**Students' Perception on Quality Dimensions and Challenges Faced inn Open and Distance Learning in Higher Education in Ethiopia**

**Birhanu Moges (PhD)**

**Abstract**

*Over a decade now, Open Distance* Learning *(ODL) has become everywhere in the Ethiopian educational system. More than seven public universities and three private universities in Ethiopia are currently running ODL programmes. Effective ODL programme demands that strategic planning is made at all times. Such planning could be done well if perceptions and challenges confronting learners on the programme are identified and addressed. This study sets out to explore and provide an up-to-date picture of the perceptions and challenges faced by ODL students in their quest to study at the university level. Specifically, the study focused on distance students in the Ethiopian public and private institutions (Harmaya University, Jimma University, St.Mary University College and Alpha University College). An exploratory research design using mixed methods of questionnaire and interviews as the data collection techniques was adopted for the study. Both stratified and purposive sampling techniques were used in sampling 48 ODL (11 from each of the four study centres) and four student leaders, 1 from each of the four centres).The result shows that the majority of respondents feel that interactivity happens at various stages of the teaching-learning process and that contributes further to the positive dialogue between the tutors and students. The majority of students are satisfied about how tutors communicate with them and their level of language. The majority of students were happy with the time table and how modules are structured in sections. The students were also happy with the activities of work they received from the tutors. An interesting result was that some students still prefer the previous method of face-to-face teaching by a facilitator but it is understandable as the use of student centered is a new initiative and will take time for students to get use to that and to see the benefits of the method, such as to get first hand lectures from the tutor that develops the course and set up the examination papers. Among the challenges identified were- institutional, instructional, social, psychological and financial. The finding revealed that, the number of students in a class during tutorial programs is not to the standard, the tutors' are responsible for one to two courses at a time and the remainder for more than two courses, assignments were too difficult for the ability of the students on the courses some students do not receive modules before tutorial sessions and, consequently, some were forced to share modules, modules were not given long enough in advance of the actual tutorial sessions less commitment of stakeholders to realize the ODL programme. The findings of the study, it is expected, will be utilized instrumentally and conceptually in informing policy directives by private and public universities presently involved in ODL programmes. It is recommended that, intensification open distance learning units at the institution and ensuring that students have a suitable educational background when they join to the specific programme*

*would make ODL efficient. In addition to this, it is good to try to make the system more flexible and use different information and communication technologies to support ODL. Further, private, public and potential providers of ODL programme in the country stand to gain a lot from the findings and recommendations of the study.*

## I.   Introduction
## 1.1   Background of the Study

Education is the most and widely accepted as a crucial and leading instrument for endorsing economic growth of one country in particular and continent in general. For instance Africa, education is particularly important, where growth is very essential if the continent is to rise out of poverty (Bloom et al., 2005). The   benefit   of open distance education(ODL) is described in many aspect of one country by many scholars. For instance, Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman and Cross-Denny (2012), ODL is a vital for economic and social development.  It provides the human resources required for leadership, management, business and professional positions by inculcating relevant knowledge and advanced skills. The institutions also serve as the major research establishments that generate, adopt and disseminate knowledge.  It expands people's productivity, as well as national capacity and competitiveness by giving people access to knowledge and the tools for increasing and diversifying their knowledge. Today, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, more interdependent and   increasingly   a   globalized   village, ODL is critical for the achievement of economic progress, political stability and peace, as well as for building democratic culture and society.

Moreover, according Krishnan (2012) stated that ODL are both a result and a determinant of income, and can produce both public and private benefits.  Some of the private benefits  for individuals are well established, and  include  better employment prospects,  higher  salaries, and  a  greater  ability  to  save  and  invest. These  benefits  may result  in  better  health  and improved  quality  of  life. Some  of  the  public  benefits  are  it create  greater  tax  income, increase  savings  and  investment,  and  lead  to  a  more  entrepreneurial  and  civic  society. Many educators (Krishnan.2012; Pardasani et al., 2012) see ODL as a means of giving people greater access to higher education and a possible solution to the ODL ever growing demand for higher education institution. As  a  force  contributing  to  social  and  economic  development, open distance   learning   is today one of the most rapidly growing fields of educational programme. It is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in developing countries (King, 2012; UNESCO, 2011).

