The Open and Distance Learning Approach: An Information and Communication Technology Mode of Enhancing Social and Academic Development in Kenya: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Open and distance learning (ODL) has in the recent times become an educational theme of significance the world over. The growth of ODL has occurred as a result of its flexibility with respect to time, pace, entry requirements, affordability and quality. In Kenya, despite the rapid expansions and innovations in the education sector in the past two decades, challenges to access and equity in ICT still exist. As we focus attention on the use of ODL as one of the popular mediums of social and academic development in Africa, Kenya needs to do more than it has done to provide opportunities that will enable its citizens to acquire and use ICT effectively. The introduction of free primary education in 2003 and free secondary tuition in 2008 are an indicator that Kenya is moving along other countries in the world to embrace change and to ensure that all children are given a chance to get an education as well as an exposure to ICT. This has resulted into a population explosion in educational institutions and thus the need for ODL. This paper examines some of the opportunities and challenges of ODL in Kenya today. It recommends that the Kenyan government through the Ministry of Education should aggressively develop ODL. It should also develop proper means of communication technology towards the country's educational curricula as a means of expanding equity and access to education through ODL as medium of effective social and academic development.

Keywords: Open and distance learning (ODL), opportunities, challenges, approach and mode.

1. Introduction

Open and distance learning has been defined as a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional system designs that aim at delivering education to students who are not physically "on site" in a traditional classroom or on campus Moore (2007). It is a process that aims at creating and providing access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both Croom (1987). It is a creation of educational experiences of equal quality for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom through ODL as a means of social and academic development.

The main difference between open and distance education and face- to- face education is that in the latter, learners attend classes at a particular time while the former learners work with printed and/or interactive electronic material. Though contact between the student and teacher is necessary, it is not normally immediate in the physical sense. Written or telephone contact is often used as well as other forms of media like radio, television and electronic networks Keegan (1990). The ODL approach involvement ranges from single or individual learning to group learning and learners are provided with opportunities to talk and share ideas online.

1.1 ODL in the Kenyan Education System

For many years, delivery of education in Kenya has relied on the use of traditional pedagogical approaches. The teaching and learning process has been conducted through a face-to face interaction between the learner and the tutor, but as countries the world over embrace technology, the importance of the ODL approach to education in every country cannot be overlooked. This is why Open and Distance learning and its expansion has become a significant trend in Kenya and the world over.

Several post-independence policy documents have articulated the role of distance education in the Kenyan education system. The Ominde Commission (1964) proposed the establishment of radio correspondence education in the country. This led to the establishment of the department of Distance Studies at the University of Nairobi (UoN) in 1967. Later, the Kamunge report (1988) expressed satisfaction that the external degree programme offered by the University of Nairobi was an example of continuing Education programmes that could be nationally accessed by eligible learners throughout the country. The Koech report of 1999 hailed the external degree programme of the UoN as being particularly beneficial to serving teachers and other Kenyans in employment who would otherwise have failed to enroll for University. It recommended that the programme be expanded in order to reach many deserving and qualified Kenyans.

In order for Kenya to achieve the overall goal of 'Education For All' by 2015 that is in tandem with the national and international commitments, it has to, through the Ministry of Education, strive to promote and popularize Open and Distance learning at all levels of education and training. It should also be borne in mind that introduction of any technology into the classroom requires thoughtful and deliberate planning and involvement of all stakeholders including teachers and learners.

Following the implementation of Free Primary Education in Kenya in 2003, the Ministry of Education (2001) revealed that a total of 1.2 million out-of-school children were absorbed in formal primary schools. Despite this, many primary school going age children are still out of school. Many schools are congested and participation rates in urban slums and Arid and Semi-Arid areas (ASALS) is low. It is for this reason that the Kenyan education system should adopt the use of the ODL approach in making education accessible to the masses. The Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in public primary schools and public secondaryschools in Kenya has peaked following the implementation of free primary education and free tuition for secondary school with the later's enrolment increasing from 1.03million in 2007 to 1.6 million in 2010 (Daily Nation, 27,9,2010).

