Provision of Assignments and Face-to-Face Sessions at the Open University of Tanzania for the Past 20 Years

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Abstract: Student Support Services are very essential for students studying through the Open and Distance Learning mode. The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) like other ODL institutions has been offering student support service to her learners. The objective of this paper is to examine the provision of take home assignments and Face-to-Face sessions (FTF) as exercised by OUT in the past 20 years. The paper discusses the way assignments and FTF sessions were organized and challenges which were encountered in such sessions. It has been observed that challenges which faced the provision of assignments forced OUT to eliminate assignments in students' continuous assessment. It is further observed that inadequate finance, material and human resources contribute to poor provision and organization of FTF sessions. Currently FTF activities have been reinforced by a Portfolio system. It is recommended that OUT should consider the reintroduction of assignments (at least one assignment per course) since assignments enhance students' academic writing and search skills. Further, FTF sessions should continue to be organized to solve students' academic and administrative problems. FTF activities should be given priority and all the resources needed for the sessions be provided to facilitate Director of Regional Centre (DRC) to effectively organize and conduct FTF sessions. Further, filling in of the portfolio should continue; but be organized in such a way that students are supervised by course specific experts.

***Key words*:** Open University of Tanzania, Student Support Services, assignments, face-to-face sessions, and Student's portfolio.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education started as a correspondence mode of education more than 250 years ago in the form of written materials posted to learners. It was not until mid-twentieth century when distance education evolved. This was a period when correspondent education integrated the use of broadcast, recorded media and face-to-face sessions. The most significant element in the distance education system during the time was the physical separation in time and space between the teacher and the learner (Rumble, 1992; Simpson, 2002). This separation in the process of distance teaching and learning considers geographical location, peers, teachers, administration and sometimes family members and friends. Student support services are utilized to bridge this separation.

What are Student Support Services?

The term student support has been used very broadly in relation to a range of diverse activities. Molefi (1998) defines student support services (SSS) as any system or procedure that is purposefully created and effectively utilized by distance education institutions to support and or facilitate teaching at a distance. He adds that SSS may include any of the following: record keeping and administration; pre-admission counselling; admission and registration information; administrative assistance, book dispatch; library services, tutoring and counselling, weekend courses and study centres, electronic communication technologies such as phones, radio, audio tapes, video and television. SSS have been perceived as one way of creating optimum conditions for success and enhancing the quality of educational provision. For this reason, SSS involve delivery of study materials and strategies for motivating learners in order to enable them to overcome problems, which may jeopardize their chances for successful learning (Hancock, 1997). In general they are resources that learners utilize to play the role of or take the place of teachers, peers and administration.

Perry and Rumble (1987) contend that despite the fact that ODL is a mass instructional methodology, it is important that strategies, through which student support services can be catered for individuals rather than mass students, be used. In this case they argue that in order to give quality education, individual students have to be addressed in ODL. Mays (2002) observes that, SSS are those elements of the system which are responsive to the individual needs of learners as opposed to the standard and mass produced elements of a course (irrespective of medium) that are distributed to all learners. Mays further points that support systems are those activities which are individualised or delivered in interactive groups (whether face-to-face, through telephone, electronically or in some other medium such as tutoring and counselling) in contrast with the learning materials prepared for a mass of users without specific focus on any actual individual or group.

Institutions that provide appropriate and adequate SSS have been observed to attract and serve their learners better than those which do not (Dhanarajan, 1997; Simpson, 2002). It is argued that accessibility and provision of adequate and appropriate support services contribute to more admission, retention and completion rates of students in distance education systems (Simpson, 2002). Simpson points out that one characteristic of ODL is its association with high dropout rates in comparison with conventional institutions. Improvements of students' admission, retention and completion rates will be realized through enhancing and developing student support services. This implies that for successful learning programmes, ODL institutions have the obligation of provide and make student support services accessible to their learners.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) was established by an Act of Parliament No. 17 of 1992. It started to enroll students into various programmes since 1994 and the initial number of students admitted in the respective courses was 766 then. The act of 1992 was repealed by the Universities Act of 2005 and granted a charter

in 2007. The positive trend in increase of students' enrollment continued with improvement of the quality of delivery and introduction of new courses. By the academic year 2010/2011, the cumulative number of admitted students into undergraduate and non-degree programmes stood at above 50,000 (OUT, 2010). This increase in students' enrollment and programmes, need to be accompanied by appropriately planned and viable student support services in order to meet diverse needs of the students.

It is of interest to examine how OUT has met the demands of student support services for the past 20 years so as to enable the students to study successfully. It is argued that the amount of SSS an institution can offer largely depends on the particular institution's capacity and resources at its disposal (Mays, 2000). Initially OUT offered among others the following SSS:
Dispatch of study materials, assignments, library services, counseling and guidance, admission and registration information, record keeping, face-to-face sessions, and electronic communication facilities.

