

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393790508>

Title: "30 Years of Unlocking Sustainable Educational Opportunities through Open and Distance Learning"

Chapter · July 2025

CITATIONS

0

READS

3

2 authors:



[Martha Jacob Kabate](#)

Open University of Tanzania

9 PUBLICATIONS 9 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Upendo Nombo](#)

Open University of Tanzania

2 PUBLICATIONS 5 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Title:

“30 Years of Unlocking Sustainable Educational Opportunities through
Open and Distance Learning



30 YEARS OF UNLOCKING

Sustainable Educational Opportunities through Open and Distance Learning

2024



Chapter Nine

Does First-Hand Information about The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) Reflect Reality?

Martha J. Kabate

Faculty of Education, The Open University of Tanzania
martha.kabate@out.ac.tz

Flora N. Nyaisa

Faculty of Education, The Open University of Tanzania
flora.nyaisa@out.ac.tz

Upendo W. Nombo

Faculty of Education, The Open University of Tanzania
upendo.nombo@out.ac.tz

Abstract

This chapter examined the alignment between the information prospective students gathered about the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and their actual experiences. It identified the main sources through which students received first-hand information and analyzed the nature of this information in relation to OUT's Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. The chapter was developed through a literature review, case studies, and surveys. Data were collected using a questionnaire that included questions about academics, support services, and other important aspects of the university. The survey, conducted via Google Forms, involved 311 OUT students from various programs. Findings revealed that the OUT website was the primary source of information for prospective students, while other sources like radio, family members, career advisors, and TV commercials were rated much lower. Students reported receiving general information about OUT's ODL model, but they expressed dissatisfaction with the information regarding the link between academic programs and career opportunities. Understanding these issues was essential for improving open, online, and distance learning and addressing barriers to successful ODL implementation. The chapter's findings contributed to refining marketing strategies and offered insights into future directions for ODL

Keywords: Information, First-hand Information, The Open University of Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

This chapter endeavours to examine the significance of first-hand information collected by prospective students and whether it accurately reflects the reality of The Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The chapter

specifically identifies information sources students resort to obtaining first-hand information about OUT, analyses the nature of information in relation to admission, academic, and support issues and the nature of this information in the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems. The specific objectives presented in the establishment of intentional opportunities for a holistic student experience were determined through the findings. The following chapter provides a discussion of the findings of each objective, as well as the implication and conclusion of the chapter. This chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of whether the information disseminated about The Open University of Tanzania accurately reflects the lived reality within its academic and administrative spheres. In the course of this investigation, the chapter intends to unearth findings that have the potential to contribute to the completion of future educational institutions and to improve the clarity of the narratives that surround them. The chapter contributes to the body of knowledge in marketing. The chapter also contributes by filling the gap in the reality of the information provided by the OUT in overcoming barriers in the successful ODL on implementation of Emerging Trends and Future Directions in ODL.

Concept and Definition

The term first-hand information refers to first insights or information obtained directly from a primary source when prospective students gather information so as to decide on the choice of the University to study. The term Information Search is considered a means used by consumers to reduce uncertainty and perceived risk (Urbany *et al.*, 1989; Cox 1967). In this chapter, consumers are prospective students who seek information to study at the OUT. Moreover, information search is the process undertaken by prospective students to acquire information and identify possible solutions for their problems regarding the choice of university to study. Information search can be internal or external (Blackwell *et al.*, 2006). Internal search is based on retrieving existing information in memory or knowledge from previous related experiences. External search is information search beyond one's memory and refers to collecting new information from a number of personal and non-personal sources. Sustainable education is a concept that involves active academic participation to create economic, social and environmental programs that improve life standards, generating empowerment and respecting interdependence Tavanti and Wilp, (2015). Sustainable education is an educational approach aimed at entrenching in students, schools, and communities the values and motivations to act for sustainability now and in the future – in one's own life, in their communities, and on a worldwide platform (Tyagi and Verma, 2022).

BACKGROUND OF THE CHAPTER

Every prospective student requires access to valuable information that will assist in determining their choice for higher learning. It is customary and anticipated for students to actively pursue information in order to narrow down their options and choose an institution that aligns with their expectations and interests. In light of the present and continuous evolution of the university marketplace, its operational methods, and the consequences for both students and universities, careful consideration is given to the crucial matter of whether first-hand information accurately represents the experience and satisfaction of the students. The prevailing assumption is that first-hand information consistently possesses a significant level of integrity, dependability, and accuracy.

Moreover, higher education institutions, including OUT, have an essential role in sustainability (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021). Wals (2014) indicates that the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) emphasises the importance of education in increasing world sustainability. One of the objectives of UNDESD is "to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning." Sustainability principles need to be at the heart of higher institutions' strategy and are key to being incorporated into the organisational culture. Higher education contributes decisively to the Sustainable Development Goals implementation, especially to Goal 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere), Goal 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages), Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), Goal 13 (climate change) and Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). In light of this context, the first-hand information that the OUT provides to potential students should be pertinent in addressing challenges associated with sustainable development.

