


Journal of Online and Distance Learning (JODL)

Towards the development and enhancement of Open and Distance Learning policies in Africa: A step by step guide to the game



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Towards the development and enhancement of Open and Distance Learning policies in Africa: A step by step guide to the game

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Accepted: 10th Aug, 2024 Received in Revised Form: 14th Sep, 2024 Published: 16th Oct, 2024

Abstract

Purpose: This study sought to explain and understand possible steps for developing and enhancing open and distance learning (ODL) policies in Malawi.

Methodology: It thus deployed descriptive and interpretive phenomenological research as advanced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to deeply understand policies, practices and perceptions within higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malawi. It was assumed that human experiences can best be understood through ones immersion into documents, conversations and lived-experiences of the research subjects. Accordingly, we used document analyses, observations and systematic conversations followed by practical activities to enhance the available draft-ODL policies at the selected HEIs.

Findings: The study established that many academics had inadequate knowledge on policy formulation using paradigmatic and marginalized philosophical theories. It was also established when policy-makers combine different theories to inform their policies, they gain more advantages than they would have otherwise done. Since education is usually confronted by complex issues, such theoretical amalgamation has paid dividends. While this study inherently took an eccentric approach to research by reconciling Husserl and Heidegger's contradictions, it also infused some elements of empiricism and conceptual ideals ushering in a mixed methodology that culminated into a transformative paradigm.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Since research is about discovering new knowledge, this study garnered its uniqueness and credibility through such methodical surprises; the approaches that transcended mere theoretical analyses to yielding a tangible ODL policy product. We acknowledge our methodological limitations although such limitations cannot lender our findings invalid. We therefore recommend researchers to try this approach, and share with us their findings.

Key words: *Epistemological Access, Transactional Distance, Curriculum Justice; Distance Education, Andragogy*

Introduction

This paper emerges from the contextual studies which were done in Malawi through the support of the Commonwealth of Learning of Vancouver, Canada (COL) and Public Universities in Malawi including the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS) and Mzuzu University (MZUNI). Primarily, the contextual studies utilised document analyses, observations and telephonic consultations with key education stakeholders in Malawi which such as academics, non-academics, university managers, industry representatives, NGOs, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and strategic government ministry officials. Mainly, the purpose of the contextual studies was to understand and explain the ODeL landscape in Malawi in terms of the available guiding policies, and how they fostered epistemologically just with ODL contexts. Where the policies were inadequate, the idea was to have such policies enhanced in relation to continental, regional and national policies as recommended by the SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020); SADC (2021); Makoe and Gatsha (2020); Isaacs and Mohee (2020), and Makoe (2018), and Isaacs (2015). Given the evidence gathered from the conversations and the contextual analyses, it was clear many HEIs in the SADC region did not have dedicated ODL policies at both national and institutional levels, and where available, they were either in draft forms or in semi-improved forms but not yet ratified. While Isaacs and Mohee (2020) and Simui (2020) respectively assert that Malawi had a ratified ODeL policy at national level minus HEIs level, our preliminary findings also confirmed these findings. Since the purpose of this study was not to question other scholars' findings but rather to develop and enhance ODL policies in Malawi, we therefore focused on analysing the available policies and they responded to continental and regional instruments in order to achieve epistemological access and justice. In doing so, we aimed to find practical solutions for enhancing such policies, and this was only possible by deploying phenomenology.

