

The Challenges Facing Distance Students in Undertaking Geography Field Practical Projects: The Case of the Open University of Tanzania Students

Jumanne Daudi Kalwani¹ and Cosmas B.M. Haule²

The Open University of Tanzania

jumanne.kalwani@out.ac.tz

Abstract: This paper discusses the challenges facing distance students in Geography field Practical projects (GFPs) at The Open University of Tanzania (OUT). A random sample size of 19 students who participated in GFP1 in 2009 and 2010 were selected from randomly sampled regional centres of Singida, Dodoma, Njombe, and Morogoro centres of OUT. The respondents were interviewed using questionnaires on their experience in GFP. They also formed a focused discussion group (FDG) for this study. Both content analysis and descriptive analysis were used. Findings showed a downward trend of students' attendance to fieldwork as compared to the early years when GFPs was introduced. The study sample revealed that, in 2006 the four selected regional centres recorded 375 (76.5%) students attended fieldwork out of 490 (100%) students who registered for GFP. In year 2010, only 132 (53.9%) attended out of 245 students who registered for GFP. Besides, 63.2% of the respondents in the study sample said they were supervised in GFP1 under limited time of 2-3 days as supervisors had to leave fieldwork due to time constraint. The paper recommends the urgent need to improve GFP organization, especially adherence to 21 days allocated for GFP and financial support in order to achieve its established objectives and goals at large.

Key words: The Open University of Tanzania, Geography field Practical projects, challenges, distance education

INTRODUCTION

The conduct of Geography field Practical projects (GFPs) is one of the challenges facing distance students at The Open University of Tanzania. The term practical is concerned with action with some purpose or result in contrast to theory, that is, put one's knowledge to practical use (Manser and Thomson, 1997). Academically, it simply means transformation of theory learnt in classroom into application on the ground. Then, the essence of doing Geography field Practical projects is connected to the origin of Geography as the discipline. According to Ndunguru (2002), the word Geography comes from the two Greek words: 'geo' meaning the earth and 'graphia' meaning a style of drawing or describing". Bonnett (2008) asserts that fieldwork is the heart of Geography. On that line it is argued that Geography field Practical projects renew and deepen the understanding of the earth and its diversity of land, life and culture. This view is also shared by Holt-Jensen (1999) who underscores the fact that for earlier geographers such as Al Muqaddasi (945-88) and Carl Sauer (1889-1975) the best training a geographer could receive came from field work and through developing the skills of observation. The impetus of Geography field Practical projects in Britain was supported by Dudley Stamp and Alice Coleman's land use surveys (Marriott, 1997; Bonnett, 2008). Although Geography as a discipline has expanded over time, especially in approaches and content, it has not dissociated itself from practical nature.

Today, Geography as a discipline is concerned with description, explanation and interpretation of spatial variations and patterns of phenomena on the earth's surface and how they unfold at a variety of scale, which cover space and places (Clark and Wareham, 2003). In addition, the spatial variations show changes over time and the resulting features related to

landscapes and environments, population and other physical and natural resources. In that case, Geography field Practical projects facilitate the students to explore, connect, map and engage in understanding how various things are related to each other in the systems (Bonnett, 2008).

A Geography field practical brings a student closer to interface of theoretical knowledge and reality and translates it to individual and societal development. This point is important; for the ultimate goal of any useful knowledge is in its utility or application for development. This is not only a geographical fact but also it is part and parcel of a continuous life long human process starting from childhood onwards. Many psychologists agree that; a normal child learns and develops its cognitive, motor and affective structures better through practice such as speech, eating, walking, and talents and so forth. Likewise, different formal education systems among Commonwealth countries exercise elementary practical Geography right at elementary schooling stage. The Tanzanian Geography curriculum, for example, requires a primary school teacher to introduce standard three and four pupils to basic practical Geography ranging from drawing classroom to immediate environmental sketch maps. These entail drawing maps of school compounds, roads, bridges, forestland, hills, churches, mosques, rivers, and so on in the community environment. In this way, the concept and practice of practical Geography develops across the hierarchy from primary to university levels but with varying incremental breadth and depth governed by specific objectives and purposes at different levels.