Sterling (2001) poses two fundamental enquiries regarding sustainable education: "What is the purpose of education?" and "Whose Education?" Starting with the first question, this is all about the purpose of education: to replicate society and culture and promote citizenship (socialisation function); to train people for employment – (vocational function); to develop the individual and their potential (liberal function); and to encourage change towards a fairer society and better world (transformative function). Another question is about "whose education"? Education seeks to place ownership and determination with educators, learners, and communities. Learners should have ownership of their learning, and education has to be meaningful, engaging and participative rather than functional, passive and prescriptive. This chapter concentrated on the

significance of first-hand information in enabling prospective students to access sustainable education for successful Open, online and distance Learning (ODL) when they gather information in order to decide to study with the OUT.

The choice of which University to attend has been characterised as a highly complex decision as it is subject to multiple influences (Briggs and Wilson, 2007). When given complete information about an institution, prospective students are better able to make informed educational decisions. According to McNicholas (2020), information seeking is one of the factors that influence the decision of prospective students to attend any university. Choosing a university to study is a substantial decision-making process in the context of information inquiry. Prospective students seek first-hand information with the expectation that these perspectives will offer a transparent and accurate depiction of university life. Information collecting reduces uncertainty, as per Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Spink and Cole 2004). The Cognitive Dissonance Theory elucidates the role of information in reducing individuals' uncertainty regarding information searching and decision-making (Blythe, 2013). The theory suggests that the individual may attempt to mitigate dissonance by modifying their perspectives in response to new information that would enhance consistency or congruence. In addition, Blythe (2013) identified four types of perceived risk that incite prospective students to assemble information prior to making a decision and boost the confidence of the University in undertaking a study. Figure 1 illustrates the four types of risks: psychosocial, financial, physical, and functional.

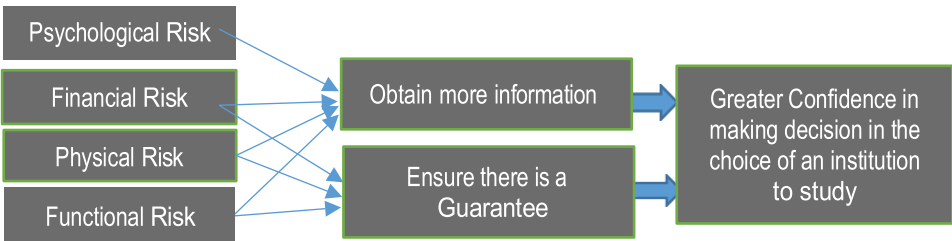


Figure 1: Information gathering risks reduction and decision-making processes adapted from McNicholas (2020).

Moreover, the decision of which University to attend and which course to pursue is a difficult task for prospective students. According to Ürer *et al.* (2021), prospective students seek information to reduce the anxiety they are experiencing while choosing a higher education institution. Information search is considered a means used by consumers. In this chapter, consumers are prospective students (Urbany *et al.*, 1989; Cox, 1967). Information searching is the second stage, as defined by Kotler and Fox (1995). The

first stage is Needs Recognition, which encompasses the selection of an institution, motivation to study, and information selection. After conducting an information search, the subsequent phase is the "Evaluation Process," which entails the selection of an institution. In general, the higher the degree of perceived risk, the higher the tendency to look for information about a service (Murray 1991). Once the need to study at the university level has been recognised, a student usually searches for information on how to satisfy this need. Students usually start the search process from their memory of alternative institutions that might be able to satisfy their needs.

The Open University of Tanzania, Information Dissemination and Marketing

As illustrated in Figure 2, the OUT admits students to a variety of programs at different levels, including PhDs, Masters', Postgraduate Diplomas, Bachelor's degree, Diploma, and certificates. The figure shows undergraduate admission on an annual basis from 2017/2018 to 2021/2022. The admission trend indicates an increase in student enrollment throughout five years. However, there was a slight decrease in student admission in 2019/2020.

