

# Students' Perceptions of Programme Coordinators' Academic Support Roles in Open and Distance Learning: Evidence from the Open University of Tanzania

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## **Abstract**

*This study examined students' perceptions of programme coordinators' academic support roles at the Open University of Tanzania. Guided by Transactional Distance Theory, it focused on students' awareness of coordinators' responsibilities and their perceived communication effectiveness. A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed, involving 130 students from four regional centres. Data were collected using a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire. Analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, MANOVA, and univariate ANOVA. Findings revealed overall moderate levels of awareness and communication effectiveness among students. Postgraduate students reported the highest levels, followed by undergraduates, while non-degree students recorded the lowest mean scores. These differences indicate that perceptions vary significantly by academic level. The study recommends strengthening structured dialogue, proactive communication, and targeted support for less experienced students to reduce transactional distance and enhance academic integration in ODL environments.*

**Keywords:** *Programme coordinators, academic support, communication effectiveness, transactional distance, open and distance learning, Open University of Tanzania*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Effective communication between institutions and students is a critical determinant of student engagement and academic persistence in open and distance learning (ODL) contexts (Deep et al., 2025; Zeng & Xin, 2025). Communication plays a central role in reducing transactional distance, the psychological gap between learners and instructors that often manifests as feelings of isolation and loneliness, which is shaped by the level of dialogue, course structure, and learner autonomy (Abuhassna & Alnawajha, 2023; Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Chen, 2023; Moore, 1993). This study focuses on two dimensions of this communication process: students'

awareness and understanding of academic support roles, and their perceptions of communication effectiveness with support personnel.

When communication is clear and responsive, it fosters connection among learners, instructors, and the institution, enhancing students' understanding of course expectations, assessment requirements, and learning pathways (McNeill & Bushaala, 2023; Wu, 2023). Conversely, unclear communication increases transactional distance, resulting in confusion, academic anxiety, and disengagement, factors commonly associated with student dropout (Kayode, 2018; Ottenheim et al., 2025). Beyond these foundational outcomes, communication practices also influence student motivation, self-regulation, and confidence (Albelbisi et al., 2021; Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Regular feedback, well-organised instructional communication, and responsive channels such as discussion forums, emails, virtual meetings, and learning management systems enable students to monitor their progress, maintain social presence, and sustain peer connections (Hashmi et al., 2025; Odhiambo, 2024). These mechanisms are particularly critical in geographically dispersed learning contexts, where students may otherwise feel isolated. Strong communication practices thus support a holistic learning experience, integrating academic guidance with social interaction to sustain motivation and persistence (Deep et al., 2025; Garrison, 2017; Tinto, 2017).

Despite its importance, many ODL students, particularly newly enrolled individuals with lower institutional autonomy, encounter significant communication and guidance challenges (Lee et al., 2013; Simpson, 2018; Tinto, 2017). Limited access to responsive communication systems exacerbates feelings of detachment (Liu & Lin, 2024; Schweighart et al., 2024), and many struggle to identify appropriate channels for academic, administrative, and psychosocial support (Halim & Chea, 2025; Maphoto, 2024). Unlike conventional face-to-face institutions, ODL students rely heavily on mediated interactions such as emails, learning management systems, and online forums (Anderson, 2008; Dorsah & Alhassan, 2021; Garrison, 2017). When these channels are poorly coordinated, students experience uncertainty, frustration, and heightened isolation, negatively affecting motivation and persistence (Liu & Lin, 2024; Salarvand et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, ODL institutions implement structured communication and support strategies. These include official email systems and automated messaging for enrolment confirmation and

orientation schedules (Arko-Achemfuor, 2017; Liu & Lin, 2024; Panda, 2023); comprehensive orientation programmes delivered synchronously or asynchronously via video conferencing tools and learning management systems (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tait, 2014; UNESCO, 2020); and peer support platforms such as WhatsApp groups and discussion forums that enable community building and timely guidance (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Kear, 2010). Institutional websites and learning management system dashboards also serve as centralised repositories of essential information (Bozkurt, 2017; Mpungose, 2020). Together, these strategies aim to reduce disorientation, clarify expectations, and build early engagement.

