PROCEEDINGS

St. Mary's University

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 12th OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SEMINAR (ODLS)

September 21, 2024
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Preface

We are pleased to present the proceedings of the 12th Open and Distance Learning Seminar, organized by the Research and Knowledge Management Office of St. Mary's University. This year's seminar, held on September 21, 2024, brought together scholars and practitioners from various institutions to explore the evolving landscape of open and distance education.

The seminar featured three insightful papers presented by esteemed academics from St. Mary's University, Debre Berhan University, and Wollega University. Each presentation contributed to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the field, fostering rich discussions and collaborative exchanges among participants.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the presenters for their valuable contributions and to the participants for their engagement and enthusiasm. Your presence and insights are what make this seminar a success. We hope that the discussions and findings shared here will inspire further research and innovation in open and distance learning.

Thank you for being a part of this important event, and we look forward to seeing the continued growth and impact of our collective efforts in the field.

Opening Remark, By Wondwosen Tamrat (PhD), Founder and President of St. Mary's University

Dear members of the university community
Invited guests
Paper presenters, chairpersons and rapporteurs of the day

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the 12th Open and Distance Learning Seminar. As you may all note, this seminar is a unique platform exclusively dedicated to open and distance learning which is a neglected field of study in many parts of the world and particularly in Ethiopia. Holding successive conferences on such a specialized area of study for more than ten years requires a lot of dedication and effort which RaKMO continues to exhibit.

Today, we have five research papers that dwell on the issues of:

- Quality assurance,
- Equality, diversity and inclusion,
- The challenges of conducting research and
- Assessment strategies in open and distance learning.

I am happy to note that this year's presenters are drawn from Debre Birhan University, Wollega University, Bahir Dar University and St. Mary's University.

I hope RaKMO will this this opportunity to strengthen the link between academicians and researchers working in private and public institutions.

It is also my belief that the seminar will grow further in terms of participants and presenters from within and outside of Ethiopia.

Once again, I would like to thank paper presenters and participants for taking their time to attend the seminar and hope you all a very successful day.

Thank you for your attention.

Quality Assurance (QA) in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

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Abstract

This paper sought for exploring the role and importance of quality assurance systems in open and distance learning mode. The article began with the introduction of the gradual development of quality assurance in general and proceeds with the definition and explanation of quality, quality assurance and purposes of quality assurance. The paper elaborated the concept of open and distance learning, quality imperative in open and distance learning, the role of quality assurance in open and distance learning, and the challenges and opportunities of quality assurance in open and distance learning. Lastly the paper stated the implication of Saint Mary"s University (SMU) in focusing on its open and distance learning division.

Key Words: Quality, Quality Assurance, Open and Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, there has been significant growth of quality assurance (QA) activities aimed at improving higher education on institutional, national, regional and global levels. Public and institutional stakeholders seeking accountability in higher education have encouraged governments to establish national quality assurance and accreditation agencies (Belawati and Zuhari, 2007).

Agencies, such as International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE), Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), typically work together and share information about quality standards, benchmarks and best practices (Belawati and Zuhari, 2007).

At national level, a number of quality assurance and accreditation agencies came into being in the past few years. For instance, Education and Training Authority (ETA) (formerly HERQA) in Ethiopia, Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) in Tanzania, National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Burundi, Higher Education Council (HEC) in Rwanda and National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Uganda plays the critical role for quality assurance not only at the national level but also at regional level in the auspices of the Inter- University Council for East Africa (IUCEA).

A number of terminologies have been developed and used to refer to similar ideals of improving the quality of higher education, such as quality assurance, quality assessment, quality improvement, and quality development (Harman, 2000; Brennan and Shah, 2000; Hopkin and Lee, 2000; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001).

With the increasing acceptance of ODL as widening access to education, it has become increasingly necessary that QA process will be developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and more functional that the products recognized in the conventional higher learning in emerging open learning environment (Olojede, 2008).

The ODL system, despite having been in place for quite sometimes, does not still command much respect and confidence to the general populace as the conventional learning system does. Hence, QA is an opportunity to build confidence to the stakeholders and to those who, in particular doubt that ODL system is inferior to the conventional system.

DEFINING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Any useful discussion on QA in higher education needs to begin by addressing the fundamental question ―what do we mean by quality?‖ The word ―quality‖ can be described in many different ways.

It is important to find appropriate ways to understand, define, and measure quality. The extreme meaning of quality, as stated by Pirsig (1974), is ―Quality cannot be defined. If you try to define it, you capture less than quality. The quality concept is beautiful. ―It is mysterious and individual, and shows internal goal in each creative person,‖ (p. 179). Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1993) defines quality as ―a degree of excellence‖, i.e. a term applicable to virtually anything. This meaning of quality is very subjective and varies from person to person. Quality is an elusive characteristic that defies precise definition. As the size of an organization and group grows, particularly in manufacturing, the definition of quality becomes more complex and confusing. Harvey and Green (1993a) developed a framework for categorizing various viewpoints on quality higher education. The five categories stated by them are as follows: (a) quality as exceptional, (b) quality as perfection or consistency,
(c) quality as fitness for purpose, (d) quality as value for money, and (e) quality as transformation. The descriptions of each definition of quality are discussed below.

Quality as exceptional is perhaps the oldest known and most widely regarded concept of higher education quality. In this regard, Harvey and Green (1993a) described exceptionality in three ways. Firstly, the exceptional can refer to an exclusive, elitist or ―high class‖ educational institution or system. Accessibility is limited and the few that are able to engage in such a system have a certain status, a stamp of quality, automatically conferred on them. Consequently, the idea that such a person received a quality education often goes unquestioned. Secondly, the exceptionality can also refer to excellence, meaning having extremely high standards which are unattainable by most. The focus in such institutions and systems is on attracting the best students and providing the best facilities and services from which quality (excellent results) then is believed to naturally flow. Such systems and institutions rely on their reputations for producing high achievers to attract more students and resources. Finally, the exceptionality can be viewed in terms of passing a set of required standards. The institution or program is assessed against established standards for their inputs and outputs and given a seal of approval if they are found in conformity.

The second category, *quality as perfection or consistency*, has its origins in the manufacturing industry (Green, 1994). Instead of looking at inputs and outputs, the concept focuses directly on processes. The emphasis is on meeting predefined and measurable specifications. Effort is expended in minimizing ―defects‖ through strict conformance to specifications. The aim is for ―zero defects‖ which are applied to higher education. This concept is related to conformance to the policies and procedures in an effort to ensure consistent (quality) results. Institutions that can demonstrate little or no deviation from the guidelines specified in their own operational guides or by reputable external agencies are regarded as quality institutions. The third category, *quality as fitness for purpose*, is based on the idea of structure matching function. According to Harvey and Green (1993a), this concept varies depending on the stakeholder group. Students and employers have certain expectations of higher education. When these expectations are met, the education is viewed as fit for its purpose and, therefore, is deemed as quality. Institutions try to ensure fitness for their expressed mission. Governments, on the other hand, may be concerned not only with fitness for purpose, but also with more fundamental fitness of purpose, that is, the fitness of the institution's purpose to the social and economic needs of the country. In other words, an institution might judge itself to be of quality because it is meeting the mission and goals it sets for itself and its students; however, another measure of quality for which the institution may be judged is the extent to which the institution is helping to achieve larger, perhaps national goals In other words, the relevance of the institution's goals are part and parcel to the national goals.

The fourth category, quality as value for money, has also its origins in the private sector. Public funding supports higher education to varying degrees in different countries. As fiscal constraints and demands for social programs grow, there is increased external pressure on educational institutions to be transparent and efficient in their use of public funds. Furthermore, as institutions start to rely more heavily on funding sources, such as tuition, students and their parents tend to become more critical about the returns on their investments. Thus, governments may regard a quality institution as one that is able to serve increasing numbers of students with stable or even declining revenues. The institutions may add financial sustainability as one aspect of a quality program and refuse to offer those that draw on resources from other areas. The parents and students may be factoring in services and amenities into their concepts of quality and ultimately into their final decision on choice of institution.

Harvey and Green's final category, *quality as transformation*, sets aside ideas about exceptionality, perfection, fitness and efficiency and focuses directly on the outcomes of education, specifically the graduate. Quality is seen as enhancing or empowering the participant. The idea is that true quality is determined by measuring the value added to the students as a result of the educational experience. This transformation may be measured by an increase in the knowledge and skills or improvements in behaviors, values or attitudes of the students. In this view, a quality institution or educational program is the one that is able to transform the knowledge, skills, behaviors, values and attitudes of its students in ways that are regarded as relevant and desirable

by the institution, society, students or parents.

