Prospects of Open and Distance Learning at the Open University of Tanzania Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic created a paradox in the continuity of education among students all over the world. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a vital solution to overcome barriers to education access associated with the pandemic. This paper analyzed the prospects of ODL at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic to avail potential opportunities for learning irrespective of emerging challenges. The study employs a qualitative research approach and an exploratory case study design. A sample of fifteen participants was purposively selected, and five ODL technical staff were conveniently sampled for the study. Findings showed that, following the COVID-19 pandemic, future plans and prospects of the ODL at OUT focus on increasing community awareness towards ODL, increasing flexibility for learning, and expanding enrollment rates. Furthermore, the OUT strives to increase accessibility for ODL by strengthening internet bandwidth to sustain distance learning and engaging financial institutions in supporting students' learning at the OUT. Based on the findings, the study recommends government organizations including the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) to establish ODL policies that will serve as guidelines for ODL operations and place equal promotion for learners' opportunities to education utilizing flexible ODL platforms at the OUT.

Keywords: *open and distance learning, online learning, blended learning, flexibility*

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become significant globally as an alternative mode to address the huge unmet demand for access to higher education (Nyandara, 2012). ODL is gaining importance in African Universities and globally, as universities use distance learning to increase people's access to education opportunities. Barriers such as household tasks, time constraints, and geographical boundaries are then reduced leading people to pursue education (Mathew & Iloanya, 2016). With the growing need for knowledge and skills for societal and economic transformation, people of all ages must have access to quality education to accomplish their career objectives and advance at work. Additionally, the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic created an increasing demand for distance and online learning at different levels of education to maintain smooth learning irrespective of teachers' physical absence (Pregowska et al., 2021). To attain 21st century skills, the use of technology for online learning

has been emerging and gaining increased attention among higher education institutions (HEIs). The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic created a crisis in HEIs at large because the traditional mode of education delivery experienced for several decades required students physical contact with course instructiors for lecture sessions (Onojah & Onojah, 2020; Toquero, 2020). This created an increasing need for strengthening educational services offered through ODL to continue learning as per structured course programs. ODL is a learning modality where the learners and course facilitators do not meet for physical classes, but they interact with each other through the use of media (Godrick, 2017). The concept of ODL was further defined by Biao (2012) as a means of knowledge acquisition in which educational actors create technology-enhanced learning environments that enhance learning at convenient periods and locations that satisfy their situations. The ODL is enhanced by the creation of learning possibilities that overcome barriers for the acquisition of education. The impediments to education can be attributed to geographical remoteness, personal responsibilities, or unsuitable courses offered to satisfy people's demands (Bozkurt, 2019). Omari and Kefiloe (2022) argued that ODL bridges the gap in the delivery and access to education by increasing and maximizing interaction among students, learning resources, course facilitators, and media interface. The main advantages of adopting ODL are linked to its flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and provision of practical education as deemed necessary by the students as per context. Similarly, ODL allows an expansion of enrollments at little cost when compared to the popular residential campus system (Musingafi et al., 2015).

In the context of ODL, flexibility denotes students' freedom of choice in terms of the time, place, and pace of learning and teaching (Bergene et al, 2023; Naidu, 2017). At the heart of ODL, flexibility allows students to schedule a convenient time to learn and choose the course most relevant to the knowledge and skills needed. ODL fosters students' flexibility to have access to higher education through online learning. Similarly, online learning is a form of distance education that is enhanced through e-learning resources (Sadiku et al., 2018). In order to facilitate ODL, electronic resources and activies can be useful in ensuring students' interactions in the absence of course instructors.

Towards increasing people's access to education, ODL in the context of Tanzania has capitalized on the regular use of blended learning. Blended learning is a form of educational delivery that involves face-to-face and online instruction or learning (Hrastinski, 2019). Blended learning involves combining pedagogical approaches and a wide range of instructional technologies to optimize the learning process (Cronje, 2020). When students learn utilizing blended learning, they require both offline and online participations in the learning process. Similarly, online learning makes use of internet services to access and retrieve materials (Hoi et al., 2018). Education programs through Zoom, Telegram, or other video conferencing applications require stable internet for effective strong connectivity. Through ODL, students irrespective of not being in atraditional learning environment acquire knowledge and skills through distance education (Cronje, 2020). By comparing these learning modes, it can be asserted that ODL is an umbrella learning strategy that embeds other forms of learning to maximize its flexibility and adaptability to a wider scope

of access to higher education. In these perspectives, the OUT configures the use of blended learning to make effective use of available digital resources for students' flexibility in access to education.