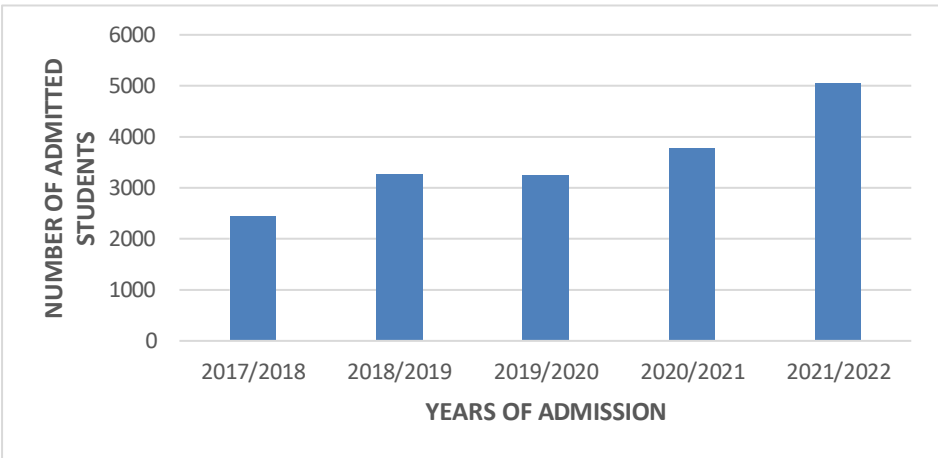


Figure 2: Admission of students and reflection on information about OUT (adapted from OUT Fact and Figure, 2022)

Moreover, the regional centres are staffed by marketing officers who work under the Communication and Marketing Department to promote the OUT programs and ensure that the institution attracts students to study each year. They also provide information about OUT, the programs offered, academic issues, school fees, and OUT-ODL during the marketing process. Additionally, the marketing officers respond to enquiries that arise during the marketing procedure. The dissemination of information is also contingent upon the demographic that is being targeted.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was developed through Google Forms, which captured the specific objectives regarding the information about OUT. A total of 311 students currently enrolled at OUT responded to a questionnaire online. The questionnaire contained information regarding first-hand information sources in which students were required to indicate an option of their favour. The students were also provided with statements on issues related to academics, supporting services, and related matters, as well as issues regarding the OUT as an ODL institution. The statements were rated using five levels of the Likert scale in search of students' agreement on the information provided. In order to analyse data, Microsoft Excel was implemented. The obtained information from the questionnaire were loaded to the Excel sheet, percentages were computed for gender, age, and sources of information regarding the OUT. Additionally, the percentages were also calculated for the statements concerning the actuality of OUT, along with likert scale levels. Subsequently, bar charts were implemented to visually represent the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part of the book chapter presents the results on gender and age of the students participated in the study. Also, the section presents results regarding sources for first-hand information, nature of the first-hand information about the University and first-hand information about OUT and the mode of study.

The data presented in Figure 3 demonstrates that a sizeable proportion of the individuals who participated in this book chapter were male.

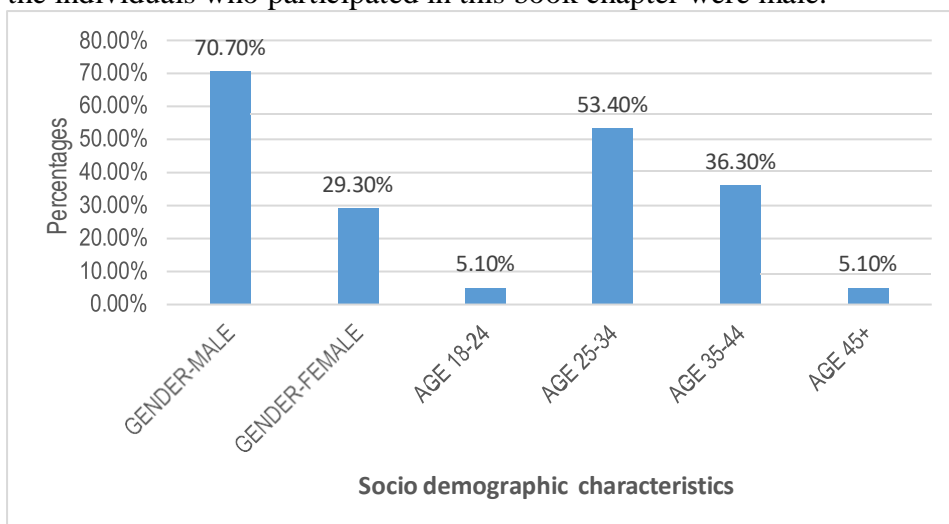


Figure 3: Demographic characteristics of the students involved in the study.

Figure 3 also shows that the majority of respondents to the questionnaire were aged 25-34 (53.4%) and 35-44 (36.3%). The results revealed that individuals who enrol in the University fall within the age range of 25 to 44 years. Moreover, there are few individuals aged 45 and above. The students who participated in the development of this chapter presented the faculties and directorates of the OUT. Students from the faculty of education accounted for 39.1%, the faculty of law 5.8%, the faculty of arts and social Sciences 33.3%, the faculty of Science 9.2%, and the Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) 12.6%. Out of the 311 responses, 11.7% were from master's programs, 60.9% were from first degrees, 14.8% were from diplomas, 9.1% were from certificates, and 3.5% were from postgraduate diplomas. Students were also from different academic years, whereby 35.1% were in their first year of study, 31.2% were in their second year, 29.9% were in their third year, 1.3% were in their fourth year, 0.9% in their fifth year, 0.9% in their sixth year, and 0.9% in their seventh year.

