



## **OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES**

Cosmas B. F. Mnyanyi, Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania

Co-Author: Tolly S. A. Mbwette, Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania

### **Summary**

*A need to remove barriers in Open and distance learning (ODL) in developing countries is imperative as few are educated and trained in specific job and that there are limited chances for hiring new ones. The few elite available require updating their knowledge and skills due to the fast change of technology. The demand for ODL is increasing due to its flexibility. It is this flexibility that offers opportunities to people with special needs, including those with disabilities, access to higher education and thus contributes to equality in education and poverty alleviation programmes.*

*Data was collected using open-ended questions in the questionnaire as well as interviews from 35 students and 5 staff of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). Rationally for OUT in this study is that it is an accredited institution operating in one of the least developed country, Tanzania. The findings indicate that apart from the challenges faced by ODL mode of delivery to higher education, it has an enormous contribution toward provision of opportunities for professional development.*

### **Introduction**

Open and distance learning (ODL) is a flexible way for human-centred development. The flexibility has been increased with advancement and use of Information and Communications technologies (Dodds, 2001). In developing countries ODL is vital as a means toward professional development as few are educated and trained in specific jobs and that there are limited chances for hiring new ones. With the globalisation, which has resulted into change in technology and use of knowledge as personal and job markets, the highly qualified personnel can not fit in the changing world (Fernandez, 2008) and thus updating their knowledge and skills is imperative. In that case the few elite are to provide services to people and at the same time update their old knowledge and skills. Thus the flexibility of ODL is highly values as provides opportunities to all

people to access knowledge, including people with special needs, such as those with disabilities. It is anticipated that ODL might contribute to equality in education and poverty alleviation programmes being implemented in developing countries if well funded and well managed. The challenge to developing countries still can not manage to buy, install, and train users of different changing technologies due to shortage of funds and unavailability of infrastructures to support ICT equipments.

One of the aims of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is to continuously provide quality open and distance education, research and public service for sustainable and equitable social economic development of Tanzania in particular and the rest of Africa. In this paper researchers report findings from a study that assessed how OUT staff and students view the contribution of ODL toward their professional development and implementation of Millennium goals. This article ends with a discussion on constraints and challenges faced by ODL in developing countries.

### **Distance education and professional development**

The flexibility of ODL allows most people to update their knowledge while serving the society. This is vital in developing countries where the human resource is scarce and of questionable quality. According to World Bank (2008) the necessity to develop human capital is accelerated with growth of the use of technology and changing roles of universities. It is expected that if human capital is well harnessed might contribute to economic development in Africa and other developing countries.

The contribution of ODL in developing countries is even higher when considering other factors that reduce skilled labour. These include mortality rates through infectious diseases and emigration of those talented ones. With ODL many people who have ICT knowledge and skills can access knowledge and become competent. This calls for change in the provision of services in higher education and continue to attract funding agencies (Walters and Volbrecht 2000). The issue of funding in developing countries places higher education in jeopardy. As most funding are in the interest of the funding agency thus making the universities non-responsive to the countries in which they operate (Luhanga, et al, 1998). In this case, the distance education suffers most.

Distance education is seen as the strategy in which people can manage their learning within their working and social environment. Thence, large number of people joins in ODL for their professional development. Taking Open University of Tanzania as a case there are 4164 postgraduate students whereas the number of academic staff with PhD is 53 and that out of 53 (OUT, 2009) most of them have other roles and that 38 academic staff are above 55 years of age.

In breaking barriers toward access to education to Tanzanians, OUT has also initiated a programme to address the problem of shortage of secondary school teachers in Tanzania. The programme is run in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Culture (Mkuchu, 2008). In the same way OUT has initiated a programme toward improving the quality of teaching in primary education (OUT, 2009b).