Worldwide, the demand for a highly skilled workforce to drive the competitive, knowledge-based economy, fueled by scientific innovations and the effects of globalization, has continually increased the need for ODL (Godrick, 2017; Manson, 2016). On this basis, the provision of education services by means of ODL in HEIs has continued to improve in many countries. For example, in China, the Open University of China (OUC) which was established in 1978 had over 2900 HEI offering diploma and degree programs employing ODL in 2017 (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019). In Germany, HEIs are committed to the provision of education in a wide range of online education programs. Collective initiatives for strengthening opportunites for ODL have resulted in an increased youth admission in HEIs. In South Korea, the provision of education has constantly responded to increased technological innovation by digitalizing teaching and learning practices thus, promoting ODL as a strategic goal for economic growth and invention (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019).

In Africa, notable efforts to increase the provision of education through ODL have been experienced in different countries. For example, the University of South Africa (UNISA) emerged as the first African distance HEI in 1873 (Craven, 2019; Manson, 2016; Maritim et al., 2012). In Nigeria, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), established in 1983 and with campuses in Lagos, Adamawa, Borno, and Kan accepted 32,400 pioneer students in 50 education programs (Eyisi et al., 2021). These initiatives for the establishment of ODL captivated a great number of qualified youths to benefit from higher education. Strategically, there is a progressive move in the education sector as ODL is currently transforming higher education in Africa. For example, Oladejo and Gesinde (2014) argue that the ODL revolution across the African continent was evidenced in the countries of Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Sudan, Rwanda, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Kenya. These countries are at present offering ODL by means of a single or dual modes, consequently, reducing obstacles for people being admitted for higher education. ODL has contributed significantly to an increased education opportunity for people in Sub-Saharan countries. For example, from 1992 to 2003, Malawi had 18,000 graduate teachers through ODL, a significant achievement as it would usually take 12 years to train this number of teachers using traditional methods in colleges (Oladejo & Gesinde, 2014).

The Relevance of Open and Distance Learning in Tanzania

The provision of ODL in developing countries including Tanzania is vital for increasing the knowledge and skills that people need in order to master their environment (Godrick, 2017). In 1992, the Parliament recommended the establishment of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) which began to offer higher education through distance learning in 1994 (Kagugu, 2011; Mhache, 2013; Msoffe, 2016). As asserted by Mbwette and Kazungu (2012), the primary purpose for the establishment of OUT was to expand the scope of adult learners' accessibility to higher education. The OUT is an accredited

government institution that offers a broad range of degree programs through blended learning. ODL aims to lessen barriers to education and expand the scope for increased education opportunities regardless of their societal, cultural, and political backgrounds and time constraints. During the beginning of its operations in 1994, OUT had an initial enrollment of 766 students (Mbwette & Kazungu, 2012). By 2008, OUT had already admitted 40,146 students into various education programs (Mnyanyi & Mbwette, 2009). However, low enrollment of students pursuing higher education at OUT was observed and was ascribed to people's perceived negative attitude towards OUT as an HEI exclusive only to adults. The establishment of OUT fostered the inclusion of course programs with knowledge and skills relevant to the world of work for adult learners. One of the initiatives involved removing barriers to people with the least prerequisite of joining directly to the university (Sanga, 2013). ODL also provides chances for the personnel in the profession to proceed with learning while earning (Msoffe, 2016; Sanga, 2013).

Education at OUT is offered through blended learning (OUT, 2016). Blended learning is a learning mode that involves the combination of online and direct instructions (Moskal et al., 2013). The blended mode of learning encourages the use of various platforms which include online applications, mobile technologies, and resources that exist in the cloud. The blended mode of education delivery involves the utilization of various means of technologies such as Zoom and Moodle and video and teleconferencing (Mathew & Iloanya, 2016). Students enrolled at OUT are obliged to become proactive in using different sources of information for the construction of new knowledge in constructivist learning. In this view, students undertaking studies through ODL are likely to develop a sense of independent learning by reading and taking critical reflections on what they learn.

Presently, the OUT has 32 centers with 89,056 students being registered in various education programs. Blended learning has become the popular mode of education delivery for the purpose of increasing flexibility for students' access to education irrespective of their geographical boundaries. Among these 32 centers, there is one center registered at the headquarters to accommodate all international students pursuing their studies in different programs at the OUT. With technological advancements in teaching, sessions for face-to-face learning sessions between students and instructors have decreased drastically. The use of learning platforms such as Moodle and Zoom with adequate internet services has enhanced the operations of ODL.

