# Open and distance learning:
# What are the benefits for Africa, and what is its future?

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the results of a three-year longitudinal study (2007–2010) on open and distance learning (ODL) programs in Africa offered by the *Agence universitaire de la Francophonie* (AUF), the equivalent of the Commonwealth for French-speaking countries. We employed a mixed-method approach, including (1) an online questionnaire targeting students who were taking or had recently completed an ODL program offered by AUF in 2008 (N = 626); and (2) semi-directed individual phone interviews (N = 24). We performed descriptive and inferential analyses (SPSS) of the questionnaire data and a thematic analysis (QDA Miner) of the interview transcripts. In this presentation, we focus on the results concerning students' challenges and satisfactions as well as the benefits of ODL programs. We draw some conclusions about the pros and cons of ODL in the current African sociocultural context.

## Introduction

We present the results of a three-year longitudinal study (2007–2010) on open and distance learning (ODL) programs in Africa offered by the *Agence universitaire de la Francophonie* (AUF). We focus on the results of the second research year concerning students' challenges and satisfactions as well as the benefits of ODL programs. We draw some conclusions about the pros and cons of ODL in the current African sociocultural context.

## Setting the Context

ODL is rapidly gaining ground around the world (Glickman, 2002 ; Shop.org, 2001). In developing countries ODL is viewed as a way to train qualified workers in their own sociocultural contexts, with no need to migrate from South to North. However, ODL programs have a number of drawbacks such as high dropout rates and lack of individualized supervision (Bernard & Amundsen, 1989 ; Blay, 1994 ; Bourdages & Delmotte, 2001 ; Brindley, 1987 ; Fredda, 2000 ; Garrison, 1985, 1987 ; Morgan & Tam, 1999 ; Powell, Conway & Ross, 1990 ; Scalese, 2001 ; Visser, 1998), to which we may add the many challenges that developing countries face, starting with access to adequate technologies so that students can enrol in the programs (Oladele, 2001; Intsiful, Okyere & Osae, 2003; Selinger, 2001; Tunca, 2002; Bakhoum, 2002). In such circumstances, the question arises as to whether ODL is really effective in developing countries. In an attempt to respond to this question, we investigated African students who were taking or had recently taken an ODL program

offered by AUF. The objective was to better understand students' challenges and satisfactions with ODL and how they benefited from it.

## Method

We employed a mixed-method approach, including (1) an online questionnaire targeting students who were taking or had recently completed an ODL program offered by AUF in 2008 (N = 626); and (2) semi-directed individual phone interviews (N = 24). We performed descriptive and inferential analyses (SPSS) of the questionnaire data and a thematic analysis (QDA Miner) of the interview transcripts.

## Results

We first present the participants' technical and pedagogical challenges with ODL as well as their satisfactions. We then look at how the students benefited from ODL.

### Technological and pedagogical challenges and satisfactions with ODL

With respect to technological challenges, considerable percentages of the sample (26% and 28%) reported frequent or very frequent power and Internet failures, respectively. These included infrastructure problems that directly affected the ODL programs and were beyond the control of the students.

In technical terms, respondents had little difficulty using computer programs. Thus, 82% reported that they had few or no problems with their basic word processing, spreadsheet, or presentation programs. Moreover, 81% found it easy or very easy to use and operate the training platforms. Only the more specialized functions such as Web page design posed noticeable difficulties, and even then, 70% of respondents had no, very few, or few difficulties.

When problems arose, only 40% and 41% of respondents sometimes or frequently asked for help from an educator, computer expert, or tutor. On the other hand, 51% and 57% asked for help from a fellow student on site or another ODL student, respectively. It appears that students sought help through more informal than formal channels, despite the presence of a university trained resource person. We note, however, that significantly more women than men sought help from on-site peers, educators, and technicians. Moreover, older respondents (41 years and up) with more experience (11 years and more) appeared to have weaker technological skills than younger respondents, along with greater difficulty using some of the specialized functions such as Web page design and more problems operating personal and professional computer equipment. Similarly, women had more difficulty using both basic and Web page design software.

Overall, respondents were satisfied with the pedagogical aspects of their ODL programs. Course support and documentation, teaching methods, and assessments and exams were reported as appropriate or very appropriate by 87%, 84%, and 82%, respectively. The relational aspects of ODL, including relationships among students and between students and the teaching team, also appeared satisfactory on the whole, with respectively 89%, 80%, and 72% of respondents agreeing that the work atmosphere, communication and exchanges with other students, and communication with teachers and tutors were satisfactory or very satisfactory. However, the organizational aspect appears to be less satisfactory. Although 81% of respondents judged the duration of the training as appropriate or very appropriate, 74% felt that the work pace was intense or very intense ("Too

intense" was not offered as a response choice). Results on the work load and assignment deadlines vary.

Some respondents seemed unable to invest the necessary time and effort into their studies, which might be explained by the fact that they were usually taking the ODL program and working at the same time, and therefore came to view their studies as a secondary activity. This was particularly true for older respondents, who felt more burdened by the amount and pace of their schoolwork. We hypothesize that older students, unlike younger students, would find the course work more intense because they had not taken any professional training for some time, which may have contributed to their technological unease.

*Benefits*

Most of the ODL graduates appeared to have benefited from their programs. In fact, 75% reported that completing the ODL program gave them a stronger feeling of professional competency, followed by professional advancement, a promotion, or more responsibility (32%), a new job that better corresponded to their personal aspirations (23%), and a higher salary (20%). We may conclude that that benefits of the ODL program resulted in substantial changes in professional self-perception, without necessarily a visible change in the profession as such. This type of change cannot be attributed solely to the ODL programs examined in this study, however, as it is liable to result from any kind of professional development.

We note that the benefits of the ODL programs were viewed in the medium and long term. Thus, 74% of respondents were satisfied with the progress they made toward achieving their career objectives. At the same time, 92% somewhat agreed, agreed, or completely agreed that the skills they developed under their ODL program helped them achieve their professional objectives. Finally, 79% were thinking about taking more training to improve their qualifications, which suggests that most respondents viewed their ODL program as just one step in a lengthy career path.

## Conclusion

To recap, we aimed to better understand the challenges and satisfactions of students with ODL as well as the benefits they drew from earning their diplomas. From our results, we identified three types of difficulties that respondents encountered in their studies: technical, infrastructural, and pedagogical. It appears that infrastructural problems and certain pedagogical problems (e.g., work pace, workload, assignment deadlines) generally posed substantial challenges. Nevertheless, the respondents overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction with their ODL programs, and reported that they gained specific benefits in terms of greater feelings of professional competency, and more generally, that they benefited from tangible improvements in their work conditions. We may conclude that ODL programs are useful for professional development in Africa, and that they merit further promotion.

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