

## Distance Learning in Prisons: Perspectives on Expanding Educational Access to Marginalised Inmate-Prisoners

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explored the issue of relevance of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in expanding educational access to prisoners. In so doing, one key research question “how relevant is the ODL system in expanding educational access to Tanzanian prisoners?” was addressed. Through a discourse analysis approach, data were collected from the analysis of relevant documents. Documents such as policies, theses, journal articles, relevant websites, books, reports, and newspapers which were thought to be relevant to the study were analysed. With the guidance of the checklist, all relevant information which could assist in addressing the research question was recorded and then, the raw data were properly documented to form transcripts. The raw data from the transcripts were then thematically analysed to form themes and sub-themes which then became the headings/parts of this paper. The findings suggest that prison education is a relevant approach for prisoner rehabilitation. However, considering that prisons are complex environments (total institutions), it is difficult to conduct education through conventional or/and evening class approaches, hence, ODL is considered a more appropriate approach to expand prisoners’ access to education. This paper calls for both Single Mode and Dual Mode Open and Distance learning institutions – in collaboration with the Tanzania Prisons Service (TPS) – to develop relevant ODL courses for prisoners to serve the purpose.*

**Key Words:** *Open and Distance Learning, Prison Education, Lifelong Learning, Adult Education, Expanding Educational Access*

## INTRODUCTION

Most criminology scholars associate the *socio-economic* factors with criminality (Weatherburn, 2001). They assume that the offending behaviours and recidivism among ex-offenders are associated with socio-economic structures such as poverty, low work skills, as well as low education (Thornberry & Farnworth, 1982; Weatherburn, 2001; Webster & Kingston, 2014). People who face such circumstances, usually, have no hope for achievements in their lives; it is a common practice for them to find themselves unemployed. These people normally have a feeling of being valueless in the society, hence, they feel that they have nothing to lose. Consequently, they tend to opt for offending/reoffending and mostly find themselves reconvicted as soon as they get released from prisons (Msoroka, 2018). Arguably, this might be the main reason for having a great number of prisoners who are usually poor, having low work skills, and low education (Braggins & Talbot, 2003; Webster & Kingston, 2014).

Worldwide literature suggests a link between offending behaviours and social structures – poverty, low work skills, and low education. In the United Kingdom, for instance, an average of 50% of inmates were reported to have low reading skills, 66% low numeracy skills, and almost 81% low writing skills (Braggins & Talbot, 2003). The same pattern has also been reported in Australia, where out of 6,386 inmates in Victoria, only 246 attended secondary school education before they got into prison (Victorian Ombudsman, 2015). Comparable findings were reported in New Zealand (Edwards & Cunningham, 2016), Finland (Koski, 2009), and in the USA (Lochner & Moretti, 2004) where the link between low education, offending behaviours, and imprisonment were observed. Studies suggest that Tanzania face a similar pattern of challenge; it has been observed that nearly 75% of inmates in Dodoma region, the Capital City of Tanzania, had low literacy skills (Sauwa, 2010; The United Republic of Tanzania, 2014). Except for a few countries, consequently, reoffending is a problem to most countries in the world. Tanzania does not have proper record on recidivism, however, the most quoted reoffending rates in Tanzania is 47% (Inmate Rehabilitation and Welfare Services Tanzania, 2014; Msoroka, 2018). One can argue that the most recent cases of prisoners who received the Presidential pardon and either refused to get out of prison or get caught and reconvicted a few days after, is a reflection of such situation. Such cases include Gerald's release on 10/12/2017 and reconvicted to 15 years on 15/12/ 2017 (Msoroka, 2018); Mussa's release on 10/12/2019 and get caught for robbery on the 11/12/2019 (Anonymous, 2019); and Merad who refused to get out of prison (Mathias, 2019). Worldwide literature recently reports that prisons have been using prison education to improve levels of education, work skills, and reduce reoffending rates among prisoners. A prison education is said to be

effective in the reduction of recidivism rates (Bozick, Steele, Davis, & Turner, 2018; Callan & Gardner, 2007; Davis et al., 2014). It is argued here that, the Gerald's, Mussa's, and Merad's cases in Tanzania should be a wakeup call to Tanzanians. Such repeating cases may be suggesting that Tanzanian prisons have not achieved the goal of preparing prisoners for life after prison's time. Therefore, this article calls for the need to invest in prison education through distance mode. It is assumed that a prison education may have a positive influence on prisoners' rehabilitation.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Total Institutions and Distance Learning**

This study is guided by two theoretical perspectives: the total institutions and distance learning. The choice of these theories is based on the fact that, in this study, they complement each other in terms of issues under investigation; their link to this study is given a priority. Each of these theories is discussed in the following sub-sections.

