Civil Servants' Perception Towards The Open University of Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the civil servants' perceptions towards the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The study employed a qualitative research approach, guided by distance learning theory, self-perception theory and mathematical theory of communication, involving 81 sampled civil servants. A case study research design with interviews and focused group discussion (FGD) were employed in the study. The collected data were analyzed through thematic and discourse analysis. The findings revealed that there is both positive perception and negative perception from civil servants about OUT. The findings also revealed that civil servants had a good understanding of the term OUT although some of them used OUT and ODL interchangeably. It was further revealed that the number of civil servants enrolled in the ODL programmes offered by OUT was notably lower as a result of limited experiences and insufficient details about the OUT programmes and its mode of delivery. The nature, availability, and formats of information about OUT raised concerns among civil servants. The study recommended that OUT as the ODL flag bearer, should continue packaging, showcasing, sharing, and updating information on ODL in the society. This will improve understanding and eventually the participation of the community, particularly the civil servants, in ODL programmes at OUT.

Keywords: Open University of Tanzania, Open and Distance Learning, Civil Servants, Distance Learning, Open Learning.

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) in 1992 followed the serious shortage of access to higher education experienced in Tanzania in the 1980s, and the need to develop a population capable of improving the economic and social development of the country (Mmari, 2002). The higher education is highly needed in Tanzania to achieve socioeconomic development. For instance, at the global level, it is shown that to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and the subsequent plan of Education for All (EFA), the United Nations Organization (UNO) urged all countries to adopt and use ODL (Aderinoye et al., 2009). Thus, the introduction of ODL in Tanzania and other countries was a response to a call by the UN (Godrick, 2017). OUT, the higher learning institution that supports Open and Distance Learning (ODL), was established in 1992 by a parliamentary act number 17. It is a single-mode institution that offers remote learning for certificate, diploma, and degree programmes at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The OUT Charter went into force in 2007 following reaccreditation in 2006. The university, which is based in Dar es Salaam, has established a total of 27 regional centers across the nation (including Zanzibar).

The university has also established coordination centres and or exam centres particularly in towns near Tanzania's international borders. The decision was after realizing that important markets for its educational programmes are to be found in neighboring African nations as well as in Tanzania itself (Mushi & Maharaj, 2013). ODL is an approach to teaching and learning that offers open and flexible access to learning opportunities to anyone, anywhere, and at any time. ODL is especially useful for potential students who are unable to access learning opportunities where they are provided. For these students, learning opportunities need to be offered where they are located, and provided at a time that best suits them and their circumstances (Simpson, 2018). ODL also provides students with options for entry and exit points, as well as course selection, making it particularly suitable for lifelong learners who want to continue their education while working or doing

domestic work. ODL methods use a wide variety of technologies to bridge the divide that is created by the physical separation of learners from the teachers and the educational institution. These include printed as well as digital learning resources; audio and video conferencing; online learning management systems; mobile devices; as well as a growing list of social media tools. Delivering content via a distance learning approach may be done via satellite, computer, television, video, smartphones, and other sorts of technology (Letseka, 2016). The term "Open University" refers to a type of institution that offer learning through ODL; it allows candidates to enroll at any time, regardless of their age or prior knowledge of the subject matter. Candidates are admitted based on their level of education. An open university has only study centers and institutions; there are no connected colleges. Candidates can select the location of their exams and study sessions (Sharples et al., 2016). Candidates can enroll themselves in the courses of their choice at an open university; those who have stopped their education can finish it upon their convenience. So, it can be argued that an open university offers students a second chance to learning.

The worth of a degree earned through an open university is frequently questioned, but one must keep in mind that degrees from open colleges are only valued when the individual possesses the necessary set of abilities (Musingafi et al., 2015). Worldwide, various studies related to ODL have been conducted to reflect the challenges as well as parameters such as administrative procedures, registration procedures, access to teachers, teaching methods, course materials, clarity of the syllabus, exam protocols, and other things of the sort. The studies found that ODL has been facing various challenges such as trouble of accessing and using ICT facilities, insufficient facilitation approaches, strategies and methodologies as well as inadequate study materials (Afiyan et al., 2021; Godrick, 2017; Messo, 2014; Musingafi et al. 2015). On the other hand, Kabage and Sanga (2022) identified the key conceptions that online instruction through ODL can enhance teaching and learning and that sometimes it can be ineffective compared to traditional distance learning. Tanzania, like many other nations, is under constant pressure to increase

