

The Prospects and Challenges of Open Learning and Distance Education in Malawi

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Abstract—Open and distance learning is a fairly new concept in Malawi. The major public provider, the Malawi College of Distance Education, rolled out its activities only about 40 years ago. Over the years, the demand for distance education has tremendously increased. The present government has displayed positive political will to uplift ODL as outlined in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy as well as the National Education Sector Plan. A growing national interest in education coupled with political stability and a booming ICT industry also raise hope for success. However, a fragile economy with a GNI per capita of -US\$ 200 over the last decade, poor public funding, erratic power supply and lack of expertise put strain on efforts towards the promotion of ODL initiatives. Despite the challenges, the nation appears determined to go flat out and explore all possible avenues that could revolutionise education access and equity through ODL.

Keywords—challenges, distance education, Malawi, open learning, prospects.

List of abbreviations

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| CDSS | Community Day Secondary School |
| COL | Commonwealth of Learning |
| DEC | Distance Education Centre |
| MCC | Malawi Correspondence College |
| MCDE | Malawi College of Distance Education |
| MGDS | Malawi Growth and Development Strategy |
| NESP | National Education Sector Plan |
| ODL | Open and Distance Learning |
| OL and DE | Open Learning and Distance Education |

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I. INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH the terms open learning and distance education (OL and DE) have been around for quite a long time, scholars continue to differ in their definitions. The idea of open learning was founded on the work of two scholars Célestin Freinet (1896 – 1966) and Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) who proposed the need for self-determined, independent and interest-guided learning in education [1]. Widdowson defines open learning as a flexible approach to education and training designed to make it more accessible, effective and responsive to individual needs [2]. This definition places considerable responsibility on the learner and relies, in the main, on well produced course materials. To Greenberg, the concept of distance education encompasses “any planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and encourages learner interaction and certification of learning” [3].

Open learning and distance education vary distinctively in their approaches of study. Whereas open learning allows learners flexibility and choice over what, when, at what pace, where, and how they learn, distance education is principally characterised by separation of geographic distance and time. Thus, open learning could be offered on campus or at a distance, and distance education could be open or closed.

In spite of the differences in definition, the concepts of open learning and distance education share a common aspect in that they both provide alternative paths to the traditional mode of learning. In OL and DE, educationists use novel methods of imparting knowledge such as the internet and e-mail, message-board forums, telephone, CD-Roms, print materials, video cassettes and video-conferencing in addition to ‘popular’ classroom-based instruction. Among other major attributes, OL and DE provides the learners a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility for learning since it espouses the twin values of flexibility and accessibility, has multiple modes of knowledge dissemination, employs a multi-modal assessment system and usually involves mediated or technology-based education.

Some modern schools of thought fuse the concepts of OL and DE to coin the idea of open and distance learning (ODL). This paper will adopt this term to refer to OL and DE or either of them because most alternative education programmes in Malawi are built on the combination of both methodologies. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), for one, observes that

most definitions of open and distance learning differ due to their varying focus on factors such as separation of teacher and student, institutional accreditation, mixed-media courseware, possibility of face-to-face meeting for tutorials, two-way communication, and use of industrialized processes. The International Council for Open and Distance Education defines open educational practices as practices which support the production, use and reuse of high quality open educational resources through institutional policies, which promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path [4].

Nowadays, ODL is seen as a viable means of widening and broadening access to education. Most nations in the developing world, Africa in particular, are aligning themselves towards its adoption across all levels of the education spectrum. Apart from increasing the opportunities on education access, other benefits of ODL include emerging market opportunities and opportunity to adapt to technology and environments. Distance education fuels the public's need for lifelong learning in education by providing access to learners not in the primary school age group, and at the same time allows educational institutions to adopt distance education as a means to adapt to the rapid changes in technology being used in education today.

II. HISTORY OF OL AND DE IN MALAWI

The emergence of ODL can be traced back to the 18th century. However, records indicate that modern distance education has been practiced around the 1840s when Isaac Pitman taught short hand in Britain through correspondence [5]. In his article on open schooling, Siaciwena mentions that open schools were introduced in Canada in 1919 and in New Zealand a bit later in 1922[6]. Open schooling, another related concept, refers to the use of alternative and usually less resource-based approaches which characterise distance education methods and open learning in the delivery of basic education and training.

Valentine notes that the notion of distance learning is dynamic [7]. As technology changes, so does the definition of distance learning. While early scholars defined distance learning on the basis of the correspondence mode of studying, modern ones take into account technological breakthroughs such as internet radio, web-based VoIP and video conferencing which allow distance learning to occur in real time. With regard to this, Desmond Keegan observes that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained" [cited in 7].

