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An Investigation of Stakeholders Concerns and Perceptions on Open and Distance Education in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: The Case of Haramaya University

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Abstract

This study tried to explore the perceptions of stakeholders in open and distance education with particular reference to the eastern region of Harargie. 120 students, 30 tutors and 10 program coordinators were consulted and considered as subjects of the study. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed in the data treatment and analysis. Data were collected from the selected sample through questionnaire, interview and a five point rating scale whose reliability is reported to be very high(α = 0.96) and which also shows good content validly. The collected data were treated with percentage, t-test, ANOVA (One-way/Two-way) and the Pearson Product moment correlation(r). The results suggest that the largest proportion of students view distance education in general as an average. Differences and connections between perceptions and level of performance of ODL students in terms of sex, age, program, and academic achievement levels were also observed. Moreover, The late arrival of course modules to the students; the distribution of modules very close to the actual dates of the tutorial sessions; tutors' reliance on the conventional face-to-face mode of instruction; large class size and the heavy workloads imposed upon tutors in some tutorial centers were some of the major constraints that caused the program to be implemented in an unsatisfactory way. Some respondents perceive distance education programs to be less effective, less systematic and less organized than the conventional system of education.

Key words*: Open and Distance Education (ODE), Open & Distance Learning (ODL) Perception, Distance Learning (DL), Open Learning (OL)*

INTRODUCTION

Distance education: Conception

Distance education has experienced dramatic growth both nationally and internationally since the early 1980s. It has evolved from early correspondence education using primarily print based materials into a worldwide movement using various technologies. The goals of distance education, as an alternative to traditional education, have been to offer basic through advanced knowledge in various academic programs, to battle illiteracy in developing countries, to provide training opportunities for economic growth, and to offer curriculum enrichment in non traditional educational settings. A variety of technologies have been used as delivery systems to facilitate this learning at a distance (Wolcott, 2003).

With the present educational opportunity, the rapid growth of new technologies and the evolution of systems for delivering information, distance education with its ideals of providing equality of access to education, became a reality. Today, there are distance education courses offered by dozens of public and private organizations and institutions to school districts, universities, the military and large corporations(Ibid). Explanations vary with the distance education culture of each country, but there is some agreement on the fundamentals. Distance learning is generally recognized as a structured learning experience

that can be done away from an academic institution, at home or at a workplace. Desmond Keegan (1996) specified six key elements of distance education:

- Separation of teacher and learner
- Influence of an educational organization
- Use of media to link teacher and learner
- Two-way exchange of communication
- Learners as individuals rather than grouped
- Education as an industrialized form

According to Holmberg, distance education is a concept that covers the learning-teaching activities in the cognitive and/or psycho-motor and affective domains of an individual learner and a supporting organization. It is characterized by non-contiguous communication and can be carried out anywhere and at any time, which makes it attractive to adults with professional and social commitments (Holmberg, 1989).

On the other hand, a more inclusive and more expressive meaning of distance education has given by UNESCO. It is defined as "any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print." By definition, in distance education the normal or principal means of communication is through technology. Obviously teachers in conventional classrooms may use technology as a supplement to their teaching, but since it is not their principal means of communication the classroom is not considered to be distance education. Another way of discriminating between distance and other forms of education is to ask where the principal educational decisions are made. Who is deciding what is to be learned? When and how is it to be learned? When has learning been satisfactorily completed? If such decisions are made in the classroom, this is not distance education. If they are made elsewhere and communicated by a technology the program is defined as distance education (UNESCO, 2002).

Context of the study

The commencement of distance education in Ethiopia goes back to 1967 when the Ministry of Education collaborated with Addis Ababa University to establish a Correspondence Study Unit under the Extension Division of the University (Teshome & Thomas, 2001).Unfortunately, it had neither the necessary infrastructure nor the expertise in designing, developing and implementing its educational program in an effective and efficient manner. In an effort to implement the New Education and Training Policy, there was a real attempt to bring about change in the education system of the country in accordance with the recommendations of TESO, EMA and MOE. In collaboration with universities and colleges of the country, a scheme called "17,000 projects" was started through which about 21,400 elementary school teachers were upgrading their qualification to diploma level. However, this program is discontinued due to not verified reasons. In the meantime, a considerable number of private and government institutions in Ethiopia are now delivering their training through a distance education system. A few years ago, IICBA / UNESCO, together with Ethiopian and other Universities abroad, has been offering advanced certificate in school management, a post-graduate diploma in distance education and MA degrees in distance education as well as in the teaching of subject area methodology at post graduate level. Two to three years ago, about 24 CPI (Critical Practitioner Inquiry) candidates were following M.Ed program from six National Universities of the country. They have now acquired their degree in the specified area. The program was initiated by IICBA / UNESCO and aimed at making teacher educators

analyze what is happening in their classrooms, and to examine the official policies that lead them to improve their practices (Joseph, 2004). Today, substantial number of government and private institutions is running various programs through distance mode of instructional procedure.

It is a well known fact that good practice and successful implementation of distance education can take place when there is a positive outlook and accurate perception of stakeholders towards the program. A study in the area of Distance Education Division (DED) of Ethiopia has concluded that the program besides suffering from lack of good leadership "passing through a period of doldrums which seems to be the result of long neglect, under-financing, under-staffing and a lack of attentiveness to the program" (Stone, 1988). A review of distance education program, points out that although distance education learners enjoy the opportunity of studying courses through distance learning having the material to hand for a long period of time and tutorial classes with teachers, they were not satisfied with the nature of the contents covered, the quality of the self- instructional materials, the inadequacy of the supplementary materials, the tutorial classes, the function of study center,   the nature of assignments and examination of distance education courses(Keegan, 1990).

With the growing potential, availability and use of information technology and the expansion of distance education, the development of the sector is becoming an increasingly international affair. ODL as an educational method and a philosophical construct has been identified as the most potent instrument for combating the educational problems assailing a notion like Ethiopia (Marew, 2002). Despite the splendid role and increased popularity of the open and distance learning, the quality of higher education via distance education has been called to question (Dede, 1996; Harrison 2001 as cited in Peat and Helland, 2002). Similarly, a summary on another study of DE generalized that despite the promises and obvious advantages to distance learning, there are problems that need to be resolved. These problems include the quality of instruction, hidden costs, misuse of technology, and the attitudes of instructors, students, and administrators (Bates, 1995). Each one of these has an effect on the overall quality of distance learning as a product. In many ways, each of these issues relates to the others.

The aim of this investigation is, therefore, to examine the perception of students on distance education as a major component of higher education institutions and its impact on current practices by examining the various factors necessary to consolidate the DE program at different levels of the educational programs. The study may provide ideas that would serve as a guide for successful implementation of distance education program. This study focuses specifically on the eastern part of Ethiopia, due to considering the experience and the location of the researcher. The author of this study has worked as a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Haramaya University and in the surrounding area for more than six years. The researcher gathered information in Harar, Dire Dawa and Jijiga which were the study and tutorial centers that enabled the researcher to complete personal observations and led him to consider the research area under investigation. Hence, in this study, the focus was on an assessment of the Eastern Ethiopian experience, mainly the Eastern Harargie and Somali regions. In these regions, DE was delivered and coordinated by Haramaya University and the researcher, therefore, has a vast amount of experience of the system in this part of the country.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The overall aim of the present study is to analyze the implementation process and problems of open and distance education in the eastern part of Ethiopia. In more specific terms, the study was intended to:

- o Analyze the views of major stakeholders on open and distance learning at Haramaya University.
- o Examine whether there are significant differences in the perception of distance learners towards open and distance education programs with respect to variables such as sex, age, marital-status, ability, program, and stream.
- o Study the impact of stakeholders' perception on the performance of distance learners.
- o Examine the current practices of ODL system of education as a whole
- o Recommend appropriate suggestions regarding the effective implementation of the distance education program.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Research design

Although the research focuses on eastern part of Ethiopia, representative respondents were taken into account. Hence, it is survey design. Survey research is probably the most widely used research type in education. It is most appropriate when issues arise concerning situation as they are now. Surveys cannot answer questions about cause and effect relationships, but experiments can. A survey is an empirical study that uses questionnaires or interviews to discover descriptive characteristics of phenomena (Kelinger, 1994).