Phenomenology as a methodological consideration

According to Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy and Smith (2013), phenomenology falls under qualitative research design, and it seeks to examine human lived-experiences to extract what remains underneath their knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAPs) regarding any phenomena. Tuohy, et al (2013) further assert that phenomenology, as philosophical inquiry, has evolved from the descriptive tradition, which emphasised pure description of human lived-experiences, to the interpretive tradition, which seeks to explain and understand human-experiences. When interpretivism involves questioning power-relations and structures of society, then it becomes critical hermeneutics or a hermeneutic of suspicion usually a branch of Critical Theory (see Mutua, 2015; Al-Shekh Hassan, 2023). Moreover, Mutua (2015) adds that interpretive phenomenology mainly uses document analyses and it accepts researchers' lived-experiences or insider-knowledge as the basis for best understanding research subjects, and for guiding them appropriately without necessarily interfering with the findings. The argument is that all human researchers have personal experiences, knowledge and motivation that can potentially influence their findings unless such subjectivities are accepted and moderated. This then implies that the concept of bracketing as advanced by Husserl and positivist researchers does not hold water going by Heidegger's claims.

In this study, we combined the descriptive (Husserl) and interpretive traditions (Heidegger) to illuminate covert claims within education policies and such clauses can shape human experiences, thinking and practices. Through critical hermeneutics, we aimed to examine contextual features of HEIs and human experiences in relation to institutional culture, gender constructions, employment prospects, individuals' wellbeing, opportunities and fears, which shaped the existing ODL practices. This also helped us arrive at a deeper understanding for guiding policy-framers regarding the necessary knowledge and tools needed to redevelop and enhance the existing policies in order to make them epistemologically just. Importantly, phenomenological understanding of the theories and practices that inform ODL and HEIs would also ensure that most appropriate methods for teaching, learning and supporting ODL systems are embedded in the enhanced policies. By epistemological access, we mean all activities from policy development, curriculum designing and implementation; assessments and teaching and learning activities; student support services including monitoring and evaluation systems; strong need for just and equalizing pedagogies, and equitable quality educational offerings up until post-graduation supports (see Chibambo, 2023; du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014 and Morrow, 2009) for more details on this.

Limitations of this study

While phenomenology would normally require designing tools for collecting data such as interview guides and sometimes questionnaires as it is done in Husserl's phenomenology, this study did not fully follow that approach. It thus mainly followed the interpretive and the hermeneutic traditions by Heidegger, which emphasizes document analyses supported by some conversations, observations and makes good use of insider-knowledge of all research subjects. In our case, we have worked within ODL and HEIs contexts in Malawi for over 15 years hence such immense knowledge became an invaluable tool in properly shaping and guiding this study. As Heidegger argues, researcher priori-experiences cannot be ignored since such experiences help researchers understand the context of the problem being studied, and how the proposed solutions would hold water within that context. What matters therefore, is researchers' ability to control such lived-experiences by not allowing them to over-take the research process and its findings. These were also the things we took into account to make sure that our findings were unfettered, trustworthy and transferable as long as the other research context resembles ours.

Explaining open and distance learning policy development and status in Africa

According to the studies done by Isaacs and Mohee (2020) and Mokoe (2018), many SADC countries, and their respective HEIs have had either no functional ODL policies and/or have draft policies for guiding their practices. These studies further revealed that most HEIs in Africa were still using policy instruments, which were designed for face-to-face (f2F) conventional delivery modes. The studies also established that, there were some few countries, which had working ODL policies at national levels but not at individual HEIs levels (see Isaacs and Mohee, 2020). This implied that a good number of HEIs within the SADC region were operating without ODL policies despite having ODL programs on the ground. Precisely,

Angola, DRC, Madagascar and Comoros had no any ODL policy both at national and HEIs levels. Conversely, Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe had national draft policies awaiting enhancement and ratification. Similarly, Malawi and Eswathini (Swaziland) had ratified their national ODL policies in 2020, while Namibia in 2016, Seychelles in 2015, and South Africa and Mozambique in 2014 (see Isaacs and Mohee, 2020).

