

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AMONG FEMALE STUDENTS IN TANZANIA: EMPIRICAL VOICES FROM LEARNERS AT THE INSTITUTE OF ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Around the globe, open and distance learning in the education sector has been acknowledged positively. The special characteristic of distance education is that it is endowed with high flexibility and can meet the demands of education for all, which the conventional education system is unable to meet. This paper investigates the perceptions of open and distance learning among female students in Tanzania with a focus on the empirical voices from learners at the Institute of Adult Education. The study participants included students and tutors from the Institute of Adult Education. Data was collected through focus group discussions and interviews. The results show that female students had both positive and negative perception towards open and distance learning. These include flexibility of learning, ability to allow female students to pursue education along with household engagements, cost effectiveness, support from the tutors, inadequacy of learning materials and isolation tendency in the ODL mode.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, women students, adult education, ICT, Tanzania.

INTRODUCTION

Around the globe, education has been regarded as an important tool for transforming people's lives through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, beliefs and values (United Nations, 2015). In this regard, education should be matched with quality due to the fact that it is considered as a lifelong process whereby those in need learn and acquire various opportunities. With this understanding, policies such as Education for All (EFA) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were introduced (Msamada, 2020). EFA under the SDG4 focuses on the provision of quality education to all people. On the other hand, the Tanzania Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 1995 and that of 2014 are clear on the equality of education among learners. Additionally, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) insist on improving quality education. Also, the Tanzania Development Vision 2025 advocates the provision of high standard education for a well-educated and learning society to raise creativity and problem-solving skills among learners. Despite the emphasis on quantity and quality education for all, for a very long time, females' access to education has been a challenge compared to males' access (Peter, 2017; UNESCO, 2012). The reason is that formal education system is not capable of accommodating all the needy people (Msamada, 2020). That is why the ODL mode is being regarded as an alternative of formal education (URT, 2009), and is therefore of paramount importance since it helps marginalized groups, especially females, to fulfill their educational goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Distance Education is a global and rapidly growing phenomenon which offers formal learning opportunities to people who would not otherwise have access to schooling or college education. Teachers and students are separated by physical distance and the means by which they

communicate ranges from basic print material and the use of postal services to highly sophisticated communication technologies (Kapinga & Mtani 2019). The special characteristic of open and distance education is that it is endowed with high flexibility and can meet the demands of education for all, which the conventional education system is unable to meet. Moreover, distance education takes education to places and people hitherto unreached, transcending social, economic and geographical equality and thereby opening a new vista in our striving towards breaking the barriers of 'opportunity and equity' (Emmanuel et al., 2014). Because of these special features of distance education, it benefits certain categories of people who for various reasons are unable to avail of the formal education system. These include persons without formal qualifications, persons belonging to different age groups, disadvantages groups, and employed persons. There are large percentages of women in all the above categories. Thus women as a category could really take advantage of the provision of distance education in a large measure (Ogunsanmi & Owuamanam, 2014).

In various contexts, numerous studies agree that Open and Distance Learning is emerging as a significant component of life-long and training around the world (Musingafi et al., 2015). The study conducted by Mkwizu and Ngaruko (2020) revealed that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has grown into an important global strategy in resolving problems of access to education among both female and male students. Nyenya and Rupande (2015) concluded that that due to its importance, countries are striving to establish universities and colleges to accommodate both female and male students for ODL.

In Nigeria, the study conducted by Olori, Adesanya and Adu (2014) maintain that female's access to Open and Distance Learning is considered as an effective strategy for empowerment within the functional framework of lifelong learning. However, little number of enrolled female students has been a great challenge. Olori, Adesanya and Adu (2014) add that female students in both developed and developing countries do not accomplish their studies as many of them drop. Ajaz (2014) argued that female's access to open and distance education is dwindled because of the fact that there is little empowerment which will serve as a window towards challenging oppression which compels millions of people not to play a part in their society or in any way deny them their human rights.