Harvey and Green (1993b) found that even though stakeholders differ in their primary views on quality, there were still a number of commonalities. For example, the majority of stakeholders agreed that the following components are essential to quality: (a) clear aims and objectives; (b) adequate physical and human resources; (c) relevant subject content and (d) valid, fair and objective assessments. Participants in the study also mentioned that providing them with transferable knowledge and skills is essential. The authors came to the following conclusion: ―The best that can be achieved is to define, as clearly as possible, the criteria used by each interest group when judging quality and for those competing views to be considered when assessments of quality are undertaken‖ (Harvey and Green, 1993b, Para. 9).
The literature shows that the definition of quality varies greatly. In this paper, quality is conceived within this broad context. However, in Ethiopian context quality mostly refers to fitness for purpose. This definition carries the assumption of sufficiency, efficiency, and effectiveness of the program or institution and of the learning-teaching process. For example, quality is defined in terms of the institution fulfilling its own stated objectives or missions.

Quality Assurance (QA)

QA has become an international issue since the early 1990s (Craft, 1994), and educational policy makers are worried about quality and its measurements. There are several methods to QA, and they are seen at the organizational structure rather than that of individual activities. Concerning this, many writers proposed a definition of QA.

Gilbert (1992, p.32), for example, defined QA as ―the assembly of all functions and activities that bear upon the quality of a product or service so that all are treated equally, planned, controlled and implemented in a systematic manner.‖ According to Harman (1998), QA in the context of higher education refers to the systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by a higher education institution or system to monitor performance and ensure achievement of quality outputs or improved quality.

Vroeijenstijn (1995, p. xviii) defined QA as ―the systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and quality improvement.‖ Harman and Meek (2000, p. 5) described QA as ― the processes of on-going review, assessing and monitoring that should be applied to all recognized providers in order to ensure that courses and awards are of a high standard and that institutional monitoring of performance is effective,‖ (as cited in Haji-Ahmad, 2007). Harvey and Green (1993, p.19) defined QA as ―ensuring that there are mechanism, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered.

Other definitions are also associated with QA as processes or procedures more than outcomes (Cuttance, 1994). Some of the definitions for QA have double-sided characters: fitness for the purpose and continuous enhancement. However, according to Hodson and Harold (2003), the purpose for fitness tended to have become a more preferable definition of quality assurance as compared to the continuous enrichment. Brennan (1997), as an example, is not in favor of the phrase ―Quality Assurance‖. Brennan is rather in favor of the world ―quality assessment‖; however, Harman and Meek (2000) claimed that QA is normally considered a larger world which goes well beyond assessment. Harman and Meek stated that QA covers other actions, such as delivery of assessment outcomes to beneficiaries and follows up efforts aimed to achieve improvement. Harman and Meek were aware of a lot of efforts in QA as it relates to quality assessment. According to Woodhouse (1996), the definition of QA offered by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) seems to be very appropriate: QA may be related to a program, an institution or a whole higher education system. In each case, QA is all of those attitudes, objects, actions, and procedures which, through their existence and use, and together with the quality control activities, ensure that appropriate academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in the program, institution or system, and this, in

turn, makes known to the educational community and the public at large. The quality assurance practice models in higher education reflect a variety of quality management practices. The literature suggests that QA comes in various forms, such as a voluntary accreditation, quality audit and assessment, Total Quality Management (TQM), and the ISO 9000 QA model.

Overall, the meaning of QA itself depends on contextual purpose and on the definition of what is being examined. From the definitions above, it can be implied that QA system documents procedures with the aim of ensuring that the overall process meets specified objectives and it demonstrates that quality is a managed outcome.

Many systems make a distinction between internal quality assurance (i.e., intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external quality assurance, i.e. inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assuring the quality of higher education institutions and programs.

COMMON PURPOSES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE (QA)

There are diverse magnitudes and variations in International QA Systems depending on their perceived purposes (Kells, 1995). According to him, the common purposes of QA are accountability, enhancement of education, resource management, state of transparency, and authority figure.

The first purpose of QA is *accountability*. Van-Damme (2000) pointed out that accountability is the principal rationale for introducing quality assurance into education sector. The second purpose of QA is *enhancement* of education as the main purpose of the QA process. Harvey (1998) and Van-Damme (2000) described enhancement of education as the key purpose of the QA process. The third purpose of QA is *resource management.*Van-Damme (2000) proposed that some countries distribute funds and other resources by studying quality indicators of potential institutions. Van-Damme added that decision-making processes pertaining to managing academic programs also depend on this function of quality assurance. *Transparency* is the fourth purpose of QA. This purpose emphasizes the rights of the public and of potential customers, such as students and employers to know detailed information on performance of educational institutions pertaining to quality standards, academic success rates and learning and teaching facilities.

The fifth purpose of QA is playing a role as *an authority figure*. Harvey and Newton (2004) explained the two authority functions of QA processes. First, the government in charge of the QA processes can play a role of an authority figure by controlling the education system and restricting uncontrolled growth. According to Harvey and Newton, this is achieved either by financial control or by using the outcomes of quality monitoring to encourage or restrict growth. Second, the authorities desire to control the status, legitimacy and standing of institutions within the education system.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

ODL was first known as ―Distance Learning‖ before it became ―Open and Distance Learning‖; indeed, the concept ―Distance Learning‖ was emerged from the idea of ―Distance Education‖ which came from ―Correspondence Education‖ which itself arose from ―Non-formal Education‖.

The Commonwealth of Learning, COL (2005), argued that there is no one definition of open and distance learning. Rather, as to COL (2005) and Keegan (1986), there are many approaches to define the term. Most definitions; however, pay attention to the following characteristics:

- Separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or in both time and place;

- Institutional accreditation; that is, learning is certified by some institution or agency;

- Use of mixed-media courseware, including print, radio and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning, and telecommunications;
- Two-way communication allows learners and tutors to interact as distinguished from the passive receipt of broadcast signals;
- Possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials, learner–learner interaction, library study, and laboratory or practice sessions, and
- Use of industrialized processes; that is, in large-scale open and distance learning operations; labor is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who works together in course development teams.

In its broad sense, Farrell (2003) insisted that open distance education embraces open learning, distance education, flexible learning, online and e-learning, and virtual education. According to him, open learning practices allow entry learning with no or minimum barriers in respect of gender, age, etc. Distance learning, on the other hand, deals with training or teaching people who are separated by time and space from their teachers utilizing certain mediating processes to transmit learning content. Flexible learning involves providing learning opportunities which can be accessed at any time and place with much emphasis on scheduling of activities than to any specific mode of delivery. Online and e-learning are terms used to describe applications of ICTs to boost distance education and implement open learning policies among others while virtual learning combines both online and e-learning but it is web-centric and not limited to learners outside conventional learning setting.

Thus, distance learning can be defined as a hybrid type of learning, combining the latest technology with traditional forms of learning. The main advantage of distance learning over full- time education is, first of all, its convenience: the student himself chooses the time and place for training, which allows him to work or study full-time in another city or even country. In addition, the replacement of lecture notes with electronic resources and the latest teaching methods as well as constant consultation with the teacher who gives this form of self-education are additional advantages over distance-learning. Analyzing the scientific literature, we can see that researchers emphasize the convenience of distance learning and highlight its many advantages over other forms of learning, namely:

- The opportunity to study at any time;
- The opportunity to study at their own pace;
- The opportunity to study anywhere. Students can study from the comfort of their home or office anywhere in the world. To start learning, all you need is a device with Internet access;
- High results of training. According to researches of American scientists, results of distance learning are not inferior or even superior to results of traditional forms of education, though a great part of educational material is studied by students independently;
- Mobility. Communication with teachers and tutors is carried out in different ways: both online and offline;
- Individual approach. With traditional teaching, it is difficult for the teacher to pay the necessary attention to all members of the group, to adjust to the pace of learning of each of them. The use of distance learning technologies is suitable for the organization of an individual approach. The student himself chooses the pace of learning, he can quickly get answers to all questions from the teacher, and
- Convenience for the teacher. Teachers, tutors, and teachers engaged in distance learning can pay more attention to the students and work even if for some reasons, they have to be at home.

QUALITY IMPERATIVE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LERNING (ODL)

Quality improvement becomes imperative for ODL providers and governments have established quality agencies to improve the quality of educational practices. Pressures for quality improvement have emerged from both internal and external parties. Internally, ODL institutions are being challenged to undertake continuous improvement from within. Externally, stakeholders who are users, consumers, and educational funders are persistently questioning quality, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency of educational endeavors in which they are interested. Moreover, for many ODL institutions, funding and student enrolment levels depend on quality of their bottom line performance and the quality of the services they offer (Belawari, 2005).

