The Challenges Faced by Adult Learners in Open Distance Learning at the Institute of Adult Education in the Shinyanga Region, Tanzania

Edina Msonge[*] iD

Institute of Adult Education (IAE), P.O. Box 340, Shinyanga, Tanzania

Corresponding Author: Edina Msonge

Institute of Adult Education (IAE), P.O. Box 340, Shinyanga, Tanzania

Abstract: This study examined the challenges faced by adult learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) in Shinyanga Region, Tanzania. Adult learners represent a diverse group with unique responsibilities, backgrounds, and goals, and while ODL offers flexibility and lifelong learning opportunities, many challenges hinder its effectiveness. The study was guided by the objective of identifying the barriers adult learners encounter in pursuing education through ODL. A mixed research approach was adopted, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data were collected from 80 adult learners and 2 course facilitators using questionnaires and in-depth interviews, with random sampling employed to ensure representation. The findings revealed several interconnected challenges, including time management, financial constraints were also significant, technological barriers such as limited ICT skills and poor internet access, and further restricted participation. Moreover, unclear ODL guidelines and policies as a challenge, highlighting systemic and policy-related gaps. Language barriers were also reported to affect learners' ability to effectively engage with course content. The study concludes that while ODL provides important educational opportunities for adults in Tanzania, its potential is undermined by systemic policy weaknesses, inadequate infrastructure, financial burdens, and personal constraints related to time and language. It recommends that the government and institutions develop clear ODL policies, strengthen ICT infrastructure, and provide financial aid and institutional support services tailored to adult learners. Flexible scheduling and language support programs are also necessary to foster inclusivity and enhance academic success. Overall, addressing these barriers is crucial for ensuring that adult learners can fully benefit from ODL and contribute meaningfully to personal and societal development.

Keywords: *Adult, Adult learners, Open and Distance Learning, Institute of Adult Education.*

Introduction

The term "adult" encompasses a broad range of concepts. It refers to a stage in an individual's life cycle and represents a status recognized by society. Additionally, it denotes a social subset that distinguishes adults from children, and it can also encompass a set of ideals and values associated with adulthood (Kapur, 2019). Likewise, Kapur enlightened that adult learners refer to individuals with diverse characters, experiences, educational backgrounds, and goals. Understanding the concept of the adult learner, it is not the age, that needs to be taken into consideration, but the social roles that define the person. The adult learner character differs from other learner characters as they have different educational backgrounds and goals, Kara, Erdoğdu, Kokoç, and Cagiltay, (2019). In this stand, adult learners comprise diverse groups with varying perceptions, goals, and responsibilities, and they are motivated to pursue higher education qualifications.

In higher education, online distance learning has grown in popularity. Adult learners are the main users of the online courses and degree options that schools are developing as they enter this learning environment (Kapinga, & Mtani, 2014). Online education offers adult learners lifelong learning due to its inherent flexibility. Moreover, online distance learning t is a structured approach to teaching and learning that utilizes a communication channel within an institutional framework, allowing for activities to occur without restrictions on time or location (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Distance education is a structured teaching and learning process using a communication channel within an institutional framework, free from time and place constraints.

Globally the importance of adult education acknowledged by UNESCO commented on the global significance of adult education and the advancement of global society, and pledged to guarantee adults' access to education (Soloma, 2018). Similarly, Soloma commented that adults support the growth of any civilization, which is why this has been done. Due to its contribution to social development, adult education has also become a key topic of educational sciences, for instance for generating socially sustainable answers to the rapid. Tanzania chose to respond to the aforementioned global agreement by working to establish adult education opportunities that would guarantee that their learning requirements are satisfied and that they are completely involved in the community as active citizens and social sustainability agents.

Tanzania's history of adult education involvement began when the country gained its independence and 70% of its people were illiterate. In 2012, there were 3,528,876 neo-literate teenagers and 6,523,100 illiterate adults aged 19 and over (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2013). Over 318,240 adults and children were

enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Integrated Post Primary Education (IPPE). Furthermore, adult education was made available to 469,630 underprivileged youngsters between the ages of 11 and 18, especially those from pastoral villages with low reading rates. This was important since, because of their age, their involvement had a direct impact on national growth (URT, 2013). Adults' knowledge, attitudes, and abilities have a significant influence on their personal development and, consequently, on broader societal advancement. Online distance education offers an option for teachers who would like to add additional credentials to their existing work. There are also some challenges despite the great opportunity of online distance education.

