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## **Blended Open Distance Learning (ODL) Challenges in 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Primary Findings from ODL students from Malawi**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and document the challenges facing Open and Distance Learning students at the United Christian University (UCU) and other institutions of higher learning in Malawi. The study was conducted at UCU Blantyre main study centre with 8 institutions which offer programs on ODL. The research included both qualitative and quantitative methods. Questionnaires and structured interviews were the primary data collecting methods, with documentary review as a complement. The major descriptive statistics utilized to analyze and show the data were tables, frequencies, and percentages. The findings revealed that ODL students faced a variety of challenges during their education. The most common issues were a lack of study time, difficulties accessing and using ICT, poor feedback, and a lack of study materials. It was suggested that UCU strive for an effective and balanced teaching and learning system that satisfies learners' desires to the point that they would return to the institution for additional studies and be proud to promote the institution to those seeking knowledge.

**Key words:** Challenges, Open Distance Learning, UCU, drop-out rate, late programme completion, ICT

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### **Introduction**

The potential value of Open Distance Learning (ODL) in African countries including Malawi has a possibility of addressing severe gaps of training young people in 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is mainly because many rich and developing countries' experiences have proven that, when properly organised and managed, ODL can allow countries to train a larger number of students in less time and at lower costs than traditional campus-based education. However, ODL programmes have their own set of issues. The high percentage of student drop-out and late programme completion are two of the most serious issues. High dropout rates and late programme completion are indications of underlying issues that ODL students face. Situational, attitudinal, psychological, and educational problems have been identified (Berge et al., 2002), as well as institutional and socio-cultural challenges (Zirnkle, 2001). Individual student, educational, and institutional issues can all be classified as challenges. The Southern Africa Regional Universities Association (2011) identifies a number of issues that are directly responsible for Southern Africa's poor higher education status. Reduced government funding for public universities and other institutions of higher learning that are deemed to be more affordable than private universities; increased competition for donor funding among private and public universities; an increase in the number of students needing university education; and inefficiency in the use of available resources by higher education institutions are among the challenges. In this study, we investigate challenges faced by students at Malawi's United Christian University full ODL institution and other higher education institutions experience. In order to realise the goal of providing postsecondary education to as many Malawians as possible, UCU would like to investigate the local issues that students face when attending ODL programmes.

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### **Background**

In Malawi there is no stand-alone ODL university, as it is with other region countries in Southern Africa which have special and stand-alone ODL Universities like Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Nigeria. Due to the world population increase and demand of education in both developed and developing countries many countries are adopting ODL mode of study to meet the demand of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Institutions of higher learning are establishing ODL study centres purely and blended ODL. Blended ODL it's when students have face-to face classes with their lecturer once in a week. In shifting from campus centres to ODL they are adopting the use of information and technology as a way of delivering their lessons, in doing so many

institutions of higher learning are expanding their courses through ODL mode of study. The dawn of the twenty-first century came with a digital revolution and economic globalization. In this age of the digital divide, the rapid pace of progress in the field of information technology, along with the emergence of networked information services, has necessitated a comprehensive evaluation of African universities' resource sharing strategies.

Malawi began ODL delivery almost 40 years ago through a public provider, the Malawi College of Distance Education (MCDE) (Chimpololo, 2010). However, the number of distance delivered education programmes continues to grow in Malawi and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is seen as a time of exciting possibilities for distance delivered education. Mzuzu University (MZUNI) and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) are two public institutions currently offering partial ODL programmes, while private institutions include Central Christian University (UCU), Share World Open University, Malawi Institute of Management (MIM), and UNICAF, among others.

In Malawi just like other countries ODL education vary distinctively in their approaches of study. Whereas ODL allows learners flexibility and choice over what, when, at what pace, where, and how they learn, distance education is principally characterised by separation of geographic distance and time. Thus, ODL could be offered on campus or at a distance, and distance education could be open or closed.