Even then, the studies further demonstrated that, the draft policies as well as the ratified policies still had serious gaps, mismatches, contradictions and misalignments when measured against the continental (African Union/AU) policy guidelines; regional (SADC) policy guidelines; national ODL policies, and individual HEIs ODL policies. These realities imply that many countries did not follow the recommendations made by the AU and SADC Committees on Education, which demanded all African countries to design ODL policies based on the broader policy instruments. This in turn, will ensure that ODL policies at institutional levels are fully aligned with other global instruments such as the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs), the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDS) and others upon which AUs Educational policies are based (see Makoe, 2018; Makoe and Gatsha, 2020; Chibambo, 2023). In other words, while the MGDs have informed the AU ODL policy; the AU has informed the SADC ODeL policy, while the SADC has informed individual countries ODL policies, and each countries ODL policies should inform their HEIs ODL policies within their context. The table below is my own attempt to explain the symbiotic relationships that exist between ODL policies and the SADC member states targeted by such instruments.

AU	SADC	INDIVIDUAL NATIONS	INDIVIDUAL HEIs	
<i>Macro Policy</i>	<i>ODL</i>	Micro ODL policy	Main policy	Minor policies
Sixteen member states served	Angola, Botswana, Comoros, DRC, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Seychelles, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe			

Why policy development, enhancement and harmonization matters

According to Isaacs and Mohee (2020) and Chibambo and Divala (2022), harmonization of ODL policies help unify education offerings within the region ensuring that quality, credible and equitable education burdens and benefits are equitably shared by all HEIs irrespective of their socio-economic and cultural differences. Since the policies are also designed based on global instruments, it follows that credit transfers for the programs and qualification will be globally acceptable, and that public confidence in ODL qualifications and graduates will be enhanced hence minimizing the long held prejudices against ODL (see Perraton, 2002). Furthermore, harmonized ODL policies also ensure that programs meet minimum standards of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) for purposes of consistency, credibility and transferability on the global market. Additionally, harmonized ODL policies help the state in regulating

delivery of the programs by minimizing malpractices by academics, students and management since each HEIs is governed by similar normative instruments. Importantly, harmonized policies promote individuals human rights, interests and investments within HEIs. Equally, harmonized policies provide clear guidelines for teachers, students, management and parents while minimizing contradictions and misrepresentations (see Chibambo and Divala, 2020). For Isaacs and Mohee (2020), harmonized ODL policies enhance transparency and accountability among HEIs and all critical stakeholders ensuring that every person takes responsibility for their actions. In the main, harmonized policies help promote epistemological access and justice by ensuring that all academic systems and processes are responsive to individual differences, needs and interests while offering necessary support to each program and students equitably and consistently. Finally, given increased proliferation of technologies in education, harmonizing ODL policies can ensure that technologies are adopted and applied responsibly while considering contextual realities of each HEIs and their students (See Sehlako, Chibambo and Divala, 2023; 2020; 2019; Simpson, 2015). Importantly, dedicated ODL policies set standards for improving and sustaining the quality of education. Generally, they are helpful when designing: curriculum documents, assessment methods, teacher recruitment and students' recruitment, student support services, self-instructional materials, author compensation criteria, income generation and expenditure controls, institutional governance procedures, and graduate employability initiatives. Given above evidence, it is clear that harmonized policies immensely contribute towards the search for epistemological access and justice in education.

Accordingly, having realized that Malawi had just adopted its national ODL policy in 2020, yet our HEIs had base-draft-ODL policies which disregarded the MGDS, SDGs and the Malawi Vision 2063 and crucial global instruments (see Isaacs and Mohee 2023; Makoe and Gatsha, 2020; Makoe, 2018 and Chibambo, 2023), it was critical for public universities to enhance their policies in line with the continental and regional ODL protocols. Therefore, there was need to gather Heads of Schools (Deans), HoDs, senior technical staff and other stakeholders from private organizations in order to engage in the enhancement of the draft-policies. This processes however demanded that the available policies should be analysed in line with different national ODL policies, HEIs ODL policies, and dominant and marginalized theories that inform educational policies (see Kumashiro, 2000; Chibambo, 2023).