Immense attention is given to ODL to meet the educational needs of the learners, with a view to providing new and alternative learning opportunities for those who were initially deprived of them, or who, for one reason, or another, did not make use of them. UNESCO (2004) continues

to strengthen the role of ODL in the diversification of educational delivery systems, remarkably, for technical and vocational education, encouraging co-operation and partnership between enterprises, professional bodies and distance teaching institutions. Support is also given to ODL to meet the needs of the disabled, migrants, cultural and linguistic minorities, refugees, populations in crisis situations, who cannot be efficiently reached by traditional delivery systems. The potential benefits of ODL to the development of higher educational institution is fully recognized and supported by UNESCO (2011). In their efforts to make wider use of ODL to expand access to advanced learning and improve its efficiency, public and private institutions are assisted, among other things, by providing them with support in the initiation and development of ODL programme in university schemes.

Open distance learning is practised in all parts of the world to provide study opportunities for those who cannot always take part in the conventional classroom teaching (Pardasani, et al., 2012; Xiao & Reed, 2011; Maritim, 2009). ODL has increasingly become a means of meeting the demand for mass education across its vast geography and widely distributed population (Mitchell, 2009). Students who study through ODL are geographically separated from their lecturers, a situation which subsequently requires that learning resources and administrative support need to be organised in advance (King, 2012). In their attempts of seeking higher education, for many of these students, ODL creates a distinctly flexible and alternative opportunity for current and previously disadvantaged groups and the marginalised to upgrade their knowledge and skills in various disciplines. It is therefore imperative that the provision of such an alternative education should be of high quality. The premise is that ODL would not only improve their own life chances, but would positively impacts on the broader agenda for social and economic development, especially (Van-Zyl & Blignaut, 2012; Tau, 2008). The successful marriage of conventional educational modes with ODL practices could only result in a variegated professional status, and a perceptible maintenance of common academic standards.

The commitment to sustaining its public and private institutions to make wider use of ODL, Ethiopian government gives priority to national capacity-building essential to the establishment and management of efficient ODL systems (FDRE, 2010). ODL has gained wide acceptance as one of the successful modes of extending education in a context of reach, acceptance, and productivity. As a scholar, reach in a sense that it has been instrumental in addressing the educational needs of speckled communities in different continents (Mitchell, 2009); acceptance in the sense that it has emerged "as a viable alternative delivery system and an alternative to the conventional system" (Bezuidenhout, 2013:25); and productivity in the sense that "Research & Development in this area has contributed in many ways to more general educational research and development." (Xiao & Reed, 2011:60).

The provision of an opportunity to learn without being restricted by geographical or time constraints is a major factor behind the growth of ODL programs. ODL highly essential to shares the goals of conventional education, aims at providing access to historically under-

served, and highly motivated population provide students" freedom and program flexibility, offer useful learning opportunity to recipients at a time and local environment convenient to them, the delivery medium plays a crucial role in minimizing the gap between teaching and learning (Keegan as cited in Van-Zyl &Blignaut, 2012). ODL, according to Van-Zyl et al.,(2012), may offer four different benefits to education providers: enabling access to students; alleviating capacity constraints; capitalizing on emerging market opportunities and serving as a catalyst in institutional transformation.

An option of in-service delivery that has potential—on the basis of cost savings and reaching geographically separated beneficiaries—is ODL. ODL may be a less expensive option than study leave, and it permits teachers to continue to teach instead of taking them out of the classroom (Aguti, 2003). To be effective, however, ODL requires considerable follow-through and support (in school-based workshops, seminars, and other means of sharing experiential knowledge and mutual support). However, it is important to explore the most effective way of delivering ODL programmes. For example, it would be useless to plan to deliver it via internet or radio when most schools are not equipped with networked computers and teachers hardly listen to radio programmes. It might be more effective to use printed material via mail even though it may sound a less efficient approach in this modern era of technology.

