Female Learner Experiences in Accessing University Education in Kenya through Distance Mode: Addressing Constraints, Prospects and Policy Directions

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Female Learner Experiences in Accessing University Education in Kenya through Distance Mode: Addressing Constraints, Prospects and Policy Directions

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I. Introduction

Distance education enables institutions of higher learning to address challenges posed by the high demand for university education world over. It provides a flexible and cost-effective opportunity for people in employment to acquire university education, with advanced skills necessary for vertical mobility [1]. Distance education programs have expanded fast because of inbuilt advantages, including cost-effectiveness and flexibility, which makes it most appropriate for people in full-time or part-time employment [2]. The rapid expansion is also attributed to its modes of delivery, which makes it possible to meet the needs of learners scattered in various locations simultaneously [3, 4].

In view of this, distance education enables institutions of higher learning to overcome the challenges of time and space. Consequently, instructors and learners can engage without necessarily being at the same place and time, depending on the methods used. To illustrate the point, [5] points out that satellite campuses in Arkansas State University and the Open University of Dar es Salam are increasingly attracting a 'hidden market' of adult learners and high school graduates, which has caused enrolment to grow tenfold over the past two decades. The flexibility associated with distance education makes it most appropriate for female learners who may lack opportunity to attend lessons during regular hours due to employment or child care obligations.

After the 1982 World Conference organized by the International Council of Distance Education in Melbourne, women participants were motivated to establish the Women International Network (WIN) to popularize distance education and influence women to capitalize on the opportunity to improve their education status [6]. Today, distance education systems around the world have made it possible for people in employment, especially women to access higher education [4].

Women's access to higher education yields multiple benefits at the individual, household, community and national levels. Cross-country surveys examining the effect of women's education on Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) have consistently demonstrated positive results [7, 8]. On the social dimension, university-educated women opt to delay marriage, motherhood and likely to restrict family size [9]. Moreover, higher education empowers women to negotiate for sexual relations, thereby reduce their vulnerability to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) including the HIV/AIDs and gender-based violence within marriage [10].

Despite its advantages to women, various studies such as [11], as well as [12] have revealed that female learners in distance education continue to face number of challenges. Some of the challenges identified by these studies included inconsistent supply of course materials, difficulty of getting tutorial assistance and long duration taken by some instructors to evaluate and return course work assignments. The studies emphasized the need for appropriate measures to cushion female learners against such challenges.

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In Kenya, the history of distance education runs back to 1966 when the Board of Adult Education was established through a an Act of Parliament to facilitate the delivery of non-formal educational programs in disciplines such as health, agriculture, family planning, rural development and environment through the mass media [11]. The initiative was stimulated by the post-independence commitment to fight poverty, ignorance and disease to spur socio-economic development [11, 12]. Since then, distance education has grown in terms of the number of institutions and student population.

In response to inherent challenges, some of which were identified by previous studies [11, 12], Kenyan universities have come up with a blended model of distance education, in which learners use modules while at home and attend campus for face-to-face interaction with their instructors. However, a closer examination of the model reveals that it has not effectively addressed the challenges experienced by distance learners, especially women. Consequently, this study assessed the challenges experienced by Kenyan women pursuing higher education through the distance learning mode, with a view to identifying policy measures that should be instituted to improve the quality of distance learning in the interest of women.

II. Statement of the Problem

The initiation of distance education in Kenya respondent to the increasing demand for university education and necessitated by the need to expand educational opportunities for both men and women for quality human resource and achievement of the country's development aspirations. Given its flexibility and cost-effectiveness, distance education enables low income-earners to access higher education, acquire advanced skills for continuing career development and vertical mobility [4]. Distance education is particularly appropriate for women, whose access to higher education has have been disadvantaged by domestic chores, maternal obligations, child care and employment.

Despite the promises and advantages of distance education, studies conducted by [11], as well as [12] have hinted that distance education is laden with challenges or diverse dimensions, which affect the quality of learning. The issues highlighted by these studies touched on aspects such as availability and quality of course materials, assignments, personal contact programs, quality of instruction, hidden costs, misuse of technology and the attitudes of instructors, learners and administrators; all of which affected the quality of distance education [12].

Such issues continue to raise concern among specialists in distance education as well as gender and development, particularly because distance education is considered a golden opportunity for women to access higher education [4]. Although the history of distance education in Kenya is deeply rooted, no systematic academic process had ever assessed and documented the challenges experienced by women distance learners in both public and private universities. Hence, this study was conducted to identify challenges experienced by women distance learners, with a view to generating information that would necessitate policy action to improve the quality of learning.

III. Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study was to assess and document challenges experienced by female learners pursuing higher learning under the distance education mode. More specifically, the study was guided by the following objectives: -
1. Identify challenges experienced by women in learners regarding course materials.
2. Determine challenges that female learners encounter in terms of assignment system.
3. Establish challenges affecting female learners regarding personal contact programs.
4. Investigate challenges experienced by female learners in accessing tutorial help from their instructors.
5. Assess the personal challenges facing female learners in their pursuit for higher education.

IV. Methodology

The cross-sectional survey design was applied to guide the research process in sourcing, processing, analyzing and interpreting data. The design had both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The design was particularly appropriate for the study because data was sourced at a single point in time. The target population included female learners enrolled for undergraduate and post-graduate courses through distance education in public universities, including Moi, Egerton, Kenyatta, Nairobi, Jomo Kenyatta, Masinde Muliro and Maseno. The study also targeted female learners at Catholic and Baraton Universities, which were the only private institutions of higher learning offering distance education as at December 2010.

a) Sampling procedures and sample size

The researcher applied both probability and non-probability sampling procedures to identify the units of analysis, i.e. women distance learners. In situations where a population is too small to be sampled, it is logical to include all the elements in the sample [13]. Based on this, all the nine institutions offering distance education were purposively considered for inclusion in the sample, which included 7 public and 2 private universities. While selecting the institutions, regional representation was observed to ensure equitable geographical coverage. From each institution, 200

learners were randomly selected for inclusion in the sample, which yielded a total sample size of 1,800 learners.

b) Data collection instruments

The researcher used a survey questionnaire to source the requisite information. The instrument was divided into six sections – A, B, C, D, E and F, in line with objectives of the study. Section A elicited information on the background profile of participants, section B sought information on challenges arising from course materials, section C covered challenges faced with the assignments system, section D yielded information on challenges associated with personal contact programs, section E focused on the tutorial system, while section F sourced information on personal challenges affecting the quality of distance education.

The survey questionnaire consisted of structured and semi-structured questions. The questions were posed before selected participants and responses jotted down. Responses on key items were standardized using abbreviations, viz. VBP (Very Big Problem); JAP (Just a Problem); and NAP (Not a Problem). The standardization of responses facilitated the tabulation of frequency distributions and determination of severity ranking. In this regard, a score of 2 was assigned for VBP, 1 for JAP and 0 for NAP; and adding all the scores for the subjects in the sample.

The instrument was pre-tested and the reliability computed. In this regard, the pre-test obtained a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.89, suggesting that the instrument's internal consistency was good according to the guidelines developed by [14]. The instrument was mailed to 1,800 women distance learners at the selected universities. At the end of data collection, 1,400 questionnaires were returned to the researcher duly filled, representing 77.8% response rate, which was considered satisfactory according to [15].

c) Data processing and analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were applied to process, analyze and interpret the data. Quantitative analysis yielded frequency distributions, percentages, cross-tabulations as well as severity scores and ranking of the problems; while qualitative data were transcribed, clustered into nodes and explored for patterns of challenges experienced by women in distance education.

V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This section presents the findings, which have been organized under five key thematic areas in line with objectives of the study, including challenges associated with course materials, the assignment system, personal contact programs, tutorial system and personal problems. Details are presented and discussed under the following sub-headings.

a) Problems associated with course materials

Distance learners are expected to learn independently with the help of printed course materials provided by instructors. In view of this, the quality of independent learning in distance education largely depends on three factors, viz. the subject content of course materials, presentation style and supply consistency. Whereas an ideal presentation style should facilitate self-learning, the supply consistency should ensure learning continuity and motivation.

In view of this, problem statements 1 and 2 were posed to women distance learners to identify the problems faced in relation to course materials produced for their degree programs. Table 1 presents the frequency distributions and percentages, which are presented under the standardized categorization, including a Very Big Problem (VBP), Just a Problem (JAP) and Not a Problem (NAP). Also indicated in the table is the severity ranking for each problem statement item.