The principal responsibility for quality assurance rests on the institution themselves and not on the accreditation bodies as they do at present. In other words, it is in the interest of the institutions themselves to carry out periodic audits of their programs in which they identify their strengths and weaknesses. Periodic audits should cover teaching effectiveness, assessment of courses and teaching, textbooks facilities, e-learning facilities, and capacity development. The purpose of institutional periodic audit is to institutionalize self-regulation and ensure continuous improvement and innovation.

There are many factors that may be considered for the improvement of the management strategy of distance education programs in order to achieve higher quality. Several literatures have stated that the major aspects, to which good attention should be paid, in a distance education delivery mode, include the following:

- Admission requirements and procedures,
- Development and production of instructional materials,
- Structure and management of the delivery system,
- Student assessment procedures,
- Quality of materials used for teaching and promotion of learning,
- Problem of assessment of the effectiveness of an individual distance education facilitation since distance education has the element of quasi-bureaucratization (teamwork),
- The student support services,
- Monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms, and
- Availability of adequate human and material resources for the operation of the program.

This is not far from Egbokhare's (2006) identification of quality of staff environment of instruction, content of instruction, student support services, culture of quality, management by processes and facts, continuous learning and improvement, quality of instruction and feedback from clients, and consumers of products as the basis of QA (Olojede, 2008).

Quality Assurance (QA) in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

QA in ODL institutions has gained serious attention by institutions, stakeholders and scholars since 1990s. Institutions have in response to quality assurance line of inquiry, begun to re-define and re-orient their institutional missions, strategies, and visions to incorporate and address quality issues. QA has now reached an important turning point and influencing ODL institution's management strategies and cultures. Indeed, quality assurance in ODL is an issue that has received considerable attention of lateness (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004; Steyn and Schulze, 2003; and Olojode, 2008). Much more than the increasing numbers of applicants, there are also other reasons, such as change in work place and employment dynamics, and the majority of people in developing countries, for instance, start work after the professional courses taken at secondary education because the cost of education and opportunities are available for low income earners in industries (Olojede, 2008).

The quality of course delivery influences the quality of the learning which, in turn, permits the identification of criteria for quality delivery (Hunt, 1998). In the ODL setting, therefore, it becomes a question of getting appropriate QA processes in place and administering them concerning both the conventional education and ODL, which include, for example, contents of the course, learning and teaching materials, accreditation of programs, and issue of quality in certificate awarded.

Clearly, quality in ODL covers a number of aspects, which along with the physical products; include pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997). Quality of products include course materials, number of graduates, examination pass rates, admission in further studies, and so forth. Quality of processes covers areas, such as learning and teaching processes, advising students, coordinating external courses and test item writers, networking with regional offices, and managing student information. Quality of production and delivery systems includes course production, print and multimedia production, test item production, scheduling, warehousing and stock control, getting materials to students, and broadcast transmissions. Quality of philosophy covers, such things as ODL vision, mission and policy statements, institutional culture, governance, corporate culture, and public image (COL, 1997). In terms of products, the quality of ODL varies from one institution to anotherdepending on priorities, resources, size, and the student body of which it aims to serve (COL, 1997).

ODL in higher education institutions is under increasing pressure to meet students' demands for flexibility, as the students have increasingly diverse background and needs. To meet this challenge, innovation in flexibility and mode of delivery is essential. Innovation in ODL assumes that new techniques will help individual institutions to achieve their aims in terms of concrete access, cost, quality, and flexibility (Daniel, 1999). In this context, technology becomes a vital tool in ODL.

QUALITY ASSURANCE (QA) in OPEN and DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) SPACE in AFRICA: CHALLENGES in Focus

The inability to learn while at work is one reason why distance learning is not as effective as full time immersion in a learning community. Leaning is most effective when it is a student's full time job (Egbokhare, 2006 as quoted in Rosenfield, 2000). This is the reason why the quality of programs must be maintained in order to at least produce a justified learning outcome. Among the main challenges facing the ODL in developing countries includes:

- Lack of national ODL policy,
- Lack of national QA framework,
- Lack of awareness on ODL due to its infancy nature in most countries,
- Lack of adequate funding/support from the Government,
- Lack of proper ICT infrastructure to support the ODL system, and
- Absence of adequate expertise on ODL.

It is, therefore, essential that a national policy on ODL is formulated by governments. This will assist in the accreditation and quality assurance of the ODL programs, which in recent times, is coming out in excess and proliferation as a result of various institutions introducing ODL programs from within and outside individual countries. It is high time that appropriate structures were put in place to facilitate due processes on ethics, standards and curriculum development. It is important to note that the personnel who are used for regular programs are also used for the ODL, for the success of ODL. Therefore, they are factors to be reckoned with. They must be adequately empowered so that they would give in their best and the products of ODL would cease to be seen as inferior to those produced in the conventional system of education. Lastly, students in ODL should be given opportunity to think, reflect, challenge and engage in dialogue with their lectures through effective student support services whenever the opportunity arises (Olojede, 2008).

Quality Assurance (QA) in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Space in Africa:

Opportunities

The ODL system, despite having been in place for quite sometimes, does not still command much respect and confidence to the general populace as the conventional learning system does; hence, QA is an opportunity to build confidence to the stakeholders and more in particular the doubting those who think that ODL system is inferior to conventional system. ODL institutions have intelligent entities capable of making choices determine their direction and plan for their betterment. Priority number one for any ODL institution is its survival in the competing world of higher learning. Intelligent ODL institutions transcend this goal by striving not only to survive but also to do so well. An ODL institution cannot achieve this goal if it ignores QA. This is an area that shapes and sharpens ODL institutional intelligence as such QA presents a great opportunity to an ODL institution to place itself better in the context of higher education not only within the country but also beyond its territorial borders.

Implications for Saint Mary's University (SMU)

In an effort to provide quality education, SMU has undertaken numerous QA activities to assess and assure quality education at the University. It is the first higher education institution to conduct Institutional Quality Audit which was accomplished in 2004. SMU has a well formulated QA Policy. The policy details the different QA policy issues and mechanisms which SMU has set in place to ensure that the academic processes are of the highest quality. A well- structured governance system has been put in place from top to down. In this regard, there is,a Senate Standing Committee Curriculum and Quality Assurance with the prime purpose of giving strategic direction, and oversees matters related to QA across the various units/offices and departments of the University; Center for Educational Improvement and Quality Assurance (CEIQA) to spearheaded the total quality management system of the University and manages the implementation of University-wide QA activities based on policies and guidelines ; and Quality Enhancement Committees(QECs) at faculty, department levels and administrative units to enhance quality activities at grassroots level with assistance and support of CEIQA.

College of Open and Distance Learning (CODL) of the University was launched in 2000 as Distance Education Division (DED) focusing on Business and Law Fields of studies. Since then the College has been making a speedy growth providing diversified programs to distance learners who wish to pursue their education in various fields of studies via its regional offices and coordinating centers which are located throughout the country.

It seems most of the activities to assure quality mainly focused on the conventional Teaching-Learning, whereas the peculiarities of ODL appear not properly assessed. Therefore, it is high time that appropriate structures were put in place to facilitate due processes on work ethics, standards and curriculum development. It is important to note that since the personnel being used for regular programs are also been used for the ODL, for success of ODL, therefore, they are factors to reckon with. They must be adequately empowered so that they would give in their best and the products of ODL would cease to be seen as inferior to those produced in the conventional system of education. There is also competition for resources especially in dual mode institutions where priority is given to in campus fulltime students. Even where ODL program generates its own income, it goes to a common pool from which it is not easy to get equipment or money for capital development in ICT infrastructure.

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Promoting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Open and Distance Learning: Challenges and Opportunities in Modern Education: The Case of North Shewa Zone, Amhara Region

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Abstract

This study investigated the promotion of equality, diversity, and inclusion in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in North Shewa Zone, Amhara Region. Education systems worldwide which increasingly adopt ODL ensured that these platforms are accessible and inclusive for all learners. This research focused on the ways ODL can foster equality and diversity in education while addressing the challenges faced by learners from various socio-economic, gender, and disability backgrounds. Using a mixed-method approach, the study explored the experiences of ODL students in the region, examining barriers, such as technological access, curriculum design, and institutional support. The study also aimed to identify strategies and opportunities for improving the inclusivity of ODL programs in the region. This included analyzing how the flexibility of ODL platforms could enhance learning opportunities for marginalized groups and exploring how instructional design can better integrate diverse learning needs. Furthermore, the research examined the role of educational institutions and educators in creating a more inclusive learning environment. Findings from this study contributed to the understanding of how ODL can be leveraged to promote educational equity in resource-constrained regions. It also provided valuable insights for policymakers and institutions in developing inclusive ODL frameworks that addressed the needs of all learners. By focusing on North Shewa Zone, the research highlighted specific regional challenges and proposed tailored solutions to enhance equality, diversity, and inclusion in education through ODL.