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE, 2010) the national policy of education document clearly stated that, the goal of ODL should be to: provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied, meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees, encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula. Since the education systems of most countries or areas have expanded quickly, these institutions have suffered from a poor understanding of quality and a lack of educational standards and indicators, (Mitchell, 2009). Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on the pursuit of education quality in ongoing educational reforms in both local and international contexts. Development of ODL courses needs good market research and business planning where a quality-based approach is a necessity, not a luxury (Lawton & Barnes as cited in Pardasaniet al., 2012). However, understanding of pedagogical issues in the ODL realm is a requirement to create a quality distance courses.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Open Distance Learning (ODL) as an educational programme and a philosophical construct has been identified as the most potent instrument for combating the educational problems overwhelming notion like Ethiopia (FDRE, 2010). Despite the splendid role and increased popularity of the ODL, the quality of higher education via ODL has been called to question (FDRE, 2010; MoE, 2007; MoE, 2010a; Hockridge, 2013). Despite the expanding adoption of ODL by Ethiopians, there has been some controversy around the quality of delivery and

instructional design (FDRE, 2010; UNESCO, 2011). Many conventional students have questioned the educational equivalence of ODL courses when compared to the perceived quality of traditional classroom packages (Gemmell, et al., 2011; MoE, 2007; MoE, 2010a; Pardasani et al., 2012; ). Not only students, but academics too, have less positive attitudes towards ODL. They held the views that ODL students' learning experiences are less compared to those in conventional higher learning institutions (King, 2012; Badu-Nyarko, 2006). King (2012) separately found that academics in faculties fear that ODL students adversely affect the accreditation of the degree and that such courses are poorly prepared by under-qualified people.

In addition, Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz and Max as cited in King (2012) found that the perceived lack of institutional support and training, inadequate compensation and incentive structures, loss of autonomy and control of the curriculum, lack of technical training and support, and lack of release time are some of the obstacles that impinge upon effective and quality provision of ODL. This study highlights the attitudes and subsequent non-committal behaviours of teachers/tutors towards ODL. Unfortunately, little is quantitatively and qualitatively established about the attitudes of students at the private and public university of Ethiopia, hence the urgent need for a study such as the current one. Different people perceive the advantages of ODL, differently and their perceptions have influenced attitudes towards the acceptance and use of ODL the system in our country and elsewhere. Out of the various challenges/problems facing ODL today, a very important one is how it is perceived by the individuals involved in it (Gemmell, et al., 2011).

Equally important as Maritim (2009), assessing problems on accurate perception of the sector by beneficiaries and/or stakeholders is a crucial factor. This is because the success of the ODL system could be affected by how it's viewed by the individuals involved in it. Secondly, the tutors and other stakeholders" perceptions have an enormous effect on the successful implementation of the system. It is clearly indicated that, the term perception refers to the idea, a belief or an image one has as a result of how she or he sees or understands something (Mitchell, 2009). Perception is the way people sense and interpret the world around them. Moreover, Badu-Nyarko (2006) explained that perceptions are results from acquisition, consumption and disposal of goods. While Jung and Latchem (2007) suggested that perceptions are a consumer's opinions and attitudes towards any products after purchasing them.

Kiewra(2010) claimed that, perception of the ODL system in the instructional process is influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantage of distance education, for himself, as a student, an employer (whose employees are also distant learning students), or as an educational planner desirous of providing solutions to educational problems. Evidently, as Saade & Bahli, (2005) the implementation of an ODL system does not ensure a high-quality education. There are still many problems commonly related to technological factors, including issues of access, connection, internet familiarity, learning facilities, provision of support, actor's commitment, etc. Although the advancement of technology has overcome or minimized these obstacles, it seems that the problems have shifted to the learner's side when using a distance

learning system. Learners may feel isolated and unmotivated (Maritim, 2009). Hence, if distance learning is to overcome the many obstacles that students face, it is necessary to study the acceptance of ODL from the students' perspective.