Table 1 : Severity of problems related to course materials

Qn	Problem statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	*JAP*	*NAP*	*Score*	*Rank*
1.	The supplied course materials do not serve as self learning materials and it is difficult to understand each and every concept with their help.	510 (35.9%)	660 (46.5%)	250 (17.6%)	1420	3
2.	The supply of reading materials is not regular and systematic. This disturbs the planning done for learners by the learners.	715 (50.4%)	385 (27.1%)	320 (22.5%)	1420	1

The results in table 1 reveal that irregular and unsystematic supply of course materials disrupted learning continuity under the distance education mode.

This emerged as the most severe problem experienced by women distance learners. More specifically, up to 715 (50.4%) learners rated the irregular and

unsystematic supply of course materials as a VBP, 385 (27.1%) indicated that it was JAP, while 320 (22.5%) were of the view that it was NAP. Overall, the findings suggest that up to 77% of the distance learners hinted that irregular and unsystematic supply of course materials was a serious factor disturbing their study plans. Moreover, the issue emerged atop as the most important challenge faced by women pursuing higher education through distance learning.

Regarding the quality, course materials were not perceived to be serving as self-learning materials; rather most distance learners (82%), found them difficult to understand. In this regard, up to 510 (35.9%) said the materials were a VBP, while 660 (46.5%) indicated that the materials were JAP. The quality of course materials emerged as the third most important challenge experience by women distance learners.

b) Problems tied to the assignment system

Submission of written assignments, evaluation by tutors, constructive suggestions form a two-way non-contiguous communication channel in distance education. In turn, the communication channel forms the backbone of efficiency in distance education. However, various studies such as those conducted by [16] and [17] have proved that longer turn-around time of evaluated assignments affects the quality of learning under distance education. Another study by [18] found that compulsory submission of assignments encourages drop-out among distance learners. With this in mind, problem statements 3 and 4 were posed to learners, with the aim of determining the proportion facing problems with the assignment system. The frequencies and percentages of women for whom the given problem statements were a VBP, JAP, and NAP along with severity rank are presented in table 2.

Table 2 : Severity of problems related to assignment systems

Qn	Problem statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	JAP	NAP	Score	Rank
3.	The compulsory submission of assignment is useless unless constructive suggestions come from tutors.	281 (19.8%)	581 (40.9%)	558 (39.3%)	1420	9
4.	The time gap between date of submission of assignments and the date when they are received back duly marked and commented is so long that not only the planning done for the studies but the entire purpose of assignments is defeated.	260 (18.3%)	690 (48.7%)	470 (33.1%)	1420	6

The results presented in table 2 show that up to 66.9 % (48.7% JAP and 18.3% VBP), of the distance learners indicated that the duration between the date of assignment submission and the date when they are received back, duly marked and commented i.e. turn-around time (TAT) was too long; thereby affecting study plans and defeating the purpose of assignments. This challenge emerged as the sixth most severe problem for women in distance education. Moreover, the findings suggest that irregular and untimely communication between tutors and learners was a critical factor disrupting study plans, particularly for women enrolled in distance education programs. The challenge also hinders timeliness of the two way non-contiguous communication for improvement, which is the sole purpose of assignments in distance education.

Regarding compulsory submission of assignments, 60.7% (19.8% VBP and 40.9% JAP) of the learners opined that compulsory submission of assignments is useless, unless constructive suggestions come from tutors. However, 39.3% women did consider the issue a problem. Consequently, the test item emerged as the ninth most severe problem experienced by women distance learners. On the basis of these findings, it can be safely concluded that a good majority of women in distance education consider compulsory submission of assignments useless, unless they are properly evaluated, commented and returned within the shortest time possible.

c) Problems with personal contact programs

The concept of Personal Contact Programs (PCPs) is a dilution of the principle on which distance education is founded. However, the introduction of PCPs concept is considered a remedy for the challenges experienced distance learners [19]. PCPs enhance learners' convenience; thus, encouraging more people to pursue higher education through distance learning. Contrastingly, [18] points out that compulsory participation at PCPs has been a cause for drop-outs in distance education. To find identify the challenges experienced by women distance learners regarding

PCPs, two problem statements i.e. 5 and 6 were posed to participants. Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages obtained for each test item.

