

Uptake of Open Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) programmes: A Case of Kenyatta University, Kenya

Mukirae Njihia
Elizabeth Mwaniki
Antony Ireri
Fatuma Chege
School of Education, Kenyatta University
mukiraeus@gmail.com

Abstract

Despite most universities in Kenya having embraced Open Distance and e-learning (ODEL) that utilise modern ICT technologies in teaching and learning, enrolment in these programmes still remain low. In Kenyatta University, for example, out of a total student population of about 70,000, only about 5,000 (7%) are enrolled in the ODeL programme. The objective of this study was to establish the challenges faced by ODeL students at Kenyatta University and which impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme thereby limiting its growth. The study employed a sequential mixed methods design that allowed collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Data was collected from a sample of 207 students through a questionnaire while Key Informant Interviews were conducted with five senior members of staff directly involved in the management of the ODeL programme. The study established that ODeL students faced technical, instructional, institutional and personal challenges which impacted on the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme. Key technical challenges experienced are insufficient exposure to computers and ICT technology, lack of finances to buy ICT gadgets, lack of internet connectivity and content hanging or not opening in the Tablets. Key institutional challenges faced were delayed delivery of study materials, poor administrative services such as registering and paying fees and poor student support services. With regard to instructional challenges, the key ones were inadequate academic support as lecturers failed to facilitate units on-line, lack of interactivity and poorly designed course material. Lastly, the individual challenges faced were financial constraints, insufficient study time, conflict between study and family/work balance. The study concludes that there is a need to institute learner support mechanisms to address the institutional, instructional and individual challenges faced by learners in the ODeL programme so as to improve on its efficiency and effectiveness.

Introduction

The Kenyan government has increased the number of fully fledged public universities from 7 in 2010 to 33 in 2016 as well as encouraged the establishment of Private universities in an attempt to meet the rising demand for higher education. However, despite these efforts, the demand for university education still outstrips the supply. For example, out of the 165,766 year 2015 secondary school graduates who qualified for admission to universities the government could only sponsor the education for only 74,389 (44.9%) students in public universities (KUCCPS, 2016). Government sponsorship is usually based on the declared capacity of the universities to offer full time education programme. Thus, public universities in Kenya can only meet the demand for less than 50% of the students who are qualifying annually in their face-to-face full time programmes. This then calls for a paradigm shift with regard to the supply of university education in the country. Towards this end, it should be noted that most universities in Kenya have embraced e-learning mode of delivery that utilise modern ICT technologies in teaching and learning. Nevertheless, enrolment in these programmes still remains low compared to the traditional face-to-face platform of delivery. In Kenyatta University, for example, out of a total student population of about 70,000, only about 4,000 (5.7%) are enrolled in the e-learning programme run by the Digital School of Virtual and Open Learning (DSVOL). This slow uptake of e-learning programmes in the university despite the high demand for

university education begs the following questions: What are the obstacles that hinder access and retention in the e-learning programme? Are the obstacles technical or human in nature? What measures need to be taken to increase access to e-learning programmes? This study sought to answer these questions through a case study of Kenyatta University e-learning programme.

Literature review

According to UNESCO (2002), 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. To achieve this, all or most of the communication between teachers and learners in Open and Distance learning is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print(UNESCO, 2000). For the Developing World, ODeL has been viewed as a promising and practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access thus increasing participation in higher education. Indeed, ODeL could expand the limited number of places available, accommodate low or dispersed enrollment as well as make the best use of the limited number of teachers available (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003). However, the promise of ODeL has not been realized in many universities (Minnaar, 2013) as its successful take off is beset by numerous challenges.

