Assessing Students Perceptions on Intensive Face to Face in Open and Distance Education: A Case of the Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract: *Intensive face to face has been going on as a strategy to blend learning in diploma in primary teachers' education at OUT. However, at The Open University of Tanzania there has been no study that has investigated whether students find it useful or not. Therefore, this study assessed students' perception on Intensive Face to Face sessions. The study specifically aimed at identifying students' perception on quality of interaction between tutors and students and between students on the other hand. It also explored the nature of challenges students meet in attending face to face sessions. Sixty students and ten tutors from the Institute of Continuing Education were consulted for questionnaire and interview administration. Overall, findings show that, students perceived intensive face to face as a resourceful occasion for their studies in terms of receiving clarification from tutors, promoting students' collaboration and acquiring study skills from peers. Students getting psychosocial support from peers were also another reason for students to positively perceive the intensive face to face sessions. Students also expressed concerns about tutors' strategies in identifying and addressing students' academic and psychosocial problems. The study recommends measures to make face to face comprehensive in nature that is, more in-depth research work in regard to the quality of teaching and learning sessions between tutors and students on one hand and between students on the other hand. Further studies on psychosocial support services that can be incorporated in the conduct of face to face for better support of ODL students can be done.*

Keywords: Perception, intensive face to face, distance education

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is any type of a learning system in which teaching is separated from learning, with learners working on their own with the aid of study materials developed by instructors (Mpofu, Mafa and Chimhenga, 2013). Teaching and learning through open and distance learning (ODL) include widening access, reducing some barriers to education, flexibility and the learner friendly approaches to teaching and learning are increasingly acknowledged. Provision of distance education relies heavily on technologies of delivery like print materials, radio broadcasting, television broadcasting, teleconferencing, electronic mail, interactive video, satellite telecommunication and multimedia computer technologies. These technologies are all used to promote students

teacher interactions at distance (Al-fahad, 2009). In addition, distance learning can be combined with face to face meetings (AACSB, 1999).

Face to face is one of the key strategies for teaching and learning in Distance education. Others inc Teaching and learning through face to face in the ODL system involves tutorial, learner-learner interaction, library studies and practical sessions. According to Howell (2003), in addition to knowledge sharing among students, the incorporation of face to face in distance education is important for the ODL institution in managing the educational process, personalizing instruction and addressing challenges which distance learners face. Watson (2008) adds that face to face is also important in supporting and motivating the learners to continue and persevere in their learning. On the other hand, Chen and Jones (2007) argue that face to face tutoring does not provide extra resources that offer learners extra competence and confidence in their learning and gives limited base of sources of information when comparing to E- learning technologies.

The argument of face to face tutoring in distance learning that are drawn from studies have also been reported and discussed in some African countries. The study of Mapfumo and Mwenje (2013) titled "Blending Traditional face to face tutoring with internet based tutoring services" done at Zimbabwe Open University found that majority (97%) of the students had positive perceptions on the benefit derived from the face to face tutorials and all students viewed face to face tutorials as a platforms for sharing study skills and for putting theory into practice. The variations in the students' views about face to face can be attributed to the difference in the contexts such as the levels of technologies and support materials in which the face to face component of teaching and learning through ODL system is provided. In fact, it can also be argued that, the variations in the students' views about the role of face to face component can be attributed to differences in nature of their course programmes. It is against this background this paper presents the case study of perceptions of the intensive face to face for the students taking the Diploma in Primary Teacher Education (DPTE) offered in the Institute of Continuing Education at The Open University of Tanzania. The intensive face to face for the DPTE takes duration of two to three weeks where students had to meet with tutors for face to face tutoring.

STUDY OBJECTIVES
The study specifically aimed to:
- Assess perceptions of students on intensive face to face sessions;
- Identify the challenges the students face during intensive face to face sessions.

METHODOOGY STUDY
Student and tutor participants were selected from the three regional centers in Dar es Salaam. The study involved a total 60 DPTE students. Because the DPTE students - like any other students, are not always at the regional centers and so it would not be easily or possible to meet them at once for study participation, the snowball sampling method was used to obtain the students for participating in completing the questionnaire. The researcher initially identified some students by tracing their contacts (mobiles) from the students records files, contacted them and visited those who were willing to take part in

the study in the primary schools where they work for completing the questionnaire. In addition, the researcher also obtained contacts and location of the respective schools from their peers. Depending on the convenience of the students, some students who completed the questionnaire were interviewed for follow up purpose.