Table 3 : Severity of problems related to personal contact programs

Qn	Problem statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	*JAP*	*NAP*	*Score*	*Rank*
5.	Asking the learners to compulsorily participate in personal contact program is a waste of time and money.	80 (12.9%)	172 (27.8%)	388 (59.2%)	332	10
6.	Though attending a personal contact program is beneficial but there are difficulties of accommodation at the venue of the personal contact program.	144 (23.3%)	250 (40.5%)	224 (36.2%)	538	8

The results in table 3 reveal that though attending a PCP session is beneficial, women distance learners face various difficulties, including lack of accommodation facilities and subsistence at the venue of PCPs, as well as commuter costs. This challenge emerged as the 8th most severe problem experienced by female learners in distance education. In total, about 63.8% (23.3% VBP and 40.5% JAP) of the women distance learners affirmed that although PCPs were beneficial, they had to cope with various challenges, including accommodation difficulties, subsistence, security and insecurity, among others.

Furthermore, the results in table 3 indicate that about 40.8% (12.9% VBP and 27.8% JAP) of the participants felt that making it compulsory for learners to participate in PCPs was a waste of time and financial resource. Consequently, PCP sessions impeded the privilege of 'saving time and finances, which distance education provides to learners [19]. However, the remaining 59.2% learners were of the view that compulsory participation in PCP sessions was not a waste of time and money; thus, the problem ranked 10th in terms of severity.

d) Problems with the tutorial system

Being a flexible mode, distance education provides tutorial sessions for learners as per their personal choice of time, making it more attractive to female learners than the conventional mode of higher education [20]. However, in most institutions, available tutorial facilities are not able to serve an increasing student population. Pointing out the challenges experienced by female learners regarding tutorial systems provides useful information that may justify institutional changes to improve the quality of learning under distance education. As noted by [18], inadequacy of library facilities is an example of issues that may impede access to tutorials by distance learners, particularly where policies are skewed in favor of conventional learners. Problem statements 7 and 8 were formulated and posed to respondents, with a view to identifying challenges experienced by female learners with regards to the tutorial system. Table 4 presents the frequencies and percentages for problem statements 7 and 8.

Table 4 : Severity of problems related to the tutorial system

Qn	Problem statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	*JAP*	*NAP*	*Score*	*Rank*
7.	There is no study centre in my neighbourhood, hence, are difficulties in getting library facilities and tutorial help.	220 (35.6%)	175 (28.3%)	223 (36.1%)	615	4
8.	There is no system of getting tutorial help from my institution when it is really needed	225 (36.4%)	207 (33.5%)	186 (30.1%)	657	2

The results in table 4 indicate that most institutions offering distance learning did not have proper tutorial systems to support distance learners. This emerged as the second most severe problem for female learners in distance education. More specifically, 220 (36.4%) learners felt that the issue was a very big problem, while 207 (33.5%) said it was just a problem. Overall, up to 69.9% of the women distance learners

were of the view that existing tutorial system was a failure because it did not serve them, despite the high level of need. Arguably, this challenge may demoralize some learners, leading to their dropping out.

Regarding study centres, up to 220 (35.6%) distance learners considered non-availability of such facilities a very big problem, while 175 (28.3%) described it as just a problem. On aggregate, about 61.9% of the distance learners did not have access to study centres within their neighbourhood. The absence of study centres was tied to inadequacy of library facilities and tutorial help in neighbourhoods. In terms of severity ranking, the challenge emerged as the forth most severe problem of women in distance education.

e) Personal problems for women in distance education

As noted by [21], most Indian women are unable to continue with their studies under the conventional mode due to traditional socio-economic biases and gender discrimination. In fact, women attracted towards distance education were either heavily burdened housewives, employed individuals or the neglected lot wishing to further their education [18, 20, 21, 22, 23]. To make distance education more attractive to women, some attention should be focused on addressing their personal problems. Keeping this in mind, problem statements 9 and 10 were posed to distance learners. The obtained frequencies and percentages alongside their severity ranking are presented in table 5.

Table 5 : Severity of personal problems of women in distance education

Qn	Problem statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	JAP	NAP	Score	Rank
9.	Learning in isolation i.e. feeling of loneliness is a big difficulty in distance education.	171 (27.7%)	213 (34.5%)	234 (37.9%)	555	7
10.	Appearing in all the papers along with regular learners in the final exam is difficult and expecting too much from distance learners.	163 (26.4%)	241 (39.0%)	214 (34.6)	567	5

The results in table 5 reveal that appearing in all the papers along with regular learners in the final examination is difficult and expecting too much from distance learners. In this regard, up to 65.4% (26.4% VBP and 39.0% JAP) of women distance learners experienced a difficulty appearing in final examinations, alongside regular learners. However, 214 (34.6%) learners asserted that appearing in examinations along with regular learners was not a challenge at all. It emerged as the fifth most severe problem for women distance learners.

