

Students' Perception on the Quality of Open and Distance Learning Programmes in Tanzania

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Abstract: *A controversial topic in higher education today revolves around the enormous growth of distance education. The issues surrounding quality of distance education have been discussed and debated by many different parties. Regardless of who is interested in this unique educational environment that distance education establishes, "all stress the need to have a better understanding of what contributes to quality" in distance education programmes. This study aimed at assessing the quality of open and distance learning programmes from students' point of view. The sample was drawn from the Open University of Tanzania's students in nine University regional centres from Tanzania mainland and it constituted 305 students. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed, since there is no single technique which is necessarily superior over the others. The factors assessed ranged from registration procedures, accesses to course instructors, administrative processes, course materials, instructional methods, clarity of syllabus, exam processes and the like. The findings showed that about 71.5% students have a positive perception on the overall quality of distance education in Tanzania. About 63.6% of participants were very likely to recommend open and distance learning to others, while 34.8% were somewhat likely to do so. The major weaknesses found were insufficiency of study material, internet services and academic staff in regional centres. The study therefore concludes that quality of higher education via open and distance learning is achieved by demonstrating that the quality of content, delivery, assessment and outcomes in ODL institutions is equal to, or better than, the traditional forms of education.*

Key words: open, distance, learning, quality, programme, perception, learners

BACKGROUND

The term 'perception' refers to an idea, a belief or an image one has as a result of how s/he sees or understands something. Perception is the way people sense and interpret the world around them (Arnould *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, Arnould *et al.* (2002) explain that perceptions are results from acquisition, consumption and disposal of goods. While Kolesar and Galbraith (2000) suggest that perceptions are a consumer's opinions and attitudes towards any products after purchasing them.

Distance education means an educational approach in which there is a quasi separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space (Keegan, 1996). In distance education, the instructor and the instructional strategy/ methods are subsumed into the learning material (popularly referred to as Study Materials), that have been designed as a self-

directed learning guide for the student. The term ‘Open Learning,’ on the other hand, refers to the philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality, lifelong education. Open and distance learning (ODL) as an educational method and a philosophic construct has been identified as the most potent instrument for combating the educational problems assailing a nation like Tanzania.

A controversial topic in higher education today revolves around the enormous growth of distance education (Novak, 2002; Meyer, 2002). According to Mehrotra *et al.* (2001), ODL is not a future possibility for which higher education must prepare, rather, it is a current reality creating opportunities and challenges for educational institutions; a reality offering students expanded choices in where, when, how, and from whom they learn; a reality making education accessible to ever larger numbers of persons.

According to Sherry (2003), translating ideals of academic excellence into applicable terms for providers and users of distance education is not an easy task...[however] in this new century, with distance education expanding worldwide, the urgency of quality assurance is apparent. The issues surrounding quality of distance education have been discussed and debated by many different parties. Regardless of who is interested in quality of this unique educational environment that distance education establishes, “all stress the need to have what contributes to quality” in distance education courses and programs (Meyer, 2002). The concept of quality is not new: it has always been part of the academic tradition. It is the outside world that now emphasizes the need for attention to quality. It is the relationship between higher education and society which has changed (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

Despite the rapid growth in the popularity of distance learning, the quality of higher learning via open and distance education has been called to question (Dede, 1996; Harrison, 2001; as cited in Peat & Helland, 2002), leading to ODL quality confusion to some stakeholders.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN TANZANIA

Distance education is a developing field in Tanzania and is emerging as a significant component of life-long and training. This is evidenced in the number of distance education programmes currently operating ranging from secondary education, teacher training, and vocational education to higher education. There has been an increase in access to the internet and to computers over the past few years, and this is reflected in growing use of e-mail as a communication technology. There is still minimal use of information and communication technologies to support management and administration of distance education in Tanzania (Bhalalusesa, n.d).

While the benefits of ODL can be evaluated by technical, social, and economic criteria, distance learning methods also have their pedagogical merit, which leads students to a different way of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition. Different people perceive the advantages of ODL differently, and their perceptions have influenced attitudes towards acceptance and use of ODL in the education system in Tanzania and

other countries. There remain concerns, however, about the effectiveness of distance education for learners who may be considered less independent and thus may require direct interaction throughout the instructional process (Schmidt and Faulkner, 1989).

