



# International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal Homepage: [www.ijrpr.com](http://www.ijrpr.com) ISSN 2582-7421

## The Influence of Educational Policies on Students' Engagement in Online Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Tanzania

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of educational policies on student engagement in online learning in higher education institutions in Tanzania. A quantitative approach and cross-sectional survey design were employed, involving 607 respondents comprising 289 academic staff and 318 undergraduate students from four higher education institutions in Mbeya City Council. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, documentary review, structured observation, and institutional database review. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, and simple linear regression. The findings indicated that educational policies guided online learning, although weaknesses existed in monitoring and enforcement. Student engagement was generally moderate, with interaction receiving the highest mean score and prompt feedback the lowest. Regression analysis revealed a statistically significant positive association between educational policies and student engagement ( $\beta = 0.39, p < .005$ ), with policies explaining 15% of the variation in engagement. Documentary review further revealed that monitoring mechanisms, quality assurance, and training provisions were inconsistently addressed across the reviewed documents. The study concludes that educational policies provide an important framework for promoting student engagement, but their influence depends on effective implementation, adequate digital infrastructure, staff capacity, technical assistance, and student support. It recommends strengthening policy monitoring and enforcement, improving digital infrastructure and technical support, enhancing academic staff capacity in online teaching, and establishing effective mechanisms for monitoring and supporting student engagement.

**Keywords:** Educational Policies, Online Learning, and Student Engagement.

### 1. Introduction

The integration of online learning into higher education has become an important feature of contemporary education systems due to advances in information and communication technologies, globalization, and the demand for flexible learning opportunities. Online learning enables students to access educational content, communicate with instructors and peers, participate in learning activities, and complete academic tasks beyond conventional classrooms. However, its effectiveness depends not only on digital technologies but also on students' active participation and engagement in the learning process.

Educational policies provide an important framework for supporting online learning and student engagement through guidelines on digital infrastructure, technology integration, quality assurance, staff capacity development, learner support, and equitable access. Globally, higher education systems have increasingly adopted digital education policies to improve access, flexibility, and learner-centred education (UNESCO, 2025). However, effective implementation may be affected by institutional capacity, digital resources, internet connectivity, technological support, and the preparedness of instructors and students (Babalola & Genga, 2024; Chiwoya et al., 2025).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, online learning continues to face challenges related to inadequate digital infrastructure, limited access to technological devices, low digital literacy, and variations in policy implementation (Oyewole, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). In Tanzania, online learning is supported by the National ICT Policy, Education and Training Policy, National Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030, and Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) guidelines for online and blended learning (United Republic of Tanzania, 2024; TCU, 2024). Despite these policy initiatives, studies have identified challenges related to internet connectivity, institutional support, and digital competencies among instructors and students (Chasubuta & Ndibalema, 2024; Sigalla & Kimario, 2025), which may affect students' participation and engagement.

Although previous studies have examined online learning adoption and implementation challenges, limited empirical attention has been given to the influence of educational policies on student engagement in online learning in Tanzanian higher education institutions. This study therefore examined the influence of educational policies on student engagement in online learning in higher education institutions in Tanzania, focusing on students' participation, interaction, and involvement in online learning activities.

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Literature Review

Institutional Theory, developed from the work of Meyer and Rowan (1977), provides a relevant foundation for examining the influence of educational policies on student engagement in online learning in higher education institutions in Tanzania. The theory explains how organisations are shaped by formal rules, regulations, policies, standards, and institutional expectations. In higher education, educational policies guide areas such as digital infrastructure, learning management systems, staff capacity development, quality assurance, digital content, assessment, and student support. Effective implementation of these provisions can create supportive online learning environments that facilitate students' access to learning materials, interaction, participation, and engagement in learning activities.

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### 2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Empirical studies indicate that educational policies provide important conditions for effective online learning and student engagement. Babalola and Genga (2024) found that coherent policy frameworks were associated with stronger online learning practices and improved student engagement, while Chiwoya et al. (2025) reported that policy alignment, institutional readiness, pedagogical support, and learner preparedness were important for successful online learning. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Oyewole (2025) identified inadequate digital infrastructure, limited access to devices, low digital literacy, and weaknesses in policy implementation as challenges affecting online learning. These findings suggest that policy provisions require adequate institutional capacity and resources to support student participation.

In Tanzania, online learning is supported by the National ICT Policy, Education and Training Policy, National Digital Education Strategy 2024/25–2029/30, and TCU guidelines for online and blended learning. These frameworks provide direction on digital infrastructure, learning management systems, digital content, staff capacity, and quality assurance (United Republic of Tanzania, 2024). However, Chasubuta and Ndibalem (2024) found that technological literacy and access to appropriate digital systems were important for effective use of learning management systems, while Sigalla and Kimario (2025) reported challenges related to internet connectivity, institutional support, and digital skills. Such challenges may affect students' access, interaction, and participation in online learning.

