



Determining factors influencing learners' decisions to develop their professionals through Open and Distance Learning at the learning centres.

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is becoming increasingly popular as an alternative mode of education in Tanzania, especially among the adult working class who wish to advance their professions without attending full-time classes. This quantitative study aims to determine the factors that influence learners to pursue professional development through ODL at learning centres. The study involved 576 continuing and graduated diploma learners from the Institute of Adult Education in Mbeya, Ruvuma, and Dar es Salaam. A closed questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents. Key descriptive statistics were used, including tables, frequencies, and percentages, to analyse and present the findings using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 23). The findings reveal that respondents' socioeconomic status, age, gender, marital status, and region significantly influence their decision to study through the ODL mode. Considering the needs and preferences of learners regarding this mode of learning is crucial. This consideration will encourage more learners to use open and distance learning, which will increase enrolment and lower dropout rates. The study recommends that the provision of good administrative support services and well-equipped offices at the learning centres will motivate learners' choices toward the ODL mode of learning. Besides, adequate and qualified staff should be employed in the main offices at the regional centres to promote efficient delivery of services to ODL learners

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Professional development, Learning centres, Institute of Adult Education (IAE)

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1. Introduction

1.1. *Introducing the problem*

Education serves as a transformative tool in people's lives by enabling the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs (United Nations, 2015). Education plays a crucial role in ensuring cultural continuity within society, passing on traditions and knowledge from one generation to the next. Additionally, education prepares individuals to manage available resources for the development of the country (Baris & Hasan, 2019). The development of science and technology requires new skills and knowledge that were not acquired in initial or basic education, particularly for the working class. To improve their skills and knowledge, the working class needed alternative education (Valdes et al., 2018). As an alternative to traditional classroom-based instruction, open and distance learning (ODL) has gained popularity in recent years. ODL provides flexible and accessible education to learners, especially those in the working adult class who are unable to attend classes full-time (Ilonga, 2020).

Open and distance learning (ODL) has a long history. It began in the USA in the 1800s and spread to other countries, such as the UK in 1840, China in 1940, and Africa in 1969. In East Africa, taking Tanzania as an example, ODL started in the 1970s with the founding of the Institute of Adult Education in 1975, established as a distance learning institution for the adult working class under Parliament Act 12 (URT, 2009). Over the years, distance education has grown in Tanzania due to the development of ODL programs by various educational institutions. Many learning institutions now offer this mode of learning at different levels, including tertiary. The development of science and technology, as well as the shifts in societal and economic dynamics, facilitated the ODL usage for many people (Kannadhasan, 2020). ODL has become increasingly popular worldwide, despite its benefits and drawbacks. Many nations continue to offer these programs to provide education to those unable to attend traditional classrooms (Upadhayaya, 2021).

Despite ODL's increasing popularity, several factors have encouraged learners to register for professional development courses through this mode of learning. Individuals are influenced by ODL in various ways, resulting in diverse attitudes and views about using ODL for professional development at learning centres (Mercz-Madarassy, 2023). Given the benefits and challenges that ODL presents, it is critical to recognize and investigate how these factors interact to affect learners' choices and persuade them to stick with this method of instruction. Learners join ODL programs for a variety of reasons, and the program's success largely depends on their perceptions. Therefore, it is essential to understand the factors that motivate their participation in ODL programs as well as the obstacles they face in achieving their educational goals. The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that motivate learners to pursue professional

development through ODL at learning centres, thereby improving the general educational environment. This study focuses on determining the key factors influencing learners' decisions to study through ODL at learning centres.

1.2. Describe relevant scholarship

The review of prior studies on open and distance learning identified different factors that influence learners to study through open and distance learning at the learning centres. In Manila, Alvarez et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine how secondary school teachers perceived their professional development using ODL. Findings revealed the efficiency of ODL programs in terms of both time and cost motivated them, and it was also shown that teachers like Open and Distance Learning (ODL) because of its accessibility, which allows them to manage their families and other responsibilities while studying in their communities. In India, Singh (2018) conducted a study on teachers' perceptions and preparedness for ongoing professional development. Findings revealed positive perceptions toward the use of open and distance learning for continuous professional development, particularly flexibility and accessibility. However, there were genuine concerns about the operational issues in open and distance learning.

