

Building Competitive Advantage in Academic Programmes in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Institutions: Case of The Open University of Tanzania

Deus D. Ngaruko,
ngarukoddp@gmail.com, ngarukoddp@yahoo.co.uk

Leonard L.W.T Fweja,
leonard.fweja@out.ac.tzleonard.fweja@out.ac.tz

Fauzia M. Mohammed
fauzia.mohamed@out.ac.tz
The Open University of Tanzania

***Abstract:** The determinants that affect competitiveness of ODL Higher Learning Institutions (ODL-HLI) can loosely be lumped up as being either from within the organization itself, or from the market. These include: student enrollment trends, staff development, academic trends, technology trends and economic trends among others. These challenges can be viewed and used as a way of planning ahead; and as important pointers in assessing the institution's performance. The determinants should highlight where the institution is doing well and needs to guard its market competitive advantage as well as indicate where there are weaknesses that need to be addressed in order to gain a competitive advantage of the higher education market. In order to maintain its market position, the paper presses greater importance on investments in ICT enhanced education delivery and sharing systems, improved customer service and greater publicity on all media and in particular through improved visibility and quality of the institution's website. The paper however, suggests that greatest competitive advantage for ODL-HLIs such as OUT's is hidden in its postgraduate programmes. The paper stresses that improved quality and completion rates of research and postgraduate students in business, law, economics, and education and applied natural sciences should become new market niche for ODL-HLIs.*

Key words: competitive advantage, academic programmes, ODL institutions

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, about two decades ago, The Open University of Tanzania- has to a large extent, managed to meet its core objective of its establishment - that is, to provide affordable higher education to as many qualified individuals all over the country and beyond borders, through Open and Distance Mode of study and delivery. During same period the OUT has been in existence, many private (for-profit) higher leaning institutions have also drastically increased and many more are being registered. Irrespective of many structural differences in terms of organisational structure, infrastructural differences, delivery mode and profile of potential students, OUT has offered almost all programmes that one would find in other non ODL institutions. It is

high time now that OUT reflects on how it is fairing in offering quality, affordable and sustainable education in the rather more fragile and fragmented mix of public (non profit) and private (for profit) institutions. This paper tries to highlight some hints on how OUT can do (and can't do) to build competitive advantage in its academic programmes. We did this through documentary reviews - and where necessary, through informal interviews with key stakeholders to complement the documentary reviews. We applied both thematic and systematic content analysis of documents we came across. We, however, do confess that our own experiences as OUT academic staff have played a significant role in some arguments posed in the discussions of the thematic issues presented in this paper. The paper is divided into five main parts. We begin with the introduction in section one followed by the literature review on the concept of competitive advantage as used in market economies in section two. Section three outlines the profile of the providers and users of higher education in Tanzania. The potential determinants of OUT's competitiveness is covered in section four. We finally conclude our paper with an outline of some recommendations in section five.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Theoretical meaning from the economics and business schools

What exactly is competitive advantage? And how, if at all, does it relate to and interact with comparative advantage¹. One possible answer is that it is something to do with more competitive markets: lower barriers to entry or simply a large number of firms may give an industry an advantage in competing with foreign rivals. A different answer is that competitive advantage is just a synonym for absolute advantage: some natural or policy-induced superiority (such as lower taxes or greater labour market flexibility) which reduces in-house operational costs for all functions. A different approach to understanding competitive advantage - exemplified by Porter (1990), is to use a case-study evidence to identify the factors which encourage a nation's firms to achieve high world market shares in their industries. Following Porter's development of the concept of competitive advantage, voluminous literature has mushroomed on the subject. The interested reader is referred to Hoffman (2000) and references cited therein for an excellent survey of developments on competitive advantage. However, there is no unanimity on the meaning and/or the sources of competitive advantage. Porter (1985) emphasizes competitiveness at the level of a firm in terms of competitive strategies such as low cost and/or product differentiation. However, his description of competitiveness do not entail a formal conceptual definition. As noted by Cho (1998), "Despite all discussions on competitiveness however, no clear definition or model has yet been developed. There is even ongoing debate about the "entity" of competitiveness."

¹ In economics, the principle of **comparative advantage** refers to the ability of a party (an individual, a firm, or a country) to produce a particular good or service at a lower opportunity cost than another party. It is the ability to produce a product most efficiently given all the other products that could be produced. It can be contrasted with **absolute advantage** which refers to the ability of a party to produce a particular good at a lower absolute cost than another. Comparative advantage explains how trade can create value for both parties even when one can produce all goods with fewer resources than the other. The net benefits of such an outcome are called *gains from trade*. It is the main concept of the pure theory of international trade.

Hoffman (2000) developed a definition of sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) based on Barney (1991) together with dictionary meanings of each term as “An SCA is a prolonged benefit of implementing some unique value-creating strategy not simultaneously implemented by any current or potential competitors along with the inability to duplicate the benefits of this strategy.” Obviously, this definition emphasizes competitive advantage of a firm based on firm-specific factors and thus ignores macro aspects of comparative advantage.

A number of writers on competitive advantage have focused on the determinants/sources of competitive advantage such as important attributes of the firm: rareness, value, inability to be imitated, and inability to be substituted (Barney, 1991); important potential resources classified as financial, physical, legal, human, organizational, informational, and rational (Hunt and Morgan, 1995); ability in developing superior core competencies in combining their skills and resources (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990); a set of dynamic capabilities—capabilities of possessing and allocating and upgrading distinctive resources (Luo, 2000). A number of studies have also analysed the role of individual factors such as intellectual property rights, trade secrets, data bases, the culture of organization, etc. (Hall, 1993), corporate reputation (Ljubojevic, 2003), diversity in workplace (Lattimer, 2003) and corporate philanthropy (Porter and Kramer, 2002). The central focus of these contributions is still on firm-specific factors of competitive advantage.