Adverse research works in distance education in response to students experiences of learning at a distance and the challenges of learning within this mode of delivery in Tanzania are well documented [for example, Mwinyichande (1997), Kilato (1997), Bhalalusesa (1998), Mcharazo (1998.), Sigalla (1999), Bhalalusesa et al. (2000), and Kakili (2001)] as cited in Bhalalusesa (n.d)]. Yet, there is paucity of studies that have systematically studied the perception of ODL programmes in Tanzania, and this study availed such a unique opportunity to explore the phenomenon in a developing country's context.

METHODS

Study Design

The principal design of this study was cross-section survey. This design was appropriate for this study because it allows group comparison in terms of beliefs, attitudes, opinions or practices (Creswell, 2005). The design also has the advantage of providing information in a short period of time. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in gathering, managing, processing, and analysing the information.

Study Area

The study was conducted in nine regional centres of the Open University of Tanzania-mainland. OUT was thought to provide a wide range of participants (OUT students) due to its coverage all over the country. Specifically, the sample was drawn from Temeke, Ilala, Kinondoni, Arusha, Mwanza, Korogwe, Mbeye, Kyela and Katavi.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Based on the specific objectives of the study, simple random sampling was employed to get the study centres and study participants. The use of random sampling technique was meant to make the sample more close to represent the population. However, purposeful sampling technique was used to capture participants for qualitative information. The sample of 305 participants was picked from all the programmes offered by OUT. To achieve a more realistic picture of how students perceive the quality of open and distance learning, it was important to question students who have participated in both traditional and distance education. It was fortunate that almost all OUT students have experienced the traditional education system.

Data Collecting Tools

A questionnaire was used in collecting quantitative information (data) while the qualitative ones were collected through interview. Interviewing is a popular way of gathering qualitative research data because it is perceived as "talking," and talking is natural (Stake, 1995). Interviews allow participants to provide rich, contextual descriptions of events. However, questionnaires are thought to be appropriate method of collecting quantitative data, as Best and Kahn (2006) argue that questionnaire is used when factual information or opinions rather than facts are desired.

Procedures

This study was conducted in June-July 2012 when students were sitting for their annual examinations. Data were collected by OUT academic staff who went for examinations invigilation to different centers country wide.

Data Management and Analysis

Data from questionnaires were explored and carefully inspected to know general features of data, check for errors and get assured that the data are correct. Then, data were analysed using the IBM-Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 19). Descriptive statistics: mean, frequencies, and percentages were calculated and presented in tables, figures and other statistical presentations.

Thematic analysis was employed for data from interviews whereby both dominant and alternative views were considered by determining which views reflect the majority opinion and those which were expressed by one or several participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Participants' Characteristics**

The nature of open and distance learning implies a variety of learners with different demographic characteristics. As the current study was conducted in different parts of the country, it was anticipated that participants would have different characteristics also (see Table 1).

Out of 305 participants about 191 (62.6%) were men. A good number of participants were at middle adulthood (31-40 years for men (48.2%), and 21-30 years for women (47.4%)), while at late adulthood (51+ years) there were 18 participants (5.9%) 17 men and only one woman.

These findings reflect that women are joining ODL programmes at their early ages than men. Most of the surveyed participants were enrolled in bachelor degree programmes (77%), followed by post graduate degrees (15.7%) whereas diploma programmes had the minimal representation (1.3%). Of all participants, about 64.6% were married (138 men and 59 women), and 55.1% were government employees. High percentage of employees portrays that the demand for flexible continuing education is growing, as working people require updating and upgrading of their knowledge and skills required in the global economy.

According to Komba (2009) the fact that distance education is highly subsidized by the government provides a good opportunity for people who could not otherwise acquire the education they long for. This applies particularly to women and other marginalized groups. It was interesting that four of the studied participants (1.3%) were pastors and priests, while mere students constituted 15.7%.

