



Students' perceptions of the open and distance learning mode for initial primary teacher training in Malawi

A case of Lilongwe Teachers' College

*Grace Mkandawire Banda, Lilongwe Teachers' College, Malawi and
Elias Kaphesi, University of Malawi, Blantyre, Malawi*

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess students' perceptions of open and distance learning (ODL) as a mode of training primary school teachers at Lilongwe Teachers' College in Malawi. The ODL program had two components: an on-campus component for face-to-face learning and an off-campus component for distance learning. Both components were assessed in this study. Data were collected using both questionnaires and focus-group interviews. The findings suggest that students perceived ODL as a useful mode for training primary school teachers. Generally, the ODL program was characterized by a number of challenges, such as delays in the payment of student allowances, delays in the distribution of study material, inadequate time for face-to-face learning, inadequate professional support in the field, and high teaching loads owing to a shortage of staffing in schools. Students also complained that food and accommodation were poor in the on-campus component. The study's findings have practical implications for the successful implementation of ODL. In particular, the findings may address student concerns, which could lead to improved student experiences and improved ODL outcomes for teacher training, as they highlight difficulties that debilitate ODL. Moreover, the study's findings reveal differences in students' perceptions of the on-campus and off-campus components of distance learning, each of which poses unique challenges that, if left unaddressed, would compromise the outcomes of the ODL program.

Keywords: perception; open and distance learning; distance learning; open learning; teacher training; self-directed learning; student teacher

Elias Kaphesi (corresponding author): ekaphesi@poly.ac.mw



www.journal.avu.org

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License. © 2017 African Virtual University

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude était d'évaluer les perceptions des étudiants sur la formation ouverte et à distance (FOAD) en tant que mode de formation des enseignants du primaire au Lilongwe Teachers' College, au Malawi. Le programme FOAD comprenait deux composantes : une composante « sur le campus », pour la formation en face-à-face et une composante « hors campus » pour la formation à distance. Les deux composantes ont été évaluées dans cette étude. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide de questionnaires et d'entretiens avec des groupes cibles. Les résultats suggèrent que les élèves ont perçu la FOAD comme un mode utile pour la formation des enseignants du primaire. De manière générale, le programme FOAD s'est caractérisé par un certain nombre de défis tels que les retards dans le paiement des allocations des étudiants, les retards dans la distribution du matériel de formation, le temps insuffisant prévu pour la formation en face à face, l'inadéquation du soutien professionnel sur le terrain et les lourdes charges d'enseignement du fait de la pénurie de personnel dans les écoles. Dans la composante « sur le campus », les étudiants se sont également plaints que la nourriture et l'hébergement étaient médiocres. Les résultats de l'étude ont des implications pratiques sur la mise en œuvre réussie de la FOAD. Les résultats ont, en particulier, porté sur les préoccupations des élèves, ce qui peut permettre l'amélioration des expériences des élèves et des résultats de la FOAD pour la formation des enseignants, car ils mettent en évidence les difficultés qui affaiblissent la FOAD. En outre, les résultats de l'étude ont révélé les différences de perception qu'ont les élèves des composantes « sur le campus » et « hors campus » de la formation à distance, chacune présentant des défis uniques qui compromettraient les résultats du programme FOAD s'ils n'étaient pas relevés.

Mots clés : perception ; formation ouverte et à distance ; formation à distance ; formation ouverte ; formation des enseignants ; formation autodirigée ; enseignant en formation

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi de avaliar a percepção dos estudantes sobre a formação aberta e à distância (FOAD) como modo de formação para os professores do ensino primário no Lilongwe Teachers' College no Malawi. O programa FOAD tem duas componentes : uma componente no campus em modo presencial e uma componente fora do campus para o ensino à distância. Ambas as componentes foram avaliadas neste estudo. Os dados foram recolhidos utilizando questionários e entrevistas entre grupos focais. Os resultados sugerem que os estudantes vêem a FOAD como um modo útil para a formação dos professores do ensino primário. De um modo geral, o programa FOAD, foi caracterizado por vários desafios, como atrasos no pagamento dos subsídios dos alunos e na distribuição dos materiais de estudo, tempo de ensino presencial inadequado, apoio profissional no terreno inadequado e carga de ensino elevada devido à escassez de pessoal docente nas escolas. Os estudantes também se queixaram da fraca qualidade da alimentação e do alojamento durante a componente presencial. Os resultados deste estudo têm implicações de ordem prática para a execução bem sucedida da FOAD. Nomeadamente, os resultados podem contribuir para responder às preocupações dos estudantes e melhorar as experiências dos estudantes e os resultados do FOAD para a formação dos professores, tendo em conta que salientam as dificuldades da FOAD. Além disso, os resultados do estudo revelam diferenças de percepção da parte dos estudantes quanto às diferentes componentes do ensino à distância, no campus e fora do campus. Cada uma destas componentes apresenta desafios diferentes, que, se não forem resolvidos, podem comprometer os resultados do programa FOAD.

