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## Stakeholders Perceptions and Concerns on Open and Distance Education: The Case of Eastern Ethiopia

Yilfashewa Seyoum\*

**Abstract:** This study attempts to examine the perception of stakeholders (Staff and coordinators) in open and distance education with particular reference to the eastern region of Harar. Consultation was made with 30 tutors and 10 program coordinators and these were considered as subjects of the study. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed in the data treatment and analysis. Data were collected from selected samples employing a questionnaire and an interview. The results indicate that the nature of the tutorial services provided by tutors did not follow the fundamental principles of distance education. The tutorial sessions were devoted largely to tutors' verbal explanation of descriptive facts, the distinctive feature of conventional face-to-face education. The late arrival of course modules to the students; distribution of modules very close to the actual dates of the tutorial sessions; absence of appropriate feedback on assignments; large class size and heavy workloads imposed upon tutors in some tutorial centers were some of the major constraints that caused the program to be unsatisfactorily implemented. Based on the findings, conclusions have been drawn followed by educational implications.

**Key terms:** Distance Learning (DL), Open Learning (OL), Perception, Open & Distance Learning (ODL)

### Background of the Study

My initiation to conduct this study emanated from my experience as an instructor both in regular and continuing education programs of some professional courses. The opportunity that I have got to pursue Masters of Art in Distance Education (MADE) at IGNOU has also inspired me to carry out this investigation with commitment. Moreover, while we were involved in informal discussion with colleagues pertaining issues like quality, facilities, and opportunities in the regular and distance education programs, I have got

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\* PhD Student, College of Education, Addis Ababa University; email: yilfa\_sey@yahoo.co.in

myriad experiences that enabled me to contribute few ideas specific to my context in the field and open education.

At present, due to the changing requirements of technological and public development, there is a constant need to acquire further qualifications to solve new given tasks in society and to formulate various types of policies. Bates (1984) claimed that the basis of this knowledge must be founded at the first stage of education, creating the sustainable capability 'to learn and continue to learn'. The need for continuous education is, therefore, urgent and an alternative strategy to the issue of access and equity. Addressing the need for education in the light of access and equity and meeting the current national and global demands would not be entirely possible if one wants to rely solely on the traditional face-to-face mode of education. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as an educational method and a philosophical construct have been acknowledged as the most persuasive mechanism for combating the educational problems overwhelming a country like Ethiopia (Marew, 2002).

It is, therefore, evident that with the growing potential, availability and use of information technology and the expansion of distance education, the development of the sector is becoming an increasingly international affair. However, despite the splendid role and increased popularity of the open and distance learning, the quality of higher education via distance education has been questioned (Dede, 1996; Harrison, 2001 as cited in Peat and Helland, 2002). This means that people have different views, attitudes and perceptions on the current system of ODL.

Different people perceive the advantages of ODL differently and their perceptions have influenced attitudes of others towards the acceptance and use of ODL in the educational system of our country and elsewhere. Out of the various problems facing distance education today, a very important one is how it is perceived by the individuals involved in it. In other words, assessing the perceptions of beneficiaries and stakeholder of the sector is a crucial factor. This is because the success of the open and distance education system could be affected by how it's viewed by the individuals

involved in it. The primary justification of the focus of the study is that the achievement of the learners could be influenced to a great extent by their opinions of the system. Secondly, the tutors and other stakeholders' perceptions have an enormous effect on the successful implementation of the system. Consequently, conducting study on the perception of distance education course participants, investigating the impact of the individual characteristics and their successes and then reporting the findings are expected to have practical implications for successful implementation of the distance education program.

Thus, the practical importance of distance education, the study may have paramount importance in examining difficulties that may debilitate the system. It may also enable us to consider the views of tutors and coordinators towards the program and its practical implications for extending and strengthening the system. In addition to this, the findings of the study may have a broader application with regard to introducing modifications in the area under consideration. Specifically, it will provide some valuable suggestions and recommendations for concerned bodies such as students, instructors, counselors, program leaders, curriculum designers and distance education coordinators

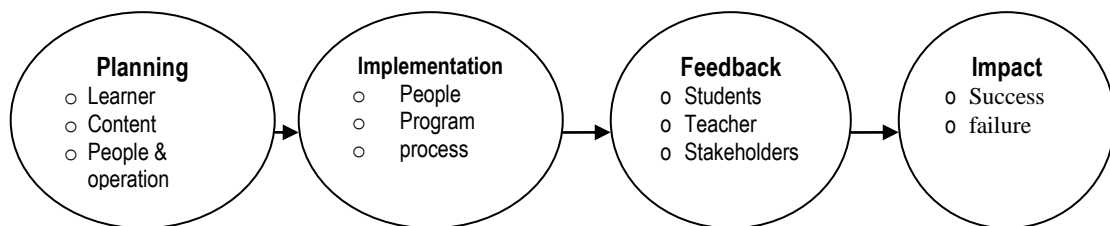
### **Objectives of the Study**

The overall aim of the present study is to examine the perception of individuals who were participating in the distance education program in eastern region of Harar. The study, therefore, attempts to:

- scrutinize the perception of stakeholders (tutors and coordinators) on the system of distance education as a whole;
- reflect the view of stakeholders regarding the various components of distance education;
- study the impact of stakeholders' perception on the performance of distance learners;
- examine the current practices of ODL system of education; and
- recommend apposite suggestions regarding the effective implementation of the distance education program.

## Conceptual Framework

In trying to investigate the problem under discussion, the researcher believes that a given distance education program should be seen from the point of view of the perspectives of planning, implementation, feedback and impact stages of the program. Consequently, the following model is constructed as a conceptual framework of the study.