Companies gain advantage against the world’s best competitors because of pressure and challenge in such aspects like having strong domestic rivals, aggressive home-based suppliers, and demanding local customers.” (Porter, 1990a). Innovation in every sphere of a firm’s activities plays the central role in awarding competitive advantage to a firm and therefore the industry.

Factor conditions do not refer to the conventional pool of resources, such as land, labour, capital, raw materials, but rather those “created” and continually upgraded such as highly specialized skilled labour, and world-class scientific institutions most suited to the industry’s needs. The demand conditions refer to, not the size, but the character of home market demand- the sophisticated and demanding buyers who can signal the future pattern of demand and can pressure the companies to innovate faster compared to competitors elsewhere. Related and supporting industries that are internationally competitive, and in particular, actively engaged in innovation and upgrading are more promising in creating competitive advantage rather than the mere existence of raw material and/or component producing industries. Firm strategies, structure and rivalry refer to managerial, organizational as well as the existence of competitive forces/challenges from other firms within the industry.

The past decade or so has witnessed a revitalization of distance education as the world of academia. Some institutions have established and many more institutions in Tanzania are currently planning to establish distance learning programmes and online degrees within the next few years. The OUT’s competitive advantage of its academic

programmes will rely heavily on the institution-specific factors such as “created” factors, “created” demand for the products, and internal economies achieved through innovation. In the next section we review the profile of higher learning institutions and assess the position of OUT’s competitive advantage in offering higher education in Tanzania.

The Sustainability of Competitive Advantage

Sustainable competitive advantage creates flexibility and alternatives in the sources and means of production. How does one gain and maintain sustainable competitive advantages?

a) Maintain systems that monitor the environment for change

The number one factor associated with the loss of competitive advantage is change in the forms of:

- *Competitor-induced change*—e.g. new products and technologies
- *Environment-induced change*—e.g. demographic changes or random events
- *Evolutionary vs spontaneous* erosion of competitive advantage.

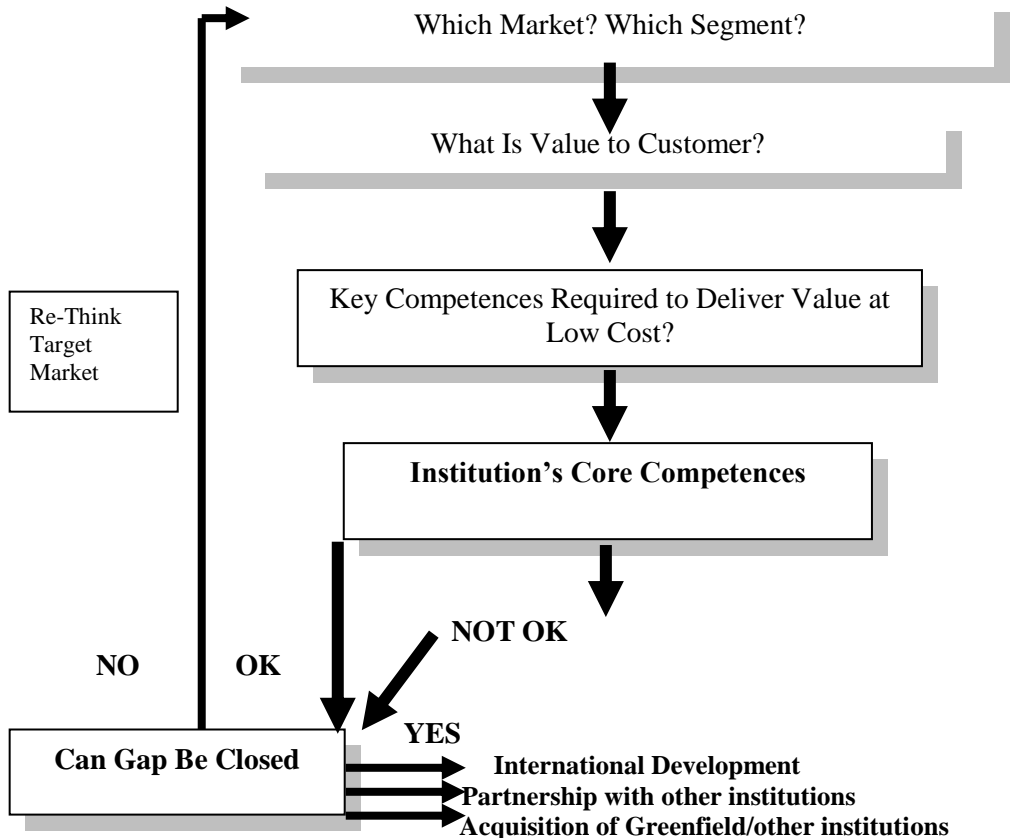


Figure 1: Deriving A University’s Competitive Advantage

Source: Adapted from Devinney (1997)

b) Develop internal systems that adapt to change quickly and effectively

Management is generally adverse to change and most management systems reward consistency. This tends to lead to the slow erosion of competitive advantage. This requires the development of an internal reward structure that values new ideas and rewards experimentation (whether it succeeds or fails)

c) Work at protecting, expanding, and building upon the unique assets and strengths of the university

This requires using the environmental monitors to look for opportunities to expand the institution's expertise or bring new expertise into the institution.

d) Creating and Sustaining Advantage Using Customer Value by Creating the Gap between you and your competitors by clarifying target customers, knowing what target customers value, delivering the value efficiently. Figure 1 illustrates how the university can derive a sustainable position of its market competitive advantage.

