

The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Promoting Women Participation in Higher Education: A case Study of the Open University of Tanzania

Mwankusye, R. M.¹ & Ally, H. N.²

Open University of Tanzania

mpeli.mwankusye@out.ac.tz

Abstract

Women education has remained a global discourse. This paper aimed at assessing the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in promoting women participation in higher education a case study of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). Specifically, the study aimed at addressing the following objectives: assessing the trend of female students' enrolments and graduation at OUT; determining reasons or pulling factors for women involvement in studying at OUT and examining challenges facing women participation in higher education at OUT. The study employed a mixed research approach where by qualitative and quantitative approaches were used, with quantitative approach being dominant. The study also used descriptive survey design, whereby a random sample of 100 female students was involved. Data for this study were collected through documentary and questionnaires techniques. Furthermore, simple descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze quantitative data, whereas qualitative data were subjected to content analysis. The research findings revealed that male students' enrolment and graduation exceed that of female students. However, the trend of female students' enrolment and graduation in postgraduate, undergraduate and non-degree programmes have kept increasing overtime. Moreover, the study disclosed a number of pulling factors for women's involvement in studying at OUT. These pulling factors were created by pushing factors from conventional educational. The challenges that female students face included among others, family and social responsibilities, technologies, inadequate support from the employer and family members as well as financial constrains.

Key words: Open Distance Education (ODL). Promoting women education, Higher education.

Introduction

The right to education has remained a global concern since the Declaration of the United Nations on Human Rights in 1948. Despite this noble declaration and other local and international educational commitments towards provision of education to all, women and girls have continued to be deprived and denied of this right. Most of the available literature reveals how acute is the problem when it comes to women accessing higher learning (University education) (Lumumba, 2006; Mkuchu, 2012). For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, women's engagement in education has tended to be pathologized. African women education is inherently impeded by cultural obstacles, which have continued to perpetuate gender inequality when it comes to accessing education, particularly the higher one. Lumumba (2006) pessimistically notes that, gender dissimilarity in access to education will have a negative impact on Southern Saharan Africa. The gross enrolment at the tertiary level for women is significantly lower than that of males. For example, in Ghana, the percentage of female enrolment in higher education is 6.7%, versus 10.8% for males; in Kenya, 3.3 % versus 4.7%; in Nigeria, 8.5% versus 12%; in Tanzania, 1.9% versus 2.3%; in Uganda, 3.7% versus 4.7% and in Zambia, 1.3% versus 3.3% (, 2010). Revealing how serious the problem is in Tanzanian context, Mbwette (2013) citing Msola (2010) reveals that female access to university education has reached 1.3% of the university age cohort. This is minimal compared to access of higher education in developed world where almost 60% of their people join university education (Mbwette, 2013). Apart from cultural obstacles, which may mediate women access to education, and thus their empowerment, Wakahiu and Kangethe (2014) condemn rigid policies and cut-off points for university entry, coupled with the high cost of higher education, as factors, which lead to low enrolment of women in tertiary institutions. This low enrolment of women in higher education denotes that women continue to be less empowered thus

lack credentials for high-profile managerial jobs. These obstacles to women's access to higher education are more pronounced in conventional academe, which are said to be less flexible (Mbwette, 2013; Mkuchu, 2012).

However, there is enough research and literature evidence on the knack of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in giving more access to higher education to women (Mwankusye, 2014; Wakahiu and Kangethe, 2014; Mbwette, 2013; Mkuchu, 2012; Vidanapathirana, 2011 and Kwapong, 2008). Almost all these sources credit positively the usefulness of ODL in giving more access to university education for both rural and urban women. While sharing experience of the Open University of Sir-Lanka Vidanapathirana (2011) asserts that in Sir-Lanka, the ODL model has enhanced enrolment of thousands of women. Awesomely, with such potential of ODL, Wakahiu and Kangethe (2014) propose for open and distance learning to be a feasible strategy to provide access to higher education for women in Africa. Tanzania, like other developing countries, adopted open and distance education, which led to establishment of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) by the parliamentary act 1992. The key objective of establishing OUT as an ODL institution remained that of providing access to affordable quality education to all through ODL. With this vision, OUT as an ODL institution has managed to transcend barriers, which over time, have been hampering women's access to university education. These include high cost, long-distance, family and job responsibilities and inflexibility in learning (Mwankusye, 2014; Mbwette, 2013; Mkuchu, 2012; Kitula, 2012 & OUT, 2008). Kitula (2012) considers the Tanzania government's decision to establish OUT as an affirmative action taken for women who could not leave their families, especially children, to get enrolled through ODL to study while at home and work places which otherwise would have been impossible conventional universities. Moreover, Mwankusye (2014) concludes that ODL teacher education programmes offered by OUT are effective as they have continued to provide equal opportunity for professional upgrading of women as

it is for men. This is a rationale behind launching of the Ordinary Diploma in Primary Teacher Education (ODPTE) programme. This aimed at opening up higher education opportunities for more women hence addressing gender imbalance in higher education (OUT, 2008).

