SCURRYING FOR A SUCCESSFUL OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING MODEL IN MALAWI: PREVALENT ISSUES AND TRENDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Access and equity to Higher Education in Malawi remains a challenge as qualified students are left out due to limited classroom infrastructure in public universities. Between 1994 and 1996, only 5,561 students (30% female and 70% male) were enrolled in our universities. From 2008 to 2016, total enrollment has not surpassed 0.03%.Going by these realities; Malawi has two options for increasing access to higher education: either to expand the f2f residential hostel and classroom infrastructure, or diversify the ODL delivery mode so that it accommodates as many students as possible while supporting them with quality instruction. Nevertheless, due to the limitations inherent in the f2f, ODL is the most feasible option considering Malawi's thirsty for education and her relative poverty levels. Accordingly, this paper analysed the challenges confronting Malawi education system. It further attempted to provide solutions to these problems. The paper utilised case studies and literature reviews. It therefore assumed a descriptive research design. At the end of the analyses, it revealed that ODL can only be successful if several factors were considered. These factors, nevertheless, differed from one country to another, and may not be treated to a-one-size-fits-all approach. Therefore, it was recommended that ODL providers should only employ well-tailored instructional strategies not just anything that worked elsewhere. A case at hand was that while modern technologies have found their place in education, their adoption must not be wholesale since they are not complete by themselves and do come with several issues. Moreover, technologies must not be considered as cost-cutting measures and or substitutes for human resources. We also recommended that ODL must neither be considered any inferior to F2F residential delivery mode nor must it be taken as a means for achieving quantiles without quality. Accordingly, the survival of ODL will immensely depend on how these issues are treated as they help shape the quantity and quality of the learning experiences.

Keywords: F2F, ODL, ICT, e-learning, technology, developing countries, study-circles.

INTRODUCTION:

Perraton (2000) noted that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is one of the fastest growing models of education which has largely succeeded because of the invention of modern technologies in particular web 2.0 and the internet. He further added that separation of the teachers and students during the teaching and learning processes and use of rich forms of multi-media to unite them in the learning process, eliminate questions of limited classroom and hostel infrastructure and hence an ideal model for developing countries. Consistent with this assumption, Chibambo (2009) observed that Mzuzu University in Malawi had already taken initiatives to address the problem of poor access to higher education which is said to be whirling at around 0.03% by establishing the Centre for ODL in 2006 that has been offering the BA (Ed) and BSc (Ed) as pilot programmes. Likewise, Wright (2009) observed that the arrival of new technologies helped redefine ODL. For instance, he defined ODL as policies that permit entry to learning without age, gender and time barriers, and recognises learner experiences. He further distinguished ODL from Distance Education (DE) by defining the latter as the delivery of learning to those who are separated by time and space, and the learning is solely based on print materials. Conversely, ODL depends on a variety of "mediating processes" used to transmit content and assessments. Likewise, ODL altogether promotes interaction and agility by providing learning opportunities through mediating tools such as f2f sessions, ICTs, print, mobile devices, video, radio, telephones and others.

One thing that comes out clear from the three arguments above is that developing countries need ODL in order to increase and broaden access to higher education given their infrastructure and financial limitations. Relative to this, (Mandela & Machel, 2002) described higher education as a tool that takes, '*individuals from poverty to fullness; families from disease to health; orphans from isolation to protection; countries from war to security and sustainable development...*". Supporting this view, (Dhanarajan, 2001) urged African leaders to expand access to higher education through ODL in order to improve lives of their citizenry. To him, there was nothing more compelling than the hunger felt by those who missed out on higher education due to limited classroom and hostel space, age, sex and time factors.

While many scholars recognise the eminence of ODL, there are also challenges that come with it whenever institutions want to go that route. Key issues concern use of different instructional strategies, management and administration. Accordingly, this paper attempted to analyse and synthesise the key issues that confront ODL in developing countries including Malawi. It particularly did so by analysing different case studies of successful ODL practices worldwide, and outline measures that are experimental and instrumental for Africa and Asia. Worth our take is (Muilenburg & Berge, 2001 and Leggett, 1998) observations that many of the issues that asphyxiate ODL should not be regarded as "emerging issues" as it is the case, since most of them do appear, disappear only to reappear when the paradigm in the educational system has shifted. This means these issues and their measures must not be generalised as they keep on changing from country to country and time to time as suggested by (Leggett, 1998). It follows therefore that these findings and recommendations from this study cannot be applied generously unless the ODL systems share homogeneous geographies and characteristics.

METHODOLOGY:

This study utilised case study research methodology. According to (Saunders, et.al, 2009) case study strategy involves investigations of a particular phenomenon within its context using multiple sources of evidence. This is mainly used when boundaries between the phenomenon under study and its context are murky and blurred. Conversely, (Christensen, et.al, 2011) defined a case study as intensive and detailed descriptions and analyses of one or more cases. It is therefore imperative to understand that a case study can either be a person, a thing, an organisation, and or a process. In this study, we were looking at both people and systems of education (processes). The case study strategy is also ideal for mainly answering questions that border on when, what, how and or why somethings happened the way they do.