access to higher education despite a perception that the quality of education is diminishing and a lack of viable funding options. Due to its importance, ODL is currently gaining importance as a contemporary educational development and rapidly expanding. Many higher education institutions, apart from OUT, are beginning and continuing to offer some of their programmes through ODL (Allen & Seaman, 2017; do Nascimento & ValdÃŠs-Cotera, 2018). It is argued here that ODL, and thus OUT, increases educational access as well raises socioeconomic status in the country, particularly among people who choose to continue working while pursuing their studies (Mkwizu & Ngaruko, 2020). By providing opportunities to educational access at a significantly affordable cost, OUT complements conventional education. The fact that ODL has gained prominence in Tanzania and other parts of the world as a substitute method to meet unmet demand for education (Godrick, 2017), it is expected that the civil servants should be aware of ODL. Thus, they should be putting efforts to undertake education through OUT while going on with their day-to-day employers' obligations. However, the number of civil servants enrolled in ODL programmes offered by OUT is still not to its expectation (Ghilay, 2017). This study, therefore, is expected to fill the gap by focusing on the perceptions of civil servants about OUT.

Theoretical Frameworks: Distance Learning Theory, Self-Perception Theory and Mathematical Theory of Communication
This study was guided by three theoretical perspectives – distance learning theory, self-perception theory as well as mathematical theory of communication. The three theories were selected because they complement each other towards addressing the purpose of the study under investigation. The theories are discussed in the following sub sections:

Distance Learning Theory
Distance learning is a theory that explains "the openness of education and discusses the possibility of giving people an opportunity to learn wherever they are" (Msoroka, 2019 p. 4). This theoretical perspective is

a subset of educational programmes in which the separation of a teacher and a learner is so significant that it affects the behaviour of learners in different ways. Distance learning requires the usage of special techniques that leads to special conceptualization (Moore, 1991). Distance learning is one of the disciplines that now expand fast and has a significant impact on all education delivery systems (Ghosh, 2012). Due to advancement of internet-based information technologies, particularly the World Wide Web, the new ODL system is expanding quickly. The goal behind ODL is to make the entire educational system flexible by separating students and teachers physically (Jegathesan et al., 2018). This study assumes that, given the nature of civil servants' busy schedule, it may be difficult for them to attend conventional face to face education. Since distance learning intends to give everyone access to education regardless of their location and time, thus, distance learning mode can be the best learning option to the civil servants of Tanzania who do not have time to attend conventional education.

Self-Perception Theory

Self-perception theory was first put forth by Daryl Bem in 1967 as a substitute explanation for cognitive dissonance, wherein specific situations cause an individual to develop attitudes that are a result of their observations of their own conduct (Bem, 1967). The relationship between attitudes and behaviours is frequently seen as a causal chain that moves linearly from attitude to behaviour. According to this view, people become aware of particular attitudes through their own actions. Bem (1972) indicates two foundations of self-perception theory. First, understanding one's own action and the events that led to it can be achieved by looking at one's own ideas, attitudes, and perceptions. Second, a person can behave as an outsider who watches other people's activities and attempts to study them in order to determine their own underlying characteristics if they do not fully comprehend them. A person uses his own behaviour as a source of proof for his thoughts and attitudes. The two foundations are relevant to this study based on the following. One, it is assumed here that the experiences gained by learners involved in OUT's may lead them to develop either positive or negative

attitudes towards OUT. This depends on the treatment they may have received during their studies. Second, others (who are not studying with OUT) may develop a negative or positive attitude towards OUT based on the experience they learn from those undertaking their studies with OUT. It is noted that knowing how students perception using technology to learn can help to improve educational initiatives (Chai et al., 2012). It is obvious that having a positive self-perception is a success factor that has a favourable impact on academic accomplishment. ODL is an example of an education innovations where if one's self-perception is inadequate, then this may result in fear of participation in the ODL. Therefore, civil servants have to be aware of the OUT and its operations in order to participate in its education system.

