Learners' Perception and Preference of Open and Distance Learning Mode at the Institute of Adult Education, Tanzania

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to explore the learners' perception and preference on the open and distance learning mode at the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania through the case study design. The study population was 96 ODL students from Geita Learning Centre. The sample comprised of 50 students selected through simple random sampling technique. Data was collected using interview and a questionnaire and was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic content method. The result revealed that ODL mode is most suitable for in-service, married and aged population because it allows them to study while working. The perception of learners on ODL was positive. Respondents were comfortable with content of the modules and learner support services provided. They were also satisfied with face-to-face sessions and tuition fee charges modality. The study therefore recommends that learners' perception on the open and distance learning should be looked critically by developing approaches that will enhance the program and address challenges associated with distance learning. The findings of this study should assist education practitioners to design and implement effective learning programs based on perception and preference of learners. ODL stakeholders should consider all the factors in relation to perception and preferences of learners while developing more open and distance learning course for the learners.*

Keywords: Perception, Preference, Open and Distance Learning, Face to face, Module

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a recognized method for delivering educational content in most of the higher learning institutions. The purpose of ODL as mode of learning is to provide quality education for an immense group of learners at low cost. Various forces within the education industry have been motivating the increased attention to the incorporation of ODL at all levels in education (Allen & Seaman, 2017). It is significant to note that the learning quality depends on the level of interaction, material access and efficiency in learning.

The open and distance learning atmosphere varies strongly from the traditional classroom situation when it comes to the learner's supports, motivation, satisfaction and interaction (Bignoux & Sund, 2018). Open and distance learning presents an innovative and cost effective means of delivering training. It also provides access to education for learners who cannot attend regular campus based learning because of various factors, including the cost of

learning, family and work. Terras, Chiasson and Adam (2012) pointed out that there was no significance difference between distance learning and face to face class with regard to learners' satisfaction; also they supported the reality that open and distance learning will be as effective as traditional class if it is designed properly. These truths clearly indicate that distance learning is a means to substitute for the conventional classroom learning if they are designed correctly. According to Maimane (2016), learners enrolled in ODL programs have different education intentions and needs. Therefore, it is indispensable to investigate their perception and preference for open and distance learning mode.

In the period of 1990s, Tanzania experienced the increased number of students to access secondary and tertiary education. As a result, the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) under National Correspondence Institute (NCI) established a secondary school program through open and distance learning mode. The Open University of

Tanzania was established also under Parliamentary Act No. 17 of 1992 to support tertiary education through the open and distance learning mode (Mjagila, 2012). The secondary education program was non-formal. The program intended to serve disadvantaged and isolated illiterate youth in the country with the aim of intensifying access to education to all. Basically, the ODL programme in Tanzania targeted primary school learners who were not absorbed in formal secondary education system in public and private schools, dropouts from primary and secondary schools, government and private sector employees who had not attended secondary education and adult learners who needed to acquire professional skills.

During the year 2014/2015, the IAE designed an ODL curriculum that could support students who could not attend conventional campus-based training due to various factors including cost of learning and the demand of working while studying. To address this, the Institute of Adult Education adopted ODL or blended learning mode alongside the traditional programme as an innovative way of training learners who could not attend on campus training. This learning mode combines face to face instruction, self-study and individual assignment, school based teaching practice, individual projects, portfolio and end of semester examination. Although open and distance learning continues to expand quickly, it still remains at an infant stage of development. However, the major concern of ODL is about the quality of learning which is closely related with how well the curriculum is designed and executed.

Therefore, developers and instructors of distance learning need a more understanding of how learners perceive and react to elements of blended learning (Bali and Liu, 2018) as students' perception and preference are critical for effective learning. It should be noted that effectiveness of learning depends on how the content is planned. Kemp and Grieve (2014) argued that distance learning activities should be planned in ways that support learning and improve students' academic performance so that there will be no difference between open and distance learning mode and conventional learning in terms of competency and performance.

In Tanzania, there is an increased number of learners who opt to study by ODL mode regardless of the constraints which may face them. It is in this context that this study sought to explore the learners' perception and preference for open and distance learning mode. The study findings could be important for higher learning institutions to be prepared to modify the course structure and curriculum. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the learners' perception and preferences in Open and Distance Learning mode. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the learners' perception on open and distance learning mode?
2. What are suggestions of learners on how the open and distance learning by distance mode should be conducted?