In Kenya, Wakahiu and Kangethe (2014) conducted a survey to explore the opinions, experiences, and effectiveness of online distance learning for religious education among African women. Results showed that most respondents had a positive opinion of the program, and participants saw it as a way to help people who don't have time to attend normal, full-time study sessions. Participants in the ODL program can also study according to their timetable and speed. Also in Tanzania, Mnyanyi and Bwette (2018) conducted a study titled "Open and Distance Learning for Professional Development in Third World Countries" at the Open University of Tanzania. Findings revealed that the majority of the learners preferred to use ODL due to its flexibility; however, learners were challenged by the problems of social barriers; they were worried about how they were going to form a study group and interact among themselves during their studies. Based on the reviewed literature, previous studies have primarily focused on the general factors that influence learners to develop their professional skills through ODL. However, none have specifically addressed the factors influencing learners to pursue professional development at individual learning centres based on their age, gender, marital status, and region.

1.3. Describing the theoretical framework

This study is guided by the Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), developed by Moore (1997). TDT serves as the foundation for understanding the factors that influence learners to pursue open and distance learning at learning centres. According to Moore, ODL is an educational strategy that offers flexibility in terms of time, place, and pace of

learning, allowing learners to study independently from any location. ODL is perceived by Moore as an educational strategy that provides flexibility in terms of time, place, and pace of learning, allowing learners to study independently from any location.

According to Moore, three variables; dialogue, structure, and the learner's autonomy caused a communication and psychological space between the facilitators and the learners in distance learning known as transactional distance. Regardless of physical distance, Moore underlined the significance of lowering the transactional distance between learners and teachers through efficient communication and interaction. If ODL's classes were tailored to each learner's needs and they were actively involved in the material, he thinks it would be more effective and inspire more learners.

Moore's Transactional Distance Theory is appropriate for this study because it offers a framework and educational structure for comprehending the variables that motivate learners to pursue distance learning (Garrison, 2000). Also, it serves as a reminder to ODL institutions and facilitators of the methods and resources available to reduce transactional distance between learners. Furthermore, the theory encourages facilitators to use the teaching and learning practices that demand supervision and facilitation in order to provide greater autonomy in learners learning.

2. Method

This study aimed to determine the factors that influenced learners to develop their professional skills through open and distance learning at the learning centres. To achieve this, a quantitative research approach was used. The quantitative method allowed the researcher to collect data from a large sample size and identify patterns, relationships, and trends (Leavy, 2017).

2.1. Research design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which was found to be appropriate because it allowed the collection of data on behaviours, attitudes, opinions, and characteristics of a population, making it widely used (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

2.2. Research site

The study focused on diploma learners enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs at the Institute of Adult Education learning centres in the Dar es Salaam, Mbeya, and Ruvuma regions of Tanzania. The diploma program was deliberately chosen due to its widespread popularity across mainland Tanzania within the Institute of Adult Education's curriculum offerings. The selection of all learning centres found in Dar es Salaam, Mbeya, and Ruvuma was purposeful. For example, Dar es Salaam, serving as the site of the main campus and head office, represents a central educational hub. Mbeya

was selected because it is one of the regional centres with a significant learner population, providing a comprehensive understanding of ODL dynamics. Ruvuma, on the other hand, was chosen for its numerous learning centres with relatively fewer learners. These regional variations were carefully considered to identify important aspects regarding the contextual factors that influence learners to study through ODL at the learning centres.

2.3. Population and sampling procedures

A total of 576 continuing and graduated learners were randomly drawn as a sample size from three purposively selected ODL regional centres (Mbeya, Dar es Salaam, and Ruvuma). Multistage sampling was used to obtain a sample. Multistage sampling allowed researchers to divide the population into clusters/groups (Cohen et al., 2018). Multistage sampling was chosen because it enabled the collection of a large amount of data from a diverse sampled population while maintaining a reasonable level of accuracy. Several steps were involved in selecting the samples. For example, in step one, the sample was selected based on the criteria of the learning centres; in step two, learners in the centres were selected based on the year of study; in step three, learners were divided in a stratum (stratified sampling) in catering for gender (male and female); and lastly, the learners were selected randomly.

