Delivery of Distance Learning Programmes in Tanzania: Experiences from Students of the Institute of Adult Education

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Abstract: *Distance learning (DL) has developed into a significant global strategy for addressing issues with educational access. This paper investigates the delivery of distance learning programmes in Tanzania focusing on the experiences of students of the Institute of Adult Education. The study participants included students and lecturers from the Institute of Adult Education. The study was qualitative with a descriptive case study design. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews. The results show that distance learning with ICT support mechanisms has the potential for adult learners. These include regular communication with adult learners, discussion boards with adult learners, interactive elements with adult learners, provision of personalised feedback on assignments, and creation of clear pathways for progression. Therefore, this study recommends that as technology plays a pivotal role in distance learning, it is essential to ensure equitable access to necessary devices and internet connectivity for learners learning comfortability.*

Keywords: Adult Education, Distance learning. Online learning, Programmes, Tanzania

1. Introduction

Globally, the educational scene has seen a significant upheaval recently, with new pedagogical methods being driven by technology. The development of distance learning programmes, which has provided new opportunities for people to receive education outside of traditional classroom settings, is one key result of this transition (Hung & Tsai, 2020). In nations like Tanzania, where the pursuit of education has frequently been hampered by physical hurdles and a lack of infrastructure resources, this shift toward remote learning has been particularly notable (Wolski & Jagodzinski, 2019)

The fusion of pedagogy and technology in education has sparked a seismic shift that has altered the conventional definitions of learning (Muchanji, 2017). This transition is most apparent in the adult education sector, where distance learning programmes have evolved as a flexible means of meeting the varied demands of students in many countries. Institutions devoted to adult education are embracing novel techniques to create memorable learning experiences as societies change and lifelong learning becomes a pillar of personal and professional development (Madarassy, 2023).

According to Réthy (2020), within the context of developed nations, in England for example, where access to education is relatively abundant but often demands flexibility to accommodate work commitments, family responsibilities, and personal aspirations, distance learning programmes have become

a cornerstone of modern adult education systems (Libiczki & Fedor, 2022). This paradigm shift empowers learners to transcend geographical limitations, time constraints, and institutional barriers, fostering a culture of continuous learning (Nagy & Kovács, 2017). Jones (2023) reports that in the US as technology advances at an unprecedented pace, reshaping communication, collaboration, and information dissemination, the delivery of distance learning programmes has reached new levels of sophistication. Muchanji (2017) adds that by leveraging digital platforms, multimedia resources, and interactive tools, educational institutions are redefining the boundaries of traditional classrooms.

According to Tőzsér (2019), the recognition of adult education as a powerful catalyst for personal empowerment and societal progress has spurred the growth of diverse learning pathways. From vocational training to personal enrichment courses, distance learning programmes have democratised access to education, allowing learners to tailor their journeys to align with their specific goals (Ramble, 2022). In Asia, taking India as an example, the nation strives to meet the diverse educational needs of its population. Distance learning has emerged as a pivotal tool to bridge gaps, expand access, and empower adult learners (Saint, 2019). With its inherent flexibility, adaptability, and reach, distance learning offers a unique avenue for adult learners in Asian countries to engage in lifelong education, enhance their skills, and navigate the complex demands of a rapidly changing world.

Kumar (2021) reports that Asian countries exhibit remarkable diversity in terms of cultures, languages, economic conditions, and educational systems. This diversity brings with it a multitude of challenges and opportunities in the realm of adult education. The fusion of technological advancements with pedagogical innovation has led to the development of distance learning programmes that cater specifically to the dynamic needs of adult learners in this region. In Pakistan, adult learners grapple with work commitments, familial responsibilities, and diverse socio-economic contexts, and the flexibility inherent in distance learning becomes a critical enabler (Libiczki & Fedor, 2022). In Bangladesh where traditional educational pathways may be limited or inaccessible, distance learning offers a viable route to personal and professional growth. Through vocational training, skill development courses, language acquisition programmes, and more, adult learners are empowered to upskill or reskill, enhancing their employability and contributing to the socio-economic development of their nations (Jones, 2023).

Brown (2022) reports that African nations' educational environments are braided together with a variety of socioeconomic issues, languages, and cultural obstacles. Despite this complex tapestry, education continues to play a crucial role in fostering both individual and societal development. Distance learning has become a dynamic instrument in this setting that can meet the particular issues faced by adult learners in African countries (Bryan, 2023). Distance learning has the potential to democratise education and give adults the freedom to pursue knowledge, skills, and opportunities that have the potential to change their lives by overcoming geographical barriers, resource limits, and conventional educational restraints (Brown, 2022). Africa's vast expanse and varied infrastructural conditions have often hindered access to quality education for many individuals, particularly adults seeking to enhance their competencies. Distance learning emerges as a promising solution to overcome these challenges by leveraging technology to deliver education beyond the confines of brick-and-mortar institutions (Obina, 2021).