#### **Total Institutions**

The 'total institutions theory' is extensively discussed by various scholars, including Goffman (1962), Amundsen, Msoroka, and Findsen (2017), and Msoroka (2018). Total institutions is a theory developed by Goffman to describe institutions which put their members away, particularly inmates, from the society. Total institutions have two types of members – staff and inmates. Such institutions are highly restricted and they usually have structured routines – for instance specific and rigid time to sleep, time to wake-up, time to eat, and head counts. (Goffman, 1962). Although they are usually a few, staff members in total institutions “have contact with both the inside and outside world; they usually feel superior and righteous” (Amundsen et al., 2017, p. 12). Inmates, in total institutions, are usually many, but they do not have much contact with the outside world (Amundsen et al., 2017; Msoroka, 2018). Goffman (1962) listed prisons, mental hospitals, army barracks, and boarding schools as examples of total institutions.

Everything inmates do, for the case of this study, prisoners, is controlled by prison staff. Usually, outsiders do not have an easy access to information related to prisons (*total institutions*) and inmates (Goffman, 1962; Msoroka, 2018; Scott, 2010). While reflecting on this research work, it was found out that total institutions theory is one of the perfect match for this project because Tanzanian prisons qualify for the total institutions characteristics. Take, for instance, very few information related to prisons is known to Tanzanians. It is not easy for outsiders to access information related to prisoners and prisons in general (Amundsen et al., 2017; Msoroka, 2018). The first ever official report related to prisoners' statistics

was published in 2017 (The United Republic of Tanzania, 2017). In this regard, it is clear that if we think of any innovation on prison education, we should also be aware that such innovation can be constrained by the prison context (Msoroka, 2018).

### **Distance Learning**

Distance learning is a “subset of educational programmes in which the separation of a teacher and a learner, is so significant that it affects their behaviours in major ways, and requires the usage of special techniques and leads to special conceptualization” (Moore, 1991, p. 1). Distance learning is a well-known theoretical perspective in the field of adult education. This theory explains the openness of education and discusses the possibility of giving people an opportunity to learn wherever they are – at home, school, work places, or on vacation (Kember, 2007). For this reason, the current paper holds that distance learning is a key to a lifelong learning – an endless process of learning regardless of one’s status and space (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Msoroka, 2018) – because it breaks the space barrier.

Distance learning is said to be a relevant approach to reach economically and geographically marginalised people. It promotes learners’ independence and freedom of choice on what to learn and how to learn (Holmberg, 1995). It should be noted that prisoners are considered as one of the marginalised groups in the society (Devine, 2010; Msoroka, 2018). It is assumed that, with distance learning, a significant number of learners may be in a position to access education without being bounded by the conventional school timetables. Learners can start and finish studies whenever they are ready, as well begin them at any level with any subject available (Msamada, 2013). In consideration with the Tanzanian prison context, it could be difficult for the conventional face to face approach to successfully penetrate the prison’s walls. Hence, this study suggests the usage of a distance learning mode and assumes that distance learning can be the best approach to penetrate the walls and improve prisoners’ access to education.

### **Methodology**

This study aimed at investigating how learning opportunities to prisoners could be expanded, especially in the Tanzanian context. As a result, the study sought to address one key question: how relevant is the ODL system in expanding educational access to Tanzanian prisoners? This qualitative study has employed a discourse analysis approach to collect relevant data. A discourse analysis is “an epistemology” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3) which describes how a certain phenomenon is perceived in a particular context, and between members of a

specific group (Kamenarac, 2019). This research considered a discourse analysis as a relevant approach to this scholarship because it gained most of the ideas from the analysis of documents. It should be noted that qualitative scholarships do not necessarily need a specific number of cases, and usually, involved cases and sample size are influenced by the needs of a specific study. Researchers always choose appropriate participants and cases which can be able to offer relevant information (Creswell, 2007). For this reason, the study did not have any predetermined number of documents to review; it only reviewed relevant documents related to distance learning and prison education. With the help of a checklist, the research made sure that it accessed all the information relevant to this study. The study reviewed policies, theses, journal articles, books, reports, newspapers and relevant websites. At the end, about 50 documents were reviewed. All relevant information was recorded. The checklist was so important during this process, since it guided the author to remain focused. As seen in Table 1 below, the checklist contained five key issues: characteristics of prisoners, crime and education, the prison context, education in prisons, and ODL in prisons.