Mathematical Theory of Communication

Mathematician Claude E. Shannon wrote an article titled "A Mathematical Theory of Communication" that was printed in the Bell System Technical Journal in 1948 (Shannon, 1948). The theory established the maximum quantity of information that could be transmitted in a system with a finite amount of transmission power (Shannon, 2001). Perception and information work best together. Etymologically, the verb informs means "to install a form within," hence perception is thought to include implanting external materials into the perceiver's mind. People tend to focus on salient information. Salience is the strength with which something catches our attention in a given situation (Kenyon et al., 2015). Figure one below summarises this theory.
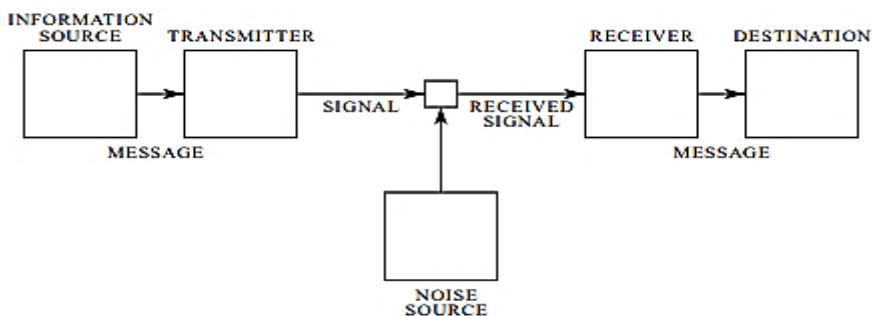

Figure 2: Five Parts of Communication System
Source: Shanon (1948)

The communication system as it is illustrated by Shannon (1948) in figure 1 consists of five parts, including:

First, a source of information that generates a message or series of messages for transmission to the receiving terminal. There are several possible message formats ranging from a series of letters, as in a telegraph or teletype system; one function of time, as in radio or telephone. Numerous combinations also exist, such as television with an accompanying audio channel.

Second, a transmitter that modifies the message in some ways creates a signal appropriate for channel broadcast. Simply converting sound pressure into a corresponding electrical current is all that is required to perform this function in telephony. Other examples of sophisticated processes done to the message to obtain the signal include television, vocoder systems, and frequency modulation. *Third*, the channel is the medium through which the signal is sent from the transmitter to the receiver. Fourth, when reconstructing the message from the signal, the receiver typically conducts the opposite process to that of the transmitter. Fifth, the target of a message is the individual (or object) for whom it is intended.

This theory is relevant to the current study because OUT is required to provide relevant information to society about ODL. The assumption here is that if message about OUT is carried through relevant media and reached the audience perfectly, it is possible that the number of people enrolled with OUT will increase tremendously; their understanding about OUT will be improved. This is because individuals tend to pay attention to things that they believe can somehow suit their needs, interests, and expectations.

Methodology

This study used qualitative research approach influenced by distance learning theory, perception theory and the mathematical theory of communication**.** The study employed qualitative research approach because it gathered and analysed unique and in-depth data that helped in understanding of individual social reality, including their perceptions and attitudes. In this qualitative research, respondents were able to freely disclose their experiences, thoughts and feelings without constraint

(Kothari, 2020). With a case study research design, the researcher allocated the existing limited resources to the most area of needs. The case study design was selected in order to explore and understand individuals or groups attributed to social or human problems in a more detailed manner (Cresswell, 2014). The study was conducted in Mpanda District in Katavi region which is one of the regional centres of the OUT. The study involved 81 sampled civil servants from all the programmes offered by OUT. The study used a purposive sampling technique to select civil servants involved in this study; two (2) students represented each programme that had students in OUT Katavi. The data were collected through interviews, focus group discussion (FGD) and documentary review. The study involved 5 focus group discussions with 10 participants each. This makes 50 participants (civil servants) to be involved in FGD. Other 31 participants were interviewed to complement the data from the FGD. The data were analyzed through thematic and discourse analysis. The researcher first transcribed all the qualitative data in a rich format, arranged them, and coded them accordingly to generate important content. The researcher familiarized, coded, generated the themes, reviewed them, defined and named the themes and wrote up.

Findings
Understanding about OUT
In this section, the researcher discusses the participants' understanding about OUT. The participants provided different opinions that describe their understandings about OUT. Some of the participants had good understanding, thus making "well understanding individuals" theme; others indicated poor understanding, thus making "poor understanding individuals".

   (a) Well Understanding Individuals
In this study, some participants indicated that they had good understanding of the OUT with a positive inclined perception. In this aspect one participant had this to comment:

OUT is an institution where candidates can enroll themselves in the courses of their choice where as those who have stopped their education

can finish it upon their convenience (Respondent 29). In addition, the respondents seemed to have a good understanding about how the OUT operates especially with regard to communication with its customers. Due to the fact that students are studying independently of their instructors and the educational institution, communication is a crucial component of ODL. Many participants reported having easy access to most of the course instructors, and good interactions with them.

