest a new way of viewing benefits brought up by ODL beyond being considered as an approach only in teaching and learning. Therefore, this paper concludes that there are implied benefits of ODL in Tanzania.

Keywords: ODL institutions, benefits, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions has occurred worldwide including in Africa (Mannan, 2009; Hanover Research, 2011; Nyenya & Rupande, 2015). In Africa, for example, the University of South Africa (UNISA) in South Africa is mentioned as the largest ODL institution in Africa (UNISA, 2020). ODL is considered as an important new approach in attempting to resolve the problems of access, quality and equity (SADC, 2009). Examples of ODL Institutions in Africa are The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) in Tanzania with students' accumulative enrollment of 147,238 from 1994 to 2018/2019 (OUT, 2019), and University of South Africa in South Africa with students enrollment of 350,775 in 2014 to 381,483 in 2018 (UNISA, 2019). Therefore, many graduates of ODL institutions benefit from expanded access to higher education.

With increased enrollment records in ODL institutions within Africa, it is crucial to have an update on benefits of ODL particularly during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic where education institutions around the world were closed. In 2020, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) indicated that majority

of governments worldwide temporarily closed educational institutions to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). To expand literature on benefits of ODL institutions, this paper examined implied benefits of ODL in Tanzania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Institutions

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) refers to a way of providing learning opportunities that is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time, or place or both time and place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of variety of media including print and electronic; two way communication that allow learners and tutors to interact; the possibility of occasional face to face meetings; and a specialized division of labour in the production and delivery of course (Commonwealth of Learning, 2019). In Tanzania, an example of an ODL institution operating in many regions within the country and with 27 regional centers is the Open University of Tanzania (OUT, 2020a, 2020b).

Reuben (2010) mentioned that ODL is an instructional system which provides for teaching and learning to take place in what, where, when and how learners wish. In addition, ODL is a system which combines the methodology of distance education with the concepts of open learning and flexible learning (Chew, 2019). Due to the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic which has disrupted many activities including in universities and institutions in 2020, this study was interested to seek the views of ODL learners about the benefits of ODL Institutions so as to bring to light their updated views on ODL. Therefore, this paper aimed to examine implied benefits of ODL using a qualitative approach to solicit current information on the benefits of ODL instituions in Tanzania. The main question posed by this paper was;

What are the Benefits of ODL Institutions?

Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by the appraisal theory to examine benefits of ODL institutions from a graduate's point of view. Madga B. Arnold developed the appraisal theory in 1903 (Exploring yourmind, 2019). Appraisal theory is simply emotions elicited by evaluations of events and situations, and that individuals display different patterns of response to situations (Roseman & Smith, 2001). The appraisal theory assumes interpretations of events rather than the events themselves that cause emotions (Roseman, 1984). Wei, Wherrity, and Zhang (2015) indicated that appraisal is an umbrella term used to refer to the semantic resources including words, phrases and structures which speakers or writers employ to negotiate emotions, judgements and valuations. A number of scholars have used appraisal theory in their studies such as McEachrane (2009), Wondra and Ellsworth (2015), and Wei et al. (2015). Wondra and Ellsworth (2015) investigated empathy and proposed an appraisal theory of vicarious emotional experiences.

Benefits of ODL Institutions

Baio (2012) commented that in Africa, ODL was motivated by the inability of numerous qualified candidates to access tertiary education in regular or formal tertiary education institutions. For ODL institutions to increase its benefits, the study by Marais and Schalkwyk (2017) suggested that ODL lecturers need to support untrained teachers through ODL teaching and learning strategies in order to become qualified teachers. Similarly, Baloyi (2017) stated that the growth of ODL is attributed to advantages like flexibility for students who wish to study while working.

Another study done in Greece by Lionarakis et al. (2018) argued that support services in higher education be organized in three levels which are individual, institutional and societal. Other studies revealed the affordable tuition fees as well as upgrading skills and re-training as benefits of ODL (Twaakyondo, 2008; SADC (2009). Another study in India by Varadarajan (2009) noted that ODL provides learners with "enjoy of freedom" from barriers of time and place. A study by Messo (2014) conducted in Tanzania, indicated that 63.6% of students were likely to recommend ODL to others. In 2019, Mkwizu added that the OUT repository serves as an opportunity for sharing doctoral research output (Mkwizu, 2019).

According to the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), when the total cumulative students enrolment of 92,568 was reached by OUT, this enabled OUT to qualify as the largest tertiary institute in Tanzania. In 2017 to 2018, the ODL programme with the highest postgraduate enrolment was Masters of Education in Administration, Planning and Policy Studies (M.Ed. APPS) with 718 under the Faculty of Education while among the ODL programmes offered at non-degree level, the ODL programme called Diploma in Primary Teacher Education (ODPTE) had the highest enrolment of 1,200 students in 2017 to 2018 (OUT, 2018). In ODL institutions particularly at OUT, there is engagement of both professional teachers and non-professional teachers (Ngaruko, 2019). Table 1 shows a summary of the benefits of ODL institutions by past scholars from 2008 to 2019.