Key words: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Equality in Education, Diversity and Inclusion, Educational Barriers, North Shewa Zone

Introduction

In the contemporary educational landscape, the pursuit of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has become a focal point of educational reform efforts worldwide. The advent of ODL provides unique opportunities to extend access to education beyond the traditional classroom, particularly for marginalized and underserved communities. However, despite its potential to democratize education, significant challenges remain in ensuring that ODL is fully inclusive and equitable for all learners. This is especially true in regions such as North Shewa Zone in the Amhara Region, where cultural, social, and economic factors shape access to educational opportunities (Kulal, et al., 2024).

ODL has emerged as a critical tool for expanding access to education, offering flexible learning opportunities for individuals who may face barriers to traditional educational models. These barriers include geographic isolation, financial constraints, and social inequalities, all of which are prevalent in regions like North Shewa. The ability of ODL to transcend these limitations makes it an attractive model for promoting EDI in education. In the context of North Shewa, where rural populations often have limited access to educational infrastructure, ODL provides a promising alternative to bridge the educational divide (OER, Social Justice, and Online Professional Development to Enhance Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at a University, 2022).

In particular, ODL is positioned to empower marginalized groups, such as women, people with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students who often face systemic barriers to education in traditional settings. By removing the need for physical attendance and offering greater flexibility, ODL creates new pathways for these groups to engage in learning. However, achieving true inclusivity in ODL is a complex challenge that requires addressing not only access but also the quality and relevance of the education provided (Ludago, 2020).

Despite its potential, there are significant challenges to promote EDI in ODL, particularly in the North Shewa Zone. One of the primary challenges is the digital divide, which limits access to technology and reliable internet connectivity for many learners. Rural areas in North Shewa often lack the infrastructure necessary to support online learning, making it difficult for students to participate fully in ODL programs. This issue disproportionately affects low-income households and marginalized groups, perpetuating existing inequalities in access to education (Wijeratne, et al., 2022).

In addition to technological barriers, cultural factors also play a role in hindering EDI in ODL. In traditional communities within North Shewa, social norms and expectations often dictate educational opportunities, especially for women and girls. Gender disparities in education remain a persistent issue, with many girls facing pressure to prioritize household responsibilities over their studies. These societal dynamics can limit the ability of ODL to foster inclusivity unless deliberate efforts are made to challenge these norms and encourage equal participation for all learners (Uzza, et al., 2022).

Moreover, there are pedagogical challenges associated with ODL that impacts the inclusivity of the learning experience. The one-size-fits-all approach that is often adopted in distance education can overlook the diverse needs of learners, particularly those with disabilities or specific learning requirements. Tailoring ODL to accommodate different learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds is essential for creating an inclusive learning environment. In the context of North Shewa, where students come from a wide range of socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this challenge is particularly acute (Iniesto & Bossu, 2023).

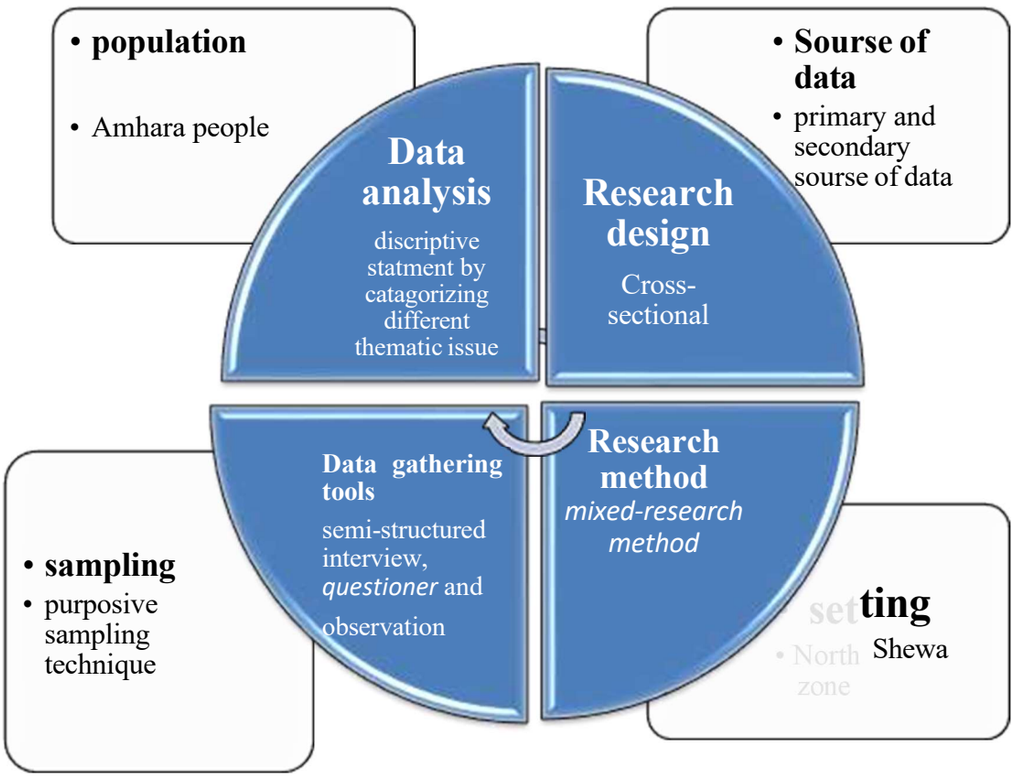
While the challenges are significant, there are also numerous opportunities to enhance EDI in ODL in North Shewa. One key opportunity lies in leveraging technology to create more inclusive and accessible learning environments. For instance, the use of mobile learning platforms, which require less bandwidth and can operate on basic devices, can help bridge the digital divide. Additionally, efforts to improve internet infrastructure and increase access to affordable devices are crucial for

ensuring that all learners can participate in ODL(Matsieli & Mutula, 2024).

Another opportunity is the development of culturally responsive curricula that reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of learners in North Shewa. By incorporating local languages, traditions, and knowledge systems into ODL programs, educators can create more relevant and engaging learning experiences that resonate with students. This approach not only enhances inclusion but also fosters a sense of belonging and pride among learners (Ikebuchi, 2023).

Policy initiatives at both the regional and national levels also present an opportunity to promote EDI in ODL. Governments and educational institutions can play pivotal roles in implementing policies that prioritize inclusivity in distance education, such as providing scholarships or financial support for marginalized students and ensuring that ODL platforms are accessible to individuals with disabilities. Collaborative efforts between educational institutions, local communities, and non-governmental organizations can further strengthen these initiatives, creating a more supportive and inclusive educational ecosystem (Iniesto & Bossu, 2023).

Methodology of the Study



Results and Discussions of the Study

Theme 1: Technological Barriers and the Digital Divide

Many respondents highlighted limited access to technological tools and reliable internet as the primary obstacles to fully participating in ODL programs. In rural areas, access to affordable internet and technological devices was especially challenging, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, such as women and low-income students. The lack of infrastructure and affordable technology poses a significant barrier to achieving equality and inclusion in ODL programs. The research shows that while ODL theoretically provides educational opportunities to all, the digital divide perpetuates existing social inequalities.

—Data gathered from semi-structured interviews from principals and teachers indicate that over 70% of the students in remote areas lacked consistent access to the internet or devices needed to participate in ODL programs."

Theme 2: Cultural and Social Norms Affecting Access to ODL

Cultural norms in rural North Shewa limit educational access, particularly for women. Social pressures often prioritize household responsibilities over education for girls, leading to significant gender disparities in ODL participation.

Traditional expectations regarding gender roles in education negatively impact girls' engagement with ODL. In addition, language barriers and cultural biases can alienate learners, especially those from non-dominant linguistic or cultural backgrounds.

> *"Surveys show that 60% of female students felt pressure to abandon or limit their studies due to societal expectations, while educational officers reported that cultural biases against distance learning existed in many communities."*

Theme 3: Pedagogical Challenges and Inclusivity

The standard ODL approach tends to follow a one-size-fits-all model, which overlooks the diverse needs of learners, particularly students with disabilities and those from various socio- economic backgrounds.

The current ODL programs lack adaptive learning technologies and fail to consider the different learning needs of students. This contributes to a gap in achieving full inclusion, as ODL often fails to accommodate those with specific learning disabilities or unique educational needs.

—Interviews with educational leaders show that less than 20% of ODL programs had accommodations for students with special needs."

Theme 4: Institutional and Policy Support

While policies exist to promote inclusivity in education, there is a gap in the implementation and enforcement of these policies in the context of ODL. Many educational institutions lack the resources and guidelines necessary to make ODL accessible to all.