Despite the rapid expansion of basic and higher education in Kenya in the past two decades, challenges of quality, access and equality still remain Amutabi (2004). These include: inadequate capacity to cater for a growing demand for more places in the university and schools, mismatch between skills acquired by university graduates and demands of the industry, an imbalance between the number of students studying science and arts based courses, rigid admission criteria and gender and regional disparities in terms of admission. The existence of numerous private universities in Kenya has not altered the situation, therefore, ODL remains one of the best alternative channels for increasing involvement in social and academic development.

Due to limited chances in universities in Kenya, parents are obliged to spend millions of shillings every year to educate their children abroad, particularly in prime courses like electrical engineering and computer science. The ODL approaches can therefore be used in tapping the opportunities offered by new technology. Policy makers, planners, stakeholders and decision makers in Kenya are faced with a major task of large numbers of qualified students who cannot be admitted into public universities. For example, both public and private universities provide opportunities for not more than five percent (5%) of the relevant age groups, namely 20-24 years old school leavers. Furthermore, enrolment in public universities has stagnated below 40,000 students over the last two decades. The effect has been an accumulation of a high number of working people qualified for university education but failed to join university because of limited facilities and thereafter settled to pursue middle level course programmes. Students who miss chances to join high school or university and wish to do so, should be encouraged to do so through the ODL mode.

At the tertiary level in Kenya, the enrolment level of people with special needs is very low owing to taboos and beliefs associated with disability. To avert this situation, there is need therefore to develop and implement a flexible curriculum that is friendly to this category of learners. This can be done through the implementation of ODL in the Kenyan education system so as to guarantee equitable distribution of educational opportunities to all geographical regions, gender groups and socio-economic groups.

Although the provision of distance education has been in existence in Kenya since 1965, the introduction of the internet and IT-supported learning has and will continue to bring revolution in the field of social and academic development. Kenyans are also reaping the benefits that accrue to individuals with ICT skills. The ODL approach is a timely implementation that will contribute to the realization of the dream of improving access to education through increased enrolment and improved quality. The Kenyan education system should therefore strongly come up with a concrete policy framework to support ODL and subsequently use it to open up social and educational opportunities at all levels of learning.

2. Materials and Methods
This study involved an exploratory research. The researcher reviewed existing relevant documents from the ministry of education such as ministry of education reports, commissions, committee reports and policy papers. It investigated the open and distance learning approach as an information and communication technology mode of enhancing social and academic development in Kenya; Its opportunities and challenges. The focus was on the use of ICT in education. Data was analyzed using qualitative techniques and presented using description.

3. Discussion
3.1 Opportunties of ODL
In Kenya today, the use of technology in education and training has focused on mass education. There is an

increased awareness and understanding of appropriate pedagogy in education. These technologies have led to the development of new learning environments and thus the revolutionalization of the way education and training is delivered. ODL is one such pedagogy that offers a variety of new opportunities for both educators and learners at all levels to enrich their teaching and learning experiences. ODL exposes educators and learners in Kenya to new technologies that support a diverse range of teaching and learning methods, in particular peer and collaborative learning. It offers facilitating strategies and tactics that support learners as multi-dimensional participants in sociocultural processes and sub-dialogical activities Holmes and Gardner (2006). They further state that new technologies enable structuring of the learning environment to provide open ended contexts, sophisticated multiple media and tools that enable the dexterous use of ideas, textual, visual and dynamic representations, audio, simulations, graphic and knowledge construction in real or different times. The contexts and facilities provide a rich, stimulating and interactive learning environment that offers close to real life situations which make learning more authentic and engaging.

The main educational focus in Kenya today is the ideal of Education for All (EFA). This ideal is easily realized through ODL, since ODL has the potential to reach large numbers of learners for educational and training purposes. Furthermore, ODL offers individuals the flexibility of pursuing training while they continue with other day to day activities. It can reach underserved populations of students who cannot attend school for educational services they desire perhaps because they live too far away or have to perform tasks that tie them to the house. For example, women in most parts of Kenya are principally seen as home-makers and this makes their attendance of face to face classes almost impossible. Through ODL, their social and educational desires can be achieved.