### **The study**

The study was qualitative in nature, focused on understanding the general views of students and staff in open and distance learning institutions in developing countries. The

study was conducted in Tanzania. The data collected had thick description nested in real context and that all participants had experience on ODL (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The participants were 45 students and 5 academic staff. Students were provided with open-ended questionnaires. Out of 45 students only 35 returned the questionnaires. The researcher further did an interview to 10 students, 7 males and 3 females. The data analysis did not focus into gender. All the five academic staff at OUT participated in an interview. The interview lasted for 20 – 30 minutes. The data collection was done in January 2009. The interview was tape-recorded and later on transcribed. The interview transcripts were sent to the interviewee for verification. After verification data were analysed using the qualitative data analysis technique that involved reading the transcripts and making constant comparison for the purpose of developing distinct categories of description and themes.

### **Results and discussion**

The focus of the study was to investigate students and staff views on removing barriers in higher open and distance learning institutions. The participants were carefully selected. In that all participants members in Open and distance higher education. The respondents revealed barriers that were grouped into personal, practical, social, organisational, policy, management, administration and globalisation. These barriers were obtained after constant refining of the transcripts from both interviews and questionnaires.

#### ***Personal barriers***

Most of the respondents indicated to have fewer skills in studying in distance learning. This might be attributed by the previous learning experiences. Most of the learners joining ODL come from traditional learning and thus when joining are enthusiastic to learn and later develop a negative experience toward learning. Especially when most of the learning materials are to be found electronically and where printed books are unavailable for the given course. As one of the respondent noted

*I do not know how to use computers as such I can not search materials in the internet and getting access to internet is a problem as I stay in remote areas there are power problems.*

In alleviating such barriers for the case of OUT there are short courses for training both staff and students. However, such courses are available in centres where there are permanent buildings. Thus, still there are problems for students to meet the cost of travel and living when in town centres. There is also lack of time to concentrate in studies as some students noted:

*In my case I am employee thus concentration to studies sometimes is minimal as I do not get enough time to study. ...I am an able to pay for my studies.*

Apart from availability of time and ability to pay for the cost of study, students said sometimes they lack study materials and there are few possibilities of having contacts with lecturers (Galusha, 1997).

*I lack study materials and thus I fail to concentrate in my studies and that possibilities to interact with subject experts is minimal....thus it is difficult to develop skills in learning especially in language and mathematical skills...*

Use of ICT might be seen solution to most of the problems faced by students due to its ability to transverse barriers of time, age, culture and social status. However, the technologies used in ICT, including the hardware and software are expensive taking into consideration the limited funding of higher learning institutions in Africa (Salmi, 1994)

which do not match with the enrolment of students, remuneration of staff, training of staff and research activities (Luhanga et al, 1998; UNESCO, 2002).

Apart from the challenges faced by students still they agree that ODL is most flexible way of learning in developing countries. Reasons pointed out include: freedom to learning as one says,

*I think many students join OUT because they want to widen their knowledge while in their family and working environment ...and that OUT is the only college where there are no strikes like other colleges in the country.*

In similar ways some respondents argued that ODL through OUT has many advantages including linking directly work and learnt skills as gives time to run other project and thus one can say that ODL provides relevant education with readily usable skills in the society.

### **Institutional barriers**

In this part most of the respondents indicated issues concerning management and administration of higher distance education in developing countries. According to a survey of 170 university students contacted by Adewale and Inegbedion (2008) it was observed that most of open and distance education students withdraw from studies because of problems caused by institutional procedures, pattern of facilitation schedules, availability of course materials, poor academic and administrative support, and poor tutorial support. Other studies like Iran (2001), Galusha (1997), Carr (2000) also reported on drop-out rates in distance learning. In this qualitative study on OUT students, students had the following to say:

*The cost of studies is low, it is easy to get admission, study materials and supplementary readings are provided in both print and electronic media and sometimes they are handwritten, it has centres in every regions and some regions have more than one centre, offers practical experiences in collaboration with other universities....*

According to Mbwette (2005) OUT contributes 25% of the enrolments in higher education in Tanzania. With current efforts of implementing ICT and other regulatory procedures it is likely to contribute much higher percentage in the future. This was also supported by the staff on the availability of electronic resources. Some of the staff said

*....now it is easy to assist students as one can just access the information needed via internet. The problem with internet is that sometimes it is not accessible.....*

This gives a warning sign that we should not depend much on the new technology. As one of the student noted:

*I fail to access my assignments as the OUT website is inaccessible and that the deadline for the assignment is fixed....*

This is a challenge of which OUT is addressing by employing ICT technical staff who will be posted in regional centres to manage ICT matters and assist students who face problems with ICT.