THE PROFILE OF HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN TANZANIA

Growth trend

The education system in Tanzania has grown from only one institution of higher education (The University of DSM, by then The University College of Tanganyika) in 1961 to about 30 universities by December 2006, composed of 11 public universities and university colleges and 19 private universities and university colleges (Msolla, *n.d.*). The growing number of higher learning institutions reflects increasing demands for personnel with higher education background from both the public and private sectors. By 1990 when the then Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education was established there were only two public Universities, the University of DSM with Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences as its constituent College and the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Morogoro, and there was no private higher learning institution, however the situation changed by December 2006, universities totaling to 30 (Msolla, *n.d.*). Table 1 summarizes the universities currently registered in the country, their ownership and their current registration status. Other higher learning institutions are registered and accredited under the Nation Council for Technical Education (NACTE), however for the sake of the present paper only universities have been sampled.

Enrolment trend in public and private universities

The then Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MSTHE) published the National Science and Technology Policy for Tanzania in 1996. The formulation of the national policy on science and technology rose out of the recognition that the country needed a suitable policy instrument to guide it in sourcing and applying new technologies and creating endogenous technological capacity. The ministry's vision is to transform Tanzania into a competitive, knowledgeable, scientific and technologically anchored society among the community of Nations (Madikizela, *n.d.*). Therefore many of the higher education institutions in the country in general, have been established in the wake of the implementation of the MSTHE policy to meet the rising market demand

for higher education. This is demonstrated by the rise in enrollment from 23,126 in 2002/2003 to 49,967 in 2006/2007 (Tables 2 and 3).

Although there is great demand among students for places to pursue higher education, the mushrooming of higher education institutions means that there are many options from which students can choose to study. Hence, there is keen competition for the student market, bearing in mind that competitors come in many different types and forms, including public and private higher institutions of learning. From the government's standpoint, the purpose of private institutions is to complement and supplement its efforts to provide higher education.

Table 1: Shows TCU registered Universities, their ownership and current registration status

S/N	Name of Institution	Location	Ownership	Status
1.	University of DSM(UDSM)	DSM, Mlimani Campus	Public	Accredited and Chartered
2.	Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA)	Morogoro	Public	Accredited and Chartered
3.	Open University of Tanzania (OUT)	DSM (with centres in all regions)	Public	Accredited and Chartered
4.	Hubert Kairuki Memorial University (HKMU)	Mikocheni, DSM	Private	Accredited
5.	Tumaini University (TU)	Moshi, Municipal	Private	Accredited
6.	Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS)	Upanga, DSM	Public	Accredited and Chartered
7.	Ardhi University (ARU)	DSM, Survey Area	Public	Accredited and Chartered
8.	University of Dodoma	Dodoma	Public	Full Registration and Chartered
9.	Saint John's University of Tanzania	Dodoma	Private	Full Registration
10.	Stefano Moshi Memorial University	Moshi, Kilimanjaro	Private	Full Registration
11.	Saint Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT)	Nyegezi, Mwanza	Private	Accredited
12.	Mzumbe University (MU)	Mzumbe, Morogoro	Public	Full Registration
13.	State University of Zanzibar (SUZA)	Mnazi Mmoja, Zanzibar	Public	Full Registration
14.	International Medical and Technological University (IMTU)	Mbezi Beach, DSM	Private	Full Registration
15.	Zanzibar University (ZU)	Tunguu, Zanzibar	Private	Full Registration
16.	Aga Khan University- Tanzania Institute of Higher Education (AKU-TIHE)	Upanga, DSM	Private	Full Registration
17.	Mount Meru University (MMU)	Ngaramtoni, Arusha	Private	Full Registration
18.	University of Arusha(UoA)	Usa River, Arusha	Private	Full Registration
19.	Muslim University of Morogoro (MUM)	Msamvu, Morogoro	Private	Full Registration
20.	Teofilo Kisanji University (TEKU)	Mwanjelwa, Mbeya	Private	Full Registration

Source: <http://www.tcu.go.tz/statistics.html>

However, this purpose can only be meaningfully realized if all of the established higher learning institutions can compete well, survive and ultimately prosper. It is from this point of view, that OUT as one of the higher learning institutions (HLIs) is not cushioned from this competition and therefore needs to establish its own competitive advantage strategies. Table 2 and Table 3 summarize the enrollment in public and private universities respectively from 2002/2003 to 2006/2007 academic years. Although OUT stands second in the number of students enrolled after UDSM, there has been a declining trend while the reverse is true for most of the other universities.

Table 2: Students Enrollment in Public Universities 2002/2003 - 2006/2007

No	Institution	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
1	University of DSM	10148	10866	12144	15081	15609
2	Muhimbili Univ.Col.of Health Sc.	1155	1833	2017	2056	2530
3	Univ.Col of Lands & Arch.Studies	884	967	1035	1194	1358
4	Sokoine Univ.Col of Agriculture	2341	2520	2480	2286	2393
5	Open University of Tanzania	5683	10313	12945	9232	7142
6	Mzumbe University	718	1669	2550	3210	3474
7	State University of Zanzibar	56	186	207	260	424
8	Moshi Univ.Col.of Co-op.& Bus.St	349	556	735	866	1104
9	DSM University College (DUCE)	0	0	0	527	1483
10	Mkwawa University College (MUCE)	0	0	0	1006	917
11	CoET	0	0	0	0	2483
12	IJMC	0	0	0	0	301
Total		21334	28910	34113	35718	39218

