



The Effect of the Practice of Open and Distance Learning Systems in Songwe Region in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the impact of implementing the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in Songwe Region, Tanzania. The target population included 112 respondents from Mbozi, Momba, Songwe, and Ileje Districts. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches were applied, using a descriptive research design. The sample size consisted of 112 respondents selected through simple random and purposive sampling techniques. Data were gathered through structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions. The findings indicate that ODL programs are crucial in Songwe Region due to the scarcity of local universities offering higher education. ODL has proven to be a valuable tool for professional development, particularly for teachers in rural areas. Many teachers who have completed ODL programs have experienced career advancement, including promotions, recategorization, and new roles, contributing positively to their job performance. Additionally, the study found that completing ODL studies has increased teachers' confidence, making them more trusted by their employers. The study recommends that employers consider reducing employees' workloads to give them sufficient time for study. It also suggests that ODL students should be eligible for higher education loans, similar to full-time students, and that institutions should allocate budgets to provide financial assistance to ODL learners. To improve accessibility, higher education institutions offering ODL should establish more regional learning centres.

Keywords: *Open Learning, Distance Learning, Open and Distance Learning*

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL), also known as distance education, allows students and teachers to be separated by time and space, overcoming barriers like financial constraints, geography, and personal responsibilities (UNESCO, 2023). It includes online courses, correspondence, and blended learning, with technology playing a crucial role in making learning more accessible and engaging (Allen & Seaman, 2017). ODL has grown significantly worldwide, especially in countries like the US, India, and Nigeria, due to its flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and wide range of programs available (Joseph, 2024).

In Africa, ODL has expanded access to education, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Zimbabwe, for example, introduced ODL programs in the 1990s, and by 2000, the University of Zimbabwe became the first to offer degrees through this mode (Musingafi et al., 2015). In Nigeria, technological advancements have fuelled ODL's growth, offering new ways to enhance teaching and learning (Ghahari & Ameri-Golestan, 2013). In Uganda, ODL is crucial to meeting the rising demand for higher education, with a large number of students qualifying for university but limited spaces available (Experience Africa, 2009).

In Tanzania, ODL is a key part of education policy, helping to address socio-economic and geographical barriers (MoEVT, 1995; URT, 2014). The government supports ODL for secondary education, adult learning, and vocational training, with the aim of expanding access and improving employability (UNDP, 2016). Institutions like the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) have been instrumental in this growth. However, there remains a need for more research on the impact of ODL programs, particularly in regions like Songwe (Maijo, 2021).

Research Methodology

The population of this study included 112 respondents from Mbozi District, Momba District, Songwe Mkwajuni District, and Ileje District. It included the District Education Officer (DEO), the Ward Education Officer (WEO), the heads of schools and ODL students. This study was conducted in the Songwe Region. Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were used. The study employed a descriptive research design. The sample size was 112 respondents, which included 4 District Education Officers (DEOs), 8 Ward Education Officers (WEOs), 16 Heads of Schools, 4 ODL Coordinators, and 80 ODL Students. A simple random sampling technique and purposive sampling technique were employed. Primary data was collected using structured interview questions, structured questionnaires, and focus group discussions. Secondary data was collected using the documentary review

method. Quantitative data gathered through questionnaires were analysed descriptively using the Microsoft Excel-13. Qualitative data were analysed and presented using thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

A total of 12 participants were able to contribute their thoughts during the interviews conducted between them and the researcher. All 4 district education officers and 8 ward education officers participated effectively in answering the questions posed by the researcher to gather information on whether there are positive or negative outcomes for the participants, especially teachers who have completed ODL programs or those continuing their studies through the ODL system. Based on their responses, the participants provided answers that enabled the researcher to conclude that providing education through the ODL system has brought positive results to the education system within Songwe Region. Many teachers have had easier opportunities for educational advancement compared to the past. Additionally, teachers who completed and submitted their certificates could get promoted, and even those who had reached the limit of the promotion could also benefit from this opportunity. In this way, it means that there is a direct impact on those who successfully participate in studies offered through ODL. Quoting one of the interviews conducted between the researcher and the district education officer, he said:

...This education system offered through ODL is very beneficial in employment matters, and many teachers have made great strides after a few institutions of higher learning brought to our region have become a haven for many teachers in their scholarly development, especially those who are already old and near retirement and can even open the way for them to receive promotions and increased pay. (Source: Interview, DEO, July 2024).

