

Grappling with open and distance learning challenges in Southern Africa: A review of the harmonisation of ODL policy frameworks in the SADC Region

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Abstract: Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become an accepted and indispensable part of education systems in both developed and developing countries. The emergence of ODL within the last decade particularly via information communication technologies has altered global market structures. In a dynamic society like the Southern African region, ODL has been used for outreach programmes in remote population groups, to support school education, provision of education and training opportunities for adults' vocational courses, higher and continuing education. Flexibility and access are clear benefits since ODL frees the student from travelling to a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person so as to be trained. This article aims to explore the various challenges faced by SADC Member States in the development and deployment of ODL practices. Open and distance learning in the Region faces a lot of challenges such as not having national ODL policy frameworks to regulate ODL provision, failing to meet the demand for ODL programmes due to insufficient capacity, negative misconceptions and possibility of not utilizing technology potential. The paper further aims to highlight how these challenges can be addressed at regional and national levels. In order to improve access to quality education, the SADC Secretariat has facilitated the development of an evidence based Regional Open and Distance Learning Policy Framework to support integration, harmonisation and maximisation of resources. The Policy framework provides for harmonisation of both quality and educational outputs.

Keywords: education, learner, open and distance learning, harmonisation, policy framework

Introduction and Background

Open and Distance Learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and training. It is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream educational systems in both developed and developing countries [1]. Open and distance learning is defined by UNESCO More et al, [1] as any process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and 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. ODL has altered what used to be known as traditional lecturer role. It is usually contrasted with conventional education, which may be described as a form of education which takes place in a classroom.

Sometimes ODL is used for school age children and youth that are unable to attend ordinary schools. Most courses and programmes are targeted at the adult population. Danaher & Amar [2] also point out that ODL contributes substantively to the provision of in-service teacher education that is responsive to social, cultural and economic forces affecting employment,

community development and citizenship. At tertiary level there are many distance learning courses offered. Since the invention of distance education, high education was delivered beyond the boundaries of the campus in large nations like United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa and Russia

With ODL, prepared course outlines become very important because many distance education systems provide courses in preparation for examinations and degrees which are similar or equivalent to those offered by conventional institutions[3]. Other components of ODL according to the above include teaching strategies which depend on type of programme and the needs they are designed to meet, learning materials and resources, communication between teachers and learners, support delivered locally and effective management and administration.

Many traditional universities have now begun to offer their learning programmes through distance education. Taylor [4] asserts that convenience, flexibility, cost and opportunity seem to be key factors influencing people towards ODL which has existed

for about one hundred years in developed regions and for one or two generations in the developing regions. Danaher & Amar [2] point out that Australia and New Zealand have long histories of distance delivery. Australia's open distance learning dates back to the 19th Century, giving the system long experience from which significant lessons have been drawn by later open and distance learning initiatives. Online distance learning market in the UK is concentrated around courses in business, law, medicine, science, and education[5]. In Europe, Latin America, Brazil and North America there is a rich variety of ODL programmes and institutions in a wide range of areas. Examples of growing confidence that ODL is a strategy that can make a significant contribution towards resolving problems of access, quality and equity are found in many countries[5].

In high population countries like Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan referred to as the E-9 countries there is a high rate of adoption for distance learning [5-6]. Open and distance learning is not a new delivery phenomenon in the Southern African Region. It has and continues to be acclaimed by many as an independent mode and as a complementary delivery strategy to the provision of formal education system[7]. Moore and Kearsly [8] point out that in Sub-Saharan Africa ODL has been used primarily to widen access to basic education and to improve quality in the conventional education system through in-service of teachers. There are approximately 150 distance education programmes working in sub-Saharan Africa.