ODL provide alternative paths to the traditional mode of learning. In ODL, educationists use novel methods of imparting knowledge such as the internet and e-mail, Facebook, WhatsApp message board forums, telephone, CD-ROMs, print materials, video cassettes and video-conferencing in addition to 'popular' classroom-based instruction. Among other major attributes, ODL provides the learners a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility for learning since it espouses the twin values of flexibility and accessibility, has multiple modes of knowledge dissemination, employs a multi-modal assessment system and usually involves mediated or technology-based education.

Malawi recognises the value of ODL in providing higher education to underserved students. The flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and life-based education options are all major advantages of ODL. It allows for an increase in tertiary enrollment at a lower cost per student than the traditional residential campus approach (Pityana, 2004). ODL courses with more flexibility can adapt to unique student needs or work requirements, making them more relevant (Saint, 1999). ODL is also more suited to meet the increased need for lifetime learning than residential programmes. Furthermore, ODL can effectively reach those students who have been denied access to higher education, such as women who are unable to attend traditional educational programmes due to household responsibilities or cultural constraints, economically marginalised groups, and those who have been incarcerated (Rumble, 2000).

Despite the expanding growth of ODL and its benefits, students who enrol with ODL in Malawi have been shown to face many challenges related to individual, institutional and instructional (Chawinga and Zozie, 2016). ODL students face three types of problems, according to Cross (1981): situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational challenges, according to Cross, include employment and home duties that limit study time. Poor logistics systems or a lack of proper advising are examples of institutional problems (Kruger and Casey, 2000). Learners' attitudes and feelings are tied to dispositional problems. Lack of technological resources, provision of support to students during home-based study, and the distance between students' homes and face-to-face delivery of courses and examinations, which may place a financial burden on students, are all possible challenges for ODL delivery, especially in resource-constrained countries like Malawi. One can ask how the institution has fared since the inception of the ODL programmes, as it appears that no empirical study has been conducted to shed light on the accomplishments and challenges of open and distance learning in the country.

Specific issues faced by distance learners, according to Zirnkle (2001), include programme expenses, a lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns, and poor technical assistance. Inadequate feedback and poor instructor contact, alienation and isolation, and poor student support services are among the other issues reported by Zirnkle. Garland (1993) recognised tenacity as one of the situational problems for students in distance learning. Poor learning conditions and a lack of time are two examples. Students, for example, thought that the course took longer than expected because they neglected to account for the responsibilities of work, family, and school. Student achievement will be weakened, and dropout rates and procrastination will rise, according to Kamau (2007), without an effective learners' support services system that gives onsite face-to-face, timely feedback on student performance, and access to library resources.

ODL also poses additional information distribution issues, particularly in Malawi. Distance learners face a barrier, according to Chawinga (2017), because they lack the technical skills required for efficient access to modern ICT. Technical competence refers to the abilities required to operate ICT hardware and software, as well as the ability to access and share information through networked systems. Learners may be unable to utilise the numerous physical, digital, and human resources involved in ICT if they lack certain abilities. Many issues arise as a result of these challenges in distance learning. The high percentage of student dropout and late programme completion are two of these issues. According to the OECD (2000), dropout rates in the United Kingdom range from 20% to 45 percent or higher in Austria, France, and Portugal. The dropout rate in African countries is reported to be over 50%. (Boholano, 2017).

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## Objectives of the study

This study is aimed at describing and assessing the current challenges related to students who study their education through ODL in Malawi, further to this the study also explore the challenges at institutional and materials offered to students. Currently Malawi does not have an Institutional of higher learning which offers purely ODL programmes apart from the United Christian University, Malawi a private institution which rolled out its programmes in 2015 offering purely ODL and Blended programmes. Other institution of higher learning in Malawi which are offering ODL programmes include; UNICAF, MZUNI, LUANAR, University of Malawi, amongst others.