Review of Literature

Open and Distance Learning involves a student centered approach in which the instructor takes the duty of the facilitator and learners engage in peer learning (Maor, 2003; Mitchell, Chen & Macredie, 2005). Kyando, (2011) illustrated the development of open and distance learning by indicating that the ODL has evolved into various phases. The novel era of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has demonstrated ODL as a developing field of study and mode of learning. Messo (2014) as cited in Bhalalusesa, (2000) pointed the evidences in the number of distance education programs currently operating in Tanzania ranging from secondary education, teacher training, vocational education and higher education.

There has been an increase in access to the internet and computers over the past years and this is reflected in growing use of e-mail as a communication technology. Furthermore, the incumbent phase of ODL is witnessed in the era of globalization which stresses on the lifelong learning and through the hybrid approach. Open and distance learning is the unique method of learning since the learning takes place in the situation where the facilitator and learners are geographically remote from each other most of the time (Burns, 2011). According to Sahin and Shelley, (2008) students' needs and perception should be central in the design, development and delivering distance education courses. Therefore, perceptions of learners related to assessment, commitment and analysis, the content and delivery process must therefore be explored.

In Nigeria, Okonkwo (2012) established that the quality of study materials was a challenge for learners to learn successful since they used mostly

printed ones but, this analysis was contrary to popular distance education delivery system around the world (Moore, 2002).

Muthuprasad, Aiswarya, Aditya and Girish (2021) in their study on students' perception and preference for online education in India during the COVID-19 pandemic found that students preferred to use smart phone for distance learning due to flexibility and convenience of online classes. Also, the analysis revealed that students preferred recorded classes with assignment at the end of each session to improve the effectiveness of learning.

Olayemi, Adamu, and Olayemi (2021focused on perception and readiness of students towards online learning in Nigeria. The study findings revealed that students perceived to be conversant on the online learning with high level of readiness but the learners had negative perception on the mode of learning due to high cost of data, poor internet and inaccessibility to online library sources. Adewale, Ajadi and Inegbedian (2021) carried a descriptive study on the learners' perception on electronic examination through ODL in Nigeria; the results exposed a difference in perception of learners on electronic examination prior and after participation on electronic examination. However, students perceived differently on factors related to cheating during the examinations. Also the age factor was regarded as a factor facing students in the use of ICT in the electronic examination.

Fidalgo, Thormann and Kulyk (2020) conducted a multinational study on students' perception on open and distance learning in Portugal, UAE and Ukraine. The results revealed students' positive perception on time management, motivation, and proficiency in English language skills. Although students were somewhat anxious, many indicated that they were interested in taking distance education courses.

Literature has described the constraints which face students in open and distance learning. The fundamental constraints which the institutions of learning are likely to encounter include deficiency of study materials, learners' dropout rate and limited access to internet. Werner, Christie and Choy (1998) carried out a study in Australian vocational education and described readiness for distance learning mostly in terms of learner's readiness for the delivery mode, learners' confidence in the use of internet and capability to engage in self-directed learning.

Tamrat and Teferra (2020) have it that open and distance learning mode provides substantial opportunity in teaching methodology and content management through synchronous and asynchronous interaction between facilitators and learner. Also, open and distance learning is regarded as an alternate mode of learning that dependents on electronic media and printed materials with less physical interactions to classrooms between facilitator and learners. Smith, Murphy and Mahoney (2003) conducted a study to establish the readiness of students for distance learning and came up with two factors for effective learning as self-management learning and comfort in learning. According to Adzharuddin, (2013) Learning Management System is an online platform that provides a connection between teachers and learners through online communication. This platform allows teachers to manage their classes by providing on line materials, assignments, discussions and other learning activities. ODL is therefore widely supported by the Learning Management System (LMS). For that reason, some higher learning institutions have managed to develop their learning management system such as Moodle, Google classroom and Blended learning management system.