This paper examines some of the support services which have been offered by OUT since the first student enrollment in 1994. It considers the status of the SSS, challenges encountered and how the challenges are addressed in way of developing a way forward. The paper specifically focuses on the provision of assignments and face-to-face sessions.

ASSIGNMENTS IN ODL
In open and distance learning assignments are used as one of the tutorial support. Boondoa and Rowley (in Atkinson *et al*., 1991) maintain that the submission of assignments to be marked by a tutor, and then returned with helpful comments is almost universally accepted as an essential part of the distance learning process. They discovered in their research that ODL institutions that did not administer assignments had a low academic achievement.

Through tutor marked assignments (TMAs), assignments play the role of tutorial function. From the comments given by tutors in the assignments, students can assess the level of their understanding of study materials and receive guidance on how they can improve their performance. It is argued that in some cases, tutors comments in assignments may guide students in search of supplementary information or updating information available in the study. In this case according to OUT/SAEU (1998) a well-commented and graded TMA completes the tutorial function by:
- Providing feedback to the students on their levels of understanding and general progress in the course.
- Guiding students in search of essential information in order to improve their performance.
- Up-dating information available in the study materials.

Assignments enable the tutor to build and consolidate a relationship with the learners. Learners get opportunity to converse with the tutor and to receive advice

on their problems and to confirm their understanding of the problem. If students make mistakes, the comments and suggestions from the tutors should indicate what they have misunderstood. If their answers are right, the feedback should boost their confidence (Mushi, 1999). Siaciwena (1997) points out that due to inadequate financial resource and other constraints, in many other distance education systems, assignments remain the main point of contact between the institutions and the students. For this reason assignments remain one of the most reliable tool for overcoming distance education drawbacks which may overwhelm students and force them to drop out of studies.

Another function of assignments is grading and ranking students' performance which is an important function of any distance education institution. Similarly assignment can compel students to study the materials and therefore, promote active learning. Without assignments, students generally, do not take their studies seriously. Assignments have great potentials to encourage students to read texts including their study materials as they seek for answers to the assignment questions.

Almost all ODL institutions administer assignments as part of students' continuous assessment programs (course work) to judge and measure their programmes as students generally work on their own. Until recently, OUT used to do the same. Failure to provide take home assignments, OUT students will miss the aforementioned functions of the assignments.

Provision of Assignments at OUT
Between 1994 and 2008, OUT started its programmes in January. During that time final course assessment in each course consisted of continuous assessment and annual written examination. The continuous assessment took the form of take home assignments, timed tests, laboratory and teaching practice for science students and teacher trainees, respectively. Two assignments were issued for each course, two timed tests and one annual examination.
The distribution of marks in each course was as shown below:
- Two assignments each carried 7.5 points and made a total of 15 points
- Two timed tests each carried12.5 points and made a total of 25 points.
- One annual examination which carried 60 points.

At the beginning of each academic year, teachers were supposed to provide the students with their take home assignments. Students relied mostly on their study materials as sources of answers to their assignments. OUT students also used main Regional libraries to get extra materials as references to support their assignments. The first assignments were supposed to be submitted to the subject teacher for marking before the first timed tests were attempted. The first timed tests were conducted in the month of May. The second assignments were collected in September before the beginning of the annual examinations. The assignments, tests and examinations were marked through panel marking sessions which took place in November and December.

Challenges Encountered in the Provision of Assignments

Provision of assignments at OUT was faced with a lot of challenges. The first challenge was inadequate study materials. OUT started her operations using study materials bought from ODL institutions, outside the country. These were mainly IGNOU, NOUN, Abuja, Nairobi and Makerere universities. Due to lack of funds, few study materials were purchased and for some of the courses, study materials could not be availed to students. This resulted into a position where a new academic year would begin while not all course materials were available. Hence, provision of students' take home assignments was delayed until such time when the required study materials had been purchased and made available to the students. Delayed provision of students' assignments led to delayed submission of the same by the students. As a result it affected end of the year results; hence leading to incomplete course work.

Another challenge was lack of enough tutors. This constraint made OUT utilize part-time tutors who were employed somewhere else with additional responsibilities other than teaching at OUT. Sometimes, due to such commitments some of these part-time tutors submitted their assignments to OUT late and as a consequence students were provided with the same late.

Late provision of students' take home assignments was noted as another challenge. This had an effect to both the tutor and the students. On the side of tutors, late assignments hindered their effective performance as the tutors failed to mark, give constructive comments and give feedback on time. Sometimes due to pressure on the tutors by the University to submit the marked assignments on time, the tutors did not give any comments to the marked assignments. Due to inadequate tutors, the marking workload became too big to handle effectively. Consequently, a lot of un-marked assignments piled at the head office. Some of the part time tutors demanded immediate payment when they set and marked these assignments. When the payments of these part-time staff were delayed, some refrained from marking the assignments and if they marked they refused to submit the marks to OUT. Sometimes, the part-time tutors could keep the marked assignments without releasing the marks for almost a year as a way of pressuring OUT to pay them. In other cases, some of the marked assignments were poorly marked without the required markers' comments.