Sources for First-Hand Information

This section identifies key information sources that students visited when they decided to study with the OUT. It is imperative to comprehend the significance of first-hand sources when investigating the manner in which prospective students acquire information about universities. Kotler (2008), as indicated in Figure 4, divides these external information sources into two categories: personal and non-personal. Non-personal sources consist of advertisements, prospectuses, and mass media, while personal sources include advice from family, friends, and instructors. Non-personal sources comprise more formal methods of information dissemination, including promotional materials and official university websites. Information sources have been classified as impersonal and personal (Patti and Chen, 2009), direct, media, and social (Bonnema & van der Walddt, 2008), or online and offline (Patti and Chen, 2009; Dao & Thorpe, 2015). The information sources illustrate students' direct methods of gathering information regarding their prospective educational institutions. These sources provide valuable, intimate insights and can have a substantial impact on the decision-making process of a prospective student. By integrating these diverse sources of information, prospective students can achieve a more nuanced understanding of what a university has to offer, enabling them to make well-informed decisions about their educational paths. Thus, students have access to a variety of information sources from which they can obtain first-hand information before deciding whether or not to pursue higher education at a certain institution, as illustrated in Figure 4.

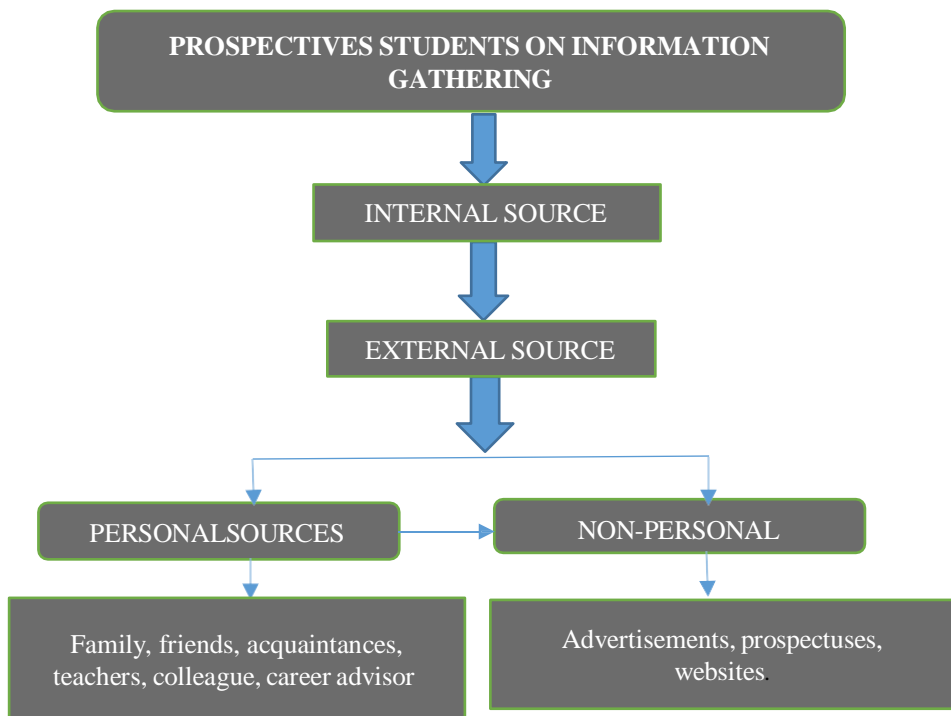


Figure 4: Information Gathering and Information Sources Adapted from Kotler, P., & Fox, K. (1995)

As shown in Figure 4, prospective students have access to a variety of information sources from which they can obtain first-hand information before deciding whether or not to pursue higher education at a certain institution. The experiences of students at The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) with these first-hand information sources are the primary focus of this chapter, as shown in Figure 5.

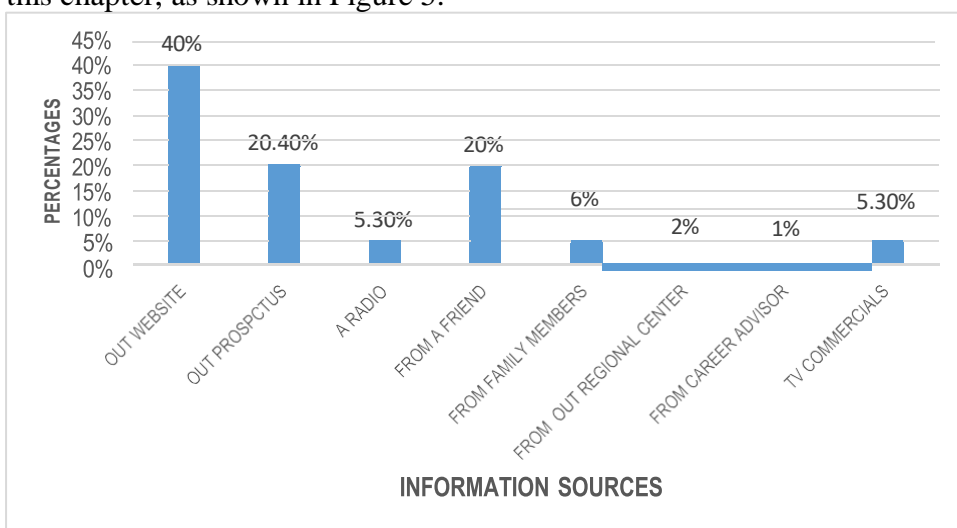


Figure 5: OUT Information Source (fieldwork 2024)