Statement of the Problem

In 2003, the Government of Tanzania developed a National Strategy for Adult Education and Non-Formal Education, which was to be implemented from 2003 to 2008. This strategy aimed to create educational programs targeting adults, youth, and out-of-school children. The equitable implementation of these strategies and programs was delegated to the Institute of Adult Education (IAE), which held the responsibility for planning and delivering adult education (URT, 2010). Subsequently, the responsibility was decentralized to local governments. This approach aimed to reduce the gaps in educational provision caused by shortcomings in the formal education system. Natives were encouraged to pursue education related to topics that would help them understand and utilize their environment for personal development, a concept referred to as social sustainability (Kagonji, 2014). Despite an increase in the number of adult learners and the diversity of students participating in online distance education, the literature contains fewer studies on adult learners compared to those focusing on traditional learners (Chu & Tsai, 2009; Ke, 2010; Remedios & Richardson, 2013). Moreover, there is limited research on the challenges affecting adult education in Tanzania from the perspective of social sustainability. Shinyanga region, through its campus of the IAE, plays a vital role in promoting adult education aimed at social sustainability. However, no studies have been conducted on the challenges faced by adult learners in open distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education in the Shinyanga region. This study filled the gap regarding the challenges encountered by adult learners in open distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education in Shinyanga, Tanzania.

General Objective

To examine the challenges faced by adult learners in open distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education in Shinyanga region, Tanzania

Specific Objectives

i.   To identify the challenges faced by adult learners in open distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education in Shinyanga region, Tanzania

Research Questions

i.   What challenges do adult learners face in the open distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education in Shinyanga region, Tanzania

Literature Review

The challenges faced by adult learners in open distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education

In Bangladesh, in the review of literature Kara, Erdoğdu, Kokoç, and Cagiltay, (2019) observed that adult learners have challenges related to internal, external, and program-related factors, indicating the interrelated nature of these challenges. Moreover, the study shows that the challenges experienced by adult learners vary depending on their age, gender, knowledge, and skills, as well as the context in which they study. For this author's argument, it's clear that the adult learner is faced with internal and external challenges related to the learning process. Generally, the findings from Kara et al. (2019) emphasize that adult learners face a variety of interconnected challenges arising from personal circumstances, external factors, and limitations within their programs. These challenges differ significantly based on individual characteristics and learning environments. This variability highlights the importance of adopting flexible and inclusive approaches that cater to the diverse needs of adult learners, ultimately aiming to improve their learning outcomes.

Likewise, Mannan (2019) exposed that in the implementation of open distance learning, no concrete ODL guidelines offered by the National Education Policy pose various challenges and raise questions on program quality inequality issues. The absence of a national policy leads institutions, BOU, governed by their institutional policies, and ODL delivery in Bangladesh to be faced with various challenges that impede its full implementation. Based on the fact above it was observed that effective implementation of open distance learning depends on the availability of concrete guidelines. In conclusion, Mannan (2019) highlights that the absence of clear national guidelines for Open Distance Learning (ODL) in Bangladesh results in inconsistencies in program delivery, raises concerns about quality and equity, and forces institutions to rely on fragmented policies. This situation underscores the importance of establishing comprehensive and standardized national guidelines to ensure uniformity, quality assurance, and equal access for all learners in the effective implementation of open distance learning.

In 2021, Bok conducted a study in Malaysia on the adult learners' challenges in distance learning: a case study in Universiti Sains Malaysia. The findings revealed work commitments to be one of the main challenges experienced by these learners, with work transition emerging as an additional challenge. Other observable challenges included family commitments, adaptation to studying, and the cost of education. These challenges were found to affect adult learners who had multiple roles, and the challenges subsequently became barriers to learning. In general, Bok's (2021) study highlights the various challenges faced by adult learners in Malaysia. These challenges primarily arise from the multiple roles they juggle at work, at home, and in their education. Factors such as transitions in the workplace, family responsibilities, difficulties in adapting, and financial constraints collectively create significant barriers to effective learning. This situation underscores the importance of implementing supportive measures to help adult learners manage these competing demands more effectively.