Palavras-chave: percepção; formação aberta à distância e eLearning; ensino à distância; ensino aberto; formação de professores; formação autónoma; professor estudante

Introduction

Interest in the use of open and distance learning (ODL) as a mode of providing quality education for large groups of learners at low cost has been growing, and various forces have been driving this increased attention to the integration of ODL in education at all levels. ODL provides an innovative and cost-effective way of delivering teacher training by using a combination of distance learning and short-term, on-campus components (Robinson, Creed & Perraton, 2001), with an emphasis on serving an off-campus population (Goel & Goel, 2000). ODL also provides access to education for students who cannot attend conventional campus-based training because of various factors, including the cost of such training, and is an effective means of serving large numbers of students in a country.

As an educational method and a philosophical construct, ODL has been identified as the most potent instrument for increasing access to teacher training in Malawi. In the period after 1985, Malawi saw a rapid growth in the number of teacher-training programs (Kunje, Lewin & Stuart, 2000). Many of these programs were based on the integration of traditional and in-service components. Some of the programs were short-lived, as they were meant to solve specific problems and were dependent on external donors. According to Kunje, Lewin and Stuart (2000), student teachers attending these programs were ill-prepared for the present challenges of teaching in primary schools. Owing to an increase in the number of programs, severe overcrowding in teacher-training colleges (TTCs) and cuts in teacher-education funding, TTCs have been unable to train enough teachers or even train quality teachers. To address some of these issues, Malawi adopted ODL as an innovative way of training teachers.

Consequently, Malawi introduced ODL alongside the traditional program in all TTCs in 2009 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009). With ODL, the Initial Primary Teacher Education (IPTE) program employs a distance education model, which combines on-campus instruction, self-study, and school-based teaching practice. The aim of ODL was to train as many teachers as possible through a cost-effective process, thereby reducing learner–teacher ratios and improving the quality of learning in Malawi. The ODL training cycle includes the following:

- Face-to-face sessions held in all designated TTCs, during which student teachers are introduced to each module's content and activities. In the conventional program, the sessions are conducted during vacation periods;
- Individual activities outlined in the student teachers' modules, along with self-assessment exercises on course content and assignments for continuous assessment, all of which are held off-campus;
- Supervision and assessment of the school-based teaching practice of student teachers by the college's lecturers; and
- School-based learning support systems overseen by field supervisors (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009).

According to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2009), the curriculum for ODL is an adaptation of the national curriculum for IPTE and is organized in learning areas similar to the conventional mode. The curriculum's nucleus consists of an interdisciplinary core, including a field research project in which student teachers examine aspects of their locally situated experiences. The field research project may address specific themes of local interest, such as school culture, environmental issues, or local history. Evaluation of student teachers occurs continuously and relies on an analysis of several evaluative instruments such as assignments, on-campus tests, lesson plans, and observation of actual classroom practices. In addition, student teachers undertake a supervised, school-based teaching practice where they apply theory to practice.

Course and instructional material were developed by a nationally based team of subject-matter specialists and instructional designers coordinated by the Malawi Institute of Education. Learning material included subject modules comprising the learning content and activities, along with self-study material and self-assignments. The ODL program also offered printed material containing all the necessary information about the course, including orientation on methodology, implementation strategies, the operational structure of ODL, the responsibilities of individual partners, and the roles and functions of tutors and the training institutions. This material included a general guide, operational guide, tutor guide, tutor support texts, and training-college support texts (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009).

The organizational structure of Malawi's ODL operates at three levels. First, the Malawi government is responsible for defining technical and pedagogical design, developing and producing instructional material, defining implementation strategy, coordinating the implementation process, providing training for participants and technical support for institutions, and monitoring and evaluating processes and results. In addition, there is a Department of Teacher Education and Development (DTED) at Ministry of Education headquarters which coordinates teacher education and development (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009). Second, Malawi's individual TTCs are responsible for the on-campus component of the ODL program. The individual colleges select and designate staff and provide the support infrastructure for the program. The colleges are responsible for the financial and material support of both student teachers and tutors during the on-campus sessions of ODL (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009). Third, the ODL program has an off-campus training component consisting of supervised classroom teaching and self-study, including assignments and assessment of teaching practice.

The ODL program does not have its own formal physical institution responsible for providing training. It uses existing teacher-training institutions. However, it has its own budget maintained at ministry headquarters. The support systems consist of: locally based supervisors who support student teachers; teacher-training colleges; and the DTED, which is responsible for supporting, monitoring and evaluating the various state teams (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009).

Statement of the problem

Although the introduction of ODL leads to an increase in the number of student teachers in colleges, the perceptions of students about ODL, which may influence their attitude and commitment to its implementation, have evaded most research studies (Hanny & Newvine, 2006). In some countries, a lack of systemic planning in resource allocation and strategic priorities has been reported as one of the elements that most seriously affected the ability of TTCs to deliver ODL (Robinson, Creed & Perraton, 2001). In other countries, shortages of academic staff and underfunding of the teachers' colleges were reported to have negative influences on colleges' ability to implement ODL (Panda, 2003). The positive and negative factors associated with ODL programs may correspond to students' perceptions of ODL. Despite the important role and increased popularity of ODL, different people perceive the advantages of ODL differently, and their perceptions have influenced attitudes to the acceptance and use of ODL in the education system (Hanny & Newvine, 2006). In other words, accurate assessment of students' perceptions is a crucial factor, as the success of the ODL program could be affected by how it is viewed by the individuals it serves.

