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STUDY TITLE: THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE ENDORSEMENT OF OPEN DISTANCE E-LEARNING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA.

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Introduction

This paper is a qualitative research proposal aimed at exploring into the factors that influence the endorsement of open distance e-learning in developing countries, using Kenyan university education system as a case study. The paper provides a brief background on the research issue, statement of the problem, purpose of the research, significance of the study, research design and the research questions. The second major part of this paper will cover a literature review, both general and empirical. This will usher in the final section which will concentrate on the research methodology and in particular the qualitative design selected its strengths and weaknesses.

Background

Open distance e-learning (ODeL) started making inroads in Kenya in the 1990s as a blended program where students took a few courses online and then the rest were taught on a face to face basis (Nyerere, 2016). ODeL in Kenya stands on a foundation which has three core layers. The first layer is seen as basically learning through correspondence whereby all materials were based on print technology and the postal services; this was followed by a second model which was based on printing, audio and video gadgets. This second layer was popularly referred to as the multimedia model. As technology evolved, a third mode was ushered in. This third model was characterized by tele-learning, and was based on the use of telecommunication technologies which provided opportunities for more harmonized communication. This gave way to ODeL which is perceived by others as the fourth model characterized by use of the internet for real time

interaction between the learner and the instructor. In spite of the changing technologies and the growing adaption of ODeL, many universities in the developing countries are still stuck on face to face teaching, hence are averse internet based teaching approaches.

Kenya has a fairly robust and sizeable population of university students compared to in the rest of the countries in the region (Njia, Mwaniki, Ireri, and Chege, 2016; Nyerere, 2016). Most of these students use the traditional face to face learning model. The number of students who enrol to pursue their programmes through open distance e-learning (ODeL) is still very small. In Kenyatta University which has a student population of more than 70,000 only a paltry 5,000 (7%) were pursuing their courses through ODeL (Njia, Mwaniki, Ireri, and Chege, 2016). University of Nairobi which has total enrolment of 68,000 students only 10,000 were on ODeL, barely 14%. Other universities like Jommo Kenyatta University of Technology, Moi and Egerton had negligible proportions enrolled on ODeL. The numbers notwithstanding, there are three core parties who have a major stake in the use of ODel namely, the learners, the instructors and the university administration staff. A study in this field is considered incomplete without exploring the lived experiences of these stakeholders.

Studies are showing that although the use of ODeL is on the increase in Kenya, it is still faced with a host of setbacks which include: compromised quality; poor support system; lack of content support; poor course assessment; the developing countries have continued to lag behind in this front (Hadullo, Oboko, and Omwenga, 2018; Njia, Mwaniki, Ireri, and Chege, 2016). Some of the emerging setbacks include rudimental ICT and e-learning infrastructure, increasing competition over meagre financial resources, over-priced and inadequate internet bandwidth, non-existent or inadequate e-learning policies, and inadequate technical support systems for the e-learning platforms (World Bank, 2019).

Studies have shown that the most of the developing nations have lagged behind in the technological revolution which has catapulted higher education systems in the developed nations into the massive use of digital platforms (Hadullo, Oboko, and Omwenga, 2018). Most of these countries seem to have an obsession in the face to face mode of delivery of education at the university level. When the time and the environment change but the national educational systems resist change, what happens to the calibre of human resource being produced? How do they position themselves against the globalized job market? Are they able to compete competitively for the international opportunities?

Problem Statement

The recognition in the premium in quality education remains a key determinant in resource allocation in many countries (World Bank, 2019). Higher education is considered a primary driver to sustainable development momentum the world over (UNESCO, 2015). Access to higher education and by extension investment in systems which enhance access is therefore a critical milestone. Both the public and private institutions of higher learning in the developing countries do not seem to have invested sufficiently in the running of e-learning. Most of the e-learning programs in the developing nations are characterized by all manner of delivery challenges (Hadullo, Oboko, and Omwenga, 2018; World Bank, 2019). In deed the question which is still begging for answers is the appropriateness of ODeL in settings like Africa and other developing nations where the setbacks such as fledgling instructor capacity abound and locally adapted electronic content is in short supply (Nyerere, 2016). Internet connectivity in most of these countries is very poor, digital literacy is low and powering of gadgets like computers and other mobile devices like cellular phones is very difficult where electricity outage is a regular phenomenon.