The focus of the present study was to assess the extent to which the OUT as an ODL institution has continued to promote or widen access to higher education amongst women in Tanzania and beyond its borders. To achieve this, the study addressed the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the trend of female students' enrolments and graduation at OUT
2. To determine reasons/pulling factors for women's involvement in studying at OUT
3. To examine challenges limiting women participation in higher education at OUT

Review of Related Literature

Provision and Access to Higher Education

The role of higher education in bringing up social development needs not be overemphasized. Overtime, studies have unveiled the importance of education at large and higher education in particular as the potential instrument for all aspects of development (Mbwette, 2013; UNESCO, 2009; Morley *et al.* 2007). For instance, within the African context, Morley *et al.* (2007) opined that African higher education plays an indispensable role in sustainable development and poverty reduction. This view is further crystallised by Mbwette (2013) who asserts that evidence from research reveals that university education fulfils its role through empowering domestic constituencies, building institutions and nurturing favourable regulatory frameworks and government structures. It is critical to individual's development as well as socio-economic development of the country. Tertiary education is a key factor in the nation 's effort to develop a highly skilled workforce for competing in the global economy (UNESCO, 2009). Basing on the above stated individual and

national importance associated with higher education, there has been a global move towards provision of such education. Expansion in higher education has been receiving global attention for decades (Morley *et al.* 2007). This has led to both national and international commitments towards widening citizens' participation in higher education. However, with all the above individual and social gains associated with higher education, what has remained the global concern is all about how many and who exactly gain access to higher education.

There is adequate evidence on scarcity of access opportunities for higher education in less developed countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Wakahiu & Kangethe, 2014; Mbwette, 2013 & Eshete, 2001). Revealing how acute the problem is, Mbwette (2013) reveals that in most Sub-Saharan African countries except South Africa; access to university has reached 1.3% of the university age cohort. This is unlike higher level of access to higher education in developed world where almost 60% of their people join university education (Mbwette, 2013). Moreover, according to Morley *et al.* (2007) those who have access to higher education in African countries represented less than three per cent of the eligible age group. This is attributed to factors such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, religion, regional origin, gender and physical or other disability. On top of that, Eshete (2001) citing (Karega, 2001; Masanja, *et al.* 2001) further admits that the levels of admissions and enrolment of females at the tertiary levels in African countries vary from university to university but are, on the whole, considerably lower than those of males. This was clearly revealed by data collected by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) from the selected universities in Africa which show that women's undergraduate and graduate levels enrolment in most universities are significantly lower than those of men. The fundamental inequalities in women's access to and participation in higher education are pernicious features in most African countries. These inequalities are characterized by low enrolment, high attrition, poor performance, and under

representation in academic staff of women compared to men. All the above observations regarding existence of inequalities in provision of higher education is contrary to what, UNESCO (2009) calls for the access and inclusion whereby every individual is given an equal chance to partake in tertiary education and its benefits irrespective of income or other social characteristics including gender. However, apart from the fact that access to higher education in African Universities needs to develop and implement deliberate policies to address social and gender imbalances at all levels within their institutions.

The Role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Provision of Higher Education

A quite number of Literature show unequivocally the potential associated with the use of ODL in promoting access to tertiary education (Wakahiu & Kangethe, 2014; Mbwette, 2013; Mkuchu, 20012; Vidanapathirana, 2011 & Kwapong, 2008). Distance education is an important academic tool that provides education for all individuals by utilizing technologies and opportunities for open and distance education without discrimination by country, region, class, age or gender. In the same context, Vidanapathirana (2011) while sharing experience of the Open University of Sir-Lanka asserts that in Sir-Lanka, the ODL model has enhanced enrolment of thousands of women. In this regard, open learning and distance education play an important role in widening the room of providing necessary training to women thus facilitating their professional field choices, selection and employment. In this sense, demographic characteristics and programmes (graduate or continuing) of women that benefit from Anadolu University Open and Distance Learning System is going to be considered a subject matter and their occupational choices will be evaluated. After that evaluation, the importance of open and distance learning as a clearing agent of women 's holdbacks in education will be explained. With such potential of ODL, Wakahiu and Kangethe (2014) propose for open and distance learning to be a feasible strategy to provide access to higher education for women in Africa.

