The Use of Distance Education for Teacher Training and Development in Malawi: Models, Practices, and Successes.

By

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1.0 INTRODUCTION
Open and Distance Learning in Malawi started in 1965 with the establishment of Malawi Correspondence College. In the same year, a Schools Broadcasting Unit was set up to augment printed instructional modules by airing instructional programmes for primary, secondary and teacher education. The College and the Broadcasting Unit merged to form the Malawi Correspondence College and Broadcasting Unit in 1973 and in 1987 changed its name to Malawi College of Distance Education. The idea of establishing a Malawi Correspondence College was first captured by the Nyasaland Development Plan of 1962-1965 which aimed at addressing the challenge of only a tiny fraction of primary school leavers continuing with secondary education, the need to improve the quality of teachers in primary schools through in-service training, thereby, improve the standard of primary education\(^1\), meeting the need for continuing education of the rural people, and fostering agriculture development, health education, and extension studies as a means of ensuring rural development (Nankwenya, 1974). In 1977, Aggrey Memorial School, a private institution of distance education, was established to offer both academic primary and secondary school education courses, and professional/vocational education and training to a variety of artisans in Malawi. Otherwise, this paper is about use of distance education for teacher training and development in Malawi. The three notable public teacher education institutions using open and distance learning delivery mode are Domasi College of Education, Department of Teacher Education and Development, and Mzuzu University\(^2\).

Domasi College of Education started offering a diploma in secondary teacher education in 2000 in response to the need for upgrading primary school teachers teaching in Community Secondary Schools created in 1999. Confronted with a whooping demand for 8,000 qualified primary school teachers in 2009 and the need to reduce the qualified teacher to pupil ration of 1:90 in 2009 to 1: 60 by 2013 and 1:40 by 2017, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology mandated the Department of Teacher Education and Development to start training primary school teachers using the open and distance learning delivery mode in 2010 alongside the residential Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme run by Teacher Training Colleges\(^3\). Following the recognition that open and distance learning delivery mode would be needed to

\(^{1}\) By 1965, there were about 5,000 primary school teachers with T4 grade (two years of teacher training after Primary School Leaving Certificate) and the goal was to upgrade these teachers to T3 grade (Junior Certificate of Education plus two years of teacher training) and T3 teachers to be upgraded to T2 grade (Malawi School Certificate of Education plus two years of teacher training).

\(^{2}\) Other higher education institutions using open, distance and e-learning delivery mode include the Malawi Polytechnic which started offering professional courses through the Evening Classes mode to people in employment who wanted to further their education and training in the late 1960s, Chancellor College in collaboration with Amity University, Indira Ghandi National Open University, and University of Madras started offering professional courses in commerce and human resource development through eLearning from 2009, and Kamuzu College of Nursing began utilising e-learning to train nurses and midwifes in 2009. All these are constituent colleges of the University of Malawi.

\(^{3}\) In Malawi, Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) enrol “O” level school leavers and train them up to primary school teacher’s certificate level only which qualifies them for teaching in primary schools.
complement the traditional face-to-face mode of provision to increase and broaden access to higher education and training, Mzuzu University established the Centre for Open and Distance Learning in July 2006 to plan, design, and develop instructional materials and delivery systems; and coordinate and facilitate all other activities leading to offering programmes through the open and distance learning delivery mode. Mzuzu University enrolled the first cohort of distance learners in the Bachelor of Arts (Education) and Bachelor of Science (Education) programmes in November 2011 and the second cohort in November 2012.

What was not very clear to most of us by 2012 were models each of these institutions used to provide teacher education and training; specific practices, technologies in particular, employed to facilitate provision; and major successes of each of the institutions in its endeavour to provide education and training through this mode of provision. There was, therefore, a need to carry out an audit study to establish the nature and efficacy of open, and distance learning delivery mode in Malawi.

1.1 Aim of the Study
The aim of study was to document the start and development of open and distance learning delivery mode in Malawi with particular focus on models employed, technologies used, and successes so far achieved.

1.2 Objectives of the Study
Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

- Document the beginning and evolution of open, distance and e-learning in Malawi.
- Explain the various models, if any, of open and distance learning used by different institutions.
- Assess the impact of open, distance and e-learning on broadening and increasing access to education and training in Malawi.
- Assess the degree of use of technology in provision of open and distance learning.
- Outline major successes of open and distance learning in the various institutions involved in the audit study.

