



An Investigation into the Challenges Faced by ODL Students in Iringa, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study investigated the challenges faced by students pursuing their studies through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Iringa, Tanzania. It employed a qualitative research approach guided by a phenomenological research design. The target population comprised the Regional Resident Tutor, the Director of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), instructors, and ODL students, from the Institute of Adult Education and the Open University of Tanzania, Iringa Branch. The sample consisted of 42 participants: 10 instructors, 30 ODL students, one Regional Resident Tutor, and one Director of OUT. Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions and were analysed thematically. The study identified several challenges, including inadequate study time, poor customer care, financial constraints, family responsibilities, and the remoteness of many learners' locations due to insufficient ODL centres in the region. Additional challenges included limited employer and managerial support and inadequate infrastructure. The study concluded that instructors should adopt friendly, reliable, and effective approaches to deliver learning materials. Furthermore, the government, through school heads and relevant authorities, should create a supportive environment by allowing teachers to pursue further studies in a timely and flexible manner and by providing both moral and material support. Basing on the findings and conclusion made, it is also recommended that the government through the Institute of Adult Education increase the number of ODL centres in rural areas to enhance face-to-face and online learning interactions between students and tutors. Additionally, the Higher Education Students' Loans Board (HESLB) should extend loan opportunities to students enrolled in ODL programmes.

Keywords: adult, adult education, open and distance learning

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasises ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. In recognition of this, countries globally continue to prioritise adult education, to enable active participation in development agendas (UNESCO, 2014). Adult education plays a key role in building social capital, fostering social inclusion, and promoting active citizenship. Basic and essential life skills remain unmet needs for many individuals across both developed and developing contexts. In ensuring adult education is accessible to all, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a global strategy to expand access to education and equip individuals with these essential skills (UNESCO, 2014).

In the 21st century, many educational institutions, particularly in developed countries, have shifted from purely campus-centred higher education models to ODL models leveraging information and communication technologies (ICT) (Bozkurt, 2022). Universities increasingly offer distance learning programmes to adult learners. Adult education is particularly important because adults play vital roles in family welfare and community survival (Tait, 2021). Accordingly, investment in ODL has become a concern for individuals, families, communities, and states, either individually or collectively.

The main benefits of ODL relate to flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and life-relevant education opportunities. ODL enables an expansion of tertiary enrolments at lower costs per student than conventional residential campus systems (Zawacki-Richter, 2019). Its flexibility allows courses to rely to students' specific needs or work requirements, enhancing relevance (Bozkurt, 2022). ODL also supports the growing demand for lifelong learning more effectively than residential programmes. Furthermore, ODL can reach learners who have been historically excluded from formal education, including women constrained by household responsibilities or cultural norms, economically marginalised groups, and even incarcerated individuals (Anderson, 2020).

At independence in 1961, mainland Tanzania (then Tanganyika) had an illiteracy rate of 80 per cent. Disease prevalence was high, often attributed to witchcraft, and poverty was widespread. People commonly attributed these conditions to divine will. Political will, resource availability, economic factors, and governance further affected adult education provision. Oppong (2006) and Mpoki et al. (2017)

highlighted a lack of data analysing age, sex, motivations, needs, obstacles, and participation rates among adults, with many of these issues rooted in colonial governance. Recognising this, President Julius K. Nyerere launched a national campaign against the three major enemies - ignorance, disease, and poverty. Consequently, adult education in Tanzania became a central instrument for national development. Its purpose shifted from merely imparting basic literacy skills to fostering self-reliance and improving quality of life at both the individual and national levels. Literacy programmes emphasised practical themes such as health, agriculture, and civic responsibilities, integrating skills in response to learners' growing awareness of their functional importance (URT, 2018).

Implementation of the strategies was coordinated by the Institute of Adult Education (IAE), which initially had planning and provision authority (URT, 2010), and later, through decentralisation, by local governments (Heikkinen et al., 2022). This approach reduced gaps created by formal education failures and encouraged learners to acquire knowledge applicable to their environment for personal and community development.

