

Stakeholders' Perceptions about the Competences of Open and Distance Learning Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Education plays a vital role in individual and national development. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is an educational approach that enables learners to study independently within their own environments without attending conventional classes. In ODL, the learning is facilitated through provided course outlines or modules. This quantitative study investigates the perceptions of key stakeholders, including ODL learners, employers, and the head of a nearby school, regarding the skills, values, and competencies of ODL graduates, as well as their ability to perform assigned tasks. The study was conducted at the Institute of Adult Education learning centres found in Dar es Salaam, Mbeya, and Ruvuma, with a total of 622 respondents. The data was collected through closed-ended questionnaires and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Descriptive statistics, including tables, frequencies, and percentages, were used to present the data, while inferential analysis employed the Pearson Chi-square test to determine relationships between variables. The results indicate that stakeholders, including employers and ODL learners, expressed confidence in the innovative skills developed by ODL graduates. The heads of the nearby schools were particularly confident with graduates' communication skills. Employers showed the highest confidence in the graduates' ability to effectively manage assigned tasks. Similarly, the heads of the nearby schools were confident in the ODL program for equipping graduates with quality and sustainable skills to serve their communities. They also recognized the graduates' ability to demonstrate a high level of competence when taking on responsibilities. ODL learners consistently expressed confidence in nearly all aspects of the program's outcomes. The study recommends that ODL institutions partner with employers to understand the skills ODL graduates should possess to succeed in the workplace. Additionally, ODL institutions should ensure that their programs are of high quality so that all graduates meet consistent standards of professional readiness in the labour market.

Keywords: Open and distance learning; ODL graduates; graduate skills; knowledge and competences; stakeholders' perception.

INTRODUCTION

Education enhances human abilities, consciousness, identity, integrity, and potential, and fosters innovation (Osler & Starkey, 2017). Education does not only provide learners with the knowledge to navigate the complexities of the modern world but also develops the skills and competences needed for success in various professional fields, enabling effective communication and problem-solving (McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). Investing in human capital through education is crucial for preparing a workforce that can adapt to the rapidly changing needs of various industries in a globalized world (Van Laar et al., 2020). Open and distance learning (ODL) has emerged as a transformative educational approach that many African countries are adopting in order

to accelerate educational development. ODL offers flexible and inclusive opportunities for lifelong learning, aiming to bridge gaps in time, geography, economy, society, education, and communication between students and institutions (Kant, 2019; Mbalyohere et al., 2019).

Open and distance learning provides learning opportunities across various cultures, locations, ages, genders, perceptions, and times (Migliani et al., 2018). It employs various media, including print and electronic formats, facilitates two-way communication between learners and tutors, offers occasional face-to-face meetings, and utilizes a specialized division of labour in course production and delivery (Asumadu et al., 2023). Open and distance learning is effective in developing skills, knowledge, and competencies, as it often promotes self-directed learning, critical thinking, ethical considerations, digital literacy, and the application of theoretical concepts in practical contexts (Bates, 2019). Open and distance learning is a rapidly growing sector globally, addressing the demand for skilled manpower that formal education alone cannot meet to sustain economic growth in various countries (Ngoboka et al., 2017).

Various national and international studies (Winslow & Allen, 2020; Kilinc et al., 2019; Messo, 2014; Falode et al., 2021) have explored the knowledge, skills, and competencies of ODL graduates in the workplace and labour market. These studies highlight that ODL has a positive impact on graduates' quality of life, contributing to their work, family, and overall life. Employers are generally confident in the training received by ODL graduates and are satisfied with their demonstrated skills. Despite the global acceptance of ODL programs for their flexibility and cost-effectiveness, prospective employers are concerned about the quality and competitiveness of ODL graduates in the labour market (Lisá et al., 2019). Traditional education models offer structured environments with direct interaction and immediate feedback, whereas ODL relies on self-motivation and independent learning. This difference raises concerns about whether ODL graduates achieve comparable or superior proficiency in critical professional areas. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of the stakeholders (ODL learners, employers, and the head of the nearby school) on the competencies of the ODL graduates in their working place and to determine if they effectively foster the necessary skills, values, and competencies needed in their work place to perform the given tasks.