Purposeful sampling was used to select tutors for interview. Ten tutors (10) were selected through random sampling method. Tutors involved are those who ever participated or attending in the intensive face to face for at least twice. The former Director of the ICE - who was also the founder of the DPTE, was interviewed as a key informant. Moreover, the researcher conducted documentary review of key documents such as reports of the intensive face to face for DPTE students for the purpose of complementing the data obtained through student questionnaire and interviews.

The data from the student questionnaires were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). The analysis involved running the frequencies and percentages of the students' responses which were presented in tables and figures. Analysis of the interview data on the other hand involved selecting relevant quotes for complementing information obtained through student questionnaire.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Tutoring and interaction in the face to face
Tutoring in the ODL can be in a form of face to face or internet based. The ODL tutoring demands the tutors to posses communication, motivational and problem solving skills for supporting and responding to learners. In tutoring, effective communication is very important for interpersonal interaction where needs of learners are addressed and learners are able to express themselves. On the other hand motivational skills for a tutor, encourage and develop strategies for coping with difficulties in a learner by incorporating massages in their regular communication. Problem solving is also a skill for the tutors which is important for identifying and providing quality support to students.

In addition to the above, the effectiveness of tutoring depends also on the course design (Verduin and Clarke, 1991; Moore and Kearsley, 1996). A study done by Rosemary and Richard (2013) titled "Tutors Effectiveness: Conception of Students Teachers at Zimbabwe Open University in Masvingo" noted that students viewed positively on tutor preparation of the tutorials, expectations of success for all students, sense of purpose in counseling student, as well as provision of adequate guidance on assignment and exams as being factors for effective tutoring.

Perception on the incorporation of face to face into distance education
According to a study done in Zimbabwe Open University, (Mpofu, Mafa and Chimhenga, 2013) face to face has an advantage in learning, namely: ability of the students to meet with other students for study groups, ability to know tutors, and better achievement in academics. In addition, the authors went on by showing that, face to face has been integrated in the learning programmes in which students are expected to interact, discuss and debate issues or questions they had

identified during their studies under Open and Distance Learning. further, Howell *et al*. (2003), in his study has shown the significance of combining distance education and face to face in bringing the general development of knowledge to students by meeting with their fellow students as well as meeting and interacting with their tutors. However, combination between face to face and distance learning has some challenges. For example,, students at Zimbabwe Open University faced the challenge of living in rural areas that are far from the regional centers where tutorials are conducted. Also they encountered travel cost, accommodation and up keep costs during the tutorial (face to face) sessions (Kurasha, 2003). On the other hand, face to face tutoring is seen as not encouraging learner- centered type of learning compared with internet tutoring, for example with internet tutoring, students feel more at ease in asking any question that they need an answer (Banda aria 2007) in Mapfumo and Mwenje (2013).

Intensive face to face for the DPTE programme at OUT
The Open University of Tanzania is one among the institutions under open and distance learning system in the world. In 1992 The Open University of Tanzania was established as a single mode higher learning institution and started to conduct various academic programmes through ODL leading to awards in certificates, diplomas, bachelors' degrees and postgraduate diplomas and degrees.

The Diploma in Primary Teacher Education is a two years course for the primary teacher which started in 2008/2009 academic year with the support from the Open University of the United Kingdom on Teacher Education for Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA). The DPTE is offered by the Institute of Continuing Education at The Open University of Tanzania in response to the urgent need for quality teachers in Tanzania. The programme integrates theory with practice aiming for professional development and enhancing capability to provide quality primary education. Specifically, the DPTE programme focuses on promoting knowledge and skills in various techniques of interactive learning and teaching that are child friendly and gender sensitive. Additionally, the programme also aims at updating the knowledge of the students' teachers in their teaching subject and enhances their professional competencies (ICE, Student Hand Book, 2010/2011). At first, student teachers went for intensive face to face sessions twice a year and later on intensive face to face was shifted into only one session (November or December) whereby first year and second year students participated in this one session. Currently, centers involved for that activity include**;** Mtwara Teacher College, Bunda Teacher College, Patandi Teachers College and Njombe Focal Development College

