



NAVIGATING DISTANCE LEARNING: RETENTION AND COMPLETION PATTERNS IN B.ED (ODL) PROGRAMS IN KENYA (2006–2010)

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ABSTRACT

Teacher shortages remain a pressing global issue, with many countries struggling to train and retain sufficient numbers of qualified educators. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional teacher training, offering flexibility and increased accessibility to working professionals. However, retention and completion rates in ODL programs vary due to financial constraints, inadequate student support, and technological barriers. This study examines retention and completion trends in B.Ed (ODL) programs in Kenyan public universities between 2006 and 2010, identifying key factors that influence student persistence and graduation rates. The study applies Wedemeyer's Theory of Autonomy and Independence and the Constructivist Theory of Learning to explain the challenges of learner engagement and self-directed study in ODL programs. Findings suggest that increased institutional support, interactive digital learning tools, and flexible learning models are critical in sustaining student motivation and reducing dropout rates.

Document analysis revealed that retention rates improved significantly over time, with 85% of students in the 2005 cohort completing their studies, increasing to 96.4% in the 2006 cohort. This positive trend suggests that improvements in student support, instructional resources, and financial aid contributed to higher completion rates. However, challenges such as limited study leave, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and financial hardships continued to impact retention. Universities with stronger digital learning platforms, structured academic support, and blended learning models recorded higher student persistence rates. To enhance retention and completion, the study recommends expanding financial aid options, improving ICT infrastructure, and strengthening student support services. These interventions will ensure that B.Ed (ODL) programs effectively bridge teacher shortages in Kenya by enabling more educators to complete their training successfully. The study concludes that while ODL has proven to be an effective model for teacher education, further investments in institutional support and digital learning technologies are necessary to enhance retention and completion rates in Kenya's public universities.

KEYWORDS; Retention rates, completion rates, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), teacher education, student persistence, higher education, Kenya, B.Ed (ODL) programs, online learning, flexible learning, educational technology, academic support, digital learning platforms, institutional support, financial aid, student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for trained and qualified teachers continues to be a major challenge worldwide, despite numerous global efforts to improve education access and quality. The Dakar Education for All (EFA) Conference in 2000 set ambitious targets to ensure universal primary education and improve teacher training. However, by 2015, 57 million children were still out of school, indicating a shortfall in the supply of qualified educators (UNESCO, 2010). One of the key barriers to achieving this goal is low teacher retention and completion rates in training programs, particularly in developing countries. Several factors contribute to teacher shortages and high dropout rates from training programs. First, the expansion of student enrolment outpaces the supply of trained teachers, leaving many schools understaffed. Second, in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, gender disparities in the teaching profession persist, with women making up only 44-45% of primary school teachers in these regions (DFID, 2001). Third, many teachers lack proper training, with reports indicating that nearly 50% of teachers in developing nations are unqualified or have limited formal teacher education (DFID, 2001). Additionally, teaching methods in some countries remain outdated, focusing too much on rote learning rather than student engagement and problem-solving skills. To address these challenges, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a viable alternative for teacher education. ODL removes geographical barriers, provides flexible study schedules, and allows teachers to upgrade their qualifications while working (Luhan, 1964). Many governments and educational institutions have integrated ODL into teacher training programs to increase the number of trained educators. However, retention and completion rates in ODL programs vary widely due to financial constraints, limited student support services, and inadequate infrastructure (Perraton, 2007).



In Sub-Saharan Africa, teacher shortages remain a major hindrance to achieving quality education, as many countries struggle to train and retain sufficient numbers of qualified educators. The high attrition rates among teachers—often due to low salaries, poor working conditions, and limited career advancement opportunities—further exacerbate the problem. The supply of teachers is adversely affected in rural areas, where retention rates are significantly lower due to harsh working conditions and lack of incentives. Additionally, factors such as HIV/AIDS have led to a decline in the teaching workforce, particularly in high-prevalence regions (DFID, 2001). To mitigate these challenges, several African countries, including Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya, have increasingly turned to ODL-based teacher training programs. These programs offer a cost-effective and flexible alternative to traditional teacher education. However, despite the potential of ODL to expand access to teacher training, challenges such as inconsistent funding, limited technological infrastructure, and inadequate instructional resources continue to impact retention and completion rates (Perraton, 2007).