Other Tanzanian studies have highlighted the importance of institutional practices in promoting engagement. Kisanga (2019) found that teacher–student and student–content interaction supported involvement in e-learning and recommended training for teachers and students. These findings indicate that the influence of educational policies depends partly on how policy provisions are understood, implemented, and supported within institutions.

Although previous studies have examined online learning implementation, digital literacy, institutional support, and student participation, limited empirical attention has focused directly on the influence of educational policies on student engagement in online learning in Tanzanian higher education institutions. The present study addresses this gap by examining educational policies as the independent variable and student engagement in online learning as the dependent variable.

Institutional Theory is relevant because institutions differ in organisational capacity, resources, technological infrastructure, and human expertise, which may affect how policies are translated into practice. The theory therefore provides a basis for examining whether educational policy provisions are reflected in institutional practices that support students' engagement in online learning.

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## 3. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the influence of educational policies on student engagement in online learning in higher education institutions in Tanzania. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted because it enabled the collection and analysis of numerical data at a single point in time and facilitated the examination of relationships between educational policies, online learning implementation, and student engagement.

A sample of 607 respondents, comprising 289 academic staff and 318 undergraduate students, was selected from four public and private higher education institutions in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. Multi-stage sampling was used, whereby the institutions were purposively selected based on their active use of online learning, followed by stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation of academic staff and students. Structured questionnaires were administered to collect quantitative data on educational policies, online learning implementation, and student engagement. Documentary review, structured observation, and institutional database review were also used to obtain supplementary information related to educational policies, online learning infrastructure, and online learning participation.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the study variables. Simple linear regression was employed to determine the contribution of educational policies to online learning implementation and the influence of educational policies on student engagement. In addition, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to determine the relationship between online learning implementation and student engagement. All statistical tests were conducted at a 5% level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## 4. Results

This section presents the findings on the influence of educational policies on student engagement in online learning in higher education institutions in Tanzania. The results focus on respondents' perceptions of educational policies, the level of student engagement in online learning, and the statistical influence of educational policies on student engagement. Documentary review findings are also presented to provide supporting evidence concerning the policy environment for online learning.

### 4.1 Educational Policies in Higher Education Institutions

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of educational policies related to online learning in higher education institutions.

**Table 1: Respondents' Perceptions of Educational Policies**

| Item                                   | Statement                      | SD<br>(1) | D (2) | N (3) | A (4) | SA<br>(5) | Mean | Std.<br>Dev |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|------|-------------|
| <b>Section B: Educational Policies</b> |                                |           |       |       |       |           |      |             |
| B1                                     | Policies clearly communicated  | 70        | 90    | 140   | 210   | 75        | 3.22 | 1.15        |
| B2                                     | Well-defined guidelines exist  | 65        | 95    | 145   | 205   | 75        | 3.22 | 1.12        |
| B3                                     | Leadership ensures enforcement | 80        | 110   | 155   | 170   | 70        | 3.07 | 1.18        |
| B4                                     | Monitoring mechanisms exist    | 90        | 120   | 160   | 150   | 65        | 2.97 | 1.20        |
| B5                                     | Policy updates communicated    | 60        | 85    | 135   | 220   | 85        | 3.32 | 1.10        |

The findings indicate that the composite mean for educational policies was 3.16 (SD = 1.15). The highest mean score was recorded for the communication of policy updates (M = 3.32, SD = 1.10), followed by the clear communication of policies (M = 3.22, SD = 1.15) and the existence of well-defined guidelines (M = 3.22, SD = 1.12). Leadership enforcement recorded a mean of 3.07 (SD = 1.18), while monitoring mechanisms recorded the lowest mean score (M = 2.97, SD = 1.20). Overall, the findings indicate that respondents reported the presence of educational policy provisions, although monitoring mechanisms received comparatively lower ratings.

### 4.2 Student Engagement in Online Learning

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of student engagement in online learning.