One respondent reported that:

> *Most of the course instructors are easily accessible. However, insufficient academic staff at my center especially for science courses has a significant impact on students' academic progress. Sufficient academic staff, therefore, should be posted even in remote areas.* (Respondent 21)

Other participants noted the following:

> *The admission procedures were well facilitated in filling out and returning application forms, there after course registration as well as examination registrations after being facilitated with the course materials in MOODLE account (Respondent 07).*

> *I was motivated to enroll in OUT programmes because of its flexibility in the mode of the study, where most of the time I was studying on my own with the assistance of learning materials from MOODLE platform* (Respondent 30).

The findings in this part therefore revealed that the respondents had a good understanding of OUT as well as how it operates.

(b) Poor Understanding Respondents

On the other hand, other participants indicated poor understanding of the OUT; they indicated some confusion in distinguishing between OUT and ODL. They used the two terms interchangeably. One of the participants commented:

> *Sometimes I cannot comprehend the differences between OUT and ODL because they are almost the same. I do not want to bother myself because at the end of the day I come to the same conclusion* (Respondent 04).

Another participant said:

> *OUT and ODL are two terms that are similar, and even if there are differences, they are very small because, at the end of the day, they describe the whole concept of providing open education* (Respondent 10).

The quotations above suggest the presence of civil servants who confuse between OUT and ODL. Arguably, it is an indication of poorly understanding individuals about OUT.

Perceptions Towards OUT

This study was interested to find the perceptions of civil servants towards OUT. The opinions of the participants were mainly divided into two parts – some had positive while others had negative perceptions.

(a) Positive Perceptions

This study found that some participants had positive perceptions towards the Open University of Tanzania. For instance, during interviews, one participant provided his feelings towards OUT. He commented:

> *I was motivated to enroll OUT programmes because of its flexibility in the mode of the study, where most of the time I was studying on my own with the assistance of learning materials from MOODLE platform* (Respondent 30).

This finding is similar to Sanga (2013) who found that many students in poor nations prefer to complete their degree of studies via distance mode due to its flexibility and ability to earn money while learning.

In the same line, majority of participants felt at ease with the initial admissions processes for ODL programmes. One of the enrolled civil servants who participated in FGD had this to say:

> *The admission procedures were well organized, from the filling out of the application forms and returning them. Thereafter, course registration as well as examination registrations (after learning through the course materials in MOODLE account) are all well-organized* (Respondent 07).

Another participant noted:

> *Today's method is quite straight forward because we may register for courses and exams from any location. There is no need to travel several kilometers to the center for registration because everything is done online. In the past, we occasionally had trouble filling out registration forms because they frequently got misplaced on the way to head office* (Respondent 01).

Some participants were also positive with the current methods of communication in place. For instance, one participant commented:

> *Life has been incredibly simple ever since the development of mobile phones. When circumstances prevent us from speaking with our instructors in person, we simply call them and ask any academic questions we may have* (Respondent 17).

Communication between lecturers and students is one of the psychosocial supports needed by the learners. Kabage (2014) identified various factors contributing towards positive perception among the students, including psychosocial support that they received from their instructors. Thus, it is argued here that the positive perceptions towards OUT indicated by the learners is partly contributed by the available modes of communication between lecturers and learners. Examination processes are important since academic study at the institution results in a certification. In this study, the participants had positive perceptions towards the examination procedures. One of the participants had the following to say:

> *Three years ago, when I enrolled at OUT, I was informed that the OUT exams frequently leaked and anyone can obtain all the papers. However, this year marks my third year, and I have never seen any paper leaking. I'm happy with the exam registration, invigilation, and release of results. The handling of examinations is strictly regulated and secured by security personnel* (Respondent 03).

From the quote above, one may argue that strengthening of the examinations' procedures has made OUT to be an exemplary university.

The examination registration process has also been improved to ensure smooth running of exams in examination centres.

(b) Negative Perceptions

On the other hand, the study found that other participants had negative perceptions about OUT. These participants had some concerns with several issues including but not limited to availability of academic staff and quality of study materials among others. For instance, one participant commented:

> *Although it is acknowledged that our university is found in almost all regions, this does not mean that other locations should be ignored. Insufficient academic staff for some programmes at my center has a significant impact on academic progress* (Respondent 14).