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## Research Methodology

A cross sectional descriptive design study of students studying at the United Christian University was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study utilised students from the United Christian University as the case study. The population of this study consisted of undergraduate and post-graduate students enrolled in various degree and diploma programmes offered at UCU and other institutions of higher learning. The ethnographic research explored the experiences of other students from other Universities as they exist in a defined population at a single point in time. This design was adequate in collecting data that addressed the intended research questions for this study, as it was able to measure all factors under investigation at once. However, this study design has weakness in establishing temporal relationship between exposure and outcome, the determinants identified may therefore not be causal. However, most factors examined are known determinants of disclosure and supported by other studies.

A total of 402 students were studied, 20 from UCU and 382 other institutions of higher learning. The study was conducted from February 2018 to August 2018. A systematic random sampling was used in the recruitment of students. All students who are pursuing various programmes and who fulfilled the selection criteria were consecutively recruited for the study. The study also relied in using purposive sampling, probability-based and snowball sampling approaches (Babbie, 2004). A lottery method using names from attendance register was used to select consecutively 30 study participants at random on daily basis. The recruitment continued until the intended sample size was achieved. Purposeful sampling based on the potential of the participant to give needed information was used to select qualitative study sample qualitative interview involved 10 in-depth peer interviews with students from various Universities until it reached saturation point, coupled with one in-depth interview with lecturers who heads ODL centres.

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## Data Collection and Themes

Data collection instruments for this research included combination of various techniques. The use of more than one technique was considered as an appropriate way for ensuring reliable and valid data through triangulation. Triangulation refers to the application of several different sources of information in research, which serves to enhance the credibility of the gathered information. The study population consisted of students who are studying through Blended ODL at UCU and other Universities in Malawi. Most of these students were sampled from both private and public Universities.

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## In-depth Peer Interviews

Participants of in-depth peer interviews were those who fulfilled the above criteria, and who have studied for ODL up to two years. Heads of ODL centres were also interviewed so as to allow the researcher get additional information from the heads of ODL centres on challenges of ODL provider perspectives on the factors affecting ODL. For qualitative data collection, the researcher conducted an ethnographic study by interviewing the ODL in their respective campuses. In-depth interview was used to collect primary data on knowledge and attitudes from selected respondents by using a semi-structured interview guide. Data was collected through note taking and voice recorder. A total of thirty interviews were conducted; where each interview lasted for the period of 30 to 45 minutes depending on the amount of information the participant possessed.

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## Structured Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire designed for the purpose of the study was used to collect quantitative data through a face to face interview with the students in their respective Universities. General challenges, institutional challenges, attitudes towards ODL and Knowledge about ODL.

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## Data Collection Process

Two research assistants were trained for three days by the researcher to familiarise with the tool (particularly on how to ask questions and record the information accurately). After acquiring all necessary permission from the Universities authorities the researcher introduced the study to the selected heads of ODL centres. Following the students' completion of their scheduled classes, the researchers approached them and asked for consent to be interviewed with assurance that refusal or withdraw would not affect the services. Those unwilling to participate were allowed to be excluded in interview. Those who accepted were interviewed in a secure place located within their premises. Data was collected on daily basis from morning to evening, and weekends, for a period of six months. A total of 402 students were interviewed; where each interview took about 30 to 45 minutes. On daily bases the researchers were counter-checking for accuracy and completeness of the filled questionnaires and all completed questionnaires were given a code number.

