

# **Challenges of Assessment of Teaching and Learning in Open and Distance Learning (ODL): The Case Study of Diploma Programme Offered by the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents teaching and learning assessment challenges in open and distance learning, confining itself in the diploma programme offered by the Institute of Adult Education through open and distance learning mode. The study was guided by the following two research questions: How are assessments conducted in the programme? What are assessment challenges that are facing the programme? In this qualitative research, data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews and document review. The study involved a programme coordinator and 10 students in the programme. Findings from this study showed that the main two challenges are difficulties in handling examinations activities; and shortcomings in providing feedback to students. It was revealed further that lack of differences between the way assessments are done in the programme and the way they are in the full time conventional programmes is the main feature in the said programme. Factors or causes for that include the following: problem of orientation in face-to-face conventional training system; low technology used; and institutional management system of the programme. The paper proposes for establishment of valid management system of the

programme, adoption of modern technologies in assessment and use of reliable staffs in supervising learning including assessments in the programme.

**Keywords:** Assessment, continuous assessment, dual mode, open and distance learning, semester examination, technology.

## INTRODUCTION

Open and distance learning is fast becoming an accepted as well as an indispensable part of the mainstream of education systems in both developed and developing countries [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2002]. All over the world, distance mode of education is gaining momentum and becoming more popular than conventional education (Attri, 2012). The growth has been stimulated by different factors including interest among educators and trainers in use of new internet-based and multimedia technologies and also by recognition that traditional ways of organizing education need to be reinforced by innovative methods, if the fundamental right of all people to learning is to be realized (Attri, 2012). The main two among factors for its growth encompass increasing need for continuous upgrading of skills as well as retraining and technological advances that have made it possible to offer more and more courses at a distance. Distance education has been used for many years (UNESCO, 2001) and the fact that distance education is effective is well recorded (Aluko, 2009). Emergence of the system of open and distance education is an inevitable phenomenal evolution in the history of education developments internationally. While the formal education system continues to be the mainstream of educational transaction, it has its inherent limitations with regard to expansion, provision of access as well as equity and cost-effectiveness. On the other hand, growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has facilitated expansion of distance mode of education (Dikshit *et. al.*, 2008). All these circumstances have opened widely a door for open and distance learning (ODL) to emerge and grow. It is in this same background that the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) has cherished a long time experience in offering education programmes through ODL.

In 2013, the IAE introduced Diploma in Adult and Continuing Education through ODL. The programme was designed as an attempt to expand enrollment and training opportunities in the adult and continuing education programme to people who are eager to pursue the course but are restricted by various obstacles to attend it at the college campus (IAE, 2013). The rationale for introduction of the programme was based on the fact that there are people who aspire for diploma studies but they are not ready, able or interested to leave behind their home and work responsibilities for pursuing further studies; there are those who cannot afford to bear the high living as well as learning costs in the campus life or in big cities where colleges are located; and there are those who cannot acquire employers' permission or release to leave their work places for studies (IAE, 2013).

The programme is designed to offer the same course offered through face-to-face conventional system. Such pattern makes the IAE a dual mode institution in the programme. As far as technology is concerned, IAE (2013) shows that the programme is organized in such a way that teaching and learning are conducted through print materials, occasionally complemented with face-to-face meetings among learners and between learners and facilitators. Thus, the main technology in the programme is initially print-based.

Face-to-face meetings are meant to reduce the impact of separation gap between the facilitator and the learner due to shortcomings of used technology. The meetings were designed to take place at learning centres located at the IAE regional offices in selected regions. The programme began with five centres at Dar es Salaam, Morogoro, Mbeya, Dodoma, Tabora and Mwanza. At the centres, students get an opportunity to meet with module facilitators for clarification of module contents and for administrating formative assessment (continuous assessment) IAE (2013).