These responses from the district education officer provide an interpretation of the significant role of education provided through the ODL system in providing opportunities for teachers who have family responsibilities and are unable to go away for studies, and also in an interview, the researcher was able to quote the DEO's statement as follows:

...Education offered through the ODL system has greatly helped many teachers access education, especially those living in rural areas where the lack of colleges previously prevented them from pursuing further studies, and even diminished their desire to do so. Now that education has reached their doorsteps, it has motivated them to enrol in programs and advance academically. (Source: Interview, DEO, July 2024).

The response from the District Education Officer (DEO) highlights the importance of educational opportunities for civil servants, especially teachers living in challenging environments, by making education more accessible and encouraging them to pursue further studies. Additionally, during the interview between the researcher and the Ward Education Officer (WEO), the WEO was quoted as saying:

...Providing education through the ODL system has greatly helped reduce the congestion of teachers waiting for permission to attend further studies. Now, the opportunity to advance academically is available even while continuing with your work responsibilities and studies simultaneously. (Source: Interview, WEO, July 2024)

The responses from the Ward Education Officer (WEO) highlight the positive outcomes of education delivered through the ODL system, particularly in expanding access to education for all teachers within the region without affecting their job performance. The WEO also contributed insights, stating that education offered through ODL helps address the economic stagnation challenge often faced by teachers pursuing further studies through the conventional or full-time system. A quote from the interview:

...Teachers studying through the ODL system still have the opportunity to improve their economic situation by continuing with their various economic activities during their free time, such as farming or running small businesses. This is different from a teacher attending full-time studies who is away from their normal environment. (Source: Interview, WEO, July 2024).

From the opinions of both the DEO and WEO, the researcher was able to identify positive outcomes from the education delivered through distance learning. It has also been well-received by the education administration within the region.

A total of 16 heads of schools were interviewed by the researcher to provide their insights on the impact of the education provided through the ODL system within Songwe Region. The heads of schools shared their views on how ODL contributes to expanding access to education for the teachers under their supervision and how it opens doors for many teachers, encouraging them to pursue further studies to enhance their professional development. I quoted one of the heads of schools who said:

...Education provided through the ODL system has been a good opportunity for the teachers I supervise to advance their education. Many of them had a strong desire to pursue further studies, but the main challenge was the lack of educational institutions within the region. (Source: Interview, HoS, August 2024).

The heads of schools also explained how the education provided through the ODL system has significantly reduced the long waiting period teachers once faced when seeking permission from their employers to pursue further studies. One head of school remarked. "Education provided through the ODL system has become a refuge for many teachers, as those who wish to advance their education no longer need to wait in line for approval from their employer." (Source: Interview, HoS, August 2024).

Moreover, the Head of schools noted that ODL has helped reduce the need for teachers to take study leave, allowing them to spend more time in their work environment, which has, in turn, helped mitigate the teacher shortage in schools. One Head of school hared:

...Teachers studying through the distance learning system are available throughout their working hours, although we have reduced some minor responsibilities to give them time to study. Their presence at work helps alleviate the issue of teacher shortages and improves the academic performance of our students at the school. (Source: Interview, HoS, August 2024).

Additionally, the head of the school indicated that the education provided through the ODL system has had positive outcomes in enhancing the operational efficiency of many teachers. It has boosted their confidence in their work, and those who completed their ODL studies have received promotions. For example, some teachers they once supervised have become heads of schools, just like the other Heads of schools. Quoting one Head of school from the interview, they said:

...The ODL education system has had a very positive impact on our region of Songwe by providing opportunities for academic advancement. Among those who have participated, some have been promoted to Head of school positions, where previously they worked under our supervision. Furthermore, through the training they receive, teachers have improved their effectiveness in performing their duties and have gained greater confidence in their work (Source: Interview, August 2024).

