



## **Provision of Higher Education through the Open and Distance Learning Mode in Tanzania: Students' Perceptions**

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### ***Abstract:***

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is increasingly gaining popularity and is seen as a viable means to promote access to education. This paper stems from a study--originally conducted in 2014-- that examined the students' perceptions towards the provision of higher education through ODL at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The issue was subsequently re-visited by examining the students' perceptions toward the provision of support services, curriculum design and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Findings demonstrate that support services, curriculum design and the use of ICT are generally perceived as satisfactory by students. However, still some challenges exist. These challenges potentially inhibit them from learning at a distance successfully. It is recommended that OUT should secure right technologies, such as employing video-conferencing and tele-tutoring, with the view to refraining from the use of costly outdated technologies. It should also review its support services system to allow flexible learning environment to students.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Open and Distance Learning, Students and Tanzania

### Introduction

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of study has been seen as the best option for promoting access to higher education across the globe following its flexibility, learner-friendly approach, and being economical (Itegi, 2015; Manzoor, 2018). The Open University of Tanzania (OUT), established in 1992, is a stand-alone institution of higher learning offering education through ODL (Mushi, 2012; OUT, 2021). Its establishment was stirred by the need to increase access to higher education and provide opportunities to individuals who were/are not able to follow the conventional institutions calendar due to various factors such as high and competitive entry requirements, socio-cultural factors such as family responsibilities, inflexibility in terms of time, routine and space, students' economic circumstances and geographical locations (Bhalalusesa, 2005). OUT operates through a network of regional study centres. It has 27 regional centres and nine coordinating centres spread throughout Tanzania and beyond to reach upcountry distance learners (OUT, 2021).

The literature indicates that ODL has considerably gained popularity in Tanzania (Bhalalusesa, 2005; Musingafi, 2015). Despite its increased popularity, many issues related to its performance and quality remain largely unsettled. Bhalalusesa (2005) argues that students and the public still consider distance learning as second-class or last-resort alternative. Also, Mutasingwa (2010) admits that parties (administrators, instructors and learners) given various responsibilities are not playing their roles as needed and that the programmes delivered under ODL seem not to be cost-effective. A serious concern is that there exists a huge gap between enrolment and graduation rates. For instance, the total number of students enrolled from 1994 to 2020/2021 was 173,740, but those who graduated between 1999 and 2020 totalled 46,728 (26%) (OUT, 2021). This implies that the majority of them (74%) have either dropped out or that it takes them a long time to graduate. It is against this background, this study examined

students' perceptions towards provision of higher education through ODL at OUT. More specifically, it examined the students' perceptions towards the provision of support services, curriculum design and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on a research study-- originally carried out in 2014-- that has been further revisited to track any possible changes and interventions. The study employed a mixed-methods research approach. The main purpose of adopting this approach was to achieve complementarity whereby results from qualitative analysis were interpreted to enhance, expand, illustrate, or clarify findings derived from quantitative analysis. The need to produce interpretations that students hold regarding ODL serves as a justification for the use of a qualitative approach, while the use of a quantitative approach was necessitated by the need to collect quantifiable data [based on a five-point Likert scale]. The study was conducted at OUT, mainly at Dar es Salaam-based OUT regional centres namely Ilala, Kinondoni and Temeke. OUT was chosen on the basis that it is the only university in Tanzania offering undergraduate and some postgraduate programmes through ODL. Besides, it is the largest and oldest provider of higher education through ODL hence making it a source of rich data. Dar es Salaam region was selected for the following reasons - it is the headquarters of OUT, hence it has a vast document for the study. Again, the region has the highest number of students admitted to pursue degree programmes through ODL (OUT, 2021). Continuing undergraduate students at OUT were the target population. A convenient sampling technique was used to identify 72 participants: 20 from Ilala, 20 from Temeke, and 32 from Kinondoni regional centres. Questionnaire, interview and documentary review were used in gathering information from the field. Documentary review was used for the purpose of triangulation. The reviewed documents include speeches from the OUT Vice Chancellor, the clients' charter, policies, prospectuses,

and the *Facts and Figures* for 2020/2021. Research ethical protocols were adhered to.