Institutional support is a key to ensure that marginalized students are not left behind. However, there is little evidence of robust policy frameworks or institutional structures designed to promote ODL accessibility in the North Shewa Zone.

—The educational institutions surveyed, only 30% of ODL programs had formal policies in place for accommodating students with disabilities in ODL programs."

Theme 5: Opportunities for Promoting *of ODL EDI*

Technological advancements like mobile learning platforms offer an opportunity to enhance access to education, especially in remote areas. Furthermore, local communities and educational institutions could collaborate to develop culturally relevant curricula. Leveraging technology and community-based learning models could address the digital divide and cultural barriers. Efforts to improve access to affordable technology and mobile platforms that function with lower bandwidth could help bridge the gap.

> *"The respondents from government offices suggested that improving internet infrastructure and increasing access to affordable mobile devices would significantly improve ODL inclusivity. Around 65% of the respondents believed that with the support of the government, mobile learning could provide a solution to the technological barriers faced by rural communities."*

Theme 6: Impact of ODL on Marginalized Communities

ODL has provided new educational opportunities for marginalized groups, but significant barriers

still exist. Women and students from low-income families remain the most affected by a lack of access to resources and education due to their social and economic circumstances. While ODL can play a crucial role in closing the education gap without addressing the broader socio- economic issues, the impact on marginalized groups remains limited. Focused interventions are needed to support these groups in overcoming these barriers. *"Surveys show that nearly 50% of the respondents from economically disadvantaged backgrounds struggled to maintain regular participation in ODL due to financial constraints."*

Theme 7: The Role of Educators in Promoting Inclusivity

This section examines how educators contribute to promoting EDI in ODL. Teachers and facilitators played a crucial role in ensuring that ODL is inclusive. However, many educators have lacked the training needed to deliver inclusive education through ODL platforms. There is a need for capacity building among educators to ensure they are equipped with the necessary skills and tools to foster an inclusive learning environment. This includes training in technology use, culturally responsive pedagogy, and inclusive teaching strategies.

"Approximately 70% of the educators reported that they had not received adequate training in inclusive teaching practices for ODL."

Theme 8: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To improve the effectiveness of ODL in promoting EDI, there needs to be a concerted effort to address technological, cultural, and institutional barriers. Policy reforms should have focused on improving access to technology, developing inclusive curricula, and providing professional development for educators to ensure that ODL is accessible to all.

—Respondents from regional education offices emphasized the importance of government and NGO collaboration to provide resources and support for inclusive ODL programs."

Conclusion

The study highlights the significant potential of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the North Shewa Zone, Amhara Region. ODL offers a flexible and accessible alternative to traditional education, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, individuals with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. However, the research also reveals persistent challenges that hinder the full realization of ODL's inclusive potential.

Key barriers include technological limitations, such as the lack of access to affordable internet devices particularly in rural areas. This digital divide disproportionately affects marginalized groups, perpetuating existing social inequalities. Cultural and social norms, especially those related to gender roles, further restrict access to education for women and girls, while the one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach of ODL programs fails to address the diverse needs of learners, particularly those with disabilities or from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Despite these challenges, the study identifies several opportunities for enhancing EDI in ODL. Technological advancements, such as mobile learning platforms that require less bandwidth, and the development of culturally responsive curricula, provide promising solutions for bridging the digital divide and overcoming cultural barriers. Moreover, there is a critical need for policy reforms and institutional support to ensure that ODL platforms are accessible and inclusive, particularly for marginalized groups.

To achieve true inclusivity, focused interventions are required, including improving internet infrastructure, providing access to affordable devices, and equipping educators with the skills necessary to deliver inclusive education. Collaborative efforts between the government, educational institutions, NGOs, and local communities will be essential in addressing these barriers and creating a more equitable educational ecosystem. Ultimately, ODL has the potential to transform education in the North Shewa Zone, but it must be supported by comprehensive strategies that address both the technological and socio-cultural challenges that hinder full participation.

Recommendations

For the Government:

- Improve Internet Infrastructure: The government should prioritize expanding internet connectivity and technological infrastructure in rural and remote areas of North Shewa Zone. This will bridge the digital divide and ensure that marginalized groups have reliable access to ODL platforms.
- Provide Financial Support: Introduce scholarship programs, subsidies, and financial assistance for low-income students and marginalized groups to ensure they can afford the necessary technology and resources for participating in ODL.
- Policy Implementation and Enforcement: Strengthen the implementation and enforcement of policies that promote inclusivity in ODL. This includes mandating accessibility features on ODL platforms and ensuring schools follow guidelines for accommodating students with disabilities.
- Collaboration with NGOs: Facilitate partnerships with NGOs to provide resources and technical support to schools and communities for the successful implementation of inclusive ODL programs.

For Educational Institutions:

- Capacity Building for Educators: Institutions should invest in training educators on inclusive teaching practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the effective use of ODL platforms. This will ensure that teachers are equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of students.
- Develop Inclusive Curricula: Schools should design curricula that reflect the socio- cultural diversity of students, incorporate local languages and traditions to make learning more relevant and accessible.
- Adopt Adaptive Learning Technologies: Institutions should integrate adaptive learning technologies that cater to students with disabilities and different learning needs, ensuring ODL platforms are inclusive for all learners.
- Support Students with Disabilities: Schools should implement formal policies for supporting students with disabilities in ODL programs by providing them with the necessary accommodations, resources, and support systems.

For Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

- Provide Technological Resources: NGOs should collaborate with the government and educational institutions to supply affordable technological devices such as tablets, smartphones, and laptops to students in remote and underserved areas.
- Promote Capacity Building: NGOs can offer workshops, training, and materials to support teachers and educational leaders in delivering inclusive and effective ODL programs.

- Develop Community-Based Learning Centers: Establish community-based learning hubs with access to technology and internet services in rural areas, providing students with a space to participate in ODL programs even without home access.
- Support Local Initiatives: Engage in efforts to promote culturally responsive education by working with local communities and educational institutions to design curricula that align with the cultural context of the students.

For Local Communities

- Encourage Equal Participation: Community leaders and members should actively encourage the participation of all students, especially girls and marginalized groups, in ODL programs by challenging traditional gender roles and cultural barriers to education.
- Support Local Learning Centers: Communities should collaborate with educational institutions and NGOs to establish local learning centers equipped with internet access and technology, ensuring students can engage in ODL.
- Raise Awareness: Local communities can play a key role in raising awareness about the importance of education for all, including the value of ODL in providing flexible learning opportunities for marginalized groups.
- Foster Collaboration with Educators: Parents and community leaders should maintain open communication with teachers and educational institutions to ensure that students' needs are being met and to support the overall success of ODL initiatives in their area.

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An Assessment of Strategies in Enhancing Student Success: A Critical Meta- Analysis to Inform Policy and Practice in Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract

In the dynamic landscape of education, the effectiveness of assessment strategies plays a pivotal role in shaping student success. This meta-analysis critically examined the existing assessment practices to offer insights that could inform both policy and pedagogical approaches. The study systematically synthesized a diverse body of research, encompassed various educational levels and disciplines, and identified key factors influencing the students" outcomes. The analysis began by exploring the multifaceted dimensions of assessment and acknowledging the evolving nature of educational paradigms. It delved into traditional assessment methods, such as examinations and standardized testing while scrutinizing innovative approaches like project-based assessments, formative assessments, and technology-enhanced evaluations. By adopting a critical lens, the meta-analysis assessed the strengths and limitations of each strategy, considered their impact on the student engagement, motivation, and long-term retention of knowledge. Furthermore, the meta-analysis investigated the influence of socio-economic and cultural factors on assessment outcomes recognized the importance of creating inclusive and equitable evaluation processes. It explored how personalized assessment approaches accommodated diverse learning styles and foster a more comprehensive understanding of the students' capabilities. The findings of this meta-analysis contributed valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to optimize assessment practices. Recommendations include a call for a more balanced approach to assessment that combined traditional and innovative methods, and acknowledged the unique needs of individual learners. The meta-analysis also underscored the importance of continuous feedback and formative assessment in promoting the students" growth throughout their educational journey. In conclusion, this critical meta-analysis served as a comprehensive resource for stakeholders in education, offered evidence-based recommendations to enhance assessment strategies for improved student success. By bridging the gap between the research and practice, this study provided a foundation for the development of informed policies and pedagogical practices that aligned with the evolving needs of 21st-century learners.