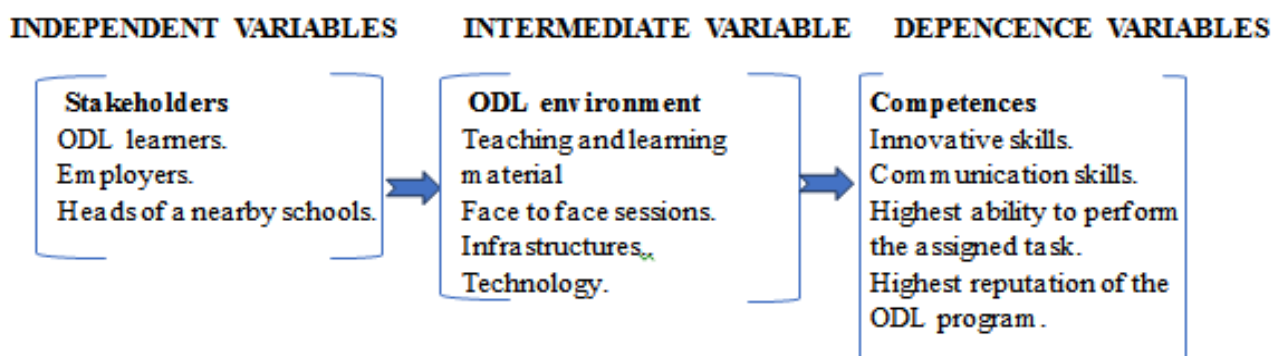
Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is to examine perceptions of the stakeholders concerning the competencies of open and distance learning graduates, where graduates and continuing learners from the Institute of Adult Education at Mbeya, Ruvuma, and Dar es Salaam learning centres were used as a unit of analysis.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected by the researcher to be significant to the government, ODL institutions, and other stakeholders in the following ways. First, it would help to know the skills that ODL learners acquire during their professional development. Second, it would provide useful information to policymakers and the ODL planners about the importance of engaging employers when developing ODL curriculum, and lastly, it would contribute to the existing body of knowledge and better understanding of the ODL skills, values, and competencies.

Conceptual Framework



A conceptual framework is a logical structure that guides a study by identifying variables and proposing relationships among them (Kivunja, 2018). Its main purpose is to; identify variables and propose the relationship among them, provides a context for interpreting findings to explain the observation and to promote the development of theories useful for practice in a study, give a contextual for interpreting the study findings to explain the observations, promote development of the theories useful to practice (Jabareen, 2009). Below is the conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between stakeholders, the ODL environment, and the competence outcomes, highlighting the importance of each component in achieving the objectives of the ODL program.

A conceptual framework prepared based on the objective of the study

Stakeholders. Stakeholders refer to groups or individuals directly or indirectly involved in the ODL program. These include ODL learners, employers, and heads of nearby schools. Stakeholders are vital in the study as they provide feedback on the progress of the program, highlight its benefits, and identify challenges. Their perspectives help in understanding the effectiveness of the program in equipping learners with the necessary skills and competencies to meet workplace demands. Stakeholders oversee the program and contribute to its continuous improvement.

ODL environment. The ODL environment encompasses the factors that facilitate or hinder the development of learners' competencies. Key components include teaching and learning materials, face-to-face sessions, learner support services, infrastructure, and technology. A supportive learning environment is crucial for motivating learners and equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed in the labour market. If the ODL environment is inadequate, learners may lack motivation and fail to attain the desired outcomes.

Competences. This refers to the results achieved through the effective implementation of the ODL program. Competence includes innovative skills, communication skills, the highest ability to perform the assigned tasks, and an enhanced reputation of the ODL program. These outcomes are reflected in the ability of graduates to apply their skills and knowledge in the workplace, complete assigned tasks effectively, and demonstrate professionalism. The success of the program is ultimately measured by the quality of its graduates and their impact in their respective fields.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study aimed to investigate the stakeholders (ODL learners, employers, and the head of the nearby school) perceptions about the competencies of open and distance learning graduates at the learning centre. To achieve this, a quantitative research approach was used. The quantitative approach uses numerical data, allowing the researcher to identify the trends and patterns; it also reduces the risk of bias and error (Farghaly, 2018).