The Role of OUT in Widening Access to Higher Education

Establishment of OUT as an ODL institution was a result of various government's deliberate plans and decisions to widen access to higher education in Tanzania. Among these, according to Muganda *et al.* (2012) involved accepting recommendations of a presidential commission headed by Jackson Makweta in 1984 which among many recommendations, recommended for the establishment of OUT. Later in 1992, the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) as a full-fledged open and distance learning university was established by the parliamentary act 1992 with the intention of reaching out to more Tanzanians who could not access education in the conventional, residential institutions of higher learning. It was also envisaged that more women would be able to participate in the OUT programmes (Muganda, *et al.* 2012). The key objective of establishing OUT as an ODL institution was to provide access to affordable quality education to all who need education. This affirmative action taken by government has resulted into continuous increase of female students' enrolment both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels since 1994 (Kitula, 2012). OUT as an ODL institution has managed to transcend barriers, which over time have been hampering women from accessing university education. Among these setbacks, include high cost, long-distance, family and job responsibilities, inflexibility in learning for women (Mbwette, 2013; Mkuchu, 2012; Kitula, 2012). Kitula (2012) considers the government decision as an affirmative action taken for women who otherwise could not leave their families especially children. This has been a reason for them to get enrolled through ODL to study while at home and at work places which otherwise, would be impossible for them to study in conventional universities. Women constitute a substantial proportion of those marginalized by the conventional systems of learning at the university level (Njaya, 2015). Given this fact, governments are looking forward to using ODL as means to provide higher education at a large scale as conventional educational methods are becoming expensive. The rising cost of conventional education marginalizes

women because their productive and reproductive roles limit them from campus-based learning. As an institution, Open University is a powerful instrument for equalizing higher education opportunities and levelling educational imbalances.

Challenges Facing Female Students in ODL Context

There is enough evidence from literature on the fact that female students unlike their male counterpart face numerous challenges, which impede their pursuit of studies in ODL context (Maxwell *et al.*, 2015; Vaskovics, 2015; Ohene & Essuman, 2014; Magoma, 2012; Israel, 2010). For instance, Vaskovics, (2015) asserts that distance education is not without its obstacles. For instance, socially female students have multiple social roles. They are family mothers, wives and health care givers. All these responsibilities crash with their studying schedules. Israel (2010) reveals that married women students experienced clashes between studies and household responsibilities, and had less time for independent study. Such responsibilities adversely affected their academic performance. Magoma (2012) sharing the experience of the University of Nairobi admits that women's enrolment in distance learning education programmes is challenged by the fact that women are having many other added responsibilities, particularly social related responsibilities. Moreover, Vaskovics (2015) observes that, the fact that women are to do all houseworks and child rearing, consequently, this makes them lack free time for studies thus, they end being very tired and academically less achieving. Constraints particularly lack of financial sources to support women's pursuit of higher education is another factor that seem to blanket women's pursuit of higher education including the ODL context. Various studies have revealed the existence of this factor in the ODL institutions (Mkuchu, 2008; Magoma, 2012; Ohene & Essuman, 2014; Wakahiu & Kangethe, 2014; Maxwell *et al.*, 2015). All these sources reveal the fact that lack of sufficient money to cover educational charges is a barrier to women's success in ODL. This might also be attributed to patriarchal system of economic ownership where women are confined to depend on their husbands for their education.

From Zimbabwe, Maxwell *et al.* (2015) observed that most ODL students of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZUO) were adults who were self-financing their studies through their own initiatives. However, this seemed to be not enough because students had other commitments, especially their duty to pay school fees for their children and meeting other home obligations. This in turn, resulted into several students postponing semesters and examinations at least once.

Magoma (2012) also shows other challenges, for women's pursuit of higher education in an ODL context. These include lack of learner support services, lack of proper knowledge in ICT, lack of ICT facilities in the regional centres and lack of enough study materials. Mkuchu (2008) in his mini study, assessed opportunities and challenges associated with training licensed secondary school teachers in education degree programmes using ODL by OUT. It was found out that; hard working conditions in most of the schools they were posted, inadequate support from their colleagues in their working stations, led them to have heavy workloads and thus failed to manage their studies at OUT. By experience, this had great effect to female licensed teachers as compared to males.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed research approach; whereby qualitative and quantitative approaches were integrated, with quantitative approach being dominant. Qualitative approach was employed purposely to listen to women's voices regarding the role of ODL in promoting their access to tertiary education, with specific case of OUT. The study also used descriptive survey design, whereby a sample of 120 females OUT continuing students from Iringa Regional centre were involved. The sample was realised through simple random sampling technique. Moreover, data were collected through documentary search and questionnaire techniques, where a five (5) levelled likert scale was used. Furthermore, in making sense of the collected data, simple descriptive statistical analysis was used to

analyse quantitative data. The analysed data were presented in frequencies and percentages in form of charts and tables. However, qualitative data were subjected to content analysis.

Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

The Trend of Female Students Enrolments and Graduation at OUT

Firstly, the study sought to assess female students' enrolment and graduation rate at OUT as an ODL institution. To achieve this study objective, data related to it were collected using documentary search, whereby researchers reviewed OUT Fact & Figures (2014/2015) plus Iringa region centres reports indicating enrolment and graduation rates of female students of Iringa regional centre for the past 10 academic years (2006/2007-2016/2017).

Trend of Female Students Enrolments

With regard to female students' enrolment, the study sought to look at the enrolment of undergraduate students in the mentioned documents. The findings obtained from the named sources were as summarized in Table 4.1. The findings obviously revealed that enrolments of male students have kept on dominating that of females students for the past nine years, except for the 2016/2016 academic year where female students' enrolment towered above that of male students.