As the most modern form of education provision, Saint (1999) argues, distance education at tertiary level offers Africa the possibility of leapfrogging certain phases in educational development. As such, in efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, open and distance learning may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary and, under certain circumstances, an appropriate substitute for the face-to-face methods that still dominate most education systems. While its benefits can be evaluated by technical, social and economic criteria, distance learning methods also have their own pedagogical merit, leading to different ways of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition (UNESCO, 2002).

In spite of the enthusiasm generated by the new thrust in open and distance education, the system is not free from challenges and problems. Saint (1999) showed that in the past, distance education was often viewed as inferior by much of the traditional academic community because it tended to have lower graduation rates and less direct interaction between the facilitator and the learner. Today, this no longer needs to be the case. Yet, in most of the developing countries, whose technology is still low, distance learning programme content delivery and assessment administration are still facing notable limitations.

The nature of communication between facilitators and learners in ODL is a necessary component in distance education, like in all other forms of education. Communication technologies distribute messages in text, sound, still images and moving images. In ODL, local support services are usually obtained at the study centre. The centre may also offer access to other learning resources, equipment and so forth. Local centres' activities include admission, allocation to courses and student services, administering learning and teaching procedures, assignments and assessment, monitoring drop-out and completion and examinations.

Assessment informs evaluation, and according to UNESCO (2002), evaluation, finally, provides information relevant to adjustment of roles and operation of system components in order to secure their optimal contributions and development.

In ODL, like in other modes of learning, assessments are not only meant for students to earn grades and for certification, they are equally helpful for monitoring effectiveness of academic programmes. They also impact on students' learning improvement and help learners to develop a positive attitude on the institutional system. Therefore, success of any distance education institution, dual or single mode, is highly dependent on efficiency and effectiveness of the monitoring and evaluation system, without which it may be impossible for administrators to be aware of problems in the system until the system itself breaks down (UNESCO, 2002).

Having presented all points on importance of ODL programmes, one central problem of this study stood to be the following: challenging environment surrounding achievement of effective assessment. The major challenge of conducting assessment in distance education emanates from the very nature of separation between the learner and the facilitator and hence, separation between the potential assessor and the assessed individuals. Without consideration of the effect of that existing space between the two parts, evaluation runs the risk of becoming a meaningless or less useful, exercise that yields little valuable information. It is within this background that more inquiries are expected to be done so as to detect challenges needed to push stakeholders to continue devising more techniques to arrest the challenges.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate challenges encountered in assessment of teaching and learning in open and distance learning

in the IAE's ordinary diploma programme offered through ODL. The study was confined to challenges surrounding the interface between the assessor and the assessed during administration of assignments, tests and examinations.

The study was guided by the following two research questions:

- (i) What are current assessment practices of IAE's Diploma Programme through ODL?
- (ii) What are challenges facing the practice of assessment in the IAE's Diploma Programme through ODL?

## RELATED LITERATURE

Various literature sources were consulted with the main objective of internalizing the concept of open and distance learning including challenges related to assessments in this mode of learning.

### ***Concept of Open and Distance Learning***

Defining the term ***open and distance learning*** is not a straight forward matter because it may have different characteristics, depending on different contexts. However, the term is used in this paper with recognition that it is a familiar term that has entered every-day usage. The term 'open and distance learning' combines two concepts: 'open learning' and 'distance learning.' UNESCO (2002) defines distance education as any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print. The term ***distance learning*** is used as a synonym for the highly comprehensive and precise term ***distance education*** (UNESCO, 2002). The two concepts are different in focus though they seem to merge by referring to the same aspect. One of the most comprehensive description was given by Keegan (1996) who observed that distance education is

characterised by separation of learner and tutor as opposed to face-to-face teaching, the influence of an educational organisation, which distinguishes distance education from private study, use of technical media like print, audio, or website to unite tutor and learner, provision of a two-way communication so that the student may engage in dialogue with the tutor, the possibility of occasional meetings for purposes of interaction and self-directed nature of the learner's involvement.

