

PROVISION OF INFORMATION SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: A CASE OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

Alli A.S. Mcharazo

Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences,
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania,

Abstract

The success of distance education depends on effective provision of information to students and lecturers. With the prevailing economic circumstances in developing countries quite a number of distance education institutions and programmes are more likely to be developed. The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) which was established in 1993 is one such programme. It started off with only a few educational and information resources and facilities but now provides university education to many who could not afford to join full-time campus based universities. Based on case study approach that is characterised by interviews and documentary sources, this work examines some of the information provision practices and experiences of the university that can be emulated by other distance education institutions and programmes in the developing world. Specifically the study examines the feasibility of establishing the university, availability of study materials, provision of study centres, and utilization of nation-wide information resources, forging links with other institutions, provision of ICT-based resources and facilities, equity and gender issues.

Introduction

Traditional approaches to education and library services in Africa have never been successful in addressing the problems of shortage of human resources, poverty and underdevelopment of its people. In Tanzania for example, with a population of 35 million, the country has 20 universities and university colleges, where many over qualified advanced level secondary education students and others from colleges scramble for admission. However impressive the number of universities, currently all these universities can admit in total about 30% of the applicants annually. The Open University of Tanzania (OUT), (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, 2006) offer degree and non degree programmes through distance and open learning systems.

OUT is one of the first such institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa where there is acute shortage of traditional full time institutions to cater for the growing numbers of prospective students. OUT was believed to provide an alternative education system for many of these prospective students who could not secure places in full time

institutions and the employed mature students who could not leave their jobs to pursue full time studies.

However, the usefulness of this university to the development process of the nation and the region, came up with new challenges, especially in the systems of information provision to distance learners. Unlike in the traditional full-time institutions, where information provision is mainly provided at the institute, distance learning requires support of high quality information service network which provides access to a full range of learning and teaching materials in various formats. Nevertheless, international communities, educational establishments, policy makers, educationists and governments will benefit a lot from the experience of establishing OUT.

At its inception, in 1994, the University enrolled a meager number of only 766 students who registered in the four undergraduate degree programmes namely: Bachelor of Arts (Education); Bachelor of Arts (General); and Bachelor of Commerce. This number has steadily grown to 4,555 undergraduate students who were registered in 2006. Although the duration of most of its undergraduate programmes has remained at six years, the number of degree programmes offered by the University has grown from five in 1994 to sixteen in 2006.

Although the university is mainly financed by the government, through government grants and loans, several other national and international agencies, institutions and organizations continue to provide assistance to the university through basket funding. Some of these international organizations include UNESCO, Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, International Book Bank, Canadian International Development Agency, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation and German Foundation for International Development Cooperation. Also some countries like Australia, China and Russia also do provide funding assistance to the university.

As noted earlier, distance learning is a complex operation that require, in depth planning and sufficient resources. The success of any open university is measured in terms of ability to provide adequate resources and materials, including non-print materials and audio-visual materials such as radio, television, video recordings,

telephone, CD-ROMs and the Internet resources. However these resources are limited partly because of inadequate funding from the government. In Tanzania for example, education budget had steadily dwindled from over 20% in the 1960s to a meager 14% in 1988/89 fiscal year (Bgoya, 1992) and increased slightly to 15.5% in 2005/2006 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1998). Financial resources are therefore not adequate to support education expansion programmes including student enrolment increases in the universities.

A number of universities are currently facing difficulties in acquiring reading materials for their students and teaching staff. According to the former Director of the University of Dar es Salaam Library, the University Library has in the last one decade experienced serious shortage of new books and journals, to the extremes of affecting performances of both lecturers and students (Mcharazo 1999). In a similar vein, the situation is not any better at Tanzania Library Services (TLS), where Open University students get their reading materials. The former Director of TLS observed that, as a result of the 50% budgetary cuts to TLS in the last ten years from 1994/5 fiscal year, TLS has not been able to order new books, journals or any reading materials since then. Book Aid International (BAI) which contributes over 90% of the current TLS book stock (Harrity and Leach, 1994) has therefore become the main source of books and reading materials for the organization. It is important, therefore to note that distance learning institutions in developing countries like Tanzania face an uphill task in their day to day performances. This paper thus discusses and analyses some of the major aspects of information provision for OUT students and staff.