Subjects

The population for the given study was made up of distance education participants in the Eastern part of Ethiopia (Eastern Harargie, Dire Dawa and Somali region). For the given study, a representative sample of students, tutors and coordinators were considered using probability sampling techniques (simple random and stratified sampling techniques were used). The researcher finally decided that 120 distance learners, 30 tutors, and 10 program leaders/coordinators should be included in the total number of the sample.

Instruments

For this investigation, questionnaires (a scale for assessing the perception of distance learners, and alternative and open-ended items for tutors) and interview (for program leaders) were used by the researcher to obtain valuable information in the study under consideration. Furthermore, the practical and personal observations of the investigator were also included as additional input to consolidate and crosscheck the data obtained through the aforementioned tools. Out of the techniques available for the construction of the questionnaire(the scale) to measure perception, Likert's method and scale discrimination was found to be most suitable due to the following reasons: the method is relatively simple and it is less laborious than that of Thurstone (Lindquist and Stelto ,1936) as noted by Singh (1987). The actual Likert scaling technique provides a five-point scale and assigns each of the five positions a scale value. The scale for respondents ranges from 1= 'Very Poor' to 5 = 'Very Good' for the positive items and from 5 = 'Very Poor' to 1 = 'Very Good' for the negative items. Examples of positive and negative items are '*I am satisfied and it was very important*' and '*I am not satisfied and it was not important at all*' respectively.

The reliability of the instrument used to collect data from the respondents was computed and the coefficient of reliability for the questionnaire was α = 0.96. The investigator accepted the obtained coefficients of reliability as a satisfactory level of internal as well as overall consistency. With regard to the validity of the rating scale in use the face validity is established through discussion of the experienced teachers in the language and pedagogy departments.

Data collection

The data collection from the learners was carried out twice. In the first place, 100 copies of the questionnaire were dispatched to the selected ODL students. There was a low rate of return, only 45 (45%). Secondly, 130 copies of the questionnaire were dispatched when the practicum program was being undertaken for a month (from December first week to January first week in this academic session, 2006/07) at different parts of Western, and Eastern Harargie as well as Somali region. During this time, 75 copies of the questionnaire were returned. Seven of them, however, were discarded for different reasons: two were not filled in at all; three were partially, but improperly filled; and two failed to follow the directions given for filling in the questionnaire. The remainders were not returned at all. Overall, 120 copies were returned. Similarly, Out of the 45 copies of the questionnaires dispatched to tutors, 30 were properly filled in and returned. Out of the remaining15 copies, 9 were discarded since they were not properly filled in and 6 copies were not returned at all. Again ten program leaders/coordinators interviewed.

Methods of data analysis

The data was analyzed using different statistical techniques. Taking into account the overall aim of the study, the intention was to include both qualitative and quantitative approaches in analyzing and interpreting the data. The quantitative data were organized, analyzed, and synthesized through rules following the parametric tests (method) of data treatment.

Some basic statistical measures such as, mean and standard deviation were employed. Furthermore, parametric tests such as t-test, Analysis of Variance/ one way and two ways/as well as Pearson-product-moment coefficient of correlation were employed. The mean and standard deviations were computed to describe the characteristics of groups in general and to deal with further statistical treatment like t-test and ANOVA. Percentages and mean values were also used to compare the differences in students' perceptions on the overall components of the questionnaire and the subscales. The responses given in the open ended items were grouped into different thematic areas and analysis was made based on what appeared most frequently. To work out all of these factors, the margin of sampling error accepted was 5 %(α=0.05 significance level). Evidence about the perception of stakeholders was gathered, classified, analyzed and interpreted using the above methods of data treatment.

RESULTS
By and large, on the basis of the analysis of the data obtained from respondents, the major findings of this study can be summarized as follows:
- The overall perception of respondents on ODL is average. Approximately 37 percent of the respondents rated the system as 'moderate' as can evidently be seem in section four. However, about the same number of the respondents also perceived the ODL system of education to be of lower quality compared to the conventional system of education.

- There is no significant mean difference between below 30 years old and 30 and above years old learners. However, a significant mean difference exists between the perception scores of female and male candidates. As a whole, we can infer that males have greater or better perceptions than females regarding the ODL system of education.

- There is a definite link between the perceptions of learners and their corresponding level of achievement. This would mean that if the perceptions of the learners are high, then their level of achievement on the ODL program would also be high and vice-versa.

- There is no difference between the perceptions of married and unmarried candidates regarding the ODL system of education. However, there is a significant mean difference in the levels of performances of the specified learners. Unmarried ODL learners exhibited a significant mean difference in academic performance compared to married learners.

- Natural Science students have demonstrated significantly better perceptions than Social Science and Language streams students during their course of study through the ODL system of education.

- High achievers have shown higher perception scores than average and below average achievers. This result also indicates that the higher the achievement in academic performance of the learners, the better perception they have of ODL. In other words, high achievement in any field creates favorable conditions for having positive perceptions of the ODL system of education.

- The diploma program learners have registered higher perception level than those enrolled on BA/BSC and certificate programs. This means that learners on the diploma program have shown more favorable perceptions of the ODL system of education than those on the degree program.

- The number of learners in a class during tutorial programs is more than 50 as highlighted by 70 percent of the respondents. The result of this study plainly shows that about 65 percent of the respondents are responsible for one to two courses at a time and the remainder for more than two courses.

- The materials in the course modules and the tutor-marked assignments were perceived by more than two thirds of the respondent to be moderate. The remaining tutors indicated that the course modules and the tutor-marked assignments were too difficult for the ability of the students on the courses.

- The majority of the responses on the patterns of module distribution were positive. However, 33 to 35 percent of the respondents revealed that some learners did not receive modules before tutorial sessions or even the entire semester and, consequently, some were forced to share modules on certain courses. Moreover, 23 percent of the respondents underlined the fact that tutors did not receive modules for some courses to which they were assigned and 45 percent of the total number of respondents stated that modules were not given long enough in advance of the actual tutorial sessions.

- In terms of the provision of the fundamental tutorial services, the tutorial programs were perceived to be poor by the majority of respondents. The types of services provided by tutors are not compatible with the fundamental andragogical principles of a distance education system. The tutorial programs were largely used for teachers'

verbal explanations of descriptive facts which is the typical feature of the conventional face-to-face instructional system. The principal aspects of the tutorial service-the provision of immediate feedback on tutor marked assignments, the involvement of students in activity-based on learning tasks and the provision of individualized academic and counseling supports-were completely overlooked during the tutorial programs.

- About 93 percent of the respondents pointed out that there was no standard time-table for the ODL program and that there should be fixed times for carrying out the activities of the program. 100 percent of the respondents replied that feedback on the assignments was not immediate and individual support services were inadequate. The personal observations of the researchers also pointed to the fact that these areas were almost neglected.

- The views of the largest proportion of respondents placed the conventional system of education in a superior position to distance education in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the effectiveness of face-to-face instruction over the distance mode of delivery as well as in terms of the systematic organization and implementation of educational programs.

- The perceived difficulty of course materials, lack of confidence in the sustainability of the program, the stress of multiple responsibilities (family, social, occupational) and poor delivery of modules were found to be the major factors responsible for the poor performance and low perception levels of students regarding the existing open and distance education programs.