Joo (2014) export that the lack of organizational support is the challenge facing adult learners in their learning process. The organization should support its employees in their professional development, which might happen through having a friendly schedule. Similarly, Kara et al. (2019) the study is to explore the challenges faced by adult learners in online distance education through the analysis of the relevant literature. The findings also show that the challenges experienced by adult learners vary depending on their age, gender, knowledge and skills as well as the

context in which they study. The findings of this study, which has an exploratory nature, have several implications for distance education stakeholders such as administrators, instructors, instructional designers, and policy makers. Joo (2014) and Kara et al. (2019) highlight that adult learners face various challenges, both organizational and individual. Issues like insufficient institutional support and rigid schedules, along with personal factors such as age, gender, and skills, affect their online learning experiences. These findings underscore the importance of collaborative efforts to create flexible and inclusive learning environments tailored to adult learners' needs.

In Tanzania, Kapinga and Mtani, (2014), commented that most of the learners pursuing this program did not have computers or internet access. Secondly, participants had limited ICT knowledge. Thirdly, most of them didn't have study skills, and fourthly, these adult learners had competing priorities and struggled to balance family responsibilities, job obligations, and commitment to the program. Likewise, Kimaro et al. (2022). Exposed different challenges of adult education provision towards social sustainability at the Institute of adult education-Morogoro Campus. The findings of the study show that the provision of adult education toward social sustainability was challenged by several factors, such as insufficient funds, shortage of time for studies, lack of political will, language barrier, and family problems. Therefore, the challenges identified by Kapinga and Mtani (2014) and Kimaro et al. (2022) highlight significant barriers to adult education in Tanzania, including limited ICT access, inadequate study skills, financial issues, family responsibilities, and insufficient institutional support. These factors hinder participation and sustainability. Addressing them demands a comprehensive approach that considers the socio-economic realities of learners and the systemic flaws in adult education programs to promote equitable access and meaningful outcomes.

Moreover, Magembe (2023) carried out a study to explore the challenges faced by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students when conducting research at the Institute of Adult Education Regional Centres in Tanzania. The findings revealed three main categories of challenges: those related to students themselves, supervisors, and institutions. The study recommended organizing regular workshops on research supervision for supervisors, encouraging them to attend and present at both local and international conferences, and advising students to plan their research activities early. Similarly, Edward (2019) highlighted home-related factors, such as difficulties in balancing study time with domestic responsibilities like cooking, caregiving, and community obligations, which negatively impact learning. In addition, workplace-related issues, such as a lack of study space and electricity, especially in rural areas, were identified as significant barriers to effective learning among ODL students. Thus, the studies by Magembe (2023) and Edward (2019) underscore that ODL students face multifaceted challenges stemming from personal, supervisory, institutional, domestic, and workplace factors. These obstacles not only hinder their research and academic progress but also limit the overall effectiveness of distance learning, particularly in rural settings.

Methodology

The study was conducted at the Institute of Adult Education in Shinyanga Region. The study adopted a mixed research approach, which includes both qualitative and quantitative elements. It was mainly qualitative, although elements of quantitative methodology were also employed. The use of this approach may help overcome the weaknesses of one approach by complementing another. Different categories of respondents were used to provide extensive and comprehensive information about the problem being investigated. Twenty respondents were involved, including 2 course facilitators and 80 learners selected from the IAE in Shinyanga. The random sampling technique was used to select both facilitators and learners. The data collection method included a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The use of a questionnaire enables the researcher to obtain quantitative data. In contrast, in-depth interviews enabled the researchers to delve into salient issues and gather in-depth information for the study.

Results and Discussion

**Table 1:** *The challenge facing an adult learner in Open and Distance Learning*

No	Statement	Response percentage									
		SA		A		N		D		SD	
		F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
1.	The lack of concrete ODL guidelines offered by the National Education Policy is a challenge to the adult learner	38	47.5	25	31.3	0	0	11	13.8	6	7.5
2.	Adaptation to studying, and the cost of education	41	51.2	30	37.5	0	0	5	6.3	4	5
3.	Inability to create a balance between their education and work, family, and social life	50	62.5	24	30	2	2.5	4	5	0	0
4.	The lack of organizational support is the challenge facing adult learners in their learning process.	32	40	30	37.5	3	3.8	9	11.3	6	7.5
5.	The adult learner had the challenge of limited ICT knowledge	35	43.8	25	31.3	10	12.5	6	7.5	4	5

Source: Field Data, (2025).