It is also ideal when the researcher does not have much influence over the events under the study as it is the case now. More so, there is a strong correlation between the current study on 'Scurrying for a Successful Open and Distance Learning Model in Malawi: Prevalent Issues and Trends in Distance Education' with this strategy as this study typically involves all the stakeholders concerned with ODL and how they perceive the system. In other words, the research goal was to examine several issues and trends that affect ODL delivery modes and how the people who are directly involved in perceives the entire system. Over and above this, case study methodology has been used in interpretive qualitative research and has been extensively supported by positivist quantitative research paradigms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS:

While this paper is based on a number of assumptions, the following three are outstanding: First, the F2F delivery mode has been mostly associated with quality teaching and graduates even if the instructors are dim-witted and unqualified as observed by (Rennie & Masson, 2007 and Perraton, 2000). Proponents of this view argue that ODL is inferior to F2F and that it focuses on memorisation rather than on problem-solving. They further argue that ODL offers a shadow of education while withholding its substance. The second view is that ODL is tool for achieving mass-education but without quality. These theorists argue that ODL is merely a tool for the attainment of social justice and equity as observed by (De Jasay, 2010; Mandle, 2009 & Raws, 1971). The third view assumes that technology must be used as a means of cutting on costs through reduced material and human resources as observed by (Wells & Wells, 2007). This view assumes that ODL is a cheap enterprise especially when ICTs are introduced, and it is ideal for developing countries where poverty is common.

Since the paper is principally based on literature reviews of various case studies from developing countries, our goal is not really to dispute these assumption, but rather to provide in-depth analyses of what exactly happens on the ground, and how it has happened elsewhere. That way, we aim at providing the platform on which educationalists can frame their policies for guiding the education systems.

MAJOR ODL ISSUES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES:

ODL in developing countries, particularly in its present forms, is still a new phenomenon. For example, DE was established in 1964 by the Ministry of Education under the Malawi College of Distance Education (MCDE) as a department according to (Muwowo, 1994). During this period, ODL was only recognised as mere correspondence learning (CL) since instructional materials were primarily distributed to the learners by post office which was not only ineffective but also expensive according to Muwowo. The instructional materials, (Sets as they were called) were mostly teacher-centred and missed out the much needed learner engagement espoused in the current forms of ODL. The sets and assignments took ages to reach either the learner or the tutors, and sometimes they could go missing while in transit as (Msiska, 2011) reported. However, today, through use of interactive printed modules, rich forms of interactive multimedia files, mobile devices and the internet, learners and lecturers alike are able to share learning experiences and have feedback instantaneously. As a result of this revolution, there has been growing interest by different stakeholders to embrace ODL as it seems exciting and promising given the wonders presented by these technologies. While the excitement with the swiftness of the delivery systems is rife, being a relatively novelty phenomenon that is heavily dependent on new and fragile technologies, a lot of challenges have been reported and some more are yet to emerge as the technologies shift gears. Below are some of select eminent issues in ODL.

INSTRUCTIONAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGIES AVAILABLE FOR USE IN ODL:

This is one of the issues that have been reported as confronting ODL systems in developing countries including Malawi. According to (Wright, 2009) institutions in Africa often rush into employing technologies without fully realising what it means for their institutions.

What they forget is that students who are still reading by candles and moonlight cannot be expected to learn online overnight. He however agrees that technologies seem to be attractive to any institution that wants to be part of the revolution, but cautions that this attraction may soon or later turn out to be a nightmare to the entire institution.

Wright seems to suggest that overspending on educational technologies may not be the wisest use of scarce resources given the presence of other equally affordable resources. Relative to this, both (Wright, 2009 & Wagner, et.al, 2005) recommend that the limited funds available should instead be channeled towards improving school attendance, and hiring of tutors who can support ODL learners. They also observe that the past decade's misguided funding policies on technologies have failed to yield the desired outcomes, while costing institutions more than what they spend on other education interventions. Likewise, (Wells & Wells, 2007) added that technology may not be the only solution to educational problems in Africa as it had been thought of. Ironically, many institutions think that technology is one way of reducing costs as it substitutes human resources and is considered to be swift and effective. This assumption, according to (Trindade & Carmo, 2000) is fallible since cost savings cannot solely be achieved by adopting technologies but when a large number of students are involved, fewer educational infrastructures are needed; all support staff is there and all academic members account for the lions' share of the budget. On this, (Silberstein, 2007) added that one of the biggest mistakes educators commit is to think that online education is cheaper than producing quality ODL instructional modules when in fact the opposite maybe true.