In Malawi, open and distance learning is relatively new. The Malawi government initiated efforts towards the introduction of ODL in 1965 when it established the Malawi Correspondence College (MCC). MCC was mandated to provide education by distance as one way of increasing access

to secondary school education. Secondary education in Malawi runs from Form 1 up to Form 4 at which time students sit for the Malawi School Certificate Examinations in readiness for tertiary education. The college worked in partnership with the Schools Broadcasting Unit, an arm of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation which was responsible for the promotion of basic education activities through radio. Later in 1972, the unit was incorporated to the college to make the Malawi College of Distance Education (MCDE). The merge resulted in MCDE gaining capacity to start producing radio programmes which complemented printed correspondence materials.

When it first launched its operations in 1965, the MCDE started with an enrolment of 1,425 students and 25 members of staff. Over the decades, the college registered tremendous growth with student numbers rising to 150, 000 against 130 employees and 2,500 teacher-supervisors [8]. The number of distance education centres also rose to 520 while night secondary schools increased to 44. In 1998, distance education centres were upgraded to community day secondary schools in response to high demand for formal secondary school education. There are currently a total of 575 CDSSs in Malawi with 99, 172 students enrolling in 2008 (latest statistics), representing 67 % of the total students enrolled in government-run schools. Furthermore, the number of open schools – formerly known as night secondary schools – has risen to 44. There were 6,939 students in open schools in 2008, making up about 3% of the total secondary school population.

Recently, the Mzuzu University in the northern region intensified efforts towards the introduction of open and distance learning in its teacher education programmes. The project, started in 2006, is being carried out in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the COL. In a bid to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio in secondary schools, the Domasi College of Education started a distance education teacher training programme in 1999 that runs parallel to a conventional one. The programme has doubled the annual teacher output at the college. The University of Malawi has also joined the cause with Chancellor College introducing a postgraduate programme – Masters in Business Administration – in 2008. The university's Continuing Education Centre has also unrolled plans to offer some of its diploma programmes through ODL at least by 2011.

III. PROSPECTS FOR ODL

Many opportunities exist in Malawi for the development of open and distance education. First and foremost, ODL has formally thrived in Malawi for over four decades now. Most educational institutions especially at the secondary and tertiary levels have either already practiced or are intending to

introduce some form of ODL in their courses. Section 2 has provided some notable initiatives that have been carried out to date. With respect to this background, I now present the major factors that need further exploration in the quest for success in ODL in no particular order.

A. Hunger for education

Malawians, for some reason, have an insatiable hunger for education. The increase in enrolment numbers for ODL over the past four decades is one indication of the public's interest for literacy. Despite being poor, Malawi is one of the few countries in Southern Africa with high gross enrolment rates for primary education, standing at 119 % in 2008. Similarly, the country has been experiencing high demand for secondary school education to the extent that government was forced upgrade distance education centres to community secondary school as one way of formalizing secondary education. In the meantime, there is also public outrage on the number of eligible students being left out of the two public universities due to limited available space. The problem has been further compounded by the recent re-introduction of the quota system of student selection which the Malawi government argues will ensure equitable access to university education among the nation's 28 districts. On the other hand, a segment of the population believes the system does comply with the tenets of meritorious selection and will only unfairly disadvantage deserving students.

B. Conducive political environment

Recent developments have indicated political interest for the promotion of education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The current government, under the leadership of Dr Bingu wa Mutharika now serving his second five-year term of office from May 2009, has always emphasized the improvement of education as a means for socio-economic development and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Education is mentioned both in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) and Vision 2020 as a priority amongst priorities [9]. In walking the talk, the government increased public funding to the education sector in the 2009/10 budget to K24.5 billion, representing a 27% increase from the previous financial year's budget. Additionally, there has been recruitment of 2713 and 1333 additional teachers for primary and secondary schools respectively between 2007 and 2008.

Government has also formulated the National Education Sector Plan (NESP), a blueprint for the development of the education sector from 2008 – 2017, which recognizes education as a catalyst for socio-economic growth and an instrument for empowering the poor and voiceless [10]. The NESP sets out the strengthening of complementary basic

education modalities for learners including Interactive Radio Instructions, complementary basic education and open and distance education as one its main strategic objectives.