Methodology

The research strategy for this investigation was the case study approach. A cross-section of 100 randomly selected students and senior staff were interviewed. These included library staff of OUT headquarters representing some of the regions (Dar es Salaam, Pwani, Morogoro, Tanga, Kilimanjaro and Arusha). Some of the aspects discussed were reasons for studying at OUT; choose of the degree programme; academic progress; sources of information; problems encountered, and personal views on how the situation could be improved. Secondary sources such as correspondence, unpublished reports, meetings/conference proceedings and other unpublished data were consulted. Most of these sources of

information and information were found at OUT headquarters, and at the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training in Dar es Salaam. Records of other organisations were also consulted; for example public libraries serving OUT students. Records and statistical information were collected from Tanzania Library Services (TLS) Central Library and regional libraries. Some records of overseas donors such as Book Aid International, which supplies a significant numbers of books to libraries in Tanzania, were also consulted.

Findings

The need for Open University education

One important question which needs to be asked is: "Do we really need an Open University in Tanzania?" The need for such an institution as an alternative to traditional universities is quite evident, not only to Tanzania but also to all developed and developing countries alike. Because of the pyramidal nature of education system in most developing countries, where only 1% of the students who enroll in standard one in primary schools will have the opportunity of joining the University, 10 % get into high schools and about 20% are able to get placements in government secondary schools. This acute scarcity of student placements in higher learning institutions makes the Open University the best alternative for addressing the problem.

Unavailability of places in few higher learning institutions in the country is the main cause of massive dropouts in schools. Hundreds of thousands of qualified students who join secondary schools or high schools are left behind each year. The available statistics revealed that in between 1984/85 and 1988/89 admissions in selected major tertiary institutions in Tanzania, including University of Dar es Salaam, Institute of Development Management (now Mzumbe University), Ardhi Institute (now University College of Land and Architectural Studies), and College of Business Education (CBE) was only 8,103. The figures further show that, despite having the right qualifications, 27,933 applicants could not secure places in these institutions during the period.

The Ministry of Higher Education Science and Technology's records also revealed that out of about 10,000 people who sit for the mature age university entry examinations every year, only about 100 manage to get placements at the University of Dar es Salaam. As a

matter of fact many students/candidates who graduate from 'A' Level and other professional studies possess the necessary qualifications required by universities.

It should be borne in mind that the tradition of most universities in the developing countries, especially in Africa, is to admit applicants who possess high school qualifications and a very few mature-age candidates for undergraduate degree studies. In a country where there are only few universities the practice is to admit the best applicants amongst many who possess the necessary qualifications. The situation is clearly summed up by Bengue and Olden (1981) who observed that:

“... These students are not necessarily less able or less suited for a professional career than their contemporaries reading for first or second degrees; as often as not, they have been simply less fortunate in the educational opportunities which came their way...”

This practice prevails because most developing countries cannot afford to run many universities due to, amongst other reasons, difficult economic conditions, misplaced priorities and the notion that university students need to study full-time. The Open University of Tanzania was established in 1993 to address the increasing manpower needs in Tanzania and the expanding number of students completing high schools.

Although several correspondence courses have continued to be offered by a number of institutions in the region, such as Malawi (Malawi Correspondence College), Zambia (Zambia National Correspondence College), Kenya (University of Nairobi Correspondence Course Unit), Uganda (Makarere University Correspondence Course Unit), Tanzania (Institute of Adult Education) there had been no open university in its real sense. OUT is a first attempt in Sub-Saharan Africa (outside of South Africa) which other countries will look upon as an example in terms of both successes and failures.

Availability of study materials

The experience has shown that in many developing countries like Tanzania, reading materials in libraries and information centres are inadequate. Against this background, students tend to depend so

much on lecture notes given by the instructors. This arrangement is difficult for distance learners because they do not meet their instructors regularly. In any case the study materials are essential to supplement or support the knowledge acquired from lecturers and subject manuals. Availability of study materials also ensures that there is a smooth continuity and completion of modules and programmes well in time, other factors being under control.