Key words: Assessment Strategies, Meta-Analysis, Formative Assessment, Students Success

Introduction

Background and Rationale

The global expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has revolutionized the landscape of education, offering flexible, accessible learning opportunities to millions of students worldwide (Makina, 2023; Chaudhary & Dey, 2013; Osunbade, 2021). ODL programs, delivered via online platforms, have made higher education attainable for non-traditional learners, including working professionals, individuals in remote locations, and those balancing multiple responsibilities (Okonkwo, 2010; Chen, 2010; Thambusamy & Singh, 2021). The flexibility and scalability of ODL have led to its rapid growth, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a shift towards remote learning for students across all educational levels (Awajan, 2023).

However, despite its numerous advantages, ODL presents distinct challenges that can negatively impact student success (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013; Kearns, 2012; Baleni, 2015). These challenges include reduced student-instructor interaction, limited peer collaboration, and difficulties in maintaining student engagement and motivation. Assessment strategies in ODL play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges (Thomas & Brown, 2021; Makina, 2022; Singh, 2021). Effective assessments can serve as powerful tools for enhancing the students' learning, providing timely feedback, and measuring academic achievement. Formative assessments, summative assessments, and technology-enhanced assessments are all utilized in ODL contexts to evaluate the student progress (Zou, 2024; Osunbade, 2021; Uiseb, 2017). However, the efficacy of these different strategies in promoting student success is still debated; particularly the unique dynamics of ODL environments are given.

Given the increasing reliance on ODL in both developed and developing countries, it is critical to identify the most effective assessment strategies to enhance student outcomes. A meta-analysis of the existing research can provide valuable insights into which approaches are most effective, thereby informing educational policy and practice.

Statement of the Problem

While ODL offers numerous opportunities, students in these settings often face challenges that can hinder their academic scess (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Ishaq, Rana, & Zin, 2020; Broadbent, Panadero & Boud, 2017). High dropout rates, reduced engagement, and lower completion rates compared to traditional face-to-face education are persistent issues in ODL programs. These challenges can be attributed in part to the assessment strategies used in ODL environments, which may not always be aligned with the needs of distance learners.

Traditional assessment methods, such as summative exams, may not fully capture the learning progress of ODL students, who often benefit from more flexible, formative, or technology-enhanced assessments that provide ongoing feedback and opportunities for self-reflection (Ferguson & Scanlon, 2024; Esterhuizen, 2015; Usoof, Hudson & Wikramanayake, 2012; Casanova, Moreira & Costa, 2011). However, there is limited consensus on the most effective assessment strategies to improve student outcomes in ODL as the findings from individual studies vary widely.

There has been no comprehensive synthesis of the existing research on ODL assessment strategies. This lack of clarity presents a significant gap in the literature and poses a challenge for policymakers and educators seeking to implement evidence-based assessment practices that promote student success. Without clear guidance, institutions may continue to rely on suboptimal assessment strategies, thereby exacerbating the issues of poor student performance, retention, and completion in ODL programs.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to conduct a comprehensive meta-analysis of the existing literature on assessment strategies in Open and Distance Learning. The overarching goal was to provide evidence-based insights that could inform educational policy and practice in ODL settings. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- identify and evaluate the effectiveness of different types of assessment strategies (e.g., formative, summative, and technology-enhanced) in enhancing student success in ODL environments;
- analyze the impact of assessment strategies on various student success outcomes, including academic performance, student engagement, retention, and completion rates;
- conduct subgroup and moderator analyses to explore how factors such as the type of ODL program, geographic region, and student demographics influence the effectiveness of assessment strategies, and
- Provide policy recommendations based on the findings of the meta-analysis, aimed at improving assessment practices and student outcomes in ODL programs.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach used to conduct the meta-analysis, focusing on data collection, the criteria for study inclusion and exclusion, and the procedures for data analysis. The aim was to ensure a rigorous and systematic evaluation of assessment strategies in ODL and their impact on the student success.

Data Collection

Sources of Data

To gather relevant studies, a systematic literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases mentioned below.

- Google Scholar
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)
- Scopus
- Web of Science
- JSTOR

In addition to these databases, gray literature, such as dissertations, conference proceedings, and reports from relevant educational organizations, was included to ensure comprehensive coverage of the available research. The search was carried out using the following key phrases:

- Assessment strategies in open and distance learning,
- Formative and summative assessments in ODL,
- Technology-enhanced assessments in distance education,
- Student success and assessment in ODL, and
- Meta-analysis of assessments in distance learning.

The literature search was conducted for studies published between 2000 and 2024 to capture recent

trends in ODL assessment strategies, particularly as technology has evolved.

Search Strategy

The search was performed using a combination of key phrases, Boolean operators, and filters (e.g., peer-reviewed, English-language publications). The reference lists of included articles were also manually reviewed to identify any additional relevant studies.

Data Extraction

The data extraction process was involved recording the following key characteristics of each study:

- Authors and publication year,
- Country or region of the study,
- Educational level (e.g., higher education, secondary education, vocational training),
- Sample size and demographics of the ODL students,
- Types of assessment strategies used (formative, summative, or technology-enhanced),
- Measurement of student success (e.g., retention rates, academic performance, engagement levels), and
- Effect sizes, statistical analyses, and key outcomes.

A coding framework was developed to categorize these characteristics systematically and ensure consistency in the extraction process across all included studies.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A set of predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria was established to select studies that were most relevant to the research objectives and ensure the reliability of the meta-analysis.

Inclusion Criteria

The studies included in the meta-analysis were based on the following criteria:

- Published between 2000 and 2024: The timeframe was chosen to capture the most recent developments in ODL, especially regarding the increasing integration of technology into assessments.
- Focus on ODL environments: Only studies that specifically evaluated assessment strategies within open and distance learning contexts were included. This excluded traditional face-to-face educational environments.
- Quantitative or mixed-method studies: Studies had to include quantitative data on the effectiveness of assessment strategies. Qualitative data were considered as supplementary but were not sufficient for inclusion on their own.
- Measure of student success: Only studies that reported specific outcomes related to student success, such as academic performance, course completion rates, student retention, and student engagement, were included
- Use of at least one type of assessment strategy: The study must have examined formative, summative, or technology-enhanced assessment strategies and their impact on student outcomes.

Exclusion Criteria

The studies were excluded from the meta-analysis based on the following criteria:

- Studies without sufficient quantitative data: Studies that only provided qualitative data without any measurable outcomes related to student success were excluded.
- Non-English studies: Studies published in languages other than English were excluded due to resource constraints in translation and validation.
- Incomplete studies or reports: Studies that did not provide complete data, such as incomplete reporting of effect sizes or unclear descriptions of assessment strategies, were excluded to maintain the integrity of the analysis.
- Duplicate studies: If the same data set was used in multiple studies, only the most comprehensive version was included to avoid double-counting results.
- Traditional classroom studies: Studies that focused solely on traditional, face-to-face learning environments were excluded as they did not align with the ODL context.

Data Analyses

The data analysis processes for the meta-analyses involved several key steps aimed at synthesizing the results of the included studies and determining the overall effectiveness of different assessment strategies in ODL.

Effect Size Calculation

The primary outcome measure used in this meta-analysis was effect size, which quantifies the magnitude of the relationship between assessment strategies and student success. For each study, the effect size was calculated based on the reported outcomes (e.g., student retention, grades, engagement) using standardized metrics. The most commonly used effect size metrics were:

- Cohen's d: For studies reporting mean differences between groups (e.g., control vs. intervention groups).
    - Hedges' g: A variation of Cohen's d, used to account for small sample sizes.

      Pearson's r: For correlational studies that examined the relationship between assessment strategies and student success.

In case effect sizes were not explicitly reported, they were calculated from the available data (e.g., means, standard deviations, t-values, p-values).

Meta-Analytic Procedures

To synthesize the findings from the included studies, a random-effect meta-analysis model was employed. This model was chosen due to the expected variability among the studies in terms of sample size, geographical location, and assessment strategies. The following steps were taken:

- Weighting of studies: Each study was weighted according to its sample size and precision (inverse variance weighting). Larger studies with more precise estimates were given greater weight in the overall analysis.
    - Heterogeneity analysis: A Q-test and I^2 statistic were calculated to assess the level of heterogeneity among the studies. A high level of heterogeneity would suggest that the effect sizes vary significantly across studies, warranting further investigation into possible moderators.
- Subgroup analysis: Subgroup analyses were performed to examine the effectiveness of different types of assessment strategies (formative, summative, and technology- enhanced) and their impact on various student success metrics (e.g., academic performance, retention, engagement).
- Moderator analysis: A moderator analysis was conducted to explore whether certain factors, such as geographical region, educational level, or the presence of technology, influenced the relationship between assessment strategies and student success.

- Publication bias: To account for potential publication bias (the tendency for positive results to be published more often than negative or null results), a funnel plot and Egger's regression test were used to detect asymmetry, which would suggest the presence of bias.