Several studies have been done to explore factors influencing learners in distance learning (Evans, (2000); Smith, (2005). The identified factors that were found to influence distance learning include self-directed learning modalities, motivation for learning, learner control and online communication (Roper, 2007). Therefore, the effectiveness and perception of open and distance learning should be studied because Learners' perception can influence the completion rate of an ODL programs. While little is known about the learners' perception and preference in Tanzanian context, this study sought to fill the gap through exploring the learners' perception and preferences in Open and Distance Learning mode in Tanzanian context by drawing experiences from the Institute of Adult Education.

Research Methodology
This section presents the methodology used in this study. It includes research design, population and sampling, data collection instrument, validity and reliability, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Research Design
Research design means a plan to guide one through the research process from the beginning to the end

(Creswell, 2007). This study utilized the case study design, which according to Yin, (2009) makes interpretations of experiences which are so close that uniqueness, context and reality are richly described to the situation so that a sense of description from a direct witness is attained.

Population and Sampling
The study targeted a total population of 96 students enrolled in the Technician Certificate and Ordinary Diploma in Adult and Continuing Education program of the Institute of Adult Education at Geita Learning Centre during the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 academic years. These were from different districts including Chato District, Mbogwe District, Geita District and Bukombe District. Simple random sampling technique was employed to select the sample of 50 respondents.

Data Collection Instruments
Interview and structured questionnaire were used for data collection. The study used both closed and open-ended items. The interview was face to face and was recorded by using diaries. The questionnaire, on the other hand, included selected demographic feature.

Data Analysis
Interviews items were analysed by using the thematic approach, a variety of textual analyses that typically involves comparing, contrasting and categorizing sets of data (Schwandt, 1997). Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to determine means, frequencies and percentages as part of descriptive statistics.

Validity and Reliability
To determine the validity of the instruments in this study, the questionnaire was pre-tested to 20 respondents and their feedback was included to improve the questionnaire.

Ethical Consideration
Respondents in this study were asked their consent to be involved in the study. In data collection process anonymity and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Respondents participated in the study voluntarily.

Results and Discussion
This section presents the results and discussion. The section presents the demographic characteristics of respondents then gives results.

Table 1: Demographic Details of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Female	26	52
	Male	24	48
	Total	50	100
Marital status	Married	35	70
	Single	10	20
	Divorced	5	10
	Total	50	10
Age group in years	26-35	30	60
	36-45	17	34
	46-45	3	6
	Total	50	100
District of residence	Chato	8	16
	Mbogwe	12	24
	Geita	13	26
	Bukombe	17	34
	Total	50	100
Working experience	1-5 years	15	30
	5-10 years	25	50
	10-20 years	10	20
	Total	**50**	**100**

Demographic Details of Respondent
The demographic characteristics of respondent included sex, marital status, age, district of residence and working experience as indicated in Table 1. With regard to sex, female were 26(52%) as compared to the male respondents 24 (48%). The analysis indicates that majority of respondents 35 (70%) were married whereas 10 (20%) were single and 5 (10%) were divorced. This analysis confirmed the study conducted by Quresh, (2002) and Bali and

Liu, (2018) who found that the distance education mode attracted more married respondents than single respondents due to family responsibilities. Based on the district of residence, the study revealed that majority of respondents were from Bukombe District 17 (34%) whereas 13 (26%) were from Geita District, 12 (24%) were from Mbogwe District and only 8 (16%) were from Chato District.

Research Question 1: What are the learners' perception on open and distance learning mode?

This study sought to establish the learners' perceptions on the ODL mode. The frequency and percentage were calculated for each of seven statements in the Likert scale of four pints as indicted in Table 2. The results revealed that majority of respondents 68% strongly agreed and 32% agreed with the statement that OD is a suitable mode of learning. It is further revealed that 60% strongly agreed and 40% agreed that the facilitators gave feedback on time. According to Deans (1998), feedback received from the facilitator in distance education plays a vital part in the success of the learner. Therefore, the facilitators need to be

commended for the good work they did. Majority of respondent (76%) strongly agreed and 16% agreed on the effectiveness of face-to-face modalities. Only 8% disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, 64% strongly agreed that the examination invigilation was effective, 20 % agreed with the same while 16% were neutral. The majority of respondents 50% strongly agreed while 38% agreed that they are comfortable with the content of modules. Only 10% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with the statement. Therefore, the content was generally perceived to be effective for learning. Qualitative data however revealed that some respondents were dissatisfied with arrangement and missing pages in some of the learning module materials while others noted that the module content lacked real examples in illustrating of the concepts.