The assumption was that, while government and HEIs have often been reactive in formulating rose-tinted policies without any philosophical backing, such policies have often ended up gathering dust on the shelves until some people come from elsewhere use such policies in developing their countries. To avoid this problem, our study adopted different philosophical propositions while embedding the Transformative Paradigm, which called for the fusion of theory and practice. Thus, we did not only aim to inform policy-framers theoretically, but also endeavoured to guide them on how they could practically use such theories to design epistemically just policies for driving ODL in Malawi and elsewhere.

Explaining paradigmatic and philosophical theories for understanding ODL policy formulation processes

Theory of Industrialised Teaching of ODL

Peters (1988; 1998; 2002) and Moore (2019) observe that this theory has some characteristics that make it resemble the *Factory Education Model (FEM) or Industrialised Education*, which emerged between the mid to late-20th Century. The industrialized education model has usually used the top-down management approaches, which are similar to production practices in the factories. Critics of Industrialized Teaching Model (ITM) have argued that both FEM and ITM were deliberately designed to create graduates who can easily meet pressing needs of society and their employers. Like typical ODL, FEM classrooms were marked by aged student population, and emphasized outcomes more than inputs as was the case with the Outcomes-based education (OBE). Arguably, FEM was mainly informed by the theory of Utilitarianism especially consequentialism, in which outcomes mattered more than processes just as OBE did (see Tardi, 2021; Driver, 2009; Ngobeni, Chibambo and Divala, 2023; Cross et al. 2002; Hoadley and Jansen, 2009; Hoadley, 2008).

Furthermore, ITM has been used metaphorically to denote the pervasive nature of ODL, which leads to the creation of passive and uncritical graduates similar to FEM outputs (see Schneider, 2019; Straus, 2015) and the Correspondence Theoretical lamentations of Bowls and Gintis (1976; 2003). Peters (1988; 1998) also laments that ODL classrooms have often resembled pre-industrial education which was controlled by knowledge-specialists just like capitalist labourers had operated during the four industrial revolutions (Schwab, 2020). Peters however concludes that both ODL and f2f delivery modes have ultimately replicated FEM through worker practices, employer expectations and practices and their thirsty for profits at the expense of human welfare. Peters later included terms such as management, coordination, supervision, quality assurance, investment, profits, overheads, mass-production, marketing, automation and distribution- which were once reserved for factories- to emphasise deplorable similarities between ODL and workplace politics. It is not surprising then that ODL has definitive line managers such as directors and their deputies; production managers; supervisors and technical staff, and at the bottom remain students who are programmed to the obey authority and report to powerful structures about their academic progress and wellbeing for purposes of rewards, gifts and sanctions not as subjective agents.

The issue here is that when HEIs adopts ITM, they contradict the very core values of education, which are: qualifications (technical instrumentalism), socialisation (cohort socialization) and subjectification (critical thinking, agency and civility) (see Biesta, 2020; 2015). This then implies that academics during this policy enhancement moment, needed to be vigilant against ITM and FEM which had negative influences on students autonomy and critical thinking. By avoiding ITM, it was envisaged that the enhanced policies may ensure that the core values of ODL such as flexibility, openness, freedom, agency, autonomy, equality and critical thinking would be entrenched and sustained.

The Autonomy and Independence Theory of ODL

According to Fantastic Five (2020) and Moore (2019), this theory was coined by Rudolf Delling, although he mostly used the term *Helping Organizations (HOs)* to mean the same. HOs consisted of machines, infrastructure, firms, and materials which eventually facilitated teaching and learning experiences, while human facilitators were mainly required to provide academic support to the