2.0 METHODOLOGY
This survey was a descriptive census of all “known” institutions offering teacher education and training through open, distance and e-learning delivery mode at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels in Malawi. According to Borg and Gall (1983:406), Fraenkel and Wallen (2000:432), and Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen (2006:402) surveys can be classified according to their focus and scope (census and sample surveys) or according to time frame for data collection (longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys). Clearly, this was a cross-sectional

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4 It is possible that some teacher education institutions offering education and training through open, distance and e-learning delivery mode may have been left out either because they are not known to the researcher or because of the way open, distance and e-learning mode was conceptually defined.
census survey of all known teacher education institutions using open and distance learning delivery mode.

2.1 Data Collection
To ensure uniformity of approach and consistency of presentation of findings, the Lead Researcher\(^5\) conducted briefing discussions, through e-mail, with each of the institutional researchers on the purpose of the study and use of the research instrument prior to the beginning of the study. Each institutional researcher was required to confirm understanding of what information the instrument sought to solicit for the study report. The main method of data collection was desk study, utilising documentary search/analysis technique. This technique was complemented by some kind of “Focus Group Discussion” in the form of a one day meeting of the eight institutional researchers presenting their findings followed by a critical discussion of each institutional research report. This helped to bring several different perspectives into contact enabling the Lead Researcher to gain insight into how the institutional researchers were thinking and why they were thinking as they did (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen, 2006:481). The study ended with presentation of the draft research report to a select team of stakeholders at a National Dissemination Seminar for purposes of jointly isolating issues surrounding open, distance and e-learning in Malawi, building consensus on major challenges, and suggesting possible strategies for addressing the challenges\(^6\). This constituted part of the methodology in that after the dissemination seminar, the Lead Researcher incorporated suggestions from plenary discussions, in particular those relating to recommendations for addressing the identified challenges.

2.2 Data Analysis
The bulk of the information generated by this study was qualitative and as such reducing and organising the data, synthesizing, looking for commonalities and discovering the emerging picture formed the larger part of the analysis (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen, 2006; Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000). Qualitative analysis enabled the researcher to identify trends, good practices, technologies used, successes, delivery gaps, challenges and future needs of open, distance and e-learning in Malawi, apart from systematic search and arranging information in order to increase understanding of the data and present what has been learned to the reader, a process Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen (2006:489) refer to as making successive approximations towards the goal of describing and explaining the phenomenon under investigation.

2.3 Limitations of the Study
Accuracy of information generated and presented by institutional researchers remains difficult to ascertain because each researcher worked alone and independent of others, despite the one day meeting of researchers. The issue is that different individuals perceive and interpret information differently. The meeting of researchers could not guarantee resolving this problem because it was

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\(^5\) Fred Gennings Wanyavinhumbo Msiska, Commonwealth of Learning Chair of ODL at Mzuzu University, sourced the funds for the study and coordinated the whole survey and produced the study report, hence, Lead Researcher.

\(^6\) This paper does not discuss challenges because of the theme the conference organizers have defined for the author.
short (one day) and that each researcher selected what to share during presentations. Consequently, the findings of this study can at best be suggestive as opposed to definitive.

3.0 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY
In spite of the numerous objectives of the study and the many institutions studied, this paper only presents and discusses findings related to models, practices, and major successes of open, and distance learning in respect of Domasi College of Education, Department of Teacher Education and Development, and Mzuzu University as teacher education institutions using this delivery mode.

3.1 Models of Open and Distance Learning
The study revealed that teacher education institutions using open and distance learning delivery mode essentially have employed one model, that of blending face-to-face instructions with independent home-study during the distance learning period. Of course, there are slight modifications to this model as you go from one institution to the other. For example, Domasi College of Education has 8 weeks of residential face-to-face orientation at the College and 40 weeks of independent study at home in each academic year. During the face-to-face sessions, learners are introduced to the instructional materials in all the courses for that whole academic year. Study materials such as instructional modules, textbooks, and pamphlets are given to learners during this period. It is during the same period that lecturers/tutors give continuous assessment assignments to learners. On average, a learner collects two continuous assessment tasks for each course to be completed during the 40 weeks of independent home-study.