The purpose of this paper was to examine the challenges facing distance students undertaking Geography field Practical projects at The Open University of Tanzania. Specifically, the paper assessed the justification of introduction of GFP in the university curriculum at OUT, the organization and evaluation of GFPs at the University, current status of GFPs at the University, and determined the potential of GFPs in geographical knowledge generation and skills development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted from February to Mid-May, 2011 in Tanzania based on a cross-sectional survey design. A sample of 29 respondents was involved. The sample included 19 students randomly selected from the list of students who participated in GFPs in the 2009 and 2010 from Singida, Dodoma, Njombe, and Morogoro regional centres. A big sample size was not possible due to difficult in accessing targeted students in time to meet the conference schedule. In addition, ten Geography staff were purposeful included in this study. A self administered questionnaire and focus group discussions were used to collect data from students on current status of GFPs and potentials of GFPs in knowledge generation. Besides, documentation and in-depth interview with key informants were used to collect data on justification and organization of GFPs at The Open University of Tanzania. Data from focus group discussions and documentation were analysed by content analysis, while that from the questionnaires were coded and analysed for its central tendency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Justification for introduction of GFPs in University Curriculum at The Open University of Tanzania. The introduction of GFP in The Open University of Tanzania was due to a number of reasons including:

Demand Driven Arising from Students

Academic records showed that, three academic years prior to the introduction of GFP, students performed dismally in several Geography courses including *OGE 121: Background*

to *Physical Resources*, OGE 123: *Introduction to Geographic Techniques*, OGE 221: *Physical Resources*, and OGE 223: *Remote Sensing and Quantitative Methods*, to mention some; despite the availability of study materials for these courses. Besides, students expressed the need for practical work in order to relate theory and practice interaction during face-to-face sessions and individual teacher-student consultations.

External Examiners' Comments

The Geography external examiner's (EE) reports frequently commented on students' performance. External examiners often commented on the low performance of some students caused by failure to comprehend the theoretical part of the content rooted in lack of field practical experience. Thus, the EE recommended the need to introduce Geography Field Practical projects in the OUT curriculum for performance improvement.

General Observation from Other Institutions

The University of Dar es Salaam, a conventional institution, conducts Geography fieldwork by taking students to a study area and ends in writing project reports which count in the final evaluation. We are not sure whether or not established ODL institutions such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), The Open University of Nigeria and UK Open University conduct Geography practical work. In consideration of the importance of practical Geography as explained herein, OUT adopted GFP in 2003. However, the main challenge was how to organize and conduct GFP countrywide to cover over 20 OUT regional centres with limited resources. This problem was considered and tackled through decentralisation of fieldwork as explained under "organization" section of this paper.

Objectives of GFPs at the Open University of Tanzania

The purposes of GFP at the Open University of Tanzania are to enable students relate theoretical and practical knowledge for better understanding of Geography and impact students with research skills for application in their day to day professional work. Specifically:

- To impart students with professional skills e.g. from theoretical soil classification concepts to 'touch and feel' experience.
- To enhance students understanding of theoretical aspects of the content through practising e.g. participation in field survey by mapping various use patterns on the ground.
- To help students cope with modern technology of processing, transmitting or storing information by applying remote sensing techniques e.g. General Information Service (GIS).
- To enable students conceptualize better theories in Geography.

Organization and Evaluation Processes of GFPs at The Open University of Tanzania

Organisation of GFP at OUT

The field Practical projects comprise two phases administered at two levels. Phase 1 is undertaken by 2nd year students and it is called Geography Field Practical 1 (GFP1). GFP1 lasts for 21 days. It involves processing fieldwork permits; itinerary logistics; preliminary survey to identify proper fieldwork sites and local resource persons to network with; arrangement and procurement of field materials. Other essential matters include; face-to-face teaching of theoretical knowledge focused on the selected fieldwork topics; training students on different research methods and how to write fieldwork report; and the actual implementation of the fieldwork. Phase 2 is carried out by 3rd year students. It is called Geography Field Practical 2 (GFP2). In general, the content of the GFP is designed to assist the student grasp both theoretical and practical knowledge in all courses of Geography on the

offer. Some of the themes already covered since the introduction of GFP in 2003 to-date are as follows:

- (i) Explore causal-effects of land use conflicts either in urban or rural areas.
- (ii) Examine problems associated with government response to natural disaster in your local environment.
- (iii) Rapid urbanization problems and how they can be solved related to human settlement specifically in informal settlements and municipal solid waste management.
- (iv) Examine the impact of global climatic change to either peasantry farming or pastoralism in your local area.
- (v) How can locally found antiquities and monuments be transformed to lucrative tourist industry to earn foreign exchange for local and national income respectively?
- (vi) By applying relevant theories and urban growth factors, conduct a survey around an established urban settlement in your area to examine rapid urban expansion into rural settlements and the resultant social economic problems arising from the urban-rural conflicts.
- (vii) In the context of an urban environment, examine the major river polluting practices caused by human activities and the resultant negative social economic effects; and comment on measures (if any) being taken to reduce the polluting problems.