Mansour (2006) points out that there are three major groups of stakeholders in ODeL: the administration, faculty, and students. Each of these categories of stakeholders brings its own challenges. Consequently, scholars have categorised the challenges facing ODeL programmes into three in tandem with each category of stakeholders, namely: (i) instructional related challenges, (ii) institutional related challenges, and (iii) individual related challenges. The instructional related challenges have to do with the faculty whose major challenge is lack of familiarity with ODeL philosophies and the expected ODeL skills since most of them came from the face-to-face mode of delivery (Commonwealth of Learning, 2004). Instructors need sufficient time to gain experience with new technology use (especially in education), to share experience and to use effectively technology for instruction (Ilara, 2006). A study in Philippines identified resistance to innovation, uneven innovation practice, and lack of standards for innovation as some of the challenges facing faculty in ODeL (Arinto, 2016). Institutional related challenges mostly revolve around administrative systems that are not designed to address the unique needs of ODeL, funding constraints, development and deployment of the necessary infrastructure and human resource among others (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron, 2015). Some common documented individual related challenges are lack of ICT skills, inability to afford necessary ICT hardware and software, high internet costs, work-study balance among others (Dodo, 2013; Nyandara, 2012).

Methodology

The study employed a mixed methods approach. The design was sequential in that it started with collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from students on their perceptions of various attributes of e-learning programme through a questionnaire. This was followed by collection of qualitative data from selected members of staff on various aspects of the e-learning programme through a Key Informant Interviews guide. This enabled triangulation of data from students and members of staff. Data were collected from 212 respondents (207 students and 5 members of staff).

Findings

a) Technical challenges faced by ODeL students

One of the objectives of the study was to establish the nature of technical challenges encountered by e-learning students. Data were sought from both the students and the faculty. The students were asked to agree or disagree on a number of statements on a likert scale on technical challenges that they faced while pursuing their studies through the e-learning programme. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Students' Views on Technical Challenges Faced in e-learning Programme

STATEMENT	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
Lack of sufficient exposure to computers and other ICT related technology	22.2%	34.3%	26.6%	13%	3.9%
Lack of finances to buy ICT gadgets	22.6%	31.4%	25.1%	15%	6.3%
Lack of internet connectivity where I live	26.6%	31.4%	20.8%	15%	5.8%

The content hanging or not opening when I need to study	29.5%	36.7%	16.9%	11.1%	5.8%
---	-------	-------	-------	-------	------

The study revealed that a majority of the students (34.3% Agreed; 22.2% strongly agreed) perceived insufficient exposure to computers and ICT technology as a challenge. The spread of ICT technology in Kenya is not very broad and it is possible that some of the students start interacting with this technology when they enrol for the programme. Majority of the students (31.4% agreed; 22.6% strongly agreed) also agreed that there was insufficient ICT training by the university. This is a challenge to the students because 90% of the learning in the ODeL programme is on the ICT platform with only about 10% reserved for on campus face-to-face tutorials. Learners' inadequate ICT skills impact negatively on the effectiveness of the programme. A majority of students (31.4% -Agreed; 22.6%- Strongly Agreed) also noted lack of finances to buy ICT gadgets as another technical challenge by the students. Although the students are issued with Tablets by the university on enrolment which are charged on their fees, they at times require replacement due to loss or damage. Financial constraints may force a student to stay without the gadget during which time his/her learning is paralysed which undermines the effectiveness of the learning process. Lack of internet connectivity was cited as a challenge by a majority of the students (31.4%-Agreed; 26.6% Strongly Agreed). The ODeL students are spread throughout the country and for some, especially those in remote rural areas, internet connectivity could be quite a challenge. A majority of Kenyans in the rural areas rely on wireless internet from cellular phone service providers due to lack of wire connectivity. This poses two challenges: one, in some places the signal is quite poor or nonexistent, and; two, the cost of internet via cellular phone is quite high. A combination of these two poses a serious challenge to students who are at times forced to travel from their workstation to local townships to seek for internet services from cyber Cafes. This may erode the expected cost-effectiveness advantage of e-learning platform. Finally, another challenge noted by students was that of content hanging or not opening when they needed to use their Tablets. This could be a result of technical challenges with the gadgets (software or hardware issues) or due to the poor internet connection as already pointed out. This constrains the learning process as the students may not access learning materials or submit their assignments in time. All these technical challenges impact negatively on the efficiency and effectiveness of the e-learning programme.

b) Institutional challenges faced by students in the e-Learning programme

The study also sought to establish the challenges faced by students in the e-Learning programme as a result of weaknesses in the university administrative structure. Similarly data were sought from both the students and the faculty. The e-learning students were asked to agree or disagree on a number of statements on institutional challenges that they faced while pursuing their studies through a likert scale. The results are shown in table 2 below.

