# Exploring the Potential of Open Distance Learning in Teacher Education in Kenya: Opportunities and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

In the Kenya's vision 2030, education is recognized as a social pillar, it is expected that Kenya will become a middle income country with high quality of life to its people. Education is an important ingredient to a country's development. The quality of an education system is highly dependent on the quality of its teachers. A country cannot develop beyond the quality of its teachers. The main aim of this paper is to explore the potential of open and distance learning to the development of teacher education in Kenya. The paper traces the historical development of teacher education in Kenya from the second half of the nineteenth century when western education was introduced to Kenya by the Christian missionaries. The history method of research has been used in the study. Data were also collected by means of literature review. The teacher education in Kenya is concerned with the training of early childhood teachers, primary teacher education, diploma teacher education, secondary teacher education and technical teacher education. Most of these teacher education programmes and other post qualification trainings are done through the traditional face to face model. Most of these teacher education programmes are not efficient and cost-effective. Kenya needs a comprehensive search to finding a cost-effective, conducive, efficient and comprehensive way of training teachers. It is our view that a search should include the use of open and distance learning as a viable solution to the training of teachers. Open distance learning should be seen as a complementary to the traditional mode of training teachers in Kenya. This paper holds that for teachers to effectively contribute to Kenya's vision 2030, the teachers should be given the most appropriate tools during training and during practice-including the content knowledge, skills and attitude so as to make them work as professionals who will bring the desired change. Finally, this research highlights the need of open and distance learning to the development of teacher education in Kenya.

**Key words:** Teacher education, open distance learning, open distance e-learning, distance education, Kenya's vision 2030, teacher education programmes, historical development of teacher education.

## INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is a critical component of any education system. Lawal (2006) and Bando (1988) agree that no nation develops beyond the quality of its educational system, which is highly dependent on the quality of its teachers. It is important that teachers are given the most appropriate tools during training in form of content, skills and attitudes to be able to do their work professionally. Teachers are a critical component of any society because they are considered mentors. Teacher education therefore, is the main pillar of any established system and the custodian of the society's culture (Kafu 2011). This has been echoed by the Kenyan government in the sessional paper No.6 of 1988 when it said that "there is urgent need to develop and promote teacher education programme if the administration of education in the country is to succeed and national development is accelerated (Republic of Kenya 1988). These views show the importance of a teacher education to the Kenyan nation. It is education that is a driving force behind development in a society. This explains why in recent years the Kenyan government has continued to invest heavily in education in general and teacher education in particular (Kafu, 2011).

Teacher education has remained a central component of education since the ancient times. An examination of education systems since the ancient times indicates and elaborates and indeed deliberates practices of teacher education. It is our argument that in examining the development of teacher education in Kenya, one should always note that before the coming of Christian missionaries there existed an elaborate teacher education system in the traditional African education systems (Maangi, 2013). As much as it may not be modeled along the western formal schools, it produced competent teachers who sustained the indigenous knowledge system across the Kenyan societies (Sifuna &Indire, 1974).

The formal teacher education as we have it today was introduced by the Christian Missionaries in the mid-19th century (Maangi, 2013). This kind of education was modeled on the Western Europe and Canadian teacher educations of the early 19th century. The Christian missionaries established the teacher education program due to the resistant unplanned, rapid expansion of the "bush" and "mission" schools in the first half of the 19th century (Sifuna &Indire, 1974). The Christian missionaries needed teachers to work in the ever increasing "bush" schools that had branched out of the "mission" schools and there were primary schools for class B and A, and standard IV. The mission schools were those in the main mission stations and they were intermediate schools that had standard V-VII. The initial teacher education program was to produce teachers for the primary schools. Those who had gone up to the intermediate schools were trained as teachers.

Later, especially during the inter war period (1919-1945), demand for higher education by Africans increased. This led to the establishment of secondary schools that needed highly trained teachers. Consequently, there was the establishment of Makerere College in Uganda in the early 1940s to train teachers of Diploma in education qualification to address the increased demand for secondary school teachers (Beecher Education Commission, 1943). In 1965, Kenyatta college was established and in 1966 the Kenya science teachers college to train the diploma teachers otherwise referred then to as S1. This was followed by the establishment of the Kenya Technical Teachers College in 1977 to train teachers in technical subjects at diploma level (Otiende 1992). In 1966; the University of Nairobi College started training graduate teachers with B.A/B.SC (Education option). Later, the program was transformed into the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) professional degree qualification in 1970. In 1972, the Kenyatta University was established to argument the efforts of the University of Nairobi. Other universities were established in later years and the training of secondary school teachers remained in the hands of universities. Today, several public and private universities conduct teacher education programs in early childhood education, primary school education and secondary education. Most of the teacher education programs are offered through the face to face brick and mortar model. In Kenya, most of the teachers are trained through the self-sponsored programs for those who qualified to join University but are not due to join due to space or those teachers who want to upgrade (Opondo & Boit, 2017). It is our view that such programs could be conducted from the open and distance learning (ODL) mode of study. There is also the school based programs that train teachers at diploma, degree and post-graduate levels to teachers during the school holidays in April, August and December. The school based programs have attracted criticisms in recent years in terms of contact hours due to shortened school holidays. It is our view that such education courses would be handled best under Open and Distance Learning model.