Source: <http://www.tcu.go.tz/statistics.html>

Table 3: Students Enrolled in Private Universities 2002/2003 - 2006/2007

No	Institution	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
1	St.Augustine Univ.of Tanzania	405	473	657	1344	2665
2	Tumaini Univ.KCMC	192	256	241	220	228
3	Tumaini Univ.Iringa	344	599	698	1308	2042
4	Tumaini Univ.Makumira	141	154	147	271	325
5	Tumaini Univ.DSM	0	126	286	264	1350
6	University of Arusha	185	161	205	154	514
7	Hubert Kairuki Memorial Univ	86	135	191	109	109
8	International Med.& Techn.Univ	0	0	25	172	371
9	Univn Col. of Education Zanzibar	439	438	485	485	1241
10	Zanzibar University	0	291	363	143	155
11	Bugando College of Health Sc	0	10	35	35	155
12	The Aga Khan University	0	88	138	123	187
13	Mount Meru University	0	33	83	164	236
14	Ruaha University College				221	446
15	Muslim University of Morogoro				167	326
16	Teofilo Kisanji University				62	274
17	Mwenge University College				33	125
Total		1792	2764	3554	5275	10749

Source: <http://www.tcu.go.tz/statistics.html>

The mushrooming of HLIs can be one of the reasons, but other factors need be considered as well. While the contribution of both public and private sectors in widening access to higher education can be tacitly acknowledged and explicitly encouraged the challenge remains to individual institution to ensure their sustainability.

Qualification of teaching staff at HLIs

Teaching staff is one of the internal resources of a HLI that is more influential in determining the competitive strategy for the same than an understanding and management of its external environment. It is one of the strategic resources that can make a difference in the performance of an institution. Well qualified staff are central to writing quality course materials, quality delivery and interaction with learners and in offering quality support services (academic, administrative). Table 4 and Table 5 present the number of teaching staff at public and private universities respectively based on their academic qualifications.

As one would expect, the number of academic staff has been increasing yearly. OUT Facts and &Figures (OUT, 2009) indicate that in 2008 OUT had 207 full time academic staff and 189 administrative staff and hence a total of 396 (Table 6). Academic staff account for 52.3% of total OUT workforce. However, apart from the growing number of staff the main challenge that remains is centered on the academic development of most of the staff in all HLIs. By 2005/06 OUT had about 32% Ph.D holders (out of 119 academic staff) and the remaining academic staff were at the levels of bachelor and masters degrees.

Table 4: Teaching staff by Qualifications in Public Universities 2005/2006

No	Institution	Ph.D	Masters	PGD	Bachelors	Others	Grand Total
1	University of DSM	469	216	0	0	0	685
2	Muhimbili Univ. Col. of Health Sc.	63	113	5	33	0	214
3	Univ. Col of Lands & Arch. Studies	41	54	0	22	0	117
4	Sokoine Univ. Col of Agriculture	176	72	0	17	0	265
5	Open University of Tanzania	38	78	0	3	0	119
6	Mzumbe University	25	106	1	49	0	181
7	State University of Zanzibar	8	18	0	2	0	28
8	Moshi Univ. Col. of Co-op. & Bus. St	4	59	0	3	0	66
Total		824	716	6	129		1675

Source: <http://www.tcu.go.tz/statistics.html>

Table 5: Teaching staff by Qualifications in Private universities 2005/2006

No	Institution	Ph.D	Masters	PGD	Bachelors	Others	Grand Total
1	St.Augustine Univ.of Tanzania	11	29	0	7	4	51
2	Tumaini Univ.KCMC	8	27	0	24	1	60
3	Tumaini Univ.Iringa	6	35	0	16	0	57
4	Tumaini Univ.Makumira	9	9	0	0	1	19
5	Tumaini Univ.DSM	1	11	2	3	0	17
6	University of Arusha	2	13	0	1	0	16
7	<i>Hubert Kairuki Memorial Univ</i>	0	0	0	0	0	67
8	International Med.& Techn.Univ	3	20	0	2	3	28
9	Univn Col. of Education Zanzibar	10	7	0	0	0	17
10	Zanzibar University	4	17	0	0	0	21
11	Bugando College of Health Sc	8	11	0	7	0	26
12	The aga Khan University	1	21	0	4	0	26
13	Mount Meru University	6	8	0	4	2	20
14	Ruaha University College	4	8		1	0	13
15	Muslim University of Morogoro	7	15	0	0	0	22
16	Teofilo Kisanji University	4	13	0	7	0	24
17	Mwenge University College	1	6	0	4	2	13
Total		85	250	2	80	13	497

Source: <http://www.tcu.go.tz/statistics.html>

Profile of Academic staff at OUT

There has been a more than two fold increase in the number of academic staff from 76 in 2003 to 207 in 2008. By 2008, 53 academic staff (25.6%) had PhDs, 97 (46.9%) had masters and 57 (27.5) had first degrees. In the same year UDSM had 45.1% of all academic staff with PhDs. Whereas in 2005/06 32% out of 119 academicians had Ph.Ds (Table 4), the 25.6% registered in 2008 as Ph.D holders lead to two assumptions. First, the pace in staff development is declining; and second, the rate of recruitment has picked up tremendously. All in all regardless of either of the two assumptions, OUT's pace in staff development should tally its expansion demands.

Table 6: Academic Staff by Qualification

<i>Year</i>	<i>PhD</i>	<i>Masters</i>	<i>First Degree</i>	<i>Total</i>
2001	18	57	1	76
2002	21	55	0	76
2003	28	48	0	76
2004	33	52	0	85
2005	37	71	1	109
2006	37	82	2	121
2007	50	94	28	172
2008	53	97	57	207
% Total Aca/staff in 2008	25.6	46.9	27.5	100

Source: OUT Facts and Figures (2009)

Student Staff Ratio at OUT & UDSM

Student staff ratio (SSR) is a reasonable indicator of academic staff workload. OUT's SSR is by far very high compared to UDSM. In 2007/08 for example, every OUT academic staff served on average 103 students whereas at UDSM each lecturer was serving only 19 students in the same year.