C. Booming ICT technologies

The global revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure has not left Malawi behind. Over the past few years, Malawi has experienced a number of developments in the ICT field which could benefit open and distance education. Radio stations such as FM 101, MIJ FM and Zodiak Broadcasting Station have increased their capacity and are now able to broadcast their programmes country-wide giving ODL institutions many options for reaching out to students. Television Malawi has also improved its picture and broadened its coverage to many parts of the country.

Another big milestone has just been achieved in the area of internet. Malawi's sole ground telephone operator, the Malawi telecommunications Limited (MTL), late last year launched its fibre optic cable which has connected Malawi to the outside world through the World Wide Web at speeds never conceived before. The cable transcends the banana-shaped country from South to the North providing rural parts a rare opportunity to link themselves to the information super highway. Parallel to this has been the blossoming of internet cafes in the four cities which cater for ICT services to the general public. Mobile phone operators have also increased their coverage across the country while at the same time improving the quality of their services. Cheap handsets have also flooded the market to ensure low-income earners get a chance to stay connected. Apart from normal calling, text messaging has proved to be a cost-effective way of student-tutor communication in ODL.

Tele-conferencing technology has also reached Malawi with the first equipment being installed at Chancellor College. ODL institutions would therefore be able to use this technology to broadcast lectures to students in distance parts of the country in real time. This would allow students to interact with their tutors as well fellow students and participate in crucial class debates.

D. Rural electrification

Related to the issue of ICT development is the aspect of electrification. The Malawi government is also carrying out a rural electrification programme as part of the MGDS. Being a developing country, only a fraction of households is connected to the national electricity grid. However, a number of rural trading centres have already benefited from this programme and more are on the line. The programme also includes empowerment of rural masses on the use of solar energy. Once through, the electrification will therefore enable students in the rural areas of the country to use electrical ICT resources such as audio cassettes, video tapes, computers and electric radios in their homes.

The coming of electricity is also assisting distance education students in rural areas to study at night. Students are now able to go to work during day and sacrifice part of their night time for academic work. There is a high likelihood that enrolment numbers in distance education could go up in rural areas with the electrification.

E. Improved road infrastructure

The state of roads in Malawi is not up to date. However, there has been tremendous improvement in the roads sector over the past decade after an increase in public funding. Nowadays, it is possible to access almost every part of the country by road. ODL institutions can take advantage of this development to open satellite centres in strategic parts of the country where print and electric study materials could be accessed by students. Furthermore, tutors could be travelling to these centres for short face-to-face sessions with the students. The improved road infrastructure has also resulted in efficient postal services. The numbers of days for postal mail to reach any destination within Malawi has been reduced to an average four days.

F. Peace and stability

Malawi has remained peaceful and stable since her independence in 1964 albeit being a poor nation. Unlike other countries in Southern Africa such as Mozambique, Angola, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo which have experienced wars and ethnic conflicts, Malawi continue to enjoy a good reputation in internal and foreign relations. Similarly, the rate of crime is comparatively low in the Southern Africa Development Community region.

The existing peaceful atmosphere is conducive to the promotion of open schooling. Open schooling in Malawi is offered through evening courses, night secondary schools and the adult literacy programme which provides late-afternoon tuition. Increased enrolment in these modes of study could complement government efforts in broadening access to education as spelled out in the MGDS and NESP.

IV. CHALLENGES FACING ODL

The promotion of ODL in Malawi does not go without challenges. Pitfalls have existed since 1965 when distance education was first instituted. This section presents some of the major challenges facing ODL.

A. Poor national economy

With a Gross Net Index per capita of less than US\$ 200 over the past decade, Malawi is one of the least developed countries in the world. The incidence of poverty is so severe

that over 50 percent of the population is classified as poor. The state of the economy remains low despite the current government's fiscal efforts that have managed to raise the GDP from -4.1 in 2001 to 2.2 in 2007 and reduce inflation from 27.5 in 2001 to 7.2 in 2007.

In an effort to increase enrolment for basic education and lessen the financial burden on poor families given the state of the economy, the government introduced free primary education in 1994. The move was successful and resulted in a 60 % increase for primary school enrolment. However, there was a simultaneous decline in the quality of education and completion rates came down to 41.5 %. The secondary and higher education levels are not spared the problem. A majority of parents struggle to raise tuition and other related fees for their children which are relatively higher at the two levels.

The current economic status of Malawi therefore poses a challenge to the promotion of ODL. Very few people have the potential to meet the demands of ODL such as the purchase of print study materials, purchase of ICT resources like mobile phone handsets and data storage appliances, payment of internet services and payment of tuition and examination fees. Ojo observes that the cost of distance education could be less but in reality it remains out of the reach of the average African due to high incidence of poverty on the continent [11].