Through these interviews, the researcher has observed how programs delivered and implemented through the ODL system have yielded positive results in the education sector within Songwe Region, as many teachers have found it to be a valuable means for their educational development.

A total of 80 ODL students were reached by the researcher, and all students responded to the questions as prepared by the researcher. These questions aimed to understand the impact of the education provided through the ODL system.

The researcher intended to investigate the impact of the ODL system and its programs on both those who have completed their studies and those who are still currently enrolled within the Songwe Region. To address this objective, five statements were presented to the 80 students for rating using a Likert scale, categorised as agree, strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and neutral. Their responses to these statements are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The impact of open and distance learning systems on teachers through ODL programs

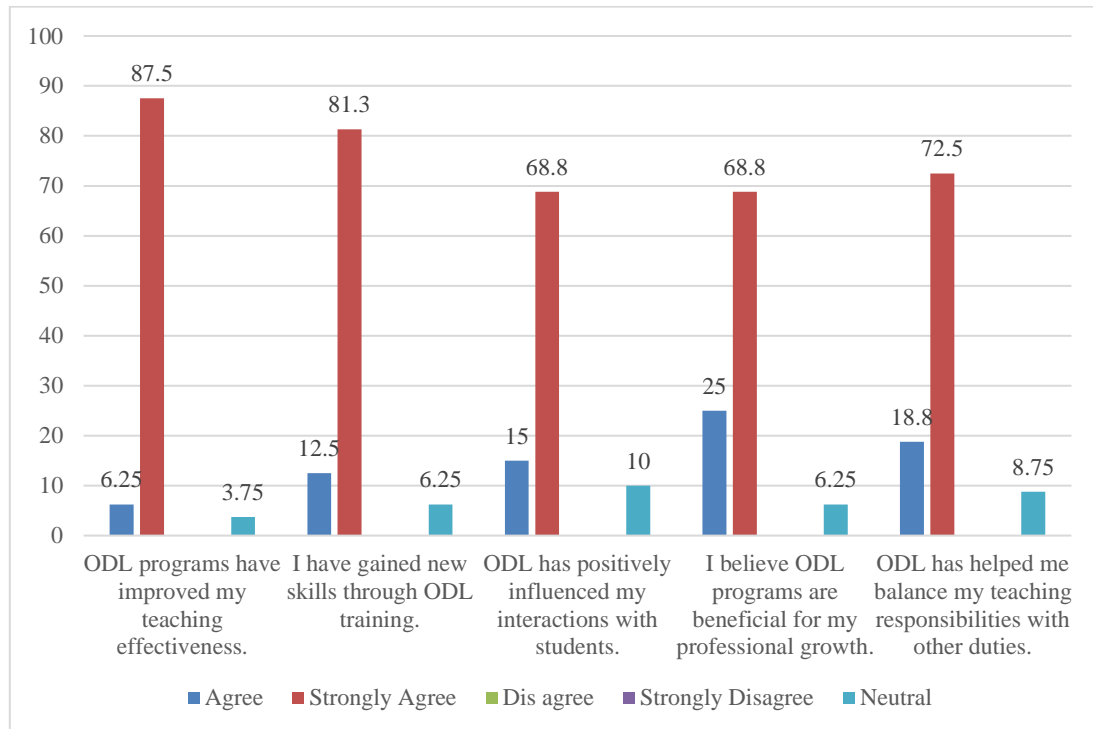
Statement	A		SA		D		SD		N	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
ODL programs have improved my Teaching effectiveness.	5	6.25	70	87.5	0	0	0	0	3	3.75
I have gained new skills through ODL training.	10	12.5	65	81.3	0	0	0	0	5	6.25
ODL has positively influenced my Interactions with students.	12	15	55	68.8	0	0	0	0	8	10
I believe ODL programs are beneficial for my professional growth.	20	25	55	68.8	0	0	0	0	5	6.25
ODL has helped me balance my teaching responsibilities with other duties.	15	18.8	58	72.5	0	0	0	0	7	8.75