Figure 5 indicates the information sources students visited prior to studying with the OUT. The findings of this chapter reveal that prospective students mostly use the website (40%) to search for information about OUT in order to decide whether or not to pursue further education. Moreover, the findings revealed other sources of information prospective students rely on, including an OUT prospectus (20.40%) from a friend (20%). However, the findings also revealed that some sources of information are rarely visited, such as career advisors (1%), OUT regional centre (2%), radio (5.3%), TV commercials (5.3%) and family members (6%). This was a surprising finding.

Nature of the first-hand information about the University

It is of the utmost importance to provide prospective students with accurate and relevant information pertaining to the University. Prospective students are always on the lookout for detailed university information so they may make educated decisions. They do not simply accept the information, and they evaluate its relevance in relation to their circumstances, personal objectives, and values (Lubbe and Petzer 2013). The quality and scope of this information can vary substantially depending on the sources queried and the individual's background, which may include personal experiences and prior knowledge. The information provided about a university must be comprehensive and detailed despite these variations. A comprehensive presentation of information assists candidates in making well-informed decisions regarding their academic future and addresses knowledge deficits. In this chapter, students at the Open University of Tanzania have exhibited specific insights into the quality and nature of the information that has been presented to them. The students were provided with statements which showed the quality of the information about OUT.