Table 1: Participants Characteristics

		Males		Females			
	Category	N	%	N	%	N	%
Age	21-30	42	22	54	47.4	96	31.5
	31-40	92	48.2	32	28.1	124	40.7
	41-50	40	20.9	27	23.7	67	22.0
	51+	17	8.9	1	0.9	18	5.9
		191	100	114	100	305	100
Year of Study	First	58	30.4	35	30.7	93	30.5
	second	43	22.5	40	35.1	83	27.2
	third	15	7.9	16	14	31	10.2
	fourth	75	39.3	23	20.2	98	32.1
		191	100	114	100	305	100
Study Programme	certificate	4	2.1	14	12.3	18	5.9
	diploma	4	2.1	0	0	4	1.3
	bachelor	170	89	65	57	235	77.0
	post graduate	13	6.8	35	30.7	48	15.7
		191	100	114	100	305	100
Marital Status	single	49	25.7	49	43	98	32.1
	married	138	72.3	59	51.8	197	64.6
	divorced	4	2.1	6	5.3	10	3.3
		191	100	114	100	305	100
Occupation	student	27	14.1	21	18.4	48	15.7
	Gvt employee	108	56.5	60	52.6	168	55.1
	Self employed	52	27.2	33	28.9	85	27.9
	pastors	4	2.1	0	0	4	1.3
			191	100	114	100	305

Factors for Joining ODL Programmes

The study was interested to know the participants’ reasons behind enrolling into ODL programmes. They were exposed to three options, whether their decisions to join ODL institution were due to time constraints, schedules or flexibility of the mode of delivery. About 63.6% of the participants joined different ODL programmes due to the flexibility of the delivery mode which builds on self study, as Figure 1 shows.

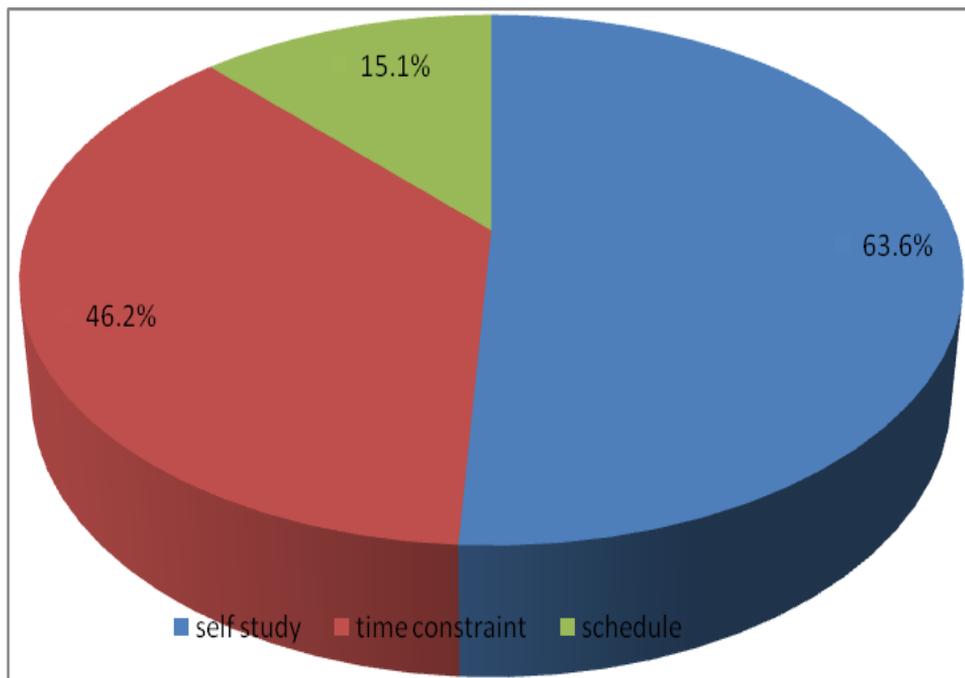


Figure 1: Factors for Enrolling to ODL Programmes

Self study being a major reason for many learners to join ODL programmes concurs with a number of other previous studies. Komba (2009) asserts that through distance education the learner enjoys a high degree of autonomy in deciding what, when and how to learn. Vansteenkiste (2004) links autonomy in ODL with Self-Determination Theory.

According to Vansteenkiste, this might be the most immediately applicable theory to distance learners, as it emphasises the role of ‘Autonomous Study Motivation’. The word ‘autonomy’ in this study implies that learners’ motivation depends on them having some freedom about their study behaviour. This freedom is promoted by choice, participation in the processes of learning and recognition of the learners; feelings, both positive and negative. The Autonomous Study Motivation is contradicted by deadlines, surveillance, guilt-invoking diktats and ignoring the learners’ negative emotions.

Key Elements in Open and Distance Learning

Open and distance learning programmes were studied by investigating different aspects, ranging from registration procedures, quality of course materials, instructional methods, support materials and the like. Figure 2 provides a summary of the items that were studied and their scores.