The following illustrative cases in Africa can be cited. In Botswana, the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) offers distance education for Junior Certificate whilst the General Education in Tanzania is offered through the Distance Education Association of Tanzania (DEATA) which was established in 1992 [5]. Danaher and Amar [2] assert that in South Africa the University of South Africa (UNISA) has played a major role in developing distance-delivered programmes. It is the largest provider on the continent with the highest foreign students enrolment figures in Africa, 82% of these being part-time learners[9].

In Zimbabwe, at independence there was a high demand in qualified teachers and this prompted the introduction of ODL in teacher education through the Zimbabwe Integrated National Teacher Education Certificate (ZINTEC). ODL is also offered in the field of Technical Polytechnics, Industrial Colleges and Vocational Training Centres. The history of Zimbabwean higher education through ODL started with the Centre for Distance Education being established in 1993 at the University of Zimbabwe with ten centres one in each of the provinces in Zimbabwe. The centre was transformed into a full-fledged

University known as Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in 1999. The University's mission is to adopt, and implement new courses and programmes to meet the needs of a changing knowledge base, employment sector and socio-economic, political and international environment.

Challenges in provision of ODL

In the context of SADC, there are limiting factors in the development of ODL programmes. Despite the important role of ODL in promoting access to and promoting quality education and training in SADC region there are a number of challenges faced. Taylor[3] asserts that despite all the positive outcomes that go along with ODL, there are also a number of negative effects. Distance learning like other highly marketable programmes and business ventures does not go without its flaws. Problems impede proper implementation of ODL.

Lack of ineffective quality assurance system is one of the challenges experienced by Southern African states. According to the SADC Secretariat[10] most institutions in Africa tend to use the same kind of academic verification process that traditional contact-based institutions use in ODL quality assurance process and therefore do not respond to the needs of ODL programmes. According to Badat quality within ODL is a real and legitimate challenge because issues of quality arise from inadequate time on development of materials[11]. Quality of instruction is also a problem since instructors often do not design their lessons in accordance with new technological developments[22]. Many of the decision makers view distance programmes as second rate. They have no strong mandates to adjust their curriculum and instruction to fit distance learning by lacking in true commitment and have a negative influence on the entire distance learning experiences.

Mnyanyi and Mbwette [12] are of the view that attitudes towards teaching methods in an ODL environment can be a major potential roadblock to effective distance education. As a mode of learning, ODL suffers from misconceptions, degrading it to be of lower quality than traditional face-to-face conventional mode[13]. Braimoh and Lekoko [14] opine that despite the glowing virtues of distance education, this mode of delivery is still looked down upon by some people as inferior to the conventional teaching and learning process. Many of the educational policy makers and planners are sceptical about legitimacy and quality of ODL on the grounds that it does not and cannot offer the same quality as conventional-on campus education. Learners find it difficult to form study groups and interactions among themselves. This happens especially when students with different status study together. Generally traditional models of distance learning have pushed back classroom walls using a lecture based

format with one way transmission and no interaction. He says every student and every member of faculty should be a resource, comprising a rich interacting community of learners. Face to face interaction allows the student to acquire essential social skills and gives learners the chance to pick up on teacher's body language and other cues that enhance educational attainment. Research also shows that the isolating experience associated with distance education, is frequently responsible for high dropout rates in ODL institutions.

Access and equity is another ODL challenge in Southern Africa. In the past few decades a proliferation in the number of ODL institutions and course programmes offered through the ODL mode has resulted in exponential growth in student enrolment in the system. Dikshit, Garg, Panda and Vijashri assert that there is a large body of learners that have yet to be reached, and providing access to them while ensuring equity poses definite challenges[15]. In the same vein, Mnyanyi and Mbvette [12] point out that ODL is different from traditional universities where student population is normally concentrated in one place whilst in the ODL mode students are scattered in many places and supporting learners located in different places becomes a major challenge. Thus, as stated in the Regional Open and Distance Learning Policy Framework (2012) limited capacity to meet the ever growing demand for education and training in most institutions offering programmes through the ODL mode is a real challenge[13].