**Open Distance Learning and Teacher Education**

Distance learning is the provision of education by a mode other than the conventional face to face method whose goals are similar to, and just as noble and practical as those on campus full-time, face to face education (Commonwealth of learning, 2000). It is a system characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner, in which instruction is delivered through a variety of ways/media including print and other Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to learners who may either have missed the opportunity earlier in life or have been denied the traditional face to face education due to career, family, socio-economic and other circumstances. It is a cost effective system of instruction independent of time, location, and place, space which can be used for a variety of learning situations – including primary, secondary, tertiary, university, vocational and non-formal education. It is our view that distance learning, as has been effectively used in many countries in Africa such as South Africa, can indeed be indeed used to tackle the priority areas of need such as training teachers in Kenya where face to face learning is constrained. It can also be used to provide access to equitable educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied. They include the underprivileged and yet unreached communities in the North Eastern parts of Kenya.

Open learning is the flexibility of and access to instruction by the distance education mode in order to ensure that a broad availability of educational opportunities reaches as many segments of the population as possible. It is important to note that openness and access disregard age, previous level of academic achievement and many other factors, which usually connect artificial barriers to education as a life-long pursuit. Open learning therefore provides avenues to learning on ways most appropriate, efficient and effective to the individual learner and the material being studied.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Kenya has experienced tremendous growth in higher education such that by 2016, university enrollment was at 536,000. This increase can be attributed to the increased enrollment brought by increased enrollments as a result of the introduction of free primary education in 2003 and the increase in the number of universities.

This increase needs more innovative educational approaches including ODL. ODL is seen as a means of providing the much needed higher educational opportunities especially in teacher education (Agalo, 2008; Murage, 2013). Access to teacher education in Kenya is still out of reach for many people due to the limited physical and financial capacity in the higher education institutions (Murage 2013, Nyerere 2012)

**Opportunities and Challenges**

For a developing country and particularly, Kenya, ODEL is a practical strategy to address the issues of access and participation in higher teacher education. As explained earlier, it is a delivery model that is cost effective with sacrificing quality (Pityana, 2009). In Kenya where resources are scarce and higher education financing has been low in recent years, ODEL is viewed as cost effective and the most viable means of expanding the provision of teacher education in uncostly manner. Since it holds the promise of economies of scale and a wider geographical reach. The Kenyan government should start to explore this potential.

As much as ODEL use in teacher education in Kenya is promising, a number of challenges should be addressed before it is utilized fully. There exist a number of technological challenges that will definitely hinder its effectiveness. There has been a challenge of lack of trained professionals to support fully the implementation of ODEL in Kenya and the region. Mpofu (2012) argues that more than 97% of lecturers facilitating ODEL in Zimbabwe have no experience in distance learning. It should also be noted that infrastructures outside the major towns remain inadequate. It therefore becomes difficult in creating a national ODEL strategy. Effective use of ODEL in teacher training will require teaching staff and administrators who are properly trained in using ODEL as a mode of delivery (Nyerere et.al, 2012). Despite the covid-19 pandemic that saw the increased use of ODEL mode few Lecturers are familiar with teaching effectively in an online environment.

In the United States of America, the National Education Association (NEA) conducted a survey that reported the top concerns of staff members about ODEL would be similar to the Kenyan situation given the reduced funding of higher education. NEA (2020) found out that members were concerned about ODEL as they would do more work as compared to face to face brick and mortar for the same pay; apparently this was a concern for Kenyan lecturers during the Covid-19 era. The NEA (2020) survey also found that most teaching staff spend more time on ODEL courses than they do in the traditional face to face courses of concern, most of them do not get a reduced workload nor do they get compensation for developing courses in teaching distance courses (Nyerere et.al,2012)

There is also the issue of governance. Apart from South Africa, most African countries including Kenya don't have clearly defined national distance education policy. Policies are critical since they will provide a framework for the development of distance education. The absence of such policies is a clear challenge to the development of distance education for the training of teachers. The first Kenyan government policy to address ODEL in higher education was through an act of parliament in 1966. It established the Board of Adult education. A number of commissions since independence have highlighted ODEL as an alternative mode of education provisioning. Sessional paper No.1 of 2005 (Republic of Kenya 2005) recommends the establishment of an open university and indeed the use of ODEL in human resource development at all levels including teacher education. It should be noted however, that the practice of ODEL in Kenya has indeed been

used at all levels of education and has been provided by different institutions each guided by their own institutional policies (Juma, 2003).

Towards mitigating ODEL challenges, Kenya adopted a National ICT policy in 2006. The policy aims at ensuring availability of efficient, reliable, accessible and affordable ICT services in the country. Through this policy, the government's intention is to encourage the use of ICT in schools, colleges and universities and indeed other educational institutions in the country to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Nyerere, 2012). Farell (2007) lists other strategies as to promote the development of e-learning resources; promote the development of an integrated e-learning curriculum to support ICT in education, facilitate public-private partnerships to mobilize resources in order to support e-learning initiatives and promote distance education and virtual institutions participating in higher education and training including the training of teachers. It should be noted also that the Kenya education sector support program (KESSP) developed in 2005 by the Ministry of Education prioritizes mainstreaming ICTs into the teaching and learning process (Nyerere,2012)

## CONCLUSION

There are a large number of qualified teacher trainees who cannot secure places in the existing facilities of the Kenyan universities. The need for an educated teaching force and the opportunity to maximize the use of limited educational resources both national and human, calls for alternative and innovative methods of increasing access and participation in teacher training. ODEL model will make teacher education available beyond lecture halls in Kenya, not limited to a particular time and space.

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