

## **A Critical Examination of the Challenges of Teacher Education through Open and Distance Learning Delivery Mode in Malawi Universities**

**Mackenzie Ishmael Chibambo, and Docks R. Jere,**

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Director (Publishing),

Mzuzu University, Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Malawi

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer in Educational Research, Mzuzu University, Malawi

**Corresponding Author: Docks R. Jere**

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### **Abstract**

Since 2007, Malawi has seen a tremendous increase in student-enrolment rates at both primary and secondary school levels in a social context of rapid change and democratisation of education. While this is a welcome development, many secondary schools have been confronted by myriad challenges such as inadequate classroom and hostel infrastructure, and human and material resources. The surge in student enrolments has resulted in very high student-teacher ratios sometimes reeling at well over 1:100 in most cases. Such incongruent teacher-student ratios present a daunting task in the teaching and learning processes. In order to increase teacher supply, Mzuzu University (Mzuni), one of Malawi's four premier public universities, has since introduced the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Parallel Learning delivery modes for training teachers as a way of reducing student-teacher ratios at the secondary school sub-sector. Given these developments, professional development of both new and experienced teachers becomes central towards the improvement of education quality and improved educational reforms. The purpose of this study was to examine student-teachers' perception on the challenges they encounter in their five-year teacher education degree programme offered through the ODL delivery mode. To do so, students were asked to identify major issues that confront them during the entire five-year initial teacher preparation programme. They were also asked to suggest possible solutions to the issues. The study adopted a qualitative research design: a causal study involving a sample drawn from 2<sup>nd</sup> year to 5th year students at Mzuni was done. The results from the analysed data revealed that there were both educational and socio-economic factors that confront students' learning experiences by gender and age. The paper further highlighted that as teacher education undergoes significant reforms by way of training more qualified teachers through ODL delivery mode, issues of quality and quantity should not be underestimated. To this end, we recommend faculty members to be equipped with responsive and innovative teaching strategies that will present a perfect fit for such large classes if we are to produce high-quality graduates who will be relevant and competitive on the market. The paper concludes by arguing that, in Malawi, a lot of work lies ahead in as much as teacher training is concerned. This is particularly true if these teachers are meant to overcome the various educational challenges that retard quality of education in the secondary schools, and that way, the teaching and learning processes will be improved.

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**Keywords:** challenges, teacher-preparation, democratisation, gender equity, case study

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the key features of the 2030 agenda which the United Nations (UN) and member states identified in the lead up to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreement was the principle of universality. According to the UN agenda (2015), universality must be applied by all countries while taking into account different national realities, capabilities and levels of development that respect national policies and principles. Thus, the notion of universality also envisages that everyone has a role to play in the development and poverty alleviation initiatives when framing the development agenda.

### **Malawi Growth and Development Strategy II (2011-2016)**

Interestingly, at national level, Malawi as a country recognises the role of an educated population as a necessity for sustainable development. The Government of Malawi recognises that, through the provision of education, people can acquire relevant knowledge, skills and competencies that can better help them actively participate in socio-economic activities (MGDS II, Executive Summary, p. xii). Moreover, the MGDS II has been Malawi's overarching strategy for the past five years (2011-2016). This has been the central operational medium-term strategy designed for the attainment of the country's Vision 2020 Mission.

**Background of Malawi’s Education System**

Malawi’s educational system comprises three broad categories, namely: basic education, secondary education and tertiary/vocational education. Table 1 below shows the changes projected in secondary school including enrolment estimates cutting across all the educational sub-sectors, and estimates for teachers and classrooms. Interestingly, student

enrolment has since tripled over the past ten years. Consequently, the enormous student enrolment increase has piled pressure on the human resources particularly teachers. Yet they are these teachers who play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning processes in our schools.

Table 1. Secondary education, targets, teachers and classrooms

All Secondary (Public, Private, Open)	2006	2007	2008	2012	2017
Total Enrolment	218,310	210,325	215,613	316,019	486,706
GER	20.5	19.0	19.0	23.5	30.5
Enrolment government-supported secondary schools (excluding open)	161,874	154,636	155,767	202,252	292,024
Enrolment open secondary schools	4,433	6,939	7,546	18,96	34,069
Enrolment government-supported Secondary schools (including open)	166,307	161,575	163,314	221,214	326,093
Enrolment private secondary schools	52,003	48,750	52,299	94,806	160,613
<b>Government-supported secondary schools (excluding open)</b>					
Total teachers required	7,633	7,475	6,615	5,779	8,344
Qualified teachers	2,655	2,872	3,050	5,056	8,344
Unqualified teachers	4,978	4,835	3,565	723	
Teachers open secondary schools	348	551	539	1,053	1,703
Total classrooms gov’t-supported	3,664	3,754	3,818	4,597	6,348
Classrooms using double-shift	1%	1%	2%	10%	15%

Source: Ministry of Education Projections, 2006.