The consequences of the above environment, were failure for students to get actual benefits of the assignments as discussed; leading to unsatisfactory performance. Moore and Kearsley, (1996) insist that students should receive regular feedback on their assignments or progress. Timely and appropriate feedback is necessary to build students' confidence as it takes care of what the tutorial class would have provided in conventional systems. The earlier such feedback is provided, the more it is likely to have a positive impact on students' performance. Regular feedback on students' performance helps them learn better.

According to Kissassi (2011), some of the returned TMAs used to have comments which discouraged students. Marked assignments had such statements as: 'not up to university standards', 'poorly done' or 'are you sure?' Such statements did not inform students areas of weaknesses or strengths. Dawati (2005) argues that the

tutor has to correspond warmly and sympathetically with students when marking their assignments. The comments should be as supportive as possible, thus picking up those aspects of a student's work which display her/his strengths and encouraging her/him to build on these. It also means identifying her/his weaknesses and suggesting ways of improvement. Therefore, OUT students missed these benefit from their assignments.

The importance of useful comments was also examined by Rumble (1992). He commented that written work by the learner must be sent to the tutor for marking and then returned with helpful comments. He says this was important since there is evidence of a correlation between student drop-out and long assignment turn round times. According to Rumble the recommended assignments' turn-around time is fourteen days. Rumble summed up that feedback on marked assignments is the most critical tutoring strategy in ODL.

By the year 2008, these challenges forced OUT to abandon the system of provision of student take home assignments. The step of not providing assignments as part of students' assessment was a result of several issues, including but not limited to; long turn-round time where the marked assignments were returned after tests and annual examinations, heavy marking workload for tutors, high costs for marking and unfaithful students who contracted experts to do their assignments. The situation was made worse by a poor recording system that prevailed. Some students were compelled to re-do assignments, tests and exams because records of their assignments, tests and exams were misplaced and could not be traced. Students had been delayed to graduate and some decided to dropout from studies; some endured embarrassments and other inconveniences in completing some of their courses. The removal of take home assignments by OUT to its students was considered as a step to reduce the challenges.

BACKGROUND TO FACE -TO-FACE SESSIONS
According to Brown *et al.* (undated), present day distance education has its roots in early university correspondence and extension programmes designed primarily to educate students via paper based processes. Brown talked about "correspondence education" to describe a method of teaching through printed materials, sent by post to students who studied them and sent back exercises to their tutors who in turn marked and returned them by post. According to Holmberg in Foster *et al.* (2002), prior to 1971, the term "correspondence education", was used to describe a method of teaching and learning at a distance, which later on was supplemented with educational broadcasting and face-to-face support to give rise to "distance education" or "distance teaching", "open learning" and "three-way-teaching". This was when correspondence education was supplemented by other media including face-to-face sessions.

Why face-to-face in ODL?
Face-to-face (FTF) contact is one of the strategies used in the teaching and learning process in distance education. It is a means of alleviating isolationism, which the distance learner faces. Apart from serving to supplement or complement teaching, FTF contact bring together both the learner and the teacher to interact socially

(Rashid, undated). Ljosa (1975) (cited in Rashid, undated) pointed out the aim of FTF sessions as to reduce the isolation syndrome, which is, the lack of access to libraries because of the remoteness of the learners' environment and lack of physical access to the teacher for personal discussions. Moreover, the student's home conditions may not be suitable for effective learning. The work and domestic demands may not favour effective learning; the postal system may not be reliable enough for effective correspondence between the teacher and learner; and most of the resources that may facilitate meaningful learning may not be available to the learner. Therefore, the FTF medium is often adopted to reinforce distance education channels or education transaction (Moore and Kearsly, 1996) in order to ease such problems.

Agboola (1992) was of the opinion that occasional FTF support to distance learners is important because certain areas of knowledge and skills, including science, drama and language related aspects can only be taught effectively through FTF sessions. These sessions provided opportunities for students to interact with their tutors in order to seek clarification and immediate feedback on difficult areas of their learning. According to Dhanarajan (1997) FTF sessions enable distance learners to share their own ideas and respond to the ideas of others, improve thinking and hence increase understanding.

Face-to-face Sessions at OUT
For the period of almost twenty years OUT has been conducting FTF sessions as part of SSS. From 1994 to 2008 formal FTF sessions at OUT were conducted twice annually. The first one was conducted before the submission of the first assignment and the second one before timed tests. Organization of FTF sessions was mainly conducted by the Directors of Regional Centres (DRCs) who are also qualified academic staff. DRCs are important players in the facilitation of FTF sessions since they are responsible for planning and are part of the execution of the FTF sessions.