DISCUSSION
Learners' response
The data presented in tables 4.2.1 to 4.2.4 (See Appendix A) highlights the perceptions of distance learners relating to various aspects of the ODL education system. In each of the categories, a relatively large proportion of the respondents rated the service provided as "moderate". It is clear from the results illustrated in table 4.2.4(See Appendix A) that approximately 37 percent view ODL overall as "moderate". However, about the same number of respondents believed the ODL system of education to be poor which is discouraging at a time when it is being implemented as a means of alleviating the problem of access, and could lead to the assumption that it is of poor quality. ODL is still in its early stages in Ethiopia and stakeholders' perceptions could have far-reaching effects on the future development of the program, possibly even impeding the effort to expand it.

When the researcher examined male and female perceptions regarding the ODL program separately, it become clear that female perception rates/ magnitude were at a lower than those of males. A possible explanation for this result could be attributed to women's lack of motivation to participate actively in the field of education in general and in ODL classes in particular. This could be due to cultural reasons since Ethiopian women carry a great deal of responsibility at home and also in the wider community and society itself. Female teachers, students and other civil servants are not exception to the general trends. In addition to their day-to-day occupational responsibilities, they carry out house-hold chores such as looking after children and other members of the family and organize the routine of family life. Consequently, females are likely to experience greater difficulties than their male counterpart when pursuing a distance learning courses and trying to achieve satisfactory results.

Moreover, the prevailing public opinion which follows the education of males over females could impact considerably on the motivation of female candidates to complete courses in the current distance education program. The conclusion could, therefore, be drawn that negative effects on the performance of a substantial number of female respondents and their perceptions of the distance education program result from the multiple responsibilities assumed by female candidates in the home, at school and in society at large as well as from the prevalent public opinion in the developing world that follows the education of males rather than females. The psychological and sociological development of men and women therefore has implications as far as academic study and opinions of programs are concerned.

A positive and significant coefficient of correlation between academic score and perception score is one of the findings of the study and the reasons for this is clear. The predisposition of high and positive perception would facilitate learning and individual involvement in an activity. If the learning situation is facilitated and individual involvement is encouraged, then the development of favourable perception is obvious and high performance is assured. Ross and Powell (1990), for instance, pointed out that the unequal development of boys and girls, their motivation, the role of instruction, academic ability, emotional development and the special nature of specific curriculum could be factors in learning academic fields. It can, therefore, be seen that a close relationship always exists between the way we perceive an academic situation and the corresponding academic achievement.

Married learners show a lower level of academic achievement compared to those who are unmarried. Nevertheless, there was no significant difference in their perceptions of the ODL system of education. This result can possibly be explained in the following way: If the candidate who participates in the ODL program is married he/she would have additional responsibility at home for looking after family. On the other hand, if candidate is unmarried, he/she could spend a large proportion of time on studying. This ultimately would have an impact on the learner's academic performance. The lack of differences in perception could be attributed to the importance attached to the ODL system by both groups as a means of improving their career prospects.

The natural science students show significantly better results in academic performance and higher perception scores than social science and language students. It is difficult, if not impossible, to justify why this has occurred. In the ODL system of education, it is expected that all types of students across streams will view the program in a positive manner and that their academic achievement will be distributed in a uniform way across departments. However, due to tutors' approaches, provision of facilities and organization of the materials, the level perception and achievement of the learners have shown that they can vary from department to department as well as from stream to stream.

The study concluded that the high achievers in ODL have significantly higher perception level than the low and average achievers. It is a fact that learners with strong academic records are expected to have a better understanding of the aim of the ODL program as a means of alleviating the problem of access and quality education in our society and may lead such learners to hold high perception scores with regard to the ODL system of education. Studies in this area also indicate that positive perceptions are a precondition for motivation towards a task and vice versa.

The study also raises the issue that diploma candidates have higher perception scores with regards to the ODL system of education than the BA/BSC or certificate candidates. The mode of delivery of the tutorial program and the type of distance modules are different from those of the BA/BSC and certificate programs. The difference in perceptions could be attributed to these distinctive factors. The coordinators of ODL also explained that the diploma-level learning materials are more structured than those of the modules.

Tutors' responses
One of the fundamental principles of distance education is the provision of opportunity for students to study according to their own learning pace or speed (Keegan, 1990). For this reason, a distance education system presupposes that every student receives all the course materials at the beginning of the program so that she/he can design his /her own study timetable in the light of the overall schedule of the program. However, it is the case here that some students did not receive almost half of the modules until the last day of the course, the day scheduled for the final examination.

In general, the inconsistencies regarding the delivery of modules and the arrival of part of the modules very close to the dates fixed for final examination seems to have a negative impact upon learners' confidence and their performance in the overall. Moreover, investigations as part of this study have uncovered discrepancies between the number of students registered for courses and the total number of course modules received in the centers. In relation to this, some of respondent reported that students did not receive some of the modules at all and this meant that a significant number of them were forced to share some of the modules with other students. In a distance education system where print medium is employed as the sole means of content delivery, students should receive the learning materials long before the dates fixed for tutorial programs. The intention here is to give students a reasonably sufficient amount of time to study the materials independently, work on the assignment questions and areas of difficulty before the actual date of the tutorial session.

Consequently, the fundamental opportunities which a distance education system provides for each student to study the course materials independently (Willis, 1993) and in accordance with his/her own learning pace (Keegan, 1990) and also to receive tutorial support pertinent to his /her own learning problems (Gibbs and Durbridge, 1976) have been disregarded in the present system of ODL education.

Further purpose of this study is to examine the nature and adequacy of the tutorial services received. A significant number of the respondents had negative perceptions of this aspect of the program. The role of the tutor in a distance education system is very different from the role of teachers in conventional classrooms. The primary purpose of tutorials is to provide academic and counseling services that enable the students to solve the problems which they encounter in the course of their independent study (Homlmberg, 1989). Therefore, the detailed explanations of every part of the course materials do not coincide with the purpose of the tutorials. The primary reason for having tutors is to provide students with individualized academic support in their courses (Gibbs and Durbridge, 1976). In contrast to this, about 84 percent of the respondents said that the students received inadequate individualized counseling. It seems that learners were disappointed about the absence of individualized academic support they presumed would be arranged.

The principal purpose of the tutorial programs is to provide opportunities whereby students receive immediate feedback on their learning progress and also on their performance in

solving the assignment questions (Homlmberg, 1989). The results of this study have shown that 100 percent of the respondents feel that learners didn't receive immediate feedback on the assignment papers which they submitted to their respective tutors. This has been supported by a high proportion of tutors who lamented the absence of immediate feedback provided for students on tutor-marked assignment papers. Though assignments are primarily used as a learning tool in a distance education system (Moore and Kearsley, 1996) the tutorial sessions conducted in the current program seem to have considered the assignments merely for evaluation purposes.

Learning is a very individual effort, particularly in distance education. Adults vary greatly in their learning abilities and disabilities. Adults' variation in their needs, background and learning abilities suggests the paramount importance of individualized academic support for distance students(Kember, 1989). However, the prevalence of teacher-dominated whole-class instruction in the tutorial sessions of the current distance education program seems to pay little or no attention to the diverse learning needs of the students.

In general, the nature of the tutorial service provided for distance learners is incompatible with the fundamental principles of the distance education system. As a result, the tutorial programs fail to address the main learning needs and problems of the students enrolled in the current distance education program. The absence of fixed, workable schedules for the various activities in the program appears to be one of the possible causes for the poor quality of the tutorial programs conducted in ODL. As frequently indicated in other sections, there were inadequate period of time between the delivery of the modules and the tutorial sessions. Students attended the tutorials without completing the preparation required by the program. This forced tutors to fall back on the conventional teacher-dominated instructional approach that leads students to be passive recipients of tutors' verbal explanation of descriptive facts drawn from the course materials. In addition, the results of this study point to the very high workload imposed upon tutors. The assignment of large number of tutees to one tutor could impede satisfactory provision of individualized academic and counseling support. The demands imposed upon tutors to mark a very large number of hand-written assignment papers could have a negative impact upon the quality of marking and could, consequently limit the possibility of providing immediate feedback.