Much professionals and academics acknowledge that ODL is a simplified version of the teaching and learning method (Abedalaziz & Muaidi, 2012).The use of innovative information and Information Communication Technology (ICT) has raised questions about the effectiveness of open distance learning compared to the traditional classroom format. Currently, the subject of much controversy is whether the proliferation of courses offered online and the way in which this technology is used has transformed the traditional classroom format into an ODL environment (Majoni &Chidakwa, 2005; Mitchell, 2009). Thus, student acceptance of ODL is one of the critical factors that should be evaluated in order to assess adequately whether the successful implementation of an ODL system can support teaching-learning activities and the student experience (Gemmell, et al., 2011). Open distance learning (ODL) researchers argue that there is a relationship between external factors (e.g., computer self-efficacy, technological factors, instructional design, and instructor's characteristics, facilities, support) and what are classified as ODL acceptance factors (namely, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness). Technical problems and a low level of students' technical skills are two top factors that ODL researchers think pose the most significant barriers to distance learning (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

Volery and Lord (2000) argued that, the characteristics of the instructor are important factors that appear to influence students" perception of ODL. The successful implementation of ODL does not only rely on advanced technology -it also relies on the characteristics of the instructor. The success of the ODL model is determined by the instructor's ability to cultivate and maintain a certain level of collaborative learning activities and initiatives. The instructor must also be a facilitator in ODL, and this characteristic plays an important role in motivating and encouraging student learning. The interaction and communication between instructors and students are also an essential part of distance learning (Bezuidenhout, 2013). A study has discovered a lack of sufficient time, the difficulty of course materials and the absence of adequate learner support as the major perceived problems that caused the withdrawal of students from distance teacher-training programs (Hockridge, 2013). Moreover, as Purnell (2003), the most frequently identified barriers in ODL included; lack of technical support, lack of adequate library and its equipment, lack of administrative support, the amount of preparation time required to create assignments, and student resistance. To be effective, distance learning programs need to address several issues seeking appropriate and timely decisions on the nature of educational program and their learning strategies, their use of technology and equipment, their dealing with students" and instructors" concerns, and organizational, governance, and financial matters (Bezuidenhout, 2013). Furthermore, Ansuka (2008:102) observes that, "impediments to teaching and learning at a distance can be: situational; epistemological; philosophical; psychological; pedagogical; technical; social; and/or cultural."

This study explores the students' perceptions and challenges faced on ODL in the higher education's students in their quest to study in the university. Specifically, the study focuses on public and private universities in Ethiopia. In this study, emphasis is placed on the following; students' perception toward ODL, challenges that pertain to individuals' situation, challenges relating to institutional set-up, financial challenges and few others. Recent and rapid technological advancements and developments raise questions whether ODL practice has kept pace with new, affordable applications and the changing educational needs of a learning society. Based on the above-aforementioned challenges the researcher want to explore the dynamics and challenges of ODL students at Ethiopia public and private institutions.

## 1.3   Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:
- Examine the perceptions of open distance learning (ODL) students toward the ODL at public and private higher education institutions in the Ethiopia.
- Identify extent the public and private higher education institutions ODL students committed to the proper support and realization of ODL programme at the Ethiopia.
- Explore the different problems/challenges such as institutional, instructional, social, psychological and financial that confronts ODL students of public and private higher education institutions.

Thus, based on the above objectives the following guiding questions were formulated and properly treated.
1. What are the perceptions of ODL students toward the ODL at public and private higher institutions in the Ethiopia?
2. To what extent the public and private higher institutions ODL students committed to the proper support and realization of ODL programme in their respective universities?
3. What are the major challenges such as institutional, instructional, social, psychological and financial that confronts ODL students of public and private higher institutions?

## 1.4   Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study therefore is to explore students' perceptions and challenges faced on ODL in the higher education institutions. It is hoped that the findings of the study will be utilized instrumentally and conceptually in informing policy directives by the university and perhaps by others equally involved in similar ODL programmes. This study also aims to find out how distance education students try to manage their multiple roles and learning. As distance education has now become a fact of life for most universities in the country, it will be appropriate for policy decisions regarding ODL implementation to be premised upon knowledge about the intrinsic and extrinsic problems facing the students. Investigating the challenges facing

the students will therefore enable ODL educators to improve upon their skills and styles of teaching to help mitigate them.