## Results of the study

This section presents the results of the study. It starts by describing the socio-demographic characteristics, and is then followed by the substantive findings of the study, which are presented according to pertinent research objectives;

**Table One: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participating ODL students**

Variable	Frequency	% of respondents
<b>Gender</b>		
Males	132	32.8
Females	270	67.2
Total	<b>402</b>	100.0
<b>Age group of students (in years)</b>		
18-24	8	2.0
25-49	310	77.1
50-64	74	18.4
≥ 65	10	2.5
Total	<b>402</b>	100.0
<b>Occupation</b>		
Employed	113	28.1
Self employed	27	6.7
Unemployed	262	65.2
Total	<b>402</b>	100.0
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	209	52.0
Never married	36	9.0
Widowed/divorced/separated	157	39.1
Total	<b>402</b>	100.0

The study enrolled 402 ODL students in which a total of 270 (67.2%) females and 132 (32.8%) male participants were interviewed. Majority of study participants were married (52%) followed by widowed/divorced/separated (39.1%). A large proportion of participants, 105(26.1%) reported a monthly income which lies between MWK 100,000 and MWK 150,000 (26.1%) followed by MWK 50,000 and MWK 100,000 (24.6%). Most participants reported to have completed primary education 280 (69.7%) Almost three quarters 296 (73.6%) of the participants were Christians. Most of the study participants belonged to the age group of 18-49 years (77.1%). A good number of students were found to be unemployed 262 (65%). Many students who were studied were adults who most of them financed their studies. As such due to many responsibilities several students have postponed several semesters at least once in each academic year for other commitments such as children fees and home responsibilities. Central Christian University as a private institution of higher learning currently has no financial schemes for needy students. Therefore, as any private institution students have to take their responsibilities to pay the tuition fee each academic year, this also helps to run the institution welfare.

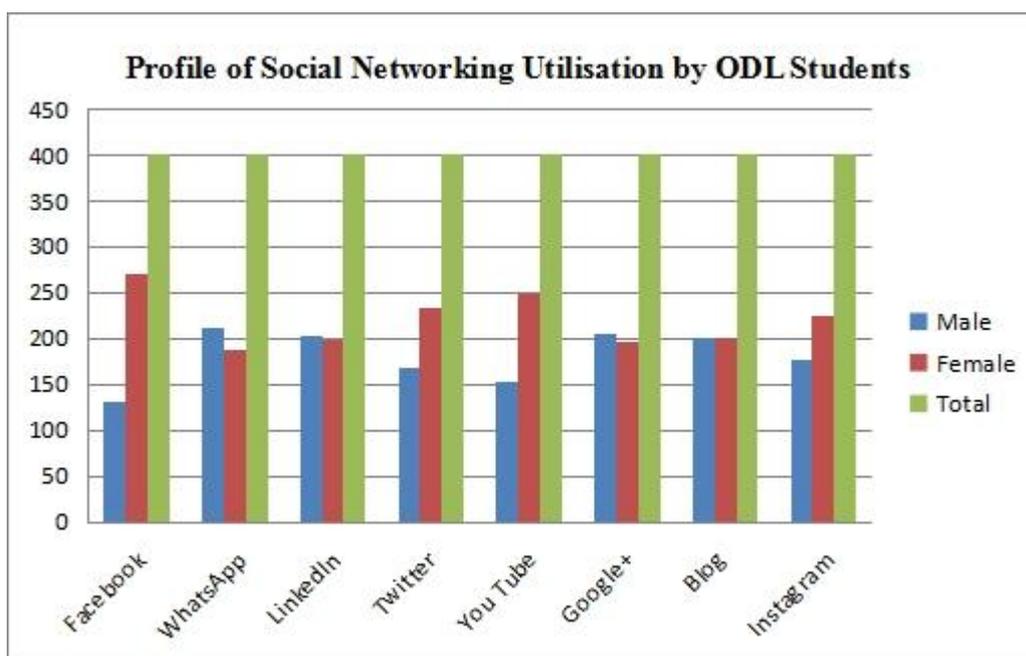
### *Personal Challenges facing ODL students*