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which was found to be appropriate because it allowed for describing the attitudes, behaviour, opinions, and characteristics of a population of interest (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

Target Population

The study's target population consisted of in-service diploma learners enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) courses at the Institute of Adult Education learning centres, employers (educational officials, particularly District Educational Officer, Adult Educational Officer, and Ward Educational Officer), and the head of a nearby school in the Ruvuma, Mbeya, and Dar es Salaam regions. The diploma program at the Institute of Adult Education was chosen due to its popularity across mainland Tanzania. Specific learning centres in Ruvuma, Mbeya, and Dar es Salaam were intentionally selected for the study. Dar es Salaam, being the location of the main campus and headquarters, serves as a central educational hub. Mbeya was included because it is one of the

regional centres with a large learner population, while Ruvuma was chosen for its multiple learning centres, despite having relatively fewer learners. These regional differences were deliberately considered to investigate the perceptions of stakeholders about the competencies of the ODL graduates.

Sampling procedures and sample size

Both random and purposive sampling techniques were employed in this quantitative study. Multistage sampling was used to select the ODL learners, allowing the researcher to divide the population into clusters or groups (Cohen et al., 2018). This method was chosen as it enabled the collection of a large amount of data from a diverse population while maintaining a reasonable level of accuracy. The sampling process involved several steps. First, the sample was selected based on the criteria of the learning centres. In the second step, learners within these centres were chosen based on their year of study. In the third step, stratified sampling was applied to divide learners by gender (male and female). Finally, ODL learners were randomly selected.

A total of 622 respondents were included in the study, comprising 576 ODL learners who were randomly drawn from three purposively selected ODL regional centres: Mbeya, Dar es Salaam, and Ruvuma. In addition, 36 employers were purposively selected based on their educational roles within the districts, particularly in overseeing teachers and handling promotions. This group included municipal/district educational officers, ward educational coordinators, and adult education officers. Their inclusion was essential as they provided valuable insights into the skills, values, competencies, and abilities of graduates who developed their professional qualifications through ODL to effectively perform their tasks, thereby contributing to the development and improvement of the program. Moreover, 10 school heads from nearby schools were also purposively selected for their educational responsibilities. The researcher believed they could offer valuable information about the program and the competence of graduated learners.

Demographic Characteristics of respondents

The Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents among them included, ODL learners, employers and the heads of a nearby school.

Table 1: demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	ODL Learners		Employers		Head of a nearby school		Total	
Gender	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Male	216	37.5	21	58.3	4	40	241	38.7
Female	360	62.5	15	41.6	6	60	381	61.2
Education								
Diploma	576	100			3	30	579	93.0
Degree			23	63.8	7	70	30	4.8
Masters			13	36.1			13	2.0
Age								
Below 35	232	40.2					232	37.2
35-44	234	40.6	10	27.7	3	30	247	39.7
45-54	103	17.9	22	61.1	6	60	131	21.1

55-59	7	1.2	4	11.1	1	10	12	1.9
Working experience								
0-5	69	11.9	8	22.2	3	30	80	12.8
6-10	233	40.4	16	44.4	2	20	251	40.3
11-15	124	21.5	11	30.5	3	30	138	22.1
16 above	150	26.0	1	2.7	2	20	153	24.5
Region								
Dar es Salaam	214	37.1	9	25	1	10	224	36.0
Mbeya	269	46.7	12	33.3	4	40	285	45.8
Ruvuma	93	16.1	15	41.6	5	50	113	18.1