On the other hand, the term **open learning** - which has recently gained strength in education - means structural changes that aim at making learning open with minimized constraints in terms of time, pace, place, learning methods or combination of those. It refers to education available to all at flexible conveniences (Yusuf, 2006).

Onwe (2013) argues that, it appears we do not have at present a universally accepted definition of the term **open learning**. According to him, some educationists argue that 'open' simply means open entry and access to learning opportunities and removal of barriers to learning opportunities (see also Kanwar and Daniel, 2010); and others argue that open learning can be substituted for flexible learning. He (Onwe) shows that Jeffries and colleagues (1990), for example, looked at open learning as "any form of learning in which the provider enables individual learners exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning." Commonwealth of Learning (2002) defines open learning as a philosophy of learning that is based on the principle of flexibility to increase access to and equity in education; a philosophy which implies that a provider finds a variety of ways to open access to credible learning opportunities to a diverse range of learners.

The terms open learning and distance education represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing

learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO, 1997). UNESCO (2002) puts it clear that the rationale for distance education from its earliest days has been to open opportunities for learners to study regardless of geographic, socio-economic or other constraints. The term ***open and distance learning*** reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed from the learner in time and space, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility (UNESCO (2002)). In distance education, the normal or principal means of communication is through technology.

According to Ridge and Waghid (2000 cited in Dodo, 2013), distance education has developed in three main phases or generations. The first generation is usually called correspondence study or the single medium distance education characterized by study materials that are mailed to students with guides on how to answer some questions and assignments before they are sent back for marking. The second generation or simply multi-media distance education, according to the said authors, is known for its greater range of 'one-way' media, especially the print, television and cassettes and some 'two-way' communication with correspondence tutors and face-to-face tutorials. The third generation or the telematic system emerged in the 1990s' courtesy of electronic information technologies like telecommunications, computer and audio-video conferencing facilities. With passage of time and emergence of new technology, the means are increasingly being found to bridge the physical separation in distance education between lecturers and students.

African countries are still backward in technology. They need to embrace forward looking policies on new generation applications of ICT in teaching and learning (Onwe, 2013).

According to its philosophy, as Van den and Schlusmans (1989) put it, open and distance learning is characterized by societal expectations that include the following: making education less expensive, enabling more people take part in cultural life, relieving overcrowded traditional universities, enabling more people to study while working, encouraging lifelong learning, making people gain more qualifications to enable them survive in today's employment world, and opening up access to university for students without formal entrance qualifications. Any ODL programme is perceived to strive towards meeting those characteristics.

### ***Assessment Challenges in Open and Distance Education***

It is a commonly held belief that distance students perform more poorly in assessment than do internal (conventional) students because of additional pressures and burdens of distance study. Different studies have been conducted in relation to challenges facing ODL programmes. Among the recent they include the following: Nyandara (2012), Dodo (2013), Mbwette (2015) and Attri (2012). Nyandara (2012) studied challenges and opportunities of technology-based instruction in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions particularly the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and Center for Continuing and Distance Education (CCDE) in China. Dodo (2013) studied challenges faced by students learning in virtual and open distance learning system at Bindura University of Science Education in Zimbabwe. Panchabakesan (2011) studied also challenges faced by students in ODL programmes.

Dodo (2013) and Panchabakesan (2011) found that the general challenges included the following: financial constraints, students' skepticism about the programme, social problems like nursing ill relatives at home, knowledge acquisition pressure, insufficient support services such as lacking identity documents/cards thereby limiting their access to some opportunities and difficulties in struggling to balance their college work, family and work expectations.

Mbwete (2015) studied about academic integrity challenges in open and distance learning delivery including on-line learning and focused on methods and tools to detect academic dishonesty as well as enforcing academic honesty. Attri (2012) studied books, journals and e-content related to distance education to explore problems associated with distance education and their tentative solutions. Identified challenges were in different ways related to, or at least had influence on, assessments. Each of them impacts on assessment quality in a different way.