Table 7: The trend of OUT's Student Staff Ratio: 1994 - 2009

<i>Year</i>	<i>Cumulative No. of enrolled students*</i>	<i>No. of active students**</i>	<i>No. of academic staff</i>			<i>Active Students/ Lecturer (Column 2/column 5)</i>	<i>UDSM***</i>
			<i>Full Time</i>	<i>Full Time equivalent</i>	<i>Total academic Staff</i>		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1994	766	459	1	4	5	92	
1995	1504	902	13	4	17	53	
1996	2833	1700	22	3	25	68	
1997	3811	2287	35	24	59	39	
1998	4809	2885	44	25	69	42	
1999	5689	3413	31	35	66	52	
2000	6738	4043	22	30	52	78	
2001	8645	5187	28	37	65	80	
2002	10710	6426	76	37	113	57	
2003	13238	7942	76	40	116	68	
2004	14577	8454	75	53	128	66	15
<i>Table 7 continues</i>							
2005	17871	10584	117	57	174	61	19
2006	22057	13142	166	39	205	64	17
2007	30319	18191	121	40	161	113	16
2007/08	34274	20564	172	28	200	103	19
2008/09	40099	26459	207	39	246	108	

*Excludes number of students graduated, deregistered and those who died in the respective academic year

**Estimated 60% of total enrolment

*** UDSM F&Fs 2007/08

Source: OUT SRP 2006/07 – 2010/11 and OUT F&Fs (January, 2009)

Implications on OUT's delivery of quality teaching, research, publications and consultancy are obvious given the prevailing SSR. For example, inclusion of tutor comments in the timed tests may be an impossible task to carry out when the workload in terms of marking is exceedingly high. This will obviously affect students learning process and the overall delivery quality.

Degree Programmes Offered by different Universities

Quality of the various academic programmes offered by a HLI is one among several factors that are likely to affect the quality of education for the students, the marketability of the institution and therefore its competitive advantage among a set of competing HLI that utilize similar resources or attract similar clients, and that produce similar products and services. Competitive academic programmes are those which are demand driven, which are developed by first identifying the target customers and what they value and deliver the value efficiently. Based on the dynamism in the job market the current trend of most employers and students who are customers of the HLI products, their interests are geared towards subject specific degree programmes (verbal communication). Such programmes attract students with several professional interests resulting into market success. According to Lambat (2007), market success for a HEI is reflected in terms of the overall growth in student enrollments, favourable financial benefits from student recruitment, excess demand for places of study, and a level of optimism for growth in student enrollment for the next academic years.

A list of various degree programmes offered in some of the TCU's HLI which are also offered in many other non TCU institutions within the country are presented in Appendix 1. The list reveals that most of the degree programmes offered by the OUT are too general and do not reflect the area of professionalism / specialization of a student e.g. Home Economics and Human Nutrition which is a subject specific degree programme does not stand on its own but falls under BSc general. The nomenclature of this sort is likely to affect the marketability of the various programmes and also lowers the options available to students from which to choose.

DETERMINANTS OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES OF OUT'S ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES

An article in the distance-learning journal by Howell, et al (2003) identifies thirty-two trends affecting distance education at present. The OUT can identify with some of the issues mentioned in this article. On student enrollment trends, they argue that the current higher education infrastructure promotes distance education programmes. While the OUT enjoyed market monopoly as the only provider of distance education in Tanzania, this advantage is threatened by the entrance into the market of higher learning institutions which also predominantly offer distance learning. This move is in response to the growing market demand that has led to the establishment of institutions such as Kampala International University (KIU) which also offers distance education programmes. The Open University needs to analyze its competitors' strategies and do SWOT analysis in order to design proper marketing strategies that will ensure it of a place in the competitive market. Other institutions of higher learning now offer scalable

distance education models on top of their face to face teaching just to satisfy the growing demand for the service. OUT needs to develop mechanisms that retain their students. The University also needs to create alternative programmes that will sustain it when student enrollments are low.

Demand Driven Courses

More distance learners are looking for flexible programme structures that accommodate their job and family responsibilities (Howell *et al.*, 2003; Devinney, 1997). These market demands are forcing OUT to plan and organize their academic programmes beyond the traditional demographic and economic predictions. The university's competitive advantage here includes courses tailored for local conditions. The introduction of the post graduate programmes such as the MCED, MBA, LLM (IT &T), Master of Social Work, demand driven short courses as well as the licensed teacher programme are examples of programmes that cater for learners who are more autonomous, self-directed with goal and relevancy oriented who need to know the rational of what they are learning. Consequently the mode of instruction is changing from transmission model to become more learner-centered, non-linear and self directed; constructivist, socio-cultural and metacognitive models (Eckert, 2003). In view of striving to wards a competitive advantage, OUT needs to create more demand driven, efficiently run academic programmes that cater for the current market trends.

Human Resource Capacity Development and Retention

OUT needs to analyze and manage both its external and internal resources and environment in order to position itself in a situation that enables it to gain and sustain a competitive advantage and achieve market success. To gain competitive advantage in this angle it needs to improve its staff capacity as they adapt new roles. As has already been earlier mentioned, the staff/student ratio at OUT is already very high- with every academic staff on average serving 103 students. Staff availability, motivation, retention and skills are other constraints affecting The Open University of Tanzania academic programmes competitive advantage. Howell, Williams and Lindsay (2003) argue that staff members of distance education require specialized skills and strategies in order to adapt to the changing clientele. 'They need to be facilitators, teachers, organizers, graders, mentors, role models, counselors, coaches, supervisors, problem solvers and liaison on top of administrative responsibilities'(ibid:5). The new roles coupled with the high staff/student ratio, challenges the traditional staff roles. This scenario can result in staff dissatisfaction, isolation, demands for reduced workload, increased compensation and even resignation. Some departments have a low number of staff which tremendously increases workload pressure hence resulting in inadequately run academic programmes.