ODL provides great opportunities to large numbers of individuals who want to expand their professional opportunities or career options; they are commonly known as mature entrants in Kenya. It can be an effective vehicle for such learning and continued development of knowledge, skills and abilities Watkins (1991). It fuels the public's need for lifelong learning in education by providing access to learners who are not necessarily in the school or university age bracket. It therefore fills the emerging market opportunity gap.

An equally strong incentive for university, middle level colleges and schools to use ODL is steadily rising due to the high cost of on-campus education. ODL ensures quality and cost effectiveness of an educational programme that a learner chooses to engage in from whichever point of location. In terms of cost reduction, ODL also turns production of content into a repeatable and durable learning tool that does not require as much infrastructure and money as it may with on-campus education. Most material can be packaged in an easy to deliver "just in time" format, and thus, the expanding payroll of educational institutions becomes unnecessary.

Kenyan parents are more often than not forced to spend millions of shillings to educate their children abroad, particularly in science courses such as computer science, computer engineering and electrical engineering. They spend about 5 million (US$16,000) per year per student. This implies that the country looses a lot of money on foreign education and this doesn't anchor well for sustainable development in the country. ODL therefore eases the country and the parents of this burden.

ODL has also enabled many learning institutions in Kenya to adapt to new technologies and environments due to the rapid changes in World technologies. It offers new opportunities to learners through virtual environments that support not just the delivery but also the exploration and application of information and the promotion of new knowledge Holmes and Gardner (2006). Increasingly powerful computers combined with the development of the World Wide Web, have meant that much more information is much more accessible than ever before. ODL therefore has appropriately assisted in delivering the wider range of learning skills deemed necessary for modern times.

ODL has also enabled students to be well educated in their chosen fields and in digital literacy thus enabling them to effectively take part in the present and future knowledge society. It also provides learners with a feeling of being part of a world community through ICT programmes such as video conferencing. This kind of communication among learners of different cultures helps to promote a strong social unity among learners across the country and the entire world.

ODL is a noble intention by the Kenyan government and other stakeholders in education to provide educators and learners in general an environment that enables them to compete favourably with other people in the entire world. ODL has been introduced especially in higher institutions of learning to ensure that education in Kenya remains relevant. It also enables the youth to be easily absorbed in the world's job market.

ODL has the potential to overcome some of the limitations of traditional learning methods including most importantly, the fixed times and locations for learning.

3.2 Challenges of ODL

ODL in Kenya has been applauded for its efficacy, convenience, flexibility and accessibility, however these advantages are not in total. Some recent researchers show that the scenarios of hundreds or thousands of students enrolling in a well developed essentially instructor free online course does not appear realistic. The numbers are overwhelming and this affects quality. Watkins (1991) states that the time demand of teaching an online course is two to three times that of teaching a face to face class. Therefore, successful ODL courses are those consisting of low learner instructor ratios.

Not everyone in Kenya appreciates the potential for ODL as a personalized resource. Indeed very few do. A major challenge that Kenya faces today therefore, is to create a desire in people to learn through ODL. Many educators have been slow to warm up to new systems of technology and are acculturated to print paradigm (ICT) while the learners are becoming more and more digital natives. This creates a gap that cannot be easily reconciled thus becoming a drawback to the facilitation of ODL.

ODL has been associated with expensive failures, high costs combined with high dropout rates Odumbe (2008). Many students in Kenya enroll with Universities outside the country such as South Africa due to the limited infrastructure and institutions of ODL but hardly carry on to complete the courses enrolled for. This results into a waste of resources and time.

Distance teaching methods in Kenya are limited to printed material since few people in Kenya own radios, television sets and computers. Those who do, live mainly in towns where access to campus-based education is easy. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) has come in to support ODL programmes through radio but they don't reach all the targeted population due to few radio channels, and educational programmes have to fight for prime time over the radio with popular soap operas, entertainments and news. At the moment a big population of Kenyans own mobile phones which cannot be used effectively to support ODL programmes since it is too expensive in terms of credit loading and more often than not, lines are unclear or congested

Learners in Kenya also experience roadblocks in the course of learning at a distance. This is so because they lack computers and other technological skills required for computer mediated learning. Some do not have time-management skills that are needed for successful distance learning. In addition, the country as at now does not have instructors with necessary skills both instructional and technical that can enable them teach at a distance using modern technologies.

