
A Review of the Coping Strategies used by Male and Female Open and Distance Learning Students

Author: Michael M. Kimotho

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa,
P.O. Box 62157 – 00200, Nairobi – Kenya.
Corresponding Author E-mail: kimothousa@gmail.com

Abstract: *The paper focuses on examining and analyzing the coping strategies employed by male and female students in overcoming the challenges they experience in open and distance learning. It also assesses the demographic characteristics of open and distance learners and relates them to their academic performance. The paper is guided by the following objectives: to analyze the challenges facing open and distance learning students, to assess the demographic characteristics and academic performance of open and distance learning students and to evaluate the relationship between demographic characteristics and academic performance of open and distance learning students. The paper provides a conclusion, recommendations and suggestions for further studies. The review sheds light to institutions of higher learning to reflect on the role of students as well as the faculty in online learning environment especially in regards to decision making regarding online programs. The review also gives an impetus to students, faculty and institutions of higher learning to provide mechanisms to develop some strategies in order to deal with challenges that come with online learning.*

Keywords: *Open and distance learning, Open learning coping strategies, ODL students challenges, ODL students academic performance*

1. Introduction

The term "Distance Education" refers to an educational approach in which there is quasi-separation of the learners and the lecturers in time and space. In distance education, the instructor and instructional strategy and methods are subsumed into the learning materials that have been designed as self-directed learning guide for students (Garland, 2010). In addition, open learning refers to the philosophical construct that seek to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality and lifelong education. These two terms represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Precisely, Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2013).

As a force contributing to social and economic development, open and distance learning is today one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and training. It is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries, with particular importance for the latter (Frick, Coffman, & Dey, 2015). This growth has been stimulated in part by interest among educators and trainers in the use of new, Internet-based information technologies, but also by recognition that traditional ways of organizing education need to be reinforced by innovative methods if the fundamental right of all people to a life of learning is to be realized. One innovation in particular is the expansion of the World Wide Web, coupled by a continued fall in the cost of processing, storing and transmitting information. This has contributed to significant shifts in how distance education is perceived by educators and how it is designed, delivered and administered.

The practice of open and distance learning (ODL) in Kenya has been at all levels of education and provided by different institutions governed by their own institutional policies. Some of the major providers include: the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), University of Nairobi (UoN), the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE), Kenyatta University; African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Education under school based teacher development program; Strathmore University, Daystar University and USIU (Anyona, 2010). Besides, there are other institutions hosted in Kenya that provide and manage distance learning. For example, the African Virtual University (AVU) which used to run programs in Francophone and Anglophone Africa but has since changed its mandate from providing distance learning directly to the learners to providing training to staff in institutions offering open and distance learning. According to Winsboro (2012), this uncoordinated ODL practice has made some impact on education and development in the training of adult literacy teachers, primary school teachers, training of teachers in special education, cooperative practitioners and training of medical professionals and primary school enrichment through the radio programs and use of electronic modes.

Open and distance education in Tanzania and in other sub-Saharan Africa countries is considered important avenue for provision of education and to remove barriers for many and increase access to education to as many people as possible. For example, many people including those living at remote areas, those who could not be allowed to leave their home or workplace to study or those whom otherwise could not have such access depend on open and distance education. Although open and distance learning is widely developed in the western countries due to well-developed structures, African countries are slowly catching up. This is because more and more people are understanding and embracing ODL learning in Africa (Anderson, 2013). One of the common issues observed throughout all ODL programs in the world is the similarities in challenges faced by ODL students in Kenya, Africa, Europe, America, and Asia among other parts of the world. The difference is on how these problems are solved by the students themselves and the institutions involved. The focus of this paper is to analyze some of the challenges facing ODL students and subsequent coping strategies deployed by male and female learners across the globe, as well as the demographic characteristics of ODL learners in relation to their academic performance.

The paper had the following objectives: To analyze the challenges facing open and distance learning students; To assess the demographic characteristics and academic performance of ODL students; To evaluate the relationship between demographic characteristics and academic performance of ODL students.

2. Challenges Facing ODL Students

Despite the expanding growth of ODL and its benefits, students who enroll with in the program, have faced many challenges related to individual, institutional and instructional. Angara, Agostinho, Lockyer, and Harper (2015), identified three distinct categories of challenges facing ODL students: Situational, institutional and dispositional. According to Angara et al. (2015), situational challenges include job and home responsibilities that reduce time for study. Institutional related challenges include poor logistics system or a lack of appropriate advising (Arbaugh, 2012). Dispositional challenges are related to learners' own attitudes and feelings. Berge, Muilenburg and Haneghan (2012) classified challenges to distance learners as situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and/or cultural related challenges. Zirnkle (2011) identified specific challenges facing distance learners as program costs, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns and poor technical assistance. Other challenges documented by Zirnkle (2011) are inadequate feedback and poor teacher contact, alienation and isolation, and poor student support services.