Marketing Strategy and Use of Technology

The Open University can attain sustainable competitive advantage in the market if there are strategies that continuously monitor the environment for change that could either be competitor-induced, environment-induced or even spontaneous (Devinney, 1997). There are constraints both within the organization and in the market that must be overcome to attain this competitive advantage. Organization constraints such as technology use (IT,

E-learning, internet connectivity) can affect Open University's competitive advantage. The development and advancement of technology is a challenge facing distance education programmes (West, 1999). Computers are becoming faster and cheaper, fax, mobile phones, videoconferencing, and interactive television are becoming more resourceful. The growing use of the internet and unlimited information encourages more online courses hence posing a challenge to OUT's mode of using study materials as the main source of information. Likewise, technological advancement also threatens not only the employment of staff that are not computer literate, but also calls for continuous training and retraining of its staff so as to keep abreast with the changing technological advancement. OUT may not be in a position of competitive advantage at present but stands a good chance of achieving this if it makes use of its wide network of regional centers that are spread out all over Tanzania. Developing this internal system to adapt to change quickly and effectively will deter it from a process of slow erosion of this competitive advantage it has over other institutions striving towards distance education programmes, but lack a structure like that of OUT. Networking is an important factor which the University must emphasize on in order to achieve the competitive advantage. It will help the University to build a relationship both locally and internationally with different universities, stakeholders and donors who might result in acquiring projects, knowledge, experience and funds.

Improved Infrastructural Facilities

The University infrastructural facility is another constraint which needs to be addressed; the nature and quality of services available in the regional centers may act as a hindrance to enrollment rates for example inaccessible, un-user friendly facilities can deter existing and potential students from benefiting from the academic programmes offered by the University. Renting office facilities in certain areas may affect the brand recognition of the University which is an important aspect of indirect marketing.

Affordability

The provision of cheaply affordable quality academic programmes is another competitive advantage that OUT has in the higher education market at the moment. The current economic trends of fewer resources and rising cost of higher education have prompted residential universities to consider distance learning as a possible solution to the dilemma of rising university and enrollment costs (Howell *et al.*, 2003; Devinney, 1997). This scenario poses a challenge to OUT's competitive advantage hence it should strive to sustain its dominance in the market. To achieve this, OUT should improve its learning environment by continuing to provide cheap affordable education programmes that support fundamental skills and knowledge of its customers lest market based strategies take hold and create opportunities for competitors to fill the supply gap. Management commitment is another very important aspect which The Open University must address if it needs to attain and sustain competitive advantage. The management needs to make correct and timely decisions to ensure operations are not affected.

Customer Service

The last but not least determinant of OUT's competitive advantage is the quality of customer service. This is the heart of all OUT organization constraints. It is very important to put students first and deliver efficient value to our customers. The quality of service has a direct relationship with performance, and satisfaction. Hence it is the responsibility of everyone at The Open University including the supporting staff to ensure that our customers receive the best care and treatment available in order to the University's academic programmes, reputation and brand name of offering quality open and distance education, research and public service for sustainable and equitable social economic development of Tanzania and the rest of Africa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The design and nomenclature of degree programmes have great impact on the attraction of students to join any particular institution. Degree programmes that are specifically designed to meet the needs of employers and employees and whose nomenclature reflects its specificity without the need of going into the details of the curriculum will create a niche for OUT in this aspect. Thus, OUT should aim at such kind of designated degree programmes in order to offer a variety of quality accelerated degree programmes specifically focusing on reinforcing its competitive advantage. Nomenclature of degree programmes should reflect the prevailing market needs. For instance, the case of MSc CED changing to MCED has had negative impact as some students and student employers were disappointed by the name change since many had been attracted by the former name. As a result there are some who withdrew from the programme and looked for enrollment elsewhere. At OUT there has been a tendency to refer to the commonly used degree names by its predecessor, UDSM, irrespective of the real market needs. Traditional names like LLB, BA (General), BBA (General), MAs, MBAs etc, could change their names to reflect prevailing market forces without necessarily jeopardizing the quality of outputs. Mzumbe University has used this approach whereby many of the would be BA (General) students studying economics at OUT have moved to Mzumbe University just because the name of the programme reads BSc Economics (personal communication with students).

OUT started with a competitive edge (ODL delivery mode) that was not ICT enhanced, however in the current competitive environment, OUT must eventually employ some form of leading edge technology to establish its ability to perform key strategic actions necessary for survival in the higher education industry. Establishing a distinctive competence in innovative ICT enhanced knowledge delivery and sharing can be important to maximizing the growth potential of OUT. If OUT is generally perceived as successful at using new technology as a way of obtaining a sustainable competitive advantage, it can readily attract both capital and customers. Technology is an important factor in achieving competitive advantage but is worthless without the knowledge and talent of the operators using it. Therefore attention should also be given to the human resource which is crucial to making a difference in the performance of OUT and in providing the essential ingredient for its competitive advantage.

One of the most important indicators of the quality of universities in the world is the competition rate for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes but more so for postgraduate programmes. OUT needs to make a scrupulous move towards improving its record keeping system especially students academic records as well as fast-tracking research supervision for postgraduate students. This will allow for an increased completion rate among students who often have problems with marks and research supervision which often delay their graduation. When many complete their courses of study within agreeable time frame, many more will be encouraged to join the University hence increasing both enrollment and completion rates. This will also instill OUT's market share in attracting highly qualified students as well as other stakeholder like employers, donors, partners in course delivery, research grants etc.