Since the program's inception in Malawi, little is known about students' experiences in the on-campus and off-campus components and about the aspects of the ODL program that are working or not. Moreover, no data have been systematically collected and analyzed to inform the implementation of the program regarding what is or is not working according to plan. In particular, it is not clear whether students perceive the program positively. Therefore, this study aims to identify issues concerning the implementation of ODL based on student teachers' perceptions of the on-campus and off-campus components of the program, which includes the type and quality of support given to students.

With these preoccupations in mind, this study seeks to answer the following general question: What are students' experiences of the on-campus and off-campus components of the ODL training program? Specifically, the following questions are addressed:

- What did students like about the on-campus and off-campus components of the ODL teacher-training program?
- What did students dislike (or what were their concerns) about the on-campus and off-campus components of the ODL teacher-training program?
- What challenges did students experience during the implementation of ODL in the teacher-training program?
- What were students' opinions of what can be done to improve the on-campus and off-campus components of the ODL teacher-training program?

Significance of the study

Students' perceptions can influence the successful implementation of an ODL training system. Consequently, the findings from this investigation of students' perceptions of ODL teacher

training are expected to have practical implications for the improvement and the successful implementation of the ODL training program. In addition, the study's findings will have broader applications with regard to the introduction of modifications to ODL as it relates to the teacher-training program. Specifically, the findings will provide some valuable suggestions and recommendations for students, supervisors, teachers, educational administrators, curriculum designers and distance education coordinators.

Literature review

Students' perceptions of ODL

According to Bisciglia and Turner (2002), students who study full-time and attend class off-campus have a more positive attitude to ODL than other students. Further, they are also more likely to be motivated and willing to take other ODL courses when given the option. Bisciglia and Turner (2002) argue that ODL students will be more enthusiastic about this type of learning environment because ODL programs are designed to serve an off-campus population. Such feelings are not always shared by their peers in traditional class-based training. While Hagel and Shaw (2006) found that jealousy existed between ODL students and traditional students, Peat and Helland (2002) came to the opposite conclusion, finding that ODL students perceived a greater level of connection between tutors and students than those enrolled in the traditional class. Therefore, the current study will provide a basis for future studies that focus on a comparison of ODL students with traditional students regarding their perceptions of the two modes of training teachers.

Shneiderman, Borkowski, Alavi and Norman (1998) found that ODL students were highly satisfied with their experiences and indicated that they would take another distance education course. In a study of 288 undergraduate college students in distance education classes at remote sites, students reported overall satisfaction with the courses (Biner, Welsh, Barone, Summers & Dean, 1997). The authors further confirmed the contention that remote-site group size affects both the satisfaction and motivation of students enrolled in distance education, college-level courses—larger classes were associated with more negative student attitudes and lower levels of relative performance. Other authors have reported that students often feel isolated, leading to negative feelings (Galusha, 1998). In addition, a study by Pugh and Siantz (1995) showed that students preferred the on-campus locations to off-site ones.

Factors influencing students' perceptions of ODL

Research related to students' perceptions has focused on identifying factors related to satisfaction, attitudes, and perceived learning and interaction. Factors affecting satisfaction may be organizational and may involve the environment, management and support services (Biner, Bink, Huffman & Dean, 1995), or they may be individual, including readiness, time and family support (Jegede &

Kirkwood, 1994). In this regard, for instance, some studies have reported that individuals who are less influenced by the surrounding environment are better suited to distance learning than people who are more influenced by the surrounding environment (Thompson & Thompson, 2001). A study conducted by Inman, Kerwin and Mayes (1999) on student perceptions of distance learning found that students were highly satisfied with the instructors and courses. However, the critical factor in much of traditional classroom instruction, namely direct interaction with instructors, played no role in determining students' satisfaction with their courses.

The results of some studies have indicated that students' anxiety may play a role in their perceptions of distance learning. For instance, Jegede and Kirkwood (1994) investigated the anxiety levels of distance education students, along with the factors contributing to anxiety. Two instruments, an anxiety checklist and an opinionnaire on factors that affect learning at a distance, were administered at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. The data analyses from the anxiety checklist indicated that participants had a high anxiety level and that they were generally more anxious about their studies at the end of the semester than at the beginning (Jegede & Kirkwood, 1994). A factor analysis of the opinionnaire identified eight factors that affect learning at a distance: content, environment, finance, readiness, time, employment, family support, and others. A comparison of pre-semester and post-semester results showed five factors that were significantly different at the end of the class than at the beginning. Students' concerns related to content, finance and readiness were greater at the beginning of the class than at the end, while concerns related to time and employment increased toward the end of the class (Jegede & Kirkwood, 1994).