Going by these arguments, it is clear that ODL should be about access, equity and production of quality graduates to the society. This means cost saving should not be considered as the core benefit but rather as one of them. That is the reason (Sife, Lwoga & Sanga, 2007) recommended that institutions must introduce technologies into ODL in order to increase access to information; enhance synchronous and asynchronous learning; increase collaboration among learners and staff; reach out to myriad students; improve pedagogy through simulations and help educate those who have other commitments and limitations such as age, sex, time and physical defects. While accepting the values of technologies (Ngare, 2007) cautioned institutions not to be besotted by the baroque technologies as many of them may prove to be unsustainable in the long run. Ironically, (Gulati, 2008) argued that despite hyping values of educational technologies, inequalities between the rich and the poor, males and females across the strata continue to widen in what has been technically known as 'Digital Divide.' Gulati then proposed that at least, for developing countries, technologies must not be introduced without carrying out feasibility and economic viability analyses. These arguments then suggest that technologies do play a significant role in education if implemented in a right way at the right time, but cannot be used as a cost saving measure.

TECHNOLOGY AS A MERE COMPONENT OF AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM:

Wright (2007) identified the following key issues that must be considered whenever education institutions want to use technology: managers' ability to identify the problem to be solved (needs assessment); managers ability to put up a good implementation plan (tech-push and pull); government willingness to make the technologies accessible by everybody (political will); effectiveness of the technology; flexibility of the curriculum to adopt technology and change; ability of the technology to promote interaction among users; lecturers ability to use the technology in teaching; lecturer incentives as they try to learn the technology; ability to acquire copyright to slice and dice published content, and regular maintenance and updates of the technology.

He further added that organisations policies must: be adjusted to suit the delivery methods, support independent studies, deal with issues of security; assist technologically-challenged students; establish evaluation tools and review implementation plans regularly.

In his argument, (Bates, 2000) observed that planning is an imperfect art that usually encounters unforeseen developments. While submitting to this view, Bates warns that the imperfect nature of planning does not licence institutions to forego basic strategic plans that ensure effective technology-based teaching. Bates seemed to imply that the degree to which institutions can adjust their policies greatly affects the success of the technologies. Educators should therefore avoid situations where technologies are provided years after requests were made. The problem with this according to (Strong, 2007) is that the time the technologies reach the schools, they are obsolete. The issue here is that technologies have a shelf life as they are designed according to a particular lifespan. This is the reason we have seen the emergence of different computer operating windows, screen designs, resolutions and sizes and, a myriad Pentiums. These issues affect the performance of the technologies in terms of speed and spare parts. Accordingly, ODL managers need to be responsive whenever requisitions like these are made by the users. Those who have limited knowledge of the technologies and change management will most likely make poor procurement decisions. Based on these, (Levy, 2003) advised managers and the stakeholders to jointly formulate tech-implementation plans so as to nurture ownership. Otherwise, any plans that are made singlehandedly will most likely fail. Besides, such plans must be revised periodically by both management and the users to accommodate new techno-innovations. These aside, (Leary & Berge, 2006) argued that, while use of technologies in education seems to be unquestionably acceptable worldover, ODL- in developing most countries- continue to be more successful through printed materials, which are the most realistic method of delivering content at the moment, hence must be accorded first priority when it comes to funding.

LIMITED ELECTRICITY AND INTERNET INFRASTRUCTURES:

According to (Wallsten, 2005 and Fay & Morrison, 2007) poor access to unswerving electricity, telecommunication and internet infrastructures inhibit growth of countries' economies and education. For example, Ngare (2007) reported that as of 2007 almost 80% of Kenyan primary schools and 35% of the secondary schools had no electricity at all. Moreover, persistent blackouts according to (Malekata, 2009; Mutegi, 2014 and Ouma, 2013) ruined nearly all the e-learning projects in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya. Similarly, in Malawi, only 10% of the people have access to electricity in their homes as per (MERA, 2014) report. According to Malekata, Mutegi and Ouma, continuous blackouts translated into high charges levied on

the students who were downloading e-resources for their studies. This forced schools to look for generators or solar panels to power the technologies. More worrisomely so, fuel for the generators was imported from the East and was and is still a prohibitive commodity just (MERA, 2014) recounted.

Given these concerns, introducing e-learning in schools had proved to be a costly and unsustainable enterprise. To counter these, alternative power sources such as solar, wind and generators were explored although they too came with stern costs. According to Wright (2009) Namibia tried to utilise solar panels and wind-turbines to generate electricity to support e-learning projects. This infrastructure helped the School-net Project provide internet and trained about 300 beneficiaries at highly subsidised rates. He then concluded that making available reasonably priced internet and steady electricity may increase the adoption of e-learning in Africa.

Internet and electricity are indeed critical issues that restrain growth of Open Distance and E-Learning (ODEL) in many developing countries.