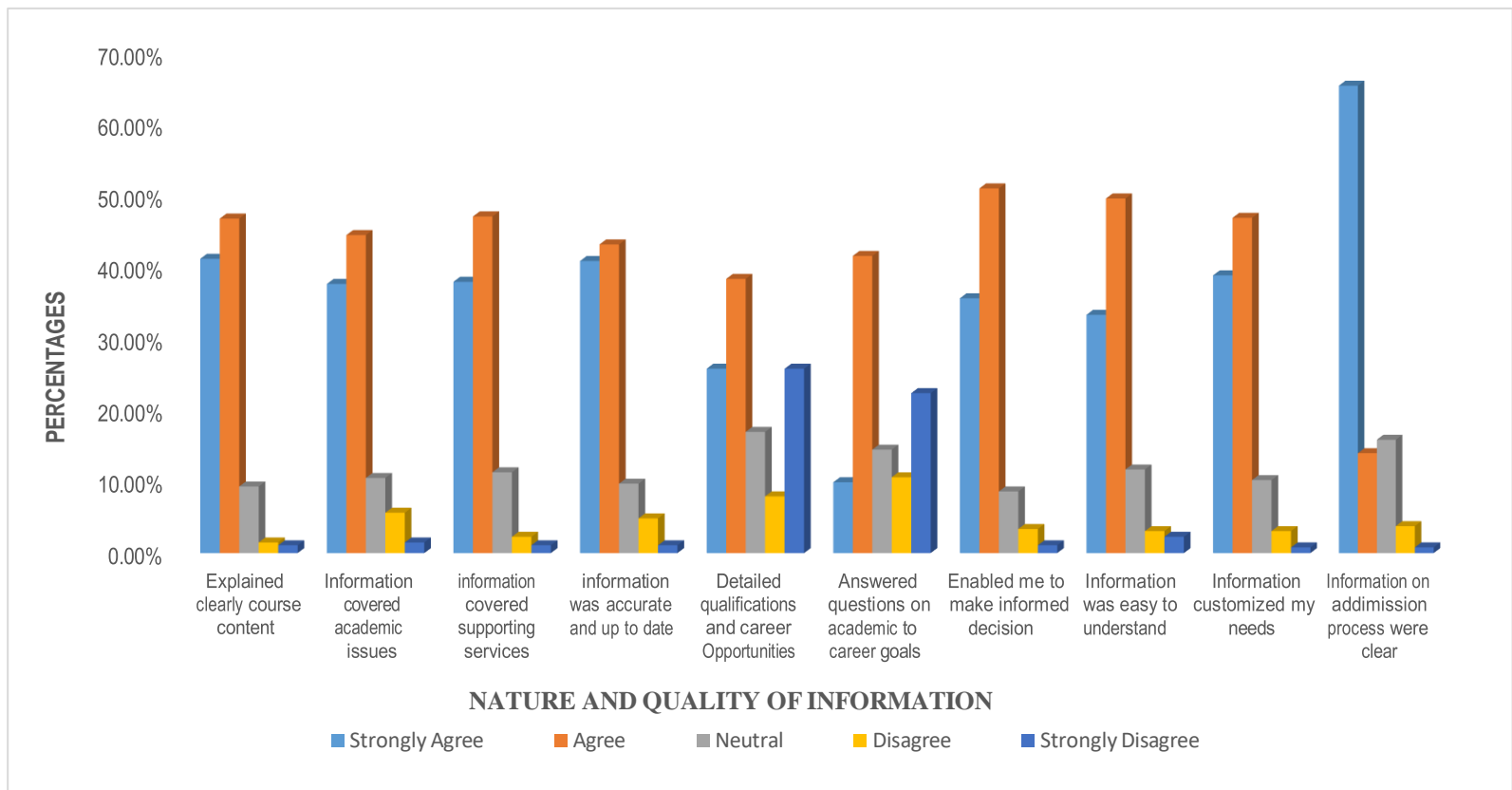


Figure 6: Nature of General information expected to OUT (Field 2024)

It is also mentioned in this chapter that the kind of general information that is anticipated to be offered by the OUT to potential students in relation to their decision to enrol in the University is presented as indicated in Figure 6. Nine out of ten statements regarding the information were agreed to be provided by the information sources. Furthermore, there was a solid agreement regarding the information on the admissions process being completely explicit. According to Figure 6, statements on the link between academic issues, career goals and qualifications and career opportunities were strongly disagreed. The findings imply that students are not satisfied with the information provided.

First-hand information about OUT and the mode of study

The Open University of Tanzania is distinguished by its emphasis on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and its distinctive educational approach within the country. Its flexibility and accessibility are the distinguishing characteristics of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). ODL is an optimal option for students who are unable to attend traditional classroom settings due to personal, professional, or geographical obligations, as it enables them to study from virtually any location and at any time. In order to facilitate education, this method frequently employs online platforms, printed materials, and intermittent in-person interactions. The focus is on self-directed learning, in which students are empowered to manage their schedules and progress with the assistance of digital resources and remote tutoring.