The rapid expansion of primary and secondary education has significantly increased the demand for trained primary and secondary school teachers. Both present teacher training colleges and universities alike have not been able to respond to such a demand. In response to this, Mzuni through the financial assistance of the World Bank and the African Development Bank has introduced ODL programmes, and weekend programmes in order to train more teachers who would in turn reduce student- teacher ratio in the secondary sub-sector.

The government of Malawi, through MGDS II, has continued to implement interventions aimed at ensuring sustainable economic growth. As for higher education, the focus has been to produce high quality professionals with relevant knowledge and skills that meet the demands of the economy. To this end, access to higher education, at both technical and university levels, has increased tremendously. More so, universities have expanded, and got significant facelift, among other initiatives (MGDS II, 2011, p.89).

**Mzuzu University in a Glance**

Mzuni is one of Malawi’s four public universities and has five faculties one of which is the faculty of education, which is also the oldest and the largest. This faculty, despite being the oldest, has been confronted by many challenges including large classes. This faculty has very high student-teacher ratios that go well over 1:200, and sometimes even as far as 1:600. Such incongruent teacher-student ratios present serious challenges in the teaching and

learning processes. Often times, teaching is conducted in the main hall with an aid of a microphone and or loud speakers.



Mzuni students scrambling for lecture rooms

The problem of over-populated classes is further compounded by inadequate modern technologies such as Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), Liquid Crystal Displays (LCDs) and overhead projectors that would help support the lessons as Jere, et. al, (2016) observed.

Since higher education has become not only desirable but also necessary for the people worldwide, Mzuni’s undergraduate degree programmes are seen as the key to economic advancement. Every year, Mzuni admits hundreds of both generic and mature students into its various diploma and degree programmes particularly in the faculties of education, environmental sciences, hospitality management and tourism, arts and

humanities and sciences and technologies. This is in line with its five- year strategic plan (Mzuni, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The success or failure of an undergraduate student is determined by a variety of factors some of which are in direct control of the institution of higher learning. For instance, the rapid increase in enrolments in higher education has further taxed Malawi's under-resourced universities. Furthermore, while higher education is undergoing significant reforms in terms of increasing and broadening access, this has distended the already insurmountable challenges in the teaching and learning processes. In particular, many students, especially those studying through the ODL delivery mode, encounter enormous problems in the following broad areas:

Firstly, student education adjustment; social adjustment and financial adjustments. Secondly, student coping with course work and inability to meet deadlines for submitting assignments and quizzes. Thirdly, effective use of the Library and Learning Resource Centre and modern technologies since most of them are older and are non-digital natives. Thus, the need for faculty members to have some kind of knowledge and understanding of these factors and how such factors facilitate or impede the learning processes must not be ignored. In terms of Quality Assurance (QA), the question of how much is utilised in the teaching and learning processes of students' feedback information should also be considered as pivotal, and this is the reason this study was undertaken.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to examine student-teachers' perception on the challenges they encounter in their five-year teacher education degree programme offered through the ODL delivery mode at Mzuni in Malawi.

### **Specific Objectives**

The specific objectives of this study were in two-folds. That is to:

- Find out challenges that influence learning experiences of ODL students by age and gender.
- Solicit suggestions from the students on possible solutions to the educational and socio-economic challenges they encounter during the learning and teaching experiences by gender and age.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **The National Education Sector Plan (NESP) (2008 – 2017)**

In light of the Malawi Government's ten-year National Education Sector Plan (NESP) (2008-2017), new curricula at all levels of education systems have

been redeveloped and/or reviewed gearing the content for the local needs, and meeting the country's development agendas. For higher education, particularly the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), improving education quality, equity, relevance, access and efficiency for its citizenry have been one of the primary focuses. This concerns both young and mature students. A "mature student" is usually someone who has been out of school for at least one year or more and decides to go back to school at some point. Often, for the majority of them, this is done through ODL delivery mode. Conversely, questions regarding distance education and its meaning have often not been easy ones because of the complexities of the activities involved in various systems. However, according to Harry, Keith, et.al. (2006); Chibambo (2016) and Chibambo, (2017), distance education is defined as 'an interactive, educational process between two people, student and teacher, separated by physical distance.