For Domasi College of Education, during the home-study period, learners are encouraged to form study circles, hold monthly seminars and meetings, and keep a professional portfolios to ensure successful learning. A Study Circle is a small group of learners pursuing similar subjects/courses who work together on a particular learning challenge. Study circles are either informally organized or timetabled to meet on specific days, for example, once a week on every Friday. In principle, study circles are meant to encourage active learning through group problem solving, reading and discussions; give a chance to participate in and contribute to group’s learning; ensure variety in the learning styles; offer an opportunity to monitor performance and progress of other participating members. Seminars and professional meetings are held monthly and usually at the Cluster Leading School and are coordinated by Field Supervisors. The purpose of these seminars and professional meetings is to discuss issues pertaining to distance learning support required, clarity of subject content, effectiveness of teaching methods employed, community projects/school-based activities, professional topics as identified by learners, among others (Msiska, 2013: 56). A professional portfolio is a collection of documents, sample performances and any relevant materials which show the range and evolution in a learner’s work and gives professional accomplishments in the life of learner (Woodley, 2005). During the home-study period, learners compile a portfolio about their studies based on specific guidelines.

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7 The study full report is available in Mzuzu University Library under Msiska, Fred G. W. (2013) Audit Study to Determine the Effectiveness of Open, Distance and E-Learning Delivery Mode in Broadening and Increasing Access to Education and Training in Malawi, Mzuzu: Commonwealth of Learning.
given by lecturers/tutors of Domasi College of Education. During successive residential face-to-face sessions, learners submit their portfolios to lecturers for evaluating and grading. Other activities during the home-study period include writing continuous assessment exercises, and teaching practice. Otherwise, there is no use of radio and television to facilitate teaching and learning during the home-study period.

The Department of Teacher Education and Development manages the Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme delivered through open and distance learning delivery mode in collaboration with Teacher Training Colleges. This programme blends residential face-to-face tuition, independent home-study, and radio programmes. The face-to-face tuition runs for three (3) weeks in three different months (August, December and April) in academic year when residential primary teacher learners are on holidays. The newly recruited cohort of primary teacher learners by open and distance learning mode attends an orientation session in August using a purposefully prepared manual. During the orientation, primary teacher learners are taught basic teaching and study skills for use during the following independent home-study. They are also given two assignments in each learning area, one to be done in the first term and the other in the second term of the school session. The April face-to-face sessions are meant to prepare for end of year examinations which are held in June/July every year.

It should be emphasized that the independent home-study takes place soon after the face-to-face session which is followed by primary teacher learners being attached to schools for purposes of teaching practice throughout the home-study period. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology prefers that primary teacher learners practise teaching in standards 3 and 4 so that they have adequate time for their independent studies. During this very period, Malawi College of Distance Education broadcasts radio programmes (known as Tikwere) on local radio station once a week for 30 minutes. These radio programmes provide extra information on primary teacher education principles and techniques, apart from providing administrative arrangements concerning assignment submission dates and feedback on assignments.

The teacher education programme through open and distance learning at Mzuzu University also uses blended learning. Learners start with a four-week face-to-face orientation in each semester meant to introduce them to open and distance learning techniques, explain to them how to work their way around the instructional modules, including how to tackle continuous assessment assignments, how to handle self-assessment exercises at the end of each unit and the module itself, and how to approach semester-end examination questions. During face-to-face orientation period, learners are given instructional modules and have the opportunity to use the university library. All other complementary instructional materials are given to learners during the face-to-face orientation. Considering that the instructional module is not exhaustive, learners are given some money by the university to help photocopy as many reference materials as they will require during the independent home-study period. The orientation is also meant to provide an opportunity for the lecturers and students to go through materials deemed difficult for students to
tackle on their own. For students studying basic sciences, Mzuzu University organises a summer school in the middle of each semester for purposes of conducting laboratory experiments. This is done at the University, because Satellite Learning Centres have not yet been established, much as this task is in progress as will be explained later.

All this is complemented with a twenty-week (20) independent home-study throughout the semester. The main support provided to learners when on twenty weeks home-study is regular communication with the students using small messaging service (SMS) for purposes of providing administrative information relating to assignment due dates, summer school dates, semester-end examination dates, and responding to learners’ anxieties. In the absence of Satellite Learning Centres which are equipped with Internet, Mzuzu University has found it very difficult to direct and support students’ learning during the independent home-study. To ensure that lecturers attend to learners’ requests, the Centre for Open and Distance Learning gives each and every involved lecturer some money to cover incidental costs of postage, SMSs, Internet, etc. per semester. Like in the case of Domasi College of Education, radio and television are not used to facilitate teaching and learning.

For students who can afford it, Internet is used mainly for searching reference materials to complement the instructional module and completing continuous assessment tasks. The Moodle Learning Management System is still in the process of being developed and deployed. Otherwise, when fully developed and functional, Moodle will facilitate online access to instructional materials, processing of assignment tasks and short tests, apart from offering the opportunity for discussions in real time between learners and lecturers, and learner to learner in subject-based discussion forums.