DRCs recruit facilitators from the regions to assist in the FTF sessions. Regions with institutions of higher learning provide facilitators for different courses. While the system continues, OUT has since 2008 used internal FTF session facilitators than part-time staff to avoid high costs and encourage timely and closely monitored conduct of FTF (Quarterly report, 2008).

Challenges to the Provision of FTF Sessions
There are three major factors which influence the provision of FTF sessions. These are finance, human and material resources. Inability to access these resources led to challenges to both OUT and the students. Adequate finance determines the success of all activities in the University. They determined the acquisition and utilization of both human and material resources.

It has been noted that lack of sufficient operational funds at OUT have affected the whole exercise of organizing and conducting FTF sessions. For instance, funds given by the government are not proportional to the growing number of students enrolled. As a result, it affects the deployment of tutors to regions, only a few of them are engaged which negatively affects sessions. Since allocation of tutors does

not meet the demands of many students, it becomes difficult to follow-up each student's queries.

Kissassi (2011) noted that there is poor organization of FTF sessions at the RCs. DRCs play their roles of identifying part-timers, secure venues and prepare time-tables on how the students should be facilitated. It cannot be assumed that DRCs were supposed to organize the FTF sessions at the RCs and be able to make it successful without adequate finance. They need to be assisted as Ukpo (2006) pointed out that directors need to be financed and trained on managing RCs on how to monitor FTF sessions effectively. Since the directors also serve as enrolment counsellors, they also need to be trained to help students identify their learning needs.

Generally, DRCs prepare budgets for FTF sessions but are not strictly honoured due to financial constraints experienced by OUT. The Open University of Tanzania like other public institutions depends on government subsidies to meet recurrent costs. The Facts and Figures booklet of OUT (2010/2011) pointed out that the amount of funds from the government have been dwindling each year while the number of students enrolled and service costs have been on the increase. Tables 1-3 show the number of students admitted and Table 4 shows funds received.

Table 1: Students Admission into Undergraduate Programmes 1994 – 2010/2011

PROGRAMME	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
BA GEN	188	51	61	50	58	42	43	62	84
BA (Ed)	359	127	192	133	136	155	147	278	326
B.COM (Gen)	195	95	161	105	88	82	55	108	151
B.COM (Ed)	24	17	39	18	23	22	2	21	27
B.Ed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	143	191
LL.B	0	355	481	333	295	207	252	360	347
B.SC (Gen)	0	32	74	70	87	55	110	127	111
B.SC.(Ed)	0	61	93	46	63	56	66	110	103
BBA (Gen)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
BBA(Ed)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B.A.T.)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B.Sc.ICT)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B.ED.(SE)	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B.A.(SW)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B.A.(Soc.)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B.A.J	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B.A.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**766**	**738**	**1101**	**755**	**747**	**619**	**675**	**1209**	**1340**

Table 1 Continued

Programme	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2007/8	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	TOTAL CUMMULATIVE
BA GEN	98	165	241	307	346	219	267	165	237	2681
BA (Ed)	442	443	545	582	1699	771	601	330	659	7925
B.COM (Gen)	0	0	0	127	179	48	0	0	0	1394
B.COM (Ed)	0	0	0	9	119	65	0	0	0	386
B.Ed	294	394	0	934	1205	575	728	408	774	6310
LL.B	293	351	664	480	480	151	339	390	457	5978
B.SC (Gen)	119	169	407	258	237	114	148	132	127	2132
B.SC. (Ed)	86	114	162	140	659	259	175	69	123	2366
BBA (Gen)	198	254	143	441	364	73	455	348	510	3038
BBA (Ed)	37	30	395	49	106	29	139	65	99	614
B.A.T.)	0	0	60	108	51	58	81	72	77	482
B.Sc.ICT)	0	0	35	17	29	28	60	33	86	253
B.ED.(SE)	0		0	0	0	5	11	8	7	71
B.A. (SW)	0	0	40	5	59	56	90	66	129	405
B.A. (Soc.)	0	0	0	10	0	114	187	168	263	877
B.A.J	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	19	30	74
B.A. (Mass Com)	0	0	0	0	0	0	98	41	99	238
B.Sc.(ES	0	0	0	0	0	0	102	44	72	218
Total	1567	1920	2692	755	5668	2565	3506	2358	3749	35442

Source: Facts and Figures 2010/2011

Table 2: Admission of Postgraduate Students into Various Programmes Cumulative Enrolment 2001-2010/2011