ODL has continued to become a flexible means of equitably enhancing education delivery by removing barriers to geographically marginalized individuals and women with domestic duties, enhancing their empowerment (Bergene et al., 2023). Perraton et al. (2002) and Komba (2009) stated that ODL provides a venue for teachers to advance the knowledge and skills related to their job performance. In addition, it catalyzes teachers' continual professional growth regardless of their context and professional responsibilities (Moore & Benson, 2012). The ODL also fosters lifelong learning by enabling people to explore all possible learning opportunities and enhance the knowledge development of teachers in inaccessible areas through increased education opportunities

(Alvarez et al., 2020; Leopold, 2017). The operation of ODL therefore addresses the challenges to conventional teaching and learning practices in terms of cost, access, and quality of education by increasing education opportunities for geographically marginalized individuals. Gupta (2008) claimed that, because of the increased demand for students' enrollment in HEIs, ODL is the means to overcome the amplified massive enrollment in higher education.

Future success and goal attainment for the provision of ODL depends on various strategies that various HEIs will put into action. The epistemological stance towards ODL is recognized for its significant contribution to an improved economy if all its vested potentials are realized (Godrick, 2017). While reflecting on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on HEIs, the promising future for the ODL in Tanzania is viewed in its capacity to increase opportunities for higher education (Mbwette & Kazungu, 2012; Mirata et al., 2022). This will be made possible by transforming ways of ODL institutional operations to align with new technological innovations that create interactive, effective, and quality education services (Mbwette & Kazungu, 2012; Sife et al., 2007). One of the transformations involved making use of the available resources to improve education delivery through ODL and reduce physical barriers.

At the broader ambit of distance education, the OUT has been identified as having conducive learning platforms similar to some notably developed countries in terms of technological innovation for learning. For example, a comparative study by Nyandara (2012) on the provision of ODL between Tanzania and the Center for Continuing and Distance Education (CCDE-China) explored the similar use of technological devices in the delivery of education. However, China went the extra mile by adopting the use of e-mails in education services. In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, OUT like other ODL institutions in the world expanded and strengthened access to education with the support of digital resources (Mirata et al., 2022).

Objectives

Specifically, the study intended to analyze the prospects of the ODL at the OUT after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase community understanding of the flexible HEI available. The findings of the study will add knowledge about the relevance of ODL in Tanzania. By analyzing prospects for OUT, education actors will be informed on adapting the use of ODL for sustainability and continuity in education irrespective of lockdowns that might arise as a result of a pandemic.

Theoretical Underpinning of Open and Distance Learning and its Implications

ODL is underpinned by the constructivist framework. Constructivism is an instructional approach that is student-centered in the construction of knowledge with students having control of their own learning (Tenenbaum et al., 2001). According to Tenenbaum et al. (2001), the constructivist theory recognizes that students' learning is not strictly limited within the boundaries of the formal educational institution, but rather, takes a broader context of their academic lives through the use of social media and the vast potential of the technology

involved in teaching. In a constructivist learning theory, the gap between formal education institutions and the broader community becomes narrower as a unique set of learning opportunities are created (Reid-Martinez & Grooms, 2015). The use of telecommunication technologies in ODL is congruent with the use of constructivist perspectives by giving students chances to connect themselves with other people all over the world. As a result of interactions, students can carry out research and discuss subject matter content through a collaborative and interactive learning environment (Tam, 2000). Similarly, teaching technologies such as computer-mediated communications, computer-supported collaborative assignments and e-resources create a supportive, collaborative, and social learning environment that aligns with the constructivist learning perspective (Chen et al., 2018; Lazou & Tsinakos, 2022; Rosé & Ferschke, 2016). Constructivism pushes for active, collaborative, and responsible learning as consistent with the ODL principle of independent learners.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach and exploratory case study design in order to explore the phenomena and the participants' view in their natural setting (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) argues that using exploratory design in a case study enables the researcher to immerse in the participants' context to explore their lived experiences of the topic under investigation. Furthermore, Yin (2009) asserts that the use of an exploratory case study provides the researcher with an opportunity to explore phenomena in their natural context, consequently, facilitating an in-depth analysis of the research topic. Data for the study were collected by using interviews with fifteen (15) academic staff from OUT who were purposively selected. Similarly, five technical staff were conveniently selected to be involved in the study. Documentary review was also carried out in order to capture essential information and enhance the triangulation of findings. Data were thematically analyzed in six stages. The stages for thematic analysis involve familiarizing with the data, creating initial codes, searching, revising, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Discussion