An attempt has been made in this study to assess the perception of respondents regarding the program. About 70 percent of respondents feel that the level of difficulty of the learning modules is moderate. The remaining 30 percent of the respondents believe that the materials in the modules do not match the levels of ability of the learners. No respondent considers the level of difficulty of the materials to be low. Similarly, about 80 percent of the subjects selected for this study rate the level of difficulty of the tutor-marked assignments as moderate. This perception may be partly explained by ODL students' previous experience of the conventional face-to-face mode of instruction. This has been supported by Billings (1989) who has reported that students who have long been oriented to teacher-dominated face-to-face instruction tend to perceive distance learning as a difficult task and the tutors' perceptions may stem from this. Researchers in this area strongly advocate that the difficulty of course materials is reported as being one of the major reasons for the withdrawal of many students from courses. In fact, there is no empirical evidence to prove the impact of the actual difficulty of the course materials on the performance of learners. The data in this study, however, shows the impact of the perceived difficulty of the course materials upon the performance of learners of the programs. A number of studies have reported that distance learners tend to persist in a given educational program if they feel that they are capable of

coping with the level of difficulty of the courses (Koul, 1987) and if they feel that the program is less demanding (Coggins, 1988). It is, therefore, possible to conclude that withdrawal of a considerable amount of students from the current distance education program may be partly attributed to the perceived difficulty of the course materials.

The stress of multiple roles has been mentioned by respondents as one of the major constraints that hinder students from persisting in a distance education program. This view of respondents has been confirmed by Moore (1975), Thompson (1984), and Barry (1991), as cited in Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) who mentioned the stress of multiple roles as a hindrance to adult learners' persistence and performance in a distance education program. Adult learners assume multiple responsibilities at home, in society and in their workplaces. They spend a great deal of time and energy on fulfilling their family, social, and occupational responsibilities. This may drastically reduce the time and energy which could otherwise have been used for learning activities.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the distance education system is perceived to be average by the respondents. About 37 percent of the subjects were rated it as moderate as can evidently be deduced from the findings. However, about the same proportion of respondents viewed the ODL system of education as poor. Differences and connections between perceptions and level of performance of ODL students in terms of sex, age, program, and academic achievement levels can also be observed and in what ways the specified individual variables can impact on the perceptions and level of performance of distance learners. In some cases, the course modules were dispatched to the students towards the end of the semester and a significant proportion of students and tutors did not receive some of the modules at all. In most cases, the modules were not distributed long enough in advance of the tutorial sessions. As a result, students were forced to attend without having studied the materials before hand and also without working on the assignment questions and exercises independently.

The nature of the tutorial services provided by tutors does not follow the fundamental principles of distance education. The tutorial programs were devoted largely to teachers' verbal explanation of descriptive facts which is the typical feature of conventional face-to-face instruction. The principal services of a tutorial program - involvement of the students in enquiry-based tasks and discussion, the provision of immediate feedback on tutor-marked assignments, individualized academic support and counseling – were completely overlooked. The late arrival of course modules to the students; the distribution of modules very close to the actual dates of the tutorial sessions (which denies students the chance of studying the materials in advance and working on assignments independently); tutors' reliance on the conventional face-to-face mode of instruction; large class size and the heavy workloads imposed upon tutors in some tutorial centers were some of the major constraints that caused the program to be implemented in an unsatisfactory way.

The largest proportions of subjects represented in this study have shown low levels of satisfaction with the program. Students have perceived the course materials to be more difficult and demanding than what they can actually learn and understand. The largest proportion of respondents continue to place the conventional (face-to-face) system of education in a superior position to the distance mode of delivery with regard to creating better opportunities for effective learning and providing systematic, well-organized and sustainable

educational services. Poor performance in the area of timely delivery of course modules, the incompatibility of the tutorial services with the fundamental andragogical principles of distance learning, the absence of fixed and reliable schedule for the various activities in the program, the prevalence of a communication gap between program implementers and students and learners' tendency to favor the conventional mode of education appear to have eroded learners' confidence in the program and, thus, created unfavorable views of open and distance system of education.

The poor performance in the delivery of the course materials, the absence of sufficient tutorial services that are compatible with the system of distance education and the absence of consistent and timely communication between program implementers and beneficiaries could have increased the perceived difficulty of the course materials and reduced the confidence of the students in the sustainability of the current distance education program. These constraints added to the stress of multiple roles assumed by adults, seem to have forced some distance students to terminate their course of study in the middle of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings and the conclusions drawn from this study it seems appropriate to

forward the following pertinent suggestions.

- The study has uncovered the fact that the largest proportion of students view distance education in general and the existing distance teacher training program in particular as average. Some respondents perceive distance education programs to be less effective, less systematic and less organized than the conventional system of education. This has a negative impact on the quality and level of performance of the ODL system of education. Therefore, the cultivation of learners' confidence in the quality and sustainability of the current program as well as in their ability to succeed appears to be an urgent and inescapable task for all parties involved in the implementation of the program. Improvement in the module delivery system and in the quality of the tutorial services, the preparation of a workable and reliable schedule and the establishing of an active and reliable communication system between the organizers and between the implementers and the students are some of the measures that require to be taken in order to build up learners' confidence and to keep in touch customers in the program.

- In spite of the exclusive reliance of the program on print media as the only mode of content delivery, the findings of this study reveal the existence of critical problems in the appropriate and timely distribution of course modules to the students. There are students who did not receive the course modules at the beginning of the program. The learning modules came during the last months of the program and some students and tutors did not receive some of the modules at all. As a result, students were denied the principal advantage of a distance education program, that is, the opportunity to learn independently in accordance with the learning pace of each student. Therefore, Universities or educational institutions running ODL programs need to exert all their efforts to prepare all the course modules well in advance the beginning of each semester. In addition, study centers must distribute the materials promptly so that students can collect them during the period of registration.

- In spite of the low participation rate of female candidates in the program, average performance was found to be higher among male rather than female candidates. Thus, the selection procedures for future programs need to give a special consideration to female candidates. In view of the multiple responsibilities of females compared to their male counterparts, the provision of specific academic and administrative support for female distance students seems to be justifiable. Moreover, the selection criteria for future distance education programs need to attract female and younger candidates as a means of creating equity and increasing academic performance. Efforts have to be made to increase the levels of achievement of female candidates by strengthening academic affirmative action. On the other hand, a joint survey research undertaken at the Fern Universität, West Germany, and Open University, UK, suggests that men and women students have different needs with respect to the local support provided during their distance study. Women are more regular attendee's at face-to-face tutorials than men and value local provision, especially the chance to interact with other students. With regard, authors also relate this to models of intellectual development of women and argue for the importance of providing distance education suitable to women's needs (Kikup and Prummer, 1990).

- When viewed alongside the fundamental methodological principles of distance education, the tutorial services rendered by tutors are found to be inappropriate. This can be attributed to the entire program of tutorial sessions being based on teacher-fronted verbal presentation of factual information and, consequently, the virtual absence of task-based learning activities, the absence of immediate feedback on tutor-marked assignments as well as the lack of individualized academic support and counseling services. The aforementioned factors have all proved the incompatibility of the existing tutorial programs with the fundamental principles of distance learning. Accordingly:

  - Tutors need to make a radical shift in their methodology from a teacher-dominated formal lecture to a learner-centered and ragogical approach. Training of tutors on the fundamental principles of methodology is therefore urgently required.