Globally, there is a growing understanding that the enrolment capacity level in institutions of higher learning is not growing fast enough (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2020; Nyerere, 2016). Nevertheless, the numbers are expected to grow from 99.4 million in 2000 to above 414 million by 2030. The face to face interactive learning is not in a position to sustain such growth and especially in the global South where the needed growth is even larger and overwhelming to the fragile infrastructure. This calls for a robust and innovative virtual learning and ODeL is considered one such important approaches. While the need for ODeL is one such undisputed approach, there is still so much in the unknown and especially in the developing nations, Kenya inclusive. How is Kenya positioning itself in terms of tertiary education with almost 100% transition from primary level to secondary level? With the huge numbers enrolled in high school, how is the university system strategizing to ensure that it does not disappoint? How is the nation positioning itself against the changing times? It is apparent that there are both scholarly and service gaps which need a comprehensive study in order to be able to establish whether ODeL is a viable alternative to the unsustainable face to face learning modes at the university level.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore ~~into~~ the factors which influence the uptake or endorsement of ODeL in Kenya and by extension other developing nations. It will examine ~~explore into~~ the lived experiences of the primary stakeholders in ODeL who include the learners already in such programmes, instructors, and administrators. Another equally important constituent will be regulators of higher learning and employers.

Research objectives

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

1.   Identify the enabling factors to quality open and distant e-learning in Kenyan Universities

2.   Identify the core inhibitions to quality open and distant e-learning programs in Kenyan Universities

3.   Distil best practices in the implementation of quality open and distant e-learning programs in Kenya and other developing countries

Significance of the study

The findings from this qualitative study will provide insights on the current practices in ODeL and hence position scholars into further areas of research, enhance quality planning and implementation of more targeted and solution based approaches to the issue of higher learning affecting millions in the developing nations. Findings from this research work will be published in peer reviewed journals with wide online readership. This is aimed at ensuring that the findings get to the consumer for action. This study is therefore considered strategic and a boon to millions in both the global south and even the developed nations in the north interested in more robust ways of ensuring quality and yet flexible access to higher education.

Status of university education in Kenya

The journey to entrench university education in Kenya begun in 1956 when the Royal Technical College was launched and in 1964 it was renamed University College of Nairobi, a constituent college of the East Africa University (Wikipedia, n.d). In 1970 it was transformed further into the University of Nairobi when the East Africa University was dissolved to give way to the national universities in each country. To date there are 74 universities running in Kenya. These

include 31 public chartered universities, 6 public constituent colleges, 18 private chartered universities, 5 private constituent colleges, and 14 institutions with letters of interim authority. These 74 institutions of higher learning had a total of 537,689 students for face to face programmes and an annual enrolment of around 70,000 students (Kigotho, 2019). This is barely 14% transition rate into tertiary education.

The current university or tertiary enrolment is reported at 11% compared to the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 9% (World Bank, 2019). These figures are miles below the global tertiary enrolment rate of 34% and the more than 60% in most of the developed nations (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2020). Kenya's transition rate into university recorded at 14% though slightly better than the Sub-Saharan average, it is still very low. Access to tertiary education is still a mirage to most of the people in the developing nations and exploration into avenues like ODeL which make education more accessible is critical. In deed the bulk of the candidates who don't secure chances in the limited face to face university programmes and are desirous of pursuing higher learning can easily benefit from innovative alternatives like ODeL.