Garland (2010) identified some situational challenges for students to be persistence in distance learning. These include poor learning environment and lack of time. For example, students felt that the course took more time than anticipated because they failed to judge the demands of work, home and school. Carr (2010) argued that poor time management leads to challenges such as learners' inability to integrate the demands of off campus study with family, work and social commitments. Pityana (2014) found that teachers who enrolled in the ODL face challenges related to failure of trainees to receive training materials on time, students' engagement in other economic activities to supplement their family incomes, and poor learner support services especially where study centers are under resourced and overstretched.

In addition, Kamau (2010) found that, without an effective learners' support services system that provides on-site face to face, timely feedback on student performance and access to library services, student achievement is undermined and dropout rates and procrastination increases. Open and distance learning also presents new challenges in information dissemination, especially in developing countries. Mossberger et al (2013) observed that technical competence needed in order to have effective access to contemporary ICT is a challenge to distance learners. Technical competence refers to the skills needed to operate the hardware and software of ICT, including the skills of using networked systems to access and share information. Lack of these skills is a critical challenge as learner may fail to use the various physical, digital and human resources involved in ICT. These challenges prompt many problems in distance learning. Among these problems are high rate of students' drop-out and late programs completion.

Additionally, more and more learners are demanding flexibility in program structure to accommodate their other responsibilities, such as full-time jobs or family needs (Marshall, Allison, Nykamp & Lanke, 2014). With these constraints, students shop for courses that best accommodate their schedules and learning styles and then transfer the credit to the university where they would earn their degrees. The absence of clearly defined national distance education policies in most African countries poses another challenge. Policies are needed to provide a framework for the development of distance education. With the exception of South Africa, few African countries have a clearly defined national information or communication policy to guide the development of distance education in their respective countries (Williams, 2013). The absence of such a policy is a clear obstacle to the development of distance education.

Access to connectivity remains one of the major challenges in Africa. Students would need access to computers that can send and receive messages using web browsers such as Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox (Anyona, 2010). In addition, they would have to find on their computers word processors and other applications to complete basic assignments. Easy and inexpensive connections to Internet service provider would be required. In addition, depending on the nature of a given course, students might be required to use a video cassette recorder (VCR) to play videotaped instruction and perhaps tape recorded lectures. Textbooks and other printed materials certainly would still be part of the curriculum (Anyona, 2010). All of these basics require funds which many individuals and institutions simply do not have.

Closely related to these connectivity issues are financial matters. Internet service provider services are expensive in Africa. The connecting colleges charge tuition, in some cases by law, very high tuition to students taking courses (Williams, 2013). Multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and institutional donors such as religious organizations and employers have a role to play in exploring funding options.

The last challenge to overcome is cultural bias. Current research into distance education has focused on the process as a western social/cultural/educational construct, and is being viewed by some as a way to export this world view to other nations more efficiently and quickly than by other media currently available. Distance learning, by its very nature, involves more than just the transmission of information, but also the transmission of cultural/social paradigms between and among the participants. Any design of a distance learning curriculum needs to be sensitive to cross-national cultural experiences (Fozdar, Kumar, & Kannan, 2016).

Consequently, Carr (2010) reports that such challenges pose serious educational concerns to the students especially on the issue of student dropouts. In the US drop-out rates range from 20% to 50%. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that drop-out rates range from 20% in the United Kingdom to 45% or more in Austria, France, and Portugal (Gore, Bloem, Patton, Ferguson, & Joseph, 2014). In Australia, drop-out rates range from 35% to over 55% (Fozdar, Kumar, & Kannan, 2016). In African countries the drop-out rate

is estimated to be over 50%. Other than the issue of dropouts, discussed challenges alongside other stressors tend to pose serious psychological distress and depression to the open and distance learning students.

