Portrait of ODL in Africa:
Results of a three-year longitudinal study (2007–2010)

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Abstract:

This paper presents the results of a three-year longitudinal study (2007–2010) on open distance learning (ODL) programs in Africa offered by the *Agence universitaire de la Francophonie* (AUF). We focus on (1) a sociological and technological profile of the participants; (2) their motivations for enrolling in an open distance learning program; (3) their perceptions of ODL; (4) the challenges and satisfactions they experienced; and (5) the benefits they obtained after earning a diploma. We draw some conclusions about the pros and cons of ODL in Africa's sociocultural landscape.

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a three-year longitudinal study (2007–2010) on open distance learning (ODL) in Africa. With the aim of drawing a portrait of ODL in Africa, we address (1) the participants' sociological and technological profile; (2) their motivations for enrolling in an open distance learning program; (3) their perceptions of ODL; (4) the challenges and satisfactions they experienced; and (5) the benefits they obtained once they earned a diploma. The quantitative results enrich our understanding of the benefits and challenges of ODL in supporting the development of professional competencies in Africa.

Research objectives

The overall objective was to draw a portrait of ODL in French-speaking Africa. More precisely, we wanted to deepen our understanding of (1) the participants' sociological and technological profile; (2) their motivations for enrolling in an open distance learning program; (3) their perceptions of ODL; (4) the challenges and satisfactions they experienced; and (5) the benefits they obtained after earning their diploma. The results enrich our understanding of the advantages and limitations of ODL for the development of more effective African professionals.

Setting the Context

We begin by presenting the context of this study: open and distance learning (ODL), and more particularly their potential as well as their limitations for the development of African professionals.

ODL: advantages for education in Africa

Since the early 1990s, the galloping development of information and communications technologies (ICT) has resulted in increasingly mediatized university course contents, from face-to-face teaching

enriched with online resources to learning entirely by distance, with a host of other forms that may be categorized as ODL (see Depover, Karsenti & Komis, 2007). In Africa, ODL are generally considered a necessity for students and educators alike, because they offer a response to the lack of available teachers for face-to-face learning, and they allow broader access to higher learning. This is especially true on a continent where most universities have only limited space for lecture theatres and classrooms. In addition, ODL hold strong potential for professional development and life-long continuing education. It is therefore no surprise that distance education is spreading rapidly throughout Africa, particularly for university and continuing education programs. It is especially suitable for providing coaching outside of regular classroom hours. This enables students to reconcile their studies with a full-time job, if not two jobs.

Furthermore, ODL in Africa pose a potential solution to the long-standing and unfortunate dilemma for both Western and African managers, whereby professional Africans, having received an education in a Northern country, fail to return home (Jacquinot, 1993; Moughli, Semporé & Koné, 2008). For all these reasons, ODL appear to be a highly useful vehicle for delivering professional training in Africa.

Challenges of ODL in Africa

The literature in this area shows that ODL in Africa, and more broadly, the pedagogical integration of ICT, is hamstrung by a scarcity of computer equipment. In fact, several authors (Intsiful, Okyere & Osae, 2003; Bakhoum, 2002) have mentioned the pressing need for appropriate tools, proper logistics, sufficient and adequate technology infrastructures, including telephone lines, telecommunications networks), consistent electric voltage, and a reliable electricity supply. Without these, it is difficult to integrate ODL and ICT into education systems. These material shortages are directly related to broader financial problems, such as lack of sustainable funding for ICT integration. The importance of adopting policies and budgets that are both stable and recurrent to support these needs is a frequent theme in the literature (Karsenti & Larose, 2005). We may add to the lack of material equipment in Africa other challenges more specific to ODL, such as high drop-out rates: the traditionally low perseverance in ODL programs has been a topic of concern and investigation for many years (see Scalese, 2001). Although the research on factors affecting drop-out and perseverance has shed some light on this problem (Bourdages & Delmotte, 2001), perseverance remains a moving target, difficult to capture, and involving an unknown number of variables.

Method

This three-year longitudinal study (2007–2010) results from an invitation by the *Agence universitaire de la francophonie* (university agency of Francophonie) (AUF). In addition, the study participants are African students enrolled in AUF-supported ODL programs. The results presented here were obtained from online questionnaires. For each of the three years, two online questionnaires containing both open- and closed-ended questions were distributed: one to participants who were enrolled in an AUF ODL program at the time in order to cover objectives 1 (ODL learner profile), 2 (initial motivations to enrol in an ODL program), 3 (learners' perceptions of ODL), and 4 (challenges and satisfactions experienced); and a second questionnaire sent to participants who had recently received ODL diplomas from AUF in order to cover objectives 1 (ODL learner profile) and 5 (benefits obtained from ODL). The first questionnaire, aimed at enrolled students, contained 68 questions divided into six sections, and the second questionnaire, aimed at ODL graduates, contained 35 questions divided into three sections. In all, 703, 626, and 724 participants responded to the first-, second- and third-year questionnaires, respectively. The quantitative data obtained were processed with SPSS statistical analysis software, version 18. We conducted a descriptive analysis as well as a cross-analysis of two variables (respondents' sex and age), which we deemed relevant to the interests of the study. Note that because the third-year results are still being processed, we present an overview of the first- and second-year results only.

Overview of first- and second-year data

We present the main trends that emerged from the first two study years concerning the sociological and technological profile of the participants, their motivations to enrol in an ODL program, their perceptions of ODL, their challenges and satisfactions, and the benefits they obtained.