Table 1 outlines the key challenges that adult learners encounter in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), based on the perceptions of the respondents. The findings indicate that 47.5 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that the absence of concrete ODL guidelines provided by the national education policy is a significant challenge for adult learners. However, 13.8 percent of the respondents disagreed with this statement, while 7.5 percent strongly disagreed. Regarding challenges related to adaptation to studying and the cost of education, 51.2 percent of respondents strongly agreed, and 37.5 percent agreed with the statements. Despite this strong agreement, 6.3 percent of the respondents disagreed, and 5 percent strongly disagreed. Notably, none of the respondents had a neutral stance on these statements.

Figure 1: *The challenges facing an adult learner in Open and Distance Learning*
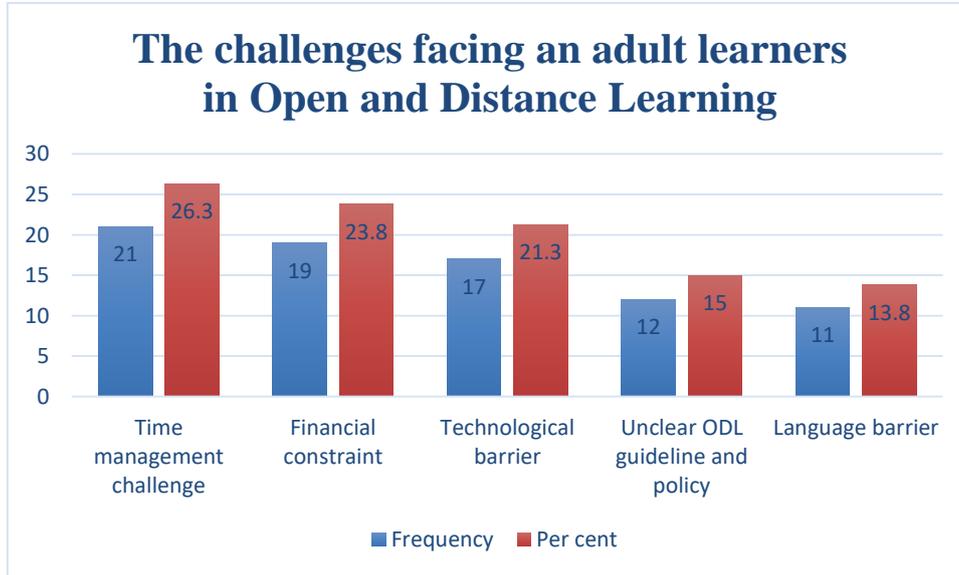
Source: Field Data (2025).

Most of the respondents face challenges in balancing education with work, family, and social life, with 62.5 percent strongly agreeing and 30 percent agreeing. Only 5 percent disagreed, and 2.5 percent were neutral. The lack of organizational support is another significant challenge, with 40 percent strongly agreeing and 37.5 percent agreeing. Meanwhile, 11.3 percent disagreed, and 3.8 percent were neutral. Additionally, 43.8 percent strongly agreed, and 31.3 percent agreed that limited ICT knowledge is a challenge. In this case, 7.5 percent disagreed, with 12.5 percent neutral. Overall, most learners acknowledge these challenges as common experiences.

Figure 1 illustrates the challenges faced by adult learners in open and distance learning (ODL). According to the data, 26.3 percent of respondents identified time management as a significant challenge. Financial constraints were noted by 23.8 percent of participants as another issue affecting adult learners. Additionally, 21.3 percent pointed out technological barriers as obstacles in their learning process. More than 15 percent of respondents stated that unclear guidelines and policies related to ODL contribute to the difficulties faced by adult learners. Finally, 13.8 percent mentioned that language barriers also pose challenges in their learning experience.

Unclear ODL Guidelines in the National Education Policy

The findings indicated that 78.8% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the lack of clear Open and Distance Learning (ODL) guidelines poses a significant challenge. Additionally, Figure 1 showed that 15% of respondents identified unclear ODL policies as a barrier. This highlights a policy gap and insufficient guidance from educational authorities, leading to inconsistencies in ODL implementation. The situation in Tanzania mirrors that observed in Bangladesh, where Mannan (2019) noted that ambiguous national ODL guidelines compromised program quality and equity.

The finding corresponds with the qualitative findings when one of the interviewees was asked about the challenges facing adult learners on ODL, the interviewee said that.

> As tutors, we witness firsthand the impact of unclear Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policies. Many of us operate without standardized guidelines, leading to inconsistencies in course delivery. Institutions often interpret policies differently, which can be confusing for both learners and instructors. This lack of clarity limits the effectiveness of ODL and, in many ways, undermines learners' confidence in the system (Interview 1, 2025).