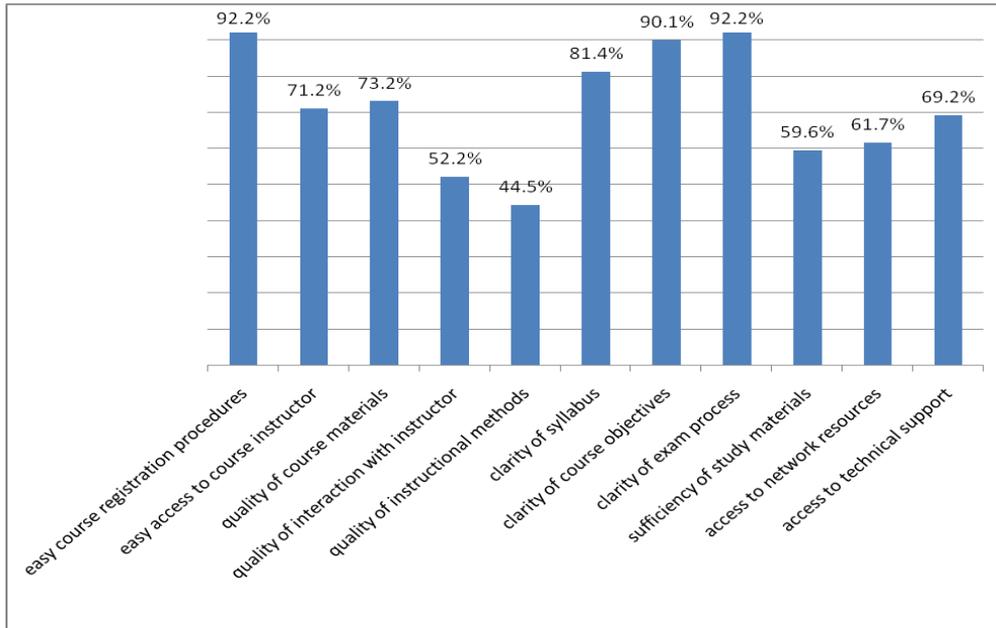


Figure 2: Elements of ODL programmes

Registration procedures: The first item was on the registration procedures, since this is the first step for any learner to get into any academic system. About 92.2% participants were comfortable with the initial procedures of getting into ODL programmes. The procedures involved filling in and returning application forms, course as well as examinations registrations, as one participant from Mbeya Regional Center said:

‘Nowadays the system is very simplified because we register for both course and examinations wherever we are. Everything is done on-line, no need for travelling several kilometers to the center for registration purposes. Formerly we encountered several problems including filling in registration forms now and then because they were often got lost on the way to head quarters’.

Access to and interaction with instructors: According to Keegan (1986) and Holmberg (1995), communication is a fundamental element of distance education, on the grounds that the students study away from their tutor and the educational organization. Easy access to course instructors was reported by 71.2% of participants and 52.2% for quality of interaction with instructors. However, insufficient academic staff at regional centres was also equally reported:

‘You know what? It is understood that our University covers a large area geographically, but this does not imply other places to be forgotten. The number of academic staff is not enough at my center, and this has a very big implication in academics’, said one participant from Korogwe examinations centre.

The role of the distance learning instructor is ambiguous and often ill defined (Easton, 2003). Even worse, a popular myth associated with distance learning courses is that instructors are not needed at all. Research has put this myth to rest. For example, Zirkin and Sumler (1995) examined the effects of interactivity and learning. Their research concluded that, there is a positive relationship between the level of course interactivity and student learning and satisfaction. The weight of evidence from the research reviewed was that increased student involvement by immediate interaction resulted in increased learning as reflected by test performance, grades, and student satisfaction. In addition, the International Distance Education Certification Center (2001) suggests that instructors provide an important and necessary role in engaging students and providing important interactive learning experiences.

It is portrayed that the primary reason for having tutors at centres is to provide students with individualized academic support in their courses (Gibbs and Durbridge, 1976). Holmberg (1989) also argues that the primary purpose of tutorials is to provide academic and counseling services that enable the students to solve the problems which they encounter in the course of their independent study. Stone (1992) examines the connection between tutor contact and locus of control with course completion rates for students enrolled in print-based, distance training courses. However, Stone did find that students with relatively external loci of control completed their coursework at significantly faster rates when exposed to regular telephone cues from their tutors.