Synthesis of Results

The final step involved synthesizing the results into meaningful conclusions. The overall effect sizes for each type of assessment strategy (formative, summative, technology-enhanced) were calculated, and the results were compared across studies to determine which strategies had the greatest impact on student success in ODL. Additionally, the subgroup and moderator analyses provided insights into the specific conditions under which these assessment strategies were most effective.

Results

To understand the effectiveness of various assessment strategies in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), data from 40 studies were analyzed. These studies provided a range of quantitative and qualitative insights into the impact of formative, summative, and technology-enhanced assessments on student success in ODL environments.

Study Sample and Distribution

- Number of studies analyzed: 40
- Geographical distribution: The studies were sourced from ODL programs in North America (10), Europe (8), Africa (6), Asia (9), Australia (3), and Latin America (4).
- Educational levels covered: Higher education (25 studies), secondary education (10 studies), and vocational/technical education (5 studies).

The studies analyzed represented a total of approximately 12,000 ODL learners from diverse backgrounds, including part-time students, working professionals, and students from rural or underserved communities. Types of Assessment Strategies and their Effectiveness the following three assessment strategies were evaluated:

1. Formative Assessment

- 30 out of the 40 studies implemented were formative assessment strategies, such as frequent quizzes, peer feedback, and regular assignments (National Center on Educational Outcomes-NCEO, 2020; Wilson, 2020; Higgins, Thompson & Montarzino, 2010).
- Across these studies, the average effect size was calculated to be 0.72, indicating a moderate to high positive impact on student success.
- Example: In a study from North America involving 500 students, courses with regular formative quizzes saw a 20% increase in student retention compared to those with fewer assessments (Regier, 2012; Baleni, 2015; Thomas & Brown, 2021; Higgins, Grant & Thompson, 2010). Similarly, students who received personalized feedback showed a 15% improvement in final grades (Uiseb, 2017; Wessels, 2001; Othman, Kadar, Umar & Ahmad, 2021).

Common Themes:

- Formative assessments helped students stay engaged with course material (Awajan, 2023; Makina, 2023; National Center on Educational Outcomes- NCEO, 2020; Wilson, 2020; Higgins, Grant & Thompson, 2010).
- Frequent assessments fostered better time management and self-regulation skills (Broadbent, Panadero & Boud, 2017; Awajan, 2023).
- Feedback provided in formative assessments was highlighted as critical to students'

progression (Uiseb, 2017; Okonkwo, 2010; Cukusic, M. et al., 2013).

2. Summative Assessment

- Summative assessment strategies, such as final exams and projects, were reported in 35 of the studies
- The average effect size for summative assessments was 0.55, indicating a moderate impact on student success.
- Example: A European study of 300 ODL learners found that students scored, on average, 10% higher in summative assessments when given practice exams or preparatory materials as part of the course (Singh, 2021; Zou, 2024; Broadbent, Panadero & Boud, 2017; Ishaq, Rana & Zin, 2020). However, without additional feedback or formative assessments, student engagement tended to drop (Osunbade, 2021; Zou, 2024; Osunbade, 2021).
    - Common Challenges:

- Students in ODL environments faced difficulties preparing for summative assessments without continuous guidance, particularly when summative assessments were used as the sole measure of performance (Okonkwo, 2010; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Ishaq, Rana & Zin, 2020).
- There were concerns regarding academic integrity, as the lack of proctored environments in ODL led to potential challenges in ensuring fair testing (Broadbent, Panadero & Boud, 2017; Othman, Kadar, Umar, & Ahmad, 2021; Thambusamy & Singh, 2021).

3. Technology-Enhanced Assessment

- 20 studies integrated technology-enhanced assessments, including automated quizzes, e-portfolios, and the use of learning management systems (LMS) to track student progress.
- The average effect size for these strategies was 0.81, making them the most effective method of assessment in ODL environments.
- Example: A study from Asia, with a sample of 750 students, found that the use of adaptive learning platforms, which adjust the difficulty level of quizzes based on the student's performance, led to a 30% increase in student satisfaction and a 25% improvement in grades (Usoof, Hudson & Wikramanayake, 2012; Elizabeth & Abraham, 2015; Rogaten, Whitelock & Rienties, 2016).

Common Themes:

- Personalized and adaptive assessments, which were made possible by technology, greatly contributed to student success by offering tailored learning experiences (Kiersey, Devitt & Brady, 2018; Hettiarachchi, 2013; Sotiriou & Bogner, 2020).
- Automated grading systems not only reduced instructor workload but also provided instant feedback, keeping students motivated and engaged (Khumalo, 2018; Al-Khatib, 2021; Madland & Irvine, 2024).
- E-portfolios allowed students to demonstrate learning over time, fostering reflective learning practices (Botswana Open University, 2019; Ferguson & Scanlon, 2024; Usoof, Hudson & Wikramanayake, 2012).

Key Factors Affecting the Success of Assessment Strategies

The analyses of the studies identified key factors influenced the success of assessment strategies in ODL:

Feedback Timeliness and Quality

- In 85% of the studies, the quality and timeliness of feedback were found to have a significant effect on student performance.
- Example: A study from Africa showed that students who received feedback within 48 hours of submitting assignments had an average course completion rate of 87%, compared to 67% for

those receiving delayed feedback (Botswana Open University, 2019; Higgins, Thompson & Montarzino, 2010; Liljeström, Hult & Stödberg, 2008; Regier, 2012).

- Feedback that was specific, actionable, and personalized encouraged students to improve and stay on track (Baleni, 2015; Kearns, 2012).

2. Student Autonomy and Self-Regulation

- Students who participated in self-regulated assessments, such as peer review or self-assessment activities, showed higher levels of engagement and motivation (Makina, 2022; Ras, Whitelock, & Kalz, 2015; Cukusic, M. et al., 2013).
  - Example: In a study of 400 ODL students from Australia, courses that included self-assessment components had a 20% higher retention rate compared to courses without such strategies (Cukusic, et al., 2013; Singh, 2021; Osunbade, 2021). This indicated that assessments that encourage reflection and autonomy are more effective in ODL.

Technology Integration

- Technology-enhanced assessments were particularly effective for students with varying levels of access to educational resources (Ferguson & Scanlon, 2024; Usoof, Hudson & Wikramanayake, 2012; Casanova, Moreira & Costa, 2011).
- Example: A study conducted in Latin America showed that the use of mobile-based assessments, such as SMS quizzes, allowed students with limited internet access to participate and succeed in ODL programs (Elizabeth & Abraham, 2015; Rogaten, Whitelock & Rienties, 2016; Awajan, 2023). The result was a 35% increase in course completion rates for students in remote areas.

Comparative Analysis of the Effectiveness of Assessment Strategies

Assessment Type	Average Effect Size	Key Impact Areas
Formative Assessment	0.72	Improved retention, better time management, enhanced engagement
Summative Assessment	0.55	Final performance measurement, student anxiety, academic integrity issues
Technology-Enhanced Assessment	0.81	Personalized learning, increased satisfaction, higher success rates

Discussions

Synthesis of Findings

The findings from the meta-analysis reveal critical insights into the effectiveness of various assessment strategies in ODL environments. The evidence indicates that technology-enhanced assessments (average effect size: 0.81) and formative assessments (average effect size: 0.72) are the most effective in improving student success (Usoof, Hudson & Wikramanayake, 2012; Elizabeth & Abraham, 2015; Rogaten, Whitelock & Rienties, 2016; Regier, 2012; Baleni, 2015; Thomas & Brown, 2021; Higgins, Grant & Thompson, 2010). Summative assessments, while still relevant (effect size: 0.55), are less effective in isolation and tend to present challenges related to academic integrity and limited feedback opportunities (Singh, 2021; Zou, 2024; Broadbent, Panadero & Boud, 2017; Ishaq, Rana & Zin, 2020).

These findings underscore the need for assessment strategies in ODL that support continuous engagement, provide timely feedback, and leverage technology to personalize learning. The unique nature of ODL, where students often work independently and face fewer face-to-face

interactions with instructors, demands a shift in traditional assessment policies to better align with the needs of distance learners.

Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations

Based on the results of this meta-analysis, several evidence-based policy recommendations can be proposed to enhance assessment strategies in ODL settings. These recommendations are designed to address the identified gaps and challenges while capitalizing on the strengths of effective assessment practices.