### **Findings and Discussion**

A number of findings emerged as indicated below:

#### ***Students' Perceptions of the Support Services***

Open and distance learning require sound support services so as to enable students to take considerable responsibility in managing their own learning. Biao (2012) submits that one of the major demands of the ever-changing landscape of distance learning is the provision of effective learner support. This is a critical component that facilitates learning and helps distance learners achieve success. From this standpoint, this study assessed the perceptions of students regarding the provision of support services at OUT. Three instruments were used to collect data: questionnaire, documentary review and interview. In the questionnaire, a five-point Likert scale was used, which required the students to indicate the extent to which they agree with statements related to support services. Table 1 summarises responses from the questionnaire:

**Table 1: Responses on the perceptions of students toward learner support services**

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. Learners are supported to become independent through the use of technology for tutoring at a distance, contact tutoring, and counselling.	0	0	6	8	13	18	29	40	24	33
2. Sufficient contact sessions are arranged to enable learners to use the course materials effectively for learning.	7	10	14	19	11	15	27	38	13	18
3. Tutors are accessible to learners for individual tutoring.	13	18	16	22	20	28	14	19	9	13
4. Assignments and tests are timely returned.	19	26	18	25	11	15	18	25	6	8
5. Learners have access to counselling before and during the course or programme, as well as after completion.	8	11	12	17	12	17	29	40	11	15
6. Satisfactory and cost-effective arrangements are made to meet learner's needs for physical facilities for study and tutorial.	7	10	17	24	9	13	27	38	12	17
7. Learners have access to the facilities (e.g., libraries) that are necessary for successful learning.	5	7	4	6	13	18	28	39	22	31
8. Learner structures, such as student representative councils, are established, recognized and empowered to represent learners on structures of institutional governance.	7	10	11	15	18	25	27	38	9	13

**Supporting Students to Become Independent.** Teaching and learning at a distance require learners who are active and internally motivated to engage in independent learning (Sumbawati et al., 2020). Consequently, arrangements in terms of support services should be in place to uphold this endeavour. Students at OUT were of the view that they are supported to become independent learners. For instance, as shown in Table 1, when asked to comment on the statement that “learners are supported to become independent through the use of technology for tutoring at a distance, contact tutoring, and counselling”, majority of students agreed with the statement. This implies that support services provided at OUT enable them to accomplish their studies successfully through distance learning. A review of documents revealed that OUT is committed to helping its students cope with learning environments. For instance, the statement “provide adequate training to students on study skills for the ODL mode of learning” (p. 5) in the Student

Affairs Policy is one of such commitments (OUT, 2008). It should be noted that ODL programmes that do not respond to students' needs and fail to teach them effectively can create feelings of failure and frustration in learners thus contributing to high drop-out and low completion rates (Biao, 2012). The author further insists that in such circumstances, ODL may become discredited as it is viewed as the second option or quick fix, justifying the fears of its critics.

**Enabling Students to Use Course Materials Appropriately.** In ODL, the study materials - commonly referred to as learning materials - are designed to serve as the students' self-directed learning manual and incorporate the instructor and instructional strategies/methods (Messo, 2014). OUT has been producing its own study materials and it also uses some from other universities: African Virtual University, University of Nairobi, Abuja University, Makerere University and Indira Gandhi National Open University are some of its sources (Mushi, 1998). Thus, key to study materials is to make sure that they are of quality, available and learners are assisted to use them aptly. According to responses, students had a positive perceptions, as the majority agreed to the statement that "sufficient contact sessions are arranged to enable learners to use the course materials effectively for learning" (refer Table 1). This was also similar to findings from interviews, as one of the participants submitted: "Learning materials are good, and adequately provided. We are also directed on how to properly follow the instructions in those materials for us to study smoothly". S 6 (Education, Year 2).

From these findings, it is evident that OUT supports its students to learn with ease by facilitating their proper interaction with study materials. It is also important to consider the fact that ODL materials should be well designed as they replace the presence of the teacher except for the assessment (Petroman & Petroman, 2013).

**Access To and Interaction with Tutors.** Effective interaction of distance learning students with the instructors through online tutoring (e-tutoring) produces a sense of fulfilment, belonging and realization with the educational environment (Chugh et al., 2017; Joubert & Snyman, 2018). When asked to indicate whether “tutors are accessible to learners for individual tutoring”, the majority of students disagreed with the statement. It can, therefore, be submitted that interaction between students and tutors at OUT is limited. Similar findings were revealed during the interview as one participant said:

I hardly meet with or talk to tutors. They are difficult for us to reach, and when face-to-face sessions are scheduled, there are a lot of students which make it difficult for them to accommodate each student's unique demands. S 9 (Education, Year 3).