A study by Emmanuel et al. (2014) on the impact of open and distance learning (ODL) in enhancing the status of women in Lagos State indicated that women also faced different types of challenges on the ODL programme which inhibited them from enjoying the programme to the fullest. DfID (2016) disclosed that in Zimbabwe, women students in ODL experienced personal, social, psychological, mental and financial problems as undergraduates. Moreover, Dube (2018) added that female's open and distance education was hindered by the communities' perceptions that have long relied upon women to perform domestic tasks, nurture men, rare children, care for the sick and elderly, visit the poor and maintain kin ties. In Ghana, the study by Poulin and Straut (2017) concluded that when women think about devoting energy to other pursuits, including those which are personal and private, the society notices selfishness and excessive individualism with fresh interests.

Moreover, there was a study conducted by Peter (2017) in Tanzania who posits that ODL is among the best modes of learning through in which people can access education. It was further claimed that the ODL mode is the best in eradicating gender disparities. Surprisingly, the gender gap in education, specifically in ODL offered by the Institute of Adult Education (IAE), still exists (Kapinga & Mtani, 2014). For instance, females' access to diploma education and their enrollment in ODL programmes is relatively lower compared to males. According to

Komba (2009), the analysis of ODL students' enrollment in the IAE from 1972 to 2006 showed that the females' rate was low compared to males. Even URT (2019) analysis of ODL learners' enrollment in IAE from 1997 to 2018 showed that female graduates' rate was low compared to males. These analyses indicated that there was a huge gender disparity in ODL. Moreover, Kusi, Antwi and Bampo (2018) support that there is variation between males' and females' enrollment in ODL, which creates gender disparities in education in Ghana.

In general, from the literature above, studies on open and distance learning in response to female students' experiences of learning at a distance mode of delivery in Tanzania and other countries are already exist. Yet, there is dearth of studies that have systematically studied the perceptions of ODL with voices from female students at the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania, and this study is expected to avail such a unique opportunity to explore the phenomenon in a developing country's context by specifically addressing the following question: What are the women learners perceptions of ODL in Tanzania?

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to investigate the perceptions of open and distance learning among female students in Tanzania with a focus on the empirical voices from learners at the Institute of Adult Education. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews. The qualitative approach was chosen because it produces the detailed description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences; and interprets the meanings of their actions on open and distance learning among women learners. Focus group discussions were chosen as a data collection tool because first, respondents not only responded to the researcher but to other respondents and their responses. Second, focus group discussion allowed group members to find out how others interpret the concepts, and whether they agree or disagree with the emerging issues. Third, focus group discussions enabled individual respondents with similar backgrounds to interact and express their attitudes thoughts and experiences of a phenomenon. Fourth, it enabled the researcher to get a lot of in-depth information in a short period of time. Fifth, it helped the researcher to discern the similarities and the differences in understanding of individual participants and, lastly, it fosters dynamics and helps the researcher to capture the experiences and insights that other methods could not.

On the other hand, interview was chosen as a data collection tool because first, it often produces the first-hand information by assuming that the best person to narrate any event is the one who witnessed or has been involved in it or experienced the situation. Second, it provides flexibility to the interviewers. Moreover, semi-structured interview is commonly used in research to corroborate data emerging from other data sources. Data for the present study were collected from the Institute of Adult Education. This area of study was purposely chosen because it provides education through open and distance mode of delivery. The participants were purposely chosen. A total of 24 first and second year diploma students were involved in the study. Each group consisted of five participants whereby two different groups of participants from each year were involved hence making four groups engaged in the focus group discussion. On the other hand, four tutors were interviewed. The information from the focus group discussions and interviews was audio recorded and later on transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis Process

Data from semi structured interview and focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis whereby they were organized into categories and themes and then interpreted as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e., patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and to use these themes to address the

research or say something about an issue. Earlier on, before commencing data collection, a research permit was obtained from the Institute of Adult Education. Thereafter, informed consent of participants on their willingness to participate in the study was signed to both students and tutors. Confidentiality of the information gathered and anonymity of the respondents were ensured.

RESULTS

Several issues emerged from the focus group discussions and interviews regarding the influence of open and distance learning among female students in Tanzania with a focus on the empirical voices from learners at the Institute of Adult Education. These are presented and discussed hereunder.

Open and Distance Learning Enhances Learning Flexibility among Female Students

Findings revealed that under Open and Distance Learning, participants acknowledged being comfortable with leaning due to flexibility that existed among learners. It was revealed that through ODL, distance female learners had greater freedom to choose what, when where and how to learn. The participants gave the following explanations:

As women, Open and Distance Learning to us is of a vital because of its flexibility. Flexibility in learning enables the learner to plan our activities according to our interest and enthusiasm. In this regard, as female learners' flexibility in learning is increasingly free from the limitations of the time, place and pace of study (FGD, Students from Group C).