Table 2: Institutional Challenges Faced by Students in e-learning Programme

STATEMENT	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
Delayed study materials/ content at regional centres or in Tablets	25.1%	40.1%	19.3%	10.1%	5.3%
Difficulty in administrative services such as registering and paying fee	27.5%	30%	23.7%	12.6%	6.3%
Lack of appropriate advice provided under the umbrella of students services support	30%	33.8%	25.1%	8.7%	2.4%
Lack of an effective institutional network of technical assistance	25.1%	31.4%	23.7%	13%	6.8%
Lack of responsiveness from regional centre/ODeL headquarter administrative staff	21.3%	30%	20.8%	19.3%	8.7%

Table 2 shows that one of the key challenges students face is delay in delivery of study materials either through the regional centres or in the Tablets as pointed out by a majority of the students (30% -Agreed; 25.1%-Strongly Agreed). This points to a lack of prior preparation by the university before an academic year/semester begins. Such delays are costly in terms of time and finances to e-Learning students who are far from campus and affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme. Students also raised concern about difficulties in administrative services such as registering and paying fees (30%-Agreed; 27.5% -Strongly Agreed). Though the university has numerous ODeL campuses spread across the country, they are not well staffed to deal with all student issues and many are the times that students have to travel to the Kenyatta University main campus to access some essential services like registering for a semester or payment of fees.

The students also felt that they did not receive appropriate advice provided under the umbrella of students' support services (33.8%-Agreed; 30%-Strongly Agreed). The university has a directorate of students' services (dean of students) which is housed at the main campus. However, it is not decentralized to the ODeL campuses and therefore, students on the e-learning programme who spend the better part of their academic life outside the university may not be receiving advice and other forms of student support, e.g. counselling and mentorship services. The university also has a students' union headed by a president which is expected to not only act as a link between the students and the university management but also provide psycho-social support to students, for example, peer counselling. However, majority of students' leaders are from the regular full-time students. Since ODeL students carry most of their learning outside the university, they may neither be in a position to be elected into university student leadership positions nor enjoy the services of the union. Furthermore, unlike regular full time students who can come together and give a strong voice to their grievances, the scattered nature of the ODeL students consigns them to suffering as individuals and therefore their issues may never get to the agenda table of the students' leadership as well as the university management.

Distance and On-line learning in the 21st century is to a great extent dependent on ICT and therefore, its success requires strong and efficient technical support for both students and faculty. On this aspect, the e-learning students felt that the university lacked an effective institutional network of technical assistance (31.4% Agreed; 25.1% Strongly Agreed). In an interview with one of the faculty members involved in the management of the ODeL programme, it emerged that ICT technical support staffs are based in the university main campus. Therefore, technical challenges on students' Tablets cannot be addressed at the regional centres and the gadgets have to be forwarded to the main campus. This takes away valuable academic time from the student.

Other institutional challenges faced by students are lack of responsiveness from regional centre as well as the ODeL headquarter administrative staff and delay in relaying of important information. By virtue of their programme, e-Learning students can be said to be at the periphery of the university and unless deliberate efforts are made to keep them abreast of development in the institution, they may not know what is going on. Furthermore, when their queries are not responded to, it may impact negatively on their academic progress.

c) Instructional challenges faced by students in the e-Learning programme

The study also sought to establish the challenges faced by students arising from the teaching-learning methodologies. The e-learning programme is structured that only 4 hours out of the expected 35 contact hours per academic unit are allocated for on-campus face-to-face tutorials while the rest should be on-line interactions. This implies that almost 90% of the instruction is supposed to be executed on-line. The students were asked to agree or disagree on a likert scale on a number of statements on instructional challenges that they faced while pursuing their studies though the e-learning mode. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Instructional Challenges Faced by e-Learning Students