Table 1. Summary of benefits of ODL Institutions

Source	Benefits of ODL Institutions
Twaakyondo (2008)	- Affordability in terms of low tuition fees.
SADC (2009)	- Upgrading skills. - Retraining. - Provide access, quality and equity education.
Varadarajan (2009)	- Enjoy of freedom from barriers of time and place.
Baio (2012)	- Access to tertiary education.
Meso (2014)	- Recommendable to others (63.6% of students were likely to recommend ODL to others) hence a recommendable mode of education.
Msoffe (2016)	- Reaches dispersed groups of people in remote areas.
Baloyi (2017)	- Flexibility for students who wish to study while working.
Bordoi (2018)	- Is one of the most viable ways for transforming a country like India?
Mkwizu (2019)	- Exposure of PhD thesis through a repository system in order to share research output - Networking. - Flexibility to interact with other Universities such as PhD Clubs of other Universities. - Collaborative Research through co-authorship.
Ngaruko (2019)	- Engages both professional teachers and non-professional teachers.

Due to ODL institutions being open and distance education oriented, use of technology is inevitable. Recently, University of Nottingham (2019) defined digital research as the use of digital technologies to change the way research is undertaken and make it possible to tackle new research challenges. These digital technologies underpin the need for international collaborative research (University of Nottingham, 2019). Similarly, Mkwizu and Ngaruko (2019) emphasized on collaborative research among ODL institutions in Africa. In addition to past studies on ODL institutions in reference to benefits like Msofe (2016) and Baloyi (2017), this paper expands literature on ODL institutions by examining ODL institutions in terms of benefits of ODL in the COVID-19 pandemic using a qualitative approach in the context of Tanzania

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is in Tanzania, and the choice of country is due to the fact that ODL institutions particularly The Open University of Tanzania do embrace the vision of access to higher education for all. This paper adopted a cross-sectional research design with a qualitative approach to avail current information on benefits of ODL institutions. The questionnaire in google form was distributed to purposively sampled postgraduates with Masters and PhD at OUT by email in the month of July 2020. The questionnaire intended to seek the respondents views on benefits of ODL institutions and in particular OUT. Therefore, an open-ended questionnaire facilitated the collection of qualitative data from the respondents. Saturation point of 12 repondents was achieved due to no new information. Reaching the point of no new data is the point of no new themes hence data saturation point (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Content analysis was used to analyze the collected data so as to avail themes that capture the benefits of ODL institutions in the context of OUT.

RESULTS

In Table 2. reveals the respondents' characteristics which indicated that majority of them were aged between 36-45 years (50%), females (58.3%), Masters level at the University (75%) and with monthly income above 300,000 TZS (100%). Most respondents were women implying that ODL benefits women in accessing higher education and improving their education thus strengthening their learning skills whilst looking after their families.

Table 2. Respondents' characteristics (n=12)

Respondents' characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age:		
18-25 years	0	0.0
26-35 years	3	25.0
36-45 years	6	50.0
Above 45 years	3	25.0
Gender:		
Male	5	41.7
Female	7	58.3
Education Level at University:		
Masters	9	75.0
PhD	3	25.0

Income per Month in Tanzania Shillings(TZS)		
Below 300,000 Above 300,000	0.0 12.0	0.0 100.0

Source: Field data (2020)

The content analysis is shown in Table 3 for the 12 respondents.

Table 3. Benefits of ODL Institutions (n=12)

Respondents	Benefits of ODL Institution
1st Respondent (IR)	ODL has been a best choice for my studies as it enables me to study while taking care of other important issues in my family.
2nd Respondent (2R)	ODL provides an opportunity to work during any unfriendly phenomenon.
3rd Respondent (3R)	ODL managed to provide services even during the outbreak of diseases and wars. A good example was experienced during COVID-19 outbreak where all universities in the world closed while the ODL was still providing its services.
4th Respondent (4R)	It is easily accessible and affordable. ODL is much more advantageous because it can be utilized to the highest grade at ones own convenient time. On the other hand, it gives a huge exposure to the ICT use which is very crucial in today's world. It also utilizes most resources (time, money, e-learning materials, space etc.)
5th Respondent (5R)	Flexibility to engage in consultancy.
6th Respondent (6R)	It is very useful despite many challenges.
7th Respondent (7R)	ODL is interactive mode of learning. Provides easy way of doing discussions, contact with your teachers, professors and supervisors hence interacting with one another in a very innovative way. Much cheaper distance learning hence " Cost Reduction".
8th Respondent (8R)	Studying while attending to my family and serving my community.
9th Respondent (9R)	Personal study skills: after completing a course through ODL the learner can study other online short courses as private studies.
10th Respondent (10R)	Improves the process of teaching and learning(teaching aids, methods, improves vocabularies, new materials, online books and articles).
11th Respondent (11R)	Learning flexibility, self-directed learning skills.
12th Respondent (12R)	ODL is flexible and friendly in terms of cost, time and pace.