Programme	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	TOTAL
PGDE	19	28	44	45	54	66	52	54	47	160	191	760
M.Dist.Ed	5	14	30	35	38	0	129	20	14	4	20	309
M.ED	22	9	5	0	1	52	50	140	90	269	541	1179
MA	1	23	4	5	0	1	30	0	103	158	3	328
MBA	0	12	12	236	269	353	857	333	493	629	585	3779
MSc	3	3	2	3	3	1	1	2	0	2	0	20
PGDL	15	8	12	15	23	34	60	41	20	47	37	312
LLM	8	1	3	2	3	4	3	4	0	0	4	32
Ph.D	24	25	12	12	2	3	2	15	0	49	44	188
LLM IT&T	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	79	9	88
MSc.CED	53	0	103	0	145	0	274	-	-	-	0	575
M CED	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	-	385	265	650
MA SW	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	154	154
MA Tourism	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	12	12
MBA T& L	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	34	34
MHRM	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	125	125
M.SC ECON Even.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	55	55
Grand Total	150	123	227	353	538	514	1458	609	767	1782	2079	8600

*Source***:** Facts and Figures 2010/2011

Table 3: Admission into various Non-Degree Programmes. Cumulative enrolment from 1996-2010/2011

Programme	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	Total
OFC	228	223	251	261	276	482	494	689	822	1049	1141	1370	750	1270	1271	2248	12825
CYP-Dip.					58	110	104	115	96	53	33	29	16	32	35	30	711
CCDE					40	9	4	33	3	2	4	0	3	0	4	2	104
ODDEOL											17	10	12	22	54	21	136
ODPTE														488	497	829	1814
ODPPH															9	14	23
CPPH												1	0	0	1	1	3
Total	**228**	**223**	**251**	**261**	**374**	**601**	**602**	**837**	**921**	**1104**	**1195**	**1410**	**781**	**1812**	**1871**	**3145**	**15616**

*Source***:** Facts and Figures 2010/2011

The report established that the estimated budget reflects the actual cost of equipment, materials and other items. This shows that OUT is grossly under funded by the government (see Table 4).

Table 4: Recurrent and Development Subvention

Fiscal Year	Recurrent (T. Shs '000)			Development (T. Shs '000)		
	Estimates	Allocation	%(Allc/Est)	Estimates	Allocation	%(Alloc/Est)
1994/95	530,000	190,000	35.80	600,000	92,000	15.33
1995/96	1,508,607	538,805	35.70	680,337	100,000	14.69
1996/97	2,493,056	650,000	26.07	208,000	90,000	43.26
1997/98	2,997,016	660,348	22.03	443,400	50,500	11.38
1998/99	2,248,546	1,140,000	50.69	425,000	30,000	7.05
1999/00	2,361,437	1,640,335	69.46	321,000	150,000	46.72
2000/01	3,354,888	2,268,907	67.62	598,570	75,000	12.52
2001/02	3,918,442	2,479,622	63.28	430,865	200,000	46.41
2002/03	3,259,146	2,579,438	79.14	456,944	80,000	17.50
2003/04	2,765,549	2,459,451	89.00	627,608	50,000	7.96
2004/05	3,849,679	2,181,296	57.00	575,409	50,000	8.68
2005/06	4,262,314	2,931,783	69.00	723,720	100,000	13.81
2006/07	6,872,210	5,303,122	77.00	1,386,443	692,000	49.91
2007/08	7,606,520	5,776,920	76.00	2,650,000	500,000	18.86
2008/09	11,959,263	5,752,209	48.00	2,135,814	1,041,300	48.75
2009/10	11,909,209	9,648,887	77.8	2,894,000	2,241,300	77.4
2010/2011	12,400,000	11,578,697	99.3	6,776,000	1,741,300	25.7

Source: Facts and Figures 2010/2011

It was further established that the nominal allocation of Other Charges (OC) during the fiscal year 2008/09 was less than half of the funds allocated to the fiscal year 2001/02 ((Kissassi, 2011; see Table 5).

Table 5: Disaggregation of Recurrent Subvention

Academic Year	Other Charges	Personal Emoluments (PE)	Actual Recurrent Allocation (ARA)	% Share of OC in ARA
2001/02	1,104,000,000	604,930,563	1,708,930,563	65.0
2002/03	938,000,700	912,775,800	912,775,800	51.0
2003/04	1,163,106,105	1,296,345,300	2,459,451,405	47.0
2004/05	1,090,993,907	1,090,302,193	2,181,296,100	50.0
2005/06	1,490,993,900	1,540,789,700	3,031,783,600	49.0
2006/07	1,303,977,580	3,999,145,324	5,303,122,904	25.0
2007/08	1,017,000,000	4,759,920,000	5,776,920,000	18.0
2008/09	1,017,000,000	4,735,209,000	5,752,209,000	18.0
2009/10	1,017,000,000	6,390,587,500	7,407,587,500	14.0
2010/11	919,000,000	8,900,397,000	9,837,397,000	9.0

Source: Facts and Figures 2010/2011

Clearly, such allocation did not give due recognition of the increased number of admitted students in the 2008/09 academic year (see Table 1-3). The report further claimed that such inadequate allocation provided partial support on the efforts that OUT undertakes to increase the number of graduates in the country. This results

into many academic and supportive activities, including FTF, to remain unattended. Such activities include inability to pay part-time staff, inability to settle the existing debts and inability to pay the contracted printing firms. The income accruing from student fees is small because distance education in Tanzania was supposed to be affordable by whoever sought university education and hence are kept to a minimum as matter of policy, especially because OUT is a state institution.