At the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), similar measures are in place. The institution maintains a network of regional and coordination centres that assist with enrolment, confirm admissions via text messages and telephone, and organise orientation sessions in partnership with academic directorates. These sessions introduce students to the Moodle learning management system, Zoom platforms, and the Academic Resource Management Information System (ARMIS) used for course and examination registration (OUT Prospectus, 2025; OUT, 2009).

Despite these efforts, studies document persistent communication challenges among OUT students, including low attendance at live sessions and uncertainty about accessing institutional resources (Hassan, 2020; Mahai, 2022; Mtae & Rangi, 2022; Salum, 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced among students with financial, family, or work commitments that prevent attendance at orientation and face-to-face sessions (Bawa, 2016; Xavier & Meneses, 2021). Consequently, the mechanisms designed to support engagement may not fully reach those who need them most, creating gaps in awareness, preparedness, and participation (Bawa, 2016; Tait, 2014).

Within this context, programme coordinators emerge as a critical mechanism for addressing communication and support gaps. Studies indicate that effective learner support in ODL relies heavily on clearly designated coordination roles that facilitate communication, provide academic guidance, and foster academic integration (Gyurova, 2019; Kinanguka, 2025; Zuhairi et al., 2020). This perspective recognises that beyond instructional technologies, the human element remains indispensable (Chai et al., 2024; Collins et al., 2019; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

From a Transactional Distance perspective, programme coordinators function to strengthen dialogue, one of the three core elements of Moore's framework, thereby reducing the psychological gap between students and the institution. They serve not merely as administrative intermediaries but as relational anchors who provide personalised interaction, timely feedback, and empathetic guidance. Without programme coordinators, ODL students would lack a vital link to academic and administrative support. These roles offer programme-specific academic assistance, clarify course-related issues, and mediate communication between students, tutors, and administrative units. As such, they function as a central communication node essential for reducing transactional distance and sustaining student engagement (Emmanuel et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2023).

Despite the recognised importance of programme coordinators, limited empirical attention has been given to how students themselves perceive these roles within OUT. Previous OUT studies have focused on broad challenges such as technological constraints and administrative barriers (Hassan, 2020; Mahai, 2022; Mtae & Rangi, 2022; Salum, 2023). While valuable, these studies have largely emphasised the *availability* of support services rather than examining how students *understand and engage* with these services in practice. The present study addresses this gap by shifting focus from service provision to students' awareness and perceptions of communication effectiveness, with specific attention to programme coordinators as a distinct unit of analysis. In doing so, it extends existing OUT-based research beyond generalised analyses of student support services. Specifically, it offers targeted insights into the effectiveness of programme-level academic support in enhancing student engagement, reducing transactional distance, and supporting persistence.

This study empirically examines students' awareness of programme coordinators' roles and their perceptions of communication effectiveness. It thereby contributes a nuanced understanding of how human-mediated support structures function within ODL environments. Guided by this focus, the study sought to answer: How do students at the Open University of Tanzania perceive the roles of programme coordinators in supporting their academic experience? Specifically: (1) To what extent are students aware of and understand the principal roles of programme coordinators? and (2) How do students perceive the effectiveness of communication between themselves and programme coordinators? Addressing these questions is essential for evaluating learner support mechanisms at OUT

and identifying strategies to enhance communication, engagement, and persistence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), developed by Michael G. Moore in 1993. This is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in open and distance learning (ODL). The theory posits that distance in education is not merely a function of physical separation between learners and instructors but rather a pedagogical and psychological space shaped by programme structure and patterns of communication. Moore conceptualised this space as transactional distance, determined by the interaction among three key elements: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy.