In addition, the participants provided their concerns about the quality and quantity of study materials. Majority of participants agreed that the study materials were of high quality, however, some participants complained that they were not enough. They recommended that course materials be more elaborative and more entertaining for distance learners. One civil servant who participated in FGD had this to say:

> The materials are fine, of course, but there are a few small errors. We are aware that the authors are human beings, not angels, and that errors are common in human beings. The only thing I want to mention is that the materials, whether they be in physical copy or digital form, should be delivered to us as soon as we sign up for classes (Respondent 02).

Another participant complained about the delay of provision of learning materials. He commented that:

> *Delay of study materials causes a lot of hassles and interferes with our examinations' preparations. I suggest that study materials should be in place on time* (Respondent 05).

On the other hand, the findings show that most civil servants complained

about the employed instructional approaches. One participant commented:

> *Many participants find it difficult to utilize email because internet access is still only available in certain parts of the nation. Face-to-face sessions serve as the secondary method of communication due to challenges of internet access* (Respondent 20).

Also, another participant claimed:

> *MOODLE, an established computer-assisted learning platform, is currently used in all OUT centers to provide students with online access to learning materials as well as quizzes, assignments, and discussions. However, this new educational approach is insufficient because majority of students have insufficient computer skills and do not own personal computers for use in the classroom* (Respondent 27).

It is argued here that the complaints above may be attributed to that fact that a substantial portion the Tanzanian community is accustomed to traditional delivery techniques; ODL delivery mode is recently adopted in Tanzania. Thus, there is a need to strengthen internet connectivity and educate people about the benefits of ODL so as to address the issue of negative perceptions.

Challenges that Face Learners at OUT
In this study, participants also had the opportunity to present the challenges that they face while persuing their studies at OUT. The following part presents the findings that reflect the existing challenges facing OUT learners.

Network Resources and Technical Support
The OUT experience is an evidence that it is vital to support the teaching and learning processes with appropriate delivery and support systems in order to manage huge numbers of students who come from a wide range of backgrounds. Most participants in the FGD argued for the reliable network resources. Their concern was about the unavailability of connectivity that sometimes hampered the progress of their studies. For

instance, one participant had this to comment:

> Sometimes we are facing serious network challenge that hinder our progress in the studies. I suggest the connectivity to be improved in order to facilitate the smooth progress of our studies (Respondent 02).

The availability of network resources and technical assistance were only lightly mentioned by the participants. However, it is important to note that institutions that offer top-notch learner support systems through efficient student-teacher contact produce good remote learning courses.

Clarity of Curriculum and Course Objectives

Curriculum design is no exception to any educational institution. Most participants during the FGD reported that the curricula were considered clear. However, there were suggestions that the design of an ODL curriculum needs to be relevant to cross-national cultural experiences. The participants suggested the review of the courses often to reflect the social and economic needs of the country. The needs, experiences, and the context of the people must also be considered in the curriculum design. For instance, one participant argued that:

> *The demands and experiences of variety of people including urban, rural residents, employed, self-employed, unemployed, those whom English is the first or second language, and other subgroups, must be accommodated by the curriculum* (Respondent 25).

Availability and Formats of Information on OUT

Some participants claimed that information about OUT is available in various formats; however, they also claimed that the available information is insufficient to meet the needs of students and those who wish to participate in the study. One participant had this to comment:

> *I am surprised that there are limited advertisements that explain OUT through media such as television, radio and newspapers. Inadequate information on these important media leads to insufficient information related to OUT. I personally got to know OUT through a colleague after he graduated from his master's*

studies (Respondent 11).

However, despite the mentioned challenges, some of the participants in the FGD ranked the overall quality of OUT programmes in Tanzania as high; participants noted that they were very likely to recommend others to join OUT programmes. The findings are similar to Sharples et al (2016) who commented that ODL programmes are flexible for every learner particularly when it comes to the selection of the location of their exams as well as study sessions. One can, therefore, argue that OUT as ODL flag bearer has to work on the raised issues in order to improve its enrolment as well as the quality of education it is delivering.

Discussion of the Findings

This study determined the civil servants' perception towards OUT. The participants reflected both good understanding as well as poor understanding of OUT. The participants who had a good understanding described OUT as institution that candidates can enroll themselves in the courses of their choice and at their own study pace where as those with poor understanding had difficult in differentiating between OUT and ODL. Arguably, this is a reflection of self-perception theory, whose proponents suggest the existence of relationship between attitudes and behaviours (Bem, 1972).