A key attraction of open and distance learning has always been the flexibility it offers in terms of the time, place and pace of learning and teaching. This flexibility may go far beyond the freedom from time, place and pace to include freedom of choice in relation to issues and topics one might study as well as the type of assessment activities that one might choose to take in return for what kind of credit and at what cost (Interview, Tutor).

It is correct to say that female students enjoy the open and distance learning at this institute. This is because it has enabled us to study at our own place, time and pace. In the event of this level of flexibility, open and distance education serves as a minimalist educational provision, devoid of much of the thrills and frills of residential campus-based educational experience (FGD, Students from Group A).

ODL Enables Female Students to Pursue Education along with Household Engagements

The second theme that was mentioned by the participants regarding how they perceived open and distance learning was that ODL enabled female to pursue education along with household engagements. Participants disclosed that contrary to face to face classes, which required more time to attend classes, ODL enabled them to plan their timetable for learning and doing other businesses for income. The following testimonies were provided by the participants:

What we can explain to you is that open and distance learning is acknowledged positively because of the fact that, apart from being students at the Institute of Adult Education pursuing diploma or certificate, we are the mothers in our families. We are supposed to ensure that we maintain our families well. This has been possible because of the nature and modality of learning under open and distance learning (FGD, Students from Group B).

Currently, we are in our finals. We are studying Diploma and we expect to get our diploma award soon after completion. This will be possible to us because of the mode of delivery that allows us to study along with family responsibilities as mothers. Without ODL I think we would not have managed to study and fulfill our dreams of having diploma from this institution (FGD, Students from Group A).

Cost Effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning among Female Learners

Student respondents expressed positive views about the costs of Open and Distance Learning System of education. They view it as the opportunity through which their dream to get educated at a higher level is realised. The following scripts show their views:

We have been dreaming of studying but the conventional university education system would not allow us this is because we are not good financially. When figuring out how we can get our diploma at affordable price, we found that this institution is appropriate to students who are coming from low-income families. This system of distance learning has made it possible for me to start the programme and definitely I will finish it and get my degree at a very affordable cost (FGD, Students from Group A).

The objective of establishing this institution for the provision of education through open and distance mode in Tanzania was to provide an avenue for many people to learn and become better worker in a variety of professions or upgrade in their existing professions. It will allow students to study up to whatever level they wish. Since the cost is lowered compared to other universities, female students have been attracted to enroll at this institution (Interview, Tutor).

Support from the Tutors

Focus group discussions with students revealed that under open and distance learning, students were assigned a personal tutor. They further disclosed that the tutor monitors their progress at least once a month, and comments on draft essays when students want. Female students gave the following testimonies:

Indeed, what we can say is that academic support that we get from tutors enables the development of more interactive and personalized learning environments that require new ways of providing learning support for students on open and distance mode of delivery (FGD, Students from Group D).

Tutors have been seriously engaging students in learning and have been motivating them to learn in different learning and teaching contexts. Student engagement involves the interaction between time, effort and resources invested by students and the institution to optimize learning experience, enhance learning outcomes and develop the students' performance and the institution's reputation (Interview, Tutor).

Inadequacy of Learning Materials

Focus group discussions with students revealed that under open and distance mode, students experienced challenges associated with inadequacy of learning materials. Students pointed out that they depended much on modules provided by the tutors while in some areas those modules could not cover the syllabus in detail, especially for subjects which needed more practical skills. Students said the following:

Apart from its advantages, we face some challenges because some important courses are being taught very theoretically. For instance, the ICT course is being taught without computers which could help us to understand well its operational procedures (FGD, Students from Group A).

There are limited ICT facilities in our institution; the number of students surpasses the available ICT facilities. In this regard, our learning is more theoretical than how we expected. Few students who have their own electronic gadgets such as laptops are the ones enjoying to some extent (FGD, Students from Group C).