Institutions running ODL programmes in Ethiopia face the challenge of serving student population which is diverse in terms in enrollment, demography, location and level of advanced knowledge prior to enrollment into programmes. Currently, ODL students are the fastest growing segment of tertiary education in the Ethiopia. Students, who enroll on ODL programmes, it is believed, do so for several reasons, including convenience. ODL students who are mainly adult workers may be time-bound due to work or location-bound due to geographic or family responsibilities (Galusha, 2012). A special case of Ethiopia is that of policy change or pressure to improve qualification from employer. Thus, knowing the characteristics and demographics of the students will help the organizers or institutions to understand the challenges. Further, understanding the students' attitudes and the challenges they face could provide insights for planning, course development and policy formulation.

## 1.5    Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of the research was limited to assessing the current status of students toward ODL and its practicality and implementation in the Ethiopian public and private institutions (Harmaya University, Jimma University, St.Mary University College and Alpha University College), identify its main challenges and factors that play major role to its success and finally propose a recommendation for a successful implementation of ODL in higher education institutions of Ethiopia. The study would be more productive if it is conducted widely by including several universities of Ethiopia. However, due to time and finance limitation, the study is limited to two government and two private Universities.

## II.    Literature Review
## 2.1    Students' Perception on Quality Dimensions of Open Distance Learning (ODL)

Correspondence education is largely regarded as the historical foundation of ODL (Tapfumaneyi, 2013: 558). The term correspondence education gradually changed to distance education and later to ODL (Tapfumaneyi, 2013: 558). As the field develops more terms were used, such as flexible learning; ODL off campus study and independent study. A term that is used quite often and prefer by many is ODL (Mohakud, Mohapatra & Behera, 2012). Many educators define distance education and open distance learning the same while others define it differently. Reviewing the literature it seems that many academics prefer the term ODL (Mohakuk et al., 2012). The principles that underpin the concept ODL are flexibility and accountability. This means that students can have more choices in terms of: Media (print, online, television, video); place of study (home, campus, and workplace); pace of study (time); and support mechanism (tutors, lecturers). ODL also makes education more accessible and provides opportunities for those students who cannot go to a residential campus due to financial or work constrains.

Makaduk et al. (2012) also stated that the main characteristics of ODL are open access, flexibility, time and space choices and learner centredness. It is important for this study to elaborate more on each of these characteristics. Open access implies a lack of formal entry requirements and an entrance examination. Flexible learning emphasizes an environment that have: Convergence of ODL; recognition of diversity in learning styles; unlimited enrolment; recognition of the importance of equity in curriculum and pedagogy; use of a variety of learning resources and media; and flexible examination system.

According to Eastmond (as cited by Krishnan, 2012), define ODL as the use of print or electronic communications media to deliver instruction when teachers and learners are separated in place and/or time. However, others emphasize ODL over education, defining it as "getting people - and often video images of people - into the same electronic space so they can help one another learn" (Craig  & Perraton, 2008:141) or "a system and process that connects learners with distributed resources".  The Commonwealth of Learning defines ODL as that which refers to situations where learners are physically separated from the educational provider, communicating in writing, (using letter, mail, email, fax or computer conferencing; verbally (by telephone, audio conferencing, video conferencing); or in face-to-face tutorial sessions' (Abedalaziz  &Muaidi, 2012:13). What can be gathered from these definitions is that ODL or learning is an approach used by providers of education for students who study when and where it suits them best. There is continuous learning by students in this mode of education, which usually suits students who fulfill other commitments such as work, family and community.

Typically in the past, audiences for ODL opportunities were adults often seeking advanced education and training at home, on the job, or in the military. Their multiple responsibilities or physical circumstances prevented attendance at a traditional institution (Braimah & Osiki, 2008). But presently, anyone is potentially a distance learner, a concept that has implications for Africa. The literature on ODL in Ethiopia universities is limited though there are extensive literature from other parts of Africa, especially east and south where ODL started long ago. Most literature and policy discourses in ODL often prioritise on expanding access to the disadvantage of challenges experienced by students admitted. A number of challenges to ODL have been identified in the literature. The literature appears to have classified the challenges encountered by distance students into several categories; institutional barriers, level of education prior to joining ODL, financial, and support services. It has been argued that distance learners' behavior is influenced by a combination of factors including their needs, characteristics and situation Knowles cited by (Hockridge, 2013). Writing about challenges for ODL policy and practice, Moodley (2002) argues about the negative attitudes to and stereotyping difference to distance learning to include: an inflexible curriculum, in accessible learning materials, socio-economic barriers, poverty and underdevelopment and factors which place the learner at risk. He continues to argue that:

Effective learning is directly related to and dependent on the social and emotional well being of the learner. It is important to recognise that particular conditions may arise within the social, economic and political environment in which the learner lives, and which impact negatively on the learner's social and emotional well-being, thus placing the learner at risk of learning breakdown. Such factors either influence learners or their family or community directly (Moodley, 2002:47).