Research methodology

Study sample

The participants in this study comprised IPTE students studying through ODL at Lilongwe Teachers' College in Malawi. The students were randomly selected from within the college to represent approximately equal numbers of males and females. In all, questionnaires were self-administered to 120 students. From this total sample, the sample size was sufficiently large to produce valid and reliable results using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for quantitative data analysis (Tesch, 1990) and content data analysis for qualitative data (Silverman, 2005). Additionally, a group of ten students was involved in a focus-group interview.

Research instrument

Because the study was descriptive in nature, a survey approach was considered appropriate to collect the data (Silverman, 2005). For this purpose, a questionnaire using a five-point scale was developed to target students' self-reported opinions and perceptions regarding distance education, as measured by their responses. Apart from the usual demographic background information,

the questionnaire contained questions on preparedness for ODL, delivery of the on-campus component of ODL, teaching and learning resources, attitude to ODL, student assessment, and management of ODL. In addition, three open-ended questions captured what students liked about ODL, what problems they experienced with ODL, and what suggestions they had for how ODL could be improved. Beyond participant demographics, the survey included Likert-type items using a three-point scale, with response choices ranging from 'disagree' to 'agree' (Devlin, 2002). The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study, after which revisions were made to clarify several questions (May, 2001).

Data collection

Students who were studying for IPTE through the ODL program participated in this study. The questionnaire was distributed to the 120 students during the on-campus training session and collected by the researchers themselves. However, 18 questionnaires were not properly completed, as they were missing a significant amount of data. The students were asked to provide personal information, including their names, to facilitate follow-up in order to clarify issues of research interest. All names and other identities were removed from the questionnaires before they were passed on to the researcher who performed the coding and data entry.

Data analysis

The data collected through questionnaires were coded, and statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS to produce frequencies and percentages based on the provided ratings. Content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data from both the questionnaire (open-ended questions; Ruane, 2005) and the focus-group interview transcripts (Sarantakos, 2005). To meet the criteria for the content analysis methods for qualitative data analysis, we used Kemke and Kramlinger's schema to analyze the texts (Silverman, 2005), which involved producing a list of key ideas, words, phrases and quotes that were generated from each interview transcript. For this purpose, we read the transcripts several times, each time identifying both positive and negative issues. For example, some issues that were expressed as wishes, such as 'I wish I could receive study material in time to do my assignments', were presented as 'I do not receive the study material in time for me to do my assignments'. We considered such wishes evidence of students' concerns about ODL as a mode of teacher training. The ideas, words, phrases and quotes that we identified were then assigned to categories of similar issues expressed by different students. As the categories began to accumulate, links and common ideas within and among the different data sources were noticed. As a result, specific ideas began to evolve into general themes, which then led to data interpretation. The use of multiple data-collection methods allowed for methodological triangulation, which increased the validity of the study's findings. Triangulation is one of the major aspects of the study design. The use of triangulation in studies on certain aspects of human behavior is viewed by Cohen and Manion (1994, p. 233) as an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human

behavior through a focus on more than one standpoint. Thus, methodological triangulation (Bryman, 2004) was used to check the perceptions of the same students who completed a questionnaire at one point and were then interviewed at another point. We anticipated that triangulation could be problematic if the data generated by different methods were divergent and if they could not be naturally accommodated within a single interpretation and conclusion. However, this potential problem did not counteract the advantages of using both interviews and questionnaire surveys. The choice of the two methods of data collection, as a means of triangulation, was a subjective decision based on the research context, because we were dealing with an unexplored, complex social situation which lacked previous relevant research. Triangulation contributed to the verification of the consistency of the findings generated through different data-collection methods.

Findings

This section presents findings from data collected from the students in the ODL program through questionnaires and focus-group discussions. The findings from the questionnaires and focus-group discussions were pooled together to generate themes for discussion in order to explore how the participants developed these perceptions of ODL as a mode for teacher training.

Design of the ODL teacher-training program

The following paragraphs present the findings regarding students' perceptions of the design of the ODL program. The focus-group discussion indicated that some students were delighted with the opportunity to combine on-campus training with off-campus study and practice (13), as the off-campus study afforded them a chance to immediately practice what they had learnt through the on-campus component and the study material. One student had this to say: 'Teaching practice during the off-campus component gives us enough time to practice what was learned during the on-campus component, such as how to deal with learners' [FG3].

However, students indicated that they had too much work during both the on-campus and off-campus components, which tended to hinder their training. They further indicated that they had more coursework to do during the on-campus period than during the off-campus one. On the other hand, students indicated that much of their time was taken up by classroom teaching rather than by self-study. As noted earlier, the on-campus component of the ODL program is held during academic holidays, and it lasts only two weeks, which might not be sufficient time to cover the content in the syllabus. This finding, limited as it is by the small sample size, offers some support for the idea that successful use of ODL as a mode of teacher training requires proper allocation of time for each ODL component. Thus, it is important to be realistic about the amount of time needed for on-campus teaching loads and study time

during off-campus periods. Heavy workloads for ODL students were also observed by Osei (2010) in Ghana.

The study material for the ODL training program

The students had various perceptions regarding the ODL study material. For some students, the study material was of good quality and featured appropriate content (10); one student indicated that ‘the modules were well designed and easy to understand and included relevant information’ [FG5]. The quality of self-study material for distance learners was also found to be a challenge in Nigeria (Okonkwo, 2012). However, in contrast to popular distance education delivery systems worldwide (Howland & Moore, 2002), there was a limited range of media used in the ODL program. Specifically, the students used print-based material without any support media or material.