2. Literature Review

In the field of lifelong learning, adult education shines as a beacon of potential and transformation (Lionel, 2019). Contrary to traditional education, which frequently occurs during the formative years, adult education targets those who want to advance their knowledge, abilities, and skills after reaching a certain age (Saint, 2019). Ramble (2022) asserts that it is impossible to exaggerate the value of adult education to learners in a constantly changing world when societal demands and work environments are in flux. Bryan (2023) adds that adult education acts as a channel for professional development, personal growth, self-empowerment, and the promotion of an informed and involved populace.

The study by Brown (2022) for students, adult education opens doors to unrealised potential. It enables people to learn new skills, widen their perspectives, and explore interests they would not have previously followed. This quest for information can revive one's intellectual vitality and feelings of curiosity. Ricard (2019) adds that in the workplace, adult education gives students current skills that improve employability and open doors to new employment options. The study by Jones (2023) remarked that the pace of change in today's world is unprecedented. Industries evolve, technologies emerge, and societal norms shift. Thus, education acts as a compass, guiding learners through these changes by providing the tools needed to adapt and thrive. It fosters resilience, enabling individuals to

navigate transitions in careers, industries, or even personal circumstances with confidence.

The study by Idris (2018) views that in the world of education, distance learning has become a revolutionary force, especially for adult learners. Libiczki and Fedor (2022) add that distance learning addresses the specific demands and difficulties faced by individuals looking to further their education because of its inherent flexibility, accessibility, and adaptability. This method of instruction crosses distance, time, and conventional classroom structures, making it an essential tool for empowering adult learners in the contemporary world. According to Lionel (2019), distance learning breaks down barriers that might have prevented adult learners from pursuing education. Geographical distance, physical disabilities, or personal circumstances no longer need to hinder access to learning. Obina (2021) found that learners from remote areas or with limited mobility can participate in previously inaccessible courses, promoting inclusivity and widening educational opportunities. A study by Bob (2023) in England, revealed that adult learners who take distance learning courses are given the tools they need to grow professionally. It provides opportunities for job growth, skill development, and switching to new positions or industries without the usual on-campus need.

In Zimbabwe, a study by Chileshe (2019) notes that distance learning often leverages technology to deliver personalised learning experiences. Learners can choose courses that align with their interests and career goals, allowing them to customize their educational journey. Online platforms may offer adaptive learning techniques, tailoring content to individual progress and learning styles. In addition, a study by Otieno (2023) in Kenya remarked that distance learning eliminates the need for commuting, housing, and other associated costs, making education more accessible and affordable. This cost-effectiveness is especially vital for those who are managing tight budgets or other financial responsibilities.

In Tanzania, a study by Lukwekwe (2015) indicates that distance learning transcends geographical borders, creating a virtual global classroom. Adult learners can interact with peers and instructors from diverse cultural backgrounds, gaining insights and perspectives that enrich their learning experience. This exposure to different viewpoints contributes to a broader understanding of the world.

In general, from the literature, it has been shown that distance learning has potential for adult learners. This is because the convenience of distance learning for adult learners lies in its flexibility, accessibility, self-pacing, and alignment with the multifaceted lives of adults. It

enables them to pursue education without compromising their existing commitments and responsibilities. In Tanzania, little is known about the delivery of distance learning programmes. Therefore, this paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by addressing the following question: What support mechanisms does the Institute of Adult Education use to enhance the engagement and motivation of adult learners in their distance learning programme?

2.1 Theories Guiding the Study

The present study was informed by two theories namely Social Cognitive Theory (Abert Bandura) and Social Constructivism Theory (Lev Vygotsky).

2.1.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is very pertinent to understanding how people learn and adapt in the setting of remote learning. This theory places a strong emphasis on how a person's personality, environment, and behaviour interact (McLeod, 2017). Students' experiences in distance learning are influenced by their social surroundings as well as their own goals, self-efficacy beliefs, and attitudes.

The theory was suitable in the present study because by applying this theory, the study will explore how students' self-efficacy beliefs, such as their confidence in their ability to succeed in distance learning impact their engagement, persistence, and overall experiences. The theory also highlights the importance of observational learning and social interactions. The researcher investigated how peer interactions, online collaboration, and feedback mechanisms within the distance learning environment influence students' learning outcomes and satisfaction. Additionally, understanding how students perceive the effectiveness of various instructional strategies and the support provided by the Institute of Adult Education was explored through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory.