It is clear in this study that one's decision to enroll OUT's programme is affected by one's attitudes. Having an understanding that a person can register with OUT in the courses of their choice and at their own study pace is a reflection of distance learning theory, whose foundation is openness and flexibility to allow individuals to undertake studies wherever they are, whenever they feel to and at their own pace (Msoroka, 2019). This study also found that there are some civil servants who cannot properly distinguish between OUT and ODL due to among other reasons lack of sufficient information about OUT. For the mentioned individuals, the two terms seemed to be used interchangeably. This suggests that some of the civil servants are not aware of the OUT as an ODL institution and therefore they are undecided to enroll with OUT.

The findings are in line with Afiyah et al. (2021) who analyzed the implementation of ODL and found that the entire ODL implementation style received positive participant comments as well as negative comments. Also, the study was interested in understanding the perception of civil servants towards OUT. In this theme, there were two sub themes depending on the responses from the participants. In sub theme one, participants seemed to have positive perception towards OUT having flexible learning schedule and delivery modes which do not conflict learners' other life commitment. This suggests that OUT learners have high degree of autonomy in learning – they choose what, when, and how to learn. This is in connection with Komba (2009), who indicated that many students enrolled in ODL programmes due to its nature of flexibility. However, as observed in the data, other participants were found to have a negative perception towards OUT.

Most of the participants had issues on poor communication and study materials. This suggests that more efforts need to be done by OUT in order to improve its operations from admission to exit point. In this study, many participants reported having easy access to most of the courses – this is key to distance learning. This finding is in line with Zirkin and Sumler (1995) who investigated the relationship between learning and interaction. Their research indicated that there is a relationship between student learning, satisfaction, and the degree of course interaction. It is argued here that such communication channel between instructors and learners is commendable. However, as seen in the data, some participants were not happy with poor communication they face with their instructors. This suggests that OUT instructors are divided into two categories – those who easily communicate with their learners and those who hardly communicate with their learners. It should be noted that teachers play a crucial role in motivating students to learn through interaction. learning opportunities. Thus, for OUT to operate smoothly, communication between the instructors and the learners should be enhanced (Messo, 2014). The findings revealed that the improvement of OUT operations – admission, communication as well as examinations' procedures – have made OUT to be more visible to the

public. However, it is argued here that more efforts need to be committed in showcasing the OUT programmes so that they are well understood by the majority, particularly the civil servants who have qualifications to enroll at OUT. It is clear in this study that students are provided with study materials through online learning management system (MOODLE) to enable interactive learning. The majority of participants agreed that the study materials were useful, though some complained about their sufficiency. The conveniency of study materials at any place any time has necessitated the smooth learning of students at OUT. This is different from Musingafi et al. (2015) and Messo (2014) who discovered that students' withdrawal from remote teacher-training programmes was primarily attributed to a perceived shortage of course materials. This study also highlighted some challenges which faced learners at the Open University of Tanzania. Based on the challenges presented, the findings imply that OUT needs to improve its services. The learners' needs should always be the priority in whatever service provided by the institution. However, despite the challenge that has been raised by the respondents, one can argue that OUT as ODL flag bearer has been putting a lot of efforts to reduce the challenges of students in order to reduce the drop out and improve graduation rates.

Conclusion

The quality of higher education provided through ODL has come under scrutiny, despite the excellent role and rising popularity of this method. Varied people have different perspectives on the benefits of ODL, and those perspectives have influenced opinions about whether and how ODL should be used in the education system in Tanzania and elsewhere. This study investigated the civil servants' perception towards the ODL in Tanzania. This study notes that the way ODL system is perceived by those involved in it may have an impact on its success. Thus, the civil servants' perception about OUT is one of the key factors that might influence the success of ODL. Based on the findings, this study concludes that the chosen employees had mixed feelings; some of them had positive perception while others had a negative perception towards OUT.

Recommendations

The following are recommended in the light of the findings obtained in this study:

(i) This study noted that some faculties did not have members of academic staff in some regional centres. Arguably, this limited provision of correct and relevant information to learners. Thus, it is recommended that there should be representatives of academic staff from each faculty and institute in each regional center.

(ii) The study also recommends that OUT should continue packaging, showcasing, sharing and updating its information into the society. This may improve understanding and eventually participation of the community including civil servants in ODL programmes at OUT.

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