For example, (Wadvalla, 2008 and World Bank, 2007) reported that in Africa, the cost of internet is 20 to 40 times higher than that of North America, since 80% of the traffic is routed through satellites and this has not changed until this day.

Moreover, satellites in Africa and South Pacific provide slower transmission than optical cables mainly due to narrow bandwidths. Besides, these satellites were launched more than 27 years ago and are antediluvian. Fortunately, underground internet cable project approved by the World Bank to connect Africa and Europe will substantially reduce costs of the internet and speed problems as (World Bank, 2014) reported. In addition, Google, Liberty Global, and the HSBC Bank planned to launch a high-speed, low-cost internet of over 16 satellites which might as well boost ODEL and Africa economies as (BBC News, 2008) reported.

However, (Mutegi, 2014 and Narayan, 2007) argued that even if internet infrastructure were there, the operating costs would still be prohibitive for the majority who live on less than an US Dollar a day. Above this, internet speed and intermittent electricity, fair internet accessibility will still remain a dream to many people who live in the rural areas but are the principal beneficiaries of ODEL. All in all, developing countries have the advantage of learning from developed countries, and may probably avoid problems that have confronted the frontrunners. Thus instead of using terrestrial systems, they may use wireless which can potentially cut through geographically challenged areas.

Concisely, bandwidth is not the only challenge limiting ODEL in Africa according to the case studies. Thus, poor infrastructures, installation, interferences, coverage, security, and surfing costs are all critical issues in almost all developing countries. The issue is that institutions must first examine the available infrastructure against their needs before deciding on the solutions. Technically, infrastructure challenges are similar in many developing countries, minus Latin America and Caribbean where it is slightly improved according to (Wright, 2009). For this, (Fay & Morrison, 2007) urged African governments to wisely allocate more funds towards infrastructure development and initiatives that will foster access and equity to higher education.

INSTITUTIONAL AND FACULTY POLITICAL PUZZLES:

In Africa, almost all public universities are politically sponsored. It is therefore usually very difficult to avoid political interference. Ironically, universities claim to have total "Academic Freedom" yet at the helm of their leadership is the Chancellor- the State President- who is naturally a politician. It is against this background that universities usually find themselves in a tight corner when it comes to liberating themselves from political servitude. In Malawi, for example, lecturers have ever been dismissed for simply teaching what was deemed antigovernment. Equally so, university administrators have not been at liberty to discipline any students anyhow without seeking prior-political authority.

The issue here is not really about this form of politics, but rather internal politics in universities. ODL institutions mostly operate within existing F2F residential institutions. They operate as centres or departments whichever is applicable. In this case, there are four forces that act on them. For example, at Mzuzu University, the Centre for ODL has a director, who works with university management, deans, faculty staff and the Ministry of Education as interested stakeholders. Below is a diagram that shows the executive structure of an ideal public university in Malawi and see where ODL leadership is thrown.