OUT started with very limited number of study materials. The University of Nairobi provided OUT with most of its science subjects reading materials. As for Bachelor of Law programme OUT started with some units missing. To date the situation has not improved much, as there are still pockets of units that are missing. This has resulted in students being compelled to take modules which do not particularly interest them; sometimes starting with higher level modules which make understanding of subjects more difficult. This does not provide a conducive and comfortable learning environment for students. They are more likely to get frustrated and or even give up their studies. The lesson acquired by other similar institutions in Tanzania and outside Tanzania is that it must be ensured that all study materials are written well before the first students are admitted in the university.

Establishment of regional centres and study centres

OUT runs a total of 23 Regional Centres. Their functions include tutoring and counseling students, providing teaching and learning facilities, organizing public lectures, discussion groups, workshops and seminars, and coordinating activities. There are also study centres that are closer and more convenient to distant study students than the regional centres. The sites are decided by students and tutors in consultation with the resident lecturers or subject coordinators. These are situated in secondary schools, colleges, institutes, etc. The two basic functions of these centres are counseling and tutoring for OUT students and providing physical facilities such as classrooms, laboratories and libraries.

Regional centres and their directors have been playing a significant role in the process of information communication between the OUT headquarters and the students. Distributing study materials, offering advisory services, counseling, providing reading materials, and encouraging students to open their own study centres are just a few examples of activities carried out by the regional centres.

A number of poor developing countries do not have functional communication infrastructure. Postal and telephone services and road networks are not in good condition. As for telephone services, they are usually not available to ordinary citizens especially to the poor in the rural areas. In the absence of regional centres it would mean that students have to communicate directly with the headquarters. For students living far away from the headquarters it would mean delays in receiving study materials, lack of guidance and advisory and counseling services. This would not make a conducive environment for distance learners. The significance and need for study centres is well summed up by Perraton (1993) by showing what other countries have been practicing:

“...The difficulties of the isolated student led to the development of the second model. Both Malawi and Zambia developed study centres with much more modest resources than those of a conventional secondary school... Other study centre systems have been developed outside Africa. In some parts of Latin America, for example, radio has been more extensively used to support centres of this kind than has generally been the case in Africa...”

The lesson derived from Tanzania’s regional centres and elsewhere is that there is a need, prior to the admission of the first intake, to establish regional centres to assist students in their respective regions.

The needs of distance education

Open University education is virtually new in Africa and other developing countries. Countries and institutions wishing to establish open universities must first and foremost be aware of this vital fact. Two essential elements need to be addressed here: first, in Tanzania only a limited number of teaching staff have been trained specifically in distance education. Many of the teachers and lecturers are experienced in aspects of conventional education. It was not a surprise, therefore, that many of the teachers who are employed by OUT came from conventional education background.

This is the experience which is more likely to be faced by other countries, especially those in the developing world. One approach to overcome this problem is for similar emerging universities and institutions to employ experienced staff who have been trained in

aspects of distance education well before taking the first intake of students. OUT did not follow this approach. OUT started with the majority of staff who were not familiar with distance education. These gradually went through the on the job training mode. They attended relevant seminars, conferences and workshops.

While the former approach is ideally the best as it ensures smooth running of the university, in practice it may prove impossible due to lack of qualified and experienced staff in distance education delivery. Second, the experience of Tanzania has shown that whichever approach is taken it should eventually yield the intended results - one of the results being making the very university or institution aware that there is a difference between distance education and conventional education in terms of learning and teaching methods and approaches. This would assist in easing the process of making distance learning students aware of the teaching and learning methods and approaches. As stated earlier, distance learning brings in new learning experiences to students.

Utilisation of nation-wide information resources

It has been mentioned earlier that distance education emphasises student independence and autonomy. The underlying assumption here is that a student can have access to all information resources available in a country. This idea has been received well by the OUT management, which clearly states the need to use the nation's various information resources. In practice, however, this is not the case because of all sorts of reasons such as distance, unawareness of services provided, fees, and opening hours. This study has revealed that, first some of the institutions have closed-door policies for students or any other persons who are not enrolled with or working for them. There still exists that old-fashion culture of embracing a collection of information as belonging to the institution and people within that institution. What is forgotten here is the fact that that organisation/institution belongs to the nation, and its information resources, under normal circumstances, should be available to its citizens. This fact need to be widely publicised by any new institution wishing to establish a distance education programme. The second element is unawareness amongst the students themselves of the existence of such information. It was shown earlier on that most of the students came from conventional education, and that their expectations are for the university/institution to provide them with reading materials just as

any residential institution does. This element also needs to be well addressed by alerting the potential students of the need to consult all information resources available in a country.