In ODL institutions such as the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), students are geographically separated from institutional actors and rely heavily on mediated communication channels. However, the presence of communication technologies alone does not guarantee meaningful interaction. Instead, transactional distance is shaped by how institutional systems support clear, responsive, and purposeful communication between students and institutional representatives. As such, communication embedded within institutional support structures plays a central role in shaping students' academic experiences and perceptions of support.

While Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) encompasses dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy as its core components, this study focuses primarily on dialogue as the most relevant dimension for examining students' perceptions. Within TDT, dialogue refers to constructive and purposeful communication between learners and institutional representatives, including instructors, facilitators, and academic support personnel. It extends beyond the mere exchange of information to include clarification, feedback, guidance, and reassurance.

In this context, programme coordinators function as key intermediaries who facilitate ongoing communication between students and the institution. Through activities such as clarifying programme requirements, guiding administrative procedures, responding to student inquiries, and maintaining follow-up communication, coordinators play a key role in shaping how students experience institutional support. When such communication is perceived as clear, timely, and accessible, transactional distance is reduced. Conversely, when communication is limited, delayed,

or impersonal, psychological distance may increase despite the availability of digital platforms.

Given that this study examines students' awareness and understanding of programme coordinators' roles and their perceptions of communication effectiveness, Transactional Distance Theory provides a suitable explanatory lens. The theory enables an understanding of how institutional dialogue and role clarity influence students' perceptions of support in ODL environments. By placing programme coordinators as key facilitators of institutional dialogue and support visibility, TDT offers a coherent theoretical foundation for analysing how communication practices and role awareness shape students' academic experiences at OUT.

## **METHODS**

This study was conducted across four regional centres of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT): Kinondoni, Iringa, Mbeya, and Rukwa. Given that OUT operates numerous regional centres nationwide, it was not feasible to include all centres in the study. Therefore, a multi-stage sampling approach was employed. In the first stage, Kinondoni Centre was purposively selected due to its large student population and strategic importance. In the second stage, three additional centres, Iringa, Mbeya, and Rukwa, were selected through simple random sampling from the remaining centres to enhance representativeness. The selection of four centres was considered sufficient to capture variability in student experiences across different geographical and institutional contexts while maintaining feasibility in data collection.

A quantitative approach using a cross-sectional research design was adopted. The study involved 130 students, with 40 drawn from the Kinondoni centre and the remaining 90 proportionately selected from Iringa, Mbeya, and Rukwa. The sample included students from postgraduate, undergraduate, and non-degree programmes. Participants were selected randomly from those available at the centres during the annual examination period, allowing access to a diverse group of students. However, this approach may introduce selection bias, as students attending examinations are more likely to be academically active and engaged. Consequently, the findings may underrepresent less active or absent students. Despite this limitation, the examination period provides a practical opportunity to access a broad cross-section of students across programmes and levels in ODL settings.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising two constructs: Awareness and Understanding (AU) and Communication Effectiveness (CE). Each construct consisted of seven items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The AU construct assessed students' knowledge and understanding of programme coordinators' roles, including awareness of their existence, responsibilities, accessibility, and contribution to students' academic experience. The CE construct examined the quality of interaction between students and programme coordinators, including responsiveness, clarity of communication, encouragement of engagement, confidence in initiating contact, consistency, provision of feedback, and the extent to which communication reduces confusion.

The questionnaire items were developed based on existing literature on learner support and communication in ODL. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by experts in open and distance learning, student support services in particular, who evaluated the relevance, clarity, and alignment of the items with the study constructs. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding coefficients of  $\alpha = .81$  for Awareness and Understanding (AU) and  $\alpha = .90$  for Communication Effectiveness (CE), indicating good and excellent reliability, respectively.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 24. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise overall trends in students' perceptions, while inferential analyses examined differences across student groups. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was employed to assess overall differences across the two constructs, followed by Univariate ANOVA to identify specific group differences. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the practical significance of the findings, and post-hoc tests were conducted to explore group variations in greater detail.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings of the study on students' perceptions of the roles of programme coordinators in supporting their academic experience at the Open University of Tanzania. The analysis focuses on two key aspects: students' awareness and understanding of programme coordinators' roles, and their perceptions of communication effectiveness. The presentation begins with participants' background characteristics to provide context for interpreting the findings. This is followed by the results

of descriptive and inferential analyses, including multivariate and univariate tests, as well as post-hoc comparisons.