Another major challenge reported by the students in this study was that they did not receive all the study material in time to complete their assignments (13). For instance, the students received some material after the deadlines for their assignments had passed (51), which affected their ability to submit the assignments. Furthermore, some students indicated that there was a ‘lack of teaching and learning resources in the off-campus [component]’ [FG4], which put pressure on the students. For example, one student reported spending a substantial amount of time looking for study material instead of studying. The students also had no library at the schools in which they were placed to help them with off-campus studies. Students were nevertheless able to visit the library at the Teacher Development Centre (TDC), but this facility was farther away than their schools, and the TTCs did not deposit books at the TDC library for use by students. These findings are similar to those of Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) for Zambia and also those of Osei (2010) for Ghana, who found that study material was in short supply for most students. Distance learning was characterized by a lack of reading material, reading rooms and Internet facilities in study centers located outside the main campus. In addition, Sultana and Kamal (n.d.) found that failure of on-time production and delivery was a major problem at Bangladesh Open University. Similar challenges involving poor distribution of study material characterized the National Open University of Nigeria (Okonkwo, 2012).

Students’ financial support

As part of their support system, the students received money for their upkeep. Initially, they were put on full teacher salaries, but they were later downgraded to student allowances. Therefore, unsurprisingly, when they were asked to indicate what they liked most about ODL, the majority of students indicated that they liked the idea of receiving allowances while undertaking the course (24). As one student put it: ‘You work while receiving an allowance[;] at the same time you do household chores and study’ [FG7]. This finding was supported by the findings of the questionnaire, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: What students liked most about ODL

What do you like most about ODL?	Frequency (N = 117)	% of respondents
Receiving allowances while studying	24	20.51
Reducing understaffing in schools	19	16.24
On-campus ODL	17	14.53
Doing off-campus practice in the home areas	14	11.97
Quality of training	13	11.11
Combining college training with off-campus study and practice	13	11.11
Training materials	10	8.55
Improving personal life	4	3.42
Solving employment problems for youths	3	2.56

However, the majority of students also lamented the fact that they experienced delays in receiving their allowances. As one student wrote, 'Failing to pay us money on time keeps us from being able to study properly' [FG2]. During the focus-group discussion, students also complained about not receiving their allowances on time. Considering the acute poverty in Malawi, student teachers would inevitably need financial support. Furthermore, these students found it difficult to get their overdue money while at the college, because they did not know the appropriate officers who were dealing with this issue. Moreover, the students were worried that it would be more challenging to follow up on issues involving their allowances once they graduated from the training program, as they did not know how to go about asking for the money. Data from the questionnaire also indicated that students were extremely frustrated by the non-payment of allowances. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that delays in receiving allowances constituted the foremost concern on the list of students' concerns about the ODL program.

The results suggest that the ODL students suffered from insufficient financial support. In addition, data from the focus-group discussion also indicate that many students complained about 'the change in the pay point from the district education office to the college, as this created unnecessary tension between the colleges and students' [FG1]. Again, the change from the initial promise of receiving salaries to receiving allowances caused students an unexpected difficulty, as switching from a salary to an allowance meant that 'it [could] be terminated at any time' [FG7].

The major challenge for students, therefore, was to survive without receiving allowances. One student teacher explained: 'It was harsh [to survive without money] because we used to borrow [money] from our friends, who sometimes were not happy' [FG6]. Despite having no money to buy essential items, students did not stop teaching, let alone leave learners unattended. The findings corroborate those of Mhishi, Bhukuvhani and Sana (2012), who found that, despite a lack of financial support, students were motivated to join a pre-service science-teacher training program for personal and professional reasons.

Table 2: Students’ concerns about ODL

What are your concerns about ODL?	Frequency (N = 110)	% of respondents
Delays in the payment of student allowances	27	24.55
Management and organization of ODL	20	18.18
School conditions	18	16.36
Time for on-campus	17	15.45
Study material	13	11.82
Food and accommodation	8	7.27
Professional support in the off-campus	4	3.64
Teaching in the home areas	2	1.82
Too much work	1	0.91

Students’ experiences of the on-campus component of the ODL training program

The majority of students indicated that they liked the ‘on-campus component of the ODL more than the off-campus component’ [FG17]. Data from focus-group discussions revealed that the students had positive attitudes to on-campus learning. As one student indicated, ‘At college, lecturers try their best to teach us [content] in two weeks ... that was meant to be delivered in three terms so that we can pass exams’ [FG3]. Furthermore, students indicated that the on-campus session of the ODL was helpful in that they ‘learned how to do practical work’ [FG6]. They also learnt how to work with learners when they were undertaking the practical component of their training, and they acquired new knowledge that they could apply when teaching in remote areas. These findings support earlier research by Osei (2010), who found that MBA (Master of Business Administration) students in Ghana rated the face-to-face component of ODL highly.