Evolution of higher education

In much of the known history of the world the number of universities and institutions of higher learning remained very small with the bulk of them being religious focused, primarily training the clergy (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2020). In as late as the 18th century, in the whole of Western Europe there was barely a 100 universities and it was not until in the 19th Century when Europe and North America saw the upsurge in Universities. The world was becoming alive to the benefits in higher education in sustained the advancing technological change, hence the need to increase the number of people accessing it. Today there is more than …universities and literally

every nation seems to have at least a national university. Demand for higher education has continued to grow and though for a long time it remained stuck in the traditional rote of face to face interaction, change in tact became inevitable. The spin into more innovative approaches of reaching out to the millions of thirsty students is insatiable. Different global bodies have over the years rallied the world to increase access to education. In the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) meant to be fulfilled by 2015 education was one of the most critical goals (UNDP, 2016). At the close of the era and many nations still lagging behind the goal, education again featured prominently in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the mantra is education for all by 2030. .

Support systems for ODeL

There is growing evidence that the need for more innovative approaches to accessing higher education in a more flexible manner is real not just in the developing countries but the world over (Nyerere, 2016; Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, and Sindhi, 2018). ODeL seems to be the innovative approach of choice. In a World Bank Policy Paper for Kenya (2018), it is articulated that there is urgent need to invest in developing a robust online higher education system. The paper underscores the need to embrace best practices elsewhere and develop a national framework to guide and manage online learning. Lessons learnt in other countries show that a national support system with a supportive leadership is paramount, there is no harm in piloting, deliberate investment infrastructure and especially high speed internet connectivity is a critical requisite, identify areas where pooling of resources is feasible and thus encourage cross functional and sharing of resources between universities, develop human resource technical capacities and especially come up with innovative ways of attracting top talent in the industry, and promote incentivised learner friendly ODeL.

It is clear though the countries may have similar challenges technocrats must be deliberate in applying contextually appropriate and responsive solutions (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, and Sindhi, 2018). The quality of ODeL determine the quality of the students graduating and hence their employability. This will lead to developing quality programmes anchored on research. It is noted that in some countries like India, online programmes have been looked down by some employers, an attitude perpetuated by the regulator for university education who has even banned online MPhil and PhDs. Such moves while for a moment can be a setback to the gains made in ODeL, quality degree through the model are bound to dispel the myth over online qualifications being less authentic compared to face to face programmes. .

According to UNESCO the growth of ODeL was dependent on open and flexible systems which are in recognition of the systemic and cultural diversity in the context of the various universities (Nyerere, 2016; Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, and Sindhi, 2018). This calls for an appreciation of the pivotal role played by ODeL in fast tracking access to university education. Governments in the developing countries have been seen to be slow in creating an enabling environment for the entrenchment of ODeL and are yet to put in place effective policies and supportive regulations, support funding and investment in high-capacity internet connectivity, enhanced skill and capacity of both the faculty and core support teams such as technicians and network administrators, and establish ODeL specific quality assurance framework. Other gaps in ODeL include: low utilization of the digital e-learning pedagogical programs and non-standardized curricula.

The growth of open distance e-learning (ODeL)

This is derived from the idea of open learning whereby the focus is on opening access to learning and learners are freed from the confines of the four walls of classroom setting or close face to face contact into a non-time and place atmosphere where flexible learning is accessible by means of technology (Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg, 2015). Distance learning can be traced back into the correspondence initiatives of the 19th century in England. Given the technology of the time, the process was laborious and involved processing learning materials in hard copies. The processed materials would then be committed to the postal system for delivery between the learner and the instructor, back and forth. The process was characterized by long time delays and occasional breakdown of the correspondence. On the contrary, the contemporary online programs have eliminated most of the handicaps of the 'correspondence' initiatives and run on real time modes which allow online discussions among other interactive methods of learning.