### Respondents' Background Information

This section presents participants' key characteristics, including programme level, year of study, residential location, and regional centre. This information provides context for interpreting the findings and assessing their relevance and applicability to similar ODL settings. A summary of respondents' characteristics is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:**

*Respondents' Background Information (n=130)*

Demographic Variable	Code	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Degree Programme	1	Postgraduate	37	28.5	28.5
	2	Undergraduate	54	41.5	70.0
	3	Non-Degree	39	30.0	100.0
Regional Centres	1	Kinondoni	40	30.8	30.8
	2	Iringa	30	23.1	53.8
	3	Mbeya	30	23.1	76.9
	4	Rukwa	30	23.1	100.0
Year of Study	1	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	59	45.4	45.4
	2	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	46	35.4	80.8
	3	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	18	13.8	94.6
	4	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	7	5.4	100.0
	5	5 <sup>th</sup> +Year	0	0	100.0
Residential Location	1	Urban	52	40.0	40.0
	2	Semi-Urban	48	36.9	76.9
	3	Rural	30	23.1	100

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

The majority of respondents were enrolled in undergraduate programmes (41.5%), followed by non-degree (30.0%) and postgraduate programmes (28.5%). Respondents were fairly distributed across regional centres, with Kinondoni contributing the largest share (30.8%) and Iringa, Mbeya, and Rukwa each contributing 23.1%. In terms of academic progression, most respondents were in their first year (45.4%) and second year (35.4%), with fewer students in advanced years. Regarding residential location, 40.0% of respondents resided in urban areas, 36.9% in semi-urban areas, and 23.1% in rural areas.

### Reliability of the Study Constructs

Assessing the internal consistency of the study instruments is essential to ensure that the items within each scale reliably measure the same underlying construct. In this study, the internal consistency of the

constructs was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. A summary of the findings is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:**  
*Internal Consistency of Study Constructs (N = 130)*

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Interpretation
Awareness & Understanding (AU)	7	.81	Good reliability
Communication Effectiveness (CE)	7	.90	Excellent reliability

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

The results presented in Table 2 indicate satisfactory reliability for both study constructs. The Awareness and Understanding (AU) scale demonstrated good reliability ( $\alpha = .81$ ), with corrected item-total correlations ranging from .44 to .66, indicating that all items contributed satisfactorily to the scale. The Communication Effectiveness (CE) scale exhibited excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ), with corrected item-total correlations ranging from .59 to .77. For both constructs, Cronbach's alpha did not improve if any item was deleted, supporting the retention of all items. These findings suggest that responses were consistent across items and provide confidence that the scores accurately reflect students' perceptions of AU and CE, confirming the instrument's reliability for subsequent statistical analyses.

### **Correlation Analysis**

A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between Awareness and Understanding (AU) and Communication Effectiveness (CE). This analysis assessed the strength and direction of the association between the two constructs. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Correlation Matrix for Study Constructs (N = 130)*

Variable	1	2
Awareness & Understanding (AU) - 1	-	.77**
Communication Effectiveness (CE) - 2	.77**	-

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

As shown in Table 3, there was a strong positive correlation between the two constructs,  $r = .766$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicates that students who reported higher awareness and understanding of their Programme Coordinators also

tended to perceive their communication effectiveness more positively. The relationship is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, suggesting that it is unlikely to have occurred by chance. These findings support the conceptual link between students' understanding of coordinators and their perceptions of coordinators' communication performance.

### **Students' perceptions of the roles of programme coordinators in supporting their academic experience**

To address the main research question, two constructs were examined: Awareness and Understanding (AU) and Communication Effectiveness (CE). The AU construct captured students' knowledge of programme coordinators' roles, while the CE construct assessed the quality of interaction between students and programme coordinators. Both constructs were measured using a structured questionnaire with items rated on a five-point Likert scale. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to assess overall differences across the two constructs, followed by Univariate ANOVA and post-hoc tests to identify specific group differences. Effect sizes were also calculated to determine the practical significance of the findings.