The results extracted from the questionnaire asking responded to rate the 10 challenges in a likert scale format as high lightened in the Table 2 below. The Table shows high percentage of the ODL students agreeing to the challenges they face as it is high lightened in the questionnaire. Most respondents showed that they had challenges in getting finance, the geographical location of the ODL centre, unfriendly learning environment and working with information and communication technologies. The findings from interviews also revealed that employment pressure had impact on individual learner learning progress. One interviewee stated that; *“the major problem facing me is lack of time”*, as most of the day time is dedicated to work. While another ODL student who was recently appointed as the head of school stated that: *“As the head of school I have a numbers of daily administrative responsibilities to attend. This leaves me with very little time to deal with self-study, put aside other family responsibilities. I need to reframe my schedule Otherwise I won’t do it”*

**Table Two: Challenges that ODL students faces**

Challenges	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Agree	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Insufficient time for studying	135	33.6	171	42.5	96	23.9
Geographical location of the ODL study centre	122	30.3	178	44.3	102	25.4
Social support problems from family, employers and friends	131	32.6	169	42	102	25.4
Financial problems	121	30.1	192	47.8	89	22.1
Unfriendly learning environment at home	109	27.1	196	48.8	97	24.1
Problem in using and lack of experience with instructional technologies	123	30.6	192	47.8	87	21.6
Conflict between family, work and study scheduled	138	34.3	169	42	95	23.6
Conflict with the scheduled days of lessons at the ODL study centre	127	31.6	184	45.8	91	22.6
Lack of trust to the ODL institutions	125	31.1	166	41.3	111	27.6

Many students who were recruited in the study took their own initiative to either upgrade their career or start a new afresh. The researcher discovered that many students lacked support from their employers which is the government and a few from the private sector companies. The Internet provides numerous venues for ODL students to share their views, preferences, lessons or experiences with others as well as opportunities to teach and learn. Social networking sites provide easy-to-use tools for all users to invite others to join the network. Below is the tabulated data gathered from the ODL students?

**Figure 1: Profile of Social Networking Utilisation by ODL Students**

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram are the most commonly used social media sites utilised by female ODL students to share information and current updates from their institutions of higher learning. While their male counterpart commonly uses WhatsApp, Google+ and LinkedIn; most students at least own a smart phone for networking. The study established that many students had no computers and were computer illiterate. The implication is that most of these students could not access information on the Internet. The use of electronic media is therefore likely to exclude the majority of distance learners. This concurs with studies conducted at MZUNI by Chawinga (2017), ODL students in Malawi are challenged with both lack of experience in the application of technology and absence of these technologies. The use of ICT is very crucial when it comes to ODL education (Boholano, 2017). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century education ICT add ingredients to the effectiveness of ODL, therefore, ICT basic studies to ODL students is not a choice. Central Christian University has digital library for all programmes being offered to students and these are shared with new students after they have been enrolled, therefore if the students cannot operate the computers then it's a loss of information and they miss opportunities of connecting to the world and sharing wide knowledge related to their programs of their study.

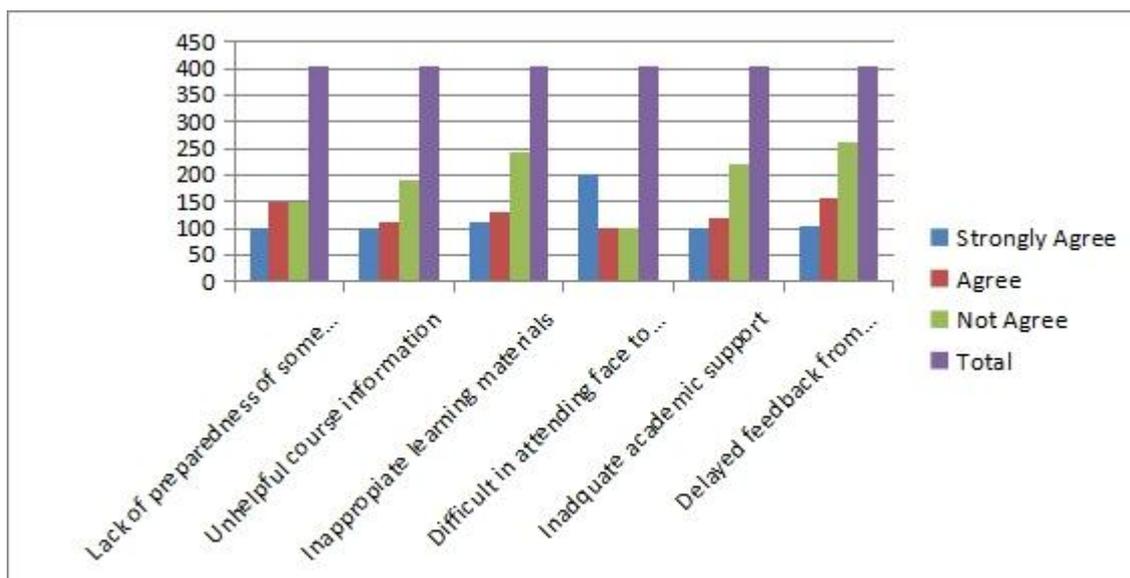
### Challenges on Mode of Lessons Delivery