2.1.2 Social Constructivism Theory

Social Constructivism Theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge based on their prior experiences, interactions with their environment, and social interactions. In a distance learning context, students are often responsible for their learning, which aligns with the constructivist notion of active engagement and knowledge construction (Nickerson, 2021). By employing the lens of Social Constructivism, the study explored how distance learning environments at the Institute of Adult Education are designed to facilitate active learning and knowledge construction. The researcher delved into how course materials, online

discussions, and collaborative projects encouraged students to connect new information with their existing knowledge and experiences. Moreover, the theory-guided an investigation into how students perceived the authenticity and relevance of their learning tasks in the context of their real-world experiences.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach as a method of inquiry. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that qualitative research allows the researcher to explore topics in-depth and gain rich insights into the complexities of human behaviour, experiences, and perceptions. It goes beyond surface-level data, providing a deeper understanding of the context and meaning behind participants' actions and perspectives. Moreover, Qualitative research excels at capturing the contextual factors that influence behaviour and outcomes. It considers the social, cultural, and historical context in which participants operate, providing a holistic view of the phenomena being studied (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Furthermore, the qualitative research approach often involves open-ended interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, which provide participants the space to express their thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences. This results in a deeper connection with participants and the ability to capture nuanced and emotive insights.

Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 25 participants were selected to participate in the study. Five lecturers and twenty students from the Institute of Adult Education were selected purposively for the study. Interview data was recorded on audio and verbatim transcribed. The acquired material was examined using a thematic analysis technique. A technique for reporting, locating, and evaluating patterns (themes) within the data has been developed in this way (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The choice of theme analysis was made because it enables the researcher to concentrate on the material in a variety of different ways. By using this technique, the researcher was able to focus on examining meaning across the full dataset.

4. Results and Discussion

Several issues emerged from the focus group discussions and interviews regarding the delivery of distance learning programmes in Tanzania with a focus on the experiences of students of the institute of adult education. These are discussed below.

4.1 Regular Communication with Adult Learners

The findings revealed that lecturers established a strong and supportive communication framework that fostered engagement, motivation and effective learning experiences for adult learners during their learning sessions. Participants argued that lecturers implemented various strategies that promoted engagement, clarify expectations, and provide support to the learners. Participants said the following:

> *I dedicate specific times when I am available for virtual office hours. This allows learners to have real-time interactions with me to seek clarification, discuss concerns, or ask questions. This makes learners feel comfortable during their learning process* (Interviewed Lecturer 1, IAE on 18th July 2023).

In the same vein, students confirmed that one of the strategies used by lecturers in communicating with learners was to dedicate their time. Students said the following:

> *Lecturers use the course platform to make regular announcements. These announcements include reminders, updates, clarifications, and motivational messages. This keeps learners informed and engaged* (FGD with Students on 20th July 2023).

The quotations above showed that regular communication with adult learners was vital to learners' engagement in learning. The findings are similar to Idris (2018) who found that when lecturers invest time in creating engaging learning experiences, learners are more motivated to participate. Engaging activities, discussions, and interactive elements make the learning process enjoyable and meaningful. On the same realm, Obina (2021) observed that when lecturers invest time in creating engaging learning experiences, learners are more motivated to participate. Engaging activities, discussions, and interactive elements make the learning process enjoyable and meaningful.

4.2 Discussion Boards with Adult Learners

The findings revealed that discussion boards with adult learners were a common strategy that lecturers at the Institute of Adult Education used to impart knowledge to the learners. It was further revealed that this was a

virtual space on a website or online platform where users engaged in written discussions, shared thoughts, asked questions, and exchanged ideas on various topics. One of the lecturers during the interview clarified that:

> Discussion boards are commonly used in educational settings, online communities, business environments, and websites to facilitate communication and collaboration among participants (Interviewed Lecturer 2, IAE 18th July 2023).

Similarly, another lecturer added the following:

> Discussions on a board are organised into threads. Each thread represents a specific topic or question. Participants can respond to the initial post (the opening thread) or reply to other participants' posts within the thread, creating a threaded conversation (Interviewed Lecturer 3, IAE 18th July 2023).

The extracts above show that virtual learning was one of the strategies that benefited learners in distance learning. The findings on the importance of virtual learning to adult learners are similar to that of Lukwekwe (2015) who found that adult learners often prefer learning in environments where they feel comfortable and relaxed. Virtual learning allows them to study from their homes, eliminating the need for commuting or adapting to new physical settings. Zirnkle (2022) added that virtual learning allows adult learners to progress at their own pace. Learners spend more time on challenging concepts and move quickly through topics they already understand, promoting individualised learning experiences.

4.3 Interactive Elements with Adult Learners

The findings revealed that distance learning was highly interactive among adult learners, despite the physical separation inherent in online education. Interaction was a key element in promoting engagement, active learning, and a sense of community. Participants disclosed further that through distance learning lecturers were able to pose open-ended questions, encourage critical thinking, and guide discussions, fostering peer interaction and collaborative learning. In explaining how distance learning was interactive, participants said the following:

> For the online platforms, we include interactive quizzes, polls, and surveys that keep learners engaged and allow lecturers to gauge understanding. Instant feedback on quiz responses enhances the learning experience among learners at our institution (Interviewed Lecturer 5, IAE 23rd July 2023).