#### ***Descriptive Statistics***

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise students' responses across the two constructs: Awareness and Understanding (AU) and Communication Effectiveness (CE). The results indicate that students demonstrated a moderate level of awareness and understanding of programme coordinators' roles ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). This suggests that, while students have some familiarity with the roles and responsibilities of programme coordinators, their overall level of understanding is not particularly strong. The relatively small standard deviation further indicates that responses were fairly consistent across the sample.

For Communication Effectiveness (CE), the mean score was slightly higher ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ), indicating moderately positive perceptions of interactions with programme coordinators. This implies that students generally perceive communication with programme coordinators as somewhat effective in supporting their academic needs. The higher standard deviation suggests greater variability in students' experiences compared to awareness and understanding. Overall, the descriptive results indicate that students hold moderately positive, though not particularly

strong, perceptions of programme coordinators in terms of both awareness and communication effectiveness.

### Multivariate Tests

Multivariate tests were conducted to examine whether the independent variables had a statistically significant overall effect on the two related dependent variables: Awareness and Understanding (AU) and Communication Effectiveness (CE). Specifically, the analysis assessed whether factors such as degree programme, year of study, residential location, and regional centre jointly influenced students' perceptions across these constructs. This approach was appropriate given the conceptual relationship between the dependent variables and the need to control for Type I error associated with multiple comparisons. The results of the multivariate tests are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4:**  
*Multivariate Tests (Pillai's Trace) for AU Mean and CE Mean*

Effect	Pillai's Trace	F (df1, df2)	p	Partial $\eta^2$
Degree Programme Level	0.882	23.667 (4, 120)	< .001	0.441
Year of Study	0.147	1.585 (6, 120)	0.157	0.073
Residential Location	0.060	0.926 (4, 120)	0.451	0.030
Regional Centre	0.096	1.011 (6, 120)	0.422	0.048
Degree Level $\times$ Year of Study	0.093	0.587 (10, 120)	0.822	0.047
Degree Level $\times$ Residential Location	0.063	0.487 (8, 120)	0.863	0.031
Degree Level $\times$ Regional Centre	0.337	2.028 (12, 120)	0.027	0.169
Year of Study $\times$ Residential Location	0.167	1.366 (8, 120)	0.218	0.083
Year of Study $\times$ Regional Centre	0.255	1.254 (14, 120)	0.247	0.128
Residential Location $\times$ Regional Centre	0.094	0.492 (12, 120)	0.916	0.047
Degree Level $\times$ Year of Study $\times$ DRC	0.195	1.296 (10, 120)	0.032	0.180

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed that degree programme level had a significant multivariate effect on students' perceptions of programme coordinators across both Awareness and Understanding (AU\_Mean) and Communication Effectiveness

(CE\_Mean), Pillai's Trace = .882,  $F(4, 120) = 23.667$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .441$ , indicating a large effect. The interaction between degree programme level and regional centres was also statistically significant, Pillai's Trace = .337,  $F(12, 120) = 2.028$ ,  $p = .027$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .169$ . Similarly, the three-way interaction among degree programme level, year of study, and regional centres was significant, Pillai's Trace = .195,  $F(10, 120) = 1.296$ ,  $p = .032$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .180$ , suggesting that these combined factors contributed to variations in students' perceptions.

All other main effects and interactions were not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ), indicating that year of study, residential location, and regional centre independently did not have a significant multivariate effect. Pillai's Trace was used due to its robustness to violations of homogeneity of variance, as indicated by Levene's test for AU\_Mean. These results indicate that differences exist in the combined outcomes of Awareness and Understanding (AU) and Communication Effectiveness (CE). However, the multivariate test does not specify which dependent variable(s) account for these differences, necessitating follow-up univariate analyses.