More than 60% students agreed that the mode of lessons delivery affects them. The delayed feedback from lecturers was a challenge, seventy percent thought that lack of instructor's contact and /or inadequate academic support was a challenge; unhelpful course information and lack of direction and poor course design /inappropriate learning materials were also at 70%; and eighty percent thought difficulties in attending face-to-face and laboratory practical's was a challenge. Students were also unhappy with delayed feedback on their performance. As reported by Hara and Kling (2003) students experience confusion, anxiety, and frustration due to lack of prompt or clear feedback from their lecturers. Thus, delayed and ineffective feedback can add burden to learners who are struggling with the isolation and the remoteness nature of distance learning. Another related observation was that of lost assignments and test scripts. Respondents were asked if they had already encountered the problem of their assignments or test scripts getting lost.

The follow-up discussion showed that the problem of scripts getting lost frustrated, discouraged and brought many discomforts to students. Tests and assignments are major assessment tools in ODL. They give both the lecturer and student feedback on student progress and thus help determine the next action. Thus, accurate ways of students' grades recording and ensuring that instructors give regular feedback is of great importance not only for learners' satisfactions, but also for institution's reputation. With regards tutorials, face-to-face and laboratory practical, respondents' challenges were socioeconomic in nature like travelling distance and its accompanied expenses. There was also the issue of dissatisfaction with lecturers and tutors performance. Students felt that most of their lecturers came to lectures unprepared and waffle around without saying anything meaningful to students. Most lecturers were described as ineffective.

One respondent who was a teacher commented that, "high teaching load left me with little time for self-study" another respondent posted that; *it is not easy studying while working* Many other statements indicated that respondents were constrained with time management.

**Table 3: Challenges of modes of ODL delivery**



### Challenges Related to ODL centre institutional

Delayed or apparent lack of study materials emerged as a key institutional related challenge facing ODL students. Results demonstrated that, students receive study materials late or never got them; also they were challenged with inflexibility of study materials found in electronic media.

An interview with students revealed that students were not happy with delayed study material, especially modules. Most of the respondents received study materials late or never got them. In this situation students are affected academically, psychologically, and financially. Lack of study materials may force students to submit assignments that are not properly written and they are likely to get to examinations without enough preparation resulting in poor performance. Such poor performance may not be the true reflection of their academic abilities.

Other challenges of which nearly half of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed were; lack of an effective institutional network of technical assistance, and lack or delayed important information. During an ethnographic study the researchers noted the following responses related to the problems high lightened;

*“Study materials are not provided”* a student from United Christian University

*“I have taken long to finish because each time there are no study materials”* a Student from MZUNI