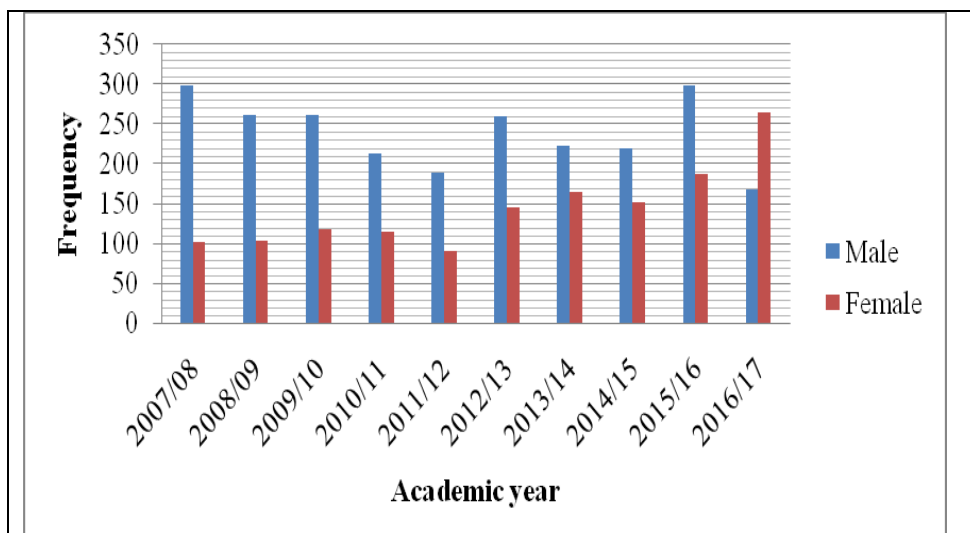


Figure 1: Iringa Undergraduate and Non degree enrollment by gender 2007/2008-2016/2017

Source: OUT Fact and Figures 2015/2016

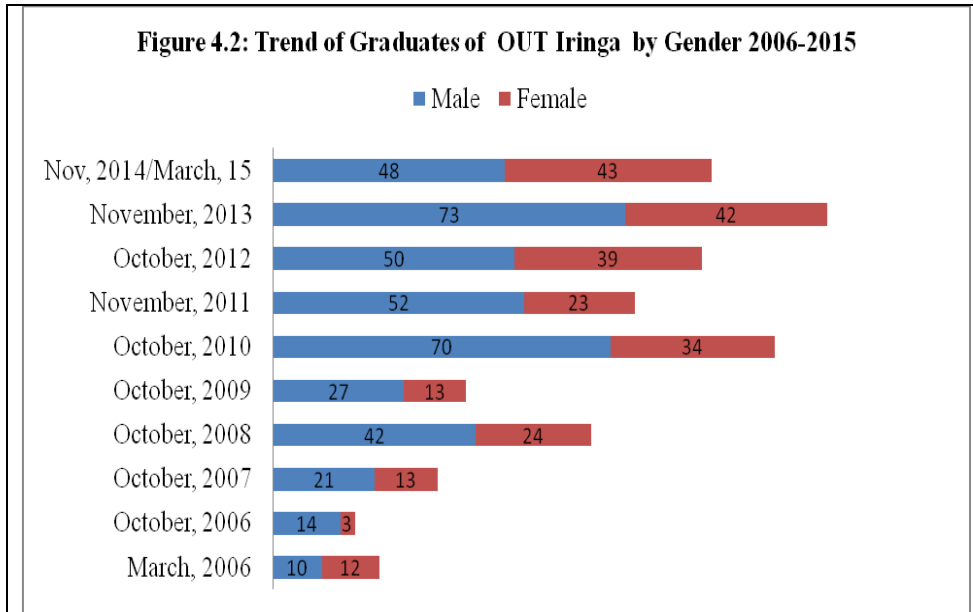
The findings in Figure 1 where there is gender disparity in students' enrolment by males dominating women at Iringa OUT regional centre, mirror the university's wide gender disparity in enrolment where males 'enrolment overshadows that of female students. This is evidently indicated by marked statistical differences between the two genders as per (OUT, 2015). The proportion of female students in annual total enrolment has always been below 31. Just like in the undergraduate programmes, female students' enrolment into non-degree programmes has never gone beyond 40% (OUT, 2015). These findings further tally with observations made by other researchers and literatures, which revealed gender disparity in admission and enrolment, is higher education (Eshete, 2001; Kwapong, 2008; Kitula, 2012; Mbwete, 2013). For instance, data collected by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) from selected universities in Africa, revealed that the level of admissions and enrolment of females in undergraduate and graduate programmes in African is considerably lower than those of males (Eshete, 2001). Apart from the fact that female enrolment is constantly below that of their male

counterparts, the above findings as shown in Figure 4.1 bring hope of reaching gender parity in the region as the trend of females' enrolment has with time, kept mounting. For instance, this was evidently marked by the fact that enrolment of female students has overtaken that of males by 264 (61.0%) to 167 (39.0%) respectively in 2016/2017. The truth that there is an encouraging improvement in female students' enrolment is further supported by OUT Facts and Figures (2015). OUT fact and figure reveal that percentage of female students enrolled has maintained an upward trend from 8.3% in 1994 to 24.0% in 2000 although the trend has kept fluctuating from 20.5% in 2001 to 60.7% in 2014/15.

