The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Promoting Professional Training and Development in Tanzania. A Case Study of The Open University Tanzania

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Abstract: *This paper unveils the unique role played by ODL in promoting professional training and development in Tanzania. ODL is significantly increasing in its importance in most societies if not all; this is justified by the increasing in enrolment in ODL institutions. In order to cope with the demanding world, individuals need to properly utilize their time. Hence, they opt for ODL institution as a medium of knowledge transmission, since they can benefit from the flexibility that it offers. In the course of this study, the researchers have adopted a qualitative research approach. Where, the main case study institution being The Open University of Tanzania. Respondents from this study have been carefully sampled through a non probabilistic sample size, and these respondents were OUT students only (current and previous). Among all constraints, ICT remains a common barrier among most ODL students in Tanzania, as all the respondents in the study indicated so.*

INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is increasingly becoming popular because of its flexibility and learner friendly approach, particularly to those who could not get access to the formal education system. Distance education is more costs effective and can take place while continuing full-time employment (Moran and Rumble, 2004). People who live in remote areas find that ODL permits them to enroll in programmes, which otherwise would not be available to them. Workplace learning is also expanding rapidly in organizations, boosted by online learning opportunities. Web-based training or E-training, an innovative approach to distance learning, can be effectively utilized for delivering knowledge to individuals anywhere in the country. If the developing countries want to enhance their international competitiveness for the well being of their people, they must address the concerns for vocational education and training. The path for economic development and prosperity through the skills training and ODL as the modality for vocational education and training allows vast number of people, hitherto unreached to take advantage of education and training opportunities (Mishra, 2002). The changing skills demands due to competition and rapid market changes, especially in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), calls for provision of continuous learning and training opportunities through Government, Non-government and Private Institutions. There is a need for a paradigm shift in the training approaches in the formal and informal sector for developing skills attuned to the needs of the society. All this cannot be achieved by formal system. Majority of employment sector in Tanzania is in the 'informal' sector, with employees working in relatively low productivity jobs. Provision of appropriate skills may thus be an important intervention to increasing the productivity of this workforce. Here open and distance learning mode institution can play important role by providing flexible and cost effective vocational education. In addition to contributing to social and economic development, ODL plays a decisive role in the creation of a knowledge-based society. The study aimed at establishing the role of Open and Distance Learning in promoting professional training and development in Tanzania. Specifically the study aimed at the following: Reviewing the literature on the contribution of ODL for professional skills

promotion in Tanzania. Exploring the challenges/constrains ODL encounters in skills transmission and Assessing trainees' perception of ODL on its acceptability in the Tanzanian society.

METHODOLOGY

A purposive judgmental technique was employed in selecting a sample of 50 OUT students. This sample population was further divided into two groups of:
- 40 continuing students
- 10 alumni of OUT

The entire sample was drawn from the three regional centers in Dar es Salaam namely, Temeke, Ilala and Kinondoni. These have the largest population of OUT students. The study was comprised of qualitative data; hence qualitative data analysis was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Does ODL contribute in training professional skills?
When asked if they consider ODL as a medium of knowledge transmission that contributes to professional training and development all respondents agreed as summarized in Figure 1.
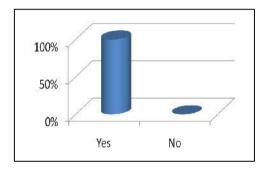

Figure 1: ODL Contribution to Professional

They asserted that, Open and Distance Learning opens career doors for all kinds of people whether able, disabled, rich, poor, gay/non-gay, young, and old, in rural or urban. ODL gives everyone of these types of people their own space to study as it offers the greatest flexibility in learning.

Another reason provided by these respondents is that ODL motivates them for higher career advances. A significant percentage of OUT clients are working students. With the degrees they achieve as students of OUT, they advance career wise and this motives them for even higher degrees in an effort to striving for higher positions in their career ladder.

Atkins *et al* (2007) supports the above claims, as he states that Open and Distance Learning is a way of learning that focus on releasing learners from constraints of time and place whilst offering flexible learning opportunities. For a lot of married and working adults, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities. Taking this into account ODL is designed to meet unique sets of needs and demand for unique groups of clients (students); hence for these students studying in an ODL institution, their demands will be fully satisfied.

How would you rate ODL trained professionals possibility of fitting in the job market?
Job market and the society is perceiving ODL significant as any other form of education since alumnus from OUT claimed to receive equal treatment in jobs success chances as any other alumnus from other systems of learning (specifically conventional).
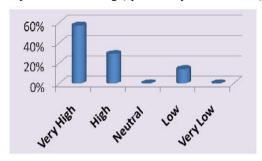

Figure 2: Chances for ODL
Trainees to fit in the job markets

A significant proportion (57% and 29%, from figure 2) of OUT students have stated that they have very high possibility of fitting in the job market because majority of OUT students are people with multi activities who work and study hence acquiring more experience at work while studying at the same time. After graduating securing a new job with the already set up network from the previous job and experience is not much of a hustle. This being the case, ODL has a very crucial role in promoting professional skills training.