Isolation Tendency in the ODL Mode

Women students commented negatively about the isolation tendency in the open and distance mode. Participants argued that they needed to assist each other in academic issues but they failed to do so because they were separate from each other, hence it was difficult to conduct discussions. They argued that they only met during face-to-face sessions which were occupied with a lot of academic activities. Apart from that, each learner studies privately at home; the situation which creates loneliness to the learner who needs immediate peer assistance academically. Students further attested the following:

Open and distance learning as mode of delivery at this institution is somewhat cumbersome. We are indeed separated from our fellow students; this is so boring. Take an example, most of the time, we are studying independently; the situation which creates loneliness. Sometimes, we feel like we are isolated from the real classroom environment. So, it is very difficult to remain motivated in this kind of education (FGD, Students from Group B).

DISCUSSION

This study found that female learners had both positive and negative perceptions on open and distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education. One of the positive views of ODL among women that were mentioned by the participants was that ODL enhanced learning flexibility among them. The findings are in tandem with that of Msoffe (2016) who argued that open and distance learning remains the only viable option for reaching dispersed groups of people in remote areas. Mahsud and Haider (2014) added that ODL being flexible, it provides as many different ways as possible for students to access and engage with content and to communicate their progress. Naidu (2017) concluded that due to its flexibility, open and distance learning have been attracting many women learners regardless of their age and social engagements that they have in the communities.

Moreover, the participants who participated in the study were optimistic that open and distance learning was cost-effective to learners who could not pay tuition fees that were offered by conventional classes. It is clear that these learners considered ODL as the most cost effective mode of learning when compared to the conventional system. Dadigamuwa and Senanayake (2012) maintained that institutions which had ODL mode charged low tuition fees that majority of the learners could afford to pay. Similarly, Ajaz (2014) maintained that students in Pakistan saw open and distance learning as the opportunity through which their dreams to get educated at a higher level were fulfilled. Poulin and Straut (2017) concluded that open and distance learning was a solution to students from the lower-income families due to its affordability.

Furthermore, the study findings revealed that during the pursuance of the course, students were assigned tutors who played a great role to assist students in their academic endeavors. Segoe

(2014) opines that tutor support in open distance learning (ODL), which is beyond the scope of course material, is very important as it fosters collaborative learning and support in students. Peter (2017) added that this support could be extended to that of an educational counsellor or tutor counsellor, career guidance, manager, assessor, facilitator, demonstrator, role model or pastor and the tutor could also act as a friend and advocate for the student within the ODL system. In the same vein, Usun (2004) contended that through tutors' support, a distance education program must design and offer effective learner support services and systems which, in the long run, will make students feel comfortable during their studies.

Women students disclosed that inadequacy of learning materials through open and distance learning made some of the women participants to perceive the courses offered at the Institute of Adult Education negatively. Kapinga and Mtani (2014) purported that accessibility of necessary learning resources to distance learners are very important since they can help learners to undertake their studies in a comfortable manner. Peter (2017) cautioned that the absence of necessary learning resources can destroy the reputation of ODL programmes because apart from its low cost, learners in ODL can find themselves having a huge expenditure to cover up the gap of learning materials. Learners will be required to buy private books, print modules and save fund to attend private computer labs, the situation which was not expected and sought by majority of female learners before joining the programmes. Msamada (2020) added that students can fail to recommend the programme to other clients who are interested in the mode if the cost for materials will be higher. As such, Msoffe (2016) recommended that that the IAE should put great efforts in placing enough teaching and learning resources to distance learners since the incorporation of these resources can improve the acceptability of ODL programmes among learners and the community at large.

Findings further disclosed that through open and distance learning, women students failed to assist each other academically because of being isolated. Consequently, they do not get chance to share what they have learned. Gibson et al. (2001) maintain that it is very difficult to encourage students to learn through ODL since the facilitator and student rarely meet. Moreover, Weller (2002) argued that, it is very difficult to create successful analytical dialogue with students in a separate situation. It is also difficult for a tutor to facilitate online debates and attend to students' queries promptly (Hughes & Daykin, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Generally, open and distance learning is vital to many female students who want to access education of any kind. This has been shown through its importance that has made education accessible and reliable. It has managed to accommodate students from the lower-income families hence the number of students being enrolled has been increasing tremendously. Though there are some impediments towards women learners, the voices discussed above show that learners still believed much on its delivery. The most important issue is to ensure that learning materials to learners are accessible.

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