STATEMENT	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
Delayed/ineffective feedback from the Instructors	18.8%	38.6%	26.6%	9.7%	6.3%
Lack of instructor's contact and inadequate academic support	16.4%	43%	20.8%	14%	5.8%
Poor course material design/ inappropriate learning materials	15%	32.9%	28.5%	15%	8.7%
Lack of adequate learning materials	16.4%	29%	27.1%	18.4%	9.2%
Unhelpful course information and lack of direction	14%	33.8%	22.2%	17.4%	12.6%
Lack of interactivity in learning; no follow-up on discussions and quizzes	13%	38.6%	26.6%	10.6%	11.1%

Majority of the respondents (43%-Agreed; 16.4%-Strongly Agreed) cited lack of instructor's contact and inadequate academic support as one of the major instructional challenges. Indeed, a majority of the students (38.6%-Agreed; 13%-Strongly Agreed) felt that the teaching was lacking in interactivity and there was no follow-up on discussions and quizzes. From the interviews, it was established that between May and August 2016, only 61% of the units were facilitated on-line. The converse of this is that 39% of the students were left to learn on their own without the

guidance of the lecturer but for the 4 hours face-to-face tutorial. As one interviewee involved in the management of the ODeL programme noted, *'some lecturers just dump content on-line and leave the students to read on their own'*. This could explain the observation by the students (29%-Agreed; 16.4%-Strongly Agreed) that there was *'lack of adequate learning materials'*. ODeL students do not readily access the university library like their full-time counterparts and thus the need to upload adequate learning materials. It was also pointed out during the interview that out of the 1200 modules uploaded on the university's online learning platform, only 430 (35%) were interactive. The rest were merely soft copies of print modules uploaded into the system which did not allow interactivity. It was also pointed out in the interviews that some lecturers had apathy towards ICT and quite a good number lacked basic ICT literacy. In such a situation, not much would be expected from them in terms of attending to the needs of the on-line students. The students seemed to support this observation as quite a good number regarded the course material as poorly designed. These instructional challenges erode the effectiveness of the e-learning programme as learners may not be well grounded in their areas. This may also affect students pass rates in examinations thus affecting efficiency of the programme.

d) Personal challenges faced by students in the ODeL programme

Data were sought from both the students and the faculty on personal challenges faced by e-Learning students. The students were asked to agree or disagree on a number of statements on individual challenges that they faced while pursuing their studies through the programme through a likert scale. The results are shown Table 4.

Table 4: Personal Challenges Faced by e-Learning Students

STATEMENT	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
Lack of sufficient time for study	19.8%	37.7%	28%	9.7%	4.8%
Financial constraints	31.4%	36.7%	19.3%	8.2%	4.3%
Lack of support from family, employer, friends	15.5%	26.6%	27.1%	15.9%	14.5%
Lack of experience and/or training with instructional technologies	15.5%	38.2%	29%	9.7%	7.7%
Conflicts between family /Work and study schedule	26.1%	38.6%	19.8%	10.1%	5.3%
Difficulty in attending face to face tutorials	21.7%	36.2%	25.6%	8.7%	7.7%

Financial constraints was a major constraint facing a majority of e-Learning students (36.5%-Agreed; 31.4% Strongly Agreed). Unlike the full time regular students who benefit from government sponsorship, the e-Learning students are categorised as 'self-sponsored students' meaning that they directly pay for their education. Many of them rely on their salaries to pay their fees and meet other educational costs alongside other family responsibilities.

Distance from home to the regional centre or the university's main campus for tutorials was cited as another challenge (42.5%-Agreed; 19.8%-Strongly agreed). This is further compounded by the fact that a majority of the students are working people and the timing of the tutorials may be at a time when they have work related responsibilities making it difficult for them to attend(36.2%-Agreed; 21.7-Strongly agreed).