2.4. Data collection method

The study employed a closed questionnaire with multiple-choice questions to collect data on the factors influencing learners' choice of open and distance learning, using a 3-point Likert scale. The closed questionnaire was deemed appropriate for this study because it facilitated the researcher in gathering specific, quantifiable data (Cresswell, 2012).

2.5. Data analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentages) with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 23), and Pearson's Chi-Square tests were employed with a significance level set at $P < 0.05$. The Chi-Square test was considered valuable for analysing categorical data and determining significant associations between variables.

3. Results

Learners were provided with various statements regarding the factors that influence them to study through open and distance learning for their professional development at the learning centres. A three-point Likert scale was used for their responses: U =

Unlikely (indicates not a choice), N = Neutral (either a choice or not), and L= Likely (indicates that it is a choice). Respondents were provided with a table listing several statements, and they were asked to make their choices as indicated in Tables of results.

3.1. Factors influencing learners to develop their professional through open and distance learning at the learning centres.

In determining the factors influencing learners to develop their professional through open and distance learning at the learning centres, five factors were provided by the respondents. These factors are socio-economic factors, gender factors, marital status factors, age factors, and regional factors. These results are detailed and presented in the subsections below.

Socioeconomic factors.

Table 1 presents data from continuing and graduated learners regarding the influence of socioeconomic factors on their professional development through open and distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education learning centres

Table 1. Socioeconomic factors influencing learners to study through ODL at the learning centers.

Socio-economic factors	L		N		U		P-value
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%	
Admission criteria	435	75.5	72	12.5	69	11.9	.461
Distance to regional centres	331	57.4	147	25.5	98	17.0	.013
Cost-effectiveness compared to other educational modes in Tanzania	389	67.7	136	24.2	51	8.0	.022
Pressures from co-workers	342	59.3	142	24.6	92	15.9	.515
Valuation by community members	358	62.3	120	20.8	97	168	.369
Affordability in terms of time	381	66.1	112	19.4	83	14.4	.100
Encourage and favour the working class	396	68.7	123	21.3	57	9.8	.003
Ability to study while performing societal responsibilities	427	74.1	99	17.1	50	8.6	.121
The program considers different age groups	445	77.2	85	14.7	46	7.9	.464

Field data 2023 Keys. Likely (L), Neutral (N), Unlikely (U), f = Frequency, % = Percent

Data in Table 1 shows that learners were influenced to pursue their professions through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) due to several factors. These factors are such

as the cost-effectiveness of ODL because its P-value is 0.01, distance to the regional centres because its P-value is 0.02, and the program encourages and favours the working class because its P-value is 0.00. These factors are critical because their respective P-values are below 0.05. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between the learner's decision to choose ODL and distance to the regional centres, ODL and cost-effectiveness, and ODL and encouragement/favouring of the working class.

3.1.1. Gender factors

Table 2 provides information on the gender factors that influenced the professional development at the Institute of Adult Education's learning centers through Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

Table 2. Gender factors influencing learners to study through ODL at the learning center.

Factors	Gender	L		N		U		P value
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	
Admission criteria	M	163	75.4	26	12.0	27	12.4	.997
	F	272	75.0	46	12.7	42	11.6	
Distance to regional centres	M	129	59.6	48	22.2	39	18.3	.565
	F	202	56.0	99	27.5	59	16.3	
Cost-effectiveness compared to other educational modes in Tanzania	M	146	67.5	40	18.5	30	13.8	.030
	F	243	67.5	92	25.5	25	6.9	
Pressures from co-workers	M	130	60.1	56	25.9	30	13.8	.246
	F	212	58.8	86	23.8	62	17.1	
Valuation by community members	M	128	59.1	45	20.8	46	19.8	.550
	F	231	64.1	75	20.8	54	14.9	
Affordability in terms of time	M	149	68.9	48	22.2	19	8.7	.040
	F	232	64.4	64	17.7	64	17.7	
Encourage and favour the working classes	M	146	67.5	44	20.3	26	11.9	.758
	F	250	69.4	79	21.9	31	8.9	
Ability to study while performing societal responsibilities	M	159	73.6	38	17.5	19	8.7	.807
	F	268	74.4	61	16.9	31	8.5	
The program considers different age groups	M	161	74.5	33	15.2	24	6.6	.141
	F	282	78.8	52	14.4	38	10.4	

Field data 2023. Keys: Likely (L), Neutral (N), Unlikely (U), f = Frequency, % = Percent, F= female, M = Male

Data in Table 2 indicates that both male and female learners are likely influenced by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for professional development based on the factors such as affordability in terms of time because its P-value is 0.04 and cost-effectiveness because its P-value is 0.03. These factors are critical because their respective P-values are below 0.05. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between a learner's decision

to choose ODL due to its affordability in terms of time and cost-effectiveness found in ODL mode.