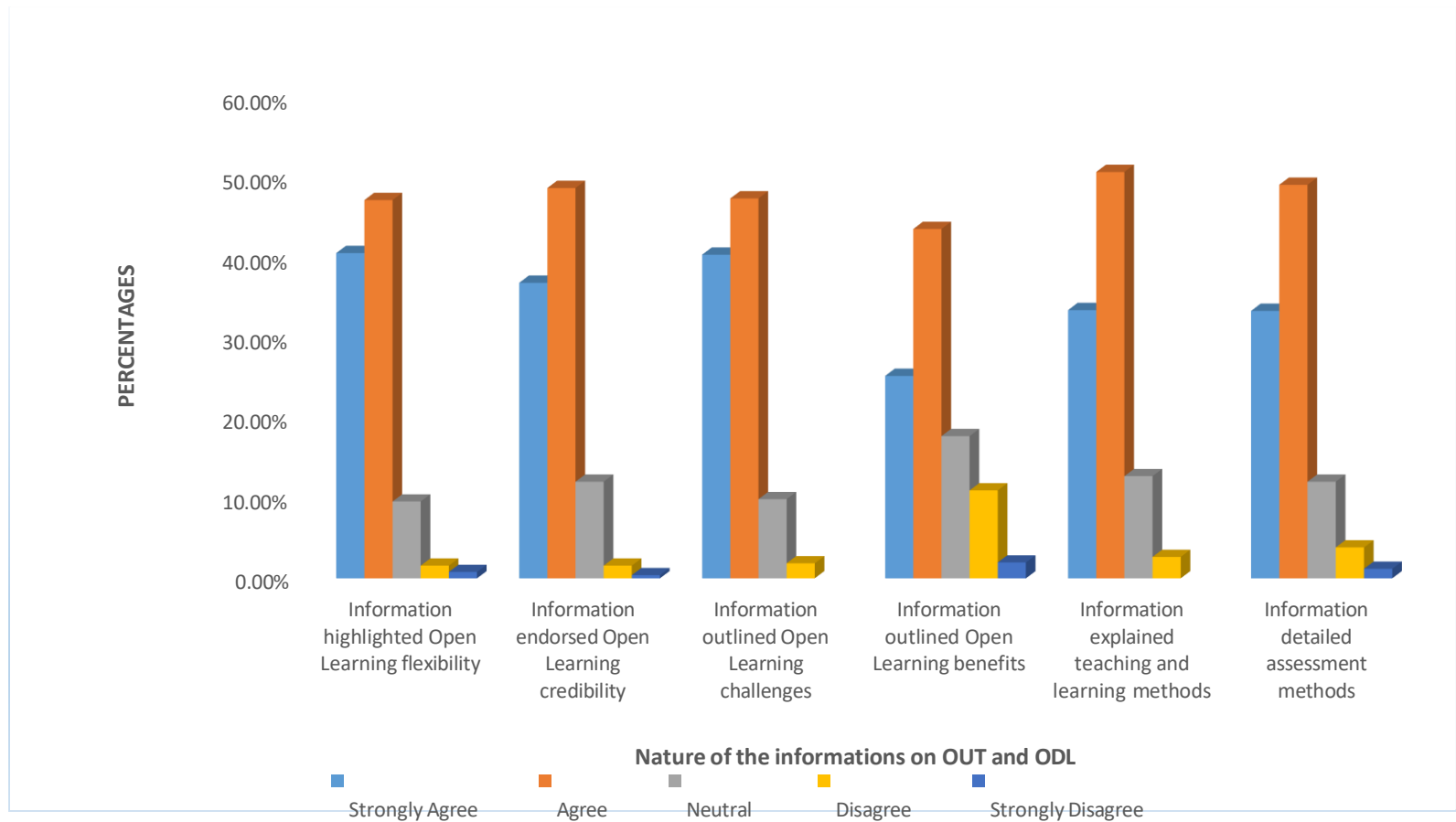


Figure 7: Nature of mode of study at the OUT (Field 2024)

For each of the six statements concerning the OUT form of study, the students were found to agree, as shown in Figure 6. During the process of deciding whether or not to study with the OUT, it has been discovered that the sources of information that students utilise contain information on the characteristics of the online distance learning (ODL) style of study.

Students expect that the information they are provided regarding the University is both accurate and indicative of their future experiences upon enrolment. Universities must ensure that the information they disseminate is both authentic and comprehensive, thereby fostering an environment that aligns with students' expectations. The information that is collected is contingent upon the information sources that are accessible to prospective students.

The website serves as the primary source of information for the Open University. The OUT Information and Communication Technology Policy 2019/20 to 2023/24 is substantiated by the results (OUT, 2019). One of the policy objectives is to guarantee that the website content is intended to provide users with pertinent and up-to-date information. The policy suggests that the university website has been improved to include all pertinent information for both current and prospective students. Additionally, the website has integrated a live support feature for students. The University maintains a website that serves as both a communication and marketing instrument. Effectively presenting, useful, and timely updating of the information is guaranteed by the appropriate organisation of the website's content. Given the information, the OUT website had valuable and relevant information, information that prospective students are satisfied with and built high expectations and hence chose to study at OUT. The findings are related to a study by Ürer, Erdil, Tümer, Nadiri, and Aghaei (2021) at the University of North Cyprus. In a case by Paddy (2019), regarding the international students at the University of Ghana (n = 166) and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (n = 269), family members are the main sources of information about the universities in both, followed by the institution's website. Another case is by Mwidege and Matimbwa (2023) at Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) in Tanzania. Students relied on the National Council for Technical Education - Vocational Education and Training to get their information, followed by friends and the MUST website, with mass media being the last.

The first-hand information regarding the nature of the general information to the prospective students reflects the reality of OUT. The important information on academic and support issues provided by the OUT to

prospective students suffices. Prospective students' information is clear to them when deciding to study with the OUT. Clear information unlocks sustainable education because the prospective students choose the course in harmony. Moreover, the information regarding the link between academic issues and career goals and opportunities seems to be not satisfying the students. Bae (2022) commented that there is a relationship between academic issues and career opportunities. The link between academic and career opportunities helps prospective students meet their needs. The characteristics of OUT's ODL method of study are well-known to potential students. This elucidates the mode of study and the decision to study with OUT as an ODL institution or conventionally. Prospective students must be aware of the characteristics of ODL, as they mitigate the challenges that students face when studying ODL. Edward (2019) noted that rural Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students encounter issues such as limited study places and unstable electricity. The challenges mentioned have the potential to disrupt and impede students' concentration, and they are inconsistent with the engagement of course material. Additionally, these concerns exacerbate the digital divide and impede academic success for students in rural compared to those in urban areas. Students may be able to surmount obstacles in their academic pursuits and achieve their anticipated potential by being cognisant of the situation.