Respondent demographic characteristics (2023). KEY: f = Frequency, % = Percent

Data show that males were 38.7% and 61.2% female. Among them, below 35 were 37.2%, followed by 35-44 years, 39.7%. Meanwhile, 21.1% of respondents are 45 years old and 1.9% above. In addition, the educational level of the respondents was as follows: 93.0% had diplomas, 4.8% had degrees, and 2.0% had master's degrees. Moreover, their working experience was as follows: 0-5 years 12.8%, 6-10 years 40.3%, 11-15 years 22.1% and 24.5%, 16 years and above. Lastly, the respondents were from three regions: learners from Mbeya 45.8%, 36.0% from Dar es Salaam, and 18.1% were from Ruvuma.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a closed questionnaire, using a 3-point Likert scale to collect data. The questionnaire had three sections: section A: demographic information, section B: perceptions about skills, value, and abilities acquired through the ODL program, and section C: perceptions about their ability to perform the assigned task. The closed questionnaire was found proper for this study because it allowed the researcher to gather specific numerical data from the population (Cheung, 2021). Prior to distribution, the reliability test was conducted whereby the questionnaire was pilot-tested, and a total of 157 participants were included in a pilot study as a sample, and the result showed that the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient value was as follows: Perceptions about Skills, Value, and Abilities (0.917) and Perceptions About their Ability to Perform the Tasks (0.851).

Data Processing and Analysis

The collected data were coded, cleaned, and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 23). Descriptive statistics were analysed using SPSS to obtain frequency and percentages, while inferential statistics were analysed using Pearson's Chi-Square tests with a significance level of $P < 0.05$. The Chi-Square test was used for analysing categorical data and determining significant relationships between independent variables and dependent variables.

RESULTS

Perceptions about Skills, Value and Abilities

Employers were asked to share their perceptions of their confidence in the skills, value, and abilities of ODL graduates in performing their assigned tasks. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Employers' perceptions on the skills, value and abilities of the ODL graduates (N=36)

Skills	Region	HP		MP		LP		P-Value
		f	%	f	%	f	%	
i. Entrepreneurship skills	DAR	4	44.4	4	44.4	1	11.1	.70
	MBEYA	5	41.6	7	58.3	0	0	
	RUVUMA	9	60.0	5	33.3	1	6.6	
ii. Problem solving	DAR	6	66.6	2	22.2	1	11.1	.18
	MBEYA	10	83.3	2	16.6	0	0	
	RUVUMA	13	86.6	2	13.3	0	0	
iii. Innovative skills	DAR	7	77.7	1	11.1	1	11.1	.01
	MBEYA	8	66.6	4	33.3	0	0	
	RUVUMA	13	86.6	1	6.6	1	6.6	
iv. Communication skills	DAR	7	77.7	1	11.1	1	11.1	.54
	MBEYA	8	66.6	4	33.3	0	0	
	RUVUMA	12	80.0	3	20.0	0	0	
v. Team Working skills	DAR	7	77.7	1	11.1	1	11.1	.57
	MBEYA	9	75.0	3	25.0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	13	86.6	2	13.3	0	0	
vi. Professional ethics	DAR	6	66.6	3	33.3	0	0	.57
	MBEYA	9	75.0	3	25.0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	11	73.3	3	20.0	1	6.6	
vii. Leadership skills	DAR	6	66.6	3	33.3	0	0	.64
	MBEYA	9	75.0	3	25.0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	13	86.6	1	6.6	1	6.6	

Employers' questionnaire responses (2023). KEY: 3= High priority (HP), 2= Medium priority (MP), 1=Low priority (LP)

The study reveals that communication skills are widely acknowledged as important by the heads of nearby schools, with significant agreement across the regions ($P = 0.05$). However, there were no significant differences in responses regarding entrepreneurship skills, problem-solving, innovative skills, teamwork, professional ethics, and leadership skills ($P > 0.05$). In Ruvuma, responses were more varied for skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership, with some respondents rating these skills lower compared to those in Dar es Salaam and Mbeya.

The study reveals significant differences among regions regarding the innovative skills ($P < 0.05$). 86.6% of employers in Ruvuma had the highest confidence in the innovative skills acquired by ODL graduates, followed by 77.7% in Dar es Salaam and 66.6% in the Mbeya region. However, responses on skills such as entrepreneurship skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, team-working skills, professional ethics, and leadership skills do not show significant differences across the regions ($P > 0.05$).