Face to face tutoring is said to be intensive in the sense that at first it was done twice a year which included six week in each session - in June and November/ December. During intensive face to face, the four weeks were used for facilitation and the remaining weeks were used for main timed-test and examination session in June and December. Currently, tests are not administered during face to face sessions. The intensive face to face sessions for the DPTE students at OUT is different from face to face sessions for other programmes in the sense that it takes longer duration - of more than two weeks, and it combines tutorial classes unlike in other programmes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Factors for integrating intensive face to face for Students under Diploma in Primary Teacher Education

From the interview with the former Director of the Institute of Continuing Education and the founder of the Diploma in Primary Teacher Education, the factors for combining face to face tutorials and distance education are as follows: First, the majority of primary school teachers have been out of school for long. Thus by running face to face tutorials would make it easier for them to module content. Secondly, in the intensive face to face students are acquiring knowledge on the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) which include course materials and text books that have been designed for use in teaching and learning. The OERs according UNESCO (2011) are defined as materials openly for use by educators and students without accompanying need to pay royalties' or license fees. In additional to that, the former Director of the Institute of Continuing Education reported that; there was a survey which was conducted in 2005 by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with The Open University of Tanzania. They survey found that, only 32 Teacher Training Colleges in Tanzania had computer laboratories then it was the time these students to be oriented with the ICT skills so as to be able to access study material through computer (internet) as open and distance learning system is concern. Therefore, intensive face to face was very important for such type of students to get them familiar with the course, the orientation of a new type of learning that is Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as well as to be oriented in academic arena.

Table 1: Students Perception on the intensive face to face conduct

Perception statement	*Agree (%)*	*Disagree (%)*	*Total (%)*
During face to face there is conducive environment for learning	63.3	36.7	100
Face to face motivates learning	80.0	20.0	100
Face to face improves academic performance	71.7	28.3	100
Time spent for face to face is enough	40.0	60.0	100
Attending face to face contributes to students completing the course	75.0	25.0	100

Students perceived positively running of intensive face to face sessions. Most of the students highly rated the face to face sessions as being motivating to students, increasing the course completion rates and improving academic performance. Motivation has great influence on the success of learning. According to Galusha (1997), motivation positively contributes to academic performance and students completion rates. OUT Facts and Figures (2012/2013), show that from 2008/2009 academic year, enrolment has generally increased as shown in Table 2 in relation to completion rates.

Table 2: **E**nrollment and completion rates of DPTE students

Year	Students enrolled	Students Completed
2008/2009	488	86 (18%)
2009/2010	497	143 (29%)
2010/2011	829	319 (38%)
2011/2012	964	Results still being processed
2012/2013	1003	First year students
Total	3781	548 (14%)

Source: OUT Facts and Figures, 2012/2013

Table 2 shows that the rate of enrollment and the rate of completion have been increasing each year. However, it can be seen that there are more students enrolled each year compared to those who complete the programme (548 (14%)). This may be due to fact that admitted students drop from the programme, or postpone their studies due to social, financial or family issues - even death. Studies done by Zuhairi and others (2013) on the quality assurance of Open and Distance Education at the University of Terbuka, found that ODL learners encounter different problems during their studies including family disruptions, lack of experience of learning through ODL system or perceiving it as irrelevant mode of studying in contrast to the conventional system.

Students' perception of intensive face to face on tutor-student interaction and tutoring

With regard to students' perception on the quality of student-tutor interaction and tutorial sessions, the findings in Table 3 show that most of the students had positive perceptions about face to face in terms of helping them to understand the module contents and perceived their tutors as generally accessible (approachable) for consultation for clarification of difficult areas or obtaining information for reference materials.

Table 3: Students Perception of intensive face to face on tutor- student interaction and tutoring

Perception statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
Tutors are reliable for consultation during face to face session	56.7	43.3	100
Tutors help in understanding instructional materials or module contents	76.7	23.3	100
Tutors clarify difficulty areas from the instructional materials which are asked by the students	78.3	21.7	100
Tutor use participatory methods to involve the students in during teaching and learning	61.7	38.3	100
Tutors discuss with the students about study skills for ODL context	68.3	31.7	100
Respective tutor teach ICT skills as a subject	78.3	21.7	100
Tutors cover module contents during face to face session	56.7	43.3	100

However, the results also show that over a third of the students reported that tutors do not use participatory methods (38.3%) and that tutors do not discuss with them about ODL study skills (31.7%) during face to face sessions. This suggests that a significant number of students viewed the quality of teaching and consultation face to face sessions as not wholly enhancing their learning in terms of their module contents and tutor support in acquiring the study skills.