Kenya, like many other African nations, faces persistent teacher shortages due to a combination of factors, including population growth, teacher attrition, and economic constraints (Wolffenden et al., 2010). While the expansion of ODL programs in Kenya has improved access to teacher training, retention and completion rates remain a concern. Many students enrolling in B.Ed (ODL) programs struggle to complete their studies, primarily due to:

- Financial Constraints - Many teachers cannot afford tuition fees and must continue working while studying, which increases the likelihood of dropping out before completing the program.
- Lack of Study Leave and Institutional Support - Unlike full-time students, ODL students rarely receive study leave from their employers, making it difficult to balance work, studies, and personal responsibilities.
- Limited Access to Learning Resources - Many universities lack adequate ICT facilities, libraries, and printed study materials, which hinders student engagement and progression in ODL programs (Mboroki, 2007).
- Technological Barriers - Although ICT integration has improved in recent years, internet connectivity and access to digital learning tools remain a challenge, particularly for students in rural areas.
- Perceived Limited Career Advancement - Some B.Ed (ODL) students feel that their qualifications do not guarantee promotions or salary increases, reducing their motivation to complete the program.

Despite these challenges, ODL remains a critical tool for expanding teacher education in Kenya. Kenyan universities such as Kenyatta University, the University of Nairobi, Egerton University, and Masinde Muliro University have been actively involved in offering B.Ed (ODL) programs to increase access to teacher training.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teacher education remains a critical challenge worldwide, with many countries facing low retention and completion rates in training programs. In Kenya, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs have emerged as an alternative to traditional teacher training, allowing educators to upgrade their skills while working. However, despite the flexibility and accessibility of ODL, many students struggle to complete their studies, leading to high dropout rates and low graduation numbers (Wolffenden et al., 2010). Several factors contribute to low retention and completion rates in B.Ed (ODL) programs. Financial constraints make it difficult for students to sustain their studies, as many must balance tuition fees with personal and professional responsibilities. Additionally, the lack of study leave policies by the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) forces working teachers to juggle full-time jobs and coursework, increasing the likelihood of dropping out. Other challenges include limited access to instructional resources, inadequate institutional support, and technological barriers that hinder engagement in ODL programs (Mboroki, 2007). Although ODL has the potential to expand teacher education and bridge the gap in teacher shortages, Kenyan public universities have not fully optimized these programs to enhance retention and completion rates. Without addressing these challenges, the impact of ODL on teacher education will remain limited. This study, therefore, seeks to analyze the retention and completion trends of B.Ed (ODL) students, identifying key barriers and proposing strategies to improve student persistence and program success.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To analyse retention and completion rates of B. Ed (ODL) students under ODL programmes from 2006 - 2010.

Research Questions

1. What are the retention and completion rates of B. Ed students under ODL programmes between 2006-2010?



LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical review

This study is anchored in Wedemeyer's Theory of Autonomy and Independence (1974) and the Constructivist Theory of Learning, both of which provide insights into retention and completion rates in B.Ed (ODL) programs.

1. Wedemeyer's Theory of Autonomy and Independence (1974)

Wedemeyer emphasized that distance education relies on learner autonomy, where students engage independently with course materials through various media (Dellion, 1966). In ODL, reduced direct interaction with instructors places greater responsibility on the learner, requiring self-discipline, motivation, and effective time management. However, many students face challenges such as financial constraints, lack of study leave, and competing work and family responsibilities, which can lead to low retention and high dropout rates. To improve retention, universities must enhance student support systems, such as structured mentorship programs and academic advising, to help learners stay motivated. Additionally, institutions should offer flexible learning schedules and financial assistance programs to support students juggling multiple responsibilities.