However, there are minor differences in the influencing factors between them based on percentages. Males are more likely, 68.9%, to find it affordable in terms of time compared to females, 64.4%. Neutral responses are higher among males (22.2%) than females (17.7%), while unlikely responses are significantly higher among females (17.7%) than males (8.7%). Both genders view ODL as a cost-effective mode of education at an equal percentage of 67.5%. However, neutral responses are more common among females (25.5%) than males (18.5%), while more males (13.8%) than females (6.9%) find it unlikely to be cost-effective.

Marital status factors

Table 3 presents information on the marital status factors that influencing professional development through open and distance learning (ODL) at the Institute of Adult Education learning centers.

Table 3. Marital status factors influencing learners to study through ODL at the learning centre.

Factors	Marital status	L		N		U		P-value
		f	%	F	%	F	%	
Admission criteria	S	42	66.6	16	25.3	5	8.0	.009
	M	393	76.6	56	10.9	64	18.6	
Cost-effectiveness compared to other educational modes in Tanzania	S	40	63.4	14	22.2	9	14.2	.051
	M	349	67.9	118	23.0	46	8.8	
Pressures from co-workers	S	37	58.6	20	31.7	6	9.4	.279
	M	305	59.3	122	23.7	86	16.7	
Valuation by community members	S	38	57.0	16	25.3	11	17.4	.170
	M	223	43.4	204	39.7	86	16.6	
Affordability in terms of time	S	44	69.7	9	14.2	10	15.7	.001
	M	237	66.3	103	20.0	73	14.1	
Encourage and favour the working classes	S	41	64.9	17	26.9	5	8.7	.297
	M	355	67.1	106	20.6	52	19.0	
The program considers different age groups	S	21	33.3	11	17.4	5	8.4	.321
	M	202	39.3	74	14.2	18	7.7	
Self- directed learning	S	40	63.4	15	23.8	8	12.6	.226
	M	365	71.1	93	18.1	55	10.6	
Interactions among learners	S	34	53.9	18	28.5	10	15.7	.041
	M	366	70.4	89	17.3	58	11.2	
Quality of the program	S	44	69.7	9	14.2	10	15.8	.218
	M	377	73.4	92	17.9	44	8.4	

Field data 2023. Keys: Likely (L), Neutral (N), Unlikely (U), f=Frequency, %=Percent, S=Single, M= Married.

