

## POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF KWAME NKURUMAH UNIVERSITY, ZAMBIA

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### Abstract

*This study examines how governance dynamics and policy implementation processes shape the delivery and outcomes of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia. Although ODL has been institutionalised as a strategy for expanding access to higher education, fluctuations in enrolment and persistent operational challenges suggest underlying governance and implementation inefficiencies. The study addresses the inadequacy of policy implementation and governance mechanisms in supporting effective ODL delivery, resulting in a gap between policy intent and practice that undermines programme effectiveness and sustainability. Limited empirical evidence on the operationalisation of ODL policy frameworks within dual-mode universities further compounds this challenge. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm and Transactional Distance Theory, the study adopts a qualitative case study design involving 30 purposively selected participants, including students, graduates, lecturers, and ODL administrators. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that while ODL improves access and flexibility, its effectiveness is constrained by weak policy implementation, inadequate learner support systems, limited institutional autonomy, insufficient learning materials, and resource constraints. Governance fragmentation and inconsistencies between policy intent and practice negatively affect programme quality and sustainability. The study contributes to the limited scholarship on ODL governance in Zambia by providing context-specific insights into the relationship between policy frameworks and implementation practices. It recommends improved institutional coordination, investment in digital infrastructure, and strengthened learner support systems to enhance policy operationalisation and programme sustainability.*

**Keywords:** Open and Distance Learning, Governance, Policy Implementation, Higher Education, Zambia

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a critical mechanism for expanding access to higher education globally, particularly in developing countries where conventional systems cannot absorb increasing demand (UNESCO, 2002). In sub-Saharan Africa, ODL plays a transformative role in addressing inequities in access, promoting lifelong learning, and enhancing workforce development (Sarkar, Keat & Gebrie, 2024).

In Zambia, distance education dates back to 1966 with the establishment of the Zambia Correspondence College, forming the foundation for contemporary ODL systems (Simui et al., 2021). Kwame Nkrumah University (KNU), originally a teacher training institution, has transitioned into a dual-mode university integrating ODL following the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013. Despite policy frameworks supporting ODL, persistent fluctuations in enrollment and operational inefficiencies raise concerns about governance effectiveness. Existing scholarship has largely focused on access and student experiences, with limited attention to the policy–governance interface. This study therefore provides a critical analysis of how governance structures influence policy implementation and ultimately shape ODL effectiveness within KNU.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations of ODL

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is grounded in theories that emphasise flexibility, learner autonomy, and mediated communication. One of the most influential frameworks is Transactional Distance Theory, which posits that distance in education is not merely geographical but pedagogical, defined by the interaction between structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). High transactional distance occurs when rigid structures limit interaction, resulting in learner isolation, while effective systems minimise this distance through increased dialogue and learner support.

However, while Transactional Distance Theory provides a strong pedagogical lens, scholars argue that it insufficiently accounts for **institutional and governance constraints**, particularly in resource-limited contexts. As a result, its application in sub-Saharan Africa requires contextual adaptation to incorporate structural inequalities and policy environments (Musingafi et al., 2015).

Additionally, systems theory conceptualises ODL as an interconnected system involving inputs, processes, and outputs (Keegan, 1996). While useful in highlighting interdependence, critics note that systems theory tends to assume functional coherence, which is often absent in fragmented governance environments typical of dual-mode universities. More recent theoretical debates emphasise the need to integrate **governance and policy implementation theories**, particularly top-down and bottom-up implementation models to better understand how institutional actors interpret and enact ODL policies (Sabatier, 1986). This theoretical integration is critical for analysing the gap between policy design and practice.

### 2.2 ODL Governance and Policy Frameworks

Governance in ODL refers to institutional arrangements that guide decision-making, accountability, policy enforcement, and resource allocation (UNESCO, 2002). Effective governance ensures alignment between institutional goals and operational practices. However, governance in ODL is increasingly conceptualised through **multi-level governance frameworks**, which recognise the interaction between national policy, institutional structures, and operational units. In dual-mode universities, governance complexities arise due to competing priorities between conventional and distance education systems. Empirical studies show that ODL units are often structurally marginalised, resulting in weak coordination and ineffective policy implementation (Simengwa & Mubarak, 2021). This reflects a broader tension between centralised control and institutional autonomy, which shapes implementation outcomes.