Findings from the study indicated that there are six prospects of the ODL at OUT vested following the emergence of COVID-19. These prospects include deliberately executing the institutional vision and mission at OUT, raising community awareness of the presence of OUT, increasing flexibility in the enrollment rate to utilize available ODL learning facilities, engaging financial institutions in the provisions of students' loans, strengthening the integration of ICT in education delivery, and enriching courses and programs as per market demand. Each of these themes is discussed in the subsequent sections:

Deliberate Execution of Institutional Vision and Mission at OUT

Commitment to the operation of ODL at OUT based on its vision and mission was the focus of the institution in realization of future operation of the ODL. Document

analysis showed that the institution's efforts and performance aligned with its mission and vision. OUT's vision of becoming "*A leading open online University in knowledge creation and application*" and its mission is, "*To provide relevant, quality, flexible, accessible and affordable open online education, research and services to community for social economic development of Tanzania and the rest of the world*" were visibly reflected.

It was revealed that daily operations at the OUT are prompted by institutional vision and mission which guides the organization's culture and practices. The enactment of central functions of the OUT and its strategic plans best describes operational procedures reflected in its mission and vision. Consequently, the mission and vision play a role by guiding the institutional operations and practices for the promotion of ODL in Tanzania. As asserted by Siakas et al. (2005), mission and vision articulate the main purpose and responsibilities of the organization and lead to the attainment of the plans. In addition, leaders' continual commitment to OUT's mission and vision enhances strategic planning and management of institutional processes (Maleka, 2014).

Raising Community Awareness of the Presence of Open and Distance Learning in Tanzania

Community awareness is vital for understanding potential opportunities related to learning through ODL. Awareness creation enables people to make choices on the type of education to pursue by considering the knowledge and skills an individual needs and the country's priorities. Findings revealed that increasing the community awareness of the presence of ODL as an accredited learning institution was among the future opportunities to be reinforced. It was reported that the OUT intends to strengthen institutional posters for prospective students on the presence of educational opportunities at OUT by creating awareness for students who are still in secondary schools. The plan intended to involve educational coordinators commonly known as Ward Educational Officers (WEO) so that students become knowledgeable of its existence and possibly, opt to advance their studies through OUT as an accredited and equally reputable HEI. For instance, once a participant clarified:

> We are continuing with marketing of the OUT. Currently we have established Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) in each region. The Regional Commissioner by position holding become the chairperson of the advisory committee to the Open University in place on matters related to institutional visibility and its operations because we have complete institutional structure in each region. Also, we have decentralized issues of graduation ceremony into regions so as to keep on promoting the visibility of the OUT. (Interview, P4 from OUT)

Community understanding of ODL as a flexible learning opportunity depends on the extent to which individuals are familiar with its existence and benefits. In transforming people's mindset about ODL, Sanga (2013) asserts that initiatives are required to publicize OUT and course programs offered through outreach activities in remote areas. According to Sanga (2013), the government and the general public intends to increase people's awareness and provide support in

the promotion of OUT. Knowledge of the ODL philosophy and mode of delivery increases understanding of opportunities for learning, the value of existing technology, and its capability to support learning for bridging the knowledge gap and understanding alternative approaches to learning regardless of age and location (Liu et al., 2007; Pant, 2008). Furthermore, through documentary analysis, it was noticed the presence of brochures with various degree programs offered at OUT were prepared for visitors and dissemination in different schools for the creation of awareness of the opportunities at OUT.

Increasing Flexibility in Enrollment Rate to Utilize Available ODL Learning Facilities

The creation of a flexible learning environment is one of the attributes mostly considered in the delivery of education through ODL so that learners are provided with diverse ways of learning (Oladejo & Gesinde, 2014). Findings through interviews revealed that an increased flexibility of the learning environment would lead to an increased enrollment. In addition, it was observed that OUT had adequate facilities to accommodate whatever increase in the number of students because in most cases the available facilities are underutilized. In emphasizing plans to increase enrollment at OUT, one participant highlighted:

> We are planning to increase students' enrollment rate from 89,056 to 150,000 by enrolling each year at least 15,000 students. The target candidates are those from the formal system due to massively enrollment resulting from fee-free education and increased classroom enrollment through "(UVICO-19)" classes. Furthermore, increasing enrollment is a country's response to Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and World Bank projects which address the promotion of education for all. (Interview, P1 from OUT)