  - The large class sizes and the consequent imposition of heavy workloads upon tutors need to be reduced by opening new tutorial centers in the vicinity of those centers that accommodate large number of students.
  - The use of multi-media for the delivery of course content need to be put into practice and considered as much as possible.

To conclude, strengthening open and distance education has the potential to focus the learning process on the student. Courses and programs that emphasize the students' strengths and needs should be succeeded in attracting students. Moreover, in order to build their reputations and keep students, distance education courses and programs must reach the required standards. Achieving distance education is the aim of all of the concerned parties in the continual quest for the best possible resources, practices, and results. With an increased need for new career skills and improvements in the technology used to deliver courses, distance education students will demand evidence of quality and authenticity from distance courses. Overall, it can be concluded that, when students benefit from an education program that meets their needs, their perception of the course is likely to positive and their performance in the field tends to improve (Cavanaugh, 2005)

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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Distance Education Learners

Table: 4.1 Biographical data of respondents (students)

Program Type						Sex				Age				Marital status			
BA/BSc		Diploma		Certificate		Female		Male		below30yrs		30 yrs& above		Married		Unmarried	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
36	30	72	60	12	10	30	25	90	75	45	34.5	85	65.5	100	83	20	17

Table 4.1 shows that the number of students in the sample registered at diploma are 72 which equates to about 60 percent of the total respondents. The number of respondents registered at BA/BSc level is 36 which, in percentage terms, equates to 30. The remaining 10 percent of the subjects of the study stated that they had registered for the certificate program. The total percentage of female candidates in the sample is only 25 percent and it can, therefore, safely be concluded that the number of male candidates is much greater than that of females. The table also clearly indicates that a large majority are married. Finally, the age-range of the distance learners leans towards the category of over 30 years old.

4.2 Perception of the respondents along with the various dimensions

After the general data had been organized and classified, an attempt was also made to categorize responses under the following headings:
- o   Tutorial and support services

o Curricular materials (self instructional material and other media)

o Examinations and assignments

o Overall perception on ODL

In addition, the perceptions of the respondents across each category as well as their overall perception of the system of distance education were determined as outlined in the following tables:

Table: 4.2.1 Tutorial and support services

Very poor		Poor		Moderate		Good		Very Good	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No.	%
0	0	4	7	30	56	16	30	4	7

The respondents' perceptions regarding tutorial and support services were ranked from poor to very good. The majority, about 56 percent gave a moderate rating. Approximately 30 percent said that the services were "good". Only a very insignificant number of the respondents rated the services as "very good". Although no respondents assessed the ODL program as very poor, the services rendered in relation to the specific dimensions to be unsatisfactory. It appears that some modifications of the service provided as part of the ODE program may be required to enable the learner to make contact with other students and teachers to develop his/her academic and social contact that would probably otherwise be missed in the ODL system.

Table: 4.2.2 Curricular materials (self-instructional material and other media)

Very poor		Poor		Moderate		Good		Very Good	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No.	%
4	6	20	32	24	39	8	13	6	10

In this section, the respondents' responses similarly ranged from very poor to very good on the continuum with a large number of respondents, about 39 percent rating the curricular material as moderate. However, 32 percent of the total respondents stated that the self-instructional materials were poor. This perception seems to call in to question the quality of the distance and open education system and the replies of the respondents could have implications for revision of the curricular materials. On a more positive note, the 10 percent of respondents who rated the curricular materials as "very good" could shed light on ways of strengthening the distance education program in the future.

Table: 4.2.3 Examinations and assignments

Very poor		Poor		Moderate		Good		Very Good	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No.	%
14	18	14	18	24	32	20	26	4	5

A relatively high number of respondents (about 32 percents) rated the assessment process as "moderate". However, it can be seen from the table that the responses still range from "very poor" to "very good" which was also the case in the previous category. In fact, approximately 36 percent of the total number of respondents rated the assessment process as either "very poor" or "poor' which could have an impact on procedures used since, in any education system, assessment is both the most significant and most challenging tasks. It is through assessing learners that sufficient awareness about the status of their performance can be gained and the quality of teaching and learning reflected upon. Therefore, when the perceptions of the stakeholders of the examinations and assignments are not up to the expected level, doubts are cast as to whether ODL can meet its goal as an alternative means of accessing education at any level.

Table: 4.2.4 Overall perception of ODL

Very poor		Poor		Moderate		Good		Very Good	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No.	%
14	18	28	37	28	37	6	8	0	0

From the previous three tables, it has been shown that in the ODL categories of tutorial and support services, curricular materials (self-instructional material and other media) as well as examinations and assessments, the majority of the respondents' replies gave "moderate" ratings. Therefore, the expectation is for the overall perceptions of ODL on the part of the respondents to follow similar patterns. It can be seen that approximately 37 percent of the respondents gave a "moderate" rating as far as their overall perceptions were concerned. However, an equal number stated that they considered the ODL system overall to be poor. This does not represent an encouraging result with regard to the use of distance education programs as a means of alleviating access and may ultimately lead to the assumption that ODL is of poor quality. ODL is still in its early stages in this country and stakeholders' perceptions could have far-reaching effects on the future development of the program, possibly even impeding the effort to expand it.

Table: 4.3 Summary of ANOVA with reference to sex and age (between below 30 years old and 30 and above years old) of the learners

Source of Variation	Df.	F
Sex	2-1=1	6.5174
Age	2-1=1	<1
Interaction	1x1=1	<1
With in	N-k=116	
Total	N-1=119	

The above table shows that the F- value for sex is significant at 0.05 levels and F-value is not significant for age(between below 30 years old and 30 and above years old learners) at the specified level of significance. Similarly, F-value is not significant with respect to interaction (sex and age). It

can be further illustrated that there is no significant mean difference between below 30 years old and 30 and above years old learners. However, it can clearly be seen that there is a significant mean difference between the perception score of female and male learners. Furthermore, even if we mix up below 30 years old females with 30 and above years old male; 30 and above years old female with below 30 years old male, the difference in mean score is insignificant at 0.05 levels with degree of freedom equal to 1/116. As a whole, we can infer that males have more positive perception than females towards ODL.

Table: 4.4: The relationship between perception score and performance of the learners

N	X	Y	
120	Perception Score	Achievement Score	r=0.63

The above table reveals that the correlation between perception score and academic performances of the learners is 0.63. The value is high correlation. Moreover, the significance of the given correlation was also checked and found to be significant, at 0.01 level with degree of freedom equal to118. Therefore, it can safely be concluded that there is a positive significant relationship between the perception of learners and their corresponding achievement. In other words this means that if the perceptions of the learners are positive, their achievement in DOL is also high and vice-versa.

Table: 4.5 The significance of mean difference between the trainees who are married and unmarried in perception score

	Mean	N	∂	t-value	Degree of freedom
Those who are married	63.4	100	17.9	1.48	118
Those who are unmarried	68.9	20	12.2		

According to the data on the table, it can be concluded that the calculated t-value is not significant at P<0.05 level of significance with degree of freedom equaling 118. It means that being married or unmarried has no effect (whatsoever) on the perception score of the students in the ODL system of education.

Table: 4.6: The significance of mean difference between the trainees who are married and unmarried in academic performance

	Mean	N	∂	t-value	Degree of freedom
Those who are married	2.01	100	.86	15.0	118
Those who are unmarried	2.52	20	.56		

As illustrated in the above table, the calculated value of t=15.0 is significant at P<0.01 levels with degree of freedom 118. Thus, it is clear that there is a significant mean difference in performance of

the specified learners. Unmarried ODL learner exhibited a significant mean difference in academic performance compared to married candidates.