However, students observed that the ‘time for the on-campus component was too short to cover most of the content’ [FG17] and that ‘lecturers prepare too much work to be covered within a short period of time’ [FG8]. They also complained of the poor food quality during the on-campus learning period. This problem with food quality was not unique to this context. Food problems have also been reported by Bof (2004) in a study of a distance learning program in Brazil, which showed that food was not of sufficiently high quality during on-campus sessions of an ODL program.

Off-campus study

The findings indicate that some students were posted to teach in schools in their home zones/districts. However, other students were moved to other districts to offset teacher shortages. It was nevertheless beyond the scope of this study to establish actual figures regarding students who were able to teach in their home areas.

Placement of students to schools in their rural home districts

As one of the policy guidelines, students in the ODL program should be placed in schools in their home areas. One student indicated that 'most liked the idea of being posted to schools in their rural home areas, as this reduced understaffing in their home schools' [FG19], as well as the idea of '[s]tudying the course' [FG4]. Teaching in their home areas pleased some students, as they were able to attend to family issues without any problem. 'You kill two birds with one stone—we learn while helping our families' [FG4]. For some students who were posted in their home areas, accommodation was not a problem because, as one student put it, 'I live in my own house' [FG4].

However, for others, the situation was different. One respondent further explained that, 'at my school, I was given a house that is grass-thatched, and it leaks when it rains. Therefore, it is difficult for me to study and prepare for lessons' [FG8]. Students also lamented the poor school conditions, which made their teaching and studying difficult. Two students indicated that, for them, teaching in their home areas meant added responsibility, as they had to support their relatives with their daily needs using the meager allowances they (the students) received. Furthermore, students complained that, when teaching in their areas, they were 'considered volunteers' [FG2], which reduced their professional status.

ODL students' teaching workloads

Another challenge of the off-campus component of the ODL program was that the student teachers were asked to teach large classes. For example, one student was given 'a Standard [Grade] 3 class with 250 learners and another class with 315 students' [FG2]. At one school, the ODL student teacher was given 'a Standard 4 class with 113 learners'. All of these class sizes were well above the recommended national class size of 40 learners. In some schools, there were so few teachers that the student teachers were asked to teach more classes than they were recommended to teach. Two students indicated that '[w]e are given too much work in the off-campus period due to understaffing, which affects our studies' [FG3], and 'as if they were qualified teachers' [FG6]. Another student was asked 'to teach all the subjects taught in senior classes, such as Standards [Grades] 7 and 8, because the qualified teachers who were supposed to teach these classes had poor health' [FG7]. This request was against the recommendation that student teachers teach only junior classes. These findings suggest that some of the ODL specifications for allowing students to teach Standard 3 or 4 classes were not followed owing to understaffing in schools. The students wished that their workloads could have been reduced to allow them time to study and do their assignments. Therefore, understaffing in most schools hindered the effectiveness of the ODL program.

Professional support for student teachers in the off-campus component of the ODL program

Students were told that they would be supported by the district education officer (DEO), college lecturers, primary education advisors (PEAs), off-campus supervisors, a mentor, a head

teacher and school teachers during their two-year, off-campus-based training. However, some students noted that the head teacher and off-campus supervisor did not provide support for students. For example, one student indicated that 'to date, we don't know who the off-campus supervisors are, and we just heard [who they are] last week' [FG5]. Furthermore, students explained that they were not aware of the kind of support they should expect in the off-campus component. They were just told that some people would be coming to schools to assist students, but they did not know exactly what these people would be doing when they came. They were also informed that college lecturers would be coming to their schools, but they were not told when and how often. As a result, some students were supervised only once by the college lecturers.

Furthermore, some student teachers did not find a mentor at their school, even though it was a requirement of the ODL program. However, where a mentor was appointed, the mentors often did not provide help for students who requested it, because they said that 'they have not been trained, so they don't know how they can assist us' [FG5]. It can be concluded that students had little support from their mentors.

Most PEAs, who were not mentors, rarely visited the schools to support students because of 'the distances the PEAs had to travel to school' [FG1]. The PEAs who had short distances to travel to school nevertheless managed to visit the students. Some PEAs tried to visit two to three times, despite having too many schools in their zones. The visits by the PEAs helped students in some areas where they might have been experiencing problems in their teaching, and they assisted the students in checking records of work and observing how lessons were delivered in the classroom.

The results of this study show that some off-campus supervisors were not willing to assist students. One student explained that a supervisor who came to collect assignments refused to attend to students' problems: 'He told us that he didn't come to help us' [FG9]. This finding indicates that the supervisors had differing attitudes to the ODL program. Some of the qualified teachers already in schools helped the student teachers, while others did not; they queried, 'Why are you asking us for help when you are going for training? Ask the college tutors for help' [FG4]. The student teachers attributed the inconsistency in the type of help provided by the different qualified teachers to differences in the modes of teacher training, as provided by the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Program (MIITEP), the Malawi Special Teacher Education Program (MASTEP), the One Year Program, and so forth. The teachers trained through MIITEP could not help the student teachers because their lesson plan or work scheme was different from the students', and they used to copy from the student teachers:

However, IPTE teachers who were trained through a program similar to ours were able to assist us in creating lesson plans and [in] other learning areas, but MIITEP-trained teachers don't assist us. When we go there to ask for help, they say, 'You are far better than us'. [FG9]

This finding suggests that there was confusion in how teachers should help ODL students, since the different groups of teachers had gone through different modes of training. This confusion is likely to spread to the learners in the classroom. In addition, the inconsistency in the content and skills being emphasized during different modes of training seemed to disadvantage the ODL student teachers. These findings have some implications for planning and policy guidelines for the implementation of ODL programs (Moore & Tait, 2002; Panda, 2003). The findings are nevertheless similar to those reported for Zambia, where financial support was indicated to be critical in the implementation of ODL, partly because of inadequate political support for ODL institutions (Siaciwena & Lubinda, 2008).

Discussion

In a country where educational resources for training teachers are limited, where reading resources in rural schools are scarce, and where teachers' experience levels and training modes vary, the ODL approach to teacher training should be carefully considered. Recognizing that the situation in Malawi may be different from other countries, we want to discuss certain implications of this study that may be considered when integrating ODL into teacher-training programs.

Generally, students in this study perceived ODL as a useful mode for training primary school teachers. This finding supports the view of Mhishi, Bhukuvhani and Sana (2012) that students may like ODL for personal gains and professional growth. For many students, ODL provided the surest way of getting employed. However, the discrepancy between the on-campus and off-campus components of ODL was salient for the students: they considered the on-campus component better and more useful than the off-campus component. Students noted that the on-campus component provided good coverage of useful content. They nevertheless complained that there was insufficient time and that food and accommodation were poor. Regarding the off-campus component, the ODL program was hampered by a lack of professional support owing to ineffective mentorship and off-campus supervisors. Students lacked professional support during the off-campus component because field supervisors and mentors were not committed to ODL and were lacking the appropriate skills to address distance learning students, who are different from their full-time counterparts.

This finding regarding students' preference for the on-campus component over the off-campus one supports the work of Pugh and Siantz (1995), who found that students preferred an on-site location to an off-site one. However, this difference in students' views about the two ODL components might be due to the difference in students' perceptions of the purpose of on-campus and off-campus components of ODL among academics on campus. There should be a common understanding, including expectations of students and methods/strategies of conducting both the on-campus and off-campus components of ODL.

The challenges that characterized the ODL teacher-training program—such as delays in the payment of student allowances, delays in the distribution of study material, inadequate time for on-campus instruction, inadequate professional support during the off-campus component, and staffing shortages in schools that resulted in heavy teaching loads for student teachers—highlight the complexity of integrating ODL into a pre-service teacher-training program (Bisciglia & Turner, 2002).

For some student teachers, being posted to teach in their home areas meant that they would help their home communities through teaching. However, the majority were not comfortable doing so because it created an extra burden, as they were forced to help their relatives by using their (the students') meager allowances. Furthermore, they were perceived as volunteers and not as real teachers. As such, the student teachers had a strong preference to work in their home districts, but not necessarily in their home villages, in order to avoid the many demands from their family if they worked near or in their villages, as Mulkeen (2005) found. This finding offers hope for increasing the supply of teachers to rural schools in Malawi.

Despite encountering numerous difficulties, the ODL student teachers showed keen interest in training as teachers. However, further planning and follow-up must be conducted after students complete the program in order to address some, if not all, of the challenges involved in the implementation of ODL as a mode of teacher training. Such efforts will help ODL institutions develop appropriate programs and support systems for student teachers during both on-campus and off-campus training. The process, structure and strategy should be designed in a way that will provide student teachers by allowing them sufficient time and opportunity to engage in well-supported learning experiences, and by providing them with ample opportunities during both the on-campus and off-campus components, as well as practice teaching in classrooms in schools. The use of e-learning strategies would perhaps alleviate some of the problems stemming from the shortage of study material.

Students' experiences of both the on-campus and off-campus components of the ODL training program lend further credibility to the findings of this study. Based on the experiences of these student teachers, we need to learn from our efforts and limitations and improve the ODL teacher-training program. One recommendation from this study is that this model of ODL as a mode of teacher training should be systematically evaluated to determine the suitability of this approach to a developing country such as Malawi. There is also a need to assess the introduction of e-learning as part of ODL. The results from such a study may help inform policy regarding ODL training for teachers in Malawi and other countries.

Conclusion

Perseverance was a prevalent theme that pervaded diverse views of ODL training. The students in this study consistently expressed their professional commitment to accomplishing the goals of

the training program despite the challenges it posed, as they also found the program rewarding. These findings indicate that the students recognize the important link between perseverance and success in teacher training. Another important theme is that students viewed the timely production and distribution of study material to be important for the success of ODL, as delays in receiving study material affected their ability to submit assignments.

The views that the students expressed about ODL show that the students' experiences with ODL were both positive and negative: they were satisfied with the content of the training but not with the support. The broad range of views regarding ODL indicates that the students have widely varying experiences with ODL. Many of the students' views were similar to those identified in other studies, although the challenges regarding support in the field might indicate a significant difference between the results of this study and those of previous studies. It would be interesting to determine whether similar results would be obtained with a larger sample or a more diverse population, including students, mentors, field supervisors, head teachers and college tutors.