According to Chaudhary and Dey (2013), three types of assessment qualities, which are essential for effective assessment, are validity, reliability and fairness (Makamane, 2011). For an assessment system to be valid, care should be taken to verify whether the purpose of assessment has been achieved or not. Reliability entails the extent to which assessment is free from errors of measurement (Chaudhary and Dey, 2013). Fairness in assessment speaks about objectivity of assessment and making assessment free from subjective judgment (UNESCO, 2006). Assurance of those in ODL programmes requires much efforts investment.

The variety of proponents were consulted, whose findings are briefly presented thereby showing varying challenges encountered in ODL programmes with assessment challenges in them. In agreement with the assertion by Moore (1999) that one of the few generalizations that can be made about any distance education programme is that a good monitoring and evaluation system is key to its success and thus, the need for finding out whether or not such challenges are also found in the programme under this study is evident.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, with critical case study strategy. Usually, case study is a dominant method employed for understanding a phenomenon (Ary, 2010). Participants were the programme coordinator and 10 students in the programme. The latter were chosen on merits of availability and information rich. In qualitative research, sample size does not matter significantly such that what matters is the possibility of obtaining informed participants who are information rich and who are willing to share it with the researcher (Patton, 1990; Creswell, 2012). Thus, convenience sampling, which is about choosing a sample based on availability, time, location, or ease of access (Ary, 2010), was used to obtain the 10 students. The said participants were obtained from the following centres: 2 from Dar es Salaam, 2 from Morogoro, 3 from Mwanza and 3 from Tabora. The programme coordinator was in Dar es Salaam.

Data were collected through three methods: unstructured interviews, observations, and documentary review. In-depth interviews were conducted with the programme coordinator and the 10 students who are studying in the programme. Being one of the learning facilitators in the programme, the author obtained valuable complementary data through direct observation or practice. Other valuable data were obtained from the programme's guiding document and the Prospectus, which guide students' activities. Due to limited time and financial ability, facilitators in the programme and heads of ODL centres were not involved in the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the study findings are presented and discussed together. Answers are presented according to questions they responded to.

### **Assessments Modality in the Programme**

Findings from the documents and the actual practice showed that assessments in the programme are in two parts: Continuous Assessments (40 marks) and Final Assessments (60 marks). While Final Assessment (FA) is carried out through administration of an examination at the end of each module, Continuous Assessment (CA) is administered in the course of study before sitting for end of module examination (IAE, 2013). The CA constitutes of the following:

**Table 1: Continuous Assessment Methods and Distribution of Marks**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Assessment Method/ Modality</b>	<b>Number/ Frequency</b>	<b>Marks</b>	<b>Weight in Percent- age (%)</b>
	Assignment	1	5	12.5
	Project	1	10	25.0
	Portfolio	1	5	12.5
	Mid-semester test	1	20	50.0
<b>Total</b>			<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: IAE (2013: 12).

It was found that CAs are planned and administered by modules' learning facilitators or their representatives at respective centres, usually during face-to-face session periods. All classroom-based tests are done in classes at the centres. Each centre has got facilitators. In some instances, some centres receive learning facilitators from Dar es Salaam (IAE headquarters).

Assignment works/reports and all other works are brought for submission whereby they are marked by facilitators at the centres, or they are transported to Dar es Salaam for marking. Feedback is given to students via centre's management.

On the case of FAs, it was found that they are planned and administered by the IAE headquarters whereby students at all centres sit for the same examinations. In some incidents, centre administrators are asked to solicit invigilators to assist in invigilating.

These data indicate that, to some extent, assessment is administered the way they were documented. Some emerging circumstances cause different practices at different centres.