Costs

The GFP cost breakdown includes purchase of field materials/equipment; transportation of supervisors from their working places/homes to various fieldwork destinations and back to their respective stations. Other accompanying costs include subsistence allowance for the supervisors; the hire of venue, apparatus and payment of consultancy from local sources and other emergencies. All these costs, on one hand are paid by OUT; and students pay for their transportation and accommodation costs during fieldwork, on the other hand.

Decentralization of GFP into operational zones

Taking into consideration the high cost of conducting a field practical in a conventional way that of bringing students from all over the country to one field site; a decentralized fieldwork model was devised. To facilitate this, GFP1 thematic topics cut-across diverse environmental issues to reflect different students' individual local environmental needs. Decentralised Fieldwork Model (DFM) was designed to reduce the student's travel and even boarding costs by confining him/her to his/her immediate environment. Moreover, it motivated students to know their local environment and devise workable strategies to solve community social economic problems. On the basis of DFM, the country was divided into six GFP operational zones as shown in Table1.

Table1: GFP Operational Zones

Geographical Zones	OUT Regional Centres	General Features
1 Southern Highlands	Iringa, Katavi, Mbeya and Ruvuma	Rich in rivers, forest resources, montage temperate climate and vegetation, diary farming and manufacturing industries.
2 Central	Dodoma and Singida	Found in semi-arid climate, livestock keeping threaten environment, grape farming, the new capital of Tanzania with modern master plans worth studying.
3 Lake zone	Kagera, Mwanza and Mara	Three Lake ports Mwanza City being the leading rapidly urbanizing Lake port with acute housing and environmental problems, a rich agricultural and mining centre, fishing industry. They are in the heart of agricultural land and inter-East African trade on the Lake Victoria.
4 Eastern Coast	Dar es Salaam, Morogoro, Tanga, Mtwara Pemba and Zanzibar	Oceanographic features, Tropical maritime climate, golden sandy beaches attractive to tourism industry, urban waste management problems.
5 North Eastern Plateau	Kilimanjaro, Arusha and Manyara	Agricultural lands due to volcanic solid from Mts. Kilimanjaro and Meru, relief climate, tourist focus, well developed infrastructure, East African Community base.
6 Western	Tabora, Kigoma and Shinyanga	Miyombo woodlands, peasantry farming, wildlife in game reserves along lake Tanganyika, fishing activities, tobacco farming and deforestation in Tabora and urban waste management problems

The GFP Coordinating Committee

The GFP Coordinating Committee, among other duties, coordinates all matters pertaining to Geography Field Practical projects. It is answerable to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; and its main functions are:

- (i) To approve topics of study either originating from itself or from Geography staff of OUT.
- (ii) To chart out work plans and other preliminary field preparations.
- (iii) To oversee actual implementation of GFP and submission of all concerned reports in liaison with the Head of Department of Geography.

Actual Implementation

A total number of 10 GFP supervisors mostly being OUT permanent and part-time Geography instructors are involved in the fieldwork.

Duties of a GFP Supervisor

Each supervisor is required to supervise and guide students during GFP1 as well as in GFP2 by doing the following:

- (i) Present theoretical knowledge to students and assess their ability to grasp theory of the content. GFP1 is an opportunity for instructor-student interaction (Face-to- Face) hence exchange of knowledge.
- (ii) Organize students in manageable groups and lead them to prepare a fieldwork work plan, then take the students to the field and guide them on methods of uncovering hidden relations in ecosystem. Thereafter, the supervisor facilitates the students to write a group work field report based on field observations and students are required to apply various skills in report writing by applying skills taught in theory. The report is submitted to the GFP Coordinator for evaluation.
- (iii) Guide students who have completed and submitted GFP1 to carry out self-conducted GFP2. In this case, a student has to apply knowledge and experience gained in GFP1 to prepare his/her own work plan to be approved by the supervisor prior conducting the independent research work. The purpose is to prepare the student to work independently in the search for new knowledge. Then, the student has to write a field report and submit it to the GFP Coordinator for evaluation.

At the end of each GFP session, each supervisor is required to write a field report covering his/her duties and problems he/she experienced during the GFP and draw recommendations for improvement. Finally, all supervision reports are submitted to the GFP Coordinator for compilation on behalf of the GFP Coordination Committee. These are later discussed in the departmental meetings along with students' GFP performance. They act as a regular feedback mechanism for overall monitoring and quality control of GFP. The departmental deliberations are transmitted to higher OUT decision-making organs for action.