References

- Biner, P. M., Bink, M. L., Huffman, M. L., & Dean, R. S. (1995). Personality characteristics differentiating and predicting the achievement of television-course students and traditional-course students. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 9*, 64–70.
- Biner, P. M., Welsh, K. D., Barone, N. M., Summers, M., & Dean, R. S. (1997). The impact of remote-site group size on student satisfaction and relative performance in interactive telecourses. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 11*, 23–33.
- Bisciglia, M., & Turner, E. (2002). Differences in attitudes between onsite and distance site students in group teleconference courses. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 16*, 37–52. doi:10.1207/S15389286AJDE1601_4
- Bof, A. M. (2004). *Distance learning for teacher training in Brazil*. Brasilia, Brazil: Brazilian Ministry of Education.
- Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods*, 3th Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (1994) *Research methods in education*, (4th ed.). London: Routledge
- Devlin, M. (2002). An improved questionnaire for gathering student perceptions of teaching and learning. *Higher Education Research and Development, 21*, 289–304. doi:10.1080/0729436022000020788
- Galusha, J. M. (1998). *Barriers to learning in distance education*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED 416 377)
- Goel, A., & Goel, L. S (2000). *Distance education in 21st century*. New Delhi, India: Deep and Deep Publishers, Rajouri Garden.
- Hagel, P., & Shaw, R. N. (2006). Students' perceptions of study modes. *Distance Education, 27*, 283–302.
- Hanny, M., & Newvine, T. (2006). Perceptions of distance learning: A comparison of online and traditional learning. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 2*, 1–11.

- Howland, J. L., & Moore, J. L. (2002). Student perceptions as distance learners in Internet-based courses. *Distance Education*, 23, 183–195. doi:10.1080/0158791022000009196
- Inman, E., Kerwin, M., & Mayes, L. (1999). Instructor and student attitudes toward distance learning. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 23, 581–591.
- Jegade, O. J., & Kirkwood, J. (1994). Students' anxiety in learning through distance education. *An International Journal of Distance Education*, 15, 279–290.
- Kunje, D., Lewin, K., & Stuart, J. (2000). *Primary teacher education in Malawi: Insights into practice and policy. Country report 3*. Sussex, UK: Centre for International Education.
- May, T. (2001). *Social research: Issues, methods and process*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Mhishi, M., Bhukuvhani, C. E., & Sana, A. F. (2012). Science teacher training programme in rural schools: An ODL lesson from Zimbabwe. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ979640.pdf>.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (1995). *The status of distance education in Malawi*. Lilongwe, Malawi: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2009). *Initial primary teacher education through open and distance learning*. Lilongwe, Malawi: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.
- Moore, M., & Tait, A. (2002). *Open and distance learning: Trends, policy and strategy considerations*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- Mulkeen, A. (2005). Teachers for Rural Schools A challenge for Africa. Downloaded from http://people.umass.edu/educ870/teacher_education/Documents/Tchrs%20for%20Rural%20Schools%20-%20Africa.%20Mulkeen%20WB.pdf. Dated 15/10/14
- Okonkwo, C. A. (2012). Assessment of challenges in developing self-instructional course materials at the National Open University of Nigeria. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(2). Retrieved from www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/review/930/2165. Dated 16/10/2014.
- Osei, C. K. (2010) Perceptions of students towards use of distance learning: The case in an executive masters business program in Ghana. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 13(2). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/summer132/osei132.html>.
- Panda, S. (2003). *Planning and management of distance education*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Peat, J., & Helland, K. (2002). *Perceptions of distance learning and the effects on selection decisions*. Retrieved from <http://bus.utk.edu/iopsyc/pdf/Perceptions-of-Distance-Education-siop2003.pdf>.
- Pugh, R. C., & Siantz, J. E. (1995). *Factors associated with student satisfaction in distance education using slow scan television*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Robinson, B., Creed, C., & Perraton, H. (2001) *Teacher education through distance learning: Technology, curriculum, cost, evaluation*. Paris, France: UNESCO.

- Ruane, J. M. (2005). *Essentials of research methods: A guide to social science research*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Sarantakos, S. (2005). *Social research*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Shneiderman, B., Borkowski, E. Y., Alavi, M., & Norman, K. (1998). Emergent patterns of teaching/learning electronic classrooms. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 46, 23–42.
doi:10.1007/BF02299671
- Siaciwena, R., & Lubinda, F. (2008). The role of open and distance learning in the implementation of the right to education in Zambia. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 9, 1–12.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Sultana, S. A., & Kamal, M. A. (n.d.). *Distance education and open learning in a developing country like Bangladesh: Philosophy and reality*. Retrieved from <http://oldwebsite.col.org/pcf2/papers%5C%20sultana.pdf>.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. Bristol, PA: Falmer.
- Thompson, E., & Thompson, B. O. (2001). How nontraditional bachelor of science degree technology students perceive distance learning. *Journal of Technology Studies*, 27. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JOTS/Winter-Spring-2001/thompson.html>.