Table: 4.7 Summary of ANOVA: The significance of mean difference of the perception score of learners among the different streams

Source of variation	Df.	F
Between	k-1=2	
Within	N-k=117	F=12.345
Total	N-1=119	

The above table shows that F- value is significant at 0.01 levels with degree of freedom 2/117. This refers to the conclusion that there is a significant mean difference in the perception of learners among different streams (Social Science, Natural Science and Language). The post-hoc Analysis of variance (Tukey Test) indicates that Natural Science students have significantly better perceptions than students in either the Social Science or Language streams.

Table: 4.8 Summary of ANOVA: The significance of mean difference on perceptions of learners across the levels of academic performance.

Source of variation	Df	F
Between Group	k-1=2	
Within	N-k=117	F=25.62
Total	N-1=119	

The table clearly shows that there is significant mean difference in perception of learners across the level of academic performance**.** In addition to this, the post-hoc Analysis of variance clearly shows us that high achievers have a higher perception score than average and below-average achievers. This result could also demonstrate that the greater the academic achievements of the learners, the better their perceptions are of ODL. It means that a high level of success creates favorable conditions for having better perceptions of the ODL system of education.

Table: 4.9 Summary of ANOVA (The significance of mean difference on the perception score of learners at different program levels (Degree, Diploma, Certificate)

Source of variation	Df	F
Between Groups	k-1=2	
Within Groups	N-k=117	F=49.26
Total	N-1=119	

According to the result of the table, the conclusion can be reached that there is a significant mean difference on the perceptions score of learners depending on the program selected. Moreover, the post-hoc Analysis of variance reveals that the diploma program learners have more positive perceptions than those who have registered for BA/BSC and certificate programs. As can be seen

from the general information section, the number of candidates registered for diploma program is higher than for the other programs specified in this study. The mode of delivery of tutorial programs and the type of distance modules offered were also different from those of the BA/BSC and certificate programs. The difference in the perceptions of the subjects mentioned above could be attributed to these distinctive features.

Students' responses to open-ended items

The following qualitative points were highlighted in the questionnaire responses:

Organization of course and other supportive materials
- Lack of thorough preparation and organization of the learning materials. Effort is, therefore, required to improve the materials
- Lack of organization of the modules. Consistent efforts should be devoted to reorganizing the learning modules
- The distance materials should be manageable in size and need to be more comprehensive for the learners
- Course preparation and organization should be based on students' levels of thinking and ability at problem-solving. Supportive materials should be accessible to make learning more lasting.
- An increase in the number of tutorial sessions is essential to cover the learning modules adequately.
- The amount of supportive reading materials and media for the distance education program should be expanded.
- If supportive materials were added in sufficient number, the learner would acquire the necessary required knowledge and the appropriate skills more easily.
- The distance learning materials are not well-prepared. The materials are characterized by a high level of redundancy and typing errors which is not motivating for learning and studying.
- The distance education materials are very extensive to work through properly.

Practical component of the program
- The practical exercises are good but more careful selective provision of the exercises would maintain the interest of learners.
- No or little emphasis is placed on the practical aspects of the program
- Practical exercises in the courses are weak and less organized. Tutors should make consistent checks on students' progress on practical activities
- Improvements in planning, organization and evaluation of the practical activities are urgently needed.
- Practical activities form part of the program but tutors do not include them in the counseling sessions.
- Educational institutions should establish a monitoring system to improve the quality and appropriateness of the practical aspects of programs.
- Practical activities/tasks should be clear and relevant and the appropriate facilities should be available to carry them out effectively.

Qualifications and skills of the tutors
- The qualifications of the tutors are up-to standard but sometimes tutors were unprepared for the tutorial sessions.
- Qualified instructors should be appointed as tutors.
- The qualifications and skills of the tutors are very good.

- The tutors are not qualified to be distance education instructors/tutors. Further training is necessary to improve the capacity of tutors.
- Some tutors do not deserve to have been appointed as academic counselors.
- There is no problem with the qualifications and skills of instructors/ tutors
- The educational institutions must carefully select and appoint qualified instructors in accordance with the field of specialization required.
- There are tutors who are not suitably qualified to deliver the course.

The quality of distance education
- I found the distance education program very important and of high quality.
- Training through distance education is as good as the conventional system of education
- The quality of distance education depends on the quality of learning modules and the capacity of tutors
- The quality of the program varies from institution to institution. The system of evaluation needs improvement. The government should be involved in monitoring the system.
- The quality of distance education could be improved by training tutors and providing appropriate services to the learners. It would be promising if continuous evaluation and feedback were provided
- No problems in terms of qualification. The instructors/ tutors are good
- The program is quite good but further reference materials should be part of the service.
- The provision of library, laboratory and other supplementary learning resources is almost non-existent. As a result, the quality of the current distance education program is not up to the expected standard.
- It is not true to say the distance education program and the regular program are on an equal footing.
- As far as I am concerned, appropriate facilities should be provided in tutorial centers and organized so as to improve the quality of distance education.

General comments
- Improvements on the preparation of module are needed.
- The tutorials for distance education should be arranged every month.
- As far as possible, please try to provide supportive materials and media.
- The distance education program is valuable and it should be undertaken conscientiously.
- The perceptions of tutors and educational administrators need to be improved for further improvement of the distance education program.
- The problem of the organization of the learning modules is tolerable but delay on the distribution of the materials is the critical problem.
- The current distance learning modules are bulky. Improvements to reorganize the material would be desirable.
- The distance education program plays an essential and do have splendid role in the professional development of teachers
- The program could have good prospects for flourishing in the future if certain improvements are carried out, e.g. announcement of tutorial times in advance.
- Currently, it seems that the government as well as educational institutions is paying less attention to the system of distance education.
- I think that the distance education program is helpful for the continuous professional development of teachers. Therefore, the government and educational institutions should put a large amount of effort into strengthening the program.

Table: 4.10: Biographical data of respondents (Tutors)

Program Type						Sex				Service years				Training/workshop of DE			
B.A/B.c		MA/M.Sc		PhD		Male		Female		5 and less yrs		above5 yrs		Yes		No	
No.	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No.	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
12	40	18	60	…	..	27	90	3	10	12	40	18	60	…	…	30	100

The above table revealed that about 60 percent of the tutors hold MA/M.Sc degrees. The remaining 40 percent of the respondents were qualified up to first degree level. No respondents appointed as tutors who had a PhD. However, the researcher's personal observations revealed that three PhD holders not included in the sample were appointed as tutors in the area of Harar, Jijiga and Dire Dawa. The conclusion can be drawn that, although the qualifications of tutors appears to be suitable, their knowledge of ODL methodology is insufficient. According to the results shown in the table, only 10 percent of the tutors are females and the majority of the respondents are experienced instructors with length of service of more than five years. However, in order to become a distance education program tutor, no training is provided. This situation could have adverse effect on the teaching and learning process and lead to lack of productivity since the unique feature of the ODL system demand specific types of tutors with specialized training.

Table: 4.11 Number of tutees in the a class, number of courses and number of assignments

Number of tutees		Number of courses		Number of assignments	
Below 50	50 & Above	One to two	Above two	Three	More than three
30%	70%	65%	35%	41%	59%

Table 4.11 illustrates that, as experienced by 70 percent of the respondents, the number of learners in a class during tutorial sessions is more than 50. A distinctive feature of the ODL education system is interaction with other learners and tutors during tutorial sessions. In order for this to be implemented effectively, the number of students in a class needs to be reduced to a manageable size. The table also reveals that about 65 percent of the respondents are responsible for two courses at a time and the remainder for more than two courses. It is clear that this, in turn, makes instructors responsible for the corresponding assignments and tutorial classes. Experience in this regard showed that it is not advisable for tutors to take more than two ODL courses at time. Similarly, about 59 percent of the respondents highlighted the fact that they were responsible for correcting more than three separate assignments. Although the content of assignments varies from course to course, it is difficult, if not impossible, to be responsible for more than three or four different assignments at a time.

