Is ODeL an Equalizer in Performance between Distance Learners and On-Campus Students? The Jury is still out

Issue at-hand

Universities the world over are very anxious about their institutional reputation for quality and relevant education as it is the only currency for attracting academically talented students. By the same token, they maintain their standing in a very competitive global higher education market. To recruit their students, universities have set more or less stringent academic performance criteria for admission in their programs. These criteria could be certain grades obtained during end of secondary education examinations and/or entry tests imposed by the institutions. In many instances, the entry qualification has become the only variable for admitting students as it has become widely accepted as a good predictor for success in a student’s academic career. As a result, many people who have performed below the set standards or entirely failed the tests and exams find themselves rejected from an opportunity for acquiring higher education.

However, the advent of open distance education and eLearning (ODeL) through open universities and dual-mode learning institutions have opened up new opportunities for many people who could not hitherto meet the admission criteria to have access to higher education stamped by prestigious universities. Many open universities, for instance, do not require formal qualifications or entry tests for undergraduate degrees. This situation, however, presents challenges to the long-held assumption that a strong academic performance prior to university is the only and most reliable predictor of success for students. Indeed, many within the academia have voiced concern over the reputational risk associated with lowering the standards for distance education students. A growing body of research has now emerged to investigate this issue and there is increasing evidence that other variables other than great performance on entry qualification could enter into play to determine academic access.
Policy Recommendation: Higher Education Institutions should look beyond entry qualification requirements as the only admission criterion into university programs and explore the contributions of other criteria such as age, work experience, past academic performances and participation in co-curricular activities at secondary level.

In a paper entitled “Relationship between Entry Qualification and Academic Performance in Undergraduate Science Courses at the University of Nairobi” presented at the 2016 3rd International Conference of the AVU, Wambugu and Emeke (2016) report on the findings of a study they carried out at the University of Nairobi (UoN) to explore the relationship between entry qualification and academic performance by comparing the performance of students in the Bachelor of Education (Science) on-campus mode of learning with that of those enrolled in the open and distance learning (ODL) mode at the University of Nairobi.

In the literature review section of their paper, Wambugu and Emeke mentioned a few studies undertaken in Africa (Kenya) and different part of the world that provide interesting insights into academic performances of ODeL students compared to conventional students admitted using entry qualification requirements. In a study carried out in in Kenya in 2011 by Mutonga (2011) where the researcher was comparing the academic performance of students in the Registered Community Health Nurse Upgrading Program who are using face-to-face mode and were admitted to the program based on entry qualification requirements and those using distance learning modes who are professional and on-the job nurses. The findings supported the hypothesis that there is a strong statistical relationship between performance and entry qualification as the face-to-face students (conventionally admitted students) had significantly higher scores than distance study students (admitted based on their professional background and not their academic performance).

Similar findings were obtained in a study carried out at the Faculty of Technology of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where the researcher found a strong positive correlation between students’ admission scores and their undergraduate performance (Adedeji, 2001).

However, other studies have produced mixed results. For example, in a study carried out in an Australian University (University of Griffith) and which sought to determine the influence of entrance test of students’ years 11 and 12 of their secondary education on academic outcomes at the university, findings showed that the test scores were positively but weakly associated with a High-Grade Point Average (GPA) measured on a scale of 1 (low) to 7 (high). The interpretation provided is that the weak relationship could be an indication that past performance is not a determinant of present performance. This interpretation is based on a discovery that cognitive development is associated with maturity (Lizzio, Wilson and Simons,
In other words, as we get older our cognitive capacity increases. Furthermore, we tend to be more focused.

In a more conclusive manner, a study at the Kwara State College in Nigeria did not find a statistically significant relationship between students’ entry grade and their cumulative academic achievement in science and mathematics courses. This led the researcher to conclude that *the achievement of the students at the university depends on their experiences under the influence of the college instructional environment which should motivate learners for effective learning.*

At the UoN, Wambugu and Emeke analyzed the two groups based on their performance in three science subject areas: Biology, Chemistry and Physics. They found that the mean score performance for the on-campus students was higher than for the ODeL students in the three science subjects and concluded that this is due to *the high mean entry qualification of the on-campus students as compared to the ODeL students. Furthermore, they ran a correlation between entry qualification and academic performance which showed a significant positive relationship: the on-campus students who had higher grade points performed significantly higher than the ODeL students in two subject areas (Biology and Chemistry) but not in Physics where the relationship was found to be negative and not statistically significant. The two researchers concluded that “though the ODEeL students had lower entry qualification marks than the on-campus students, the difference in their academic performance was not significant”.*

**Recommendations**

Even though it is too early to assert that ODeL can be some sort of performance equalizer for older and non-traditional students who are admitted to the ODeL components of dual-mode programs on the basis of their professional experiences and not on their entrance exam scores like conventional students, there are indications that even if the former are not superior students compared to the latter, they are capable of passing the requirements for the courses they are taking. ODeL is therefore a strong avenue for equitable provision of learning opportunities at the higher education level. Open Universities have clearly shown that great instructional design and strong motivation can match academic performance at secondary education levels. As recommended by Wambugu and Emeke, African universities should:

- *look into the contributions of other criteria such as age, work experience, past academic performances and participation in co-curricular activities at secondary level in cases where applicants have less than excellent mean grades.*
• examinations for both the on-campus and ODLeI students should test similar competencies to ensure that similar content is being delivered.

References


Wambugu, Lydiah and Emeke, Adenike (2015). Relationship between Entry Qualification and Academic Performance in Undergraduate Science Courses at the University of NairobiOpen University, UK Website. http://www.openuniversity.edu/study/admissions-applications/entry-requirements.

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