Today, the IAE serves as a centre for learning, research, and training in adult education at Certificate, Diploma, and Degree levels. Its services extend to the grassroots through regional centres across the 26 regions of mainland Tanzania, aiming to design, develop, and deliver accessible lifelong education programmes through blended learning for sustainable socio-economic development locally, regionally, and globally (Institute of Adult Education, 2018).

The Institute of Adult Education (IAE) offers a wide range of programs tailored to adult learners, focusing on personal, professional, and academic development. These include literacy and basic education courses, GED and secondary school equivalency programs, vocational and technical training, and certification programs in fields like IT, healthcare, and business. IAE also provides opportunities for adults to pursue associate and bachelor's degrees, career development support, life skills courses, and language classes, such as ESL or foreign languages. With flexible learning modes, including online and evening classes, adult learners can balance education with work and family commitments. Additionally, the institute offers personal development programs in areas like health and wellness, financial literacy, and communication skills, as well as resources like career counselling and job placement assistance, making education accessible to adults at any stage of life (Institute of Adult Education, 2018).

This paper focuses on three objectives: assessing situational challenges facing ODL, examining institutional challenges affecting ODL, and exploring personal challenges experienced by ODL students.

A growing body of literature documents diverse challenges that hinder the effectiveness of learners pursuing their studies through ODL across contexts.

Garland (2017) identified situational challenges that limit students' persistence in distance learning, including poor learning environments and insufficient study time. Many students reported that courses required more time than anticipated, making it difficult to balance work, family, and school responsibilities. Similarly, Kember (1989) and Garland (2017) noted that poor time management undermines learners' ability to integrate academic, occupational, and social obligations. Bozkurt, (2022), drawing on Muilenburg and Berge (2001) and Shah and Cheng (2019), also identified inadequate information dissemination skills, particularly in developing countries where ICT competence is crucial for meaningful ODL engagement. Other frequently cited barriers include high programme costs, financial constraints, household responsibilities, inadequate equipment and infrastructure, instructional weaknesses, poor technical support, social isolation, and limited family or employer support.

Extending the analysis, Musingafi et al. (2015) classified distance-learning challenges into situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and cultural categories. Zirkle (2015) also highlighted obstacles such as programme costs, poor infrastructure, lack of technical support, limited instructor feedback, and weak student services.

A study by Ukpo (2015) reported that teachers in ODL programmes often experience delays in receiving learning materials, financial pressures from additional income-generating activities, and weak support services, particularly in under-resourced centres. Without effective learner-support systems offering face-to-face consultations, timely feedback, and library access, academic achievement suffers, increasing dropout and procrastination rates (Kamau et al., 2017).

To address these challenges, Musingafi et al. (2015) recommended learner-responsive teaching systems that motivate students to persist and advocate for the institution. Similarly, Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) noted that well-managed ODL programmes can enhance access to quality higher education for previously marginalised groups, contributing to national and global development through a more skilled workforce.

In Tanzania, Nyangarika and Bundala (2020) examined leadership challenges affecting ODL administration. They identified issues such as limited tutor involvement in decision-making, poor communication, and inconsistent leadership styles. The authors concluded that effective leaders cultivate shared values, encourage teamwork, and motivate staff towards common goals. UNESCO (2014) similarly emphasised technical competence in ODL, including the ability to operate ICT hardware and software and utilise networked systems for information exchange (Warschauner, 2003).

Although earlier evaluations reported notable successes in adult education expansion (UNESCO, 2017), by 2015 persistent challenges had emerged for ODL students (Bozkurt, 2022). Many struggled to balance time demands with work and family obligations. High rates of poor academic progress were observed, with some students failing to complete programmes on time and others withdrawing. These findings underscore the need for further investigation into the challenges faced by adult education students undertaking ODL in Iringa, Tanzania.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the Iringa Region, as it hosts centres of both the Institute of Adult Education and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The region has recorded notable cases of students failing to complete their studies, resulting in dropouts (Author, 2023). A qualitative approach was adopted to obtain detailed information from informants in their natural settings, capturing their constructed meanings, opinions, values, behaviours, and perspectives (Kombo & Tromp, 2006; Creswell, 2009).