**Table 2: Respondents' Perceptions of Student Engagement in Online Learning**

| Item                                 | Statement                                    | SD<br>(1) | D (2) | N (3) | A (4) | SA<br>(5) | Mean | Std.<br>Dev |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|------|-------------|
| <b>Section D: Student Engagement</b> |                                              |           |       |       |       |           |      |             |
| D11                                  | Students actively participate in discussions | 80        | 100   | 155   | 185   | 65        | 3.09 | 1.16        |
| D12                                  | Platforms encourage interaction              | 70        | 95    | 145   | 200   | 75        | 3.20 | 1.13        |
| D13                                  | Feedback provided promptly                   | 90        | 115   | 155   | 155   | 70        | 3.00 | 1.21        |
| D14                                  | Activities enhance motivation                | 75        | 100   | 140   | 195   | 75        | 3.16 | 1.15        |
| D15                                  | Consistent attendance in online classes      | 85        | 110   | 150   | 165   | 75        | 3.06 | 1.19        |

The findings show that the composite mean for student engagement was 3.10 (SD = 1.17). The highest mean score was recorded for the statement that online learning platforms encouraged interaction ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), followed by the view that online learning activities enhanced motivation ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). Active participation in discussions recorded a mean of 3.09 ( $SD = 1.16$ ), while consistent attendance in online classes recorded a mean of 3.06 ( $SD = 1.19$ ). The lowest mean score was recorded for the provision of prompt feedback ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). Overall, the findings indicate a moderate level of student engagement in online learning.

#### 4.3 Influence of Educational Policies on Student Engagement

Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether educational policies significantly influenced student engagement in online learning in higher education institutions in Tanzania.

**Table 3: Regression Model for Policy Influence on Student**

| Model | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | Engagement |        |
|-------|------|----------------|-------------------------|------------|--------|
|       |      |                |                         | F          | P      |
| 1     | 0.39 | 0.15           | 0.15                    | 103.50     | < .005 |

Regression Coefficients

| Predictor                        | B    | SE B | $\beta$ | T     | p      |
|----------------------------------|------|------|---------|-------|--------|
| Constant                         | 1.82 | 0.14 | —       | 13.00 | < .005 |
| Educational Policies (Section B) | 0.40 | 0.04 | 0.39    | 10.17 | < .005 |

As presented in Table 3, the regression model showed a statistically significant positive association between educational policies and student engagement in online learning ( $R = 0.39$ ,  $R^2 = 0.15$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.15$ ,  $F = 103.50$ ,  $p < .005$ ). The model explained 15% of the variance in student engagement. The regression coefficient for educational policies was statistically significant ( $B = 0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $t = 10.17$ ,  $p < .005$ ). This finding indicates that higher educational policy scores were associated with higher levels of student engagement in online learning. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the educational policy score corresponded to a 0.40-unit increase in the predicted student engagement score.

#### 4.4 Documentary Review of Educational Policies

Five documents were reviewed to provide supplementary evidence concerning educational policies and their provisions for online learning.

**Table 4: Summary of Documentary Review Findings**

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| Item Reviewed                        | Doc 1 (Nat ICT Policy) | Doc 2 (HEMIS Policy) | Doc 3 (Univ A Report) | Doc 4 (Univ B Report) | Doc 5 (Guideline) |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Explicit online learning guidelines  | Yes                    | No                   | Yes                   | No                    | Yes               |
| Roles and responsibilities specified | Yes                    | Yes                  | No                    | No                    | Yes               |
| Monitoring mechanisms described      | No                     | Yes                  | No                    | No                    | No                |
| Quality assurance addressed          | Yes                    | No                   | No                    | No                    | Yes               |
| Training provisions included         | No                     | No                   | Yes                   | Yes                   | No                |

The documentary review showed that explicit online learning guidelines were present in three of the five reviewed documents. Roles and responsibilities were specified in three documents, while monitoring mechanisms were described in one document. Quality assurance provisions were addressed in two documents, and training provisions were included in two documents. The main policy themes identified in the reviewed documents were ICT infrastructure and digital literacy. However, monitoring mechanisms and enforcement procedures were absent from most of the reviewed documents. These findings provide supplementary evidence that educational policy provisions for online learning existed, although the extent of monitoring and enforcement varied across the reviewed documents.

## 5. Discussion of the Findings

The findings demonstrate that educational policies play an important role in shaping the environment in which online learning takes place in Tanzanian higher education institutions. Policies establish expectations for the organization of online learning, instructor–student interaction, access to digital resources, assessment, feedback, and student support. However, their practical influence depends on institutional capacity to translate policy provisions into practices experienced by students. This finding is consistent with Policy Implementation Theory, particularly the framework of Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980), which emphasizes implementation structures, resources, institutional commitment, and the capacity of implementing actors. In online learning, effective policy implementation therefore requires appropriate technological infrastructure, competent instructors, technical assistance, effective communication, and student support mechanisms.

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The findings are supported by Smith and Johnson (2022), who associated student engagement with digital tools, instructional interaction, and course design, and by Kangwa et al (2024), who found that professional development and student self-regulation contributed to engagement in digital learning. Nassary and Kitula (2024) similarly reported that training and technical monitoring supported engagement through improved implementation practices. These studies indicate that policies are more likely to influence student experiences when they are incorporated into institutional practices rather than remaining as formal guidelines.