The quotation above implies that the lack of clear and standardized Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policies results in inconsistent course delivery. This inconsistency undermines the overall effectiveness and credibility of ODL programs, which in turn diminishes learners' confidence and trust in the system. These findings align with those of Kara et al. (2019), who highlighted program-related barriers and the connection between these systemic shortcomings and the challenges faced by learners. This situation emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive and standardized policies in Tanzania to ensure quality, consistency, and equitable opportunities for adult learners.

Financial Constraints

Financial challenges have emerged as a significant barrier to education, with 88.7% of respondents in Table 1 and 23.8% in Figure 1 indicating that financial burdens impede their learning.

The findings concur with Kimaro et al. (2022) findings, which found in Tanzania that insufficient funds adversely affected the sustainability of adult education. These results indicate that financial instability, ranging from tuition fees to the costs of internet access and learning materials, remains one of the most pressing challenges in Open Distance Learning (ODL). To address this issue, it may be necessary to implement scholarships, subsidies, and institutional financial support schemes to enhance access to education.

The findings are supported by the qualitative findings provided during the interview with one of the interviewees. The interviewee quoted that.

> Many adult learners encounter financial challenges that make it difficult to pay tuition on time, which can result in suspending their studies. Beyond tuition, additional costs for internet access, devices, and materials further add to their financial burden. Balancing low-income jobs, family responsibilities, and educational expenses is a struggle that negatively affects attendance and engagement in online sessions (Interview 1, 2025).

The quotation suggests that financial constraints significantly hinder adult learners' ability to fully engage in ODL. The combined burden of tuition fees, technology-related expenses, and family or work responsibilities can lead to interruptions in studies, reduced attendance, and lower levels of engagement. These findings echo Bok's (2021) study in Malaysia, which highlighted that financial difficulties, combined with work and family obligations, limited learners' engagement with distance education.

Time Management

The results indicate that 92.5% of respondents struggled to balance their education, work, family, and social life, while 26.3% specifically mentioned issues with time management, as shown in Figure 1. This highlights the challenges faced by adult learners who often have to juggle multiple responsibilities, making it difficult to dedicate enough time to studying. In Tanzania, Kapinga and Mtani (2014) found that competing priorities were among the most critical challenges for adult learners. These findings confirm that time management is both a personal and structural challenge, linked not only to the roles of the learners but also to the necessity for flexible institutional scheduling.

The findings were supported by the qualitative information obtained during the interview. The interviewee, when asked about the challenge facing the adult learner, has the following to say;

> Time management poses a significant challenge for many adult learners who juggle full-time jobs, family, and studies. This often leads to late assignments and missed classes. While tutors aim to offer flexible deadlines and asynchronous learning, it's not always possible to accommodate everyone. A stronger institutional framework supporting flexible scheduling and modular study options is essential to help learners balance their responsibilities (Interview 2, 2025).

The quotation implies that inadequate time management, along with work and family responsibilities, adversely affects adult learners' academic performance and participation in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). While tutors offer flexibility, the lack of institutional support for adaptable schedules undermines these efforts. This situation emphasizes the importance of developing flexible learning policies that address the diverse commitments of adult learners. The findings correspond with the findings of Bok (2021) identified that family commitments and workplace transitions pose significant barriers to learning in Malaysia.

Technological Barriers

The findings reveal that 75.1% of respondents identified limited ICT knowledge as a significant challenge, while 21.3% pointed to technological barriers, as shown in Figure 1. This observation aligns with Kapinga and Mtani (2014), who noted that Tanzanian ODL learners often lack access to computers, internet connectivity, and essential ICT skills. Addressing this issue necessitates not only the development of infrastructure but also targeted ICT training to enhance digital literacy. The findings were supported by the qualitative findings obtained during the interview. The interviewee quoted that.

> Technology offers both opportunities and challenges in ODL. Many adult learners lack basic ICT skills and personal computers, while poor internet connectivity in rural areas often prevents them from attending classes. Limited digital literacy further disadvantages these learners compared to more tech-savvy students. To tackle these issues, increased investment in ICT training for learners and tutors and improvements in infrastructure are necessary for equal access to online platforms (Interview 2, 2025).