Sometimes the time of FTF sessions would be ready and yet the OC from Government was not forthcoming or the amount received could not meet even the basic needs. What happened was that OUT postponed the FTF sessions or reduced the number of facilitators to be deployed to the regions? This is similar to what was emphasized by Mays (2000:16) and WGDEOL (2002) who revealed that support services were normally viewed as of secondary importance to the primary role of teaching, as such they tended to be the first cut in times of budgetary constraints in both single and dual mode institutions. Mays stressed that learner support had to be integrated in distance education teaching, learning and administrative systems; not invented as an afterthought or disposed of in lean budget years. It can be deduced that in the case of OUT, this was the reason of abandoning take home assignments.

Inadequate tutors and lack of knowledge in conducting FTF sessions is another challenge to both OUT and students in the provision of FTF sessions (Kissassi 2011). For the past twenty years, students had to strain themselves financially to attend FTF sessions just to find that there were no tutors to help them in their specific problem areas. The few tutors who were available gave general information which could be obtained from the almanac or prospectus, while some of the tutors were not even conversant with the distance mode of learning. Again, the problem of inadequate tutors was associated with the underfunding of OUT by the government.

Staff from OUT and particularly the teaching staff had little knowledge in ODL. As such they needed to be oriented on distance education mode so as to be able to serve the students more effectively. Daweti (2005) emphasized that, tutors recruited were normally from the traditional system of education. He argued that the recruited tutors, in spite of good academic qualifications were used to classroom teaching, and had very limited knowledge of distance education. Daweti stated that such tutors needed to familiarise themselves with the distance education system as they were likely to be unfamiliar with the principles of distance education. He insisted that "the new tutors needed to become aware of the principles, processes and procedures associated with distance learning.

Whenever new staff joined an organization, it was the duty of the organisation to provide induction to the processes and procedures that govern the running of the organisation. In the absence of such formal induction, new staff will be at a loss to cope with the situation." At OUT, such training is conducted during new staff orientation and in a very short period. There are courses like Certificate Course in Distance Education (OCCDE), Ordinary Diploma in Distance Education and Open Learning and Staff Orientation Course in ODL. Unfortunately studying the courses does not give the graduates any recognition by OUT. This has discouraged staff to study the courses. For example since 2000 when the OCCDE course was started to

2010/2011 only five OUT staff have graduated. Several others have registered from time to time without doing anything tangible.

The Staff Orientation Course in ODL is an online certificate course for all staff without formal training in ODL. Actually, the orientation course is an alternative to OCCDE. The major differences are basically that, it is done online as this was the current mode of instructional delivery in ODL. Secondly, "staff do not have to suffer the humiliation" of appearing in examination rooms alongside their students to write Timed Tests and Annual Exams. Thirdly, the University had promised to recognize the certificate of competence to be awarded for successful participation and reward the graduates accordingly.

In spite of these deliberate measures to lure members of staff to do the course, among 140 staff who registered for the course in the last 2 years, only 4 have submitted reports to prove that they have studied it. It is possible that members of staff were mostly interested in awards which would "free them from a marriage of convenience" with either OUT or ODL. Target No.3.12 in OUT Rolling Strategic Plan 2011/12 - 2014/15 provides for more than 70% of OUT academic staff and part-timers to be trained in distance learning to at least certificate level by June 2012. As of July 2012 less than 3% have met the target!

It is essential that even if tutors were academically qualified in their area of specialization, they needed skills to enable them communicate and relate appropriately with distance learners. Such training would help tutors be of help to students. Rowntree (1992), emphasized that for tutors to be facilitative, supportive and play guidance role, they must not only be selected for their academic capabilities but must also be trained, developed and supported in an on-going and integrated way.