Different from conventional universities students said ...*sponsorship is a problem in conventional universities...*this indicates that ODL is breaking the barriers toward cost of learning. However, students indicated a concern on the need to improve further on recording systems, securing funds for building science laboratories (by now OUT students use Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) and University of Dar Es Salaam (UDSM) science laboratories.

In responding to institutional problems OUT has already secured land for building laboratories and other facilities and that removing problems for collision the OUT is in the process of preparing a time-table that would last for three years. This is likely to solve collision problems as a student has an opportunity to select and do some of the examination in one session and others next time. On improving recording system the OUT is implementing student registration procedures in examinations and has planned for marking panels which ensures that all examinations are marked and recorded as required and that all assignments are accessible online.

The challenge ahead is how we are sure that all students can access the OUT website and that how do we assist students with print-disabilities to learn? In ensuring this OUT has a unit attached to Institute of Educational Technology (IET) that is responsible among other things to coordinate and ensure that all students benefit from the technology. Currently, the OUT e-learning platform has incorporated sound in the electronic materials for students to use, by now the system is under construction.

### **Social barriers**

Most of the students indicated to have problems pertaining to social barriers. These include ability to form study groups and interactions among themselves. This happens especially when students with different status study together. However, most of the students indicated to have challenges especially when they see the government officials study and complete their studies. In that ODL is creating equality, equity and increased self-esteem among members of the society.

With the advent of globalisation where use of internet is inevitable, the social barriers are more proliferated. It is in this era where adults who do not know how to use computers, sometimes, face difficulties as they may require assistance from the younger ones who might be sub-ordinate in their working environment. The social issues are more seen when one need to view information about personal documents such as results for a course as one noted:

*I face problems when I need to access results from SARIS as I have to ask someone to assist. I feel it would be better if results are posted as hardcopies and sealed.*

*In my area the only aged person is me, thus, I have difficulties to form study groups. But sometimes I tend to study with my fellow students though they are a bit younger than me.*

Social barriers are acceptable as barriers not only to individuals in developing countries but as also a barrier to internationalisation where a need to understand cultural contexts

is imperative (UNESCO, 2002). In addressing social barriers to learning OUT is introducing flexible ICT courses for students to learn and freely use the technology.

### **Infrastructure barriers**

Participants in this study noted barriers attributed by infrastructures. Some participants said it is difficult for them to travel especially during rainy seasons,

*I did not attend face-to-face because of transport as it was raining and that I got information on face-to-face session late.....*

Thus the how, when and where (Ellington, 1997) to study is hindered by infrastructural barriers of which OUT is addressing through its plan to use cellular phones in delivering contents and other information that might be necessary for students. In this effect already OUT has contacted UpCode Company based in Finland and there is another programme which is under pilot study using phone technology. Rationally for phone usage in Tanzania is due to the increasing number of phone users which comparatively high (Jabiri, et al, 2004) and the increased use of ICT (Mbwette& Mboma, 2000). However, there are cost implication to both students and the institution. The institutional costs are based on training system support staff and students on the technical how.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

There are challenges on implementing open and distance learning in developing countries. With the advent of globalisation the literate need to upgrade their knowledge and that the most possible way is to develop professionally in their working environment. However the noted problems are found to lie among individual distance learners, institution, infrastructure and social of which ICT might contribute in alleviation.

In the use of ICT collaboration among different universities within and outside the host country might be one of the solutions as enable the system developed in one university to be used with other universities. With such collaboration then most of the funding available can effectively be used. However, such collaborations require some procedures to be followed and the issue of ICT security is to be observed. Within the institution there are possibilities of improving the delivery system though change takes time.