Another important problem faced by women distance learners arose from the natural human tendency of socializing in groups. Overall, about 62.1% (27.7% VBP and 34.6% JAP) of female learners were of the opinion that learning in isolation i.e. a feeling of loneliness was a big difficulty in distance education. However, 234 (37.9%) participants hinted that they did not suffer from the feeling of learning in isolation and this issue emerged seventh on the severity ranking scale.

VI. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The irregular and unsystematic supply of reading materials was considered a key factor disrupting their study plans among women in distance education; it also emerged as the most severe problem undermining the quality of distance learning. This finding is corroborated by the findings of [24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29], most of who noted that irregular and unsystematic supply of reading materials was a serious problem to all distance learners in various settings, irrespective of gender. However, the challenge is intertwines with other aspects, including socio-economic status and personal obligations to constrain the quality of learning in distance education.

Without adequate reading materials, most learners find it difficult to cope with their study plans; thus, causing delays in course completion and increasing the risk of dropping out. To cope with this problem, institutions offering distance education should consider introducing a supervisory system that connects to learners to ensure that all instructors develop update and disseminate reading materials as often as possible. This should also include evaluated assignments as suggested by [29]. Also suggested by [29], is the use of computers to manage postal communication, with a view to improving administrative effectiveness, as well as streamline the supply of reading materials to learners.

However, the findings of this study seem to refute the notion that in distance education course materials adequately serve the purpose by inducing self-learning. Because women have multiple responsibilities, the fear is that they may not find adequate time to concentrate on reading materials;

hence, it becomes necessary for institutions offering distance education to create opportunities for tutorial help as and when needed. On this note, the absence of tutorial help from the institutions emerged as the second most severe problem facing women in distance education.

The root of this problem entrenches in the findings related to the quality of course materials. In this regard, it was noted that reading materials do not necessarily serve as self-learning materials due to quality issues, which make it difficult for learners to grasp concepts without supplementary support in terms of tutorials. Previous studies by [29, 31, 32, 33] have also expressed similar concerns regarding the quality of reading materials. Under such circumstances, the learners will have difficulties managing independent self-learning and so must be supported through tutorials.

In support of tutorials for distance learners, [29] notes that however effective and pedagogically sound a reading material may be, it cannot replace the tutor. In this regard, the role of tutors is well recognized and established in distance education. This has two implications, viz. one, reading materials should be designed and developed on the basis of sound pedagogy of self-learning and they should also be tried out on learners to ascertain their suitability for independent learning, before being used as course materials; two, institutions of higher learning should arrange and ensure regular availability of tutorial help to enable learners understand the content of their reading materials. In India, the telephone network has made it possible for institutions offering distance education to provide tutorials over the phone. Through this arrangement, one tutor can serve a huge number of learners simultaneously and is considered a relatively cheaper option than setting up study centres and maintaining a huge number of tutors for this purpose.

Furthermore, lack of library facilities and absence of study centres in the neighbourhood, appearing in all papers along with regular learners in final examinations and longer turn-around time of evaluated and commented assignments took the fourth, fifth and sixth positions on the severity ranking scale, respectively. A careful examination of these problems reveal that they reflect the concerns of women about their learning and academic achievement through distance education. Perhaps due to this concern and determination to complete their studies, women are increasingly devising new ways of coping with the problems of learning in isolation, difficulties of accommodation at the venue of personal contact programs; they are also ready to meet the requirement of compulsory submission of assignments and compulsory participation in PCPs. These problems ranked at the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth places,

respectively; hence, may be considered less severe for women in distance education.

Even though this study found that women experience a number of challenges in their pursuit for higher learning through distance education, severity ranking of the identified problems suggests the problems varied significantly in terms of negative effects on the learning continuity and achievement. Personal problems such as learning in isolation and attending compulsory contact sessions, which are traditionally considered to be exclusive to female learners are really not perceived as serious problems. Female learners appear ready to cope with such issues to safeguard their learning, which implies that distance education can serve as a boon for women thirsting to further their education, provided the quality of course materials is improved, their supply streamlined, and adequate tutorial help is available.

In addition, the study has implications for further research. It would be highly pertinent to study the inter-relationship between problems experienced by women in distance education. Besides, there is need for further research on the improvements desired by women distance learners. More still, there is need for research to distinguish between the problems experienced by women and men learners in distance education.

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