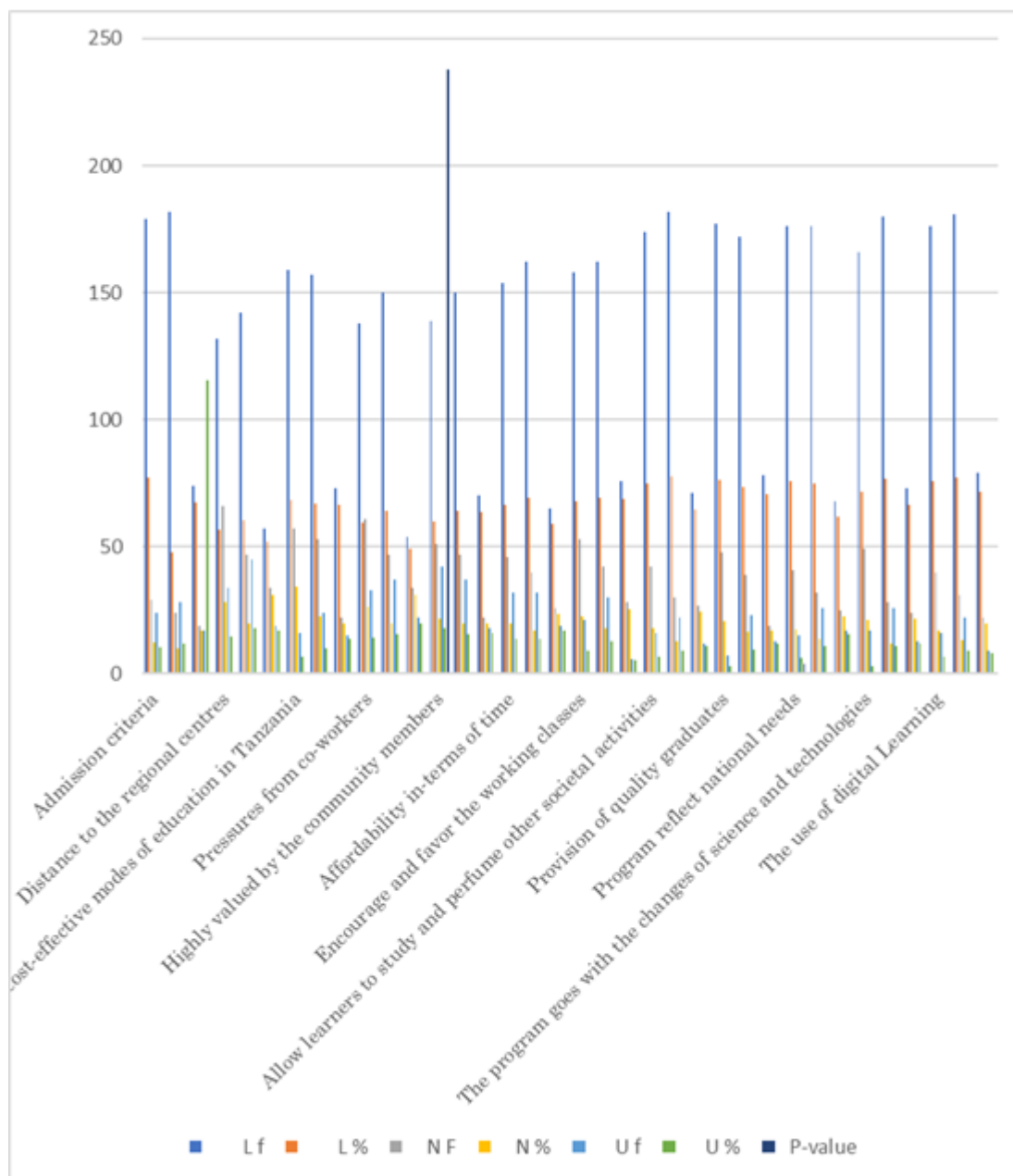
The data in Table 3 indicates that single and married learners were influenced to study through ODL based on factors such as admission criteria because its P-value is 0.00, interactions among learners because its P-value is 0.04, and its affordability in terms of time because its P-value is 0.00. These factors are critical because their respective P-values are below 0.05. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between a learner's decision to choose ODL due to its admission criteria, affordability in terms of time, and interaction among learners.

Despite these commonalities, there were differences in the percentages between single and married learners for these factors. Single learners were more influenced by affordability in terms of time, with 69.7%, compared to married learners at 66.3%. On the other hand, admission criteria had a greater influence on married learners (76.6%) than on single learners (66.6%). Regarding the cost-effectiveness of the education mode, 63.4% of single learners found it cost-effective, whereas 67.9% of married learners shared this view. Lastly, interactions among learners influenced 53.9% of single learners, while a significantly higher percentage of married learners, 70.4%, were influenced by this factor.

2.1.4. Age factors

Figure 1 presents information on the age group factors influencing professional development through open and distance learning (ODL) at the Institute of Adult Education learning centres.