Online education in the last couple of decades has witnessed phenomenal growth in its diverse modes due to the birth of revolutionary technologies such as the entrenchment of the internet in everyday life, the embrace of digital economy, and the growing demand for better skilled workforce (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, and Sindhi, 2018). It is apparent that by the year 2025, online education is likely to be the mainstream education system. This is not a phenomenon to ignore. While the market for more online programs with global coverage appears to exist, adequate planning and implementation of best practices and innovative strategies is necessary for a university to successfully introduce and/or expand online education given the challenges outlined above. To implement a successful online program, or launch a successful online course, the program/course being offered needs to harness innovative technology in a way that enhances student learning beyond face-to-face classes rather than water

down the curriculum, promote reduced learning, deliver an inferior product, and heighten student and faculty frustration. Any online program or course should provide extra (over and above traditional program or course) benefits to its various stakeholders: students, faculty, administrators, and employers.

The bulk of the students who enrolled in ODeL considered the flexibility of the program and the opportunity to do both studies and work as great source of motivation. In the developing countries, the general trend is that ODeL enrolment is fast growing (Qayyum and Zawacki-Richter, 2019). For example in Brazil, enrolment was growing at 63.8% annually between 2003 and 2009, before stabilizing at per annum growth level of 9.9% between 2009 and 2014. In China, a reasonable enrolment growth of 8.8% per annum in the period between 2004 and 2016 was recorded. Other remarkable levels are registered in South Korea, India, South Africa. However in countries like Ethiopia, Burkina Faso Mali and Niger ICT is rudimental and so in such places ODeL is yet to grow serious inroads (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, and Sindhi, 2018).

In most of the developed countries ODeL was becoming a more normal mode of curricula delivery in institutions of higher learning (Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg, 2015). For example in Finland there were indications that both online and blended approaches were an established normal way of teaching the adult population pursuing higher level of education such as post graduate degrees. A look at Germany the situation is quite different. Notwithstanding that over 90% of the Germany universities have digital learning materials and around 80% provide some form of interactive units, only 16% of the universities offered ODeL in diverse forms. It is further revealed in the case of the U.S. ODeL enrolment has continued to increase for the past 14 years in spite of whether the economy was expanding on shrinking (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta,

Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, and Sindhi, 2018; Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg, 2015). On the other hand the number of students who are exclusively taking face-to-face classes have continued to decline. One intrigue is that more 50% of the students who took at least one online class also enrolled in an on campus class. Equally surprising is that the real distance learners who enrolled in U.S. online degree programs living overseas constituted only a one per cent of the total number of online learners. The emerging phenomenon is that online programmes don't seem necessarily catering for the distance learner, not in the US. The intrigues emerging from the developed world tend to suggest that the ODeL is still a grey area, not just in the developing nations where the challenges are myriad but also in the very developed world. These unfolding mysteries form a good ground for a qualitative research as proposed in this proposal.

Studies are showing that while in the developed countries and industrialized world ODeL is gaining momentum and getting blended with the face to face models, there is a sustained decline in regular brick and mortar based enrolments (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner, and Sindhi, 2018). While a host of challenges contribute to the declining numbers in the face to face enrolment in the US and other developed nations, there seems to be a consensus that the sheer cost of college education has become prohibitive to many and thus a deterrent, people are getting more sceptical about the regular notion that increase in education has a premium, there is an increasing delay in completion of university programmes, people less enthusiastic to traverse regions in search of higher education, many people are no longer willing to invest the cost travelling long distances to attend college, and there is a general apathy in incurring huge debts for sake of higher education. These challenges are seemingly early warning signs over the need for educationists, national and international strategists to initiate some serious reflections over

the future the traditional face to face academic models at the university level. Studies to inform such dialogue are indeed an urgent need

Research design

This research paper proposes a descriptive qualitative approach. It is specifically anchored on qualitative phenomenological perspective. This is considered flexible and an innovative design capable of facilitating the researcher to navigate and explore into the primary constructs in open distance e-learning among the population of interest. It provides to the study the crucial manoeuvre to explore in the commensurate detail the factors which influence the primary stakeholders to either embrace or shun open distance e-learning (ODeL) in Kenya (Creswell, 2009; Silverman, 2010). The approach will allow the researcher to engage with the research respondents who will be able to provide their lived experiences in ODeL, share their very subjective views as they have experienced them (Creswell, 2009; Scott and Garner, 2013). This will give the research the agility essential for incisive and in-depth exploration of the experiences as they unfold in spontaneity.