EXECUTIVE STRUCTURE OF MZUZU UNIVERSITY:
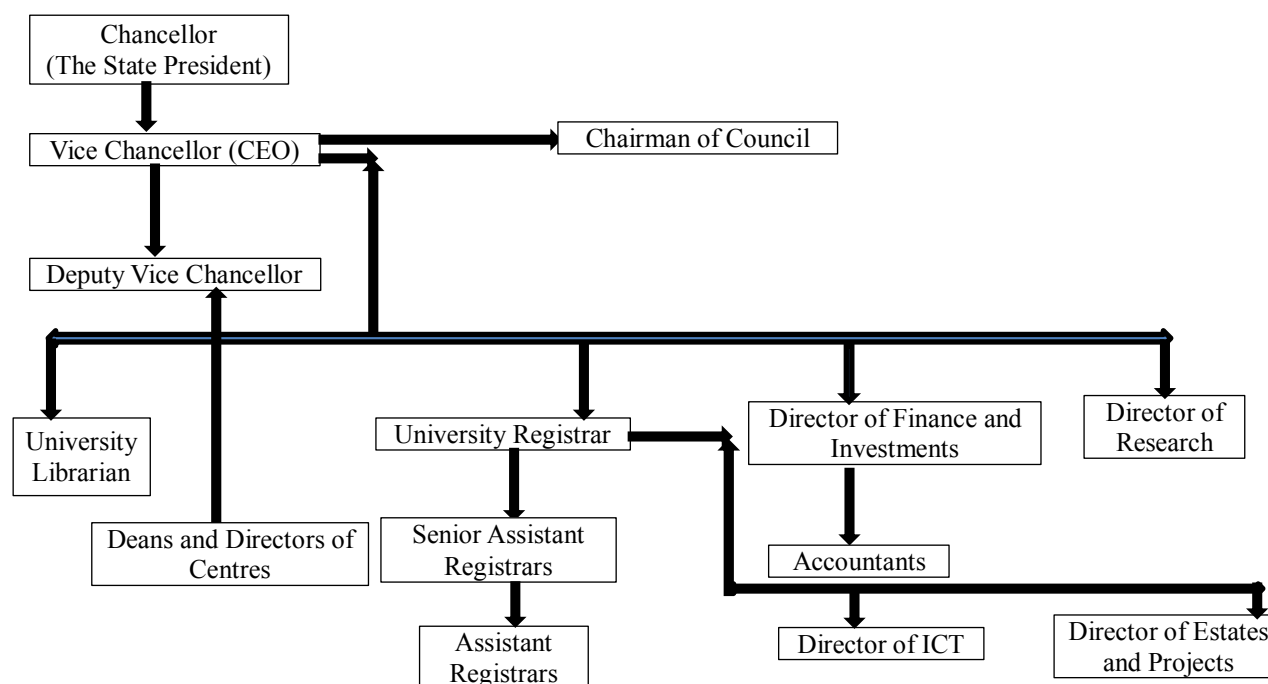
Essentially, these offices are held by individuals with own interests and values. When it happens that some of them have grudges against the other, be it administrative or personal issues, the experience has been that of wanting to pull down each other just like wrestlers do. That is probably the reason Mzuzu University initiated ODL programme way before 2006 but was, up until 2011, unable to commence the programmes. According to random interviews held with staff they did indicate that some officers went around telling them to absolutely refuse and abandon anything that concerned ODL including development of instructional materials. This way they believed would send a message to the director of ODL that his insolent and arrogant behaviour towards staff was unacceptable in the academia. Again, while the situation improved through round table discussions, it is not surprising that up until to date only 70% of the required modules have been produced despite spending 8 years developing them. In a follow interview, many respondents (staff) indicated that they were too busy with the teaching and marking of f2f and ODL assignments and examinations. Others indicated that they were simply not happy with the amount of money they received for writing these modules.

Much as some of these reasons might be genuine, not all of them were. They were merely "political puzzles or gig-saws" aimed at frustrating the whole system in a more diplomatic way this time. Interestingly, UNESCO pumped in 5000 U$ as a top up towards the writing of science materials raising the compensation from 290 U$ to 390 U$ per module. Ironically, some individuals again went around mobilising staff to turn down the offer. Consequently, Mzuzu University had to return the money to UNESCO for failing to liquidate it.

The issue here is that implementing ODL can be an exciting journey full of ups and downs. From this case study, challenges may emanate from politicians, university management, faculty members, education ministers and ODL managers themselves. Thus, prospective and existing ODL managers, and deans must utilise people-centred management. They should make sure that their personal and work relationships are always intact and solid. Where misunderstandings arise, as it is normal of any community, sound conflict resolutions procedures should be employed.

LIMITED FUNDS AND EQUIPMENT:

When compared to the average wage, the cost of equipment can be expensive in many developing countries. World Bank (2007) for example, observed that 650 million of India's 1.1 billion people still earn two dollars a day or less despite India being an emerging economic powerhouse while Malawians earn less than a dollar a day. More so, owning a computer is a dream for many people although telecentre operators provide services to local communities in many developing countries. On this, Wright (2009) observed that there are a number of low-cost computers that ODL managers can consider. These options are significantly less expensive than a used Pentium III which can cost well over US$ 800 in the Democratic Republic of Congo as (Chibomba, 2007)

observed. He also added that One-Laptop per Child computers were sold at US$ 180, and were built with constructivism and connectivism in mind. They were capable of networking, and the software was robust. In addition, the Intel Classmate PCs were sold at almost US$ 250, and were ideal for secondary schools in Africa and Asia. He also observed that there were over fifty initiatives that involved the use of low-cost computers to serve students in developing countries. Instead of purchasing new computers, Kenya, Namibia, Trinidad, Tobago, Uganda and Malawi had opted for refurbished computers from Non-governmental Agencies across Europe. Similarly, Computers for Schools Project in Kenya provided refurbished computers to nearly 300,000 students in marginalised communities as reported by (Okono, 2007). While these solutions seem to work, a number of challenges related to refurbished computers were recorded. For example, compatibility issues, higher maintenance costs, and restrictions on software since some of the machines could not run new programmes were some of the issues that topped the list according to (Okono, 2007). He then cautioned institutions not only to assess the initial costs of the technologies, which may only be 25% of the actual cost, but also to assess all associated costs. This means that whatever costs technologies may attract, they do eat into the limited budgets available for the basic needs that could help the poor survive.

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND DIVERSITY:

Western courses bring Western values as (Edmundson, 2007) observed. Many people in developing countries feel that they are forced to accept courses from the West when, in fact, they have a choice. To this end, they prefer to use materials developed by local writers.