The findings imply that a variety of assessment methods is in place to make assessment results reliable and recommendable. However, the modality of meeting at the centres under direct face-to-face invigilation indicates that the assessment system does not reflect the essence of nature of distance learning in modern days. It seems to be conducted in the same way like that in the conventional face-to-face programme. It was found that while the programme was designed to be implemented by the IAE's headquarters, through technological media, the actual implementation is done at the very regional centres with only some directives from the headquarters. As such, the programme was observed to be suffering from lack of ownership and poor facilitation as well as assessment. In it, learners are facilitated by hired part-time facilitators who are neither recognized by the regulatory body nor acquainted with the philosophy of ODL. To them, the programme is there for earning money. Such situation contributes in affecting negatively the quality of learning facilitation and assessment.

There is still another observed assessment challenge related to the status of the programme. The ODL centres in the programme seem to have changed their status from acting as face-to-face ODL meeting centres to acting as college campuses in which the programme seems to operate occasionally as conventional or part-time learning programme

centres. At the centres, students do not study like in distance education mode but as conventional part-time students where, in some cases, those students who reside in nearby locations usually meet and get taught. Such pattern affects key defining features of ODL programmes. It also affects modality of assessing teaching and learning. At some other centres, students and facilitators are organized in such a way that they hold learning sessions weekly on the selected days throughout the year or they conduct weekend classes. The pattern tends to confuse students because they cannot tell whether they are learning through distance or in the conventional system. Learners who live in places far from the centres are badly affected by the situation.

### ***Challenges in Conducting Assessments***

Findings indicated that right from the programme inception, several assessment limitations or difficulties were already known and were noted to include the following:

- Difficulties in attempting quizzes, assignments, tests and examinations due spatial separation between students and facilitators;
- Difficulties in monitoring continuous learner's progress like in a classroom situation whereby the facilitator can monitor students and visually uphold a level of integrity consistent with institution's reputation but with distance education, the student is removed from direct supervision; and
- Difficulties in timely provision of feedback to learners and provision of remedial activities.

Data from interviews and observation in the field revealed that two of the three programme's assessment difficulties or limitations already presented are still prevailing in the programme. The difficulties are in the following aspects:

**Difficulties in attempting quizzes, assignments, tests and examinations:** students reported that they got difficulties in meeting at the centres for assignments, tests and examination because, to some, centres are located afar, to many of them, the centres are regional headquarters of neighbouring regions. Thus, they face challenges in managing travel to such centres. Their home and work responsibilities including travelling and living costs in the hotels make them fail to afford. Such a case was reported about students who live in Kasulu (Kigoma region) and others in Musoma (Mara region) who have to travel long distances to Mwanza. On the other side, data from the coordinator and information collected through participant observation indicated that facilitators faced shortage of time to meet students' needs and to administer the CAs.

It was also reported that there were cases where students at different centres felt dissatisfied because they thought that some students at other centres were lucky in having better facilitators who made better coverage of modules than theirs. So they held that having all students at all centres sitting for the same examination was unfair because they were not taught equally. The response raises issues in terms of quality and reliability of teaching and opportunity to learning and hence, assessments. The question that is raised is, 'assessment of what?' The answer is, 'teaching and learning!' The next questions could be the following: 'Who teaches?' Also, 'He/she teaches what?' Since such aspects were outside of the study scope, answers for those questions were not sought for.

**Difficulties in timely provision of feedback to learners and provision of remedial activities:** Students who were asked about challenges related to timely feedback in assessments could not clearly comprehend the concept of 'timely provision of feedback.' The researcher found that

the concept 'timely' did not make sense to them due to what was conceived by the researcher to be lack of awareness among them about appropriate times for them to receive back.

But when asked whether or not they had their CA results already for the previous semester, they indicated that they did not have such results. The observed situation in the field and responses from the programme coordinator showed that feedback provision is one of the major problems in the programme. It was reported that the problem is greatly contributed due to the fact that some facilitators at many centres are part-time facilitators who are hired and paid to serve students for hours of face-to-face meetings. They use the same hours for assessments. Therefore, after the face-to-face sessions elapse, such facilitators would be unavailable for service in the programme, including providing timely feedback to students.