In the African context, governance challenges are characterised by centralised decision-making, limited institutional autonomy, and weak accountability systems (Sarkar et al., 2024). However, recent studies suggest that these challenges are not merely structural but also relational, involving power dynamics between university management, lecturers, and ODL units. This complicates policy implementation and often leads to symbolic compliance rather than substantive change.

### 2.3 Digital Transformation and ODL Delivery

The integration of digital technologies has transformed ODL delivery through Learning Management Systems (LMS), virtual classrooms, and digital content (Magasu et al., 2022). Globally, digitalisation is associated with increased scalability and learner engagement. However, this optimistic narrative is contested by studies that highlight the digital divide as a critical barrier in developing contexts. In sub-Saharan Africa, digital transformation remains uneven due to infrastructural deficits, high data costs, and limited institutional capacity. Consequently, technology adoption does not automatically translate into improved learning outcomes. Instead, it may reproduce or deepen existing inequalities. In Zambia, evidence indicates that e-learning adoption is constrained by systemic limitations, including inadequate infrastructure and limited digital literacy (Magasu, Pauline & Jive, 2021). This suggests that technological interventions must be embedded within broader governance and policy frameworks to be effective.

### 2.4 Learner Support Systems in ODL

Learner support is widely recognised as central to ODL effectiveness, encompassing academic, administrative, and psychosocial assistance (Messo, 2014). Strong support systems are associated with improved retention, completion rates, and learner satisfaction. However, empirical studies across African ODL institutions consistently report inadequacies in learner support. These include delayed feedback, limited academic interaction, and insufficient administrative coordination, all of which contribute to high attrition rates and poor academic performance. For instance, Musingafi et al. (2015) found that lack of timely feedback significantly affected student outcomes in Zimbabwe Open University. While such studies establish the importance of learner support, they often treat it as an operational issue rather than linking it to broader governance and policy failures, thereby limiting explanatory depth.

### 2.5 Empirical Evidence from Zambia and Sub-Saharan Africa

Empirical studies in Zambia highlight persistent structural and operational challenges in ODL implementation. Lubungu and Mudenda (2017) report challenges related to inadequate learning materials, poor communication, and limited lecturer availability at Kwame Nkrumah University. Similarly, Siame, Hachintu and Jive (2023) identify systemic barriers such as financial constraints and limited institutional support. At a regional level, Simui et al. (2021) argue that while ODL expansion has improved access, sustainability is undermined by governance inefficiencies and resource constraints. However, a critical limitation of these studies is their fragmented focus, they examine isolated challenges without sufficiently analysing how governance structures and policy processes interact to produce these outcomes. Recent African studies increasingly call for integrated analyses that link policy, governance, and practice, rather than treating them as discrete variables.

## **2.6 Policy Implementation Gaps in Higher Education**

Policy implementation theory emphasises that successful implementation depends on clarity of objectives, institutional capacity, resource availability, and monitoring mechanisms. However, in many African higher education systems, policies often remain at a symbolic level without effective operationalisation (UNESCO, 2002). This “implementation gap” has been widely documented, resulting in policy-practice inconsistencies, reduced institutional effectiveness, and weak accountability. Top-down approaches tend to overlook local institutional realities, while bottom-up approaches may lack coherence and coordination. This tension highlights the need for context-sensitive implementation models that account for institutional complexity, particularly in dual-mode universities where governance structures are inherently fragmented.

## **2.7 Research Gap**

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into ODL challenges, it remains conceptually and analytically fragmented. Studies tend to focus on isolated issues such as technology, learner support, or access, with limited attention to how governance structures and policy implementation processes interact within specific institutional contexts. Moreover, there is a lack of context-specific, empirically grounded analyses that integrate theoretical perspectives on governance and policy implementation with lived institutional realities in Zambia. This study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth case analysis of Kwame Nkrumah University, examining how governance dynamics and policy implementation processes jointly shape ODL delivery and outcomes. In doing so, it moves beyond descriptive accounts to offer a more integrated and theoretically informed understanding of ODL systems in sub-Saharan Africa.

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The study adopted a qualitative case study design within an interpretivist paradigm. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants’ lived experiences and institutional realities regarding Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The case study design was particularly appropriate as it allows for a holistic and context-sensitive examination of complex governance and policy implementation processes within a bounded system, namely Kwame Nkrumah University.