3. Coping Strategies used by Male and Female ODL Students

Coping is established as a key variable in the process of reducing, minimizing or tolerating stress and in preventing psychological distress (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2015). Coping is defined as cognitive and emotional attempts to deal with the internal or external demands of the encountered situation. It is perceived as a process as opposed to a trait or outcome. Higher education students cope in different ways with varying levels of success. For a minority of students the challenge is too great, and consequently they exit their programs of study (Vázquez, Otero, & Diàz, 2012). Some students adopt positive methods such as seeking social support or using leisure activities while others use maladaptive strategies like escape/avoidance to manage stress. Other poor coping mechanisms include: ignoring the problem, failure to seek help from others and escapism through substance use. As a result some students contemplate self-harm and suicide especially the young people who do not seek help or talk about their problems.

A study conducted by Gore, Bloem, Patton, Ferguson, and Joseph (2014) on coping strategies employed by distant students indicate that student use diverse coping strategies including seeking social support and making changes to improve the stressful situation. They also use escapism through substance use, comfort eating, or trying to ignore stressful experiences. There is limited research from teacher education students' perspectives on the strategies they use to cope with stress during their educational programs. Some of the positive coping strategies identified by Gore et al. (2014) include seeking support and using leisure activities. However, dysfunctional coping methods are also reported which include taking out frustrations on children especially for the married distant learning students.

Robotham and Julian (2016) conducted a bivariate analysis which illustrated statistically significant differences in coping processes in relation to a number of demographic variables that included gender, age, marital status, place of residence, program of study and year of study. The findings indicate that female ODL students used escape avoidance and seeking social support more frequently than males. Students under the age of 26 years used escape avoidance frequently in contrast to those aged 26 years and older who used positive reappraisal. Marital status was linked with the coping strategies used. Those categorized as single, divorced and separated used escape-avoidance, distancing and self- controlling frequently compared to those categorized as married and cohabiting. Differences in the coping processes of student nurses/midwives and teacher education students emerged. Nursing/midwifery students used escape avoidance, sought social support and positive reappraisal more frequently than teacher education students. Those who perceived that being a student was stressful used escape avoidance, accepting responsibility and confronting coping more than those who did not.

A research conducted in the Mid-Atlantic area investigated exemplary traditional vocational learners' stress and how they coped (Shamsuddin, Fadzill, Shah, Omar, Muhammad, Jaffar, Ismail, & Mahadevan, 2013). They found that these students were more likely to use vocational /recreational skills approaches to coping than physiological or socio-psychological approaches. The study found that these students developed strong stress coping strategies through developed skills. In another study, Esia-donkoh (2014) identified the significant issues, conflicts and experiences which occurred during the time respondents underwent their first year at institutions. In his study he found out that the respondents were able to cope with stressful events by using the following strategies. They took things slowly, sought psycho-social support from the system, learnt from mistakes, being organized, anticipating problems and kept a calendar. The study also concluded that respondents should visit the institution at least twice in a semester to meet each other, their tutors, and their psychologists to interact and learn from their counselors.

Cole (2011) investigated ways of coping used by male subjects in rural public centers in Saskatchewan. He statistically compared the frequency and intensity of stress. He concluded that there was no relationship between leadership style, stress and the role of coping methods employed. Results from the study indicated that task-oriented participants and relationship-oriented participants perceived themselves similarly in terms of total frequency and intensity of stress experience. The study also noted that the choice of coping mechanisms was neither based on an individual's broad motivational structure of task nor person orientation. The findings also indicated that the selection of coping methods is governed by reasons such as personal likes and dislikes, past experiences, accessibility, cost, social, acceptability and peer influence.

In another study conducted by Walinga (2013) on the coping mechanisms used by distance learning students indicated the four coping mechanisms planful problem solving, accepting responsibility, seeking social support and confrontive coping. The results obtained in the study show that deferment and postponement were limited because of the social support given by student management office and administrators.

Academic excellence in an ODL programme can also be achieved if students develop proper coping mechanisms. A study by Wai-ye, (2013) indicates that female students who adopted certain coping strategies were academically successful in their studies. The study revealed that some of the strategies employed by female students to succeed academically include: family support (funding of their education, husbands sharing family responsibilities), hard work, great motivation and determination, less involvement in social activities, reading while travelling on vehicles, studying late at night, employ someone to do the household chores, reading and listening to cassettes during lunch hour breaks, switching from full time to part time job, attending tutorials and women having control of household decision-making.

4. Demographic Characteristics and Academic Performance of ODL Students

Understanding the role of student demographics in the online learning environment helps institutions understand what resources need to be allocated toward support of online learning

programs in the form of online advising and technical support for students, course development support for faculty, and investing in learning-management software or collaboration software. To this end, it is important to analyze some of the key demographic characteristics and academic performance of ODL students.