Generally, with this promising trend of attaining gender parity in students' enrolment at OUT, it can be argued that OUT being an ODL institution is strategically positioned to achieve this noble goal. This further substantiates the widely supported fact that ODL widens access to higher education amongst women by its ability to transcend obstacles to women's access to higher education as it is in conventional institutions of higher education (Mbwette, 2013; Mkuchu, 20012; Mwankusye, 2014; Kwapong, 2008). Proving this true, Kwapong (2008) further admits that theories of distance education also confirm that open and distance learning is no doubt promising as it creates access to education for women and meeting their learning style.

Trend of Female Students Graduation

Students' enrolment and admission into higher learning institution is one thing, and successful completion of their studies (graduation) is another thing. This study, also sought to find out the trend of female students' graduation. Findings from documentary reviews, where OUT Fact and Figures (2014/2015) were reviewed, are presented in Figure 4.2.



The above findings with regard to female graduation rate reveal that for the past 10 years at Iringa regional centre, (from 2006-2015) male students dominated their female counterparts by their en masse graduating. These findings are in line with the university wide trend where males graduate are in massive numbers compared to female students for postgraduate, undergraduate and Non-degree programmes. For instance, according to OUT Facts & Figures, the cumulative number of graduates from 1999 to March 2015 was 22,289 whereby 8,875 (39.8%) were females. Among 22,289 graduates, 9,211 students graduated in non-degree programmes out of whom 4,142 (45.0%) were females. 6,412 students graduated in undergraduate programmes out of whom 3,821 (37.3%) were females and 2,845 were graduates for postgraduate programmes whereby 912 (32.1%) were females (OUT, 2015, pp. 56). From the above findings, it can be argued that apart from OUT as an ODL praised for widening the chance for higher education to disadvantaged groups including women as suggested by Komba (2009), low rate of women graduate creates haziness on the survival of the women in the ODL systems. Women by their nature, have multiple roles, such as being mothers, wives and employees. Furthermore, it is obvious that low graduation

rate might be attributed to by the reason that few women students are enrolled in OUT programmes compared to male students. However, the findings in Figure 4.2 above further expose the improved trend of females' students' enrolments and graduation in the past three years' graduations: 2012, 2013, and 2014/2015. This might have been credited by the fact that there has been a promising improvement in trend of females' students' enrolments for the past years as seen earlier in sub-section 4.1.1 above (Figure 4.1).

The Pulling Factors for Women's Involvement in Studying at OUT

The observed increasing trend in women's enrolment and graduation at Iringa regional centre might have reasons. The second research objective of this study sought to determine the reasons (pulling factors) for women opting to study at OUT as an ODL institution. Data related to this objective were collected using 120 questionnaires administered to Iringa regional centre female students (direct administration and through phone calls). 100 questionnaires (83.3%) were returned and processed for data analysis. In the provided questionnaires, respondents were to indicate their level of agreement in a five (5) level likert scale to a number of statements as reasons for them to join OUT as an ODL institution. Table 4.2 below summarises the findings on the reasons for female students join OUT as an ODL institution.

The findings as presented in Table 4.1 reveal that most students agreed to six (6) out of nine (9) statements as reasons for their decision to join OUT as an ODL institution. These reasons are; OUT as an ODL offers cost effective/affordable education. It enhances ability to study while working. It provides the room to study while taking care of family matters. There is flexibility in learning (learner's freedom to choose what to study, when and at what pace). It provides the room for learning. It reaches where students are (i.e. it reaches people who are geographically dispersed). Lastly, it opens the room for continuous professional development. All the above named reasons got a big support of more than 80 individuals which is

equivalent to 80.0%. This implies that it is an obvious fact that the above named factors are the reasons, which motivated women to join OUT as an ODL institution.