### **3.2 Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 30 participants from a population of 6,686 ODL stakeholders. The sample comprised 10 current students, 5 graduates, 10 lecturers, and 5 ODL administrators. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement and experience with ODL policy implementation and delivery, ensuring information-rich cases relevant to the study objectives. While the sample represents a small proportion of the total population, qualitative research does not seek statistical generalisation but rather analytical depth and contextual understanding. The adequacy of the sample size was therefore guided by the principle of data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data. Saturation was reached at approximately the 26th interview, with subsequent interviews confirming recurring patterns across participant groups. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder categories further enhanced the diversity of perspectives and strengthened the robustness of the findings. A total of ten (10) current students were selected using homogeneous purposive sampling, while five (5) graduates were selected through heterogeneous purposive sampling. Ten (10) lecturers were chosen using expert purposive sampling. Additionally, five (5) administrators were selected through critical purposive sampling.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation, including semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to probe participants' experiences, while key informant interviews with administrators provided policy-level insights. Document analysis focused on institutional ODL policies, strategic plans, and administrative records to examine the alignment between policy intent and implementation practices.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis following a systematic and transparent procedure. The process involved: data familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts, initial open coding to identify meaningful units of data, categorisation of codes into broader themes, and iterative refinement and validation of themes.

Coding was conducted manually and supported by a constant comparison technique to ensure consistency across data sources. An analytical framework was developed by linking emerging themes to key constructs derived from Transactional Distance Theory and policy implementation theory, enabling both inductive insight generation and theoretical interpretation.

In addition, content analysis was applied to policy documents to identify discrepancies between policy intentions and actual practices, thereby complementing interview findings and strengthening analytical depth.

### **3.5 Trustworthiness**

The study ensured methodological rigour through established qualitative criteria. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources (interviews and documents), prolonged engagement with participants, and member checking to validate interpretations. Dependability was achieved through a clear and auditable research process, including detailed documentation of data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was strengthened through the use of audit trails and reflexive journaling to minimise researcher bias and ensure that findings were grounded in the data. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context, enabling

readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

### 3.6 Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all information provided was treated with the utmost discretion. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and individuals were clearly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage, before, during, or after data collection, without any adverse consequences. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no form of coercion or undue influence was applied. To safeguard participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings (e.g., *Lecturer 3*, *Student 4*). Furthermore, all data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

## 4.0 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Perceived Contribution of Policy and Governance to ODL

Participants generally acknowledged that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at Kwame Nkrumah University has expanded access to higher education, particularly for working professionals and geographically constrained learners. The flexibility of the model was widely viewed as its most significant strength.

One participant noted that:

*ODL has given many of us a second chance to upgrade our qualifications without leaving our jobs. (Student Participant 3)*

However, this positive contribution was often framed as aspirational rather than fully realised, with participants emphasising that the effectiveness of ODL is contingent upon robust governance and consistent policy implementation. As one lecturer observed that:

*The policy is there, but what is missing is how it is implemented on the ground (Lecturer 2)*

This suggests that while ODL policy frameworks provide a foundation for access, their impact is mediated by institutional capacity and governance effectiveness.

### 4.2 Governance and Policy Implementation Challenges

Majority of the participants revealed that governance and policy implementation challenges were systemic and interrelated rather than isolated issues.

#### 4.2.1 Inadequate Learning Materials

All participants consistently reported limited availability and outdated instructional materials, which undermined teaching and learning processes. One participant had this to say:

*Some modules are either outdated or not available at all, so students rely on photocopies or shared notes (Graduate Participant 1)*

This reflects weak policy operationalisation in curriculum development and resource provision.

#### 4.2.2 Weak Learner Support Systems

The absence of a structured and dedicated learner support system emerged as a critical gap. Most of the participants described fragmented support mechanisms and poor coordination. One participant had this to lament:

*There is no clear system for student support; you have to figure things out on your own most of the time (Student Participant 1).*

This indicates a disconnect between policy expectations and institutional practice.

#### 4.2.3 Human Resource Constraints

Heavy reliance on part-time lecturers was identified as a major challenge affecting instructional quality and consistency. Some participants indicated that;

*Some lecturers are part-time, so feedback is delayed and sometimes inconsistent. (Lecturer 3 & Administrator Participant 5).*

This highlights limitations in staffing policies and institutional capacity.