### **References**

- Adewale, O. A. & Inegbedion, J. O. (2008). Solving the Problem of Attrition in an Open and Distance Learning Institution, A paper presented in the ACDE conference available at [http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/acde2008/acde\\_en/papers.pdf/SUB-THEME%20IV%20PDF/SOLVING%20THE%20PROBLEM%20OF%20ATTRITION%20IN%20AN%20OPEN%20AND%20DISTANCE%20LEARNING%20INSTITUTION\\_ADEWALE%20O.A.pdf](http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/acde2008/acde_en/papers.pdf/SUB-THEME%20IV%20PDF/SOLVING%20THE%20PROBLEM%20OF%20ATTRITION%20IN%20AN%20OPEN%20AND%20DISTANCE%20LEARNING%20INSTITUTION_ADEWALE%20O.A.pdf) accessed 27.02.2009
- Carr, S. (2000). As Distance Education Comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 46(23), A39-A41.
- Dodds, T. (2001). Creating open and lifelong learning institutions in higher education: a Namibian case-study, *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 20 (6), 502–510
- Ellington, H. (1997). Flexible Learning-Your Flexible Friend. In C. Bell, M. Bowden & A. Trott (Eds.), *Implementing Flexible Learning: Aspects of Educational and Training Technology XXIV*. London: Kogan Page

- Fernandez, L. M. L (2008) A Prospective Vision for Universities: The role of the technology transfer units and distance education, VANCOUVER: Commonwealth of Learning
- Galusha, J. M. (1997). Barriers to learning in distance education. *Interpersonal Computing and Technology*, 5(3),6-14 also available in [www.infrastruction.com/barriers.htm](http://www.infrastruction.com/barriers.htm) accessed on 13th March 2009
- Jabiri, B. K., Yngström, L., Magnusson, C., Chaula, J. A (2004) Towards Managing ICT Security in Non-Commercial Organisations in Developing Countries, <http://209.85.229.132/search?q=cache:4xMVUgy3TqEJ:icsa.cs.up.ac.za/issa/2004/Proceedings/Research/013.pdf> (Accessed 12.03.2009)
- Luhanga, M. L., Mkude, D. J., Mbwette, T. S. A., Chijorga, M. M., & Ngirwa, C. A. (1998). *Strategic Planning and Higher Education in Africa: The University of Dar Es Salaam Experience*, Dar Es Salaam: DUP
- Mbwette, T. S. A. (2005). The Special Role Of Distance Education And Evaluation Of Global Changes on Policies And Programmes Related To International Cooperation in Higher Education and Research in Tanzania. A Paper Presented In The Conference on “The Changing Landscape: Making Support to Higher Education and Research in Developing Countries More Effective” Nuffic Conference, The Hague, 23-25<sup>th</sup> May
- Mbwette, T. S. A. and Mboma, L. M. (2000). Proceedings of a Workshop on the Importance of a Common Strategy of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Applications in Tanzania Universities and other Institutions of Higher Learning (Mimeo), University of Dar es Salaam Computing Centre, 21st to 23rd June 2000.
- Mkuchu, S. G. V (2008). Opportunities and Challenges of Using ODL in Training secondary School Licensed Teachers for Education Programmes: Experiences from the Open University of Tanzania, available in [http://www.wikieducator.org/images/4/45/PID\\_671.pdf](http://www.wikieducator.org/images/4/45/PID_671.pdf). accessed on 13.03.2009
- OUT (2009). The Open University of Tanzania: Facts and figures, Dar Es Salaam: OUT , available in [www.out.ac.tz](http://www.out.ac.tz) accessed on 12.03.2009
- UNESCO (2002) *Open and Distance Learning: trends, policy and strategy consideration*. Paris, UNESCO
- Salmi, J. (1994). Higher education reforms in Developing Countries: Issues, Options and Constraints. In T. Kokala (ed.). *Quality of Education in the context of Culture in Developing Countries*. Tampere: Tampere University.
- Setboonsarng, S. & Zhang, J. (2006). Using ICT in Capacity Building for Poverty reduction in Asia: Lessons Learned from the Microfinance Training of Trainers Course. ADB Institute Discussion Paper No. 50
- Walters, S. and Volbrecht, T. (2000) Re-imagining a picture: Higher Education in Lifelong Learning. *Adult Education and Development Journal*