Additionally, the heads of nearby schools were asked the same question to share their perceptions of their confidence in the skills, value, and abilities of ODL graduates in performing their assigned tasks. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: heads of a nearby schools' perceptions on the skills, value and abilities of the ODL graduates (N=10)

Skills	Region	HP		MP		LP		P-Value
		f	%	f	%	f	%	
i. Entrepreneurship skills	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.12
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	4	80	1	20	0	0	
ii. Problem solving	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.22
	MBEYA	3	75	1	25	0	0	
	RUVUMA	3	60	0	0	2	40	
iii. Innovative skills	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.54
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	4	80	1	20	0	0	
iv. Communication skills	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.03
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	5	100	0	0	0	0	
v. Team Working skills	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.51
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	3	60	1	20	1	20	
vi. Professional ethics	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.40
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	4	80	1	20	0	0	
vii. Leadership skills	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.27
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	2	40	2	40	1	20	

Heads of nearby school questionnaire responses (2023). KEY: 3= High priority (HP), 2= Medium priority (MP), 1=Low priority (LP)

The study reveals that communication skills are widely acknowledged as important by the heads of nearby schools, with significant agreement across the regions ($P = 0.05$). However, there were no significant differences in responses regarding entrepreneurship skills, problem-solving, innovative skills, teamwork, professional ethics, and leadership skills ($P > 0.05$). In Ruvuma, responses were more varied for skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership, with some respondents rating these skills lower compared to those in Dar es Salaam and Mbeya.

The results from Tables 2 and 3 show that employers and heads of nearby schools hold different perceptions on the skills, value, and abilities of the ODL graduates. Employers note significant regional differences, particularly in innovative skills, with the highest confidence in Ruvuma (86.6%), followed by Dar es Salaam (77.7%) and Mbeya (66.6%). In contrast, heads of nearby schools recognized communication skills, with higher confidence in all regions.

Furthermore, ODL learners were asked the same question regarding their confidence in the skills, values, and abilities they acquired through the ODL, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: ODL Learners' perceptions on the skills, value and abilities of the ODL graduates (N=576)

Skills	Region	HP		MP		LP		P-Value
		f	%	f	%	f	%	
i. Entrepreneurship skills	DAR	135	63.0	51	23.8	28	13.0	.00
	MBEYA	202	75.0	46	17.1	21	7.8	
	RUVUMA	75	80.6	17	18.2	1	1.0	
ii. Problem solving	DAR	137	64.0	46	21.4	31	14.4	.00
	MBEYA	206	76.5	39	14.4	24	8.9	
	RUVUMA	86	92.4	7	7.5	0	0	
iii. Innovative skills	DAR	142	66.3	47	21.9	25	11.6	.00
	MBEYA	184	68.4	64	23.7	21	7.8	
	RUVUMA	75	80.6	15	16.1	3	3.2	
iv. Communication skills	DAR	155	72.4	34	15.8	25	11.6	.00
	MBEYA	220	81.7	32	11.8	17	6.3	
	RUVUMA	93	100	0	0	0	0	
v. Team Working skills	DAR	143	66.8	48	22.4	23	10.7	.00
	MBEYA	209	77.6	41	15.2	19	7.0	
	RUVUMA	79	84.9	12	12.9	2	2.1	
vi. Professional ethics	DAR	155	72.4	36	16.8	23	10.7	.00
	MBEYA	222	82.5	32	11.8	15	5.5	
	RUVUMA	66	70.9	21	22.5	6	6.4	
vii. Leadership skills	DAR	143	66.8	38	17.7	33	15.4	.00
	MBEYA	215	79.9	35	13.0	19	7.0	
	RUVUMA	82	88.1	11	11.8	0	0	

Learners' questionnaire responses (2023). KEY: 3= High priority (HP), 2= Medium priority (MP), 1=Low priority (LP)

The data reveal that entrepreneurship skills, problem-solving skills, innovative skills, communication skills, teamwork skills, professional ethics, and leadership skills are highly valued by ODL learners across all regions ($P < 0.05$). Learners from Ruvuma show the highest confidence in most of these skills, followed by those from Mbeya and Dar es Salaam.