Quality and quantity of study materials: study materials appear as published text books, compendia and course outlines. According to Mushi (1998) these materials are normally produced by OUT; others are acquired from other universities such as Nairobi University, Abuja University, Makerere University, the Open University of the United Kingdom (UKOU) and Indira Ghandhi National Open University (IGNOU). Students are provided with study materials in their registered courses to facilitate interactive learning. About 73.2% of participants acknowledged that the study materials are of good quality; insufficient study materials were also reported. However, they suggested that course materials should reach them in time and should be made more elaborate and interesting.

‘Of course the materials are good, though there are minor mistakes. We understand that the writers are human beings, not angels so mistakes are common to humans. The only thing I would like to share is that the available materials, whether in hard or soft copies should reach us as soon as we register for courses. Delaying causes a lot of inconveniences, and interferes our preparations for exams’, said one participant from Katavi Regional Centre.

Koul (1987) conducted a study in India and discovered that lack of sufficient course materials was the major perceived problem that caused the withdrawal of students from distance teacher-training programs. The same situation was found in Malawi where the lack of financial clout in ODL initiatives has impinged upon the availability of library resources. Furthermore, the service centres do not have adequate book resources to satisfy demand. Most of them are under-resourced and possess a large of quantity of old

and out-dated editions.

One of the fundamental principles of distance education is the provision of opportunity for students to study according to their own learning pace or speed (Keegan, 1995). For this reason, a distance education system presupposes that every student receives all the course materials at the beginning of the program so that she/he can design his/her own study timetable in the light of the overall schedule of the program. In general, the inconsistencies regarding the delivery of modules and the arrival of part of the modules very close to the dates fixed for final examination seems to have a negative impact upon learners' confidence and their performance in the overall.

Further investigations in this study have uncovered discrepancies between the number of students registered for courses and the total number of course modules received in the centers. In relation to this, some participants reported that students did not receive some of the modules at all and this meant that a significant number of them were forced to share some of the modules with other students. In a distance education system where print medium is employed as the sole means of content delivery, students should receive the learning materials long before the dates fixed for tutorial programs. The intention here is to give students a reasonably sufficient amount of time to study the materials independently, work on the assignment questions and areas of difficulty before the actual date of the tutorial session.

In analyzing the perceptions of distance students of Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU), Ashalatha (1990) found that course materials and counseling sessions were highly useful to the students.

Instructional methods: More often than not, perceptions of the open and distance learning system in the instructional process is influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantages of distance education, for him or herself (Russell, 2002). The quality of instructional methods was moderately ranked (44.5%) in the current study. This could be partly due to the recency of ODL delivery modes in Tanzania as a large part of the community is used to conventional delivery methods. In order to minimize the dominance of traditional delivery modes in the minds of the people, Komba (2009) urges ODL institutions in Africa to build upon existing quality assurance mechanisms in order to ensure the quality of ODL programmes and establish network with institutions with similar interests. As education institutions in Africa start using ICT nationally and across borders, it is important to establish links with trustworthy quality assurance and accreditation agencies for the programmes so that such programmes are recognized as being trustworthy and educationally valuable.

Suzanne and Larry (1999) analyzed students' perceptions of instructions and instructional methods impact in terms of students' satisfaction with the delivery at the Pennsylvania State University. The study has shown that didactic conversation with the instructor contributed significantly to the satisfaction of students.

Keegan (1986) and Holmberg (1995) note that the medium of communication plays a critical role in linking the students with their instructor, providing for a two-way communication which is considered essential for the teaching and learning medium. The researcher in the current study inquired the most used instructional means of communication between learners and instructors, as Figure 3 shows.