Coincidentally, the Faculty of Education at Mzuni has this year doubled its first-year intake by enrolling 950 students to pursue a five-year educational degree programme which is being offered through the ODL delivery mode. What is unique in this case, is the fact that nowadays; adults can apply to attend universities as mature students irrespective of their many responsibilities and this has included lactating mothers who once were left out on the high education plan. Applications by mature students are nonetheless and oftentimes, evaluated differently from school-leavers though universities sometimes vary admission requirements. Moreover, many universities recognise that mature students should have more life experiences than younger students. These may include work experience, experience as a parent or independent learner and general outlook towards life and responsibilities. This is usually referred to as experiential learning (EL) in some universities.

Thus universities take into consideration experiences and any other academic credentials an individual applicant may have whenever enrolling them. That aside, mature students are oftentimes under immense internal and external pressures to succeed because of family, personal, social, cultural and employment issues. What is perhaps even more important is the fact that these students must do all these while competing with young students whose standards of previous education have been much higher than their counter parts. Even then, mature students in general, are not a homogenous group as they come from different cultural, social, political and economic backgrounds. Furthermore, their initial educational standards are varied as are the levels of the subjects/courses they take at the various universities.

Table 2: Bio-data of respondents by age  
*Age range of study sample of student teachers by gender*

Male students		Female students	
Below 30 years of age	Above 30 years	Below 30 years	Above 30 years
13 (13.8%)	44 (52.4%)	8 (0.10%)	19 (23.1%)
57 (69.5%)		27 (32.9%)	

N= 84

Therefore, as already alluded to, the ten-year NESP concept paper identified issues of expanding access, improving quality and relevance, and enhancing management and governance of the system as index goals of the overall national education sector strategic plan. To that end, the proposed interventions regarding higher education were sought to address the identified challenges in the context of these goals during the implementation period of the plan.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a qualitative research design. A causal study involving a sample drawn from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> year students’ cohorts at Mzuni was utilised. The research design was causal in nature since the researchers focused on one phenomenon to understand it deeply.

**Study Design**

The study focused on factors that influence student-teachers’ learning experiences especially in the universities in Malawi which have large enrolments in a single classroom. Sturman (1994:61) as cited in (Bassey, 1999:26) holds the view that, in order for a researcher to understand a case, to explain why things happen the way they do, and to generalise or predict from a single example, he/she requires an in-depth investigation of the interdependencies of the parts and of the patterns that emerge from the same. Based on this view, a sample of 15 students was selected using the purposeful sampling technique. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews because they were well-suited for exploring how people give meaning to their lived experiences.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected through in-depth interviews which were conducted during the 2 semesters of 2017 and 2018 Academic years involving nine male and six female students (N=15). A semi-structured interview guide was used, and it lasted about thirty minutes on average. Later, in order to supplement the earlier data obtained from the in-depth interviews, a questionnaire was also administered to a randomly selected sample of eighty-four (84) students composed of 57 males and 27 females.

**Data Analysis**

Basically, data was analysed thematically.

**Significance of the Study**

The paper focused on the challenges student-teachers face during the entire five-year initial teacher preparation degree programme. In particular, the study sought to find out factors that affect learning experiences of ODL students enrolled in universities with large enrolments at undergraduate level in a single class, and how mature students can be integrated into university life with minimal challenges. Adapting to higher education, perhaps after a gap in formal education, can lead to special needs, advice and support. Social integration is also a key issue in order for mature students to succeed and accomplish their goals once they are admitted in the universities. Hence, “*theories*” about adult learning and social adjustment/integration should be used as a framework for understanding students’ adjustment to higher educational systems in Malawi.

**Limitations of the Study**

Time pressures coupled with overload of teaching very large classes at the time of the study made it necessary for us to use smaller samples for in-depth interviews than had anticipated during the initial planning stage. Thus, the sample of the study was somehow biased and lacked true representation of the target population. However, in order to complement qualitative data due to time and context constraints, a questionnaire was also administered to a reasonable sizable sample of respondents (N= 84).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

***Challenges Faced By ODL Students In Higher Education Institutions In Malawi***

***Social adjustment:***

From the interview conducted with fifteen students, the following are some of the challenges they encountered:

Social interaction with the generic face to face (f2f) students and other students is not good since they are given derogatory names such as *Tchuwa* and other offensive names. As a result of this, they fail to approach these students for academic and technical assistance. On this, one female student narrated her ordeal:

*‘There is a poor relationship between us and face-to-face (generic) students at times.’*

***Accommodation***

There are limited lodging rooms within the campus and yet mature students are coming to the institution for the first time. Given this, they find it difficult to get suitable accommodation and be established. Moreover, some landlords and landladies tell them to pay rent for four months in advance yet these students only stay on the campus for one month. This then becomes a financial burden to them and makes them fail to get decent accommodation. Some students though, find places which are very far from

the campus making them report late for classes. This also makes them fail to utilise reading hours in the library especially at night as they rush to get home earlier before the night falls for their own safety. The following comments further support this view:

*'Off-campus accommodation rates are much higher than university's halls of resident thus making our life very unbearable. Some landlords simply take advantage of our plight and do charge exorbitant rental fees and even force us to pay for four months in advance well knowing we only stay on campus for a month or so.'*

### **Academic Challenges and Needs**

#### **Library services accessibility:**

Some said that they do not know how to use the internet and OPAC. As a result, the only source of information for their assignments and other tasks are printed books. Worse still, they also fail to get the much sought-after books and the modules in time since the library orientation was not adequate due to late reporting. Likewise, their inability to interact with the F2f generic students who are mostly familiar with the library systems and technologies make them fail to use these facilities effectively. Some students also said that they do not know how to type assignments using a computer and hence they get them typed at internet cafés where they pay handsomely, and this eats into their pockets. Relative to this, some students narrated:

*'Provision of E-modules should be re-visited since some of us live in remote areas where we cannot easily access the internet and computers.'*

#### **Lectures:**

Some students said that they did not understand the lectures especially during their early days. This was because of the speed of some lecturers and problems of accent. Since some students left school some years ago, it becomes so difficult for them to both listen and take notes at the same time while thinking about their families and personal problems. Regarding this, some students said:

*'Orientation period should be observed and made more rigorous by both lecturers and all concerned Administrative and Library staff.'*

Another student said:

*'Lecturers should observe orientation period to help students adapt to university teaching and learning environment.'*

#### **Financial constraints:**

Almost all the students interviewed said that they were financially handicapped because they had to divide their salary between school requirements and their families. For example, some students had this to say:

*'I find it very difficult to pay fees as well as support my family.'*

This becomes a real issue when the wife is not working and has more than two children going to secondary school who also need school fees. Because of poor finances, they become psychologically affected hence fail to adjust to the new environment. This then affects their performance particularly during their first semester experiences.

#### **Speed of performance:**

Many studies have shown that intellectual functions that depend heavily on speed of performance declines among older people (Salthous, (1985), as cited in Graig, (1989). Older people have slower reaction time, perceptual processing ability and cognitive process. They have less recent practice and are slower because they have not practiced a particular skill lately. Older people pick up information a little less. They have shorter perceptual span especially when two things are happening at the same time. They are only good at remembering meaningful and interesting materials but not otherwise. In addition, research has also shown that many of these problems are as a result of depression, inactivity and side effects of prescription of drugs. Hence, whenever cognitive power declines, there is also a decline in the speed of cognition processing.

#### **Employers' reaction on granting study leave:**

Most offices in which these students work did not succumb to the idea of granting them study leave. Instead, they were simply given unpaid leave and this aggravated their financial problems. Moreover, some officers deliberately delayed to grant them permission for study leave. As a result, they reported late for classes hence affecting their performance negatively as they could not catch up with their colleagues. In some cases, other students reported that they were dismissed by their employers because of asking for a study leave. This then hugely affected their studies in the process.

### **DISCUSSION**

This discussion is further based on the comments and observations obtained from the in-depth interviews with the participants and from the supplemented data from the semi structured questionnaires.

#### **Social adjustment and integration:**

In education, the total development of the students necessitates that individual differences among them are accepted, understood and planned for, and all types of experiences in an institution are so organised as to contribute to the total development of the individual student. According to Kochhar (2004, p.21) the far-fetched argument that, "all that students need in an educational institution is good teaching," is an exploded myth. Overall, students in this regard experienced some challenges as regards to finding

suitable accommodation, time management, and social demands such as anxiety of being far away from home. For mature students, the challenge was further compounded by the problem of trying to mix and interact with the young generic F2F students whose interests are not congruent with theirs.