Some learners and parents in Kenya Still do not view ODL as an attractive alternative to the traditional learning environment because they feel it isolates the instructor and the learner from other members of the class. According to them, such isolation may lead to learner frustration and ultimately to the abandonment of the study.

In some parts of the country cultural and societal values prevent women and girls from accessing ODL. Women and girls may not be allowed to travel away from home in search for cyber-cafes so as to access the net for information. It is believed that cyber cafes are places where women and girls should not gain access to because they will get "spoilt". This notion has dragged women and girls behind in terms of knowledge acquisition through ODL. They are also unable to afford access to information technology due to lack of well paying jobs and thus inadequate income to support them in their pursuit for knowledge. In such regions they are also less likely to have the fundamental skills needed to benefit them from the use of information communication technology. They may also not be able to communicate in the international languages such as English and Spanish that dominate the internet.

The Kenyan government does not have an ODL policy for Higher education and other institutions of learning in place, and therefore there is no specific provision for distance learning education in the overall national budget. As a result, institutions of ODL especially the universities have to generate funds to run ODL programmes, general planning, coordination, supervision and evaluation. In most cases the same money generated from ODL programmes is used to subsidize other conventional programmes since the value attached to ODL is minimal. Therefore most of the ODL programmes have been launched on an ad-hoc basis as a means of generating income for the cash strapped public universities rather than designing them with the benefit of the learners in mind.

Some of the key players in ODL like the Ministry of Education, vice chancellors, Deans and directors do not understand principles and applications of ODL. This creates a serious gap in policy planning and the implementaton of ODL programmes in the Kenyan education system.

ODL also faces the challenge of outdated facilities. Most of the programmes use print as the medium of instruction. Supplementary materials such as computers, audio-cassettes, video cassettes, slides and experimental kits are generally not in use due to poor designs of course programmes and lack of funds to produce high quality ODL materials for the Kenyan educational programmes.

Slow internet connectivity in Kenya is yet another challenge. Technology enhanced distance education relies heavily on the internet for delivery of academic courses; digital library, the portal and many other products. Unfortunately, slow internet connectivity in Kenya mitigates the effectiveness of ODL.

ODL in Kenya faces countless challenges, however, if the decision makers and other stakeholders in the education sector appreciate its effectiveness in enhancing knowledge, then it will change the Kenyan population by opening up to them a world full of knowledge.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations
Based on the issues raised in the preceding discussion, the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

There is hope that the Kenyan government will make deliberate attempts to have educators equipped with knowledge that will enable them make informed decisions on a number of educational questions that pertain to the strategies of ODL. These attempts should be informed by the realization of the need to resolve the perennial problems inherent in the introduction of ODL in the Kenyan education system so as achieve the desired outcomes in social and academic development.

Inspite of the glaring challenges, great is the need to encourage development of mechanisms for flexible delivery of curriculum to cater for disadvantaged groups and children with special talents and needs. This can be done through promoting open universities and distance education to increase learning opportunities. The government should build infrastructure and facilities such as rural electrification and telecommunication networks to enhance ODL use.

The Kenyan government should invest more in buying satellite radio receivers to aid informal education in remote arid areas of northern Kenya and areas with poor accessibility due to bad terrain especially districts such as Isiolo, Tharaka and Mbeere. Such investment is not only urgent but inevitable if the government wants to ensure all children access quality education. of vital importance is the need for training of teachers in the effective use of technology as a tool for teaching and learning. More so, their anxieties ought to be eased by assuring them that their role as teachers is still an essential one.

The Kenyan government also needs to review the current training delivery mechanisms to include mandatory on-job training in order to enhance quality and relevance of training as part of the academic programme. As part of the preparation for digital curriculum delivery and teaching in schools, parents ought to enroll their children for computer classes and training to make them compliant with the changing times.

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