This model tries to explicate that a given distance education program needs to have four interrelated aspects: planning, implementation, feedback and impact. While planning distance education, the nature of the learner (need, interest, capacity etc.), the nature of the program (theoretical vs. practical, academic vs. vocational etc.) and people and operation (academic and non academic staff, and logistics) need to be critically examined. In a similar way, during the implementation of the program, people involved in the program should be coordinated according to the goal set to the program to facilitate the process. Then, feedbacks on the progress and achievement of a program must be gathered from students, teachers and other stakeholders. Feedback leads us to have adequate knowledge about the impact of a program which would identify the direction of success or failure. The model is constructed to guide the research procedure and to see the various aspects of DE in the course of the investigation. The model signifies how a successful distance education program aspects and particular issues can be integrated to examine the status of a given distance education program.

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## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Factors Affecting Distance Learners' Perception and Performance**

Studies have found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning and conventional university classroom settings. Students taking distance learning courses perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods. More often than not, perception on the distance learning system in the instructional process is influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantage of distance education, for himself, as a student, an employer (whose employees are also distant learning students), or as an educational planner, desirous of providing solutions to educational problems (Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002).

In most distance education courses and programs, since enrollment is voluntary, most of the students who begin the programs do not complete them. Though the dropout rate was ranging between 30 to 50 percent in the past years, nowadays the figure has reduced to the lower end of that range (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The completion rate can have a strong effect on the efficiency of a distance education program because a common rationale for distance education is that it can produce the same kinds of graduates at a lower cost than equivalent conventional education (Sewart, 1981). For example, the average cost per student at the Open University of the United Kingdom was calculated as 50 percent of the cost at a Conventional British University (Wagner, 1977). However, this argument loses merit if the cost per student is inflated by high dropout rates (Rumble, 1986).

Student attrition is typically higher in distance-delivered courses than in on-site instruction. Nevertheless, be it in the conventional or the distance mode of education, dropout is usually a result of no one cause, but of an accumulation and mixture of causes (Kember, 1989; Billings, 1989). According to Willis (1993) distance learners' dropout is the result of various factors, including limited student advisement and counseling, poor family

support, inadequate feedback, late return of assignments, and lack of personalized teacher-student and student-student interaction (Willis, 1993).

A study conducted in India has discovered lack of sufficient time, the difficulty of course materials and the absence of adequate learner support as the major perceived problems that caused the withdrawal of students from distance teacher-training programs (Koul, 1987).

In Man, Michael and Larry (1999) work, eleven community college instructors and 334 students in their distance learning classes were surveyed. Data showed instructors had conflicting attitudes about distance education. They were willing to teach distance learning class again, but they rated the quality of the courses as equal or lower quality than other classes taught on campus. Their students, on the other hand, were highly satisfied with these instructors and the courses. But the critical factor in much of traditional classroom instruction, and direct interaction with instructors, played no role in determining students' satisfaction in these courses. This difference in the nature of student-teacher interaction in distance learning classes may explain instructors' conflicting attitudes.

Coggins (1988), in a study of students associated with the University of Wisconsin External Degree Program, examined the relationship between 'personal variables' (learning style and demographic data) and program completion rate. She found that completers and non-completers did not differ significantly on variables related to gender, occupation, marital status, presence or absence of children, distance from campus, or age of entry into the program. However, there was a significant difference between the two groups for a number of variables. Completers had entered the program with higher levels of education and they had greater expectations of achieving higher grades as well as greater expectations of acquiring a degree. The two groups of students differed in their preference of course content. Non-completers tended to be more concrete learners preferring a content that allowed them to work with things instead of people. Completers' preferences were for a content that involved interviewing and counseling people (Coggins, 1988).

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The relationship between gender and success in distance education courses was the subject of a study by Ross and Powell (1990). Data from the 1987 – 88 school years at Athabasca University, in Alberta, Canada, indicated that a greater percentage of women passed distance education courses. Furthermore, “this higher completion trend was visible irrespective of the student’s general study area, specific course selection, course level, mode of course delivery, student’s program status, or the number of courses students had previously taken”. Similarly, a study conducted to assess the effectiveness of a distance in-service teacher training program in India discovered a higher average dropout rate (5 percent) among men than among women. The study further reported that there was no significant difference in the number of dropouts among different age groups (Koul, 1987).

An exploratory analysis assessing demographic, motivational, support and learning style variables indicated some possible reasons for the gender differences in academic achievement. These include differences in marital status, employment and use of institutional support between the two groups. An important difference was noted in the motivational variable, as women felt gaining a university credential was critical and the impact of failing serious (Ross & Powell, 1990).

One of the best predictors of success in distance education is the educational background of the student. For example, Coggins (1989) found significant differences between completers and non-completers (dropouts) in terms of educational level attained and length of time since last credit course. The latter variable suggests that the greater the length of time since completing a formal educational course, the less likely the student was to complete a new distance education program. That is, adults with more recent educational experiences tend to persist and do better than those who have not had those experiences (Verdiun and Clark, 1991). Factors such as proximity of residence, previous post-secondary education, and length of professional experience were correlated with persistence (Holm, 1988). Furthermore, Holmberg (1989) concludes that older, mature, better-qualified

enrollees versus traditional students are more likely to have the strong motivation that is necessary to succeed at a distance.