As a result of the need to enhance interaction between students and instructors, Joubert & Snyman (2018) is of the opinion that technology-enhanced learning must be used by ODL institutions as a method of academic support for students in light of these technical breakthroughs and greater reliance on technology.

**Prompt Feedback [Timely Return of Assignments].** One of the reasons for establishing learning centres and locating some in remote areas is to enable distant learners to easily access services including assessment feedback (Messo, 2014). A majority of the students revealed their dissatisfaction on the return of assignments. For instance, (as shown in Table 1), responses to statement “there is timely return of assignments and tests”, majority of students disagreed and some were neutral with the statement. This reveals that students are dissatisfied with assessment practices. This dissatisfaction was also revealed during the interview as one of the participants submitted: “Sometimes, there are delays in turning up the assignments. They are sometimes misplaced as well. It has happened twice to me. This affects learning following the importance of feedback” S 11 (Journalism, Year 2).

These findings are consistent with some of the previous studies such as that of Bitegeko & Swai (2012) which indicate the persistence of poor feedback in ODL institutions. The authors further argue that many students at OUT experience delays of the instructors' feedback on marked assignments and timed test which also seem to be a discouraging factor to their studies' success. This challenge was also observed by Hara & Kling (2003) that in most cases students in ODL experience confusion, anxiety and frustration due to perceived lack of prompt or clear feedback from instructors.

**Provision of Counselling Services.** It was found that counselling services are provided to learners, as they enter and progress with their studies at OUT. Responding to the statement that “learners have access to counselling before and during the course or programme as well as after completion”, 40% agreed and 15% of students strongly agreed. This suggests that, learners are guided on how to progress well with their studies. The commitment to provide efficient and effective guidance and counselling services to students was also revealed in several OUT official documents i.e. student affairs policy, client service charter and the prospectus for 2021/2022 (OUT, 2008, 2010 & 2021). Literature indicate that counselling services to learners is very important due to several reasons. Ahmed (2017) opines that when first year students enter educational institutions, they are exposed to psychological issues that are social, personal, and professional in nature, necessitating counselling. Counselling services are intended to help and support students who are having psycho-social issues, particularly as they transit into the university life (Kamunyu et al., 2016). The authors add that these issues may interfere with their ability to make academic, interpersonal, and campus life adaptations (Kamunyu et al., 2016).



**Provision of Satisfactory and Cost-Effective Arrangements to Meet Learner's Needs.** Students at OUT were generally of the view that cost-effective arrangements are in place to enable them meet their learning needs. For instance, when asked to comment on the statement “satisfactory and cost-effective arrangements are made to meet learner's needs for physical facilities for study and tutorial”, majority of students agreed with the statement. However, some had concerns over availability of learning facilities. During the interview, one responded submitted:

For me and my colleagues taking Bachelor of Science with Education and I think even those in other courses related to science, the facilities we are provided with are not sufficient to promote learning. We, as an alternatively, share with friends in conventional universities at some point. S 26, (Science, Year 1).

About the accessibility of learning facilities such as library, the findings in Table 1 show that majority of students agreed with the statement that, “Learners have access to the facilities (for example, libraries) and equipment that are necessary for successful learning”. However, some of the students remained neutral, and others disagreed with this statement. The occurrence of varying responses on this component indicates dissatisfaction of learners on the accessibility of facilities for learning.

The responses to the statement that “Learner structures such as student representative councils are established, recognized and empowered to represent learners on structures of institutional governance” reveal that 38% of students, who are the majority, agreed. Furthermore, a close analysis of participants’ responses from the interview suggests that, in general, students had a positive perception of the support services that are provided at OUT. One respondent submitted: “Our learning support is very good because they give us some materials to read, information about the course, and sometimes, if you need counselling services, are provided” S 33, (ICT, Year 2).