Key: A-Agree; SA-Strongly Agree; D-Disagree; SD-Strongly disagree; N-Neutral; F-Frequency

Source: field data July to August 2024

The findings show that out of 80 respondents, 5(6.25%) of respondents' ODL program had improved my teaching effectiveness, 70(87.5%) strongly agreed that ODL programs have improved my teaching effectiveness, and 3(3.75%) of respondents were neutral with the statement. In the second statement, 10 (12.5%) of respondents agreed gained new skills through ODL training., and 65 (81.3%) of respondents strongly agreed they gained new skills through ODL training. but disagreed, strongly disagreed and neutral go t5(6.25%). moreover, in the third statement, 12(15%) of their respondents agreed ODL ODL has positively influenced my interactions with students, 55 (68.8%) respondents strongly agreed ODL has positively influenced my interactions with students, and 8 (10%) of respondents were neutral with the statement. In the fourth statement, 20 (10%) respondents believed ODL programs are beneficial for my professional growth. 55 (68.8%) strongly believe ODL programs are beneficial for my professional growth. While 5(6.25) respondents were neutral. The last from the list of statements is as follows, 15(18.8%) of respondents agree that ODL has helped them to balance their teaching responsibilities with other duties. 58 (72.5) strongly disagree that ODL has helped me balance my teaching responsibilities with other duties. While 7 (8.75%) were neutral as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The impact of Open and distance learning



Source: Field data (July and August 2024)

Conclusion

The study showed that ODL programmes are still highly needed in the Songwe Region due to the scarcity of universities offering higher education within the region. The availability of ODL programs helps residents and employees in the region to access education on time without the need to travel long distances or live far from their families. Additionally, the findings indicate that education stakeholders, including WEOs, HOS, and ODL students themselves, support distance education. This reflects how well ODL has been received by these education stakeholders.

Furthermore, the findings identified various challenges facing education delivered through distance learning. Despite these challenges, the demand for ODL programs remains strong within the Songwe community, as the number of students applying for ODL programs continues to increase every year.

Moreover, the findings revealed that there is very little understanding among the Songwe community regarding the meaning of education provided through open and distance learning. Many residents, especially ordinary citizens, are not aware of programs, and even those few who are aware have very limited understanding. They perceive rather than for everyone. As a result, there has been a low response rate in terms of individuals enrolling themselves and their children in the ODL program with the organisation.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that open and distance learning is a significant enabler for the professional development of employees in the formal employment sector, particularly teachers in rural areas and those who do not have study leave from their employers. Education their careers, resulting in positive outcomes in their work performance. Some teachers, after completing, have been promoted, recategorized, or received promotions in other positions. It has also increased their confidence in their work and earned them greater trust from their employers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made:

Firstly, for employees, especially teachers, who are developing their education through ODL programs, I recommend that their employers reduce their workload to allow them to get enough time for studying, enabling them to perform better in the courses. Secondly, students pursuing education through ODL should be eligible for higher education loans from the relevant student loan authorities, just like full-time students. Thirdly, employers with staff members who are advancing their education through the ODL mode should allocate a budget to provide financial support. This could also encourage other employees to pursue further education without needing to enrol in full-time programs. Fourthly, institutions offering higher education through open and distance learning should increase the number of learning centres, making them more accessible and reducing the need for long-distance travel to access educational services. Fifthly, there is a need to educate the public about open and distance learning, along with sufficient advertising to raise awareness of the programs offered through ODL to attract more participants. Finally, but importantly, the various challenges facing education delivered

through ODL should be addressed. This can be achieved by involving all education stakeholders and the government in improving teaching and learning infrastructure, particularly by enhancing internet connectivity to ensure it reaches all areas.

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