The results of some studies indicated that anxiety in distance education learners may play a higher role in attrition than previously considered. The anxiety level of distance education students and the factors contributing to anxiety were investigated by Jegede and Kirkwood (1994). Two instruments: an anxiety checklist and an opinionnaire on factors which affect learning at a distance were administered at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. Analyses of data from the anxiety checklist indicated that participants have a high anxiety level and were generally more anxious about their studies at the end of the semester than at the beginning (Jegede & Kirkwood, 1994, p.286). Results of a t-test showed a statistically significant difference between the pre-semester means and the post-semester means. However, researchers question that this difference may be attributed to the timing of the post-semester administration as this occurred just prior to final examinations. A factor analysis of the opinionnaire identified eight factors affecting learning at a distance: content, environment, finance, readiness, time, employment, family support and others. A comparison between pre-semester and post-semester showed five factors means to be significantly different at the end of the class than at the beginning. On the other hand, students concerns related to content, finance and readiness were higher at the beginning of the class than at the end, while concerns related to time and employment increased towards the end of the class (Jegede & Kirkwood, 1994).

Research related to learners' perceptions has focused on identifying factors related to satisfaction, attitudes and perceived learning and interaction. Factors affecting satisfaction may be organizational and involve the environment, management and support services (Biner, et al, 1994) or they may be individual factors including readiness, time and family support (Jegede & Kirkwood, 1994). In this regard, for instance, some studies have reported that individuals who are more field independent (that is, less influenced by the surrounding environment, including the social environment)



are better suited to distance learning than people who are less field independent (Moore, 1975; Thompson, 1984).

Stone (1992) examined the connection between tutor contact and locus of control with course completion rates for students enrolled in print-based, distance training courses. The treatment group received weekly phone calls from the training staff while the comparison group received only minimal feedback. Results did not show a statistically significant difference between the two groups in course completion rates. However, Stone did find that students with relatively external loci of control completed their coursework at significantly faster rates when exposed to regular telephone cues from their tutors.

Fjortoft (1995) similarly investigated predictors of persistence in distance learning programs. Based on the literature of adult education, a model relating adult learners to persistence, including eight variables, was developed. Independent variables included age, gender, GPA at time of college graduation, satisfaction with college experience, intrinsic job satisfaction, ease of learning on their own, intrinsic benefits of degree completion, and extrinsic benefits of degree completion. Persistence was defined by active enrollment status. Results indicated a positive relationship between perceived intrinsic benefits and continued enrollment while a negative relationship between age and persistence was discovered. More specifically, the study indicated that it was more difficult for the older students to persist in the distance learning program than it was for younger students.

Most of the dropouts from a distance in-service teacher training program in India considered face-to-face teaching as their most preferred mode of instruction. Learning through reading was preferred only to some extent and working on problems was their least preferred mode of learning. Nearly three-fifth of the dropouts thought that learning through self-instructional printed materials was difficult (Koul, 1987). Moreover, Koul (1987) has found that there is an increase in the rate of dropout with an increase in the difficulties of the geographic terrain. He reported that the lowest dropout

rates were recorded in areas where the states provide strong motivation and encouragement for the trainees to pursue their study.

Based on a review of the above studies, several learner characteristics seem to have some effect on the success of the learner in a distance education environment. While studies on the effects of gender (Ross & Powell, 1990; Coggins, 1988) indicated mixed results, students who are younger and have a higher level of education (Coggins, 1988; Brent & Bugbee, 1993) are more likely to complete a distance education course. Finally, it is worth noting that many distance education institutions have managed to hold the dropout rates to an acceptable minimum through a combination of high-quality learning materials and a comprehensive learner support system (Moore, 1987 & Sewart, 1981).

Daughterty and Funke (1998) carried out a study entitled “University Faculty and student Perceptions of Web-based Instruction”. The purpose of the investigation was to examine the perspectives of university faculties and students currently involved in one medium of DE, Web-based instruction. Students and faculties were surveyed on the advantages, disadvantages and general effectiveness of using the internet as a teaching and learning tool. Findings indicated that the student benefits included (a) meaningful learning of technology through the integration of course content and computer applications, (b) increased access to the most current and global content information available, (c) increased motivation, and (d) convenience. Faculties reported a wide range of challenges in the development and delivery of Web-based instruction. The most frequently identified barriers included (a) lack of technical support, (b) lack of software/adequate equipment, (c) lack of faculty/administrative support, (d) the amount of preparation time required to create assignments, and (e) student resistance. Moreover, faculty respondents consistently identified convenience and improved learning as advantages for students enrolled in Web-based instruction.

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Purnell and his colleagues (2003) conducted a study on the topic "Improving Distance Education for university Students: Issues and Experiences of Students in Cites and Rural Areas". The study examines issues related to improving distance education course quality raised by university students in Australia. Focus group sessions were held in a number of rural and larger urban areas in the State of Queensland. Six interrelated areas of concern were identified: Student contact with lecturers/tutors, assessment tasks, flexibility, study materials, mentors, and educational technology. These issues and the implications for the provision of distance education were examined in detail. On some issues, there were significant differences between participants in larger urban areas and those in rural areas. Participants especially appreciated real time interaction with other people during their studies, particularly with other lecturers/tutors. This desire for interaction was strongest in rural areas and contrasts with earlier models of distance education where students were often presumed to be fairly autonomous learners. The nature of support distance education students want is changing, particularly in rural areas. The findings of this study has supported more learner-focused approaches to distance education especially as we move towards greater use of information technologies for communication and learning experiences for students.

Similarly, Rovai and Barnum (2003) investigated the research area "On-line Course Effectiveness: An Analysis of Student Interactions and Perceptions of Learning". The study focused on an analysis of nineteen on-line graduate courses in order to determine how perceived learning varies by course and its relationship to active and passive participation by students in on-line discussions. Study results provided evidence that significant differences existed data to the courses, suggesting that quality assurance is an issue in internet-based instruction. Moreover, female students felt that they learned more than their male counterparts. Only active interaction, operationalized by the number of messages posted by students per week, was a significant predictor of perceived learning. Passive interaction, analogous to listening to but not participating in discussions and operationalized by the number of

times of accessing to the discussion boards of the e-learning system each week, was not significant.