Table: 4.12 Difficulty levels of the course modules and assignments

Item	Difficult		Moderate		Easy	
Difficulty level of the course modules	No	%	No	%	No	%
	9	30	21	70	-------	--------
Difficulty level of the assignments	6	20	24	80	--------	--------

The majority of the respondents described the level of difficulty of course modules and corresponding assignments as "moderate". However, 20 to 30 percent of the respondents rated them as "difficult". The ability levels of the majority of students should be taken into consideration during the preparation of the course modules and assignments so that they are pitched at an appropriate level, neither too easy nor too difficult. This fact was also highlighted during interview with coordinators.

Table: 4.13 Patterns of module distribution

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Students received all the modules before the tutorial sessions	67	33
Students received all the modules prepared for the semester	65	35
Some students were forced to share some of the modules with others	22	78
Tutors didn't receive some of the modules prepared for the courses which they offered	23	77
Tutors received the modules long before the actual tutorial session	55	45

Most of the responses regarding the patterns of module distribution were positive. However, 33 to 35 percent of the respondents highlighted the fact that some learners did not receive modules before tutorial sessions, did not have the necessary modules for the semester and were forced to share modules on certain courses. Furthermore, 23 percent of the respondents complained that tutors did not even receive modules on time for some courses to which they were assigned. This caused inevitable delays regarding preparation by tutors of effective tutorial sessions. Similarly, about 45 percent of the total respondents replied that modules were not provided well in advance of tutorial sessions. Tutors need to have the module weeks or even months before the actual tutorial session take place to be able to prepare well. A face to face interview with coordinators disclosed that this happens partly due to EMA organizational problems and partly due to reluctance on the part of tutors.

Table: 4.14 Status of tutorial Support

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
The academic support given to the students was sufficient	15	85
Assignments were submitted on time	11	89
The programs run in regular time-tables	7	93
Feedback for assignments were immediate	0	100
Individualized academic supports was adequate	0	100

Overall, the respondents clearly rated the support services as "poor". About 85 percent of the subjects responded that the academic support provided is insufficient and 89 percent stated that assignments were not submitted on time. Similarly, about 93 percent of the respondents highlighted the fact that there was no standard timetable for running the ODL program. It is not good practice for any educational program to be implemented without organizing a timetable of activities for each component. Disappointingly, 100 percent of the respondents felt that feedback on the assignments was not immediate and individual support was inadequate. The personal observations of the researchers also revealed that these areas were almost neglected.

Table: 4.15 Responses to miscellaneous issues

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Do you think that the ODL system of education students academically capable?	42	58
Do you think that students have received sufficient counselling support?	16	84
Was the number of tutorial sessions adequate to cover the contents of the module?	18	82
Do you believe that distance education can be as effective as the conventional method?	41	59

As far as the academic ability of ODE learners is concerned, about 42 percent the respondents believe that ODL learners are as competent as conventional learners. Nevertheless, 58 percent, a large proportion of the respondents think that ODE learners are less able. The table also reveals that 84 percents of the respondents feel that the counselling support arranged for the ODE learners is inadequate. Furthermore, 82 percent are of the opinion that the time allotted to cover the content of the learning module is insufficient. The personal observations of the researcher also uncovered the fact that coordinators and program organizers seem to have insufficient knowledge regarding allocation of time for tutorial sessions. As a result, many tutors experience the problems mentioned by the respondents. Finally, the respondents were asked to reflect on whatever believes ODL to be as effective as the conventional education system or not. Approximately 41 percent think that it is as effective as the conventional system. However, about 59 percent have reservations about whether the quality of the ODL education system is equal to that of the conventional system. Center coordinators argue in response that, apart from the necessity of introducing minor changes to the system, it is currently in a good position and contributing to the development of the nation in the same way as the conventional system of education. They also highlighted the fact that no discrimination takes place regarding the appointment of graduates to specific posts.

Tutors' responses to open-ended items

Problems in course assignments
- Tutees are not used to doing assignments. Yet, it is part of the procedure to collect in and correct assignments at the end of each semester. The preparation and organization of assignments is poor.
- There are too many questions set for some courses. Assignments are not submitted on time.
- Students were not conscientious about completing assignments. There is not enough time for feedback.
- Students copy assignment answers from each other. The handwriting was often not legible and, as a result, it was time-consuming to read and score properly.
- Delay of submission of the assignment and lack of guidance given to trainees about assignment are a few of the problems of the current distance education system.
- Redundant and irrelevant questions.
- Students do not take due care when completing assignments and so correcting them was a challenging task.
- The assignments were full of problems in terms of content, language and format.
- Tutees copy the answer directly from the modules and answers are usually erroneous.
- Assignments submitted are poorly organized. There is not enough time to give feedback to students.
- The assignments are prepared by the module writers and are often unsuitable with regard to content coverage.
- Some of the questions for assignments are not clear. It is unfortunate that most of the questions are objective-type ones.
- Some of the questions are ambiguous and complex for students.

Frequently occurring problems with distance learners
- Communication problem, poor English, inattentiveness towards their education and lack of confidence.
- Most of the distance learners lack basic concepts. As a result, whatever type of question they may encounter, they assume the question is difficult for them.
- Many registered for the course and sat the exam but few of them attended the tutorial sessions.
- Problem with time management: Distance learners lack appropriate time management skills and are therefore disorganized.
- There are too many students in a class for the tutorial sessions
- Distance learners seem overloaded due to their private work on top of the program. Students are interested to attend tutorial sessions given by their tutors most of the time but the majority of distance education learners lack motivation for learning.
- Distance learners came to the tutorial sessions without having read their learning modules. They lacked skills for active participation. Distance learners registered for the sake of improving their career prospects.
- Distance learners expect their tutors to cover every thing in tutorial sessions with them as passive participants.
- The students sometimes registered for the program beyond their capabilities. The center coordinators are not properly trained to pay attention to this.
- Lack of information on the tutorial time/ schedule. Problem of distance- residence is too far from the tutorial center. Lack of time to study the material in advance of tutorial sessions.
- Lack of time, counseling and relevant materials. The modules lack concrete examples, there are insufficient contextual examples

- Most of the learners were absent from the tutorial sessions for unknown reasons. There is no follow up system to control absenteeism.
- Modules on some courses were not reaching students on time.
- Lack of reference materials. None in some areas, only small amount of background reading materials.
- Modules were not prepared appropriately. Inadequacy in terms of course coverage, and unidentified errors as well as lack of organization of the learning contents.
- Some modules for diploma levels were written in advanced mathematical language more suitable for a higher level of qualification.
- Most students were not motivated to learn but they came because they were forced to do so.
- Many of them need further assistance and help which may not be possible during tutorials.

Academic competency of distance learners
- The academic background of the students was not up to standard. Some of them, however, were too old to be students.
- Apart from a few exceptions, most of the distance learners were not prepared to participate fully in the class and the level of academic performance was lower compared to conventional (regular) students.
- Since some students did not possess the appropriate prior qualification, they lacked motivation and showed a low level of effort and achievement. Some did not read the modules because they were incapable of doing so.