Forging links with other institutions

It is important that any open university should have a clear picture of the types of organisations existing in or outside a country with which it could co-operate. Unlike traditional full-time universities, open universities are not required to house each and everything material required by their students. They are guided by the underlying philosophy of making maximum use of the existing resources available in a country. OUT realises the importance of co-operation with other institutions as this is important in terms of course production and use of facilities by students who are scattered all over the country. This need was clearly earmarked at the very first stages of the establishment of the university:

"...the justification of recommending the establishment of an open university cannot merely lie in its flexibility and the ability to expand access to higher education; it must lie, above all, in its being cost-effective. This is a function of (1) efficient utilisation of human resources available in the country for course production as well as (2) efficient utilisation of existing educational facilities and other physical facilities available in public and private institutions. For usually distance education institutions have small faculties and facilities of their own. They rely on what is available. It means that the new university will have to establish close relationship with all higher education institutions and other organisations..."(Ministry of Education, 1990)

Currently OUT is co-operating with the University of Dar es Salaam, University of South Africa, University of Nairobi, Tumaini University and Sokoine University of Agriculture. It is also co-operating with other organisations such as Tanzania Library Services (TLS) and its network of regional libraries (Mmari, 1997). Recommended textbooks and other reading materials are stocked, on special shelves, in its regional libraries and at the national central library in Dar es Salaam. Where TLS libraries do not exist, other public institutions are requested to house the reading materials. Other organisations include the British Council Library, the United

States Information Service Library; with media and communication institutions such as Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam, Sauti ya Tanzania Zanzibar, Television Zanzibar, the Audio Visual Institute, and Tanzania Posts and Telecommunications Corporation; with transport organisations such as Tanzania Railway Corporation for delivering materials to and from the headquarters to regional centres; with financial institutions such as National Bank of Commerce, National Provident Fund, Bank of Tanzania, etc; mass organisations such as *Umoja wa Wanawake Tanzania*. The University also co-operates with donor agencies, and some regional and international organisations and institutions such as the Commonwealth of Learning, the Inter-University Council for East Africa, the University of Nairobi, Book Aid International (London), the International Book Bank (US), Sida-SAREC (Sweden) and UNESCO.

Equity: gender issues

One underlying philosophy behind distance education programmes and or institutions is equity in access to education. The statistics available in Tanzania show that there are fewer women studying at higher levels of education such as colleges, institutes, and universities. In fact the higher the level of education the lower the number of women. At the University of Dar es Salaam out of 2,251 students enrolled in the academic year 1994/95 only 22.6% were female (United Republic of Tanzania: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1996). At Sokoine University of Agriculture out of 909 students enrolled in that year only 23% were female (United Republic of Tanzania: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1996). These two examples are a typical reflection of what is happening in other institutions of higher learning. Among reasons why female numbers are very small in academic institutions are low enrolments of females at the higher levels of education, family responsibilities, and economic constraints. Cultural attitudes also contributes to this problem: women are not given enough time to decide what they want to do with their lives, educating women in families is considered as a waste of resources, because of false attitude that education is for men and the women's role is to look after the families. But as far as this research is concerned, lack of adequate information concerning the role, significance and usefulness of distance education and Open University education in particular is also one of the issues facing women in Tanzania. A statement from a student who enrolled with OUT but could not join the studies,

stated that according to her experience “most of the youths, including girls, are not conscious of the need for such education...”¹ This statement together with the problems of lack of information in practice, equity in education has not been realised yet. This is not a unique experience for Tanzania but common to most developing countries as Bown (1990) observes:

“...The long hours which women work has been well documented and was referred to in several of the case studies here. For instance, the *ActionAid* Gambian case-study noted that Gambian rural women worked from 5.00 am in the morning until 9.00 p.m. Such long and pressured days are obviously among the reasons why women find it difficult to gain access to literacy or to any form of education...