### Follow-Up Univariate Tests (ANOVAs)

The significant multivariate effects identified by the MANOVA were further examined using separate univariate ANOVAs for Awareness and Understanding (AU\_Mean) and Communication Effectiveness (CE\_Mean). These analyses pinpointed which specific dependent variables were driving the observed differences, allowing for more precise interpretation of the multivariate findings. The results of the univariate tests are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5:**  
*Univariate ANOVAs for AU\_Mean and CE\_Mean*

Effect	Dependent Variables	F (df1, df2)	p	Partial $\eta^2$
Degree Programme Level	AU_Mean	28.45 (4, 123)	< .001	0.48
Degree Programme Level	CE_Mean	18.76 (4, 123)	< .001	0.38
Degree Programme Level $\times$ DRC	AU_Mean	2.91 (6, 123)	0.012	0.13
Degree Programme Level $\times$ DRC	CE_Mean	2.47 (6, 123)	0.029	0.11
Degree Programme Level $\times$ Year $\times$ DRC	AU_Mean	2.14 (10, 123)	0.028	0.15
Degree Programme Level $\times$ Year $\times$ DRC	CE_Mean	1.89 (10, 123)	0.047	0.13

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

The univariate ANOVAs, summarised in Table 5, identified which dependent variables drove the significant multivariate effects observed in the MANOVA. Results showed that degree programme level significantly influenced both Awareness and Understanding (AU\_Mean) and Communication Effectiveness (CE\_Mean), indicating that students' knowledge of programme coordinators' roles and their perceptions of communication effectiveness varied across non-degree, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes.

Interaction effects involving degree programme level and regional centre, as well as the three-way interaction with year of study, were also significant for both AU\_Mean and CE\_Mean. However, these interactions had smaller effect sizes than the main effect of degree programme level, suggesting that contextual factors such as location and year of study influence perceptions to a lesser extent. In contrast, other independent variables, year of study, residential location, and regional centre alone, did not show significant effects, indicating minimal individual impact on students' perceptions. Overall, the univariate results confirm that degree programme level is the strongest determinant of students' awareness, understanding, and perceived communication effectiveness. These findings highlight the need to consider programme level when designing targeted ODL support and communication strategies.

### **Post-hoc / Pairwise Comparisons**

Following the univariate ANOVAs, post-hoc tests were conducted to identify which degree programme groups differed significantly in Awareness and Understanding (AU) and Communication Effectiveness (CE). Degree programme level was the focus, as it was the only independent variable showing strong, significant effects on both dependent variables. For Awareness and Understanding (AU), Games-Howell comparisons revealed significant differences across all degree levels ( $p < .001$ ). Postgraduate students scored higher than undergraduates (Mean Difference = 1.15) and non-degree students (Mean Difference = 1.57), while undergraduates scored higher than non-degree students (Mean Difference = 0.42). These results indicate a clear hierarchy, with postgraduates demonstrating the greatest awareness and understanding of programme coordinators' roles, followed by undergraduates, and then non-degree students. Confidence intervals for all comparisons excluded zero, confirming the statistical significance of these differences.

For Communication Effectiveness (CE), postgraduates also scored significantly higher than undergraduates (Mean Difference = 1.13,  $p < .001$ ) and non-degree students (Mean Difference = 2.18,  $p < .001$ ). Undergraduates scored higher than non-degree students (Mean Difference = 1.05,  $p < .001$ ). Homogeneous subset analysis confirmed that each degree group formed a distinct category, with no overlap between groups. This establishes a clear hierarchical pattern: postgraduates perceive the highest communication effectiveness, undergraduates occupy the middle, and non-degree students report the lowest levels. Overall, the post-hoc analyses demonstrate that students' perceptions of both awareness and communication effectiveness with programme coordinators systematically increase with programme level. These findings highlight the need for targeted support for non-degree and undergraduate students in ODL contexts.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

This study aimed to examine students' awareness and understanding of programme coordinators' roles, as well as their perceptions of communication effectiveness within an ODL context. The findings reveal moderate levels across both dimensions, offering important insights into the current state of student-coordinator dynamics and highlighting areas requiring targeted intervention.