Counseling support
- Increasing tutorial sessions by using the telephone and email could provide a higher level of counseling support.
- I would recommend half of the regular contact hours required to cover the course.
- Sufficient time allocation and provision of references would improve the academic support services.
- To improve the time allocation for tutorial sessions, I would suggest three sessions instead of two.
- Doubling the number of hours and increasing the support service would improve the academic support provided.
- Increasing the frequency of contact with learners and the number of counselors would contribute to an improvement in the support service.
- Orientation, student handbook, access to telephones and correspondence need to be considered.
- I would suggest two tutorial sessions but extended in terms of duration.
- Tutorial sessions should be announced ahead of time, modules should be ready and distributed on time.
- I would suggest that half of the total credit hours of the course be allotted to the tutorial sessions.
- Support should be available on how to study, how to do assignments, and how to manage time.
- Tutorials should be arranged at least three times in a session.
- It would be good if eight tutorial sessions per semester were arranged.
- Regular communication with the learner would improve the academic support.
- Tutorial time should be increased and I suggest that it be conducted once a month.
- The establishing of various centers and the use of modern communication technology would contribute to an improvement in the quality of academic sessions.
- With regard to time, I would suggest ten days per module.
- If we use the existing time available for tutorial sessions effectively, it is sufficient.

- Local high school teachers should support tutees in addition to the tutorial sessions. Employing center counselors would improve the service a great deal.
- For each course, there should be four to six tutorial sessions.
- Sufficient reference materials and group learning should be encouraged
- Students should have at least six tutorial sessions for a given course

Critical problems of DE
- Lack of appropriate attention to the program by the concerned bodies.
- The government does not pay attention to distance education and there is a lack of appropriate incentives for those who complete courses which could demotivate possible future students.
- The repercussions of curriculum change have not been taken into account.
- Lack of appropriate academic support for individual candidates when required.
- Problems of module distribution at the appropriate times.
- Lack of academic feedback before the final (term-end) exam.
- Failure to assess needs and workload accordingly.
- Poor or not well-prepared and broadly organized learning modules.
- Poor relationship between administrative regions and institutions responsible for distance education.
- Lack of appropriate support for the learners and lack of organized study centers.
- Institutions are reluctant to open new programs through distance education.
- Poor coordination of the program and little attention paid to tutors.
- Distance education is becoming the option of academically poor and weak candidates.
- Poor communication with and orientation of students who join the distance education program.
- Poor quality of the program in terms of students, tutors and materials.
- Lack of time and libraries at the study centers. Geographical location of the study centers creates logistical problems.
- Insufficient module supply, wrong location of study centers as well as the fact that tutors' workloads are too heavy.
- Lack of attention, lack of policy and proper organizational structure and lack of suitably qualified manpower and management.
- Shortage of time to cover the learning modules. Lack of information in distance education program in general.

Dropouts
- Academic incompetence, family problems and displacement/unplanned transfer from their workplace could be reasons for dropping out.
- Lack of motivation, lack of support and lack of organization of the program.
- Failure to attend the tutorial sessions, misinformation about the exam time and the distance education program as whole.
- Academic incompetence and lack of interest in the way education is offered to them.
- Lack of special arrangements to support and counsel academically poor students
- Long distance from the workplace to the study center and unwillingness of employers to allow the distance learners to continue the program.
- Economic and personal problems could contribute greatly to dropping out.
- The program does not follow the fixed schedule.
- Students have insufficient support and communication with course instructors/ tutors.
- Frustration of students, tutors' wrong perceptions of the distance learners and lack of financial support for distance learners.
- Maybe lack of time to follow up their studies and tutorial sessions properly are reasons for dropping out.

- Lack of appropriate educational background and lack of permission to give time to their learning from their employers.
- Little expectation from the program on the part of the distance learners.
- Focus on developing confidence in students by the counselors could help to reduce the dropout rate.
- Employed learners need to have appropriate orientation to the distance education program.
- Establishing proper study centers and providing appropriate facilities would play an important role in decreasing the number of dropouts.
- More academic support is needed to reduce the dropouts rate.
- Distance education programs need to have a clear vision of future prospects.
- Try to minimize students' workloads. Try to raise the aspirations of distance learners.
- Sufficient counseling, fixed timetable and an attractive program would play an important role in reducing the dropout rate.
- Advising students prior to starting courses on what they can study successfully and offering appropriate training with structured and organized learning modules would contribute greatly to a reduction in the number of dropouts.
- Attracting capable students to the distance program would alleviate the problem of dropouts.
- Making the system more flexible to the learners needs would help the problem of wastage.
- It would be advantageous if employers of distance learners exempted them from additional assignments at work as a means in decreasing attrition rate.
- Increasing the academic counseling service and special awareness creation programs could bring about a decrease in the number of dropouts.
- The closer proximity of the location of tutorial sessions to the learners' places of residence could decrease the dropout rate.

General Comments
- Strengthening distance education units in an institution and ensuring that students have a suitable educational background when they join specific program would make distance education effective.
- Practical sessions also need to be arranged. More time should be allotted for the tutorial sessions.
- Try to make the system more flexible and use different information and communication technologies to support the face-to-face sessions.
- Distance learners though out reach geographically, situation should be appropriate to keep them closer at least by providing them with all possible facilities that the regular program/ learners have access to. That is, proper counseling, tutorials, continuous assessment, library service and the like.
- Modules should be prepared and distributed at the appropriate time.
- To seriously undertake the program in a well-organized manner, students should be evaluated appropriately and the process of grading of student performance should be taken seriously.
- All necessary support should be setup carefully and available on time.
- Proper policy, awareness raising, good organization and well-considered utilization of manpower would make the distance education program effective and efficient.
- An increase in the number of tutorial centers, allotment of enough time, enhancement of the promotion service offered, and well-organized learning modules are all necessary preconditions for launching any given distance education program.
- Good course structuring, effective management of the program, attractive pay for tutors as well as better awareness and support from the regional bureau would make distance education more successful.

- Frequent and continuous evaluation, limiting overstretching of tutors with regard to workload and feedback on assignments would make the program more effective.
- The most important strategy is to plan, implement, monitor and update the way we offer the training. Above all, it is important to constantly gather data from the students on what they need and prefer, the problems they face and what they want to be done for them. Unless we do this, we cannot attain what we want from distance education.
- It would be wise to use various types of communication media to augment the effectiveness of distance education.
- Devising procedures to force learners to do assignments by themselves would increase the academic performance of the learners and assure the quality of distance education.
- Standardization of the learning modules should be given priority to safeguard the reputation of the distance education system.
- The appointing of suitably qualified and trained tutors could raise the standard of the open and distance education system.

4.3 Distance Education Coordinators

Distance Education coordinators, regional and center coordinators were also asked for their views on the distance education system conducted in their area. The following points were highlighted:
- A combination of criteria such as GPA, length of service year and performance evaluation was taken into consideration when selecting candidates for the distance education program.
- Most respondents were not happy with the selection criteria. They felt that the length of service was given priority but when a new employee had a good academic record this was not taken in to account.
- Most of the respondents (about 85 percent) believed that if lessons in the distance education program are delivered appropriately, distance learners are capable of performing to the same standard as conventional learners.
- The distance education system alleviates problems of access, contributes to the continuous professional development of employees (teachers and others) and is of paramount importance in assuring the quality of education by using various media for delivery of the lessons.
- The most serious and most frequently mentioned problems in the ODL system are delays in module distribution, assignment submission and feedbacks, the appointment of unsuitably qualified tutors, shortages of reference materials, lack of fixed timetables, poor coordination at tutorial centers and inadequate support services.
- The number of dropout has been identified as one of the major problems in the system of distance education. The main issues associated with the problem of dropout are personal, social and vocational problems. Respondents suggested that improving the working condition of the distance learner (if they are employed), as well as the study centers, the capacity of tutors and counseling services could alleviate the problem of the number of dropouts.
- Most respondents stated that ODL is a very good program which addresses the question of equity and access to education and that it is the most potent tool for addressing the question of cost effectiveness and is the most justifiable method for countries like Ethiopia.