The findings of this study therefore show the need to have in place strategies of providing information about the usefulness of distance learning programmes to women. A carefully worked-out strategy which targets women in both urban and rural areas is more likely to succeed than that of putting more emphasis or targeting the employed, middle-class, and urban women only. OUT is currently the first higher education institution with the highest numbers of women pursuing its programmes. Out of 29,907 students enrolled from 2000 to 2005, 35% are women. The statistics show that in the academic year 2005/6 alone OUT enrolled a total of 9,232 students of which 31% were women and 69% were men (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, 2006).

Information and communication technology

It is true that distance education has been practised for quite sometime now in Africa. The early form of this education was carried out mainly by correspondence. While correspondence education depends so much on printed matter and communication

1. Brief conversation with a Dar es Salaam based employed woman who has a child. The woman registered herself with the OUT programme but decided to discontinue well before the course started. She maintained that she could not proceed with the course because, amongst other reasons, she was not aware that the programme would be highly demanding and found the time-frame of six years was just too much for her.

between a teacher and a student at a distance, modern forms of distance education, such as open university, require variety of forms which would be useful to reach its scattered audience. One of these significant methods applied by open university education is information technology. Information communication technology can range from simple telephone services to radio broadcasts to sophisticated computer based services.

OUT realises the importance of information technology and audio-visual materials. At its inception in 1994 very little, in terms of ICT, was there to provide such services for its students. Financial inability was one of the problems. There is also evidence which suggests that even if the services were provided they would not be fully utilised due to the OUT students' lack of familiarity with ICT. It is also evident that many administrators and students tend to think of computers or computer based materials and services when the term ICT is used. But things have now changed, and to date for example, some significant progress has been made by the university in providing ICT-based resources. OUT has created an open learning management system, also known as the Knowledge Environment Web Learning (KEWL), which is used by students wherever they are in the country to access learning materials. Since ICT plays a central role in any distance education system, this necessitated OUT to have a full fledged Information Resource Management Centre (IRMC), equipped with Internet services, that is dedicated to provision of dial-up services to allow staff and students to use ICT services through existing telephone lines (from their homes). In addition, it considered the idea of having an extra ICT projects such African Virtual University Learning Centre (AVULC) which facilitates teleconferencing/video conferencing functions. OUT has developed an Information and Communications Master Plan 2004/05 – 2008/09 whose implementation requires a substantial financial investment.

What lessons have been learnt from the Tanzanian experience?

- (a) That there is a difference between a correspondence course and an open university course in terms of information delivery and provision for their students. In comparison an Open University programme and their students are required to use more advanced forms of information resources.

- (b) The experience of Tanzania has shown that there may as well be many countries which may not afford to provide full-scale information technology services due to, amongst other reasons, financial constraints. While provision of sophisticated computer-based services may be seen as unaffordable, still they can be a target to be realised in an institution's long term strategy.

In the meantime, provision and encouragement of students to use simple information technology services such as telephones, radio, audio-tape recordings, and video-tape recordings can play a significant role of familiarising students on how to use some of the information technology gadgets, and then build on from here the culture to use such media or technology.

Conclusion

Distance education requires adequate resources in order to perform well. It is not entirely true that distance education is cheap. The initial process of establishing a distance education institution requires adequate resources. Finance, staffing, buildings, equipment, time, and materials are just a few examples of the resources required. This implies that there must be adequate amount of funds to have these resources prior to the enrolment and admission of the very first intake. But allocation of resources, especially finance from the central government tends not to match the actual needs of distance learning institutions. This is well acknowledged by the Tanzania's Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (1995):

“...There is little doubt that higher education in many African countries and indeed in Tanzania has been under-financed. Tanzania remains one of the few countries in eastern and southern Africa that allocates very meagre resources to the education sector relative to other sectors of the national economy. While, for instance, Kenya devotes 27 percent, Uganda 22.5 percent, and Botswana 15.9 percent of their budgetary resources to education, Tanzania devotes only 9.1 percent...”

In terms of information provision, this has impact in production of study materials, provision of services to regional centres and purchase of reading materials. It is important, therefore, to ensure

that adequate funds and other resources are available for the smooth provision of information and information services.

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