In Southern Africa as expressed by Mafa *et al* [16], Mnyanyi and Mbvette [12] the majority of ODL students in rural areas do not have access to information communication technologies (ICT) hence these learners face problems of meeting cost of travel and living when in town centres. Yusuf [17] shares the view that successful distance education cannot be assured without Internet. In most African countries basic ICT infrastructures are inadequate. Most of the learning materials are found electronically and most learners have fewer skills. Challenges on ODL on the modern distance learner are that they will have to learn how to use ICT and that ICT is not taught in many places and also there are other problems in developing countries including unstable power supply[7].

Lack of Comprehensive policy on ODL is another challenge faced by countries in the SADC region. There are very few policies to guide the development and implementation of programmes at national and institutional levels. Yusuf [17] alludes to the fact that most member countries in Southern Africa do not have official ODL policies. Most of the fifteen member countries in Southern Africa do not have institutional or national policy framework to regulate and monitor the provision of ODL programmes thus

there is lack of consistency in policy implementation. Most ODL institutions in member states suffer from a shortage of financial resources. South Africa for example has about 80 000 students studying at UNISA hence the accompanying ODL learner challenges.

Lack of monitoring and evaluation system is another challenge in the implementation of ODL programmes in most Southern African countries. ODL institutions in the Region generally do not have strong monitoring and evaluation systems which are critical elements in managing programmes offered through the ODL mode. This can be attributed to a lack of an inadequate research and evaluation base in ODL needed to support informed policy choices.

Addressing challenges: The Regional ODL Policy Framework

The challenges faced by Southern African states in their provision of ODL have been effectively addressed by the establishment of a regional policy framework. To ensure that the Region has standardised and harmonised education training policies and programmes, the SADC Heads of State and Government committed themselves through signing the SADC Protocol on Education and Training in 2007. Butcher *et al* [18] affirm that the main purpose of establishing SADC was to improve economic growth and development, alleviate poverty, enhance the standard and quality of life of the people of the region and support development through deeper regional integration [19]. Currently it has fifteen (15) member states namely; Angola, Botswana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe[18].

Braimoh and Lekoko [14] point out that there must be clear and well defined policy to permit effective networking and exchange of information to meet needs of the diverse clientele of the Southern African region. SADC Member States acknowledge that whilst each member state has its own policies for education and training, cooperation can be facilitated by the development and formulation of a comprehensive and standardised Regional Policy Framework[20]. The policy should be ideal for guiding the provision of education through the ODL mode in individual member states and the region as a whole. The SADC Secretariat in 2007 facilitated the development of an evidence based Regional Open and Distance Learning Policy Framework to support integration, harmonisation and maximisation of resources as envisaged in the SADC Protocol on Education and Training.

The Regional ODL Policy Framework also seeks to address issues member states face in the development and deployment of ODL such as limited collaboration, networking and partnership among

ODL institutions in the Region so as to facilitate programme exchange, sharing of resources and expertise [14]. It also aims to monitor and evaluate the progress in the implementation of ODL in the Region. To this effect a Regional and ODL Monitoring and Evaluation Framework has been developed [20]. The main purpose therefore, is to contribute to the development of effective harmonised ODL, to increase access to quality education and training and support regional integration across SADC [21].

In order to standardise the practice of ODL within the SADC region, the Regional ODL Policy Framework has identified some issues which it wishes to address. Governance is one such notable policy issue identified by Braimoh and Lekoko [14] who assert that the governance and management of ODL institutions do not have the capacity to adequately respond to development and mainstreaming of ODL. The Policy framework is needed to see the standardisation of University programmes, admission criteria, training, retraining and discipline of staff, selecting and controlling use of information communication technologies and managing budgets. Thus effective management and efficient administration systems are vital to the well- functioning of an ODL institution.