To summarize, it is possible to infer that perception of staff and students, dropout, gender, background of the learners, anxiety, and support services were some of the factors that debilitate or facilitate the performance of students in open and distance learning. We shall see how these experiences are reflected in our case.

## **Plan and Procedures of the Study**

### **Sampling**

The population of the study was made up of distance education participants in the Eastern part of Ethiopia (Eastern Harar, Dire Dawa and Somali regions). In these areas, tutors and the academic program coordinators were included and consulted. An attempt was made to select tutors and academic program leaders using purposive and **available sampling techniques**. It has been decided that 30 tutors and 10 program leaders/coordinators were considered as the respondents of the study.

### **Instruments**

Questionnaire (for tutors) and interview (for program leaders) were used by the researcher to obtain valuable information in the study under consideration. Furthermore, personal observations of the investigator were also included as additional input to consolidate and crosscheck the data obtained through the aforementioned tools. Meanwhile, document surveys and of review of related literature were considered as sources of evidence to substantiate the finding.

### Data Collection

Out of the 45 copies of the questionnaires dispatched to tutors, 30 were properly filled in and returned. Out of the remaining 15 copies, 9 were discarded since they were not properly filled in and 6 copies were not returned at all. Besides, ten program leaders/coordinators were interviewed.

### Methods of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed and interpreted using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The only statistical treatment employed for quantitative data was a simple percentage. First an attempt was made to tabulate the data into numbers, and then the figures were changed in to percentage. The researcher believes that the percentage in combination with the qualitative information would have the advantage to indicate the current status of the teaching learning conditions in open and distance education.

### Results

**Table1: Biographical Data of Respondents (Tutors)**

	No.	%
<b>Level of Qualification</b>		
B.A/B.c	12	40
MA/M.Sc	18	60
PhD	-	-
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	27	90
Female	3	10
<b>Service Years</b>		
5 and less yrs	12	40
Above 5 yrs	18	60
<b>Training/Workshop in DE</b>		
Yes	-	-
No	30	100

The above table revealed that about 60 percent of the tutors hold MA/M.Sc degrees while the remaining 40 percent hold first degree. No respondent appointed as tutors had a PhD. However, the researcher's personal observations revealed that three PhD holders who were not reported were also appointed as tutors in the areas of Harar, Jijiga and Dire Dawa. Since none of them took training or workshop related to Distance Education (DE), the conclusion is that although the qualifications of tutors appear to be suitable, their knowledge of ODL methodology is insufficient. This situation could have adverse effect on the teaching and learning process and lead to lack of productivity since the unique feature of the ODL system demand specific types of tutors with specialized training.

**Table 2: Number of Tutees in a Class, Number of Courses and Number of Assignments**

Number of Tutees		Number of Courses		Number of Assignments	
Below 50	50 & Above	One to two	Above two	Three	More than three
30%	70%	65%	35%	41%	59%

Table 2 illustrates that, as experienced by 70 percent of the respondents, the number of learners in a class during tutorial sessions is more than 50. A distinctive feature of the ODL education system is interaction with other learners and tutors during tutorial sessions. In order for this to be implemented effectively, the number of students in a class needs to be reduced to a manageable size.

The table also reveals that about 65 percent of the respondents are responsible for two courses at a time and the remainder for more than two courses. It is clear that this, in turn, makes instructors responsible for the corresponding assignments and tutorial classes. Experience in this regard showed that it is not advisable for tutors to take more than two ODL courses at a time.

Similarly, about 59 percent of the respondents highlighted the fact that they were responsible for correcting more than three separate assignments. Although the content of assignments varies from course to course, it is difficult, if not impossible, to be responsible for more than three or four different assignments at a time.

**Table 3: Difficulty Levels of the Course Modules and Assignments**

Items	Difficult		Moderate		Easy	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Difficulty level of the course modules	9	30	21	70	---	---
Difficulty level of the assignments	6	20	24	80	---	---

The majority of the respondents described the level of difficulty of course modules and corresponding assignments as “moderate”. However, 20 to 30 percent of the respondents rated them as “difficult”. The ability levels of the majority of the students should be taken into consideration during the preparation of the course modules and assignments so that they are pitched at an appropriate level. This fact was also highlighted during interviews with coordinators.

**Table 4: Patterns of Module Distribution**

Items	Yes (%)	No (%)
Students received all the modules before the tutorial sessions	67	33
Students received all the modules prepared for the semester	65	35
Some students were forced to share some of the modules with others	22	78
Tutors didn't receive some of the modules prepared for the courses which they offered	23	77
Tutors received the modules long before the actual tutorial session	55	45

Most of the responses regarding the patterns of module distribution were positive. However, 33 to 35 percent of the respondents highlighted the fact that some learners did not receive modules before tutorial sessions, did not have the necessary modules for the semester and were forced to share modules on certain courses. Furthermore, 23 percent of the respondents complained that tutors did not even receive modules on time for some courses to which they were assigned. This caused inevitable delays regarding preparation by tutors to handle tutorial sessions effectively. Similarly, about 45 percent of the total respondents replied that modules were not provided well in advance of tutorial sessions. Tutors need to have the modules weeks or even months before the actual tutorial sessions take place to be able to prepare well. Face-to-face interview with coordinators disclosed that this happens partly due to EMA organizational problems and partly due to reluctance on the part of tutors.



**Table 5: Status of Tutorial Support**

Items	Yes %	No %
The academic support given to the students was sufficient	15	85
Assignments were submitted on time	11	89
The programs run in regular time-tables	7	93
Feedback for assignments were immediate	0	100
Individualized academic supports was adequate	0	100

Overall, the respondents clearly rated the support services as “poor”. About 85 percent of the subjects responded that the academic support provided is insufficient and 89 percent stated that assignments were not submitted on time. Similarly, about 93 percent of the respondents highlighted the fact that there was no standard timetable for running the ODL program. It is not a good practice for any educational program to be implemented without preparing a timetable of activities for each component. Disappointingly, 100 percent of the respondents felt that feedback on the assignments was not immediate and individual support was inadequate. The personal observations of the researchers also discovered that these areas were almost neglected.