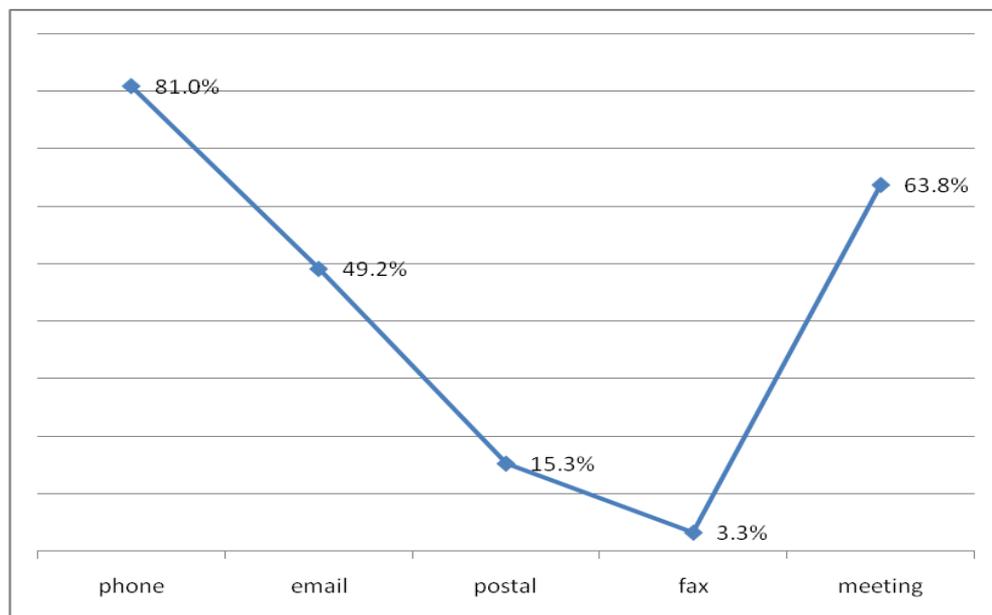


Figure 3: Communication between Learners and Instructors

Participants reported phones, e-mails, and face to face meetings being the dominating means of maintaining contacts between the two sides. Due to the advancement of modern technology, it is undeniable that phones (mobile phones) were found to be the leading way of communication between learners and instructors (81%). One participant from Mwanza Regional Centre added that... ‘since the invention of mobile phones the life has been so easy. We don’t need to meet our instructors face to face when the situation does not allow. We just call them and ask whatever questions we have’. The use of e-mails is challenging to many participants; it is the fact that internet services are still limited to some areas of the country. Limited internet services was the reason for the second means of communication to be face to face meeting (63.8%).

However, use of ICT for communication in ODL institutions is very important, though Gearhart (2001) hints on ethical issues. Gearhart suggests that the increasing use of information technology in distance education may actually enhance unethical behaviours because of the effects of “psychological distance,” when acts are carried out at a distance they feel less personal because the person acted on cannot be heard or seen in the exchange. For example, what are the ethical issues in ensuring that assessment is fair to all interested parties (learners, and society) as a whole?

According to the findings of this study, communication with the tutor is important for students, since they often feel the need to contact their tutor in order to guide them in relation to the course material. The importance of quality tutor-learner communication is underlined in several studies. Insisting on the use of ICT for communication, Schellens and Vackle (2006) contend that the expanded use of new tools related to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) facilitates communication, cooperation and dialogue among participants in distance learning courses, generating an increased research interest concerning collaborative learning environments. Great significance is attributed to the role of communication within the frame of distance education (Richardson and Swan, 2003; Jones and Issroff, 2005).

Clarity of syllabi/curriculum and course objectives: syllabi/curriculum design is no exception to any educational institution. About 81.4% of participants in this study reported that the course syllabi/curricula were found clear. Cummins and Sayers (1996) insist that the design of a distance learning curriculum needs to be sensitive and relevant to cross-national cultural experiences. The needs, the experiences and the context of the people the curriculum is intended to serve must also be taken into account. Dodds and Edirishingha (2000) alert us to the diverse nature of the audience for distance education, which includes people of all ages, from young children to ageing adults. Curriculum designers must bear in mind that the curriculum needs to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs and experiences of a range of people, including urban and rural dwellers; the employed, self-employed and unemployed; learners who have the language of instruction as a first or as another language, and other sub-groups.

However, Ramsden (1992) argues that curriculum designers need to be cognisant of environmental constraints such as lack of infrastructure, poor access to ICTs, the existence of multilingual and multi-cultural communities, and the absence in many communities of a culture of reading and of learning independently.

Likewise, a good number of participants (90.1%) were confident with the clarity of course objectives. The definition and use of the term learning objective have become less and less precise in recent years. The term is often used interchangeably (but loosely) with the term 'learning outcomes (Harry, 1999). For the purposes of this study learning outcomes are synonymous with learning objectives. According to Mager (1962) an objective is an intent communicated by a statement describing a proposed change in a learner – a statement of what the learner is to be like when he has successfully completed a learning experience.