Students also face the challenge of inadequate finance for FTF sessions. They have to incur costs for travel, accommodation, food, internet services and sometimes photocopy of study materials and hand-outs. With their meagre income it is very difficult for majority of students to manage consistent attendance to FTF sessions. Some students claimed that if it were not long distances they would have been able to participate during FTF sessions more effectively and would not have dropped out (Kissassi, 2011). Moore and Kearsley (1996) pointed out that drop out is usually a result of no one cause. As one of OUT objectives is to reach the marginalized, therefore despite the distance, those students in need of FTF sessions have to be considered. Moore and Kearsley added that access to FTF sessions is very important to marginalized students or those who are in remote places. One of the objectives of establishing OUT was to help majority of those left out to get access to university education. The objective was thought to be possible because distance education brings all necessary tools for learning into the home and into the community, no matter how remote and no matter how many wanted to learn. The objective also states that, the University has no barriers and no walls, therefore the objectives could be achieved. As long as the issue of long distance is a challenge, these ideals still have a long way to be achieved by OUT. The trend of enrolment by Regional

Centres shows that metropolitan regions have the highest enrolments hence it is likely that distance could be among the factors affecting enrolment (Table 5).

Table 5: Admission by Region/Coordination Centre (Undergraduate degree and Non - degree Students)

REGION	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Arusha	42	35	72	44	514	59	55	89	146	138	154
Dar	291	344	464	435	373	264	372	446	504	714	902
Ilala	0	0	0	0	041	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kinondoni	0	0	0	0	011	0	0	0	0	0	0
Temeke	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dodoma	16	10	35	28	45	27	26	78	73	62	95
Iringa	35	28	65	46	39	48	56	107	78	123	147
Kagera	14	15	45	19	21	39	27	23	53	53	92
Kigoma	6	15	25	16	35	12	26	35	46	63	53
Kilimanjaro	42	21	78	34	35	52	40	69	73	124	160
Lindi	6	7	9	11	10	4	14	37	30	33	38
Manyara	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24	39
Mara	21	15	37	22	18	31	22	82	80	67	95
Mbeya	66	54	72	62	59	48	55	101	95	149	148
Morogoro	27	30	56	54	34	26	30	62	84	101	107
Mtwara	17	13	23	25	13	18	32	45	22	32	29
Mwanza	39	37	77	33	71	59	53	93	136	147	157
Coast	14	17	26	25	21	11	19	45	22	41	63
Rukwa	22	3	17	4	3	8	12	17	37	43	50
Ruvuma	15	16	22	20	30	22	23	30	49	72	48
Shinyanga	18	16	41	20	41	27	63	108	47	63	103
Singida	6	7	16	12	11	7	6	60	52	51	76
Tabora	36	12	42	22	29	45	41	73	65	48	59
Tanga	13	8	55	19	27	28	21	75	124	134	111
Zanzibar	20	32	42	20	16	35	51	75	67	55	51
Pemba											
TOTAL	766	738	1329	978	998	880	1049	1757	1942	2404	2849

Table 5: Continued

REGION	2005	2006	2007	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	Total
Arusha	232	266	522	250	343	202	459	3162
Dar	1266	1692	1866	967				10901
Ilala	0	0	0		782	557	681	2020
Kinondoni	0	0	0		812	991	1282	3085
Temeke	0	0	0		195	196	371	762
Dodoma	87	172	292	114	94	97	186	1537
Iringa	195	202	347	186	234	113	228	2277
Kagera	125	133	195	78	169	217	225	1543
Kigoma	67	74	156	68	95	60	181	1033
Kilimanjaro	221	279	604	266	234	313	242	2787
Lindi	42	35	79	58	63	53	90	619
Manyara	92	84	250	57	184	42	115	887
Mara	82	107	168	53	133	134	98	1265

Mbeya	161	264	430	134	250	169	347	2664
Morogoro	164	171	351	184	282	145	256	2164
Mtwara	74	96	157	57	170	55	255	1133
Mwanza	190	215	281	160	215	181	355	2499
Coast	84	95	168	88	153	57	180	1129
Rukwa	89	92	165	68	89	27	108	854
Ruvuma	100	127	202	92	99	104	159	1230
Shinyanga	145	78	154	57	217	205	174	1577
Singida	75	89	104	123	63	63	162	983
Tabora	78	93	156	72	97	69	148	1185
Tanga	167	194	303	127	151	71	256	1884
Zanzibar	55	80	97	74	126	148	255	1299
Pemba				7	62	52	72	245
TOTAL	**3798**	**4662**	**7077**	**3344**	**5318**	**4229**	**6894**	**51012**

*Source***:** Facts and Figures 2010/2011

Table 5 summarises students' admission by region/coordination centres. According to the Facts and Figures (2010/2011) Dar es Salaams' OUT three regional centres (Kinondoni Ilala and Temeke municipalities) dominated the number of admissions for the last decade or so. It was further revealed that more than 31% of enrolled students came from OUT regions of Arusha, Ilala, Iringa, Kilimanjaro, Kinondoni, Mbeya, Morogoro, Mwanza and Tanga. Of these nine regions, which have cumulative enrolment of more than 1800 students from 1994 to 2010/11, Arusha had the highest cumulative enrolment followed by Kinondoni. In short, ten regional centres (i.e. Dar es Salaam and the nine regions mentioned earlier) have recruited more than 65% of Undergraduate Degree and Non-Degree students (Facts and Figures 2010/11). The population of each of those regions is higher than each of the remaining regions.