**Table 6: Responses to Miscellaneous Issues**

Item	Yes %	No %
Do you think that the ODL system of education makes students academically capable?	42	58
Do you think that students have received sufficient counseling support?	16	84
Was the number of tutorial sessions adequate to cover the contents of the module?	18	82
Do you believe that distance education can be as effective as the conventional method?	41	59

As far as the academic ability of distance education learners is concerned, about 42 percent of the respondents believe that distance education learners are as competent as conventional learners. Nevertheless, 58 percent, a large proportion of the respondents think that distance education learners are less able. The table also reveals that 84 percent of the respondents feel that the counseling support arranged for the distance education learners is inadequate. Furthermore, 82 percent are of the opinion that the time allotted to cover the content of the learning module is insufficient. The personal observations of the researcher also uncovered the fact that coordinators and program organizers seem to have insufficient knowledge regarding allocation of time for tutorial sessions. As a result, many tutors experience the problems mentioned by the respondents. Finally, the respondents were asked to reflect on whether they believed ODL to be as effective as the conventional education system or not. Approximately, 41 percent think that it is as effective as the conventional system. However, about 59 percent have reservations whether the quality of the ODL education system is equal to that of the conventional system. Contrary to this, center coordinators argue that apart from the necessity of introducing minor changes to the system, it is currently in a good position and contributing to the development of the nation in the same way as the conventional system of education does. They also highlighted the fact that no discrimination takes place regarding the appointment of graduates to specific posts.

### **Tutors' Responses to Open-ended Items**

#### ***Problems in Course Assignments***

Tutees did not do assignments though it is part of the procedure to collect and correct assignments at the end of each semester. The preparation and organization of assignments was poor as well. What is more, there were too many questions set for some courses, and assignments were not submitted on time. Students were not also conscientious about completing assignments. It is observed that students copy assignment answers from each other. Moreover, the handwriting was often not legible and it was time-

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consuming to read and score properly. Delay of submission of the assignment and lack of guidance given to trainees about assignment were also other problems of the distance education system. The assignments which were prepared by the module writers were often unsuitable with regard to content coverage. That is, they were ambiguous, complex and most of them were objective-type.

### ***Frequently Occurring Problems with Distance Learners***

Communication problem, poor English ability, inattentiveness towards their education and lack of confidence were among the major problems of distance learners. Most of the distance learners lacked basic concepts. As a result, whatever type of question they might encounter, they assumed the question was difficult for them. Moreover, even though many of them registered for the course and sat the exam, only few of students attended the tutorial sessions. They seemed overloaded due to their private work on top of the program. Further more, they came to the tutorial sessions without having gone through the modules and expected their tutors to cover every thing in tutorial sessions. The center coordinators were not also properly trained to pay attention on problems such as, lack of information on the tutorial time/ schedule, long distance of tutorial center, insufficient time to study the material and absenteeism from the tutorial sessions for unknown reasons and others. In addition, modules on some courses were not reaching students on time, prepared appropriately, and adequate in terms of course coverage and the contents lack organization.

### ***Academic competency of distance learners***

The academic background of the students was not up to standard. Some of them were too old to be students. Apart from a few exceptions, most of the distance learners were not prepared to participate fully in the class, and the level of academic performance was lower compared to conventional (regular) students. Since some students did not possess the appropriate prior qualification, they lacked motivation and showed little effort and

achievement. Some did not read the modules because they were incapable of doing so.

### ***Counseling Support***

Increasing tutorial sessions by using the telephone and email could provide a higher level of counseling support. Some respondents recommended that sufficient time allocation and provision of references would improve the academic support services. Some suggested that doubling the number of hours and increasing the support service would improve the academic support provided. Increasing the frequency of contact with learners and the number of counselors would contribute to an improvement in the support service. Respondents suggested that orientation, student handbook, access to telephone for correspondence need to be considered to help the distance learners more. It is suggested that two tutorial sessions with extended time duration could improve student performance. Tutorial sessions should be announced ahead of time, and modules should be ready and distributed on time. Support should be available on how to study, how to do assignments, and how to manage time. Regular communication with the learner would improve the academic support. Tutorial time should be increased and I suggest that it should be conducted once in a month. The establishment of various centers and the use of modern communication technology would contribute to an improvement in the quality of academic sessions. Moreover, local staff in surrounding educational institutions should support tutees in addition to the tutorial sessions; as a result, employing center counselors would improve the service a great deal. Sufficient reference materials and group learning should be encouraged.

### ***Critical Problems of DE***

The government does not pay attention to distance education and there is a lack of appropriate incentives for those who complete courses. This could demotivate possible future candidates. Hence, lack of appropriate attention to the program by the concerned bodies is a major problem of DE. In the

current ODL, lack of appropriate academic support for individual candidates, problems of module distribution at the appropriate times, lack of academic feedback before the final (term-end) exam, failure to assess needs and workload, and poor or not well-prepared/organized learning modules are among the critical problems of DE. Moreover, poor relationship between administrative regions and institutions responsible for distance education, lack of appropriate support for the learners and lack of organized study centers, institutions reluctance to open new programs through distance education, poor coordination of the program and little attention paid to tutors are still the common problems identified by tutors. Distance education is becoming the option of academically poor and weak candidates. However, poor communication and orientation of students who join the distance education program, poor quality of the program in terms of students, tutors and materials, lack of time and libraries at the study centers, insufficient module supply, wrong location of study centers, heavy workloads of tutors', lack of policy and proper organizational structure, and lack of information in distance education program in general need great attention to augment the level of performance of ODL.