Evidence from Tanzania further highlights the importance of the conditions surrounding policy implementation. Ambele et al. (2025) identified limited internet infrastructure and digital literacy as constraints to engagement, while Shangali and Mwamakula (2026) reported poor connectivity and high data costs as challenges to online learning. Masashua (2025) also found that an e-learning-supportive environment and lecturer engagement were associated with student motivation, although e-learning systems were used more for accessing and sharing materials than for interactive activities. These findings suggest that policies need to support not only access to digital platforms but also meaningful interaction, collaboration, feedback, and active participation.

The importance of interaction and feedback is consistent with Ochieng and Wamae (2024), Mwinuka and Mwantimwa (2024), and Mutua (2024), who emphasized instructional design, interaction, feedback, assessment, and clear online learning requirements. Hernández (2025) similarly linked digital literacy, inclusive access, technical support, and feedback with engagement. Although these studies were conducted in different contexts, they demonstrate that effective online learning policies should address students' practical learning experiences rather than focusing only on broad policy statements.

The documentary findings concerning limited explicit provisions for student support are also consistent with Chasubuta and Ndbalema (2024), who identified technical assistance and feedback as important to engagement while noting limitations in student support provisions. Van der Merwe, Botha and Naidoo (2026) similarly emphasized internet access, devices, technical support, feedback, and collaborative activities, and noted that policy awareness alone was insufficient where resources and monitoring were inadequate. Kumar et al (2025) further found that institutional support and faculty competence were important in translating policy provisions into students' learning experiences. Together, these findings indicate that policy influence depends substantially on institutional resources, staff capacity, and mechanisms for implementation and monitoring.

The findings are also consistent with Nkosi and Dlamini (2025) and Kanyamuna (2025), who emphasized digital literacy, access to devices, instructor professional development, instructional design, student support, and effective communication. However, student engagement is not determined by institutional policies alone. Kyeyune (2023) identified instructor presence and peer interaction as important factors, while Oyugi (2024) emphasized motivation and peer collaboration. Nakazibwe (2025) further highlighted institutional culture and leadership commitment. These studies show that engagement results from the interaction of institutional, instructional, technological, social, and individual factors, with educational policies forming part of this broader environment.

The present findings also provide a useful comparison with earlier Tanzanian studies. Mtebe and Raphael (2018) reported limited policy influence where technological infrastructure, digital skills, and institutional readiness were inadequate, while Mwakabenga and Kafyulilo (2020) found that limited internet access and access to digital devices constrained the influence of institutional policies. Differences between these earlier findings and the present evidence may reflect changes in institutional experience and the increasing formalization of online learning. Nevertheless, the earlier studies reinforce the importance of technological and institutional conditions in policy implementation. Bakari (2025) and Muhammad et al (2026) likewise emphasized instructor online facilitation skills, infrastructure, faculty development, student support, and policy enforcement.

Overall, the findings indicate that educational policies provide an institutional framework for organizing and supporting online learning, but their influence on student engagement depends on effective implementation. Policy provisions become more meaningful when supported by reliable digital infrastructure, competent instructors, student support, interaction, timely feedback, adequate resources, and effective monitoring mechanisms. Thus, the relationship between educational policies and student engagement depends not only on the existence of policies but also on how their intentions are translated into practices that shape students' online learning experiences.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendation

### 6.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that educational policies influence students' engagement in online learning in higher education institutions in Tanzania by providing a framework that guides the organization and delivery of online learning. However, the extent to which this influence is realized depends on effective implementation at the institutional level. Gaps in student support, timely feedback, technical assistance, and implementation mechanisms may limit students' engagement despite the existence of policy provisions. The findings therefore indicate that policy formulation needs to be accompanied by practical institutional arrangements that enable students to participate effectively in online learning. Strengthening the implementation of educational policies is consequently important for creating an online learning environment that supports meaningful and sustained student engagement.

### 6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that policymakers and higher education institutions strengthen online learning policies by including clear provisions for student support, technical assistance, feedback, and mechanisms for monitoring implementation. Institutions should enhance academic staff capacity through continuous professional development in online teaching and Learning Management System (LMS) use, while establishing effective procedures for responding to students' academic and technical needs. Investment in reliable digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, technical support, and digital learning resources should also be prioritized to facilitate students' participation in online learning. In addition, institutions should regularly assess students' engagement to identify implementation gaps and guide improvement of online learning practices. Future studies should examine the institutional and contextual factors affecting the implementation of educational policies and students' engagement, including differences between public and private higher education institutions and changes in engagement over time.

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