The quotation above suggests that while technology plays a crucial role in enabling Open and Distance Learning (ODL), it also contributes to a digital divide that disadvantages certain learners, particularly adults in rural areas who have limited internet access and low ICT skills. This indicates that technological inequality remains a significant barrier to inclusive education. To achieve equitable participation in ODL, it is essential to improve infrastructure and connectivity, as well as to provide ongoing digital literacy training for both learners and tutors. Strengthening these areas will ensure that technology serves as a bridge, rather than a barrier, to learning. The findings supported by findings from a study conducted by Kara et al. (2019) emphasized that the challenges faced by learners vary depending on their knowledge and skills, especially in technologically driven environments. Given that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) relies heavily on digital platforms, these technological barriers pose a risk of excluding learners from full participation.

Insufficient Organizational Support

The results indicate that 77.5% of respondents felt that a lack of support from institutions or employers was a significant barrier to their learning. This aligns with the findings of Joo (2014), who emphasized that organizational support, such as flexible schedules and encouragement for professional development, is essential for adult learners. Similarly, Kara et al. (2019) identified challenges at both the organizational and program levels as major obstacles. These findings underscore the importance of having supportive institutional policies, guidance, and learner services to enhance the experience of ODL.

The findings correspond with the qualitative findings obtained during the interview. The interviewee, when asked about the challenges facing adult learners, has the following to say.

> Many adult learners encounter inadequate support from both institutions and employers. Workplaces often do not

offer the flexibility needed to attend online classes or exams. At the same time, educational institutions face challenges such as limited resources, slow communication, and insufficient administrative assistance. As a result, adult learners may feel neglected. By enhancing organizational support through better services, mentorship programs, and collaboration with employers, open distance learning can become more effective (Interview 1, 2025).

The quotation suggests that the effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) relies heavily on support from educational institutions and employers. Without adequate guidance, administrative help, and workplace flexibility, adult learners may feel neglected and disengaged, hindering their academic progress. This highlights a gap in collaboration between institutions and employers. Strengthening support services and partnerships is essential to better meet the needs of adult learners. The findings correspond with the findings of Kimaro et al. (2022), who commented that in the context of Tanzania, limited institutional resources and insufficient political commitment are significant constraints.

Language Barriers

In this challenge, a total of 13.8% of respondents identified language barriers as a challenge, as shown in Figure 1. While this percentage is lower compared to other challenges, it is still significant because language proficiency directly affects learners' ability to engage with course content, participate in discussions, and achieve academic success. The findings supported with Kimaro et al. (2022) who recognized language as a barrier to adult education access. These findings indicate that language support services such as translation, simplified materials, or remedial classes are essential for reducing exclusion.

Language presents a significant challenge for many learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Most course content is in English, while some adult learners are more comfortable with Kiswahili, which limits their engagement and participation. We frequently observe learners struggling with assignments due to language barriers. As tutors, we attempt to simplify the materials and offer some translations; however, the institutional language support remains insufficient (Interview 2, 2025).

The quotation above means that language barriers greatly affect learners' participation, comprehension, and performance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The dominance of English in course materials disadvantages those proficient in Kiswahili, leading to lower engagement and learning outcomes. Without proper language support, such as translation services or bilingual resources, ODL programs may exclude some learners and compromise educational equity. Strengthening these support mechanisms is essential for enhancing inclusivity and effectiveness in ODL. The findings align with the findings of Edward (2019), who highlighted similar challenges in Tanzania, where factors related to home life and cultural obligations sometimes worsened linguistic difficulties.

Conclusion

The study revealed that adult learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) face a range of interconnected challenges that are both systemic and personal. The most significant barriers identified were time management, financial constraints, unclear ODL guidelines, technological barriers, and lack of organizational support, while language barriers also posed challenges. These findings highlight that while ODL provides opportunities for adult learners to access education flexibly, its effectiveness is undermined by structural policy gaps, limited financial resources, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and insufficient institutional support.

Recommendations

The government should establish clear and comprehensive guidelines for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as part of the National Education Policy. This will ensure consistency, quality assurance, and equitable access across educational institutions. Additionally, institutions should create flexible academic schedules and develop learner-friendly timetables that take into account the various responsibilities of adult learners.

To improve internet connectivity and access to online learning platforms, it is essential to expand ICT infrastructure in both rural and urban areas. Furthermore, institutions should offer language support services, including remedial classes, simplified study materials, and translation services, to assist learners facing linguistic challenges.

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