Figure 1. Age factors influencing learners to study through ODL at the learning centres



Field data 2023 Keys. Likely (L), Neutral (N), Unlikely (U), f = Frequency, % = Percent

Data in Figure 1 shows that learners of all age groups are influenced by ODL for professional development based on the factors like admission criteria because its P-value is 0.02, the program's alignment with developments in science and technology because its P-value is 0.03, and its relevance to national needs because its P-value is 0.00. These factors are critical because their respective P-values are below 0.05. Therefore, there is a

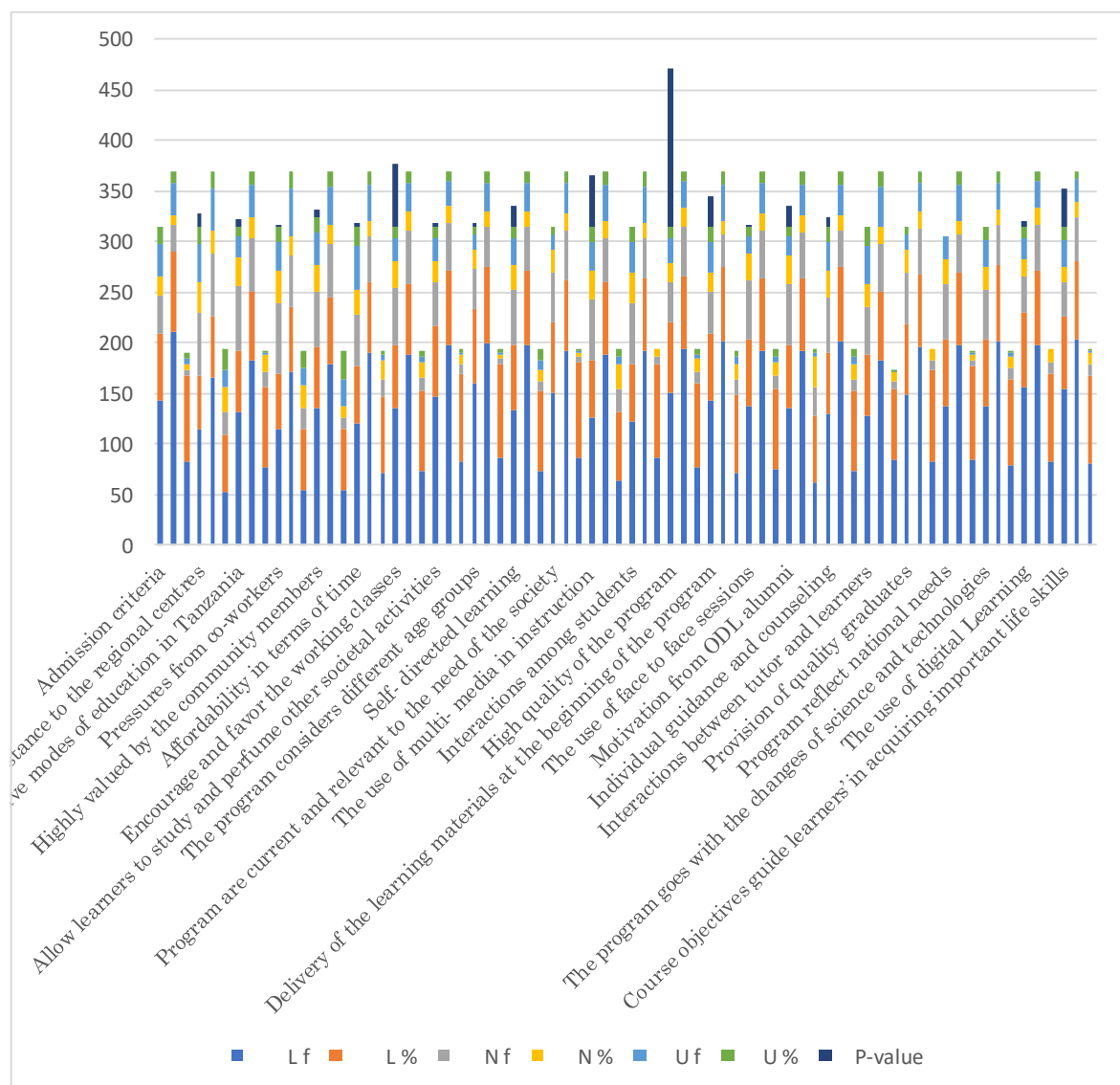
significant relationship between a learner's decision to choose ODL and factors such as its admission criteria, alignment with advancements in science and technology, and reflection of national needs.