learners. Moore further argues that when learners are autonomous, HO's roles may be reduced to simple tasks such as diffusion of information, document provision and library services. Similarly, Charles Wedemeyer also coined the term *Independent Learning* (IL) to reflect on student-centred learning experiences, and their ability to control their learning pace. He cites the possibilities for learner freedoms to start or stop their learning; teachers' ability to adapt instruction materials and teaching strategies, and adaptability of pedagogies and instructional materials to suit needs and abilities of each learner. Essentially, Moore used the term *learner autonomy and transactional distance* which has become common today in ODL. Precisely, *transactional distance* generally consists of structure, dialogue and autonomy as its main maxims. Autonomy however, consists of varying degrees of learner abilities to manage their own learning and time for educational purposes (also see Keegan, 1996; Diehl and Cano, 2019; Fantastic Five, 2020). When all of Moore's propositions are considered, one gets a picture of the contemporary educational practices that are anchored on autonomy, freedoms and democratic values especially in those advanced HEIs that value critical pedagogy (see bell hooks, 1994; Freire, 2005), unfortunately this is not the case in Malawi. Accordingly, the policy-framers were called to reflect on Moore's views and consider them as valuable for achieving epistemologically just ODL policies. By considering the transactional distance, it also meant that different forms of distance, their roles and implications on ODL also had to be provided for.

Theory of Communication and Interaction in ODL

This theory aims to explain how teaching and learning experiences are enhanced by different communication tools, and possible interaction within ODL contexts. Holmberg (1995) believes that students may learn better when in regular contact with their teachers, peers, content and HOs. The pioneers of this theory such as Börje Holmberg, Michael Moore and Terry Anderson (see Holmberg, 2005; 1995; Moore, 2019; Fantastic Five, 2020) have also argued that adding Guided Didactic Conversation (GDC) can improve student-teacher relationships, and motivate them through interactive and two-way-communication prospects. Since interaction happens between learners and content; learners and teachers, peers and peers, and students and community, ODL policies should ensure that self-instructional materials and student support services maximise engagement and interaction at different levels.

Anderson further identifies forms of interaction such as learner-content, learner-teacher, peer-peer, teacher-content, teacher-teacher and content-content. He also added the Interaction Equivalence Theory (IET) for designing interactive and engaging instructional materials. The IET emphasises the need for building relationships, study pleasure and empathy between students and HOs. He argues that empathy and cohort socialisation may improve teaching and learning experiences through writing, telephones and consistent use of the internet. He further urges course facilitators to develop personalized, conversational, dialogical and easy to follow instructional materials. Accordingly, the IET has become instrumental in the redesigning and enhancement of ODL policies. The table below explains how main systems and sub-systems interact within the Communication and Interaction Models to facilitate teaching and learning experiences, and how such systems interact.

Main systems	Sub-systems A	Sub-systems B	Aims and Outcomes
Teachers	Teachers	Teachers	Teaching and learning; student support services, feedback, belonging and motivation
	Teachers	Learners	
	Teachers	Content	
	Teachers	Community	
Learners	Learners	Teachers	Cohort socialisation, teamwork, belonging, improved learning experiences
	Learners	Learners	
Content	Content	Content	Socialisation of epistemologies/integration, teaching and learning support
	Content	Learners	
	Content	Teachers	
Community	Community	Learners	Curriculum development, reviews and reforms, students support and financing education
	Community	Teachers	
	Community	Community	

It should be noted that the first three theories have been considered as dominant paradigmatic theories to ODL. They simply aim to describe what goes into ODL, and the related implications if these theories are adopted without caution. Although ITM and FEM have been cursorily treated under this group- probably because they are peculiar to ODL, they best belong to philosophical theories because of their critical orientation. The following theories are marginalized philosophical theories as they can be widely used to critique different aspects of educational systems.