### ***Awareness and Understanding of Programme Coordinators' Roles***

The results indicate that students demonstrated a moderate level of awareness and understanding of programme coordinators' responsibilities. While this suggests a foundational familiarity, it also signals that students' comprehension remains incomplete. This finding aligns with previous research in ODL contexts, where students often exhibit only partial awareness of available academic support structures, particularly during the early stages of their studies (Simpson, 2018; Arko-Achemfuor, 2017). Such patterns are frequently attributed to limited orientation processes and the insufficient visibility of academic support roles within distance learning environments. Conversely, structured onboarding programmes and continuous, proactive support communication have been shown to significantly enhance students' awareness of institutional roles and resources (Simpson, 2018; Tait, 2015; Zuhairi et al., 2020).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings can be interpreted through Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance Theory, which posits that psychological and communication gaps in distance education arise from

the interplay of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. The moderate awareness observed in this study reflects a structural gap within the learning environment, wherein unclear definitions and communication of academic support roles contribute to increased transactional distance. When learners lack a clear understanding of who to contact for specific needs, the resulting ambiguity can impede their ability to navigate the institution effectively (Abuhassna & Alnawajha, 2023). Thus, reducing transactional distance requires deliberate efforts to clarify role expectations and embed this information throughout the student lifecycle.

### ***Communication Effectiveness***

Students' perceptions of communication effectiveness were also moderately positive, suggesting that while interactions with programme coordinators were viewed as somewhat helpful, they were not consistently strong or uniformly satisfactory. This finding is consistent with existing literature documenting variability in communication quality within ODL settings, which often depends on programme-specific practices, regional centre characteristics, or individual coordinator approaches (Xanthopoulou & Lappa, 2022; Tait, 2015). In contrast, institutions that employ structured digital communication platforms, proactive advising models, and frequent, personalised engagement typically report higher perceptions of communication effectiveness (Zuhairi et al., 2020; Arhin et al., 2025).

Notably, prior studies conducted at the Hellenic Open University (Chrysoula, 2010) reported higher perceived communication effectiveness than observed in the present study. This disparity is likely attributable to consistent tutor contact, prompt responsiveness to student inquiries, and well-established communication protocols within that context. Such comparisons underscore the critical role that institutional policies, digital infrastructure, and consistent engagement practices play in shaping students' perceptions of communication quality.

When examined through the lens of Transactional Distance Theory, the moderate communication effectiveness scores suggest that while dialogue between students and coordinators exists, it remains insufficient to fully minimise the psychological and academic distance that can characterise ODL environments (Moore, 1993; Abuhassna & Alnawajha, 2023). Effective dialogue in distance education must be responsive, sustained, and structured to reduce ambiguity and foster connection. The moderate ratings in this study indicate that current dialogue practices, while present, may

lack the consistency or depth required to bridge the transactional gap effectively.

### ***Differences by Degree Programme Level***

The findings of this study further revealed a clear and significant hierarchy in students' awareness, understanding, and perceived communication effectiveness based on their degree programme level. Postgraduate students consistently reported the highest levels, followed by undergraduate students, with non-degree students reporting the lowest. While the quantitative results establish this pattern with statistical significance, it is critical to move beyond description and interpret the underlying reasons for these differences. This interpretation is essential for developing targeted, effective support mechanisms in open and distance learning (ODL) environments. The observed hierarchy can be attributed to a confluence of factors related to academic maturity, motivational orientation, prior educational experience, and the specific nature of the student-coordinator relationship at each level.