However, the degree of influence varies across different age groups. For learners aged 36-44 years, admission criteria are a significant influence, with 47.7%. In comparison, 77.1% of those below 35 and 67.2% of learners aged 45 and above. Regarding the program's alignment with changes in science and technology, 76.8% of learners aged 36-44 are likely to be influenced, followed by learners below 35, 71.5%, and those aged 45 and above, 66.3%. Conversely, those under 35 are more influenced by the ODL program's reflection of national needs; 75.8% are likely to be influenced, compared to 75.1% of those aged 36-44 and 61.8% of those aged 45 and above.

2.1.5. Regional factors.

Figure 2 presents information on regional factors influencing professional development through ODL at the Institute of Adult Education learning centres

Figure 2. Regional factors influencing learners to study through ODL at the learning centre.



Field data 2023 Keys. Likely (L), Neutral (N), Unlikely (U), f = Frequency, % = Percent.

Data in Figure 2 indicated that learners from Mbeya, Dar es Salaam, and Ruvuma were influenced by open and distance learning (ODL) for professional development due to several factors. These factors include interactions between tutors and learners, admission criteria because its P-value is 0.00, distance to regional centres because its P- value is 0.00, one of the cost effective mode of learning because its P- value is 0.00, pressure from co-workers because its P-value is 0.01, high valuation by community members because its P-value is 0.00, affordability in terms of time because its p-value is 0.00, allow learners to

study and perform other societal activities because its p-value is 0.00, ODL program consider different age group because its P- value is 0.00, self-directed learning, because its P-value is 0.02, Program are current and relevant to the need of the society because its P-value is 0.00, interactions among learners because its P-value is 0.00, delivery of learning materials at the beginning of the program because its P-value is 0.03, the use of face-to-face sessions because its P-value is 0.00, motivation from ODL alumni because its p-value is 0.02 , individual guidance and counselling because its P-value is 0.01, interaction between tutor and learners because its P-value is 0.00, provision of quality graduates because its P-value is 0.00, program reflect national needs because its P- value is 0.00, alignment with changes in science and technology because its P-value is 0.00, the use of the digital learning because its P-value is 0.00 and the course objective enabled learners to acquire the needed skills because its p-value is 0.03. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between a learner's decision to choose ODL due to its admission criteria, distance to regional centres, one of the cost-effective modes of learning, pressure from co-workers, high valuation by community members, and affordability in terms of time, allowing learners to study and perform other societal activities. The ODL program considers different age groups, self-directed learning, and programs that are current and relevant to the needs of the society, interactions among learners, delivery of learning materials at the beginning of the program, the use of face-to-face sessions, motivation from ODL alumni, individual guidance and counselling, interaction between tutor and learners, and the provision of quality graduates. The program reflects national needs and alignment with changes in science and technology, and the use of digital learning and ODL course objectives enables learners to acquire the needed skills.

Moreover, despite these common factors, data revealed some regional differences in the degree of influence based on percentages. Learners from the Ruvuma region was highly influenced by factors such as admission criteria, with 84.5% likely to be influenced, compared to 78.3% in Mbeya and 66.2% in Dar es Salaam. Regarding cost-effective education, 80.7% of learners in Ruvuma found it likely to be a factor, compared to 67.5% in Mbeya and 61.1% in Dar es Salaam. When considering the program's value to the community, 66.0% of learners in Mbeya found it likely to be influential, followed by 59.0% in Ruvuma and 58.7% in Dar es Salaam. For the program's reflection of national needs, 91.3% of learners in Ruvuma were likely to be influenced, compared to 73.1% in Mbeya and 64.4% in Dar es Salaam. Regarding the adaptation to science and technology, 84.8% of learners in Ruvuma found it likely to be a factor, followed by 75.0% in Mbeya and 64.4% in Dar es Salaam. Additionally, learners from the Mbeya region were more influenced by pressures from co-workers, with 63.8% likely to be influenced, compared to 59.0% in Ruvuma and 53.6% in Dar es Salaam.

4. Discussion

Regarding socio-economic factors, the study confirmed that the cost-effectiveness and affordability of ODL, regardless of learners' geographical location and time constraints, motivated their choice of this mode of learning at the Institute of Adult Education. This result supports the findings of Hebebcı et al (2020), who found that learners were motivated to choose ODL because of its ease of access and its support for continued education. Furthermore, in relation to the distance to regional centres, the study by Mswazie and Blignaut (2019) revealed that the majority of learners were motivated to choose the ODL mode of learning because the learning centres are nearby, allowing them to attend weekend seminars and discussions.