Additionally, data from Tables 2 and 4 indicate that both employers and ODL learners in the Ruvuma region show the highest confidence in innovative skills, with 86.6% of employers and 80.6% of learners expressing confidence. Mbeya follows, with 66.6% of employers and 68.4% of learners confident in these skills, and Dar es Salaam comes next, with 77.7% of employers and 66.3% of learners expressing confidence. In contrast, Table 3 shows that heads of nearby schools express the highest level of confidence in graduates' communication skills with strong agreement across all regions. These statistically significant differences emphasize the role of regional factors in shaping opinions of the innovative and communication skills gained through the ODL.

Perceptions About their Ability to perform the assigned task.

Employers were asked to share their perceptions on the ability of ODL graduates to perform their assigned task, and their responses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Employers' perceptions concerning the ability of ODL graduate to perform their task. (N=36)

Statement	Region	A		N		DA		P-Value
		f	%	f	%	f	%	
i. It is easy for them to be promoted	DAR	7	77.7	0	0	2	22.2	.11
	MBEYA	7	58.3	5	41.6	0	0	
	RUVUMA	9	60.0	3	20.0	3	20.0	
ii. They can easily be assigned any task	DAR	7	77.7	2	22.2	0	0	.02
	MBEYA	9	75.0	3	25.0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	12	80.0	0	0	3	20.0	
iii. They can help their learners and fellow teachers when needed	DAR	8	88.8	1	11.1	0	0	.21
	MBEYA	12	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	14	93.3	0	0	1	6.6	
iv. They are confident with any given work	DAR	9	100	0	0	0	0	.45
	MBEYA	11	91.6	1	8.3	0	0	
	RUVUMA	12	80.0	0	0	3	20.0	
v. ODL equips graduates with quality and sustainable skills to serve the community	DAR	9	100	0	0	0	0	.79
	MBEYA	12	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	14	93.3	0	0	1	6.6	
vi. I'm satisfied with my employee who graduated from Institute of Adult Education through ODL	DAR	9	100	0	0	0	0	.72
	MBEYA	11	91.6	1	8.3	0	0	
	RUVUMA	11	73.3	2	13.3	2	13.3	
vii. ODL graduates demonstrate a high level of competence when given responsibilities	DAR	9	100	0	0	0	0	.34
	MBEYA	11	91.6	1	8.3	0	0	
	RUVUMA	12	80.0	2	13.3	1	6.6	

Employers' questionnaire responses (2023). KEY: 3=Agree(A), 2= Neutral (N), 1= Disagree (DA)

The data indicate that employers in Ruvuma have the highest confidence in the ability of ODL graduates to be assigned any task, followed by 77.7% of employers from Dar es Salaam and 75.0% from Mbeya ($P < 0.05$). However, other aspects, such as ease of promotion, the ability to assist learners and fellow teachers, confidence in handling any given task, the adequacy of quality and sustainable skills provided by the ODL program, employer satisfaction with employees who graduated from IAE through ODL, and the competence of ODL graduates when assigned responsibilities, do not show significant differences across regions ($P > 0.05$).

Additionally, the heads of nearby schools at the learning centres were asked the same question about the ODL graduates and their ability to perform their task. The researcher's aim was to determine their awareness of the program, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Head of a nearby school perceptions concerning the ability of ODL graduate to perform their assigned task. (N=10)

Statement	Region	A		N		DA		P-Value
		f	%	f	%	f	%	
i. It is easy for them to be promoted.	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.39
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	5	100	0	0	0	0	
ii. They can easily be assigned any task	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.57
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	4	80.0	0	0	1	20.0	
iii. They can help their learners and fellow teachers when needed	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.46
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	4	80.0	0	0	1	20.0	
iv. They are confident with any given work	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.54
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	4	80.0	0	0	1	20.0	
v. ODL equips graduates with quality and sustainable skills to serve the community	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.03
	MBEYA	2	50.0	2	50.0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	3	60.0	2	40.0	0	0	
vi. I'm satisfied with my employee who graduated from Institute of Adult Education through ODL	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.17
	MBEYA	4	100	0	0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	5	100	0	0	0	0	
vii. ODL graduates demonstrate a high level of competence when given responsibilities.	DAR	1	100	0	0	0	0	.00
	MBEYA	3	75.0	1	25.0	0	0	
	RUVUMA	4	80.0	1	20.0	0	0	