The researcher took a step further by looking at challenges associated with the provision of support services to learners. In this regard, learners identified some challenges: the inadequacy of classroom facilities in learning centres, and the inadequacy of library facilities. Figure 1 summarises the questionnaire findings:

**Figure 1: Challenges associated with support services**

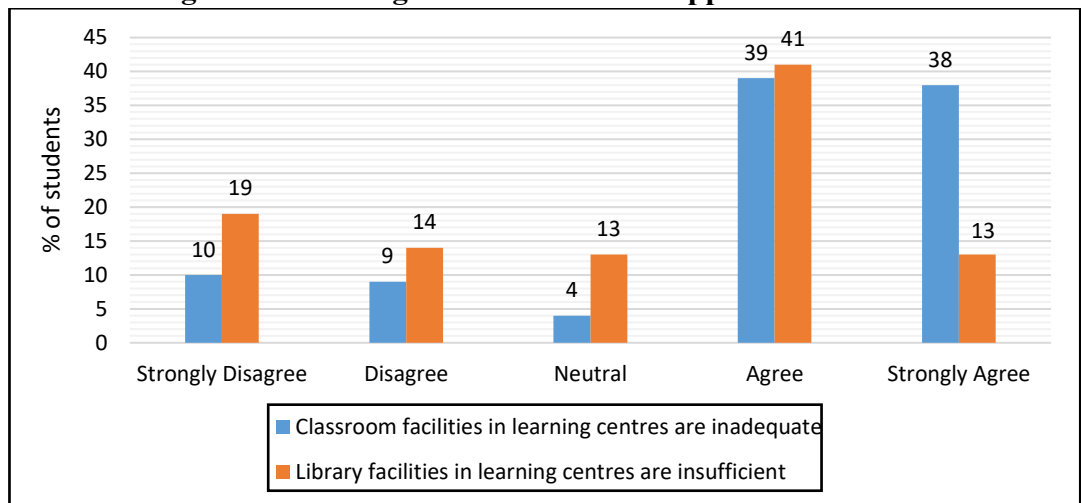


Figure 1 reveals that the big challenge is the inadequacy of classroom facilities in learning centres whereby majority of students agreed with the statement that “classroom facilities in learning centres are not adequate”. Also, learners are of the view that library facilities in learning centres are insufficient. While the support services provided at OUT seem somewhat deficient, there are efforts to improve the situation. In his opening speech for the academic year 2018/19, the Vice-Chancellor of OUT, among many others, requested that OUT employees provide better customer service so that both continuing and new students can get services in a virtuous environment. He said, “Do not let the students suffer, help and serve them with decorum so that they will come back the next day”. The statement was made on October 12, 2018, at OUT’s temporary headquarters in Kinondoni, Dar es Salaam during the Vice Chancellor's meeting with OUT employees (OUT, 2018).

Generally, OUT provides support services to its students but the services are potentially inadequate as some gaps were observed especially in the provision of prompt feedback, accessibility of tutors, counselling services, learning environments and other related services. This seems to be the reality with many institution of distance learning. Mowes (2005) argues that students face a variety of difficulties related to accessing support services in ODL including difficulties in communicating with their tutors and getting oriented to the distance learning environment. While the provision of these services is not satisfactory, it should be noted that successful students' learning is greatly influenced by the nature of services provided (Lee, 2003).

### ***Students' Perceptions on the Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)***

Currently, the world is witnessing rapid and far-reaching developments in science and technology (Hara & Kling, 2003). These developments have inevitably necessitated the integration of ICT with education. Ivala (1999) submits that the integration of ICT in education, particularly in ODL, not only widens the scope of education but also strengthens the capacity of distance learning providers to meet the needs of students. In fact, ODL depends on technology to enhance teaching and learning. Against this backdrop, the second objective of this study aimed at investigating students' perceptions regarding use of ICT at OUT in order to establish the university credentials about the use of ICT. As was the case with the first objective, the researcher used a questionnaire, an interview and a documentary review to gather information. Table 2 presents the findings generated from the questionnaire:

Table 2: Perceptions of students toward the use of ICT

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
	1. Computer facilities in learning centres are adequately available.	18	26	17	24	5	7	16	23	14
2. Internet connectivity is satisfactory and students are able to use the internet services appropriately.	8	11	22	31	2	3	18	25	21	30
3. Video-conferencing and tele-tutoring are used to enhance teaching and learning.	34	47	21	29	11	15	5	7	1	1
4. Internet services are regularly used by tutors and students to enhance teaching and learning (e.g., sending assignments online).	18	25	23	32	5	7	17	24	8	11

*Key: F = Frequency*

**Availability of Computer Facilities.** Students were of the view that computer facilities at OUT are not enough to accommodate all students in learning centres. These views came from the questionnaire and interview. For instance, the majority of students acknowledged that computer facilities in learning centres are not adequately available. As shown in Table 2, students disagreed with the statement that “computer facilities in learning centres are adequately available”. Likewise, the interview with participants revealed the same dissatisfaction among them. For example, one of the participants at the Temeke centre during the interview had this to say:

Yes, computers are available, but they cannot accommodate all of us. They are very few, but you can also find one or two computers connected to the internet. I have not been able to use a computer at my centre. I always use computers at the Kinondoni centre where I can access wireless internet services. In general, computer and internet service is not satisfactory. S 20, (Education, Year 3).