In a follow up discussion after completing the questionnaire one student commented that:

> Madam, we sometimes wonder for some of the tutors, one can ask in a rush if there is any of us with a problem to discuss, it is sometimes too quick, and am sure some of us go back with unsolved problems, yah it makes face to face partly ineffective (**Student 1**).

Corresponding to this student's comment, the data in Table 3 also shows that a sizable number of students reported that tutors were not reliable for consultation and did not complete the module contents.

> During intensive face to face, we do not teach the whole module of the specific subject, in fact we don't necessarily need to do that ….I expect students to suggest difficulty areas they encountered in their reading (**Tutor_1**)

> The Open and Distance learners have the expectation of being taught each and everything within the two or three weeks, this is difficult to achieve. After all our role is to facilitate and not to spoon-feed them (**Tutor_2**)

The two extracts obtained in the interviews with tutors suggest that tutors expect students to be proactive in identifying difficult areas for discussion and that teaching and learning session during face to face is not for going through the module contents one after another. This tutors' view does not match the students' perception about the teaching role of the tutor during face to face. In their study titled "Blending tradition face to face tutoring with internet based tutoring services, Mapfumo and Mwenje (2013) noted constraints and benefits of ODL for students and tutors in Zimbabwe. When students were asked about their perceptions on benefits derived from face to face tutoring, among the 415 students who were involved in the study, 407(97%) students said they benefited from face to face with tutors. In their study on prospects, challenges and way forward in regard to combining face to face and Open and Distance learning at Zimbabwe Open University, Mpofu, Mafa and Chimhenga (2013) found that in face to face tutorial students do interact, discuss and debate or ask questions they had identified during their studies.

Individual tutoring practices of instructing students in open and distance learning enrich printed-based learning through a variety of practical and interactive exercises (Rouke, 2003 in Rosemary and Richard, 2013). The findings above show that face to face tutoring facilitates an understanding of instructional materials (Fung and Carr, 2010) by making sure difficults areas which most students came across - while studying, are

clarified. Moreover, Yuen (2010) points out that face to face tutoring offers no cooperative activities beyond the classroom and also the face to face tutoring does not provide extra resources that give a learner an extra competencies and confidence (Bandalaria, 2007).

Students' perception of intensive face to face on student-students interaction and support for learning
The results in Table 4 indicate that, overall, students positively perceived attending face to face sessions towards their academic progress in several ways.

Table 4: Students Perceptions of intensive face to face on the student-student interaction and students learning

Perceptions Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
Promotes collaboration among students	78.3	21.7	100
Students get a chance to help each other in adopting new perspective in learning	81.7	18.3	100
Students get a chance each other in finding other sources of materials for learning	80.0	20.0	100
I get help from my fellow students on academic issues	76.7	23.3	100
I build the ability to learn with others for better achievement in learning	81.7	18.3	100
I get network for cooperating with other long distance learners	73.0	27.0	100

Teachers' views were in agreement with students' positive perception of face to face as regards the academic benefits they get through the meetings, interactions and discussions during face to face sessions.

> During face to face students interact by making group discussions ... they learn and make discussions usually in the evening hours after periods or sometimes during evening time (**Tutor 1**).

However, apart from the positive views about face to face as regards student academic support and other benefits - as explained above, follow up interviews with students who had completed the questionnaire also showed that attending face to face served as an opportunity for some students to seek and obtain psychosocial support from their peers which in turn help them to proceed with their studies.

> I am a woman, am a worker, as a woman, during face to face period, I meet other fellow female students. …When we meet we don't discuss only about studies, we chat out problems that affect female students especially us with families. So instead of running away from studies because of family and

> academic pressure, talking to others helps, you can get some advice **(Student 3).**

> I like intensive face to face, it is a one way of exchanging views with others. To me I find even changing the place for studying is useful and I can concentrate. I also become encouraged when I meet other students **(Student** 4).

The two extracts above imply that some students perceive face to face as something useful and positive for their studies because of the psychological and social benefits or satisfactions which they get: such as seeking or getting advice from peers including balancing academic and family life particularly for female students (Student 3) and experiencing face to face providing conducive and motivating environment in terms of social influence to concentrate on their studies.