Evaluation of GFPs Reports

Each student who participates in the field practical whether 2nd year or 3rd year of study should write GFP reports. The report should bear the following aspects: title, background information, literature review, conceptual framework, presentation, data collected, data analysis, results, problems encountered in the field, conclusion, and recommendations.

The evaluation process in either GFPs starts by the coordinator re-distributing received students' reports to supervisors who mark according to "The Open University of Tanzania Undergraduate Studies Prospectus 2001, General University Examination Regulations (10.8)". In this case, each phase of the field Practical projects is marked out of 100%. Thus, GFP1 students' marks are added to GFP2's. Then, the average of the two forms gives the final score as follows:

$$\frac{X/100 \text{ of } 2^{\text{nd}} \text{ year} + Y/100 \text{ of } 3^{\text{rd}} \text{ year}}{2} = \text{Final Score}$$

The Current Status of GFP at OUT

In order to assess the current status of GFP at OUT, the length of the field work, trend in registration and attendance for GFP were investigated. Other aspects considered in this study include the time taken for each stage of GFP, areas of difficulty and problems that hinder effectiveness of GFP.

Trends in Registration and Attendance to GFP

The trend of registration and attendance to GFP from 2006 to 2010 is given in Table 2. The results show increase in registration and decrease in attendance. The students in this study attributed the trend of low turnout for GFP due to financial constraints. Like other face-to-face sessions (science Practical projects, student progress portfolio assessments), the costs of attending GFPs is whole met by students. So when it happen to be the congestion of academic activities such as teaching practice and examinations in closest time abscond from GFPs become an obvious cost reduction strategy.

Table 2: Trend in GFP registration and attendance

Year	No. of students registered	Number of students attended	%
2006	490	375	76.5
2007	270	203	75.2
2008	269	192	71.4
2009	231	180	77.9
2010	245	132	53.9

The students observations are supported by Limb and Dwyer (2001), who argue that though students' research are different to academicians' research; the work should be within the time, geographical areas, and financial constraints that can be accommodated by students. On the other side, the supervisors as per their reports attribute the trend to unpredictable change in almanac. The unexpected changes in almanac resulted into expiring of permit to attend GFP given to students by their employers. Besides, with inefficient communication system it is unlikely for information on change in almanac to reach all students in time.

The Length of Fieldwork

Table 3 shows the duration of supervised fieldwork as reported by interviewed students. The results show that one to two days was the mode of both GFP1 and GFP2.

Table 3: Length of Fieldwork

Number of days	GFP1	GFP2
No response	5	7
1 - 2	10	10
3- 4	3	2
5+	1	0

The students' view is in agreement with the existing records which show that since its inception, the plan was for a supervisor to spend four days in each centre. In most cases, one supervisor is coordinating fieldwork in not less than two centres. As far as the total days allocated for exercise last for not more than seven days and dispersion of regional centres, it is more likely for the supervisor to spend not more than two days per centre. In addition, other University events such as teaching practice do overlap with GFP. In some cases, GFP came either soon after the Teaching Practice or close to commencement of Annual Examinations. In that case the student is either exhausted or work under congested schedule that reduce attentiveness. As the students and/or their supervisor work in a rush, both inefficiency of the exercise and insufficiency of the time for GFP tasks increase.

Areas of Difficulty in GFP Process

Table 4 shows the areas of difficulty as identified by students. The most difficulty area in GFP process indicated by students is the review of related literature. This is followed by research proposal development and presentation of findings and its discussion. When asked on how they overcame those problems, the common solution was either to approach the Director of Regional Center (DRC) for consultation or discuss the problem with fellow students who have already gone through GFP. Some of them went for internet search. However, the students hardly contacted the supervisor. On the other hand, the supervisors' reports attributed the difficulties encountered by students to poor background in theoretical knowledge. These views are shared by Kombo and Tromp (2006), who argue that the role of literature review is to deepen the theoretical foundation of the research. This implies that students with little theoretical knowledge in the theme of research would fail to get insight into what has already been done and what need to be done.