### **Does age make a difference?**

In term of cognition in later years, there is remarkably little decline in intellectual functioning as a result of normal aging. Mental skills are not really affected by the age factor. However, Jenny Rogers (2007:37&38) points out that one of the ways in which children and adults differ is on short-term memory. She argues that as we grow older, our short-term memory capacity becomes less efficient and more easily disturbed. She further elaborates that what seems to happen is that our brains receive information and scan it for meaning in order to decode it at some point in the future. But, if this scanning stage is interrupted, the information never passes from short-term to long-term memory. Therefore, where learning is concerned, any method that relies too heavily on short-term memory is doomed to failure (ibid, p.38) and this could be the case with those ODL students who were of significant age.

### **Academic adjustment:**

Interestingly, in the question of academic challenges and needs, the following featured highly on the students' agenda:-

- Ability to follow lectures
- Use of library resources
- Use of computer facilities, and
- Coping with assignments load.

Undergraduate students are as diverse as the setting in which they are taught. Tummon, et.al. (2013:56) point out that students on a full-time foundation degree programme may have come straight from school (generic students) while students on ODL and Parallel Learning delivery modes may be returning to universities after some years away from formal schooling. Often, the latter are adults and also popularly known as mature students or colloquially known as 'Tchuwas'.

### **Financial commitment:**

Data obtained from the in-depth interviews revealed that many ODL students have serious financial challenges. Some of the reasons given were that the university demanded them to pay 50% of the total fees at the beginning of each semester. In addition to this, fees hikes are sometimes made in the middle of the academic year and this disrupts students' financial plans and budgets. As for mature students, the problem was even worse because they also had to support their families besides paying school fees. In addition, there was also the problem of

accommodation and upkeep. Currently, as a matter of policy, ODL students are not allowed to access Government Loans from the *National Higher Education Bursary and Loans Board* and this again is a setback as far as issues of social justice and fairness are concerned.

### **The Way Forward in Line with Students Suggestions**

Perhaps a crucial question to ask at this point is "*How can the conflicting demands of teaching and research for the lecturers be balanced?*" Smith and Brown (1999) asserted that university lecturers are currently under pressure to teach students; produce graduates who are attractive to employers and at the same time make unprecedented efforts to undertake meaningful research. However, 'good teaching is teaching which helps students learn' (ibid, p.27). Conversely, as Bryan, et.al (2006:2) argued, 'if we are to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our universities, we need to find out about the relative merits of the different techniques available to us in a changing world and of increased class sizes.'

Consequently, one would support and undoubtedly agree with Ekpiken (2015) who argued that higher educational institutions should impact in-depth knowledge and understanding so as to advance the students' new frontiers of knowledge in different walks of life. Further, it also helps students develop the ability to question and seek truth and makes them competent to critique and engage with contemporary issues. In addition to that, higher education does not broaden the intellectual powers of the individual within a narrow specialisation of subject domain but also gives individuals a wider perspective of the world around them (p. 77).

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, by examining the major issues obtained from student-teachers' perception on the challenges they encounter during their entire five-year initial teacher preparation degree programme, the results have showed that there is dire need to help students improve their study skills as Burns & Sinfield (2012) advocated. In addition, staff members also need to make deliberate efforts by helping students on the use of library resources, computer skills and time management. Furthermore, students should be oriented on financial management skills. Moreover, landlords should be engaged to ensure that they provide students with decent accommodation at a reasonable price and a flexible tenancy agreement. In addition to that, the generic F2F students should be engaged to collaborate with ODL and mature students on social and academic activities since both of them do the same degrees and are like kinsmen. Probably, the students union should draw its membership from both ODL and F2F students not the

current arrangement where the membership is only made of the F2F generic students.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

In view of the large class sizes, lecturers need to be acquainted with innovative teaching and assessment techniques in order for them to meet the needs of students with a wide range of cognitive abilities and age. Likewise, the Dean of students should assist all newly admitted students to find suitable accommodation near the university precincts as is done at the University of Malawi. In addition to this, both the government of Malawi and public universities should monitor gender equity as the current abysmal male-female ratio of 3:1 falls short of the 50:50 SADC Protocol on Gender Equality. Likewise, the National Loans Board should stop using punitive rules and being the catalyst for unfairness and injustices through its side-lining ODL and mature students in its loan disbursement programme since all students are legitimate citizens of Malawi and have the right to equal treatment. Most importantly, while the quest for increasing and broadening access to higher education for all the citizens is emphasised, quality assurance issues should also be prioritised if the fight for social justice is to be real.

### AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There is need to research on how the academic members of staff and the university as a whole use feedback information from the students at the end of each semester in support of QA. Similarly, studies are necessary to find out academic performance between mature undergraduate students and the generic students by gender.

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