2. Constructivist Theory of Learning

The Constructivist Theory argues that learning is most effective when students actively engage with content, instructors, and peers (Prawat & Floden, 1994). In ODL, limited interaction and isolation can lead to low motivation and disengagement, affecting completion rates. According to Schlosser and Anderson (1994), effective distance learning must recreate traditional teacher-student interactions to ensure continuous student involvement. To enhance retention, universities should integrate blended learning models, combining online discussions, live video lectures, and face-to-face sessions to keep students engaged. Additionally, providing interactive digital platforms, timely instructor feedback, and peer collaboration opportunities can help create a more connected learning experience, reducing dropout rates and improving completion.

By applying these theories, Kenyan universities can enhance retention and completion rates in B.Ed (ODL) programs, ensuring a more effective and engaging distance learning experience.

RELATED LITERATURE

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Teacher Retention

Globally, ODL has played a crucial role in training teachers by offering flexible and accessible learning opportunities. Many teachers begin their careers without formal qualifications and rely on in-service training through ODL to gain certification (UNESCO, 2000). However, retention and completion rates in these programs vary due to financial constraints, lack of academic support, and limited institutional resources. For instance, in Pakistan, an ODL-based Primary Teachers Orientation Course provided initial training for unqualified teachers, but retention was affected by curriculum reform pressures and inadequate student engagement (UNESCO, 2000). In Kenya, early distance education programs prioritized raising teachers' educational backgrounds rather than enhancing classroom pedagogical skills (UNESCO, 2010). While this approach expanded access, retention rates remained low due to poor study support structures, limited instructional materials, and financial barriers. Addressing these challenges requires integrating structured mentorship, financial aid, and improved ICT support to enhance retention in B.Ed (ODL) programs.

Retention Trends in ODL-Based Teacher Training

Historical evidence on ODL's effectiveness in teacher training shows both successes and challenges in retention and completion rates. A notable case is the 1963 UNRWA-UNESCO initiative for Palestinian refugee teachers, which successfully reduced the number of untrained teachers from 90% to 9% in five years through a structured correspondence learning model (Young, 1980). The program's success was linked to frequent tutor interactions, structured assignments, and ongoing academic support, reinforcing the importance of learner engagement in ODL retention.

Similarly, large-scale teacher training projects in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria demonstrated that ODL can be effective in training educators at scale, yet completion rates were largely influenced by incentives such as salary increases upon graduation (Lewin & Stuart, 2003). In Zimbabwe's ZINTEC program, 80% of the 7,400 trainees completed their studies, highlighting how economic incentives and structured support systems positively impact retention (Mulkeen, 2010).

In contrast, ODL programs in Malawi and Uganda faced higher dropout rates due to limited student support, financial difficulties, and heavy work-study commitments (Perraton, 2007). The Northern Integrated Teacher



Education Project in Uganda achieved an 88% completion rate, largely due to blended learning models that included in-person mentorship and structured tutorials (Perraton, 2000). These findings emphasize that program design, financial aid, and institutional support significantly affect student retention in B.Ed (ODL) programs.

Retention and Completion Challenges in B.Ed (ODL) Programs

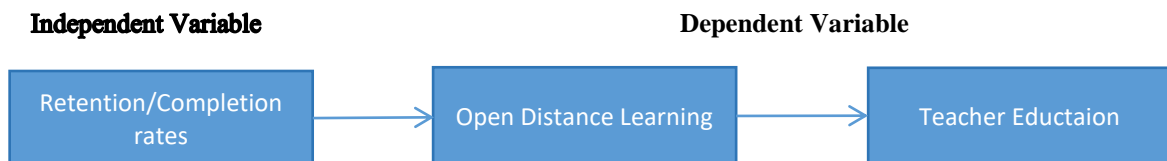
Across Africa, ODL has expanded teacher training opportunities, yet completion rates remain inconsistent. Countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria have demonstrated that ODL can supplement teacher shortages, but retention challenges persist due to:

- Financial constraints – Many students struggle to pay fees while managing full-time employment.
- Limited student support – Lack of mentorship, feedback mechanisms, and face-to-face learning opportunities affects persistence.
- Technological barriers – Inadequate ICT access and poor internet connectivity hinder student engagement.