***Assessment challenges related to general assessment management system:*** The response that was given to the interview question: "Who is responsible for assessment in the programme?" was not simple to answer during this study. It was, and is still, apparently too general. The responses from the programme coordinators revealed that management and responsibilities of teaching and learning assessments are in hands of the headquarters via the responsible department, but observation showed that they are greatly left in the hands of regional centres. It was found that the attempt to decentralize administrative and implementation responsibilities to the regional centres has raised two main challenges. The first one is that the IAE or the responsible department has not instituted a quality assurance system or mechanism to take care of the way the programme is currently operating. The second challenge is that it is unclear as to whether or not the programme is managed by the IAE headquarters via the department, which owns

the programme or whether or not it is via the department responsible for regional centres' coordination, administratively responsible to oversee activities of regional centres. As a result, currently, it is difficult to hold any of the said departments responsible for success or failure in assessments of the programme.

***The Challenge of Technology:*** With interests to understanding use of technology in assessments, the researcher included a question on this matter in the interview protocol. Responses showed that the rate of using modern ICT facilities is insignificant and the infrastructure for the same is not well established. For example, it was reported that formerly, the programme was designed in such a way that it could attract development in use of ICT. Besides, the programme was designed in a way that telephone and computer-based communications would be used to bring together students/learners and facilitators or programme administrators. In a long run, these modern technologies would be used to facilitate learning and to conduct assessments. They were shown in the programme's guiding document as additional measures to reduce the technology gap in the programme. Plans to prepare other content delivery facilities such as audio compact discs (CDs) and digital video discs (DVDs) which contain recorded teaching programmes were put in place (IAE, 2013).

Shortages in use of technology seemed to have been a cause of many challenges in the programme. Also the noted apparent decentralization of the programme and hiring of facilitators right at the centres seemed to have been short-term ways of addressing the challenge of technology. This is like an attempt of removing space between the learner and the facilitator and hence, neutralizing need for technology. As a result, removal of space makes an ODL programme cease to be ODL.

## CONCLUSION

This study has raised several challenges. Critical analysis can show that the challenges can be understood if they are collected into main three streams of challenges regarding assessment in ODL. The first challenge is rooted in overall administration and power relations. The study failed to establish a clear boundary in this. It means that feeling of responsibility on improvement of assessments in the programme depends on a wish of any of the IAE units linked to the programme. The second challenge is related to the fact that operation of the programme does not have clear up-to-date guidelines that can be treated as part of the programme curriculum. The existing guidelines are greatly not followed in the current practice and yet, others have not yet put in place. As such, timing and modalities of sitting for examinations cannot be easily predicted. The third challenge lies on the area of technology. Any improvement in an ODL programme implies improvement or development in the technology used. The kind of technology under use makes it difficult to tell about the ODL generation to which the programme belongs. It seems not to belong to any of the three generations, which are mentioned in the analysis of related literature.

Thus, while ODL programmes are increasingly becoming the best learning alternatives at different education and training levels, the practice of ODL programme under this study does not acknowledge this practically. Therefore, it is recommended that the IAE, which has been able to design and run this potentially desired programme leading to award of tertiary education, has to strive to address the observed challenges. The increasing demand and prospects of ODL programmes call for the IAE to invest more in more ODL programmes. The growing emphasis on democratizing education and efforts towards “education for all” call for prioritization of ODL programmes at different levels and in different fields.

For the IAE to address the challenges, firstly, administrative structures of the ODL programme and its operations need to be clearly defined in easily referable documents and should be followed so that a unit responsible for assuring assessment of quality of the programme is put clear and held responsible. Secondly, the IAE should check her rate of adopting technology and innovations so that she uses them instead of finding ways of operating without them. There is a need to use multimedia in the programme activities, including assessment, so as to have a centralized assessment system.

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