Table 4: Area of Difficulty in GFP

S/N	Area of Difficulty	Frequency
1.	Literature review	7
2.	Research proposal development	5
3.	Findings and discussion	5
4.	Research methodology	3
5.	Introduction	3
6.	Statement of the problem	1
7.	Abstract	1

The probable explanation to this situation can be traced to the kind of support services available and accessible to students. Out of the 19 respondents, twelve had and seven did not contact their supervisors after the GFP face-to-face. In addition eight respondents rated the contact during GFP face-to-face as insufficient. Since the contact was so brief and students were not in a position to comprehend what they are going to face in the filed. The mode of contact between supervisors and students after the GFP face-to-face varied from one student to another. Eleven students indicated that they managed to come into physical contact with their supervisors, while other five made telephone calls, and one wrote a letter. Looking at the mode of contact you find low level of use of information and communication technology (ICT) essential for distant learners. This is also confirmed by poor access to past GFP reports. In this study, only seven students managed to access past reports either deposited at head office or from a student copy.

Time taken to accomplish each stage of GFP

The duration taken by students to accomplish GFP activities in each stage is given in Table 5.

The results show that majority of respondents completed the GFP reports in three months. However, there is a relative high proportional of those who spend more than six months to finish the entire tasks in GFP. In addition, over three quarter of the respondents made two or more drafts before the final report. Three produced a single draft prior to final GFP report and only one did not produce any draft.

Table 5: Duration taken for each stage of GFP

S/N	Stage	Time taken	
		One to two months	Three months and above
1.	Research proposal development	16	3
2.	Field work	15	4
3.	Report writing	13	6

Potential of GFP in Knowledge Development and Skills Development in Tanzania

The potential of GFP in knowledge generation can be evaluated at various levels. Firstly, being the usefulness of the course in learning other courses. As argued by Clark and Wareham (2003), unlike at school where Geography is taught, the university Geography is learned. This is evidenced by students in this study who reported that the knowledge gained in GFP helped them to learn other courses easily. The identified courses include: introduction to geographic techniques, rural settlements, population and development, environmental assessment and management, physical resources, introduction to education research, introduction to educational statistics, environmental education, and Geography teaching methods. The transfer of learning illustrated by use of knowledge gained in GFP indicates that if programmes are properly organised, learning will be simple. As students could share experiences and remove the long held boundaries among disciplines.

Since, GFP is based on case studies; it enables one to see things differently. This is supported by Foster (1997), who asserts that field work enable Geography staff to build up expertise of different location. As they supervise students, staff are exposed to various landscapes and issues which enhance their practical knowledge of how real the theories operate in the field. This increases their confidence to explore more on what they teach in their courses.

In addition, GFP develop students understanding of geographical skills. The study skills developed in the fieldwork as asserted by Kneale (2003), include intellectual skills, interpersonal skills, practical skills, and personal skills. Practical skills such as IT and GIS, field investigation, data analysis, research methodologies and professional presentation are important in creation and organization of knowledge. Besides, interpersonal skills such as oral and written communication, and networking together with intellectual skills especially critical reasoning are necessary elements in assessment of how knowledge is generated and what kind of knowledge are likely to be developed by the process.

As suggested by Foster (1997) in UK, GFPs if properly handled can facilitate the development of resources bases required in learning Geography. Since, GFPs not only provide opportunities for students to collect primary data in various geographical issues but also put staff in a position to publish. In this case, GFPs as other field reports can fill the gaps in teaching and learning materials. This assertion is supported by Hoggarts *et al.* (2002), who argue that issues to be covered in the field are determined by policies for selective survival and deposit.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussions on status and challenges facing OUT students doing GFPs, OUT is in position to share experiences with other international ODL institutions and fellow stakeholders in ACDE on how to conduct Geography fieldwork with students scattered in different localities. It has also been noted that the emphasis on Geography field practical

should not lie on understanding theoretical knowledge only but also in behavioural change of the learner from a bookish to a practical scholar, the expected outcomes essential for individual and societal development. Despite this prospect, the Open University of Tanzania face resource and time constraints in conducting GFP to students who are countrywide distributed.

Ways Forward in Enhancing the Role of GFPs in Distance Education at OUT

From the previous discussions, we suggest the following in order to increase student supervisor contact as a way forward:

- Go back to original plan of 21 days of supervised GFPs as stated in university regulations. This will allow more interactions between students and supervisors, give students time to practice and incorporate comment as they proceed with their field work, and ensure follow up.
- Shift GFP time from April/May to October/November when there is less pressure in academic activities for staff. This is more likely to increase GFP horizon as there will be ample time for staff to make follow-ups and student to make consultations.
- Rectify GFP administration by avoiding frequent and short notice alteration of the almanac and remove the bureaucracy and delays in approval and disbursement of GFP funds.

Besides, in order to overcome the difficulties facing students in development of GFPs we suggest that:

- Complimentary handbook/guidelines on how to go about in various stages of GFP should be prepared.
- To enhance follow-up and technical back up, GFP themes should be within the current line of departmental research.

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