Examinations processes: Examinations are crucial because university study ends up with an output, the credential. It is imperative that this credential be a result of evaluative mechanisms that are worth their salt, that seek to objectively establish whether or not a student has obtained the necessary knowledge and/or skill in a subject to warrant certification and graduation (Ramsden, 1992). Clarity of examination processes was reported by 92.2% of participants, as one from Temeke regional centre had the following to say:, *'when I joined The Open University of Tanzania three years ago, I was told that exams here are always leaking and people could get all papers. But*

things are quite different, this is my third year and have never seen any, even a fake paper'. The processes asked were exams registration, invigilation and satisfaction of results. This is in accordance with the assertion made by Lawi and Said (n.d) in their study of Examination Security in Universities in Tanzania. According to them examination management at OUT is centrally coordinated by the Directorate of Examinations Syndicate (DES) where more than 800 courses are assessed each year. Examinations handling is highly controlled and protected by both police and security officers. Lawi and Said add that this system is one of the recent best systems in the country, as it is modeled to the Examination Council of Tanzania (NECTA).

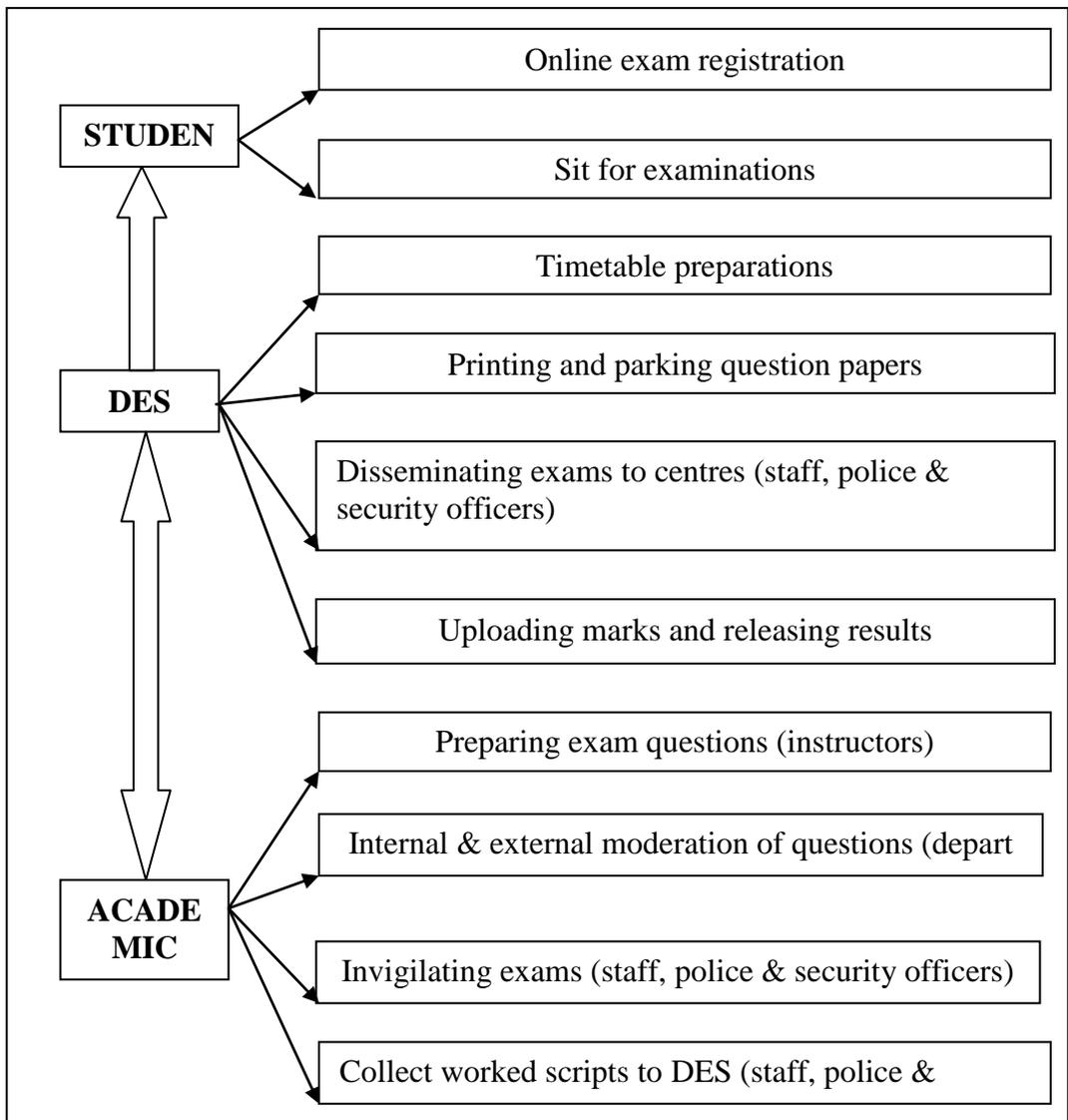


Figure 4: Examination Management Process

Source: Compiled from data obtained from Directorate of Examinations Syndicate (DES), OUT, 2013

Network resources and technical support: ODL experience indicates clearly that in order to deal effectively with large numbers of students coming from a rich variety of backgrounds, it is crucially important to back the teaching/learning processes with efficient delivery and support systems (Guri-Rosenblit, n.d). The access to network resources and technical support were moderately reported (61.7% and 69.2%). Good distance learning courses result from institutions that provide quality learner support systems via effective communication for students and instructors. Corry (2008) suggests support systems can be divided into three different areas. Academic support, administrative support, and technical support. Academic support involves instructors providing substantive engagement and feedback for course activities. Administrative support involves things such as financial aid, advising, registrar services etc. For schools using technical systems to deliver education, it is not a matter of whether a student will have problems; it is a matter of *when* they will have problems.

Generally, the study found that about 71.5% of participants ranked the overall quality of ODL programmes in Tanzania as of high quality, and 63.6% participants said they were very likely to recommend others to join ODL programmes while 34.8% were somewhat likely to do so. For the purposes of this study, high quality equates to courses that receive high scores on student satisfaction surveys and other benchmarks that measure student performance. Quality is a perception, which must be verified. Indeed, it is easy to talk about quality, but it is much harder to put words into action (Brennan and Shah, 2000). The findings on the high quality of open and distance programmes are also supported by Manohar *et al.* (1995) who studied learners' perception of management programmes of distance education institutions. A majority of students opined that the main advantage of joining the programme was to improve qualifications followed by enhancing professional opportunities.