Implications of the Findings of the Chapter

In addressing the central theme of this book, unlocking sustainable education through open, online and distance learning, this chapter attempted to examine how the first-hand information about OUT reflects reality. According to the study's results, the website of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) serves as the primary source of information for prospective students, underscoring its critical role in facilitating accessibility to education. The chapter provides critical knowledge to prospective students about the sources of information commonly used to get information about OUT. The sources of information provide credible and basic information about the OUT. The information provided reflects the real picture of what the OUT is regarding the information on application, admission choice of programmes and the mode of study, which is ODL. Prioritising accessible and reliable information minimises the barriers to a successful ODL implementation. It meets the needs of the applicants and provides a clear understanding of the academic journey at the OUT. Moreover, the chapter entails that if the first-hand information does not reflect the reality of the OUT programs, it may affect institutional development through a limited number of students who would like to join the OUT. The first-hand information influences the reputation and image of the University.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse whether or not first-hand information may be applied to the actual situation of OUT. In this chapter, the OUT website is the central source of information. Nevertheless, the reality of OUT is represented in the nature of the general information about OUT, which is comparable to that of other institutions, however, the nature of the first-hand information should not be the end of information that distinguishes OUT as an online and distance learning institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The OUT website and other information sources should be improved periodically to include information regarding the link to academic issues, career opportunities, and goals that show not satisfying the prospective students' needs.

Other sources of information that have been rated low have to be examined to see if the information contained in or provided, like those from regional centres and TV commercials, suffice the needs and expectations of the prospective students towards the choice to study at the OUT.

A study needs to be conducted to identify the information deficiencies in the sources that hinder prospective students' engagement in deciding to enrol at the OUT.

REFERENCES

- Bae, S. M. (2022). The analysis of a causal relationship between career maturity and academic Achievement on Korean adolescents using autoregressive cross-lagged modelling. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(9), 5572.
- Bonnema, J. and van der Waltd, D. L. R. (2008). Information and source preferences of a Student Market in Higher Education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 22(4), 314–327
- Cox, D. (1967) Risk taking and information handling in consumer behaviour. Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University Press.
- Dao, M. T. N. and Thorpe, A. (2015). What factors influence Vietnamese students' choice of university? *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29(5), 666–681. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-08-2014-0110>

- Edward, J. K. (2019). *Challenges for Effective Learning among Open and Distance Learners: Experiences from the Open University of Tanzania Students in Kigoma Municipality* (Doctoral dissertation, The Open University of Tanzania).
- Funeka, L. P., Govender, N. and Govender, V. (2024). Factors influencing the selection of a University among first-year students—A case of a University of Technology in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 38(4), 62-80.
- Hemsley-Brown, J. and Oplatka, I. (2015). University choice: what do we know, what don't we know what we still need to find out. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29(3), 254–274. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-10-2013-0150>
- Hossain, M. A. and Quaddus, M. (2012). Expectation–confirmation theory in information System Research: A review and analysis. *Information Systems Theory: Explaining and Predicting Our Digital Society, Vol. 1*, 441-469.
- Kotler, P. and Fox, K. (1995) *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions*, 2nd Ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice-Hall.
- Lubbe, I. and Petzer, D. J. (2013). Key information sources influencing prospective students University choice: a South African perspective. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 27(4), 920-940.
- McNicholas, C. 2020. The role of information in postgraduates' decision-making cycle. Robert Gordon University [online], PhD thesis. Available from: <https://openair.rgu.ac.uk>
- Mwidege, A. & Matimbwa, H. (2023). Factors Influencing Prospective Students to Join Higher Learning Institutions: Insights from Mbeya University of Science and Technology. *MUST JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT*, 4(4).
- OUT (2019). Information and Technology Policy 2019/2020-2023-2024. OUT.
- OUT (2022). FACT AND FIGURE 2021/2022. OUT
- Paddy, L. P. (2019). *Determinants of international students' choice of universities in Ghana: A Case of the University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Coast).
- Patti, C. H. and Chen, C. H. (2009). Types of Word-of-Mouth Messages: Information Search

- And Credence-Based Services. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 15(3), 357–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496490903185760>.
- Sterling, S (2001). *Sustainable Education –Re-visioning Learning and Change*, Schumacher Briefing no 6. Schumacher Society /Green Books, Dartington, ISBN 1 870098 99 4. <https://www.greenbooks.co.uk/sustainable-education>.
- Tavanti, M. and Wilp, E. A. (2015). Globally responsible management education: From principled Challenges to practical opportunities. *Handbook of research on business ethics and corporate responsibilities*, 196-220
- Tyagi, N. and Verma, S. (2022). Culturally responsive Teaching: A suggestive pedagogical Framework. In *Handbook of Research on Social Justice and Equity in Education* (pp. 312-331). IGI Global.
- Urbany, J. E., Dickinson, P. R. and Wilkie, W. L. (1989) Buyer uncertainty and information Search. *Journal of Consumer Research* 16: 208-15.
- Ürer Erdil, D., Tümer, M., Nadiri, H. and Aghaei, I. (2021). Prioritising Information Sources And Requirements in Students' Choice of Higher Education Destination: Using AHP Analysis. *Sage Open*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211015685>.
- Wals, A. E. (2014). Sustainability in higher education in the context of the UN DESD: a review of learning and institutionalisation processes. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 62, 8-15.
- Žalėnienė, I. and Pereira, P. (2021). Higher education for sustainability: A global perspective. *Geography and Sustainability*, 2(2), 99-106.