*Differences in academic maturity and experience:* A primary driver of the disparities is the varying degree of academic maturity and prior experience with higher education systems. Postgraduate students, by definition, have successfully navigated an entire undergraduate degree. This journey equips them with a refined set of academic skills, including a more sophisticated understanding of university structures, administrative processes, and how to effectively seek support (Cremers et al., 2021). Their higher scores in awareness and understanding likely reflect this accumulated "institutional knowledge". In contrast, undergraduate students are still developing this knowledge base. Non-degree students, who may be taking individual courses for professional development or without the commitment to a full degree, often have the most tenuous connection to the formal university system. Consequently, they experience the lowest levels of awareness (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This lack of prior experience makes them less familiar with the roles and responsibilities of academic support staff like programme coordinators.

*Varying motivational orientations and goal clarity:* The differences in perceived awareness and communication effectiveness can be linked to the distinct motivational orientations of these student groups. Postgraduate students typically exhibit a more focused, career-driven, and intrinsically motivated orientation. Their academic goals are often highly specific and directly tied to professional advancement, which fosters a more proactive approach to seeking and valuing clear, effective communication from

coordinators (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). They are more likely to perceive communication as effective if it directly serves their advanced research or career goals. Undergraduate students, while often career-oriented, may have a broader range of motivations, including social and exploratory ones, leading to a more variable engagement with formal communications. Non-degree students, whose motivation may be situational or extrinsic, for example, a single required certification, may have lower expectations or a diminished sense of belonging, making them less likely to engage deeply with institutional communications, thereby perceiving them as less effective (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tinto, 2017).

*Differences in student-coordinator interaction and relationship:* The nature of the student-coordinator relationship also varies significantly by programme level. Postgraduate students, particularly those in research-based programmes, typically have a smaller cohort size and a more sustained, individualised interaction with their programme coordinators and supervisors. This frequent, high-touch interaction naturally fosters a deeper awareness of the coordinator's role and a stronger perception of communication as effective and tailored (de Kleijn et al., 2016). For undergraduate students, interactions are often more transactional, managed through larger course structures, leading to a more generalised and less personalised relationship. Non-degree students, who may be the most transient and least integrated into a specific academic "home", often have the most fleeting or non-existent relationship with a dedicated coordinator. This relationship gap directly explains their low levels of awareness and perceived communication effectiveness (Tinto, 2017).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study examined students' perceptions of programme coordinators' academic support roles at the Open University of Tanzania, focusing on awareness and communication effectiveness. Findings revealed moderately positive perceptions, with significant variation across degree levels: postgraduate students reported the highest levels, followed by undergraduates, while non-degree students recorded the lowest. This hierarchy underscores the influence of academic progression on student engagement with support structures, consistent with Transactional Distance Theory.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made: *Institutional Recognition:* Programme coordinators play a critical role in fostering dialogue and reducing transactional distance. Their position

should be formally recognised and adequately resourced within the institutional structure. *Targeted Communication*: Accurate and accessible information regarding coordinators' roles and responsibilities must be disseminated to students, particularly during orientation and at key milestones, to ensure students understand how and when to seek support. *Tiered Support Strategies*: Given the hierarchical differences observed, institutions should adopt differentiated support approaches, prioritising intensive, proactive outreach for non-degree and undergraduate students, while maintaining responsive, personalised communication for postgraduate students.

### **Synthesis and Implications**

The moderate levels of awareness and communication effectiveness identified in this study reflect systemic gaps in ODL support structures. Institutions cannot rely on students acquiring an understanding of academic support roles informally; rather, this information must be embedded into structured orientation, continuous advising, and consistent communication channels. Similarly, improving communication effectiveness demands not only appropriate digital tools but also clear protocols that ensure timely, personalised interactions. These findings affirm Transactional Distance Theory as a valuable diagnostic framework for ODL contexts. By identifying areas where dialogue is insufficient or structural roles remain ambiguous, institutions can implement targeted interventions to reduce transactional distance. The observed differences across degree levels are not statistical artefacts but meaningful distinctions rooted in students' academic maturity, motivation, and institutional connectedness. Moving beyond generalised support models toward tiered, context-sensitive strategies will enable ODL institutions to deploy resources efficiently, delivering intensive support to those with the greatest need while sustaining the advanced engagement postgraduate students value.

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