The study employed a phenomenological research design to examine human experiences as expressed by participants. This design was selected because of its strength in exploring qualitatively the various ways individuals experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand phenomena within real-life contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample comprised 10 instructors, 30 Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students, one resident tutor, and one OUT director. ODL students were selected through simple random sampling, while Regional Resident Tutor, the Director of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and instructors, were purposively selected based on their roles in supporting ODL students and their involvement in the learning process.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews were administered face-to-face, and the researcher recorded them using a

smartphone and a notebook. Focus group discussions were conducted with ODL students, guided by specific questions posed by the researcher. Data were analysed thematically, with participants' views reported directly through verbatim quotations. All participants were treated in accordance with established research standards and ethical norms, ensuring respect for their rights and dignity. The researcher adhered to all ethical considerations relevant to human subjects in research.

Results and Discussion

The study sought to investigate the challenges affecting students pursuing their studies through ODL in Iringa Municipality. Findings from the interviews and focus group discussions revealed a range of situational, institutional, and personal challenges as presented hereunder.

Situational challenges

One of the instructors noted that inadequate classroom space posed a major challenge, as illustrated in the following quotation:

...Poor infrastructure, such as inadequate classrooms, is also a challenge facing the Open and Distance Learning programme in Iringa. We do not have enough classrooms. As an institution, we sometimes use the classrooms of nearby schools. At times, the leader is forced to look for centres outside the main ODL office in order to offer services, especially in remote areas... (Interview with ODL instructor, January 2025).

Students, instructors, and the Regional Resident Tutor all agreed that the number of ODL centres in Iringa Municipality is insufficient. Most centres are located in urban areas, making it difficult for individuals in rural and remote areas to access ODL services. Commenting on this, one student explained:

The centres are too far from where I work; this makes it difficult for me to attend face-to-face meetings and discussions. I think the centres should be established even in rural areas. (Interview with ODL student, January 2025).

Another learner expressed similar concerns:

Indeed, the centres for Open and Distance Learning are not enough. For example, I work in Morogoro Region, but I attend face-to-face sessions in Iringa because it is the nearest centre to my workplace. This shows that there are still too few ODL centres in Tanzania. (Interview with ODL student, January 2025).

Interviews with ODL learners also revealed strategies for managing these challenges. One student suggested:

There is a need to reduce tuition fees and improve infrastructure and resources such as libraries, classrooms, and ICT facilities. (Interview with ODL student, January 2025).

These findings align with Zirnkle (2015), who identified programme costs, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional challenges, and poor technical assistance as major barriers to distance learning. Zirnkle also highlighted inadequate feedback, limited teacher contact, isolation, and weak student support services as persistent concerns.

Additionally, the study found that poor infrastructure, such as inadequate classroom facilities, limited ICT services, and insufficient access to computers, internet connectivity, and mobile networks, remains a significant challenge for ODL learners. These findings correspond with Mohamed and Victor (2012), who reported that Tanzania's ICT infrastructure continues to face systemic weaknesses. For example, unreliable electricity supply has been a longstanding issue since the early 1990s, further complicating the effective implementation of ICT-based ODL.

The study also revealed that both students and tutors must exhibit flexibility, trustworthiness, approachability, and good organisational skills. The Regional Resident Tutor emphasised the following during the interview:

A tutor should help learners who suffer from social challenges, sympathise with learners' issues that may affect learning, and be a friend to the learners, providing them with necessary information and moral support. An ODL instructor should also advise learners on course choices for continuing or completing a study programme and on specific qualification requirements. (Interview with Regional Resident Tutor, January 2025).

Institutional Challenges

During the interview with the OUT Director, concerns were raised regarding administrative and financial challenges faced by learners. The Director stated:

Our centre faces financial challenges. The major reason for this is that most learners delay payment of tuition fees and other contributions required to run academic activities. (Interview with OUT Director, January 2025).

The researcher also found that poor support from employers and managers constituted another major challenge for ODL learners. Participants explained that some employers discouraged employees from enrolling in ODL programmes due to fears that further study would reduce the available workforce. In some cases, employers were unwilling to pay tuition fees or grant permission for staff to attend discussions and face-to-face sessions with their instructors.