Promote the Use of Formative Assessments to Support Continuous Learning

Evidence:

The meta-analysis shows that formative assessments, with an effect size of 0.72, play a significant role in improving student retention, engagement, and performance. Formative assessments, such as regular quizzes, assignments, and peer feedback provide ongoing checkpoints for students, enabling them to gauge their understanding of the material throughout the course (Awajan, 2023; Makina, 2023; National Center on Educational Outcomes- NCEO, 2020; Wilson, 2020; Higgins, Grant & Thompson, 2010; Broadbent, Panadero & Boud, 2017; Uiseb, 2017; Okonkwo, 2010; Cukusic, M. et al., 2013)

Recommendations:

Policymakers should prioritize the integration of formative assessments across all ODL courses. Specifically, they should:

- Mandate frequent formative assessments as part of the course design to ensure students receive consistent opportunities to assess their learning progress.
- Incentivize instructors to design formative assessments that encourage reflection and critical thinking rather than rote memorization.
- Ensure that formative assessments are low-stakes but provide meaningful feedback that helps students improve their performance without fear of penalty.

Rationale:

The findings suggest that formative assessments keep students engaged by providing real-time feedback and helping them develop self-regulation skills. This is especially important in ODL settings, where learners may struggle with self-discipline or feel disconnected from the learning process.

Increase the Integration of Technology-Enhanced Assessments for Personalized Learning

Evidence:

The highest average effect size of 0.81 was found in studies involving technology-enhanced assessments, such as adaptive learning platforms, automated quizzes, and the use of learning management systems (LMS) for real-time feedback. These tools not only enhance the student experience but also allow for individualized learning paths (Usoof, Hudson & Wikramanayake, 2012; Elizabeth & Abraham, 2015; Rogaten, Whitelock & Rienties, 2016; Kiersey, Devitt & Brady, 2018; Hettiarachchi, 2013; Sotiriou & Bogner, 2020; Khumalo, 2018; Al-Khatib, 2021; Madland & Irvine, 2024).

Recommendations:

ODL institutions should expand the use of technology-enhanced assessments by:

- Adopting adaptive learning platforms that adjust the difficulty of questions and assessments based on the student's performance, ensuring a personalized learning experience.
- Implementing learning analytics to track student progress in real-time, allowing both students and instructors to intervene early if learning issues arise.
- Encouraging the use of e-portfolios to assess student growth over time, providing a more holistic view of learning outcomes beyond exams and assignments.

Rationale:

The findings indicate that technology-enhanced assessments not only improve student performance but also enhance engagement and satisfaction. By tailoring assessments to individual needs and providing instant feedback, these strategies help reduce student frustration and dropout rates, which are common in ODL environments.

Develop Comprehensive Feedback Policies to Enhance Student Engagement

Evidence:

Feedback timeliness and quality were found to have a significant impact on student success. In 85% of the studies analyzed, students who received prompt and constructive feedback performed better than those who experienced delays. The studies also showed that personalized feedback—addressing individual strengths and areas for improvement—resulted in higher student motivation and retention (Baleni, 2015; Kearns, 2012).

Recommendations:

Institutions should formalize feedback policies that:

- Set clear timelines for providing feedback (e.g., within 48 hours for quizzes, and within one week for major assignments).
- Ensure feedback is constructive and personalized, offering specific guidance on how students can improve their performance.
- Incorporate peer feedback opportunities to promote collaborative learning and self-assessment skills.

Rationale:

Timely and personalized feedback is a cornerstone of successful formative assessments. By formalizing feedback policies, institutions can ensure that students feel supported throughout their learning journey, increasing their engagement and reducing the sense of isolation that is often felt in ODL.

Reevaluate the Role of Summative Assessments in ODL

Evidence:

Summative assessments, with an effect size of 0.55, were less effective than formative or technology-enhanced assessments. The studies highlighted several challenges with summative assessments in ODL, including concerns about academic integrity (due to the proctored nature of many online exams) and the lack of continuous feedback throughout the course (Osunbade, 2021; Zou, 2024; Osunbade, 2021). While summative assessments are necessary for evaluating overall learning outcomes, relying solely on them is insufficient to promote student success in ODL (Broadbent, Panadero & Boud, 2017; Ishaq, Rana & Zin, 2020).

Recommendations:

Institutions should reevaluate the role of summative assessments by:

- Reducing the weight of summative assessments in the overall grading scheme to encourage continuous learning rather than focusing solely on end-of-term exams.
- Combining summative assessments with formative assessments, ensuring that students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning throughout the course.
- Exploring alternative summative assessments, such as capstone projects, case studies, or open-book exams, which can provide a more authentic and comprehensive evaluation of student learning.

  Rationale:

Summative assessments should complement formative assessments rather than stand alone as the primary measure of success. By diversifying summative assessment strategies and ensuring they are combined with continuous feedback, ODL institutions can better support student learning and reduce reliance on high-stakes testing environments.

Strengthen Academic Integrity in ODL Assessments

Evidence:

Several studies reported concerns about academic integrity, particularly with unprotected online exams and summative assessments. Cheating, plagiarism, and unauthorized collaboration were more prevalent in these settings, which can undermine the credibility of the assessment process (Awajan, 2023; Makina, 2023; Liljeström, Hult & Stödberg, 2008).

Recommendations:

ODL institutions should implement stronger academic integrity measures, including:

- Adopting proctoring solutions that monitor student behavior during online exams, such as using AI-powered proctoring tools or live proctoring services.
- Incorporating assessment designs that reduce opportunities for cheating, such as open-book exams, problem-based assessments, and personalized assignments.
- Providing clear guidelines and education on academic integrity to ensure that students understand the importance of honesty in their assessments.

Rationale:

Protecting academic integrity is crucial for maintaining the credibility of ODL programs. By implementing robust proctoring solutions and designing assessments that are less susceptible to cheating, institutions can ensure the fairness and validity of their assessment strategies.

Address Equity and Access in ODL Assessment Strategies

Evidence:

Some studies highlighted the digital divide that exists among ODL students, particularly in regions with limited access to high-speed internet or technology resources. Students in rural or underserved communities may struggle with assessments that require constant online interaction or high-tech tools (Botswana Open University, 2019; Elizabeth & Abraham, 2015; Hettiarachchi, 2013).

Recommendations:

Policymakers should address equity issues in ODL assessments by:

- Ensuring assessments are accessible via low-bandwidth technologies, such as SMS-based

quizzes or offline assignments that can be uploaded later.

- Providing students with the necessary digital tools (e.g., laptops, internet subsidies) to participate in online assessments.
- Designing alternative assessment formats for students with limited access to technology, ensuring that no student is disadvantaged due to their circumstances.

Rationale:

Ensuring equitable access to assessment tools is critical for the success of all ODL students. By designing assessments that are accessible to learners with varying levels of technological access, institutions can promote inclusivity and reduce barriers to academic success.

Conclusion

The findings from this meta-analysis provide compelling evidence for revising current assessment policies in ODL settings. By focusing on formative and technology-enhanced assessments, institutions can foster continuous engagement, provide personalized learning experiences, and support student success. Additionally, feedback policies, summative assessment reforms, academic integrity measures, and efforts to address equity are essential to creating a robust and effective assessment framework that aligns with the unique challenges of ODL.

Future research should continue to explore innovative assessment practices and their impact on student outcomes, particularly as technology evolves and ODL expands to meet the needs of diverse learners worldwide.

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Closing Speech, By Behailu Tamiru, Dean of College of Open and Distance Learning, St. Mary's University

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we come to the end of our twelfth Open and Distance Learning Seminar, I am filled with a sense of accomplishment and gratitude. Over the half-day seminar, we have delved into the latest advancements, shared innovative practices, and engaged in thought-provoking discussions that have enriched our understanding of open and distance learning.

The presentations and discussions have been nothing short of inspiring, highlighting the depth and breadth of research in open and distance learning. Each of you has contributed significantly to the success of this seminar, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

This seminar has been a testament to the power of collaboration and the collective pursuit of knowledge. Each presentation, each question, and each discussion has contributed to a vibrant exchange of ideas that will undoubtedly shape the future of our field. I am deeply grateful to our distinguished speakers for their insightful presentations, which gave us new perspectives and valuable insights.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the organizers for their tireless efforts in making this seminar a success. Your dedication and meticulous planning have ensured that everything ran smoothly, allowing us to focus on the important work.

To all the participants, thank you for your active engagement and contributions. Your enthusiasm and commitment to open and distance learning are truly inspiring. Through your efforts, we can continue to innovate and improve the educational experiences for learners.

As we leave here today, let us carry forward the knowledge and inspiration we have gained. Let us continue to push the boundaries of what is possible in open and distance learning, always striving to create more inclusive, accessible, and effective educational opportunities.

In closing, I encourage you all to stay connected, to keep the conversations going, and to support one another in our shared mission. Together, we can achieve great things.

Thank you once again for your participation, and I look forward to seeing the remarkable advancements that will come from our collective efforts. With that, I declare the seminar closed.

Thank you."