Heads of a nearby school questionnaire responses (2023). KEY: 3=Agree(A), 2= Neutral (N), 1= Disagree (DA)

The data show that the ODL program has successfully equipped graduates with adequate quality and sustainable skills to serve the community, and these graduates demonstrate a high level of competence when assigned responsibilities ($P < 0.05$). Heads of nearby schools in Dar es Salaam consistently express strong agreement with positive statements about ODL graduates, followed by those in Ruvuma and Mbeya, particularly in terms of the

quality and sustainability of the skills acquired and the high competence of graduates when given responsibilities. However, there are no significant differences across the regions in other aspects like ease of promotion, ability to be assigned any job, capability to assist learners and fellow teachers, confidence in handling any given task, and overall satisfaction with employees who graduated from IAE through ODL ($P > 0.05$).

Moreover, the results from Tables 5 and 6 reveal that employers and heads of nearby schools have different perspectives on the adequacy and competence of ODL graduates. Employers perceive significant regional differences primarily in job assignment, with a higher level of confidence in Ruvuma (80%), followed by Dar es Salaam (77%) and Mbeya (75%). On the other hand, the heads of nearby schools perceive significant regional differences in skill adequacy and competence, with the higher level of confidence in Dar es Salaam, Mbeya, and the Ruvuma region.

Furthermore, ODL learners were asked the same questions concerning their perceptions about ODL graduates and their ability to perform the assigned task; their responses were shown in Table 7.

Table 7: ODL Learners' perceptions concerning the ability of ODL graduate to perform the assigned task. (N=576)

Statement	Region	A		N		DA		P-Value
		f	%	F	%	f	%	
i. It is easy for me to be promoted	DAR	161	75.2	30	14.0	23	10.7	.00
	MBEYA	214	79.5	24	8.9	31	11.5	
	RUVUMA	89	94.6	4	4.3	1	1.0	
ii. It is easy for me to be assigned with any job	DAR	162	75.7	31	14.4	21	9.8	.00
	MBEYA	212	78.8	27	10.0	30	11.1	
	RUVUMA	86	92.4	6	6.4	1	1.0	
iii. I can easily support learners and colleagues when they need my support	DAR	168	78.5	24	11.2	22	10.2	.01
	MBEYA	224	83.2	15	5.5	30	11.1	
	RUVUMA	84	90.3	9	9.6	0	0	
iv. I'm confident with any given task with my employer	DAR	166	77.5	26	12.1	22	10.2	.01
	MBEYA	226	84.0	15	5.5	28	10.4	
	RUVUMA	89	95.6	3	3.2	1	1.0	
v. ODL contribute to professional skills training	DAR	167	78.0	22	10.2	25	11.6	.00
	MBEYA	223	82.8	11	4.0	35	13.0	
	RUVUMA	90	96.7	1	1.0	2	2.1	
vi. My employer is satisfied with the level of knowledge and skills gained from ODL program	DAR	160	74.7	29	13.5	25	11.6	.00
	MBEYA	209	77.6	25	9.2	35	13.0	
	RUVUMA	89	95.6	4	4.3	0	0	
vii. My training has prepared me for any given work by my employers	DAR	147	68.6	31	14.4	36	16.8	.00
	MBEYA	211	78.4	11	4.0	47	17.4	
	RUVUMA	87	93.5	6	6.4	0	0	
viii. It is easy for me to get the job I want	DAR	151	70.5	34	15.8	29	13.5	.00
	MBEYA	198	73.6	25	9.2	46	17.1	
	RUVUMA	87	93.5	5	5.3	1	1.0	

Learners' questionnaire responses (2023) KEY: 3=Agree(A), 2= Neutral (N), 1= Disagree (DA), % = Percent, f = Frequency

The data indicate that ODL learners have a positive perception of several aspects of the ODL program. They feel that their training has adequately prepared them for any tasks assigned by their employers, that their employers are satisfied with the ODL program's knowledge and skills, that they can easily be promoted or find any job, and that they can easily help fellow teachers when needed. Additionally, they feel confident in handling any task given by their employer, are able to incorporate what they have learned into their workplace, and believe that the ODL program contributes to the development of professional skills ($P < 0.05$). According to the data, 96.7% of learners from Ruvuma show the highest agreement, reflecting strong confidence in the ODL program, followed by 82.9% of learners from Mbeya and 78.0% from Dar es Salaam.