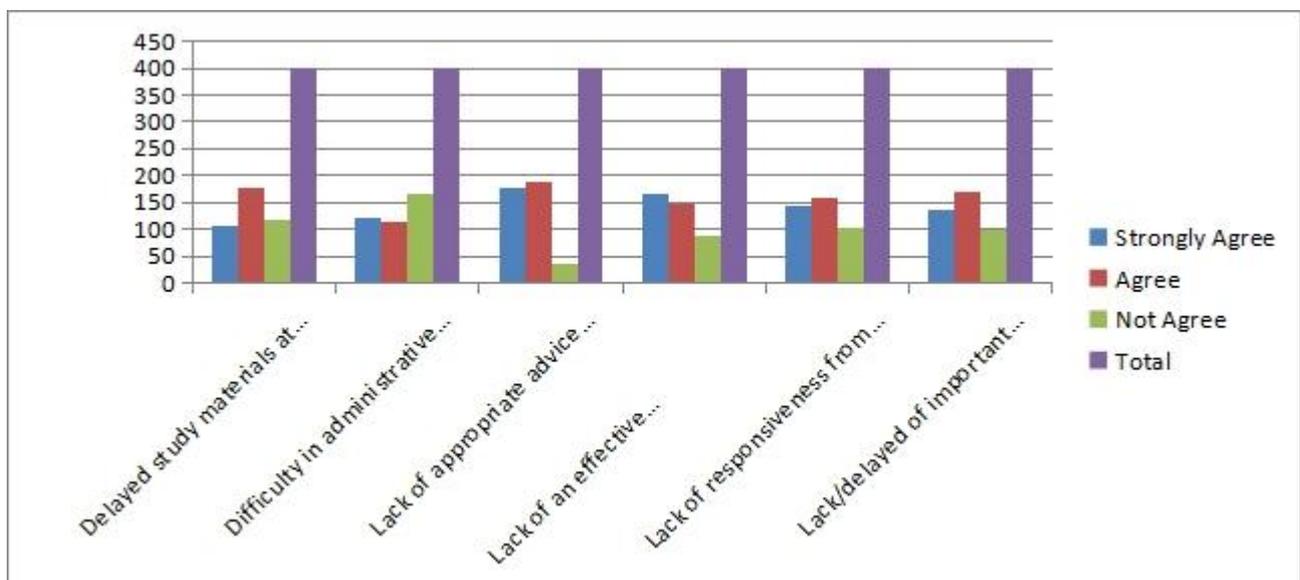
*“Some courses never receive materials for the entire year”*-Student from Chancellor College

*“Most of us are getting tired with the situation of study materials”*-student from LUANAR

*“I failed to get study materials in some registered courses”*-Student from Central Christian University

Some students may persist at slow pace, resulting in late completion of programmes. Others withdraw from studies. The public (employers included) may question the individual student’s academic abilities on the ground that why does it take him /her long to graduate. Also, the quality of education provided through ODL becomes questionable.

Delayed or lack of study materials may affect students economically as they waste resources in terms of money and time; patiently waiting for the arrival of study materials and sometimes travelling to regional centre to make follow- up, but find nothing.



ODL centres have their fair share of problems that naturally affect their output quality and the morale of both lecturers and students. These problems vary with centres depending on the authorities responsible for the centres, the cost of living in that area, the leadership competency by some lecturers appointed to run centres and to some extent, the backgrounds of the students themselves. From the research, both students and members of staff raised the following as some of the most prominent challenges faced at the centres.

- ~ Teaching media needs to be improved for large classes. 4 lecturer respondents (40%) suggested that at least four LCD projectors per centre are required to improve the situation.
- ~ Six lecturer respondents also noted that lists of reading material have to be prepared early enough by the departments and forwarded to the E- library. The challenge is that the Library fails to mobilise the required material as there will not have been proper communication.
- ~ Some lecturers go to the centres without the full grasp of the work they are supposed to be doing. This is according to 19 questionnaires and 3 interviewees. This negatively affects the students’ learning zeal and puts the name of the university into disrepute.
- ~ Overall, because of resource inadequacy (time, financial and material), there were conflicts between members of staff and students and amongst the staff and students themselves respectively.