Table 4.2: The reasons for female students join OUT as an ODL institution (N=100)

SN	Reasons for Female students joining OUT	Agreed (Freq & %)	Not sure (Freq & %)	Disagreed (Freq & %)	Total (Freq & %)
i.	Cost effectiveness of education (affordability)	86 86.0%	-	14 14.0%	100 100.0%
ii.	Ability to study while working	100 100.0%	-	-	100 100.0%
iii.	Room to study while taking care of family matters	95 94.0%	1 1.0%	5 5.0%	100 100.0%
iv.	Flexibility in admission criteria	14 14.0%	18 18.0%	68 68.0%	100 100.0%
v.	Flexibility in learning (Learner's freedom to choose what to study, when and at what pace)	100 100.0%	-	-	100 100.0%
vi.	Learning opportunity reaches where you are. (Reaches people who are geographically dispersed).	95 95.0%	-	5 5.0%	100 100.0%
vii.	Opens room for continuous professional development.	100 100.0%	-	-	100 100.0%
viii.	The use of Self Instructional Materials (SIM)	5 5.0%	5 5.0%	90 90.0%	100 100.0%
ix.	Great support from OUT staff	-	5 5.0%	95 95.0%	100 100.0%

Source: Field data

The majority support on the named factors as reasons for women opting for OUT as an ODL mode tallies with what other sources which positively credit the ODL mode as being; flexible, brings

educational opportunities at doorsteps, and that it is affordable (Vaskovics, 2015; Messo, 2014; Kwapong, 2008; Komba, 2007; Evans, 1994). For instance, Vaskovics (2015) accredits distance education to have ability to reach anyone anywhere. It is thus widely accepted as a method of educating large populations of people in developing countries particularly women who are now able to reap the benefits of distance education which has managed to overcome many of the barriers, which are otherwise faced by such learners through conventional methods of learning. Vaskovics (2015) further shows that women's higher education in Asia became possible through employment of distance learning because women were not to leave their multiple homes, and work or attend classes. By its nature of overcoming time and space and meeting the learning styles of women who play triple roles in society, open and distance learning is a sure way of making education accessible to women no matter their location, status and situation (Kwapong, 2008). Evans (1994) citing Trivedi (1989) asserts that, distance education is of assistance to women. This is because, with its outreach to their homes, it enables them to learn at their own pace and it gives them a second chance to step into the main systems of education, including higher education, thus enabling them at the same time to earn and learn as well as to fulfil family responsibilities.

Moreover, the findings in Table 4.1 above indicate that respondents (women) disagreed on some factors as reasons for the decision to join OUT as an ODL institution. These factors are; flexibility in admission criteria, the use of Self Instructional Materials (SIM) and great support from OUT staff. The rate of disagreement was as follows; 68 (68.0%), 90 (90.0%) and 95 (95.5%) respectively despite the fact that there is literature evidence that the above named factors play a significant role in attracting potential students to join ODL institutions (Mwankusye, 2014; Messo, 2014). For instance, both Mwankusye and Messo (2014) found that OUT students credited positively on the facts that quality study materials, the help from OUT staff and flexible admission criteria were the reasons for their decision to join OUT.

The above findings may have an implication that the respondents are probably less informed of the influence of the named factors. With regard to flexibility in admission criteria, the above findings may have been influenced by the fact that admission at OUT like other higher learning institutions in Tanzania, is now controlled by the centralized system thus, impinging the flexibility nature in admission criteria of OUT as an ODL institution. This is contrary to what Messo (2014) found that 92.2% of participants (OUT students) were comfortable with the flexibility of OUT admission and registration procedures of getting into ODL programmes.

The Challenging Factors Limiting Women's Participation in Higher Education at OUT

Apart from the fact that there are several factors shown to be the reasons for most women joining OUT as an ODL institution as discussed in section 4.2, also, according to Vaskovics (2015) distance education is not without its obstacles. Therefore, the third research objective of this study sought to examine factors limiting women's participation in higher education at OUT as an ODL institution. Specifically, through questionnaire, respondents were firstly asked whether there were challenges affecting their smooth pursuit of higher education at OUT. Responses from 100 respondents indicated that majority 78 (78.0%) individuals agreed by indicating "YES" that there were challenges while 16 (16.0%) disagreed by indicating "NO". The remaining 6 individuals (6.0%) did not respond. The findings were as presented in Figure 4.3 below. The findings denote that most of the respondents (female students) studying at OUT as an ODL institution were aware of the challenges that were hampering their smooth participation in higher learning education at OUT. This signifies that apart from the fact that ODL mode is credited positively for widening the access to higher education amongst people who are less represented in higher education including women; still there are bottlenecks that pull them back.