While the idea to have materials that are developed locally sounds good, it has a lot of implications. For example, (Gordon, 2005) observed that there are at least 6,912 languages in the world, 347 of which have more than one million speakers. In Africa, individual countries have more than 20 languages meaning that it be impossible to develop courseware for each of these languages given the costs attached. Additionally, if the courseware is to be produced in one language, the issue becomes: which language should that be? The solution becomes simple then: the language of the colonial masters. But even then, the issue of cultural imperialism arises. Further, each cultural group has Oral Traditions that are best supported by lectures and group discussions. Other cultures are uncomfortable with the concept of critical thinking inherent in ODL as they feel it will breed rebellion. For example, in an article describing the development of distributed learning in Bhutan and Nepal, (Rennie & Mason, 2007) said, "…the concept of 'critical thinking' so highly regarded by Western academics, is anathema to the traditional Buddhist educational system, and this actively works against the idea of student-centred learning that values curiosity, rationality, and creative approaches to learning…."

Relative to this, a telemedicine project in Thailand failed not only because of high costs, but also because medical personnel in urban areas were reluctant to consult those in rural areas as (Wright, 2009) reported. On this, Wright observed that the technology was not able to bridge the social barriers. He then concluded that the implementation of technology did not mean that cultural and social differences disappeared but that the differences got magnified. This means that overcoming cultural and religious perceptions towards technology maybe difficult than actually implementing it. Accordingly, to maintain an indigenous culture and reach those who live in rural areas, presenting courses in local languages made sense. However, if business is conducted in a language such as French and English, it is beneficial to expose the students to the global village. If the need to have materials in a local language is crucial, groups of ten or more educators could establish a language-specific version of the Wikiversity that was founded by the Wikimedia Foundation to create free learning materials.

RESOURCES ALLOCATION:

Educators in developing countries should be aware that external funding from donors may not always be available, and projects may not be sustained once the external funding has ended. Thus, they need to collaborate across borders, especially regarding the development and delivery of courses. On this, (Chibambo, 2014; Nafukho, 2007 and Coppola, 2004) urged educators to consider using open-source software such as Moodle, Sakai, Free World Knowledge and OERS which are not only affordable but also provide institutions with greater opportunities to adapt them according to their curriculum.

QUALITY ASSURANCE:

F2F instruction is mostly associated with quality teaching even if the instructors lack suitable credentials. According to (Rennie & Masson, 2007 and Perraton, 2000) ODL is viewed by many people as second-rate form of education that focuses on memorisation rather than problem-solving. It is often seen as a less costly

enterprise, especially when ICTs are introduced.

They further observed that ODL is seen as offering a shadow of education while withholding its substance. It is an inefficient but cheap way of containing educational demand without necessarily meeting it.

This view of ODL is not only common in Asia and Africa, but also to some extent in the developed countries. This view was also common in Europe until some twenty years ago is still prevalent in subject-specific areas today.

While the debate about ODL has been exciting, Ngare (2007) observed that the mode of delivery, whether F2F or Virtual actually has nothing to do with the quality of education being offered. To him, what is critical is the availability of good measurement criteria, regular curriculum reviews, quality assurance mechanisms, and relevance of the curriculum. Likewise, Wright observed that high-quality educational materials tend to be produced by people who are qualified; have a positive attitude; care about what and how they do it. He observed that one of the reasons ODL is not respected is lack of quality assurance mechanisms that continually measure the congruency of organisational goals with the actual achievement, instructor training, course development, instructor-learner interactions, student support services, testing, measurement and evaluation, paths of student success upon graduation and interactions that promote critical thinking. Quality affects student achievement, graduate employability, graduate ability to initiate start-up businesses, ability to upgrade themselves, support of educational stakeholders, and institution reputation all over the world. This means various countries need accreditation agencies to develop customised quality assurance criteria for assessing their institutions. They should therefore not simply use those tools that target F2F institutions since some of them may not effectively address the peculiarities of ODL.

In some cases, staff that migrate from F2F to ODL bring with them prejudices that do not help the institutions achieve their goals such as those on accessibility, flexibility and equity. Such migrants must be oriented to qualities of ODL that make it different from F2F. For our take, QA systems should have a higher priority even if resources are limited. ODL providers do not really need to develop their own QA standards but must rather adapt the existing ones for their milieu. In any case, they should communicate the QA standards they are using, and ask external reviewers to validate them regularly.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AND ACHIEVEMENT:

Maliyankono (2006) observed that Africa still has myriad people who are missing out on higher education due to the absence of strategies that can encourage them to be on board. According to Maliyankono, this situation perpetrates social injustices at all levels although some politicians may hold a different view of it. Agreed or not agreed, the concept of "Social justice" allows for diverse interpretations. For instance, philosophers and economists endlessly argue that it is "anything morally and ethically sound "(Raws, 1971) to anything that is meaningless in a free society as (Jasay, 2010 and Hayek, 1992) argued. Whichever is the case; social justice is enshrined in human rights and is all about fairness and equality in society. Thus fairness in education apparently calls for accessibility, affordability and quality which many developing countries including Africa and Asia are yet to achieve. The buzz word in many countries is "educational opportunities should be available to everyone" if the dream of realising social justice and fairness is to be realised. However, when new programmes are being introduced, government and funding agencies usually focus on completion rates in determining whether funding should be continued and programmes be expanded or not. Since ODL programmes may suffer from low completion rates as (Perraton, 2007) observed, it might be advantageous for project initiators to consider motivating students who show signs of commitment in ODL to enable them succeed. These may result into high completion rates and hence attracting further funding that can be used to develop programmes for higher-risk students. Similarly, (Wright, 2008 and Perraton, 2007) observed that successful ODL students were likely to be those who were highly-motivated, well-organised, supported by those around them, able to tolerate ambiguity, goal-oriented, and interested in using technology. Thus post-secondary level students were likely to be more successful in ODL than primary school students. They however warned that this did not mean that primary students may not be successful, but rather that the other group was more likely to finish a certified programme. This meant adult learners were particularly motivated if they knew that they would get a certificate, a salary increment, or a promotion. ODL seems to be ideally suited for those people who were working, married, refugees, incarcerated, and the busy one. These recognise the need for education that is not bound by time, age and place. If developing countries want to maximise investment in ODL, they should support such learners because they value it. To this end, students may need finances, technology, materials and any other support. These support services may be provided in a virtual form as (Brigham, 2001) observed. However, in some cases, printing costs are passed on to the students who are already financially squeezed by tuition fees and

upkeep. There must be ways of dealing with this problem, and hence, it calls for further research. Given plans like these, African institutions will rip more than what have been invested.

Apart from printing costs, access to the internet and in ability to use the technologies, learners have other concerns deserving our attention. For example, (Williams & Natvig, 2007 and Hellman, 2003) observed that social factors such as lack of feedback, and isolation from fellow learners may contribute to attrition rates that was then at between 10% and 20%. This was also due to lack of "cohort socialisation" the feeling learners have on being part of a larger community of learners. To this end, (Chibambo, 2009 and Wright, 2009) suggested that ODL systems should try to provide opportunities for interaction among the students, facilitators, and families in order to remove the isolation factor. The convergence zone is that stakeholders, if well informed about the value of ODL, will support the learners until they graduate. Furthermore, constructive feedback, regular assessments, telephone calls and programme updates from ODL facilitators and administrators are all key to mitigating cohort socialisation problems.

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENTAL CONCERNS:

Mostly faculties will not support a learning system that is considerably different from the one they are familiar with. Since most of them were trained using F2F, anything that seems to challenge their line of thought will be resisted. For this reason, (Gulati, 2008) observed that implementing ODL may be loathed by those who do not share its values. For example, one common practice associated with F2F is weeding those students who fail on academic grounds, yet this is not the case with ODL. In ODL, the priority is to help deserving students' succeed irrespective of the timeframes. They are these philosophical differences that confront faculties when running ODL alongside F2F.

Over and above this, (Anderson & Middleton, 2002 and Milhem, 2003) noted that if institutions value research more than ODL, they may resist anything that has to do with ODL since it consumes much of their time. The problem may increase if ODL is to be offered through e-learning. This then will lead to teaching anxiety associated with limited training on the new technology, tension between allocating time to online course development and research, increased workload, and performance expectations in an unfamiliar learning and instructional environment in which learner-centred and constructivist approaches are emphasised. Relative to this, Porto (2008) observed that concerns of this nature are common in many developing countries as well as in economically advanced countries. In such countries, technical support is often absent, and those who have the technical-know-how may focus on network infrastructure and security but not trainings. This means faculties must learn how to install software and troubleshoot problems they encounter. It is also important to realise that while training staff in technologies, learners too must be considered. The truth of the matter is that young people are technologically savvy and enthusiastic as (Foss, 2009) observed, and can be used to assist the instructors most of whom are non-digital natives.