Similarly, another lecturer added the following:

> Sometimes we use video conferencing whereby in video conferencing platforms, breakout rooms are used to divide larger groups into smaller discussion groups for focused conversations. This mirrors in-person group discussions and enhances the learners' participation (Interviewed Lecturer 4, IAE 25th July 2023).

The voices show that interactive elements are common and essential in distance learning for adult learners as they enhance engagement, promote active learning, and foster a sense of community. The findings can be extrapolated to that of Otieno (2023) who argued that collaborative group projects, peer review assignments, and interactive group discussions enable adult learners to learn from their peers, exchange insights, and collectively solve problems. Similarly, Bob (2023) adds that interactive assignments that involve problem-solving, case studies, or real-world applications encourage learners to actively apply their knowledge and skills, making the learning process more practical and engaging.

4.4 Provision of Personalised Feedback on Assignments

The findings revealed that distance learning provided personalised feedback on assignments to adult learners through various online tools and techniques. While the absence of face-to-face interaction poses challenges, technology offers innovative ways to offer constructive feedback and support individual learning journeys. Participants said the following:

> In distance learning, lecturers always provide detailed written comments on assignments, highlight strengths and areas for improvement. These comments are potential as they address specific aspects of the assignment, offer suggestions for

enhancement, and provide guidance for future work (FGD with Students on 20th July 2023).

On the same vein, another participant added the following:

We schedule one-on-one virtual meetings with adult learners to discuss their assignments and address questions. Video conferencing platforms allow for face-to-face interactions, fostering a deeper understanding of the feedback. In this way, the academic life of learners becomes simple and enjoyable (Interviewed Lecturer 2, IAE 18th July 2023).

The scripts above depict the importance of using various online tools for adult learning programmes. In showing the importance of the provision of personalised feedback on assignments to adult learners, Wolski and Jagodzinski (2019) purported that personalised learning with feedback promotes higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Feedback also promotes metacognitive skills, such as self-reflection, self-regulation, and self-assessment. Similarly, Bob (2023) observed that the goals of personalised feedback are to connect with students, help students understand course content, and motivate students to study future material.

4.5 Creation of Clear Pathways for Progression

The findings revealed that creating clear pathways for progression in distance learning empowers adult learners to set goals, monitor their development, and make informed decisions about their educational journey. This transparency and guidance enhance motivation, engagement, and the likelihood of successful completion. Participants said the following:

Distance learning programmes typically outline a structured curriculum with clearly defined learning objectives, topics, and modules. This provides a roadmap that learners can follow to understand the sequence of topics and skills they will acquire (Interviewed Lecturer 3, IAE 18th July 2023).

On the same vein, participants added the following:

Each module or course has well-defined learning outcomes that specify what learners can do or understand upon completing the module. These outcomes set expectations for learners' progression (FGD with Students on 20th July 2023).

The quotations show that creating clear pathways for progression in distance learning ensures that adult learners have a well-defined route to achieving their educational and professional goals. It empowers learners to navigate their learning journey with confidence, stay motivated, and maximize their learning outcomes. The findings tally with that of Madarassy, (2023) who found that detailed course syllabi provide information about learning objectives, assessment methods, reading materials, and assignment deadlines. Learners can refer to these syllabi to understand the scope and expectations of the course. Muchanji (2017) added that distance learning programs often specify any prerequisites or corequisites required for specific courses. This ensures that learners have the necessary background knowledge before advancing to more complex topics.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

From the study's findings, the delivery of distance learning programmes in Tanzania, as experienced by students of the Institute of Adult Education, underscores the transformative power of education in the modern age. Through innovative technological platforms and well-structured curricula, the Institute has enabled adult learners to overcome geographical barriers, time constraints, and personal commitments, embracing education in ways previously unimaginable. The stories and experiences of these students illuminate the profound impact of distance learning on their lives, aspirations, and societal contributions.

5.2 Recommendations

In light of the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. As technology plays a pivotal role in distance learning, it is essential to ensure equitable access to necessary devices and internet connectivity. The Institute should collaborate with governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide subsidized or free access to devices and internet packages for economically disadvantaged learners.

2. Recognizing the diverse needs of adult learners, the Institute should prioritize the provision of personalised support mechanisms. This could include dedicated virtual counselling services, regular virtual office hours with instructors, and peer mentorship programs.

3. Encouraging regular interactions through discussion forums, group projects, and live webinars can foster a sense of community, reduce isolation, and enhance engagement among learners.

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