With the adequate learning infrastructure being underutilized, another participant supplemented on the potential opportunity of using the resources available by articulating that:

> We intend to promote flexibility in terms of enrollment time by increasing number of intakes from November first intake to the second intake in April. In addition, flexibility will be more improved in matters related to certification where upon successful completion and approval by the responsible authority, the graduate will be awarded the certificate so that they can use to request for promotion at work or securing jobs rather than waiting for graduation. (Interview, P3 from OUT)

These findings provide relevant evidence for the future commitment towards increasing students' enrollment and therefore widening the opportunity to access higher education which conventional institutions could not manage. This strategy is likely to contribute to the massive increase of people with relevant skills to serve the country from local, regional, and global perspectives and contribute to social and economic reforms. The OUT's prospects in improving education delivery utilizing ODL correspond with the 1997 SADC Procedure on Education and Training Development that recognizes ODL as a means for

intensifying opportunities for education for people with limited chances to attend face-to-face classes (Maritim et al., 2012). It is further asserted that, by using ODL, a vast number of learners are equipped with skills for the implementation of a multifaceted regional developmental agenda.

Engaging Financial Institutions in the Provisions of Students' Loans

It was found that few students are enrolled at OUT because of financial constraints encountered as compared to those admitted in conventional higher learning institutions. It was realized that plans of the OUT to increase students' enrollment should involves engaging financial institutions that are eligible to provide loans for students upon their admission at OUT. For example, one of the senior staff at OUT said that:

> The OUT intends to involve financial institutions such as Banks (National Microfinance Bank in particular) in giving students' loans when being admitted at OUT under specific contractual agreements between students and the bank in which the OUT will make confirmation of students' admission status to the bank. (Interview, P1 from OUT)

Students' financial support for pursuing higher education and institutional support services are imperative for their smooth learning. In Tanzania, for example, the Higher Education Students' Loans Board (HESLB) plays a vital role in ensuring that many Tanzanian students get access to higher education. The current financial support indicates that many students especially those enrolled at the OUT are less considered for financial support. Nyahende (2013) stated that financing higher education in Tanzania increases enrollment of students in higher learning institutions. A response to the funding crisis involves increasing the significant scale of private funding of higher education. This strategy of engaging financial institutions in provisions of funds among students was also supported by Guille (2000) who argues that the World Bank, non-governmental organizations and other financial institutions are entitled to support students equitably to have access to higher education. Additionally, Guri-Rosenblit (2019) and Garrett (2016) suggested that administrators can strategize to identify possible target groups with challenging social and economic backgrounds in terms of education access. Financial support through provisions of loans to students admitted at OUT can increase students' enrollment rate and motivate more people to seek admission similarly.

Strengthening the Integration of ICT in Education Delivery

ICT integration in teaching and learning, research, and administrative purposes is imperative for successful and efficient ODL operations. Findings revealed that OUT has adequate ICT infrastructures which are underutilized due to the small number of students enrolled. On such grounds, great emphasis is on promoting its maximum utilization through increased enrollment in different programs. To underscore this point, one of the participants said that:

> We have sustainable ICT infrastructures. During COVID-19, we thought of having home-based assessment and we started conducting

online Oral Examination (OREX) and managed to assess almost 2,000 students at their home place without coming to our regional centers. Currently, we have established On Demand Examination (ODEX) which provides great flexibility for our students to request for examination independently upon completion of the courses. (interview, P1 from OUT)

In addition, another technical staff added some important issues related to the process of strengthening ICT integration in the delivery of education by means of ODL by articulating that:

ICT is the major technology for OUT operations that supports the continued transformation of the teaching and learning process from using CD to Moodle, Zoom, and video conferencing. Therefore, we are very keen in ensuring stable internet and use of modern learning facilities. (Interview, P5 from OUT)

Based on the participants' responses, the prospects of the OUT in ensuring maximum and efficient ODL operations potentially rest on strengthening the bandwidth of internet service capacities. Through documentary analysis and observation of ICT internet setting, it was found that, currently, the OUT has 20 established systems of interconnected internet which are stable to help education delivery through ODL by using various learning programs which can include Moodle and Zoom that require highly stable internet services. These findings are supported by Guri-Rosenblit (2019) who argued that ODL institutions require digital technology from local and global perspectives to enable staff to deliver the courses effectively, be involved in research fellows' teams, and collaborate with other HEI. To support the idea, Perraton et al. (2002) assert that ICT plays a great role in ODL by facilitating two-way computer-mediated learning through networked computers and diversified resource-based learning. Alvarez et al. (2020) supported that the introduction of the internet and technology changed the way in which teaching and learning in ODL are upheld. Increasing internet capacity can improve the effectiveness of digital learning tools and platforms such as Zoom, and Moodle. The increased bandwidth leads to smoother video conferencing and better access to computer mediated programs, optimizing the learning in ODL.