Regarding gender, the study established a significant relationship between learners' gender and their engagement in open and distance learning (ODL) for professional development. Both male and female learners were notably influenced to pursue professional development through ODL primarily due to its time efficiency and cost-effectiveness. These findings align with prior research by Yang et al. (2017), which observed that both genders are motivated to choose ODL because it addresses personal needs and is socially endorsed. Furthermore, Ten Hoeve et al (2017) emphasized a notable relationship between gender and participation in ODL among adult learners, highlighting its affordability in catering to the demands of employed adults. Likewise, gender studies on the participation of female learners in ODL in developing countries such as Turkey, India, Australia, Germany, and the USA demonstrate that more females than males enrol in ODL.

The study revealed a significant relationship between learners' marital status and their engagement in open and distance learning (ODL) for professional development. It confirmed that factors such as the ODL admission process, cost-effectiveness, flexibility in terms of time, and learners' interaction were primary motivators for both single and married learners opting for ODL. These findings resonate with previous research by Msoffe (2016), which indicated that many ODL learners choose this mode of education to enhance their qualifications despite starting with lower educational backgrounds. Regarding flexibility in terms of time, the study aligns with Qureshi et al. (2002), who found that the ODL mode of learning attracted more married learners than singles: 30.4% versus 12.6%, respectively. Moreover, concerning learners' interaction, the study aligns with McGhie (2017) findings, suggesting that ODL learners are drawn to this mode of learning because it facilitates interaction, mutual support, encouragement, and academic assistance among peers during their learning journey.

The study identified a significant relationship between learners' age and their engagement in open and distance learning (ODL) for professional development. Learners across all age groups were notably influenced by factors such as the admission criteria,

the adaptability of ODL programs to advancements in science and technology, and the alignment of programs with national educational priorities. These factors played a crucial role in learners' decisions to pursue professional development through ODL at the Institute of Adult Education's learning centres. The finding that ODL programs evolve with advancements in science and technology resonates with research by Peytcheva-Forsyt et al. (2018), which highlighted that younger learners are particularly inclined towards technology-enabled learning experiences. This responsiveness to technological changes likely appeals to learners who view technology not only as a learning tool but also as a means of entertainment. Similar findings were reported by Olayemi et al. (2021), indicating that many learners prefer ODL due to its alignment with national educational priorities and its integration of technology. Traxler (2018) noted that ODL is extensively utilized for activities such as pre-service teacher training, academic qualification enhancement, and professional development among educators.

The study revealed a significant relationship between learners' geographical regions and their participation in open and distance learning (ODL) for professional development. Learners residing in various regions were notably influenced by factors such as affordability, interaction between tutors and learners, and overall cost-effectiveness when opting for ODL. It was observed that a majority of ODL learners, regardless of their location, were motivated to choose this mode of learning due to its inherent flexibility, accessibility, and affordability. These findings are consistent with previous research by Chawinga & Zozie (2016), Gurung (2018), and Ag-Ahmad (2020). For example, it was found that flexibility and cost-effectiveness were primary motivators for learners enrolling in ODL programs (Itasanmi et al., 2020). Additionally, factors such as admission criteria and the tutor-learner interaction played significant roles in learners' academic and administrative support within the ODL framework (Rajabalee & Santally, 2021). However, contrasting results were also identified in other studies. It was revealed that financial challenges related to tuition fees and learning materials were significant reasons for dropouts among ODL learners, particularly due to costs associated with face-to-face interactions and transportation (Tamrat, 2022).

5. Conclusions

In the study's context, learners participating in open and distance learning programs were notably influenced by various socioeconomic factors tied to their age, gender, marital status, and regional location where they pursued their education. Understanding and addressing these needs and preferences are crucial because they significantly influence the decision of more learners to opt for open and distance learning. This, in turn, can potentially increase enrolment rates and mitigate dropout rates associated with traditional educational settings. By aligning educational offerings with the diverse

circumstances and preferences of learners, ODL institutions can better support their educational journeys and foster greater success in open and distance learning programs.

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