An analysis of the available official documents at OUT (facts and figures, policies, prospectuses and reports) could not establish the figures on the number of available computers for facilitating students' learning in learning centres. That is, there was nowhere to find information related to the availability of computers in learning centres despite much emphasis on the use of ICT to facilitate teaching and learning.

**Internet Connectivity.** Being an important means of accessing online materials and a means of communication, the internet was found to be unreliable at OUT learning centres. Responses to the statement “internet connectivity is satisfactory and students are able to use the internet services appropriately” showed that majority of students disagreed. But also a significant number of students, i.e., 30% strongly agreed and (25%) agreed that internet connectivity is satisfactory. With these varying responses, it is evident that internet services is not reliable and vary across centres. This is in line with the findings by Messo (2014), who observed that students at OUT are dissatisfied with access to internet services.

**Online Course Delivery Practices.** It is well documented that teaching and learning at a distance must take advantage of virtual environments (Gonzalez et al., 2019). Reflecting on online course delivery practices at OUT, majority of students showed concern that the video-conference or teleconference and other networking sites for live lectures and conversations with instructors are missing. For instance, findings from the questionnaire as shown in Table 2 revealed that 47% of students strongly disagreed and 29% of students disagreed with the statement that “video-conferencing and tele-tutoring are used to enhance teaching and learning”. Also, instructors were perceived as being reluctant to use online gadgets to enhance learning. From the questionnaire, findings revealed that 18% of students strongly agreed and 23% agreed with the statement that “Internet services are regularly used

by tutors and students to enhance teaching and learning (e.g., sending assignments online)”. These findings were confirmed during the interview with students. These issues were raised, and one of the interviewees responded that:

Internet service is helpful to us and the management because they provide information about course registration, results, and sometimes course outlines and modules through the internet using the university website. But I have never communicated with a tutor through the internet may be for others but I am sure they have been experiencing the same. S 13, (Social Work, Year 2).

These findings implies that internet service is used by the management to provide general information but it is not used by individual tutors to facilitate teaching to their learners. It should be noted, however, that explicit efforts to integrate education with modern technology at OUT have been in place. The establishment of ICT policy in 2009, which has been regularly revised, is one of such efforts (Nihuka, 2015). The OUT Policy, for instance, clearly specifies that the university aims to (i) enhance the usage of ICT as the primary medium for communication between students and teachers and (ii) transform all study materials that will be developed into an interactive format that is consistent with Moodle Learning Management System (OUT, 2014). Likewise, the university client charter states that OUT is committed to the delivery of quality distance learning through the use of modern technologies (OUT, 2010). Moreover, the findings reveal that outdated technologies such as the use of print materials are common. A similar observation was made by Ngenzi (2012) and Muganda et al. (2012), who identified a number of deficiencies in the use of ICT at OUT. It should be noted that as the world is undergoing rapid technological change, OUT should also go with these changes instead of relying on costly outdated technologies so as to attract a large number of students as well.

***Perceptions of Students toward Curriculum Design***

Curriculum is an important component in all educational systems and one of the components that determine the quality of education. Due to varied nature of the audience for distance learning, which includes people of all ages - from young children to ageing adults, the curriculum must take into consideration of needs, experiences and the context (Dodds & Edirishingha, 2000). Against this background, this study explored the perceptions of students about the curriculum design. The researcher used a questionnaire, an interview and a documentary review to gather information. Table 3 presents the findings generated from the questionnaire:

**Table 3: The perceptions of students on curriculum design**

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. The content of the course is sufficient, accurate, up-to-date, and relevant to the aims and outcomes and reflects awareness of the multicultural reality of Tanzania.	12	17	0	0	8	11	23	32	29	40
2. Active teaching and learning approaches are used to engage learners intellectually and practically, promote learner responsibility, and cater for individual needs.	7	10	16	22	8	11	24	33	17	24
3. The course materials provided reflect the needs, knowledge and experiences of the target learners.	6	8	4	6	10	14	30	42	22	31
4. The overall technical quality of the materials is satisfactory and facilitates learners' use.	10	14	16	22	15	21	18	25	13	18
5. The assessment strategies are matching with the aims and outcomes of student learning in the course.	5	7	4	6	13	18	30	42	20	28