The coverage of examination was perceived to be a challenge as 44% strongly disagreed with the statement and 24% disagreed. Only 32% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement whether the coverage of examination was based on the module's content.

Table 2: Learners' Perception on ODL mode

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
ODL is suitable mode as have designed well and have flexibility in learning	34(68%)	16(32%)	-	-
Facilitators give feedback on time	30 (60%)	20(40%)	-	-
Face to face session are effective since help me the module materials as conventional classes	38(76%)	8(16%)	4(8%)	-
Examination invigilation is effective	32(64%)	10(20%)	8(16%)	-
I am more comfortable with content of module since satisfies the needs of learning	24(50%)	18(38%)	5(10%)	1(2%)
The coverage of the examination rubric met my expectation	11(22%)	5(10%)	12(24%)	22(44)
Printed media is appropriately good than other media because of its structure	33(66%)	13(26%)	4(8%)	-
What sup as a social media also is effective for ODL learning	23(48%)	24(46%)	3(6%)	-

The table also reveals that 66% strongly agreed and 26 % agreed that printed media is appropriately better than other media for effective learning. This means that the learners preferred the use of printed media than other sorts of media for learning. With regard to the use of WhatsApp as an effective social media for learning, 48% strongly agreed and 46% agreed.

The perception of respondents was also presented through the qualitative data, which revealed that the learners enjoyed the learning experiences. One

of the respondents, for instance, revealed that "modules are well designed and there is a good arrangement of the units which were easy to understand. Furthermore, modules are designed in simple language. For instance, the content of geography and communications skills modules for NTA Level 5 is excellent."

The study also revealed the challenge which students faced in open and distance learning included unavailability of study materials through the institutional website. For instance, one of the

respondents revealed that "the website had no module outlines which could guide students to learn effectively".

Research Question 2: What are suggestions of learners on how the open and distance learning by distance mode should be conducted?

This question sought to establish the preference factors for learners to opt for the open and distance learning by distance.

The study further sought to establish learners' preference for open and distance learning. As indicated in Table 3, sixteen (32%) preferred distance learning because of studying while working, 11 (22%) preferred distance learning because of family commitments, 9 (18%) preferred distance learning due to a general satisfaction on how the program was run. Furthermore, 7(14%) were attracted by the program due to their marital status in that the married students would attend the courses while sustaining their families.

Minority of the respondents indicated that flexibility of learning (10%) and pressure from the employers (4%) were factors that attracted them to join the program. This implies that the pressure from employers, which probably meant desire for better performance, increased the demands for the learners to join the program. According to Hannay *and* Newvine (2006), open and distance learning programs should be designed to provide access to higher education for learners who cannot attend conventional courses due to employment, marital status, family responsibilities and cost implications. Therefore, learners with fulltime employment and marital status showed highest preference for distance learning.

Table 1: Learners Preference for Studying by ODL

Preference for ODL mode	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Study while working	16	32
Family commitments	11	22
General Satisfaction	9	18
Marital status	7	14
Flexibility of learning	5	10
Pressure from employer	2	4
Total	50	100

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section presents the conclusion and then gives the recommendation of the study.

Conclusions

The study concludes that majority of respondents expressed a positive perception on the ODL mode of learning. They were impressed with the quality of module, examination procedures and other factors. They were also satisfied with the learner support services provided by the institution. They also explained that pressure from employers attracted them to join the program. The findings have further demonstrated that open and distance learning is more suitable for those who cannot attend conventional courses due to employment, marital status, family responsibilities and cost implications. Finally, students preferred open and distance learning programs due to a general satisfaction on how the program was run, studying while working and marital status.

Recommendations

The study therefore recommends that learners' perception on the open and distance learning should be looked critically by developing approaches that will enhance the program and address challenges associated with distance learning. The findings of this study should assist education practitioners to design and implement effective learning programs based on perception and preference of learners. ODL stakeholders should consider all the factors in relation to perception and preferences of learners while developing more open and distance learning course for the learners.

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