To improve retention in Kenya’s B.Ed (ODL) programs, universities must implement blended learning approaches, provide financial assistance, and ensure structured student support systems. The success of ODL in teacher training depends on institutional commitment to student engagement, quality learning resources, and flexible learning structures.

Conceptual framework

Retention in B.Ed (ODL) programs is influenced by student engagement, institutional support, and learning resources. Dewey (1936) emphasized that effective education is not about following rigid models but fostering meaningful learning experiences. In the ODL context, opportunities for student-tutor interaction and open-ended dialogue enhance learner motivation and persistence.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm to explore retention trends in B.Ed (ODL) programs. Constructivist approaches emphasize the social construction of reality, allowing for a deeper understanding of student persistence and completion rates (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Mertens, 2005). A descriptive survey design was employed, as it effectively captures data on educational trends and retention patterns (Orodho, 2005).

Study Location and Population

The research was conducted in four public universities in Kenya offering B.Ed (ODL) programs: Masinde Muliro University, Egerton University, the University of Nairobi (Kikuyu Campus), and Kenyatta University. These institutions were selected due to their diverse experience with ODL and representation of both urban and rural settings. The target population consisted of 1,700 respondents, including B.Ed (ODL) program directors, lecturers, registrars, and students.

Sampling and Sample Size

A sample of 228 respondents was selected using purposive sampling for university directors, registrars, and lecturers, while random sampling was applied to select students. The sample included:

- 4 B.Ed (ODL) directors
- 4 university registrars
- 20 B.Ed (ODL) lecturers
- 200 third- and fourth-year B.Ed (ODL) students

These students were chosen due to their longer exposure to ODL programs, making them the most suitable respondents for examining retention challenges.

Data Collection Method: Document Analysis

This study relied on secondary data sources, utilizing document analysis to examine retention trends in B.Ed (ODL) programs. University reports, course completion records, and institutional policy documents were reviewed to assess retention rates, dropout patterns, and institutional efforts to support student persistence (Orodho,



2005). Additional data was gathered from official statistics, academic publications, and previous research on ODL retention.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to identify patterns and trends in student retention. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages and frequency distributions, were used to summarize retention rates, while qualitative thematic analysis helped interpret institutional strategies and challenges affecting completion rates.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical research guidelines were followed to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and data integrity (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Since the study relied on document analysis, care was taken to ensure the accuracy, credibility, and ethical use of secondary data sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Retention and Completion Rates of B. Ed (ODL) Students in Kenyan Universities.

Document analysis of B.Ed (ODL) students in Kenyan universities reveals relatively high retention and completion rates over the study period. The 2005 cohort had an attrition rate of 15%, meaning that 85% of students successfully completed their studies. For the 2006 cohort, attrition dropped significantly to 3.6%, with 96.4% of enrolled students progressing to the final year, and nearly all (1540 out of 1542) successfully graduating. These findings suggest that ODL programs in Kenya have strong completion rates, particularly when compared to conventional programs that often experience higher dropout rates due to financial constraints, academic challenges, and lack of institutional support.

These results align with global studies on ODL retention. For instance, Walker (2007) found that universities such as the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of South Africa report completion rates exceeding 80% and retention rates of approximately 70%. The Kenyan data, with retention rates exceeding 85-96%, indicate that ODL is an effective model for teacher training, as it allows students to balance work, study, and family responsibilities while gaining professional qualifications.

A key factor contributing to high retention in B.Ed (ODL) programs is the direct link between completing the program and career progression. Studies show that when teacher training programs guarantee employment or salary increases, students are more likely to persist through challenges and complete their studies (Walker, 2007). This explains why Kenyan ODL students demonstrate strong commitment and motivation, leading to impressive retention rates compared to many other academic disciplines.

However, despite these successes, there are variations in retention rates across different cohorts. The higher attrition rate of 15% in 2005 compared to 3.6% in 2006 suggests that universities may have implemented improved student support strategies, such as better instructional resources, increased financial aid, or enhanced academic advising, leading to lower dropout rates in later years. Understanding the specific interventions that contributed to improved retention can help institutions further strengthen ODL programs.