Lack of sufficient time for study is another challenge that students faced (37.7%-Agreed; 19.8%-Strongly agreed). This could be understood in the light of the fact that these students combine learning, full time employment and family responsibilities and at times striking a balance among the three may not be easy. Indeed, a majority of the students cited the conflicts between family /Work and study schedule as a big challenge (38.6%-Agreed; 26.1%-Strongly agreed). Lack of experience and/or training with instructional technologies was also given as a major challenge (38.2%-Agreed; 15.5%-Strongly agreed).

Conclusion

This study has established that Kenyatta University e-learning students through the ODeL programme face instructional, institutional and individual (personal) challenges which have a bearing on their academic progress and on the programme's efficiency and effectiveness. The key institutional challenge was poor administrative services reflected by: delay in delivery of on-line learning materials, difficulties in registration, lack of ICT technical support and poor student support services. These findings concur with those of a similar study in Zimbabwe (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron, 2015). With regard to instructional challenges, the key one was failure by lecturers to conduct on-line facilitation. Others were poorly designed instructional materials that were not interactive, inadequate academic support and apathy to ICT by some lecturers. These findings are in agreement with others from similar studies (CoL, 2004; Lara, 2006; Arinto, 2016). Some of the key individual challenges faced are lack of ICT skills, financial constraints and work-study-family equilibrium. The individual challenges faced by ODeL students of KU resonate with those of similar students in other countries (Dodo, 2013; Nyandara, 2012).

It is clear from the results above that in order to enhance the uptake of ODeL programmes in Kenyatta University and elsewhere, there is a need to institute learner support mechanisms to address the institutional, instructional and individual challenges. For a start, there is need to adequately staff the regional ODeL centres to enable them fully address the administrative, technical and psycho-social needs of students. There is also need to enhance the training given to ODeL students on ICT and instructional technologies to enable them fully exploit these resources. The capacity of lecturers in ICT also requires development to enable them develop interactive on-line modules as well as engage students on-line. Lecturers should also be given the necessary material technical support and incentives, for example, Tablets and Internet bundles. The government should also consider extending financial support to ODeL students to enable them invest in the appropriate ICT gadgets for their studies.

References:

- Arinto, P. (2016). Issues and challenges in open and distance e-Learning: Perspectives from the Philippines. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 17(2), 162-180.
- Commonwealth of Learning (2004). *Planning and Implementing Open and Distance Learning Systems: A Handbook for Decision Makers*. CoL: Vancouver
- Dodo, O. (2013). An analysis of challenges faced by students learning in virtual and open distance learning system: A case of Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE). *Journal of Global Peace and Conflict*, 1(1), 28-40. Retrieved from www.aripd.org/jgpc.
- Illara, S. (2006). Preparing teachers and schools for the 21st century in the integration of information and communication technology: Review of recent report in the US. *Interactive Educational Multimedia*, 12, 44-61.
- Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (2016). Release of the 2016/2017 Placement Results, Retrieved from <http://kuccps.net/?q=content/release-20162017-placement-results>
- Mansour, B. (2006). Challenges and solutions in offering distance education programs: A case study of an HRD program. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 11(3), 33-39. Retrieved from http://www.itdl.org/journal/nov_06/article03.htm.
- Minnaar, A. (2013). Challenges for successful planning of open and distance learning (ODEL): A template analysis. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 14(3), 81-108. Retrieved from <http://www.irrODEL.org/index.php/irrODEL/article/view/1387/2528>.
- Musingafi, M., Mapuranga, B., Chiwanza, K., & Zebron, S. (2015). Challenges for open and distance learning (ODL) students: Experiences from students of the Zimbabwe Open University. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(18), 1-5. Retrieved from www.iiste.org.
- Nyandara, Z. (2012). Challenges and opportunities of technology based instruction in open and distance learning: A comparative study of Tanzania and China. In proceedings and report of the 5th UbuntuNet Alliance Annual Conference, 130-145. Accessed from: Retrieved from <https://www.ubuntunet.net/sites/default/files/nyandaraz.pdf>
- UNESCO (2000). *Analytical survey, distance education for the information society, policies, pedagogy and professional development*. UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education, Moscow: UNESCO/IITE.