### ***Dropouts***

Academic incompetence, family problems and displacement/unplanned transfer from their workplace could be reasons for dropping out. More importantly, lack of motivation, lack of support, lack of organization of the program, failure to attend the tutorial sessions, misinformation about the exam time and the distance education program as whole seem to contribute a lot for educational wastage of ODL. Lack of special arrangements to support and counsel academically poor students, long distance from the workplace to the study center and unwillingness of employers to allow the distance learners to continue the program, and economic and personal problems could contribute greatly to dropping out. Students have insufficient support and communication with course instructors/ tutors. **Focus on developing confidence in students by the counselors could help to reduce the dropout rate.**

Employed learners need to have appropriate orientation to the distance education program. Establishing proper study centers and providing appropriate facilities would play important roles in decreasing the number of dropouts. Distance education programs need to have a clear vision of future prospects. Sufficient counseling, fixed timetable and an attractive program would play important roles in reducing the dropout rate. Advising students prior to starting courses on what they can study successfully and offering appropriate training with structured and organized learning modules would contribute greatly to a reduction in the number of dropouts. Attracting capable students to the distance program and making the system more flexible to the learners needs would help in minimizing the problem of wastage. It would be advantageous if employers exempted distance learners from additional assignments at work as a means in decreasing attrition rate. The closer proximity of the location of tutorial sessions to the learners' places of residence could also decrease the dropout rate.

### ***General Comments***

Strengthening distance education units in an institution and ensuring that students have a suitable educational background when they join to specific program would make distance education more effective. Practical sessions need to be arranged and more time should be allotted for the tutorial sessions. It is good to try to make the system more flexible and use different information and communication technologies to support the face-to-face sessions. Distance learners though outreach geographically, situation should be appropriate to keep them closer at least by providing them with all possible facilities that the regular program/ learners have access to. That is, proper counseling, tutorials, continuous assessment, library service and the like need to be provided in time. Modules should be prepared and distributed at the appropriate time. To seriously undertake the program in a well-organized manner, students should be evaluated appropriately and the process of grading student performance should be taken seriously. All necessary support should be setup carefully and available on time. Proper policy, awareness raising, good organization and well-considered utilization

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of man power would make the distance education program effective and efficient. An increase in the number of tutorial centers, allotment of enough time, enhancement of the promotion service offered, and well-organized learning modules are all necessary preconditions for launching any given distance education program. Good course structuring, effective management of the program, attractive pay for tutors as well as better awareness and support from regional bureau would make distance education more successful and attractive. Frequent and continuous evaluation, limiting overstretching of tutors with regard to workload and feedback on assignments would make the program more effective. It is indicated that the most important strategy is to plan, implement, monitor and update the way we offer the training. Above all, it is important to constantly gather data from the students on what they need and prefer, the problems they face and what they want to be done for them. Unless we do this, we cannot attain what we want from distance education. It would be wise to use various types of communication media to augment the effectiveness of distance education. Devising procedures to force learners to do assignments by themselves would increase the academic performance of the learners and assure the quality of distance education. Standardization of the learning modules should be given priority to safeguard the reputation of the distance education system. In addition to this, the appointing of suitably qualified and trained tutors could raise the standard of the open and distance education system.

### **Distance Education Coordinators**

Distance Education Coordinators: regional and center coordinators were also asked for their views on the distance education system conducted in their areas. The following points were highlighted:

1. A combination of criteria such as GPA, length of service years and performance evaluation were taken into consideration when selecting candidates for the distance education program. However, most respondents were not happy with the selection criteria. They felt that the length of service was given priority but when a new employee had a good academic record this was not taken in to account.

2. Most of the respondents (about 85 percent) believed that if lessons in the distance education program are delivered appropriately, distance learners are capable of performing to the same standard as conventional learners. The distance education system alleviates problems of access, contributes to the continuous professional development of employees (teachers and others) and is of paramount importance in assuring the quality of education by using various media for delivery of the lessons.
3. The most serious and most frequently mentioned problems in the ODL system were delays in module distribution, assignment submission and permission of feedbacks, appointment of unsuitably qualified tutors, shortages of reference materials, lack of fixed timetables, poor coordination at tutorial centers and inadequate support services. The number of dropout has been identified as one of the major problems in the system of distance education. The main issues associated with this problem were personal, social and vocational. Moreover, respondents suggested that improving the working conditions of the distance learners (if they are employed), as well as the study centers, tutors and counseling services could reduce the number of dropouts.
4. Last but not the least, most respondents stated that ODL is a very good program which addresses the question of equity and access to education and that it is the most potent tool for addressing the question of cost effectiveness and is the most justifiable method for countries like Ethiopia.

## **Discussion**

One of the fundamental principles of distance education is the provision of opportunity for students to study according to their own learning pace or speed (Keegan, 1990). For this reason, a distance education system presupposes that every student receives all the course materials at the beginning of the program so that she/he can design his /her own study timetable in the light of the overall schedule of the program. However, it is



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the case here that some students did not receive almost half of the modules until the last day of the course, the day scheduled for the final examination.

In general, the inconsistencies regarding the delivery of modules and the arrival of part of the modules very close to the dates fixed for final examination seems to have a negative impact upon learners' confidence and their performance in the overall.

Moreover, investigations as part of this study have uncovered discrepancies between the number of students registered for courses and the total number of course modules received in the centers. In relation to this, some respondents reported that students did not receive some of the modules at all and this meant that a significant number of them were forced to share some of the modules with other students. In a distance education system where print medium is employed as the sole means of content delivery, students should receive the learning materials long before the dates fixed for tutorial programs. The intention here is to give students a reasonably sufficient amount of time to study the materials independently, work on the assignment questions and areas of difficulty before the actual date of the tutorial session.