Classical and Ideal Utilitarianism

The pioneers of this theory include Jeromy Bentham and Stuart Mills (Classical utilitarianism), and George Moore (Ideal/Modern Utilitarianism) among others (see Driver, 2014; Tardi, 2021). Utilitarianism is one of the theories public institutions have used to design and develop their policies. In its classical sense, Utilitarianism follows the Majoritarianism and Consequentialist dimensions. Majoritarianism argues that an action is good or right if it pleases the majority. This way, the opinions or needs of the minority are often sacrificed as their voices do not count. Conversely, an action is often considered as good or right if the outcomes are good, desirable or pleasing (Consequentialism) irrespective of the means for achieving those outcomes. Since Consequentialists believe that, *the means cannot justify the end*, then the outcomes based education model(OBE), which was conceptualised based on this theory, has found itself in troubles and contestations (see Cross et al. 2002; Ngobeni, et al. 2023). For example, Cross, et al. (2002) have argued that it is not surprising that OBE has met huge resistance from educators around the globe because schools were more obsessed with outputs than the inputs that could complete the quality equation. Similar experiences were also reported in South Africa and Malawi where OBE did not succeed (see Chirwa and Naidoo, 2014; Hoadley, 2008; Ngobeni, et al. 2023). Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic had also seen many countries introduce urgent educational policies to save schools from lockdowns. For example, HEIs introduced mandatory vaccinated campuses, e-Learning, social-distancing and mask wearing. These policies were mainly guided by majoritarianism and consequentialism. For

example, the University of Johannesburg and Wits University conducted online surveys on whether universities should permanently close or use e-Learning (see Chibambo and Divala, 2022; Vurayi, 2022; 2021). Since the majority voted for e-Learning, and vaccinated-campuses, these policies were implemented while disregarding the minority who objected these based on religion, culture and health concerns.

Worrisomely, these policies were adopted amidst public outcries on digital divide, poverty and irregular internet bandwidth and expensive data which would limit student participation in education especially in the rural areas and poor townships (Sehlako, et al. 2023). The issues here is that, wholesale adoption of e-Learning and vaccination were not only unjustified but also ignored the need for justice among the learners and teachers. It was for this reason that George Moore later devised the Ideal Utilitarianism, which faulted Classical Utilitarianism for excluding the minorities, and its failure to differentiate positive good and happiness from negative good and happiness leading to value-ridden and prudential hedonism and hedonist-egoism. Moore later proposes impartiality and transferability as key determinants of the good and the right. He argues that goodness and happiness should be positive and must have long-term benefits to everyone including the doer (See Driver, 2014). Moore also gives some examples of two students who choose to go for drinking during examinations and another one who choose to go reading in the library arguing that both have chosen the good, but that one has chosen the lowest good while the other, the highest good. He thus concludes that educational policies should consider the quantitative and qualitative nature of the good as was the case with the student who went for reading.

Accordingly, we adopted the Ideal Utilitarianism approach to policy development in Malawi in order to create an epistemologically just policy (Chibambo, 2023; du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014; Morrow, 2009).

Justice as Fairness for understanding ODL policies

John Rawls (see Rawls, 1985; 1970) has considered Justice as Fairness as a useful tool for designing and developing policies on resourcing and financing different activities with a purpose of equalizing them. He proposes that more resources should be given to those who have little and/or give less to those who have more if we are to equalize them also known as the Difference Principle. Rawls has argued that, when systems have no visible differences, then give them equal resources unless there is a reason for not doing so (justice as fairness). In South Africa, the government finances education institutions using the Quintile System. Schools under quintiles one, two and three are classified as disadvantaged, hence get more resources than those in quintiles four and five which are considered as advantaged and are mostly located in urban-areas (Ngobeni, et al. 2023). In Malawi, the government funds secondary schools based on their status such as being Conventional, Day, or Community Day schools etc. HEIs are also funded based on classifications such as enrolments, research outputs, graduation rates and location etc. This way, Malawi violates the Rawlsian principles as it gives more towards the already advantaged schools such as conventional and national secondary

schools while inhibiting CDSSs, which are usually patronised by rural-poor students hence increasing the inequalities.

The issue here is that, since ODL operates alongside f2f programs in Malawi (see Chibambo, 2023; Chibambo and Divala, 2020; Zozie, 2020), it has often received limited resources also due to lack of an independent budget-line. Even though ODL generates its own resources, experiences have shown that such resources go towards supporting the whole university instead of supporting ODeL activities. These anomalies have also been flagged by our contextual studies as well as participants' dialogues (also see Chizengo, 2023). This then have supported the call to revise and enhance the draft ODL policies in Malawi for them to guide resource redistribution as proposed by the Rawlsian theory (also see Ward, 2020).