3.2 Practices: Technologies Used to Deliver Teacher Education and Training
The study revealed that all open and distance learning teacher education institutions in Malawi use basic, rudimentary and sometimes obsolete technologies like typewriters and ink duplicating machines to deliver their programmes. For example, Malawi College of Distance Education uses print, radio and CD-ROMs as main instructional technologies in delivering its programmes. Of course, the predominant medium of course delivery is the print in the form of self-instructional modules developed based on the existing school curricula. Domasi College of Education continues to use the print media as main modes of instruction since the start in 2000. It is only recently that the College opened eleven (11) Internet Centres throughout the country to enable some learners access additional learning materials from the web and interact with tutors through e-mails. Otherwise, there is no use of web-based learning management system. Mzuzu University equally relies predominantly on printed instructional modules as main medium of

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* Malawi College of Distance Education facilitates the Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme of the Department of Teacher Education and Development by airing a radio programme (Tikwere) for teacher learners once a week. Otherwise, its niche is provision of secondary education.
instruction. Internet is used mainly for searching for reference materials to complement instructional modules and complete continuous assessment tasks during independent home-study for only those learners that have access to Internet facilities. Moodle Learning Management System is being developed and the hope is that when fully developed and functional, will facilitate online access of instructional modules, links to assignment tasks, short tests, and online reference materials, apart from offering opportunity for frequent contact between learners and staff during the independent home-study period through discussion forums.

The Department of Teacher Education and Development admitted that while blended learning offers one of the strategies helpful for learning (Sethy, 2008), the concept is partially applied in the Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme. Tuition is predominantly done through short face-to-face sessions which run for three (3) weeks in August, December and April every academic year. During the face-to-face sessions, use is made of basic equipment such as LCD projectors, audio tapes, video cassette recorders and television sets to deliver instructions. During the distance learning phase, mobile phones are used by Teacher Training Colleges only for sending mass messages to students. Otherwise, there is no use of computer mediated learning in the Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme.

The emerging picture suggests that open and distance learning in Malawi is predominantly driven by basic and rudimentary technologies in the name of computers for word processing, printing and ink duplicating machines, CD-ROMs, LCD projectors, audio and video tapes, and mobile phones for just sending mass messages to learners. The radio is only used by Malawi College of Distance Education in the Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme of the Department of Teacher Education and Development. This state of affairs makes open and distance learning delivery mode very cumbersome for both tutors and learners, leading to the inimical prejudice that education and training through open and distance learning is more challenging, requiring an extra effort, hence, less attractive to prospective students than the case is with residential face-to-face delivery mode. On their part, lecturers/tutors are not able to timely update instructional modules, provide timely feedback to learners, and give regular support as learners progress through the modules and programmes. This tendency risks giving the unfortunate impression that the content and resulting learning are dependent on very few and shallow sources which are not readily updated, hence, not comparable to content and learning in residential face-to-face delivery mode. Learners find themselves isolated from their tutors for greater part of their home-study periods, making it very difficult to get the necessary guidance and support in the course of study, leading to frustration and dropping out of the study programme. More serious is that reliance on such media deprives learners of the possibility of enriching learning with a wealth of resources available on the Internet while at the same time limiting flexibility of study (Msiska, 2013).

Note that Mzuzu University has not yet established Satellite Learning Centres to support distance learning, hence, not possible to assume that every learner accesses Internet during independent home-study period. Of course, the University has just developed a proposal for building Satellite Learning Centres and submitted to World Bank for funding consideration.

This is evinced by overwhelming applications received for admission into the residential face-to-face study programmes compared to those for open and distance learning delivery mode.
3.3 Major Success of Open and Distance Learning in Malawi

Institutions were asked to outline what they consider to be the major successes of their open and distance learning delivery mode. Malawi College of Distance Education cited training a cadre of secondary school teachers in instructional module writing who have written all instructional materials for Malawi College of Distance Education; building staff capacity in distance education administration and student support services through local and international training; offering education and training to a lot of Malawians (enrolled 1,424 learners in 1965, then 34,966 by 1991/92 school session and 47,998 in 2011); and opening a total of 400 Open Secondary Schools by 2012 having started with only 44 in 1998. This large number of people educated through the open and distance learning delivery mode negates the widely held view that people do not like this mode of delivery. The experience of Malawi College of Distance Education serves to illustrate that open and distance learning delivery mode is feasible and can be used to broaden and increase access to education and training where the face-to-face residential delivery mode only serves a tiny proportion of the population. The issue for Malawi is that this mode of provision has not been given due prominence at policy level and budgetary allocation has been muted to say the least (Msiska, 2013: 116-119). It can logically be assumed that these two tendencies have conspired to stifle the development of open and distance learning.