Similarly, the Regional Resident Tutor (RRT) in Iringa Region highlighted challenges related to inadequate infrastructure, including insufficient classrooms, weak ICT services, limited access to computers and internet connectivity, and unreliable mobile phone networks. Commenting on this, he noted:

In Iringa Municipality, all centres lack ICT services and devices. We are therefore not able to provide training and courses related to ICT practically; instead, we teach theoretical concepts, which do not contribute effectively to the knowledge and skills of our students. Moreover, there are challenges in providing stationery and internet services. (Interview with RRT, January 2025).

Based on the challenges identified, Regional Resident Tutor, the Director of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), instructors, and ODL students, suggested several measures for improving ODL practices. They recommended that the government increase the number of ODL centres, including in rural areas, to enhance accessibility. Instructors further proposed that the Institute of Adult Education increase the frequency of face-to-face meetings between students and instructors. They also emphasised the need for the Institute to supply additional teaching and learning materials to support learner engagement and academic success.

To mitigate financial barriers, the RRT stressed that the Government of Tanzania, through the Higher Education Students' Loan Board (HESLB), should extend loan provisions to students pursuing their studies through the ODL mode. Finally, learners from both the Institute of Adult Education and the Open University of Tanzania in Iringa advised the government to review and, where possible, reduce the cost of ODL programmes.

Personal Challenges

Personal challenges were stated by learners about their experience on the challenges facing them in Open and Distance Learning.

Commenting on this, one of the students stated:

Open and Distance Learning has great benefits; however, we unfortunately face difficulties such as inadequate time to manage the programme. This challenge is caused by family responsibilities (domestic chores) and work commitments, especially for employees. (Interview with ODL student, January 2025).

ODL learners also complained that completing studies through the Open and Distance Learning programme takes a long time. This factor contributes significantly to withdrawal from studies. Students further noted that the time allocated for face-to-face sessions is too short to cover the required content. These findings align with

Tresman's (2012) study in the UK, which revealed that Open University students perceived a "lack of time" as the most significant factor influencing their decision to withdraw. Similarly, Musingafi's (2015) study in Zimbabwe found that high failure rates among teachers enrolled in ODL programmes were largely attributed to difficulties in balancing study time with socio-economic responsibilities. Many students also face family-related challenges when studying from home.

With regard to financial challenges, the study found that tuition fees and related expenses in ODL programmes are often too costly for learners. Participants explained that they must bear these costs themselves, as they receive no sponsorships, scholarships, or government loans. Consequently, some students withdraw from their studies due to an inability to pay the required fees.

During the focus group discussions, one learner expressed the following:

We are happy because there is access to learning at different levels, such as secondary education, diploma, and now even degree level, through Open and Distance Learning. However, tuition fees and other expenses are too high. Most of the time, we face issues with ODL management because of delays in paying these fees. It is not our intention to delay, but most of us pay the fees on our own, and we sometimes lack the financial resources needed to cover them. (Interview with ODL students, January 2025)

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shown that ODL students in Iringa face a combination of situational, institutional, and personal challenges that hinder their academic progress. Key situational challenges include inadequate study time, competing work and family responsibilities, and the limited number of ODL centres, particularly in rural areas. Institutional challenges encompass poor infrastructure, weak ICT services, financial constraints, and insufficient support from employers and administrators. Personal challenges largely relate to balancing academic, professional, and domestic commitments, as well as the high cost of tuition and other educational expenses.

The findings contribute to the literature by providing an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of ODL students in a Tanzanian context, highlighting how infrastructural, financial, and social barriers intersect to affect learner persistence and performance. The study further underscores the critical role of tutors, administrators, and policy-makers in creating supportive, learner-centred environments that address both academic and socio-economic needs.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that ODL tutors adopt friendly, reliable, and well-organised methods for delivering instructional materials, while the government should increase the number of ODL centres in rural areas, enhance ICT infrastructure, and ensure frequent face-to-face interactions between students and instructors. Additionally, the Higher Education Students' Loans Board (HESLB) should provide financial support to ODL students, enabling them to cover tuition, learning materials, and other study-related costs.

For further research, there is a need to investigate the long-term impact of these challenges on student learning outcomes, retention, and completion rates. Future studies could also explore innovative pedagogical and technological interventions that enhance access, engagement, and equity in ODL, particularly in under-resourced regions of Tanzania and similar developing-country contexts.

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