The Capabilities approach for understanding ODL policies

Realizing the weaknesses inherent in Rawls theory, we also adopted the Capabilities Approach by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2010) who have argued that to complete the resourcing segment, HEIs would require conditions (emoluments) that should consider individual capabilities. This means that resources alone are inadequate unless individuals' capabilities are enhanced to make good use of such resources. Therefore, there is need to avail certain conditions that will help individuals turn those resources into capabilities and functionings. In ODL, differentiated resource distribution among students and teachers would, according to the Capabilities Approach, not bear the much needed fruits unless additional student support services and teacher-stakeholders supports such as continued professional development (CPDs) are consistently provided to enhance the capacity of these people.

Towards the transformative paradigm: From theory to practice, a step-by-step guide

Public Universities in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) organised series of training workshops which were held in Mzuzu and Blantyre to develop different ODL policies such as Employability Policy; Open Educational Resources (OERs) Policy, and generic ODL policies among others. These took forms of workshops under three distinct sessions from October 2023 to April 2024 respectively.

Mainly, these workshops aimed to empower academics and support staff with knowledge, attitudes and skills on ODL best practices. The different activities were then rolled out through series of related workshops based on the three main thematic areas. For example, the first group had twenty participants (five women and fifteen men); the second had thirty people (ten women and twenty men), while the third group had twenty participants (five men and fifteen men). These participants were drawn from different schools and departments, ODL secretariats and other stakeholder organizations including persons with disabilities (PWDs). The understanding was that policy development would require grassroots representation if it were to be comprehensive, representative and acceptable by different users, and stakeholders (see Matiki, et al. 2023). Accordingly, the coming section details policy development processes in relation to ODL in Malawi; its objectives and some crucial recommendations. Essentially, this paper has covered issues beyond the workshops, which are both theoretical and practical in nature as seen in this work.

Participation at the ODL Policy development and enhancement workshops

This particular workshop was attended by twenty participants, fifteen of which were male, while five were female from different staff categories. Out of this number, eight were Heads of Schools (Deans) and HoDs in cases of delegation, and these represented the highest hierarchy of the targeted Public universities. There were also support staff who provided secretarial, security and housekeeping services. Some technical staff from ICTs, library, and publishing were also invited to provide technical insights regarding the core technological needs of ODL. As argued by Holmberg (1995; 2005), and Matiki, et al. (2023) students can easily succeed if HEIs and society understand their needs, and are willing to listen to their voice to support them adequately. These concerns were also highlighted by Anderson, Holmberg and Moore in the ITM, ICM and Utilitarian discourses.

Approaches to the workshops and transformative action plans

To achieve our objectives, which were to design and/or enhance ODL policies at a selected HEIs in Malawi, the representative HoD welcomed the participants, the Consultants and DVC respectively. The HoD further provided background information regarding the workshops and the sponsors (CoL) and its key mandates across the globe. She further presented the biography, affiliations and scholarly achievements of the Consultants. The DVC as invited guest, officially opened the workshops. He highlighted the importance of ODL in increasing access to quality higher education. He also spotted the role of ODL in improving human capital development and growth for national development. He however noted that ODL alone would not achieve these goals unless necessary policies were in place. He further claimed that ODL policies would help set direction for offering quality higher education that is guided by best practices. He finally requested participants to take these workshops seriously just like they do with their classes.