The average profile of a student enrolled in an AUF-supported ODL program is a man about 35 years old, living in a French-speaking African city, who has earned a master's or doctoral degree and holds a professional position. In this perspective, ODL serve chiefly as a way to advance one's career, and is viewed as a form of continuing education more than initial training. On the other hand, the two subsamples in our study (participants who were enrolled or had completed an ODL program) for the two study years are very much alike in terms of sex, age, matrimonial status, family and sociocultural status, job type and years of professional experience. Consequently, the participants who were enrolled and had completed the programs were barely distinguishable, aside from progress made towards diploma completion.

However, for year 2, we observed a divergence in the technology profile among the participants enrolled in an ODL program. Younger respondents (23–30 years old) tended to use a virtual campus to connect to the courses, whereas older respondents used computers at work or at home. We deduced that younger respondents were less equipped with computers than older respondents, forcing them to travel more to pursue their program. This trend is corroborated by the first-year results, which indicate that the older and more experienced the participants, the more they tended to have a computer and an Internet connection at home. The consequence of this technology discrepancy was that younger, less experienced participants felt that they did not save much travelling time by taking an ODL program, as the distance to a face-to-face learning site was replaced somewhat by the distance to an Internet connection site (in this case, AUF's virtual Francophone campus).

For the two years, the younger, less experienced respondents had fewer problems with computers than the older, more experienced respondents. This suggests that younger, less experienced respondents have better technology skills, which enable them to cope with some of the technology problems on their own. This second hypothesis was previously proposed in year 1, and appears consistent with the fact that the younger, less experienced respondents used Web 2.0 more often, undoubtedly indicating higher technology literacy. This is in contrast to the older respondents, who had more problems with specialized Web page design software, for example. We may tentatively blame this on the technology generation gap.

The year 2 results also converge on the students' perceptions of ODL. Although the great majority of respondents deemed the relational aspects (workplace atmosphere, exchanges and communications among learners and with teachers, conflicts among learners and with teachers) and pedagogical aspects (support and course materials, teaching methods, assessments and exams, and program duration) highly satisfactory, they were divided about several organizational aspects such as quantity (workload) and timelines (work pace, assignment deadlines). It thus appears that some respondents were pushed to the limit in terms of time and effort investment. One explanation for this could be that they generally held a job and sometimes a second one at the same time as the ODL program. Similarly, although the ODL modes differed substantially from face-to-face methods (*"In ODL, we learn differently,"* was the second most frequent perception), the workload was perceived as about the same for both types of learning, as well as the knowledge received. With respect to personal investment, ODL are therefore just as demanding as face-to-face learning. Nevertheless, the respondents were generally satisfied with the ODL programs.

The results presented here mainly reveal differences due to the closely related variables *age* and *professional experience*. We also note some less significant differences between men and women in

years 1 and 2, chiefly concerning technical and relational aspects. For example, women generally found the basic software and specialized software such as Web page design applications more difficult. We may posit that the men had more advanced technology skills. However, overall, the participants did not have any particular technological problems, aside from the more specialized applications such as Web page design, or in cases of voltage or network failure. Thus, technology skills were not a significant factor for ODL success.

Women also consulted on-site colleagues, trainers or technicians more often than men when technical problems arose, although overall, the respondents appeared to use informal strategies (working out problems on their own by trial and error, asking other students or colleagues on site) than formal ones (teachers, technicians or tutors). Finally, it is interesting to note that men's perceptions of mutual support among ODL learners were greater than women's. Men appeared to have a more collaborative vision of ODL learning. When all variables were confounded, a strong overall perception of the collective dimension emerges. Nevertheless, women had a more individual perception of ODL than men did. Results were similar for the two years.

Concerning the benefits obtained from ODL, the results are positive overall for all participants in years 1 and 2. We note, however, a certain discrepancy between the benefits for professional development and the benefits related to actual professional advancement. In fact, although the great majority felt they had made real gains in their professional development, particularly by acquiring new skills, these did not necessarily translate into concrete outcomes. This could explain why some respondents felt that the ODL programs did not fully deliver on their promise. This disparity between hopes and reality cannot be blamed wholly on the ODL programs examined in this study, as it is liable to apply to all continuing education programs. On the other hand, men seemed to be more disappointed than the women, as the women had lower perceptions of some aspects of their professional development but higher perceptions of the concrete benefits they obtained.

In conclusion, given the large percentage of respondents who were willing to embark on further ODL programs, we may hypothesize that pursuing ODL can be a valuable part of a larger career plan in the medium and long term. This might explain why older respondents with more experience obtained more benefits from ODL in terms of both professional development and concrete outcomes.

Conclusion
To conclude, the objective of this three-year longitudinal study was to draw a portrait of ODL in French-speaking Africa. More precisely, we wanted to better understand (1) the sociological and technological profile of the participants; (2) their motivations for enrolling in an open distance learning program; (3) their perceptions of ODL; (4) the challenges and satisfactions they experienced; and (5) the benefits they obtained after earning a diploma. The results presented here are from the first and second year of the data collection. Data from the third study year are currently under analysis and will be added in order to identify convergent and stable trends. Among others, we note that ODL appear to provide a means for African professionals to pursue ongoing professional development. Some differences due to age, experience and sex were observed. Overall, the respondents perceived several organizational aspects of ODL, such as quantity (workload) and timelines (work pace, assignment deadlines), as burdensome. Nevertheless, the respondents appeared to draw some benefits for their careers, suggesting that ODL can play a positive role in skills development among African professionals.

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