**Table 1: Key Issues Observed through the checklist**

Key Issue(s)	Author(s)	Title of the Source(s)	Issues Raised
Characteristics of Prisoners Crime and Education The Prison Context Education in Prisons ODL in Prisons			

Then, the raw data were properly written to form transcripts, which were, latter, thematically analysed. During the analysis stage, transcripts were read several times while closely examining and interpreting the texts. The examination and interpretation of the texts were consistently guided by the research question of this study. This cross-examination, between the text and the research question, helped to “maintain a critical lens when re-reading and analysing key pieces of data related to the central research phenomena” (Kamenarac, 2019, p. 108). Consequently, themes and subthemes which form this article organically emerged from the text (Creswell, 2003; McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). After thorough analysis, two key themes remained: Prison education - a relevant approach for prisoners’ rehabilitation; and Distance Learning - a relevant approach in the prison context.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

This section discusses the findings of this study, which were generated from the document analysis. This study found that prison education is a relevant approach for prisoners' rehabilitation. Also, based on the prison context, Distance Learning was found to be a more relevant approach to provide education for prisoners. These issues are presented and discussed in sub-sections below.

### **Prison Education: A Relevant Approach for Prisoners' Rehabilitation**

According to Campbell (2005), rehabilitation can be referred to as "the process of helping a person to readapt to society or to restore someone to a former position or rank" (p. 831). In the prison context, the key theme to this piece of work, rehabilitation tends to prepare prisoners for smooth reintegration into the society; usually, it is linked with several programmes, including education (Pollock, 2014). It should be noted that the United Nations assumes that the best approach to reduce recidivism among prisoners is the usage of rehabilitation programmes (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). As noted previously, most prisoners have poor educational background which contributes to their offending and reoffending behaviours.

Recently, worldwide literature suggests that prison education has a positive contribution in the reduction of recidivism rates (Klein, Tolbert, Bugarin, Cataldi, & Tauschek, 2004; Msoroka, 2018; The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). Programmes such as vocational training, literacy education, and college education, are associated with prisoners' rehabilitation (Campbell, 2005; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). These programmes are believed to empower prisoners by equipping them with relevant skills and help positively to cope with after-release lives. The educational programmes are said to have the power to influence prisoners' attitudes, motivation, awareness, personal, social, and occupational functioning (Workman, n.d.), hence, reduction of recidivism. For this reason, prison officers/administrations are encouraged to offer educational opportunities to prisoners.

### **The Context of Prison Education**

Prison education, internationally, is advocated by The United Nations standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners (The Nelson Mandela Rules) accepted by the UN Congress in 1955 and its revisions of 2016 (Msoroka, 2018; UN, 2016). For instance, Rule Number 4(2) of the Nelson Mandela Rules states: "prison administrations and other competent authorities should offer education,

vocational training, and work skills, as well as other forms of assistance that are appropriate” (UN, 2016, p. 8). Rule Number 104(1) states:

Provision shall be made for the further education of all prisoners capable of profiting thereby, including religious instruction in the countries where this is possible. The education of illiterate prisoners and of young prisoners shall be compulsory and special attention shall be paid to it by the prison administration. (UN, 2016, p. 30)

It should be noted that the United Nations considers prison education as a perfect tool to reduce recidivism among inmates (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006, 2012; UN, 2016). In the African context, prison education is linked with the 1996 Kampala Declaration on Prison Conditions in Africa. For instance, one of the recommendations provided by this Declaration states: “the human rights of prisoners should be safeguarded at all times and that non-governmental agencies should have a special role in this respect” (Penal Reform International, 2008, p. 12). The current study associates this recommendation with prison education because it considers education as a part of human rights (UN, 1948). Furthermore, the Declaration recommends that “prisoners should be given an access to education and skills training to make it easier for them to reintegrate into the society after their release” (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006, p. 44). In the local context, literature suggests that Tanzania does not have a national (mandatory) policy to guide a prison education.

The only available document (Prison Education Guide) does not guarantee prisoners’ access to education (The United Republic of Tanzania, 2011). Considering that Tanzanian prisons have all features of total institutions, the environment is not supportive enough for conventional approach to prison education (Amundsen et al., 2017; Msoroka, 2018). Most prisons do not have sufficient educational facilities – no/insufficient classrooms, shortage/lack of chairs and tables, and shortage/lack of writing materials and text books (Msamada, 2013; Msoroka, 2018). Worse enough, some prison personnel are reported to have a negative attitude towards prisoners and prison education in general and consequently, very few prisons are reported to offer educational programmes (Msoroka, 2018). However, most of these programmes are disorganised; they do not lead to recognised qualifications (Msoroka, Findsen, & Barnes, 2018). In due course, prisoners are not happy to attend such programmes; they consider them as a waste of time (Braggins & Talbot, 2003; Msamada, 2013). Hence, by considering the importance of education for prisoners’ rehabilitation, in

this study, it is argued that if distance learning was employed it could serve the purpose.