OUT needs to embark on an aggressive marketing mechanism of its academic programmes. It should particularly emphasize on its popular post-graduate academic programmes that seem to be competing well in the present market conditions. It should also seek mechanisms that will market other less attractive academic programmes with a view of making them popular as well as more competitive. OUT needs to use various means to market itself such as brochures, fliers, news bulletins, TV and Radio programmes and even introduce an annual open day where members of the public are welcome to learn as much as they can about OUT and its programmes and abilities. This can act as an eye opener to many who either are unaware of OUT or have vaguely heard about it.

The visibility and quality of OUT website must be maintained high. In the most recent ranking of the 100 Universities in Africa includes UDSM (10th) and SUA (45th) as the only Universities from Tanzania in that group¹³. Similar web ranking of the world universities in 2010 by Webometrics.com¹⁴ based on quality of the visibility done in 2010 did not have a mention of OUT in the list in which UDSM was placed 24th and SUA 82nd in the top 100 universities in Africa. The power of the internet as an advertising tool in this day and age era is inevitable for OUT's programmes and activities to be recognized by the world of academia. The website must also clearly show the research and consultancy activities undertaken and those still going on, profile of academic staff and where possible staff VCs and individual web pages should be easily accessible on the internet.

Lastly but not least, it is our view that OUT's emerging market niche in higher education should be postgraduate and research degree programmes in applied natural and social sciences, law, economics and business administration, and education. This unique and important positioning strategy will certainly expand our market and locates our programmes within the central mission of OUT. The strategy has strength because it builds on upon the good things OUT is known for: enabling one to work while studying. This is mainly due to OUT's potential to attract many postgraduate students whose work

¹³ <http://www.4icu.org/topAfrica/>

¹⁴ <http://www.webometrics.info/index.html>

schedules cannot give room for timed tests and examinations at some point in time. It should be pointed out that it is not our intention to undermine emphasis on undergraduate programmes, but experience has shown that conventional universities are more competitive than OUT in effective undergraduate teaching for fresh young “A” level leavers in the country. However, failure to overcome some challenges outlined in this paper such as manpower development and attractive staff retention schemes may pose significant threats that may severely limit to expand into new market segments.

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Appendix 1: List of undergraduate degree programmes in Selected Universities

PROGRAMMEME	UDSM	SUA	OUT	KCMC	Mzumbe
B.A. in Archaeology (B.A. Archae.)	√				
B.A. in Culture and Heritage (B.A. Cult. & Her.)	√				
B.A. in Fine and Performing Arts (B.A. FPA)	√				
B.A. in Language Studies (B.A. L. Studies)	√				
B.A. in Literature and Language (B.A. Lit. & Lang.)	√				
B.A. in History (B.A. Hist.)	√				
B.A. in History and Archaeology (B.A. Hist. & Archae.)	√				
B.A. in Economics (B.A. Econ.)	√				
B.A. in Economics and Geography (B.A. Econ. & Geog.)	√				
B.A. in Economics and Sociology (B.A. Econ. & Soc.)	√				
B.A. in Economics and Statistics (B.A. Econ. & Stat.)	√				
B.A. in Geography and Archaeology (B.A. Geog. & Archae.)	√				
B.A. in Geography and Environmental Studies (B.A. GES)	√				
B.A. in Geography and Statistics (B.A. Geog. & Stat.)	√				
B.A. in History and Political Science (B.A. Hist. & PS)	√				
B.A. in Political Science and Economics (B.A. PS & Econ.)	√				
B.A. in Political Science and a Language e.g. French	√				

PROGRAMMEME	UDSM	SUA	OUT	KCMC	Mzumbe
(B.A. PS & L)					
B.A. in Political Science and Philosophy (B.A. PS & Phil.)	√				
B.A. in Political Science and Public Administration (B.A. PS & PA)	√				
B.A. in Political Science and Sociology (B.A. PS & Soc.)	√				
B.A. in Sociology (B.A. Soc.)	√				
B.A. in Sociology and Philosophy (B.A. Soc. & Phil.)	√				
B.A. in Statistics (B.A. Stat.)	√				
B.A. with Education (B.A. Ed.)	√		√		
B.A. in Journalism (B.A. Journ)	√				

Appendix 1 continues

B.A. in Mass Communication (B.A. MC)	√				
B.A. in Public Relations and Advertising (B.A. PRA)	√				
B.A			√		
B.A Tourism studies			√		
B. Com. in Accounting (B.Com. Acc.)	√				
B. Com. in Banking and Financial Services (B.Com. BFS)	√				
B. Com. in Finance (B.Com. Finance)	√				
B. Com. in Human Resources Management (B.Com. HRM)	√				
B. Com. in Marketing (B.Com. Market.)	√				
B. Com. in Tourism and Hospitality Management (B.Com. THM)	√				
B. Com			√		
B.Com with Education (B.Com.Ed)			√		
B. Business Administration (BBA)			√		
B. Business Administration with Education (BBA. Ed)			√		
B.Ed. in Adult and Community Education (B.Ed. ACE)	√				
B.Ed. in Commerce (B.Ed. Com.)	√				
B.Ed. in Commerce and Accounting					√
B.Ed. in Language and Management					√
B.Ed. in Early Childhood Education (B.Ed. ECE)	√				
B.Ed. in Physical Education and Sport Sciences (B.Ed. PESS)	√				
B.Ed. in Psychology (B.Ed. Psych.)	√				
B.Ed. in Economics and mathematics (BEEM)					√
BSc. in Applied Statistics					√
BSc. in Production and Operations Management (BSc. POM)					√
B.Sc. in Chemical and Process Engineering (B.Sc. CPE)	√				
B.Sc. in Civil and Structural Engineering (B.Sc. CSE)	√				
B.Sc. in Civil and Transportation Engineering (B.Sc. CTE)	√				