## Conclusions

The findings of the research show that there are several challenges that ODL students face. These include individual, instructional and institutional related challenges. Those challenges from individual category include; lack of sufficient time for study, problems related to the access and use of ICT, financial constraints, lack of support from employers, and occasional obstacles resulting from travelling distance from home to the Study Centre especially during face to face and examinations sessions. Much of the causes of the individual challenges emanate from students’ failure to manage time for self-study and to attend other social and work obligations, and lack of computer and competence skills in ICT. Other causes are low income, negative employers’ mind -set to ODL and long distance from the study Centre

Instructional related challenges facing the UCU students include: Ineffective and delayed feedback of students' assignments and examinations results, lost scripts and unrecorded grades. These challenges contributed negatively to students' learning because most of them find it difficult to move on to new content. Instructional challenges widen the transactional distance gap, and add burden to learners most of whom are struggling to learn in isolation while not knowing the fate of their education.

Institutional related challenges that UCU students face include; delayed or lack of study materials. In relation to this most of students could not access electronic media due to lack of ICT devices and absence of technological infrastructures within their localities. Other identified institutional related challenges as lack of students support services in areas of guidance and counselling, and inadequate academic support and administrative services at study Centre

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## Recommendations

It must be appreciated that the programme has improved over the period that it has been operational on the ground. However, whenever there is a new programme that involves such huge enrolment, there are bound to be challenges of various magnitudes. It is therefore the scope of this paper to possibly make the following recommendations for consideration. These have been developed from the responses and contributions that were gathered from both the students and lecturers in an on-going research. From a health perspective, there should be health services provision or some contingency to cater for health problems of students during their stay at ODL centres as the coordinators run into problems when there is a health problem of a student.

The second recommendation from this study is that, although studying through ODL mode is an independent endeavour, UCU should equip students with independent study skills. This could help distance learners to balance time and merge work, social life and their studies. Specifically, UCU should strengthen its initiatives of compulsory introduction to ODL course with a focus to improving students' ODL knowledge and skills, as means of helping them to cope with changes to non-traditional education.

Although ICT is crucial for effective and efficient delivery of ODL courses, due to limited and expensive access to up-stream facilities for ICT use, students cannot use ICT viably. UCU should continuously establish necessary infrastructure for ICT at its main study Centre and provide students with access to ICTs facilities such as audio-visual conferencing facilities, computers and CD-ROMs. More important, those students who are reluctant to change their mind set towards ICT should be oriented to ICT.

Fourthly, although students travel a long distance, a common occurrence in distance education to reach their regional centre, UCU should plan for hostel services at the study Centre with permanent buildings. Hostel services would not only create revenue to UCU, but also provide safe place to students and cuts the cost and risks related to lodging environment during the examinations and face to face sessions.

Finally, UCU should continue to recruit academicians who are committed and have passion to ODL as mode of education delivery. Orientations courses to ODL should be provided to faculty members as the means of equipping them with ODL teaching and learning skills. All these will strengthen instructional at UCU. Consequently, this will lessen instructional related challenges such as delayed feedbacks. UCU should strengthen and improve the operations of face- to- face sessions. The face- to- face sessions should provide opportunities to students to talk to their instructors and peers around content that seems difficult for them while on their own.

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## Conclusion

This study reveals that there are several challenges faced by UCU students. The challenges include individual, instructional and institutional related challenges. Individual challenges included a lack of time for study, issues with access and usage of ICT, financial constraints, a lack of employment assistance, and occasional obstacles stemming from the distance between home and the regional centre, particularly during face-to-face and test sessions. Ineffective and delayed feedback of students' assignments and examination outcomes, misplaced scripts, and unrecorded grades were identified as instructional problems. These instructional problems had a negative impact on students' learning since it was difficult for them to move on to new material. Institutional related challenges were found as delayed or lack of study materials; lack of students support services in areas of guidance and counselling; and inadequate academic support and administrative services at the regional centre.

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