Williams (2013) examined gender differences in motivational and behavioral learning strategies in the Internet-based cyber-learning environment and found highly significant gender differences in the category of textual encoding strategies, in which males showed stronger behavioral and motivational learning strategies. He also examined effect of student motivation on performance in Web-based instruction (WBI) and found that student's self-efficacy for self-regulated learning positively related to his/her academic self-efficacy, strategy use and Internet self-efficacy.

In a work aiming to form a model that can predict the satisfaction of Web based adult distant learners and their intention to join again in the distance education courses to be presented through Web in the future, indicated that, self-efficacy in computer knowledge was the only statistically significant variable that can help predict the achievement (Fozdar, Kumar & Kannan, 2013). A study by Vaez & Laflamme (2014) investigated college student's personal choice for taking web-based courses and whether their self-efficacy for the course content and technological components would predict their performance in online sections of a class. They found that measures of self-efficacy were predictive of final exam scores, but demographic factors (age, gender, the number of hours employed per week, the number of children living at home, and distance traveled to campus) do not correlate with final grades in an online class.

The study by Young (2013) examined relationship among several motivational characteristics (like self-efficacy for distance education, self-regulation and achievement goals) and academic achievement in distance education settings. The findings clearly show that motivational characteristics are very important in the literature of distance education. Demographic characteristics like age, gender, and employed/unemployed were not significantly correlated with academic achievement. The findings also demonstrate that demographic factors (like age, gender, the number of hours employed per week) do not correlate with final grades in an online class. There was truly a significant and positive correlation between academic achievement and self-efficacy beliefs of distance education which is one of the variables motivating students (Young, 2013). Student's self-efficacy beliefs have strong and positive influence on their academic achievement. According to the results of this study, it appears that the students with higher self-efficacy beliefs of distance education have higher academic achievement (Marshall et al., 2014). According to Pityana (2014) demographic characteristics such as employed or unemployed did not display a significant difference in academic achievement. Self-efficacy significantly and positively predicted student's academic achievement.

A study conducted by Berge, Muilenburg and Haneghan, (2012) on the relationship between student demographics and academic success indicated that there existed a strong relationship between age, critical thinking and self regulated learning characteristics. All these characteristics were significant as far as academic performance was concerned. The results from the above

analysis are more in line with results from a research study by Anderson (2013) whose findings indicated that older students, with full-time enrollment status, and more educational experience tend to perform better academically compared to younger students. Similarly, graduate students tend to be older and have more educational background. These results prove that most graduate students have high levels of self-regulated learning characteristics, especially in the areas of rehearsal, elaboration, critical thinking, and metacognitive self-regulation.

In Europe, Wang and Castañeda-Sound (2014) examined determinants of degree performance of students leaving UK universities and found that degree performance is influenced significantly by personal characteristics. They also indicated that performance of female students is better than the performance of male students in some subjects such as Biological Science and Humanities and worse in Mathematics and Computing. Robotham and Julian (2016) observed that both men and women, married individuals do better than non-married students. The findings indicate that the performance of mature students is better than the performance of younger students.

In Asia, Kiamanesh (2014) provided evidence that Mathematics self-concept, home background, and teaching play significant role in determining the variance in mathematics achievement. Likewise, Suryadarma, Suryahadi, and Sumarto (2014) found that student performance is strongly influenced by the education level of parents in Indonesia. They also add that there is a positive relationship between the level of mother education and students' performance in Pakistan. They also contend that student perceptions of factors associated with class size, the attributes of the lecturer, student effort and the complexity of the course are associated with student performance. Hedjazi and Omidi (2013) found that female students' academic success was more pronounced than males in Iran. At the same time, they found positive relationship between students' performance and student's demographics such as active learning, students' attendance and involvement in extracurricular activities in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, both male and female open and distance learning students coping strategies and academic performance are not only determined by their gender but also by other internal and external factors. There should be a review of current programs to minimize the high levels stress particularly in relation to workload and the perceived over-emphasis on assessment.

Another recommendation is the inclusion of preparatory life skills and stress management components into programs for open and distance learning students. Institutions of higher learning should provide adequate and accessible support structures for open and distance learning students. There should be increased student and lecturer contact in order to provide mentorship to students. Staff development programs should be put in place in order to support this endeavor. Open and distance learning students should strike a balance on issues related to work, study, family and social commitments. In order to keep abreast with technology, open and distance learning students should be equipped with skills needed to operate both hardware and software of

Information Communication Technology. A further research can be done on assessment of support structures for open and distance learning students.

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