### **Distance Learning: A Relevant Approach in the Prison Context**

It has been argued throughout this article that the Tanzanian prison context is too complex to handle successful conventional educational programmes because of its nature (Msoroka et al., 2018). However, evidence suggests that distance learning can penetrate the prisons' walls. Studies suggest that, in Uganda and Kenya, several prisoners have been attending distance learning programmes from the University of London (Coughlan, 2014; Serwanja, 2014). Nevertheless, it is noted here that these prisoners have been receiving scholarships from the African Prisons Project. The successful prisoners from the two countries are reported to have smoothly integrated into their societies. In New Zealand, for instance, the Department of Corrections is working with the Open Polytechnic which provides tertiary education (certificate and diploma programmes) to qualified prisoners (Department of Corrections, 2014; Msoroka, 2018). To enable prisoners' access to tertiary education, the Department works with the Study-Link which facilitates student loans to eligible prisoners who attend such programmes (Department of Corrections, n.d.). The Department reports that prisoners, who undertake the programmes, smoothly reintegrate with the society. In Tanzania, the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) has taken a lead to establish an opportunity for distance learning to Tanzanian prisoners. The OUT has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Tanzania Prison Service (TPS) (Kazinja, 2014; Msoroka, 2018).

OUT has an agreement with the TPS to cooperate in areas such as research and education for prisoners and prison staff (Kazinja, 2014). This MoU has enabled a few prisoners to undertake their first degree and diploma. Evidence suggests that the successful prisoners are doing great in the society; they have become productive members of the society after their release (Msoroka, 2018). Some of them are engaged in programmes which aim at assisting other inmates to undergo rehabilitation process. However, the current study notes that there is a problem of funds for prison education; consequently, many prisoners have no access to tertiary education through the proposed distance mode because prisoners cannot afford the study costs. Also, it is noted here that many other prisoners do not have the minimum qualifications required for admission into various programmes (George, 2016; Msoroka, 2018). Arguably, this might be the right time for the distance learning institutions, both the single mode ODL and dual mode learning



institutions, to develop relevant programmes to accommodate as many prisoners as possible.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This research project aimed at investigating how learning opportunities to prisoners can be expanded. In addressing this objective, this research project was guided by one research question, “how relevant is the ODL system in expanding educational access to Tanzanian prisoners?” It is noteworthy that, ideally, prisons were introduced to reduce crime (JustSpeak, 2014; Materni, 2013; Pollock, 2014; van Ginneken, 2016). However, studies suggest that, with the current view of prisoners, this aim has yet to be achieved. It is clear in this study that many prisoners have low education and they lack work skills, which are arguably among the main causative agents for crimes and recidivism. Consequently, education is inevitable if we want prisons to fulfil their original purpose (Callan & Gardner, 2007; Chavez & Dawe, 2007; Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Davis et al., 2014). Programmes such as literacy, vocational, and tertiary education could equip the convicted offenders with skills relevant for them in after-prison life.

However, since the prison context is complex, conducting educational activities conventionally is considered to be difficult (Msamada, 2013; Msoroka, 2018). For this reason, this paper argues that distance learning (DL) is the best approach to expand educational access to the marginalised prisoners. Hence, the paper brings attention to people, especially to the Tanzanian society, that distance education could be the solution to improve prisoners’ access to education. In collaboration with the Tanzania Prisons Service (TPS), this paper calls for educational institutions – both Single Mode Open and Distance and Dual Mode learning institutions – to develop relevant distance education programmes for prisoners to serve the purpose. The author of this article is aware that, currently, ODL is mostly at the fourth generation (E-education/e-learning generation) which is characterised by the use of computer networks (online facilitation). For instance, most of the programmes at the Open University of Tanzania are currently provided online through Moodle platform. However, these facilities are not welcomed in most prisons (total institutions), especially in the Tanzanian context (Msoroka, 2018). Hence, it is difficult to conduct an online teaching and learning activities in such environment. Therefore, it is suggested that the educational institutions and the Tanzania Prison Service (TPS) should work together and be ready to use the correspondence mode to facilitate teaching and learning in prisons. The government, individual institutions, and other partners, including

the Non-Government Organizations, should ring-fence special fund to facilitate ODL in the prison context. However, it is noted here that the achievement of educational programmes in prisons depends heavily on the change of mindset among people in the society, including staff in educational institutions and in prisons. People should start considering prisoners as potential workforce who needs some help to improve their capabilities.

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