Later, the consultants, presented the history and generations of ODL as suggested by Anderson and Dron (2011), and the theoretical propositions discussed in the early sections using PowerPoint. The reasons were to stimulate the participants and induct them into the history of ODL and policy formulation processes, and how certain policies fail or succeed. We essentially examined the three generations of ODL, which are determined by technological advancements as reflected in the four industrial revolutions (Schwab, 2020), all of which, had unique characteristics and implications on ODL, and how best HEIs could reposition themselves in readiness for the fifth industrial revolution (see Chibambo, 2023). These presentations were also paramount considering the contextual studies which established that many academics in the SADC region did not have right knowledge on ODL issues, guiding theories, and principles. It was important that we present these areas to help them understand the anatomy of ODL; its evolution and current issues and trends. Since ODL is an offshoot of mainstream education, it was important that they understand critical theories of education that help policymakers to design effective policies and their implications. This approach served not only as motivational strategy but also as learning platform and a rapport builder.

The second step involved asking participants to comment on the different presentations about the history of ODL and the theories. We later divided them into three groups to scrutinise different policies from different HEIs across Africa to ensure that the draft ODL policy spoke to different policies at minimum, while adopting proper structure and content. They were later assigned different sections of the draft policy so that they should concentrate on the given areas. Each group handled a minimum of two topics doable within the timeframes. They also scrutinized different ODL policies including ones from the University of Rwanda and Zambia as these HEIs operated under similar conditions. The selected HEIs Strategic Plans, curriculum documents and other documents were also availed to ensure that the enhanced policy spoke to these instruments. Where institutional instruments were lacking, such sections were highlighted, and comments were appended demanding the HEIs to amend the instrument for it to accommodate the revised ODL policy.

The fourth and fifth stages required group leaders to make PowerPoint presentations of the amended policies. Throughout these processes, Consultants moved around supervising the discussions and offering guidance wherever necessary while keeping the atmosphere cordial. The section below represents what goes into a standard ODL Policy.

Generic constitution of a standard ODL policy

Generally, the draft policy was based on the following main areas:

- a) **Institutional Strategy:** This focused on learner engagement, industry linkages, collaborations, partnerships and internationalisation.
- b) **Program Designs:** This looked at research, teaching, learning, student recruitment and student support services (SSSs).
- c) **Digitization and e-Learning:** This looked at assessments, monitoring, evaluation and feedback.
- d) **Quality Assurance:** This looked at self-instructional materials development, authorship, peer reviewing, editing, compensation, copyright and other quality checks.
- e) **Teaching and Learning Processes:** This focused on student support services, assignments, examinations, counselling and other supports.
- f) **Financing and Resourcing:** This focused on resource mobilisation, resource utilization, resource management and governance systems.
- g) **Monitoring and evaluation:** This focused on the need to design specific tools for regular monitoring every element in the life cycle of the program including teaching, learning, quality, program designs, while making modifications to the elements of the program.

Once the policy was redeveloped, we consolidate the amendments, and have it preliminarily reviewed and edited for consistency, clarity based on the house-styles, before it could be taken for blind-peer reviewing and technical editing to meet QA requirements.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study set-out to explain and understand possible steps that are taken when designing, developing and enhancing ODL policies. It did so by deploying the descriptive and interpretive phenomenological research traditions as advanced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. This was important because policies, practices and perceptions are best understood through different documents, lived-experiences and dialogues with the research subjects. Similarly, the findings from different contextual analyses were utilized to inform this work. We thus used document analyses, followed by conversations and practical activities that helped us enhance the available ODL policies. The study established that many academics had inadequate knowledge on policy formulation and guiding philosophical theories. It demonstrated that using different theoretical propositions have more advantages than disadvantages since education has been confronted by complex challenges. By reviewing different philosophical debates alongside a transformative paradigm, we took the risk of being misconstrued as having pursued unconventional research approaches. Since research is mainly about discovering new knowledge, this study has gained its uniqueness and credibility through such surprises. It is that ability to analyse different theoretical abstractions alongside strategic actions that yielded the ratified generic ODL policies for Malawi's HEIs. Since this is merely work in progress as is the case with any educational research, we call upon policy enthusiasts to try out our approaches, and let us know your experiences.

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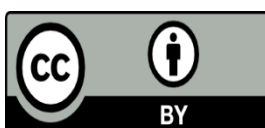
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