SOLICITING EDUCATION RESOURCES FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE INSTITUTION:

Many sources can help ODL practitioners deal with this challenge. For example, OERs and Free World Knowledge (FWK) materials can help alleviate situations arising from limited up-to-date educational materials as (Chibambo, 2014) reported. In addition, Open Courseware Consortium provides access to free university courses worldwide. Content can be retrieved online and be stored in storage devices for use in areas where there is no internet. Furthermore, (SAIDE, 2008) established the OER-Africa Project to promote the benefits of OERs in higher education. Furthermore, the Opencast Community (a collaboration of higher education institutions) sought to provide audiovisual lectures at leading universities. Other sources for free content include the Project Gutenberg and the Creative Commons. Most importantly, educators in Africa need to overcome the "not-so-invented-here syndrome" by adapting materials from such sources. In cases of protected materials, copyright clearance and or acknowledgement (for public domain items) must be sought before slicing and dicing the content. These aside, there are challenges that come with adapting course materials developed for other Universities to African Universities. Even then, materials adapted for either country must allow the students to reflect on the culture while drawing from the expertise and experience of other countries. The issue here is that to produce instructional materials from a scratch is as good as to re-invent the wheel has proved to be a nightmare worldwide Thus, many burgeoning ODL institutions began by adapting existing materials while gradually developing own materials. Perhaps this is also the reason Mzuzu University has staggered since 2006 to date when it comes to materials development.

USING MOBILE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES IN SUPPORTING ODL:

Chibambo (2009) observed that m-learning is becoming a new driving force in ODL. He argued that mobile-phones have become part of life in Africa so much so that promoting their use in education would help reduce the "digital divide". While this assumption holds, both (as (Batchuluum, 2007; Chibambo, 2009 and Wright, 2009) observed that m-learning must be implemented alongside the print culture at least for Africa. According to these scholars, the issues that confronted mobile-phones included small screens, poor resolutions and inputting mechanisms which made candid educational functions impossible. Minus these, mobile-phones were socially and culturally accepted by Africans, and promoting their use would not be off the wall.

Relative to this, in South Africa, (Brown, 2005) studied the use of mobile-phones at the University of Pretoria. He observed that responses to information provided via SMSs were in mass and immediate and that without text messages, posted information would have taken 3-18 days to reach the students. He also reported that in response to reminders for registration through SMSs, 58% of the students registered before the closing date compared to the normal expectation rates of below 40%. Brown also reported that mobile-phones were used to transmit attendance or submit grades and to contact students about class activities. He, additionally, reported that bulk SMSs resulted into a saving of 20 times more than when postal services were used. Brown, finally, concluded that mobile-phones opened gates to e-learning in Africa. In another case study, (Aderinoye, Ojokheta, & Olojede, 2007) reported that in Nigeria, mobile-phones were used to teach literacy to 9.3 million nomads who wonder along the shorelines. Mobile-phones were also used to send job listings and health information to low-income residents of Cameroon and Uganda, and to help doctors diagnose patients in remote areas of Kenya and Tanzania according to (Developments, 2007 & TRALAC, 2008). More so, Ericsson Group was expected to establish an innovation centre in Sub-Saharan Africa to develop mobile applications for health, education, agriculture, and small businesses that would focus on "meeting the needs of the poor…in Ericsson's ongoing commitment to support the achievement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals" (iConnect Online, 2008). In view of these, African educators were urged to seize the opportunity by preparing their institutions for the coming developments. Importantly, London Business School observed that there was an increase of ten mobile-phones per every hundred people in developing countries, and this would eventually boost the people's economic growth by at least 0.6%, according to (Economics Focus, 2005). There is no doubt that with the tremendous influx of mobile-phones in Africa, the interest educators have in these devices, the involvement of mobile-phone companies in education, time is coming when mobile-phones will be useful for both communication and in-depth academic functions. Going by these realities, it can be concluded that m-learning has the future in Africa considering that these gadgets are not only accessible but are also affordable, acceptable and ubiquitous. Nevertheless, for those wanting to adopt m-learning, they must know that certain limiting factors exist that will most likely compromise the whole educational processes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

From this discussion, we found that ODL is as superior as F2F is, and that it does offer the same quality of education just like any other educational systems. Issues of quality do not only concern ODL alone but also other systems. Moreover, all educational systems require prudent QA checks to ensure quality. We also proved that ODL is not a so cheap way of providing education as some scholars wanted to make us believe since it requires instructional materials and support structures just like F2F does. However, ODL might be relatively feasible and affordable if carefully planned and when weighed on the basis of increasing access to education against the total investment. The study also revealed that social just may not be automatically achieved through ODL unless the issues of quantity against quality are balanced. The study further revealed that technology has provided relief in terms of improving: interaction, communication and learning experience but that does not mean that it helped cut on cost through substituting human resources.

Even though challenges have been led bare, new and budding ODL institutions will continue to be founded every year. On the other hand, existing F2F institutions' ambitions to go ODL, especially in their quest for expanding and increasing access to higher education, will continue to grow. From this discussion, the take is that continued growth of ODL depends upon how the factors raised in this paper are handled as they remain integral to the learning and teaching experiences. For most of the people in developing countries who missed out on the higher education ladder, not because of their own fault, but because of the restrictive nature of the F2F system, and their own engagements, ODL is there for them and their future. Finally, I want you and me to think critically over what (Ambedkar, 1989) said, "We may forego material benefits but we cannot forego our right and opportunities to reap the benefits of the highest education to the fullest extent".

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