Consequently, the fundamental opportunities which a distance education system provides for each student to study the course materials independently (Willis, 1993) and in accordance with his/her own learning pace (Keegan, 1990) and also to receive tutorial support pertinent to his /her own learning problems (Gibbs and Durbridge, 1976) have been disregarded in the present system of ODL education.

Further purpose of this study was to examine the nature and adequacy of the tutorial services received. A significant number of the respondents had negative perceptions of this aspect of the program. The role of the tutor in a distance education system is very different from the role of teachers in conventional classrooms. The primary purpose of tutorials is to provide

academic and counseling services that enable the students to solve the problems which they encounter in the course of their independent study (Homlberg, 1989). Therefore, the detailed explanations of every part of the course materials do not coincide with the purpose of the tutorials.

The primary reason for having tutors is to provide students with individualized academic support in their courses (Gibbs and Durbridge, 1976). In contrast to this, about 84 percent of the respondent said that the students received inadequate individualized counseling. It seems that learners were disappointed about the absence of individualized academic support they presumed would be arranged.

The principal purpose of the tutorial programs is to provide opportunities whereby students receive immediate feedback on their learning progress and also on their performance in solving the assignment questions (Homlberg, 1989). The results of this study have shown that 100 percent of the respondents feel that learners did not receive immediate feedback on the assignment papers which they submitted to their respective tutors. This has been supported by a high proportion of tutors who lamented the absence of immediate feedback provided for students on tutor-marked assignment papers. Though assignments are primarily used as a learning tool in a distance education system (Moore and Kearsley, 1996), the tutorial sessions conducted in the current program seem to have considered the assignments merely for evaluation purposes.

Learning is a very individual effort, particularly in distance education. Adults vary greatly in their learning abilities and disabilities. Adults' variation in their needs, background and learning abilities suggests the paramount importance of individualized academic support for distance students (Kember, 1989). However, the prevalence of teacher-dominated whole-class instruction in the tutorial sessions of the current distance education program seems to pay little or no attention to the diverse learning needs of the students.

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The absence of fixed, workable schedules for the various activities in the program appears to be one of the possible causes for the poor quality of the tutorial programs conducted in ODL. As frequently indicated in other sections, there were inadequate period of time between the delivery of the modules and the tutorial sessions. Students attended the tutorials without completing the preparation required by the program. This forced tutors to fall back on the conventional teacher-dominated instructional approach that leads students to be passive recipients of tutors' verbal explanation of descriptive facts drawn from the course materials.

In addition, the results of this study pointed to the very high workload imposed upon tutors. The assignment of large number of tutees to one tutor could impede satisfactory provision of individualized academic and counseling support. The demands imposed upon tutors to mark a very large number of hand-written assignment papers could have a negative impact upon the quality of marking and could, consequently, limit the possibility of providing immediate feedback.

An attempt has been made in this study to assess the perception of respondents regarding the program. About 70 percent of the respondents felt that the level of difficulty of the learning modules is moderate. The remaining 30 percent of the respondents believed that the materials in the modules do not match the levels of ability of the learners. No respondent considered the level of difficulty of the materials to be low. Similarly, about 80 percent of the subjects selected for this study rated the level of difficulty of the tutor-marked assignments as moderate. This perception may be partly explained by ODL students' previous experience of the conventional face-to-face mode of instruction. This has been supported by Rumble, (1992) who has reported that students who have long been oriented to teacher-dominated face-to-face instruction tend to perceive distance learning as a difficult task and the tutors' perceptions may stem from this.

Researchers in this area strongly advocate that the difficulty of course materials is reported as being one of the major reasons for the withdrawal of many students from courses. In fact, there is no empirical evidence to prove the impact of the actual difficulty of the course materials on the performance of learners. The data in this study, however, shows the impact of the perceived difficulty of the course materials upon the performance of learners of the programs. A number of studies have reported that distance learners tend to persist in a given educational program if they feel that they are capable of coping with the level of difficulty of the courses (Koul, 1987) and if they feel that the program is less demanding (Coggins, 1988). It is therefore possible to conclude that withdrawal of a considerable amount of students from the current distance education program may be partly attributed to the perceived difficulty of the course materials.

The stress of multiple roles has been mentioned by respondents as one of the major constraints that hinder students from persisting in a distance education program. This view of respondents has been confirmed by Moore, (1975), Thompson, (1984), and Barry (1991), as cited in Ojo and Olakulehin (2006), who mentioned the stress of multiple roles as a hindrance to adult learners' persistence and performance in a distance education program. Adult learners assume multiple responsibilities at home, in society and in their workplaces. They spend a great deal of time and energy on fulfilling their family, social, and occupational responsibilities. This may drastically reduce the time and energy which could otherwise have been used for learning activities. The course difficulty, lack of appropriate counseling services and deficiency in educational background could also be another reason.

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## Summary

The major findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. The number of learners in a class during tutorial programs is more than 50 as highlighted by 70 percent of the respondents. The result of this study plainly shows that about 65 percent of the respondents are responsible for one to two courses at a time and the remainder for more than two courses.
2. The materials in the course modules and the tutor-marked assignments were perceived by more than two thirds of the respondents to be moderate. The remaining tutors indicated that the course modules and the tutor-marked assignments were too difficult for the ability of the students on the courses.
3. The majority of the responses on the patterns of module distribution were positive. However, 33 to 35 percent of the respondents revealed that some learners did not receive modules before tutorial sessions or even for the entire semester and, consequently, some were forced to share modules on certain courses. Moreover, 23 percent of the respondents underlined the fact that tutors did not receive modules for some courses to which they were assigned and 45 percent of the total number of respondents stated that modules were not given long enough in advance of the actual tutorial sessions.
4. In terms of the provision of the fundamental tutorial services, the tutorial programs were perceived to be poor by the majority of respondents. The types of services provided by tutors are not compatible with the fundamental and pedagogical principles of a distance education system. The tutorial programs were largely used for teachers' verbal explanations of descriptive facts which is the typical feature of the conventional face-to-face instructional system. The principal aspects of the tutorial service-the provision of immediate feedback on tutor marked assignments, the involvement of students in activity-based on learning tasks and the provision of individualized

academic and counseling supports-were completely overlooked during the tutorial programs.