Domasi College of Education highlighted four major successes. One of them being the enrolment of female teachers and lactating mothers. The College has registered more female learners in the open and distance learning delivery mode than in its residential face-to-face delivery mode. Lactating mother learners are allowed to bring nannies with them to take care of children while mothers attend to tuition during orientation and examination periods. This experience vindicates the claim that open and distance learning can be used to accommodate learners in and with special circumstance (broadening access). The second success is provision of mentorship to other tertiary institutions of open and distance learning. Domasi College of Education was the first tertiary institution to offer a Diploma in Education using the open and distance learning mode. Based on her experience, the College has provided mentorship to a number of institutions in Malawi, including Department of Teacher Education and Development and Mzuzu University, venturing into open and distance learning. Thirdly, the College has increased enrolment into teacher education programmes as a whole as shown in the graph below.
The fourth success is creation of capacity through workshops, study tours and in-services training to deliver programmes through the open and distance learning mode. Consequently, the College is able to develop its own instructional materials for this mode of delivery, manage programmes, and provide comprehensive support services to distance education learners.

The major successes of Mzuzu University include establishment of the Centre for Open and Distance Learning to plan, coordinate and oversee activities relating to open and distance learning. The Centre has facilitated training of staff in designing and developing instructional materials for the open and distance learning delivery mode. To date, instructional materials for the Diploma in Education have all been produced, and the University has enrolled two cohorts of learners, 34 in November 2011 and 150 in 2012. Going by the eligible applications (649) received this year, Mzuzu University is expecting to enrol at least 500 learners in the third cohort of the Bachelor of Arts/Science (Education) programmes in November 2013. By far, the major success has been the establishment of Commonwealth of Learning Chair for Open and Distance Learning which signifies determination to institutionalise open and distance learning delivery mode at the University.

Relative to the Department of Teacher Education and Development, the introduction of open and distance learning in the Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme has greatly contributed to the supply of primary school teachers, thereby, reducing the teach to pupil ratio. Since 2010, the delivery mode has recruited 16,000 teacher trainees and attached them to selected primary schools in the country. As a consequence of this, the teacher to pupil ratio has drastically reduced from 1:90 in 2010 to 1:60 in 2012. The target is 1:40 teacher to pupil ratio by 2017 (MOEST, 2011). And finally, the Initial Primary Teacher Education Programme has created 16,000 jobs for school leavers who otherwise could have been unemployed.

The successes of the Department of Teacher Education and Development further underscores acceptability of the open and distance learning delivery mode. With 16,000 teacher learners enrolled, it becomes a paradox to insist that open and distance learning delivery mode is not popular with learners. The experiences of the Department of Teacher Education and Development, Domasi College of Education and Mzuzu University are reminding us of the need to harness this delivery mode as a means of bringing education and training to the majority of our people, thereby, broadening and increasing access to education and training required for creating an open society necessary for the development of nations and their individuals.

4.0 CONCLUSION
Available evidence suggests that Malawi has successfully used open and distance learning delivery mode since 1965 at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education and training, and that thousands of people have benefitted from this mode of provision. Noting the large number of people that have benefitted from provision through open and distance learning, the paper contends that it is a paradox to insist that open and distance learning delivery mode is not popular with learners. Secondly, the study has revealed that a hybrid of face-to-face and
independent home-study is the commonly used model for provision through open and distance learning delivery mode. Within this design, institutions of open and distance learning in Malawi continue to use basic, rudimentary and often obsolete technologies which make the delivery mode cumbersome for both tutors and learners, leading to the inimical prejudice that education and training through open and distance learning is more challenging than through the residential face-to-face mode of provision. The implication is that the full potential of open and distance learning delivery mode has been attenuated by use of such instructional technologies. Per se, this has denied thousands of deserving Malawians access to education and training. Given that only 0.5% of the eligible schools leavers access higher education and training in Malawi, the paper recommends that Malawi must invest in requisite infrastructure and appropriate technologies that enhance the efficacy of open, distance and e-learning as a means of broadening and increasing access to education and training.
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