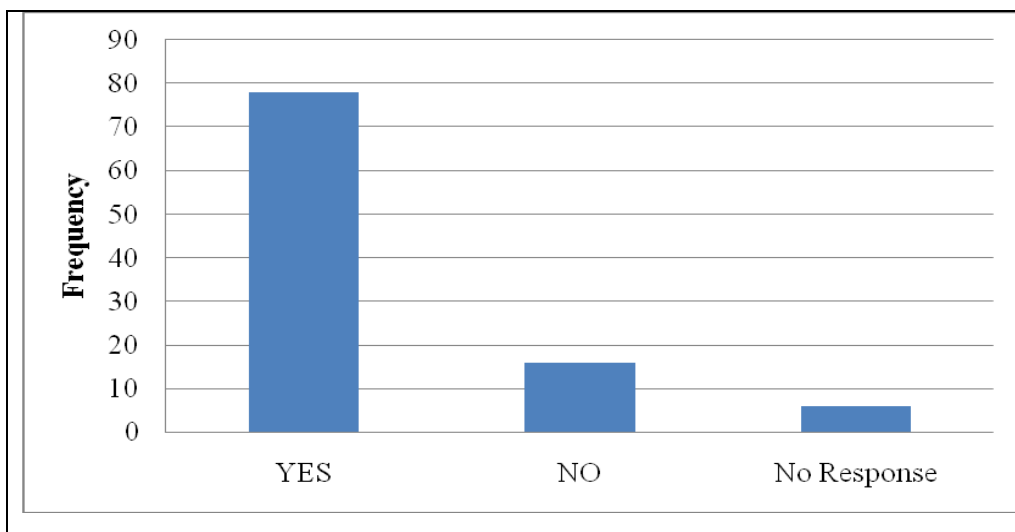


Figure 3: Responses on whether or not there are challenges facing women in their pursuit of their studies at OUT.

Source: Field data

Secondly, respondents were to go a step further by rating their level of agreement to a number of predetermined statements as challenges limiting their participations in higher education at OUT. The findings were as presented in Table 4.3:

Table 4.3: Challenges limiting Female students' participations in higher education (at OUT as an ODL institution (N=100))

SN	Reasons for Female students joining OUT	Agreed (Freq & %)	Not sure (Freq & %)	Disagreed (Freq & %)	Total (Freq & %)
i.	Lack of study skills	34 (34.0%)	4 (4.0%)	62 (62.0%)	100 (100.0%)
ii.	Overwhelmed with family and social responsibility	82 (82.0%)	5 (5.0%)	13 (13.0%)	100 (100.0%)
iii.	Inadequate finance to support your studies	82 (82.0%)	5 (5.0%)	13 (13.0%)	100 (100.0%)
iv.	Lack of support from the	32	4	64	100

	family and friends	(32.0%)	(4.0%)	(64.0%)	(100.0%)
v.	Lack of time to attend F2F and exams	50 (50.0%)	-	50 (50.0%)	100 (100.0%)
vi.	Lack of experience or training on Instructional/learning technologies	69 (69.0%)	-	31 (31.0%)	100 (100.0%)
vii.	Unfavourable home learning environment	41 (41.0%)	-	59 (59.0%)	100 (100.0%)
viii.	Lack of support from employers	59 (59.0%)	-	41 (41.0%)	100 (100.0%)
ix.	Lack support from OUT staff	14 (14.0%)	-	86 (86.0%)	100 (100.0%)
x.	Shortage of study materials	45 (45.0%)	5 (5.0%)	50 (50.0%)	100 (100.0%)
xi.	Long distance from home to the centre	55 (55.0%)	-	45 (45.0%)	100 (100.0%)
xii.	Ineffective and insufficient feedback from the University	23 (23.0%)	9 (9.0%)	68 (68.0%)	100 (100.0%)
xiii.	Being less informed of ODL	36 (36.0%)	9 (9.0%)	55 (55.0%)	100 (100.0%)

Source: Field data November (2016)

Responses as presented in Table 4.2 reveal mixed feelings regarding challenges facing women pursuing their studies at OUT. From the findings, it is transparent that women pursuit of higher education at OUT is impeded by factors like: being overwhelmed with family and social responsibility, inadequate finance to support their studies, lack of experience or training on instructional/learning technologies and long distance from home to the regional centre.

Overwhelmed with Family and Social Responsibility

There were 82 respondents equivalent to 82.0% who agreed that family and other social responsibilities impaired their smooth pursuit of their studies at OUT. This observation is related to the fact that in African context, women shoulder a number of family and social

responsibilities, among which include: taking care of children, husbands and nursing the sick. The fact that women's pursuit of higher education at OUT is crippled by being overwhelmed with family and social responsibilities aligns with the findings of similar studies such as (Magoma, 2012; Dodo, 2013 also Ohene and Essuman, 2014). In Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ghana, family and other social responsibilities overwhelm women. Dodo (2013), found that most of the ODL students were struggling to balance their college work, family and work expectations. Ohene and Essuman (2014) also found that many distance learners were within the working class bracket and were married adult learners taking care of the family. However, it should be realized that ODL is an affirmative action taken for women who could not leave their families especially children to enrol through to ODL for studies. This, if not well managed, turns to be an obstruction for women's smooth pursuit of their higher education in ODL context. From Tanzanian context, Israel (2010) in a study on analysis of factors influencing women's academic performance in distance Education taking OUT as a case study, found that the majority of female students at OUT were adults and married and had children. Married women experienced clashes between studies and household responsibilities, and had less time for independent study.