The contribution of ODL in training professionals and the society's perception on ODL can be measured through the extent to which they fit in the job market and how they can apply the gained skills in their jobs and daily life progress. For the student/learner ODL means increased access and flexibility as well as the combination of multiple responsibilities. It may also mean a more learner-centered approach, enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interaction. For employers it offers high quality and usually cost effective professional development in the workplace. It allows upgrading of skills, increased productivity and development of a new learning culture. In addition, it means sharing of costs, of training time, and increased portability of training (UNESCO 2002). This provides a justification for the possibility of ODL students fitting in better in the job markets. On the other end; 14% (Figure 2) who rate low for their possibility of fitting in the job market, is simply because they still believe ODL might be considered as an out cast in Tanzanian education system.

What Difficulties do you encounter as a student of ODL in Tanzania?
From table 1, respondents were provided with three boxes to tick for the difficulties they faced as students of ODL in Tanzania. The results were interesting, since all the respondents ticked all the three boxes. And these were: 1) Lacking ICT knowledge, 2) Being a stranger to ODL, 3) Others.

Table 1: Difficulties encountered as a student

Response	Frequency
Lacking ICT knowledge	50
Stranger to ODL	50
Others	50

Among the 'others' factor; they outlined i) lacking study materials and ii) absence of online tutoring as crucial factors that still holds back their performances in ODL as system of learning. Majority of Tanzanians lack the proper training on how ODL operates and what it stands for; this as a result complicates the successful adoption and coping ability of the unconventional system of learning of these students. ICT and ODL are two inseparable elements; and all ODL stakeholders are required to be comfortable with ICT. But ODL students in Tanzania are still hampered by ICT illiteracy. A study by Mnyanyi and Mbwette (2009) had a similar finding, where OUT students claimed they were victims of ICT illiteracy as to some of them, even operating a computer was problematic. On the hand, the infrastructure system that facilitates the smooth operation of ICT is still poor in Tanzania. The country has been struggling with power/electricity issues ever since the early 90's. Power is the most unreliable element in the country, and this complicates education via ICT.

If you had admission opportunity in other higher learning institution apart from OUT. Where would you opt to study?
The Open University of Tanzania as an ODL institution offers affordable quality education and flexible learning opportunities to its clients. This as a result has been the competitive advantage of the institution for attracting customers with unique set of needs; as shown on the pie chart (Figure 3); where 72% of OUT students were confident about their choice of studying at the Open University of Tanzania and that they did so because their needs are well met at OUT/ODL institution.
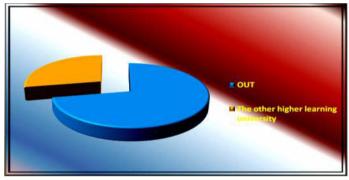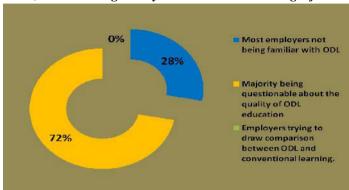

Figure 3: Opting for a place to study

On one hand the responses above clarifies that ODL is well received in Tanzania as it is designed to serve a unique market segment, and customers in this kind of a market segment are appreciative towards this system of learning and have purposely chose to be part of it. On the other hand; as a result of constraints that are encountered by ODL students in Tanzania choices of opting to study at OUT can be limited, the most outstanding constraint being lacking ICT knowledge. This justifies why 28% of the respondents in the study agreed to opting for other higher learning institution if they had admission opportunity there.

A significant 72% of the study's respondents have outlined that majority of employers were questionable about the quality of ODL education, this does not come as a surprise. Simply, because the nation has more alumni from conventional system of learning than the unconventional, as this type of learning represents a small population on the overall national population of university graduates. Hence the employers develop to trust what they are used to or familiar with, rather than different graduates they haven't tried before. In other words; these employers are still imprisoned on the belief that proper skills and knowledge is achieved by sitting in the class through out the year. Because employers were not familiar

with ODL, alumnus felt rejection of their entrance into the job market as indicated in figure 4 (28% response).

As an OUT alumnus, what challenges did you encounter in securing a job?

Figure 4: Challenges encountered in securing a job

CONCLUSION

It is an undeniable fact that ODL will remain an important element of present and future education and training system. However, the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the move towards more knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies creates new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of education. ICTs open up new horizons for progress and the exchange of creativity and intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless the growing digital divide is actually leading to greater inequalities in development. This is giving rise to paradoxical situations where those who have the greatest need of them. Disadvantaged groups, rural communities, illiterate populations or even entire countries do not have access to the tools which would enable them to become full-fledged members of the knowledge society.

Just like any other useful tool in the society Open and Distance Learning presents both opportunities from which massive populations of people benefit from and at the same time presents challenges in the same society on the such things as high pace technological advances constrained by the very scarce resources available in a society or country and Tanzania not being an exception.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the key recommendations from the study:

- OUT as an ODL higher learning institution has to invest more on developing its infrastructure which will enhance effective delivery of ODL.

- And OUT is required to properly motivate orient and develop its human resource in the use of ODL.

- As an admission criteria, OUT students must be required to posses ICT skills, and if not then a course on computer/ICT must be provided to these students before being admitted for a degree study at the university. This will solve the limitation most students claim to face as ODL students in accessing this system of learning.

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