Enriching Courses and Programs as per Market Demand

Continuing enrichment of courses and programs as per market demand is one of the prospects of OUT in ensuring sustained expansion of students' access to higher education. Findings indicated that students registered at OUT have the freedom to choose programs and courses based on job market demand and affordability. In addition, findings indicated that students with admission at OUT can register and pay for courses based on their financial ability until course requirements are accomplished. For instance, OUT introduced a curriculum for entrepreneurship education to provide students with skills highly required for self-employment. One of the participants mentioned that:

Apart from teaching development studies and communication skills as

> university-wide courses, we also teach entrepreneurship course. This course has its own respective department. We offer entrepreneurship courses at all levels. Also, we have a diploma course using the NACTE curriculum particularly for the ICT courses. All these are referred to as non-degree programmes. Even when you see our graduation book, we have all these courses and we are thinking of developing them for Diploma, Bachelor, Masters and PhD levels. (Interview, P1from OUT)

The argument by the participant indicates that market demand for skills determines the nature of course programs offered at OUT. With an increased need for job-related skills in the 21st century, the process of learning becomes learner-centered with adequate student flexibility in choosing courses and/or programs as per their demand. The aim is to ensure that individuals explore the maximum learning opportunities available through ODL. As evidenced by Sanga (2022), the OUT provides various courses based on students' needs to strengthen their competencies at work and promote efficiency in job performance. Gumpot (2000) asserted that course restructuring in ODL higher education institutions should rely on market discourse for people to demonstrate skills that are market responsive.

The prospects of ODL can be further analyzed in its flexible nature of education delivery. The ODL offers freedom for students to choose a convenient time for learning and serves as a means for improving knowledge and skills for those who did not acquire it in conventional institutions (Sanga, 2022). Mbwette and Kazungu (2012) assert that ODL provides adult learners with a broad range of choices for courses useful in job-related skills because various degrees and non-degree programs are offered by OUT through various means of communication including correspondence, e-learning, and some on-campus sessions. Commonly, blended learning mode which combines two or more modes of teaching and learning is frequently used. In Africa and Tanzania in particular, educational operation by means of ODL at OUT depends on the institutional mission and vision. Most ODL institutions operations in Sub-Sahara are not informed by their corresponding national ODL policy to govern the general provision of education (Mathew & Iloanya, 2016; Oladejo & Gesinde, 2014; Sanga, 2022).

ODL provision at OUT is potentially an opportunity to provide higher education to a wider population while they remain in their employment and other services (Sanga, 2022). It further creates opportunities for gender equality in access to education particularly for women who are overwhelmed with family responsibilities (Nyangarika & Mtani, 2020). Towards the realization of a knowledge-based economy, the OUT can make use of advanced technology-based instructions to increase learners' interaction in the process of learning despite existing geographical barriers among students (Nyangarika & Mtani, 2020; Sanga, 2022).

Conclusion

The findings of the study have demonstrated that the future operation of ODL is a function of various strategies that cover the deliberate execution of institutional vision and mission at OUT: raising community awareness for the

presence of OUT, increasing flexibility in enrolment rate to utilize available ODL learning facilities, engaging financial institutions in the provisions of students' loans, strengthening the integration of ICT in education delivery, and enriching courses and programs as per market demand. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the OUT has a rich learning repertoire of prospects that need to be fully utilized in an attempt to promote education access. With due increase of the population in Tanzania and other developing countries, the prominence of ODL will continue to increase in order to increase people's access to higher education. Increasing awareness of ODL will create interest and upsurge in education access among the people in need of higher education.

Recommendations

Drawing on the conclusion of the study, this paper recommends that, together with the government establishing ODL policy, the OUT is required to have a greater commitment to its mission, vision, and other strategic rolling plans to efficiently manage institutional operations. Deliberate efforts to advertise learning opportunities through ODL should be made through social media in order to capture a massive number of needy people. Similarly, the institution responsible for monitoring admissions as well as provisions of student's loans should place equal priorities in terms of students' admission and financial support for students at OUT. Likewise, OUT should strengthen the band of internet connectivity to extend access to higher education as a result of the increased population.

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