#### 4.2.4 Financial and Technological Constraints

Participants emphasised that inadequate funding and poor technological infrastructure significantly constrain ODL delivery.

*Without proper funding, even the best policies cannot be implemented effectively. (Administrator Participant 1).*

On the technological matter, some participants reported that:

*Internet connectivity is unreliable, which makes online learning very difficult. (Lecturer 9 and Lecturers 3 & 4)*

These findings point to structural constraints that limit policy implementation.

#### 4.2.5 Policy Implementation Gaps

Across all participant groups, there was consensus that although ODL policies exist, their implementation was inconsistent and weakly monitored.

*Policies are well written, but there is little follow-up to ensure they are actually implemented.” (Administrator Participant 5)*

This reflects broader governance fragmentation and lack of accountability mechanisms.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while ODL at Kwame Nkrumah University is recognised for enhancing access, its effectiveness is constrained by systemic governance and policy implementation challenges. These challenges are interconnected, with deficiencies in resources, institutional capacity, and coordination collectively contributing to the gap between policy intent and practice.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a significant disconnect between policy frameworks and implementation practices at KNU. This aligns with broader literature indicating that the effectiveness of ODL systems is often undermined not by policy absence but by weak operationalisation (Sarkar et al., 2024 & UNESCO, 2002).

### 5.1 Governance and Policy Implementation

The study found that governance fragmentation and limited institutional autonomy hinder effective policy execution. This finding is consistent with Simengwa and Mubarak (2021), who argued that centralised governance structures in African universities often marginalise ODL units, reducing their responsiveness and efficiency.

However, unlike some studies that emphasise policy absence as the primary issue, this study demonstrates that policy existence without implementation capacity is the central challenge-offering a nuanced contribution to the literature.

### 5.2 Learner Support Systems

The absence of structured learner support systems at KNU reinforces findings by Messo (2014) and Musingafi et al. (2015), who highlighted the critical role of support services in reducing transactional distance. The findings strongly align with Transactional Distance Theory (Moore & Kearsley, 1996), as limited interaction and support increase learner isolation. This suggests that KNU's ODL system operates at a high transactional distance, negatively affecting student outcomes.

### 5.3 Learning Materials and Instructional Quality

The study identified inadequate and outdated learning materials as a major constraint. This is consistent with Lubungu and Mudenda (2017), who found similar challenges among KNU students. However, this study extends previous research by linking these challenges directly to governance inefficiencies, rather than treating them as isolated operational issues.

### 5.4 Technological and Infrastructure Constraints

Technological challenges identified in this study corroborate findings by Magasu et al. (2021), who argued that e-learning in Zambia often exacerbates inequality due to limited access to digital resources. While global literature emphasises digital transformation as an enabler of ODL, this study highlights its context-dependent limitations, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

### 5.5 Human Resource and Financial Constraints

The reliance on part-time lecturers and limited funding aligns with findings by Siame et al. (2023), who identified systemic resource constraints affecting ODL delivery. However, this study contributes further by demonstrating how these constraints are symptoms of governance weaknesses, rather than merely financial limitations.

## 5.6 Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes three key contributions:

1. It shifts the discourse from access-focused narratives to governance-centred analysis
2. It demonstrates that policy–practice gaps are structurally embedded
3. It provides context-specific empirical evidence from Zambia, enriching African ODL scholarship

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that ODL at KNU holds significant potential for expanding access to higher education. However, its effectiveness is constrained by governance fragmentation, weak policy implementation, and systemic resource limitations. The central issue is not the absence of policy but the misalignment between policy intent and institutional practice, which undermines programme quality and sustainability.

### 6.1 Recommendations

- Review and align ODL policy with current technological and institutional realities
- Establish decentralised and functional ODL governance structures
- Develop and regularly update high-quality learning materials
- Institutionalise comprehensive learner support systems
- Enhance autonomy of ODL directorates
- Invest in ICT infrastructure and digital learning platforms
- Improve staff retention through incentives and capacity building
- Strengthen financial planning and resource allocation for ODL

### 6.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

The study underscores the need for integrated governance frameworks that align policy with implementation. Policymakers and institutional leaders must prioritise: institutional capacity building, resource mobilisation, and monitoring and evaluation systems. Effective ODL requires not only policy commitment but also operational coherence and accountability mechanisms.

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