Phenomenological approach is selected on account of its suitability in facilitating experiential studies which delve into intricate constructs like the phenomenon under investigation. It has sufficient play to allow the back and forth essential for this exploration (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2009). One of the greatest strengths of this approach is the place of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument. The research will therefore develop appropriate tools to allow data collection with the essential precision. These will include participant observation, key informant interview guide and a focus group discussion guide.

The researcher is enrolled in an ODeL programme with Beulah Heights University. Through own experiences and interaction with colleagues, critical data is expected to be generated. The researcher will have to apply the art of bracketing and hence minimize the elements of a smoke screen and see the constructs of others (Patton, 2002). The researcher will conduct in-depth interviews with the sampled respondents drawn from the selected universities. Equally critical will be focus group discussions with select groups from the sampled universities. The data will be triangulated.

Research questions

In keeping with descriptive phenomenological qualitative research, the following core research questions will form the basis for the data collection:

1. What In the views of the primary stakeholders (respondents) what are the factors which influence the endorsement of ODeL in Kenya's universities?

2. What are the core factors which would create an enabling environment for the implementation of quality open and distant e-learning in Kenyan Universities?

3. What are the core inhibitions to quality open and distant e-learning programs in Kenyan Universities

4. What are the best practices in the implementation of quality open and distant e-learning programs in Kenya and other developing countries

Study population and Sampling strategy

The literature review done has tended to suggest that a comprehensive research on the factors influencing the endorsement of open distance e-learning may have to touch the three core components, the institutions of higher learning (universities), the administrators of the ODeL,

and the students. It is therefore proposed that at least three universities running ODeL

programme be selected. In order to ensure a rich diversity and hence enrich the process, two

public universities will be selected purposively, two private and two faith based (Creswell,

2009). Students, administrators and faculty will be sampled from each of the sampled university

as well.

In keeping with the nature of descriptive qualitative phenomenological research approach, the

researcher will not attempt to get a representative sample but an estimated number of

respondents considered reasonable for the purposes of this study (Kumar, 2005). The researcher

will seek to attain some level of saturation in the information sought and hence a non-probability

sample of around 30 respondents may suffice (Patton, 2002). While it is appreciated that the

qualitative phenomenological supper from the limitations of constructivists and thus subjective,

the experiential data sought will set the stage for future exploration which if need be will allow

either a mixed methods or a purely quantitative research. At the moment the grey areas are too

many and hence trying to develop a quantitative approach, complete with hypotheses would be

pre-emptive.

Data collection instrument

In this qualitative phenomenological study the researcher will conduct all the interviews and

observations hence will remain the primary data collection instrument (Creswell, 2009). The

researcher will pre-test the data collection tools i.e. observation checklist, key informant

interview guide and the focus group discussion guide. Based on the pre-test experiences, the

necessary adjustments will be made and the tools will be considered ready for use. The

researcher will use the multiple data collection methods in order to increase the premium of the

data and minimize intrinsic bias associated with single method data collection approaches
(Patton, 2002).

Instrument validation

The researcher will seek to have as credible data as possible, a feat possible through diligence in
collection and processing. Both audio and video data recording will be applied at the collection
pint. The data will be transcribed and processed through the selected software. The use of several
perspectives as made possible through the multiple sources will enhance the validity and
reliability of the data (Patton, 2002).

Data analyses

The data collected will be processed and analysed through either NVivo or computer assisted
qualitative analysis (CAQDAS). Complementary word processing and spread sheet programmes
like excel or even statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) may be used as need arise. These
processes will not only speed up the work but also minimize the level of human error. It will
allow drawing of conclusions which will determine the future direction in the research area.

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