B. Inadequate financial allocation towards ODL

Whereas the Malawi government strives to improve the quality of education in the country through increased public funding, the area of ODL remains critically under-funded. The education budget does not give a priority to ODL although the NESP (2008 – 2017) lists ODL as a strategic instrument for widening access and ensuring equity in education. In the 2009/10 national budget, the main public ODL provider (the MCDE) was allotted K63 million representing a meagre 0.3 % of the total education sector allocation.

Financial problems continue to cripple ODL initiatives in Malawi. Currently, the country lack capacity in physical infrastructure to house distance education centres which offer secondary school instruction. The centres also face enormous challenges pertaining to distance education study materials, curriculum guides, science equipment and face-to-face supervision which is hampered by inadequate staffing levels. The higher education sector faces similar problems due to budget cuts from government. For the past five or so years, the University of Malawi has been receiving less than what it had budgeted for and this has had serious implications on its strategic activities which include the introduction of ODL.

C. Insufficient libraries

The lack of financial clout in Malawi's ODL initiatives has also impinged upon the availability of library resources. Although initial plans on DEC's included establishment of libraries within them, none do exist in the 44 centres spread

across the country. In fact, the Malawi National Library has only 12 service centres in the 28 districts while the British Council has only one located in the capital city Lilongwe. The 13 service points are far short of the country's requirement for ODL.

Furthermore, the service centres do not have adequate book resources to satisfy demand. Most of them are under-resourced and possess a large of quantity of old and out-dated editions. These problems are worsened by high levels of theft and vandalism and insufficient public funding.

D. Unreliable electricity supply

The success of ODL in Malawi could also be impeded by erratic power supply. Black-outs are the order of the day and more-often-than-not do happen at night during which time most distance education students gear up for study. Towards the end last year, for example, intermitted power cuts were so frequent that presidential intervention was sought in the quest to find a lasting solution to the problem. Low power supply has been identified as one of the main constraints to the country's socio-economic development, forcing the government to initiate energy reforms necessary for the increased generation of power supply.

Alternative sources like solar energy and renewable energy technologies could mitigate the problem but their current usage rates are by far short of the national requirement. Renewable energy sources only make up about 0.2 % of the total energy supply. Some of the major obstacles to alternative sources relate to the exorbitant cost of purchasing solar panels and other materials, lack of technical support and lack of incentives to encourage alternative energy use. Statistics indicate that only about 25 % of households in the urban sector and about 1 % of rural households have electricity supply. The overall rate of electrification is estimated at 7 %.

With the current state of affairs, it would be extremely difficult for ODL students to either study at night or use their ICT appliances during the day. Audio-tapes, radio and television broadcasts, the internet, mobile phones and computers all need electricity in one way or the other to operate. Similarly, the rural electrification programme will only succeed with a corresponding power generation increase into the national grid. The recent commencement of ODL initiatives by higher education institutions means a further increase in the demand for electricity.

E. Lack of ODL expertise

Although ODL has been around in Malawi for over four decades now, there are very few trained personnel in the field. Laymaman reports that most the DEC supervisors in Malawi lack training and skills on the principles of ODL [8]. Among other problems, the supervisors fail to understand their role, provide improper student support and develop sub-standard curriculum materials.

At the higher education level, the situation is not different. Few academicians have pursued ODL as their career. Most of them are learning the principles of ODL on-the-job or through seminars and workshops. There is hope, however, that upcoming professionals would be inspired by an envisaged student demand to choose ODL as their area of specialization.

V. CONCLUSION

The future for ODL looks bright in Malawi as the nation braces itself to overcome any perceived hurdles that stand in the way towards the broadening of education access through alternative pathways of study. The government of Malawi has shown its willingness to achieve the strategic objectives of the NESP which takes into account the provision of formal education to school-going youths who fail to secure places at conventional secondary schools and adults who would like to take a second chance after missing formal education during their youth. However, the government is not spared the predicament of trying to uproot abject poverty amongst its citizens through increased funding and attention on equally-important areas such as food security, health, transport and infrastructure and trade while at the same time promoting education which it recognizes as a tool for socio-economic development.

On the other hand, low economic standing, insufficient budget provisions, erratic power supply and limited library resources pose a great threat to ODL efforts in Malawi. Although ODL is widely viewed as a cost-effective method of providing education to the less-privileged, it comes with its own associated costs. Distance education students still need to fulfill financial obligations in form of tuition and examination fees, internet service fees, airtime credit, study material costs and other unforeseen expenses.

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