Key: F = Frequency

**Relevance of the Course Content.** The majority of students were of the view that course content is relevant. As shown in Table 3, when responding to the statement that "the content of the course is sufficient, accurate, up-to-date, and relevant to the aims and outcomes and reflects awareness of the multicultural reality of Tanzania", majority of students agreed with the statement; however, there was a concern of 12 (17%) students who strongly disagreed with the statement. While the course content seems to be relevant (from the views of students), Glennie (1996) recommends that curriculum designers need to be cognizant of environmental constraints such as lack of infrastructure, poor access to ICTs, the existence of multilingual and multi-cultural communities and the absence in many communities of a culture of reading and of learning independently.

**Teaching and Learning Approaches.** Literature on distance learning places emphasis on students-centred learning (Moran & Myringer, 2003). Thus, the role of the teacher is to enable students to get actively involved in the teaching and learning process. Responding to the statement that "active teaching and learning approaches are used to engage learners intellectually and practically, promote learner responsibility, and cater for individual needs", 33% (24 out of 72) students agreed, and 24% (17 out of 72) strongly agreed with the statement. This shows a great deal of satisfaction among students with the approaches that are used by the university to enhance teaching and learning. With these responses, it can be concluded that the learner-centred approach is dominant at OUT. Glennie (1996) calls for a learner-centred approach to distance learning that responds to learners' diverse needs. The author further insists that the needs, traditions and interests of ODL institutions and their staff should not dictate learning programmes in distance learning.

**Appropriateness of Teaching and Learning Materials.** Teaching and learning materials were generally appropriate. As shown in Table 3, for instance, the majority of students agreed with the statement "the course materials provided reflect the needs,



knowledge, and experiences of the target learners". Also, majority of students agreed with the statement that "there are clearly laid down aims and learning outcomes and an explicit indication of study time (notional study hours per section of the study material) that allow learners to adopt sensible study plans", although a large number of students (32%) were neutral. Students had varying views regarding the quality of materials provided at OUT. Responding to the statement "the overall technical quality of the materials is satisfactory and facilitates learners' use", students either agreed or disagreed and others were neutral. These findings are contrary to Messo's (2014) findings who reported students' dissatisfaction over the quality of the instructional method. Perhaps, there have been significant interventions to improve them.

**Relevance of Assessment Strategies.** Assessment is an integral part of the learning process. Consequently, it is crucial for ODL institutions to put into practice a reliable assessment system that can guarantee the accomplishment of the course objectives (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). Major assessment strategies in ODL include examinations, tests and assignments (Musingafi et al., 2015). Authors add that, they provide feedback to both students and instructors on students' progress and the class as a whole aiding in the decision-making process. Therefore, it is crucial to accurately record student marks and make sure that instructors provide regular feedback both for the satisfaction of learners and the reputation of the institution. Experiences at OUT show that assessment strategies are congruent with students' learning outcomes in the course as majority of students agreed with the statement "the assessment strategies are matching with the aims and outcomes of student learning in the course". This signifies that the assessment strategies are in harmony with curriculum content thus enhancing learning. As a result of this observation, it can be submitted that the students' perception of curriculum design at the OUT is generally positive. This finding is somewhat a splendid accomplishment as many ODL institutions have been criticised for inappropriate and delayed

assessment feedback (Hara and Kling, 2003; Musingafi et al., 2015; Chaudhary & Dey, 2013).

### Conclusion

From what has been observed, ODL is now an educational option that is worth strengthening so as to promote access to higher education. Therefore, based on the findings and the discussion generated in this paper, it is recommended that the Tanzanian government support this emerging useful educational option, which is very crucial. Government support should come in the forms of material and financial support that would in turn help OUT to accommodate students' needs in terms of support services, curriculum design and proper use of ICT. The Open University of Tanzania should also strive to secure the right technologies including use of video-conferencing and tele-tutoring with the aim of refraining from the use of costly outdated technologies. It should also review its support services system to allow flexible learning environment to students. More specifically, OUT should find appropriate and prompt ways of providing feedback (assignments and marked test scripts) and modules, making sure that tutors are accessible, providing counselling services and adequate physical facilities such as library materials in learning centres. This will create a conducive learning environment which will consequently result in positive students' perceptions towards ODL.

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