Overall, the findings confirm that B.Ed (ODL) programs are effective in improving teacher education in Kenya, with high retention and completion rates supporting their viability as a long-term solution to teacher shortages.

Table 1 Graduates per Year in B. Ed (ODL) Department

Academic year	Nairobi	Egerton	Masinde	Kenyatta	Total No. of Graduates/year
2006	294	384	200	669	1547 (24.8%)
2007	295	380	285	850	1810 (29.0%)
2008	298	245	199	600	1342 (21.5%)
2009	395	200	299	648	1542 (24.7%)
Total No. of Graduates for the 4 years (2006-2009)	1282 (20.5%)	1209 (19.4%)	938 (15.8%)	2767 (44.3%)	6241 (100%)

Source: Author (2010)



Table 2 Enrolment rate, Attrition Rate and Completion rates for 2005 and 2006 Cohorts.

Year	Enrolment rate	Attrition rate	Completion rate
2005 cohort	1571	229 (15%)	1342 (85%)
2006 cohort	1600	58 (3.6%)	1542 (96.4%)

Source: Author (2010)

SUMMARY

The study revealed that retention and completion rates in B.Ed (ODL) programs remain a challenge despite a growing demand for teacher education through distance learning. The low retention rates were primarily attributed to financial constraints, inadequate institutional support, and the high cost of education. Many students struggle to complete their studies due to limited access to instructional resources, insufficient ICT infrastructure, and lack of specialized support services.

Despite these challenges, the findings indicate that a majority of students who persist in B.Ed (ODL) programs successfully complete their courses within four years. Universities that have stronger student support services, better infrastructure, and blended learning options report higher completion rates. Additionally, the promise of career advancement and salary increments motivates students to persist through challenges, contributing to higher retention levels in institutions with well-structured ODL programs.

The study also found disparities in retention rates across different universities, with Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi having better resources and ICT infrastructure, which supported student persistence. However, most institutions faced challenges related to inadequate learning resources, poor internet connectivity, and limited student engagement strategies, negatively impacting retention.

To enhance retention and completion rates, universities should increase financial aid options, improve digital learning platforms, expand student support services, and adopt more flexible learning models. By addressing these challenges, B.Ed (ODL) programs can become more effective in providing accessible, high-quality teacher education, ultimately helping to bridge the teacher shortage gap in Kenya.

CONCLUSION

The study findings indicate that completion rates in B.Ed (ODL) programs are relatively high, suggesting that students who persist through the program are likely to graduate. Retention rates have been supported by affordable tuition fees, quality teaching, adequate instructional resources, and advancements in educational technology (Wolfenden, 2010; Walker, 2007).

However, despite these positive outcomes, retention remains a concern, with some students facing challenges such as limited infrastructure, financial constraints, and inadequate student support services. Universities with better technological integration and structured academic support have seen higher student retention and completion rates. To further enhance retention and completion, universities must improve learning resources, expand digital access, and provide targeted financial aid. Strengthening ODL infrastructure will not only increase student persistence but also ensure that more educators complete their training, ultimately enhancing the quality of teacher education in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATION

From the study, the following recommendations were drawn;

Increase Financial Support and Infrastructure Investment – Adequate budgetary allocations should be made to sustain student financial aid, ICT investment, and cost-effective learning infrastructure. Expanding regional centers and digital learning platforms will ensure greater accessibility and student retention.

Enhance Student Support Services – Universities should establish well-equipped student support centers to address academic deficiencies, provide mentorship, and improve learner engagement. Strengthening extra-mural centers for distance learners will help students stay on track and reduce dropout rates.

Improve Access to Learning Resources – Institutions must ensure that ODL students receive study materials on time, as delays in accessing learning resources contribute to low retention and completion rates. Providing efficient logistics for distributing instructional materials will enhance student persistence.



Leverage ICT for Interactive Learning – Universities should invest in technology-enhanced learning by creating centralized media centers for content delivery and student interaction. This will improve engagement, motivation, and overall retention in ODL programs.

By implementing these strategies, B.Ed (ODL) programs can improve student retention and completion rates, ensuring that more educators successfully graduate and contribute to the education sector.

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