To conclude, findings revealed that employers, the head of a nearby school, and ODL learners have a positive perception of ODL graduates' abilities to perform assigned jobs. ODL Learners and employers are largely confident in the training and the skills provided by the ODL program, whereas the head of a nearby school exhibits more nuanced views, especially concerning regional differences in skills adequacy and competence.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the skills, values, and abilities of ODL (Open and Distance Learning) graduates, as well as their job performance, differ, while employers and

ODL learners expressed confidence in the innovative skills acquired by ODL graduates. Heads of nearby schools, on the other hand, were particularly confident in the ODL graduates' communication skills. Employers and ODL learners showed the highest confidence in the graduates' ability to perform the given assigned tasks effectively. Similarly, heads of nearby schools were highly confident in the ODL program's success in equipping graduates with quality and sustainable skills to serve the community. This variation is partly due to the differing quality of services and facilitation that learners receive at their learning centres. While employers and school heads in a region might experience relatively uniform services, learners may face varied challenges depending on their regional context, leading to differing perceptions.

These regional differences significantly affect the quality of the ODL program and how employers perceive the competence of its graduates. To enhance the competence of ODL learners and better align them with employer expectations, it is crucial to identify and address the specific needs and challenges faced at the ODL learning centres. Furthermore, providing learners with a diverse set of skills will not only improve their ability to perform assigned tasks but also enable them to compete more effectively in the global labour market.

The findings, based on the skills, value, and competence, show that innovative skills were the most commonly acquired by ODL graduates. Employers emphasized the significance of equipping their employees with innovative skills during professional development. This is consistent with Ismail and colleagues (2024), who emphasized that innovative skills are essential for success in the workplace, and ODL programs should equip learners with these skills to succeed in a globalized world. Additionally, the head of a nearby school identified the communication skills as one among the important skills that ODL learners should acquire. These findings align with studies done by Phan and colleagues (2022) and Mahmud & Wong (2022), which emphasized the importance of communication skills and problem-solving skills for ODL learners. Furthermore, Fajaryat and Akhyar (2020) found that employers preferred employees who possessed a combination of these skills in their working place. ODL programs, like conventional learning, can effectively develop these skills to meet labour market demands, as graduates' demonstration of acquired knowledge and skills reflects the program's value.

The findings revealed that learners, employers, and the head of the nearby schools were confident in the ability of ODL graduates to perform their assigned tasks. This aligns with the study by Bobek and colleagues (2022), which found that ODL graduates perform just as well as conventional learners in the workplace, with employers holding a positive attitude toward them. It is crucial for ODL graduates to deliver productive output when assigned tasks. Supporting this, Fausat (2020) found that employers are willing to assign any task to distance learning graduates, trusting in their abilities to perform the tasks.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings showed that ODL graduates possess a variety of essential skills for their jobs during their ODL learning studies for professional development, such as innovative skills and communication skills. Moreover, ODL graduates show the highest competencies in performing their given tasks. However, based on the findings, the study emphasizes the importance of ODL institutions identifying the specific skills that employers need in order to better align their programs with these requirements.

The study recommends that ODL institutions partner with employers to understand the skills ODL graduates should possess to succeed in the workplace. Additionally, ODL institutions should ensure that their programs are of high quality so that all graduates meet consistent standards of professional readiness in the labour market.

Ethical Approval

I hereby declare that participants were given the consent letter to participate in this study, and thereafter I collected and reserved them.

Conflict of Interest

I hereby declare that there was no any competing interest exist in this work.

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