Challenges of the intensive face to face from students' perspectives
Findings from the student questionnaire and follow up interviews showed that the majority of students (43%) faced challenges in terms of short time for their time allocated for the f2f sessions. The students explained that the time allocated for the face to face was not enough in accomplishing required tasks. The students' concerns about time were also reported by tutors as challenge for face to face sessions.   One   tutor commented that:

> Time for intensive face to face is so limited to cover all the main contents and activities as expected...This is affected by financial problem from the institution **(Tutor 1**).

Other challenges included shortage of print study materials, as reported by students (35%) who participated in this study. In addition to that, 50% of tutors reported that student use of the CDs in accessing material was also a challenge as most of the students come from upcountry regions where the infrastructure for online service - in terms of internet connection, is poor as well as lack of ICT skills.

Challenges on face to face
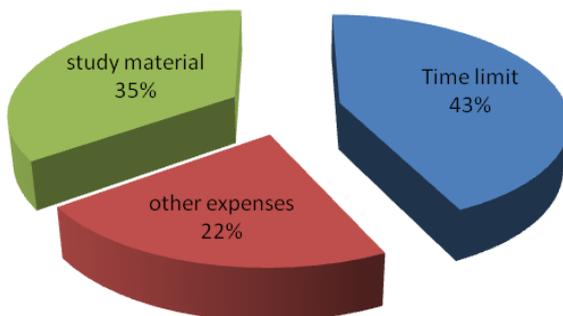
Source: Field Data

Therefore, students are forced to rely on print materials as the major option. Students incur expenses during face-to-face sessions such as travel and accommodation expenses. This was reported by the students (22%) as a challenge. Therefore, the students in the Diploma of Primary Teacher Education (DPTE) progrmme perceive the face to face sessions as an advantage session to them where more teaching and learning takes place; in this case they viewed the three weeks arranged by the institution for f2f as not being enough to accomplish the intended goals.

Furthermore, students reported shortage of time as a challenge (45%). This finding align with that of Mapfumo and Mwenje (2013) from Zimbabwe Open University in which students reported that the time allocated for face to face tutoring was not enough to cover the module contents. In addition, a study done by Islam and Johan (2009) in Bangladesh, found that tutors and learners opined that allocated time for face to face tutoring was not sufficient to cover the syllabus. This implies that, sometimes face to face sessions do not meet the students goals or objectives of the study and hence interrupt the leaning of a distance learner.

CONCLUSION

While most of the existing studies - like that of Mpofu, Mafa and Chimhenga (2013), and those of Howell *et al*. (2003), have reported benefits of face to face to students in terms of academic satisfaction, the results of this study shows that intensive face to face is not only perceived as being beneficial and resourceful to the students in terms of academic but also in terms of providing psychosocial support services. It implies that improving face to face should not only focus on academic aspects, the psychosocial aspects that affect ODL students needs to be taken into account for holistic face to face support services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations should be taken into considerations for improving education provision in Open and Distance Learning for the Open Universities Programme and Diploma in Primary Teacher Education in Particular:

(i)   Each regional center to be equipped with computers and internet. Connection and the tutors or departments should see the possibility to run parallel ICT sessions during face to face on particular ICT skills particularly for centers which cater for students in which majority come from upcountry areas.

(ii)   Because the findings in this study has shown that students viewed face to face positively because it benefits them academically and obtaining some psychosocial support mainly from their peers, OUT counseling Unitcan provide tutors with counseling skills that are relevant to providing support for their ODL students during face to face sessions.

(iii)   The course materials should be reviewed so as to meet the expectation and needs of a learners.

Recommendations for future studies

(i)   The present study has indicated that to some extent the students positively perceive face to face because of the support services and information they get from their peers during face to face sessions. Therefore, a study on students' perception and experiences of face to face in terms of support services as part of the process of implementing face to face sessions is needed.

(ii)   Because the present study has revealed some students' dissatisfaction in regard to strategies which tutors use to identify students' problems and approaches that teachers use to address the students' academic difficulties, therefore, a more in-depth study on the nature of study or learning difficulties students face, the corresponding strategies that teachers use might of interest.

(iii)   This study has also revealed a mismatch between students' and tutors' expectations in terms of the roles of the students and tutors' during face to face sessions in the context of ODL system. A follow up study would be useful for accounting the nature of the disparities, the effects and possible measures to rectify the problems emanating from the mismatch.

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