Methodologies used by the tutors during FTF sessions were another challenge to FTF sessions. The lecture method of FTF was mainly used where students were able to present their topics in advance. Other discussions dominated when tutors were not given topics in advance and they either posed questions to students or students suggested topics on the spot and then they were discussed. It has been argued widely elsewhere that, during FTF sessions the role of the tutor should be to facilitate students and not to teach them. According to WGDEOL (2002) tutors are supposed to use contact sessions not to teach the content of the program(s) rather, they should play the role of facilitating discussions on issues arising, as well as check on progress and implications of the issues explored in the printed material. It is recommended therefore, that tutors should be more facilitative than didactic. In some cases students may not have study materials and hence they cannot participate in discussions during FTF sessions. As a result some tutors resort to lectures.

Holmberg (1988) stresses the importance of interactions between learner and the tutor and learner and learner. He argues that when students participate in learner-teacher and learner-learner dialogue they learn to:
• Argue purposefully in the language of their discipline.

- Take up, give reason for, maintain, modify or abandon own theoretical points of view in the course of discussion.
- Enquire into and critically evaluate knowledge presented by others.
- Reflect critically and self-confidently together with other students on the knowledge they have created, and on methods used.
- Present their ideas rationally and systematically.

In each case, the intention is to involve the students in the capacity of the tutorial rather than make them passive participants. Adequate learner involvement encourages learners to understand what is being taught, thereby developing independent and successful learning. Majority of activities at FTF sessions have now been replaced by the Student Progressive Portfolios (SPP). Students are supposed to fill in the portfolios, outline outcomes and learning objectives for each course. So far this exercise has not been clearly understood by majority of the students as well as some FTF facilitators. As such it is conducted on ad-hoc basis as many students fill the portfolios on the spot i.e. they do not prepare the portfolios progressively as they study, rather some copy from each others work at the FTF sessions. Some students do not know how to write/fill in the portfolios. They cannot differentiate learning objectives and learning outcomes. The exercise is supposed to be compulsory and students are not supposed to do their examinations if they have not filled the portfolios which must be approved by authorised tutors.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined provision of SSS at OUT for the past 20 years. Particularly the paper has discussed the provision of take home assignments, currently replaced by portfolio at FTF sessions. Since 2008 OUT has done away with assignments as part of continuous assessments. It has been pointed out that factors which influenced accessibility and effectiveness of FTF sessions were finance; human and material resources; long distances; and inadequate and qualified tutors. This indicates that, as much as students would like to participate in FTF sessions, their goals would not be achieved if these challenges are not aggressively addressed. The most affected students were those who are far from the head office and particularly those far from Regional Centres. Currently, FTF sessions have been of less effect to students as the Students Progressive Portfolios have not helped students to solve their day to day academic problems mainly because of unfamiliarity with the portfolios.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended among other things that:
- OUT should re-visit the decision to discontinue the take home assignments. At least there should be one take home assignment for each course. Ways should be devised to control those students who would not be faithful in attempting the assignments e.g. redo the assignment, repeat the year or be summoned to defend his/her work. Furthermore, the nature and type of questions can be changed e.g. to develop relevant competence-based questions.
- Students' Organization at Regional level should organize fund raising activities which can involve government, public and private sectors. The fund could be

used to pay accommodation costs for those staying far away from centres, meet costs for internet access and supply adequate materials to limit photocopying expenses.

- Whatever problems which have been experienced during FTF sessions, it is asserted that FTF sessions still helped students in their studies. The sessions instil a sense of confidence and the feeling that the University cares for them. FTF sessions should continue to be organized to address students' academic and administrative problems as well as to examine the conduct of portfolio. Some of the cost-effective ways could be the use of recorded media, mentors, television/video conferencing and journals.

- As long as OUT is not conducting FTF sessions effectively, students will continue to rely on private tuition providers, some of whom are not academically and ethically qualified. OUT should take cognisance of the fact that any quality activity requires adequate investment. Hence investment on FTF will always be in high demand. Therefore, OUT rather than individual students ought to negotiate with commercial banks to create a package for OUT students to access medium term loans (soft loans). Repayment should be after graduation and be given a grace period of say two or more years. The Government and donors could also contribute to the package on a special credit arrangements for enhancing education in Tanzania.

- OUT should have in place sustainable in-service training programmes for members of staff on distance learning, and the programmes should be offered on continuous basis. OUT staff should be encouraged to study the Certificate Courses on Distance Education offered by OUT. Certificates obtained after the courses should be honoured and recognised as one of the incentives for promotions.

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