5. About 93 percent of the respondents pointed out that there was no standard time-table for the ODL program and that there should be fixed times for carrying out the activities of the program. 100 percent of the respondents replied that feedback on the assignments was not immediate and individual support services were inadequate. The personal observations of the researchers also pointed to the fact that these areas were almost neglected.
6. The views of the largest proportion of respondents placed the conventional system of education in a superior position to distance education in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the effectiveness of face-to-face instruction over the distance mode of delivery as well as in terms of the systematic organization and implementation of educational programs.
7. The perceived difficulty of course materials, lack of confidence in the sustainability of the program, the stress of multiple responsibilities (family, social, occupational) and poor delivery of modules were found to be the major factors responsible for the poor performance and low perception levels of students regarding the existing open and distance education programs.

The nature of the tutorial services provided by tutors does not follow the fundamental principles of distance education. The tutorial programs were devoted largely to teachers' verbal explanation of descriptive facts which is the typical feature of conventional face-to-face instruction. The principal services of a tutorial program - involvement of the students in enquiry-based tasks and discussion, the provision of immediate feedback on tutor-marked assignments, individualized academic support and counseling – were completely overlooked. The late arrival of course modules to the students; the distribution of modules very close to the actual dates of the tutorial sessions (which denies students the chance of studying the materials in advance and working on assignments independently; large class size and the heavy workloads imposed upon tutors in some tutorial centers were

some of the major constraints that caused the program to be implemented in an unsatisfactory way.

The poor performance in the delivery of the course materials, the absence of sufficient tutorial services that are compatible with the system of distance education and the absence of consistent and timely communication between program implementers and beneficiaries could have increased the perceived difficulty of the course materials and reduced the confidence of the students in the sustainability of the current distance education program. These constraints added to the stress of multiple roles assumed by adults, seem to have forced some distance students to terminate their course of study in the middle of the program.

### **Recommendations**

In the light of the findings of this study, it seems appropriate to forward the following pertinent suggestions.

1. When viewed alongside the fundamental methodological principles of distance education, the tutorial services rendered by tutors are found to be inappropriate. This can be attributed to the entire program of tutorial sessions being based on teacher-fronted verbal presentation of factual information and, consequently, the virtual absence of task-based learning activities, the absence of immediate feedback on tutor-marked assignments as well as the lack of individualized academic support and counseling services. The aforementioned factors have all proved the incompatibility of the existing tutorial programs with the fundamental principles of distance learning. Accordingly:
  - a.) Tutors need to make a radical shift in their methodology from a teacher-dominated formal lecture to a learner-centered and pedagogical approach. Training of tutors on the fundamental principles of methodology is therefore urgently required.
  - b.) The large class size and the consequent imposition of heavy workloads upon tutors need to be reduced by opening new

tutorial centers in the vicinity of those centers that accommodate large number of students.

- c.) The use of multi-media for the delivery of course content need to be put into practice and considered as much as possible.
2. Some respondents perceive distance education programs to be less effective, less systematic and less organized than the conventional system of education. This has a negative impact on the quality and level of performance of the ODL system of education. Therefore, the cultivation of learners' confidence in the quality and sustainability of the current program as well as in their ability to succeed appears to be an urgent and inescapable task for all parties involved in the implementation of the program. Improvement in the module delivery system and in the quality of the tutorial services, the preparation of a workable and reliable schedule and the establishment of an active and reliable communication system between the organizers and between the implementers and the students are some of the measures that require to be taken in order to build up learners' confidence and to keep in touch to customers in the program.
3. The distribution of the course modules during (or very close to) the actual dates of the tutorial sessions deprives learners of the chance to study the course materials independently and to work on the assignment questions and exercises on their own before they attend the tutorials. Therefore, Universities or educational institutions running ODL programs need to exert all their efforts to prepare all the course modules well in advance the beginning of each semester. In addition, study centers must distribute the materials promptly so that students can collect them during the period of registration.
4. Efforts have to be made to increase the levels of achievement of female candidates by strengthening academic affirmative action. On the other hand, a joint survey research undertaken at the Fern Universität, West Germany, and Open University, UK, suggests that men and women students have different needs with respect to the local support provided during their distance study. Women are more regular attendee's at face-to-face tutorials than men and value local provision, especially the



chance to interact with other students. To this end, authors also relate this to models of intellectual development of women and argue for the importance of providing distance education suitable to women's needs (Kikup and Prummer, 1990).

To conclude, strengthening open and distance education has the potential to focus the learning process on students.

Courses and programs that emphasize the students' strengths and needs should be succeeded in attracting students. Moreover, in order to build their reputations and keep students, distance education courses and programs must reach the required standards. Achieving distance education is the aim of all of the concerned parties in the continual quest for the best possible resources, practices, and results. With an increased need for new career skills and improvements in the technology used to deliver courses, distance education students will demand evidence of quality and authenticity from distance courses. Overall, it can be concluded that, when students benefit from an education program that meets their needs, their perception of the course is likely to be positive and their performance in the field tends to improve (Cavanaugh 2005).

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