Gagne and Shepherd (2001) study found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning versus conventional classroom settings. It is explained that students taking distance learning courses perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the splendid role and increased popularity of the open and distance learning, the quality of higher education via open and distance learning has been called to question. Different people perceive the advantages of ODL differently and their perceptions have influenced attitudes towards the acceptance and use of ODL in the system in Tanzania and elsewhere. Out of the various problems facing distance education today, a very important one is how it is perceived by the individuals involved in it. This is because the success of the open and distance education system could be affected by how it's viewed by the individuals involved in it.

One of the important determinants of the success of distance education programs is the perception of tutors, coordinators, learners, office staff and others towards quality of support services. This study assessed the perceptions of learners towards the quality ODL programmes provided by the Open University of Tanzania. The study witnessed

that the selected learners had positive perception of the registration procedures, quality of course materials, access to instructors, clarity of syllabi and course objectives. However, some of them made serious complaints about the sufficiency and timely delivery of the study materials supplied to them. The participants also expressed dissatisfaction over the quality of instructional methods, the quality of interaction with instructors, number of staff in the centres and access to internet services. The study therefore concludes that quality of higher education via open and distance learning is achieved by demonstrating that the quality of content, delivery, assessment and outcomes in ODL institutions is equal to, or better than, the traditional forms of education.

Recommendations

The following are recommended in the light of the findings obtained as a result of this study:

- (i) The development and timely delivery of quality study materials to learners should be ensured. There should also be a constant review of curricula and study materials to meet the expectations and needs of learners and the market accordingly.
- (ii) OUT should make the provision of library and internet facilities so that instructors and learners can avail the facilities (though few centres have libraries).
- (iii) There should be improved way of communication between the institution and learners to avoid delay of important information. Use of students' cell phone numbers is favoured over students' mails.
- (iv) There should be one or two representatives of each faculty and institute in all regional centres so that learners can get the right information from the right personnel. At least there are some commonalities among faculties, but where there is no staff from institutes, the Institute of Continuing Studies for example, learners do not get the right information particularly during orientation and face to face sessions.
- (v) Face to face sessions should be increased focusing solely on academics with few administrative issues.

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