PROGRAMMEME	UDSM	SUA	OUT	KCMC	Mzumbe
B.Sc. in Civil and Water Resources Engineering (B.Sc. CWE)	√				
B.Sc. in Computer Eng. and Information Technology (B.Sc. Comp. Eng. & IT)	√				
B.Sc. Information & Communication Technology (B.Sc. ICT)			√		
B.Sc. Information & Communication Technology Management (B.Sc. ICTM)					√
B.Sc. in Electrical Engineering (B.Sc. Electr. Eng.)	√				
B.Sc. in Electrical Power Engineering (B.Sc. Electr. Power. Eng.)	√				
B.Sc. in Electro-Mechanical Engineering (B.Sc. Electromech. Eng.)	√				
B.Sc. in Food and Biochemical Engineering (B.Sc. Food & Bio. Eng.)	√				
B.Sc. in Industrial Engineering and Management (B.Sc. Ind. Eng. & Mngt)	√				
B.Sc. in Mechanical and Industrial Engineering (B.Sc. Mech. & Ind. Eng.)	√				
B.Sc. in Mineral Processing Engineering (B.Sc. Min. Process Eng.)	√				
B.Sc. in Mining Engineering (B.Sc. Mining Eng.)	√				
B.Sc. in Telecommunications Engineering (B.Sc. Telecom. Eng.)	√				
Bachelor of Laws (LL.B)	√				√
B.A. in Law Enforcement (BALE)	√				
B.Sc. in Aquatic Environmental Sci and Conservation (B.Sc. AES & Conserv.)	√				
B.Sc. in Fisheries and Aquaculture (B.Sc. Fish. & Aquac.)	√				
B.Sc. in Applied Zoology (B.Sc. Ap. Zool.)	√				
B.Sc. in Botanical Sciences (B.Sc. Bot. Sc.)	√				
B.Sc. in Chemistry (B.Sc. Chemistry)	√				
B.Sc. in Geology (B.Sc. Geol.)	√				
B.Sc. with Geology (B.Sc. with Geol.)	√				
B.Sc. in Engineering Geology (B.Sc. Eng. Geol.)	√				
B.Sc. General (B.Sc. Gen.)	√				
B.Sc. in Microbiology (B.Sc. Microbiology)	√				
B.Sc. in Molecular Biology and Biotechnology (B.Sc. MBB)	√				
B.Sc. in Wildlife Science and Conservation (B.Sc. Wildlife)	√				
B.Sc. with Education (B.Sc. Ed.)	√		√		
B.Sc. in Computer Science (B.Sc. Comp. Sc.)	√				
B.Sc. with Computer Science (B.Sc. with Comp. Sc.)	√				
B.Sc. in Electronic Science and Communication (B.Sc. ESC)	√				
B.A. with Education (B.A. Ed.)	√				
B.Ed. in Arts (B.Ed. Arts)	√				
B.Ed. in Science (B.Ed. Sc.)	√				
B.Sc. with Education (B.Sc. Ed.)	√	√			

PROGRAMMEME	UDSM	SUA	OUT	KCMC	Mzumbe
B.A. with Education (B.A. Ed.)	√				
B.Ed. in Arts (B.Ed. Arts)	√				
B.Ed. in Science (B.Ed. Sc.)	√				
B.Sc. Agriculture General		√			
B.Sc. (Horticulture)		√			
B.Sc. Animal Science		√			
B.Sc. Range Management		√			
B.Sc. Agronomy		√			
<i>Appendix 1 continues</i>					
B.Sc. Agricultural Economics And Agribusiness		√			
B.Sc. Agricultural Education And Extension		√			
B.Sc. Food Science And Technology		√			
B.Sc. Home Economics And Human Nutrition		√			
B.Sc. Agricultural Engineering		√			
B.Sc. Aquaculture		√			
B.Sc. Forestry		√			
B.Sc. Wildlife Management		√			
Bachelor Of Tourism Management		√			
Bachelor Of Veterinary Medicine		√			
Bachelor Of Science In Biotech And Laboratory Sciences		√			
B.Sc. Environmental Sciences And Management		√			
B.Sc. Informatics		√			
<i>B.Sc. (Education)</i>		√			
Bachelor Of Arts In Rural Development		√			
Doctor of Medicine (MD)				√	
Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSc.N)				√	
Bachelor of Science in Prosthetics and Orthotics				√	
Bachelor of Science in Physiotherapy				√	
Bachelor of Science in Health Laboratory Sciences				√	
BSc. Economics (Economic Policy and Planning)					√
BSc. Economics (Project Planning and Mngt)					√
BSc. Economics (Population and Development)					√
Bachelor of Public Administration (Human Resource Mngt)					√
Bachelor of Public Administration (Public Service Mngt)					√
Bachelor of Public Administration (Local Gvt Mngt)					√
Bachelor of Public Administration (Health Services Mngt)					√
Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing Mngt)					√
Bachelor of Business Administration (Entrepreneurship Dvpt)					√
Bachelor of Business Administration (Production and Logistic Mngt)					√
Bachelor of Accounting and Finance (Business Accounting & Finance)					√
Bachelor of Accounting and Finance (Local Gvt Accounting & Finance)					√
Bachelor of Acc and Finance (Public Sector Acc, Fin and Investigation)					√