Inadequate finance to support your studies

From the findings, 82 (82.0%) respondents agreed that inadequate financial support was one of the challenges which impeded women's pursuit for higher education at OUT. Similarly, Ohene and Essuman (2014) found that in Ghana, lack of adequate money to cover the cost for the programme was a financial barrier to education. In Kenya, Magoma (2012) found that financial constraints were among many challenges that faced women enrolment at the University of Nairobi regarding distance education programmes. From Zimbabwe, Maxwell *et al.* (2015) also found that most of the ZUO students were adults who were self-financing their studies but also meeting other obligations in their homes thus automatically making finance become a hurdle. Experience shows that several adults, including women

postponed semesters and examinations at least once due to other commitments, especially their having to pay their children's school fees. From these findings and literature support, it can be argued that inadequate financial support to women in their pursuit of higher education might remain a challenge if no serious and positive measures are taken, including giving them accessibility to loans and other forms of sponsorship schemes.

Lack of experience or training on Instructional/learning technologies

Instructions and learning in ODL context rely on the use of diverse media and technologies. On whether or not lack of experience on the use of instructional and learning technologies was a challenge for females' students' access and continuity to higher education in ODL context, the findings in Table 4.2 above indicate that 69 respondents (69.0%) agreed with the assertion, while the rest 31 (31.0%) respondents disagreed. This implies that women do not access instructional and learning media and technologies, which in turn hampers their effective learning in the ODL context, a form of delivery, which is completely reliant on such technologies. These findings are in line with those from Magoma's study in Kenya, who also found that lack of proper knowledge in ICT, lack of ICT facilities in the regional centres and lack of enough study materials were among the factors that ruined women's education prospects at Nairobi University. Similarly, Maxwell *et al.* (2015) put forward the problems related to the access and use of ICT that constrain women's access to education in the ODL context.

Lack of support from employers

With regard to whether or not lack of support from employers was one of the challenges facing OUT female students in their pursuit of studies at OUT, the findings as shown in Table 4.2 above reveal that 59 (59.0%) of the female students agreed with the claim, while the rest 41 (41.0%) disagreed. This further connotes that women do not get full support from their employees to study at OUT as an ODL

institutions. This might have been caused by the fact that employers were less informed of the ODL paradigm. These findings are contrary to those of the study by Maxwell *et al.* (2015) on challenges for ODL experienced by students from ZUO, whereby 60% of respondents declared that lack of employers' support was not a challenge in their pursuit of studies. Moreover, findings in Table 4.2 above clearly show mixed feelings regarding the influence of the following factors as challenges to women acquisition of higher education at OUT. These include, lack of time to attend face to face (F2F) and exams. This was evidently shown by having equal number of those who agreed and disagreed with the assertion by 50 (50.0%) and 50 (50.0%) respectively. This has an implication that there are those who see it as a problem to some extent and those who do not. Moreover, the findings which show that the problem exists are in line with the findings from other studies (Mkuchu, 2008 & Maxwell *et al.*, 2015). Where it was found that there are obstacles associated with students' lack of time and long distance to travel from home to the regional centre for face to face and examinations sessions. Responses as indicted in Table 4.2 reveal that respondents were pessimistic on these assertions, as they disagreed with such factors as; ineffective and insufficient feedback from the University, lack of support from the family and friends, lack of study skills and being less informed of ODL. This implies that to Iringa, OUT female students, these are not that much a problem. These findings are contrary to the findings by previous studies (Maxwell *et al.*, 2015 and Magoma, 2012) in Kenya and Zimbabwe respectively.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the light of the findings as presented and discussed in section 4 above the following conclusion can be drawn:

Firstly, with regard to the trend of female students' enrolments and graduation, from the findings it can be concluded that still there is gender disparity in students' enrolment and graduation rates by males dominating women at Iringa OUT regional centre. This is a

reflection of the university wide gender disparity in both enrolment and graduation. However, it should be noted that, there is escalating trend of females' enrolment and thus graduation over time, therefore bringing hope of reaching gender parity in the region and at the university level.

Secondly, it can be concluded that women as beneficiaries of higher education being offered by OUT through ODL are pulled by several factors to study at OUT. These include: cost effective/affordable education offered by OUT; ability to study while working, the fact that OUT provides room to study while taking care of family, flexibility in learning; OUT having ability to serve people who are geographically dispersed; all these have opened a room for continuous professional development.

Last but not least, it can also be concluded that, apart from the fact that OUT as an ODL institution is credited positively of being able to unlock doors for women to access higher education, still, the woman's journey to higher education in ODL context is beset by several factors. These factors include being overwhelmed with family and social responsibilities, inadequate finance to support her studies, lack of experience or training on instructional/learning technologies and long distance from home to regional centre, to mention few.

From the findings and conclusion made, this study recommends the following:

The fact that ODL mode is proved to be of advantage to women, therefore, there is a need for Iringa regional centre and OUT at large to continue taking affirmative action to promote its programmes to potential women students. There is a need for OUT to do analysis on opportunities associated with factors or reasons for women joining OUT. OUT should also analyses threats associated with challenges facing women access and pursuit of their studies at OUT as an ODL institution.

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