The Regional ODL Policy Framework is viewed as the key instrument in harmonising the provision of ODL in and across SADC Member States, thus contributing to the advancement of the regional integration agenda[22]. The Framework is being operationalised by a regional ODL strategic plan and implementation framework and the immediate impact will be an increased and more strategic deployment of open and distance learning within and across the SADC region. Ultimately, the policy framework will help revitalise education structures in the Region and promote the development and deployment of effective, harmonized open and distance learning, increase integration across SADC. Furthermore, the policy framework shall also provide comprehensive guidelines for harmonising and supporting the implementation of relevant aspects of related policies and strategies such as the SADC Gender Policy, SADC Gender Mainstreaming for ODL, SADC ICT Policy, the Regional Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Strategy for ODL and the Regional Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.

It is important to note that the SADC ODL Policy Framework is an evidence-based product that resulted from extensive consultative processes[12]. A baseline survey was carried out in four sub-sectors of education, that is, secondary education, higher education, teacher education and technical vocational education and training (TVET) in 12 SADC member states. The research reports detailed the status and potential of opportunities for ODL particularly in the

four sub-sectors. A policy dialogue forum was organized to validate the research reports, synthesise the findings, build consensus and make recommendations on issues that could be addressed in the Regional Policy Framework. This was followed by an august conference which drew participants from government, civil society organisations and the academia. The conference discussed the draft policy framework and built consensus on key policy areas and issues that formed the basis of the Regional Policy Framework. An ad hoc Technical Committee comprising experts drawn from participants at the Regional Conference further worked on the Draft Regional ODL policy Framework to ensure among other things, that key issues raised at all the consultative fora were fully integrated into the policy document. The draft document produced by the Ad Hoc Technical Committee was presented to the SADC Technical Committee on ODL (TCODL) for further review and recommendation to the SADC Project Steering Committee for approval. As discussed, the development of the regional framework was protracted and consultative to ensure consensus among all stakeholders.

In terms of vision, the framework envisions a region where all citizens have seamless, equitable access to lifelong learning through the provision of gender sensitive, quality and relevant open and distance learning. The mission is to support integration, harmonisation and maximisation of resources and regional standardisation of quality ODL provision in the SADC region. The goal of the regional policy framework is to increase access to quality education and training across the Region. The Regional ODL Policy Framework has 14 key policy focus areas each with a policy statement and specific objectives and activities that have to be undertaken in order to ensure that the defined issue is adequately addressed. The following are the key policy areas: National ODL Policy Frameworks; Governance and Management; ODL Staffing; Training and Development; Public Perception of ODL; Institutional Capacity; Learner Support; Quality Assurance; Monitoring and Evaluation; Collaboration, Networking and Partnership; Funding, Budgeting and Resource Mobilisation; Inclusive Education; Curriculum Development; Application of ICT in ODL and Research Development and Dissemination.

The successful implementation of the Regional Policy framework requires high level political support, at both Member State and regional levels. It will require strengthening of the existing structures that deal with education and training. The successful implementation of the regional policy also requires the involvement of all key stakeholders at both national and regional levels. The main policy players in terms of policy implementation include among others; SADC Council of Ministers, the Committee of Ministers of Education

and Training, SADC Parliamentary Forum, SADC Secretariat, Member States, SADC National Committees, SADC Technical Committee on ODL and Centres of Specialisation. Member States are expected to monitor, evaluate and fund the activities required to meet the minimum standards.

Conclusion

There is an increasing demand for ODL in Sub Southern Africa. The argument for ODL as a viable option has centred on issues of access to educational opportunities, openness and flexibility. Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to face challenges in the development and implementation of ODL programmes such as not having the capacity to adequately respond to the development and mainstreaming of ODL, inadequate trained personnel, failing to meet the growing demand for programmes and services, limited learner support, not having effective quality assurance systems, and lack of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems. As rightly put by Braimoh and Lekoko [14] Southern African countries have accepted ODL as an indispensable ingredient of the growth of National Systems hence, there is need to embrace the development of a regional policy framework that will strengthen the already positive effects of distance education.

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