Source: Field data (2020)

DISCUSSION

This study's respondents were largely highly educated women with income and aged between 36 to 45 years. With a larger proportion of respondents being women suggests that ODL strengthens families since women can undertake studies while taking care of their home in the African culture settings which traditionally home chores are women's responsibilities. Thus women can also attend higher education whilst managing their households. In addition, the majority of respondents used the words "flexibility", "opportunity", "friendly", "useful", "affordablility", and "allows studying while attending family" as their opinions on benefits of ODL.

Furthermore, other respondents had exceptional views such as respondent (1R) stated that;

"*ODL has been my best choice for my studies*"

Equally for respondent (4R) noted that there is benefits in terms of;

"*Exposure to ICT use*"

Other respondents (7R, 9R and 11R) commented that the benefits of ODL are;

"*Interactive mode of learning*"

"*Personal study skills*"

"*Self-directed learning skills*"

Another extraordinary view was stated by respondent (3R) and that is;

"*ODL managed to provide services even during the outbreak of diseases for example,*

during COVID-19 all universities were close while ODL were still providing services"

These results are similar to previous studies such as Twaakyando (2008), SADC (2009) and Baloyi (2017) in terms of affordability and flexibility. The theme result on "exposure to ICT use" in this study is in line with the study by University of Nottingham (2019) which highlighted on the use of technology. Therefore, from this study, it is clear that the respondents did state about exposure to ICT use as one of the benefits of OUT as an ODL institution.

However, the results of this study are also different from previous studies such as Msoffe (2016). The differences between this study and Msoffe's study of 2016 is that this study reveals that benefits of ODL are themed in terms of best choice, useful, exposure to ICT use, interactive mode of learning, personal study skills, self-directed learning skills and ODL managed to provide services even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The emerged themes from this study on benefits of ODL institution align well with the appraisal theory as the respondents were able to avail information which reflects their appraisal of ODL institution from their own opinions. The patterns of the respondents opinion on benefits of ODL in ODL institutions and in particular in the context of OUT, the emerged themes were "flexibility", "opportunity", "friendly", "useful", "affordablility", "allows studying while attending family", "ODL has been my best choice for my studies", "Exposure to ICT use", "Interactive mode of learning", "Personal study skills", "Self-directed learning skills", and "ODL managed to provide services even during the outbreak

of diseases for example, during COVID-19 all universities were close while ODL were still providing services".

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to avail current information on ODL institutions in relation to its implied benefits in Tanzania particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Majority of the respondents were highly educated women aged 38 to 45 years and earn income above 300,000 TZS. This means that the benefits of ODL includes women in higher education and thus not only allows them to manage studies and home chores but implies that their engagement in higher education assists in closing the gender equality gap in education. The themes that emerged as benefits of ODL institution were "flexiblilty", "opportunity", "friendly", "useful", "affordability", "allows studying while attending family", "ODL has been my best choice for my studies", "Exposure to ICT use", "Interactive mode of learning", "Personal study skills", "Self-directed learning skills" and "ODL managed to provide services even during the outbreak of diseases for example, during COVID-19 all universities were closed while ODL were still providing services".

The outcome of this study implies that practically the stakeholders in the education sector should value and support institutions to use ODL in enhancing access to higher education for graduates. It is a mode of education that has stood the test of COVID-19 pandemic as evidenced from this study's respondents' views on benefits of ODL. Theoretically, the patterns from the emerged themes support the appraisal theory and from this study, the themes ranged from flexibility, self-directed learning skills to managed services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The social implication is that although ODL is open and distance learning by nature, one of the respondents mentioned "friendly" in terms of cost, time and pace. Hence ODL institution embraces a mode of education which is considered as friendly.

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BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHORS

Dr. Kezia H. Mkwizu is currently a Postdoctoral Scholar, Directorate of Research, Publications and Innovations, The Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania.

Her research interest areas are in Tourism, Marketing, International Business, Higher Education, Media and SMEs.

Mailing Address: The Open University of Tanzania, P.O Box 23409, Tanzania.

Mobile Number: + 255 784 403226

Email: kmkwizu@hotmail.com

Prof. Dr. Deus D. Ngaruko is currently the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), The Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania.

His research interest areas are in Development and Applied Economics.

Mailing Address: The Open University of Tanzania, P.O Box 23409, Tanzania.

Mobile Number: + 255 788 477455

Email: ngarukoddp@gmail.com