Galusha cited in Dabaj (2011), propounds that there are many barriers in teaching and learning process of ODL. He argues that the most common being the unawareness of the roles as teachers and students. Further he asserts that studies show that the barriers of ODL fall into such categories as cost, motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, alienation, lack of experience and training. In addition, course content on the other hand constitutes another barrier and should be modified in ODL (ibid,2011). Therefore, to create effective and qualified distance education all barriers must be identified and eliminated. But it is worth noting that these challenges usually overlap and merge together at some point. Again, Lehman (cited in Bezuidenhout, 2013) writing about barriers to ODL, categorizes the teacher related barriers as philosophical, logistical, administrative, technological [including existing telecommunication systems, ergonomic concerns and lack of funds for new devices]; and the student related barriers as lack of interaction (i.e. feedback) with instructor and classmates, lack of support services, resistance to change and lack of training in technical issues. He argues that many students, like the instructors, is used to and is comfortable with traditional classroom education; and that "ODL has failed to become integrated into the academic culture, not as a result of the commonly cited factors of cost and teachers resistance, but rather due to the insistence of distance educators on perpetuating a culture that is out of touch with the driving force of higher education" (Lehman cited by Bezuidenhout, 2013:32).

Another set of barriers, which constitute a challenge are the issues of 'distance' and the perception of alienation. According to Galusha (2012:4) and I share this view, "Students of all kinds want to be part of a larger school community". For both traditional and distance students, being part of that community is an important part of their social lives. As part of institutional arrangements, Universities tend to separate regular traditional students from distance students during official activities such as matriculation and congregation. The lack of support and service to distance students also constitute a major barrier. Learner support generally refers to interactive activities and services that are meant to support and facilitate the learning process. As already indicated support is essential because of the separation between the learner and the educational provider. Broadly, such services include teaching, tutoring, counselling, advising and administrative services. Krishnan (2012) considered learner support services as being measures that go beyond the production of study materials and support the learning process. He further identified and differentiated between academic and non-academic support. Support and services required by distance students are in the form of social and technology. The fact that the bulk of

distance education students are workers from the various sectors and regions of the country, which are in different levels of development in terms of infrastructure, makes the challenges and solutions varied.

## 2.2    Quality in Open Distance Learning (ODL)

Quality is an important component of successful teaching and learning and therefore the study was to gather data about the use of delivering programmes to open learning centres. According to Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) is quality assurance the systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions in order to monitor performance against objectives. Quality has always been an issue in education and specifically in distance education. Since the 1990's quality assurance in higher and distance education become more prominent. The reason for that is that tax payers and governments want universities to be more accountable on how they spend their money (Jung, 2007). On the other hand students also demand better quality education (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). These demands for quality force universities to ensure quality in terms of products, processes and delivery systems (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007).

Education quality is a complicated phenomenon which is influenced by many factors (Jung, 2007). While designing, developing, and delivering ODL courses, students' needs and perceptions should be central. A course failing to meet  student  expectations  and  needs eventually leads to lower levels of student involvement (Nair, 2012). Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) developed five broad criteria of quality education which provides us useful insight for  improvement  of  the  ODL system.  These are:  Efforts, Performance, Adequacy, Efficiency and Process.  Efforts refer to the initiatives taken by the institution. These initiatives are associated with growth in terms of courses offered, learners enrolled, pass out rates, learner support services provided, evaluation mechanism adopted etc. The growth in these criterions would reflect on the performance of the institution.

The quality of ODL varies, like any other form of education. Its quality can be  the  result  of  a variety of factors; some are intrinsic while others are extrinsic to ODL organizations. Some of these (intrinsic and extrinsic) factors include the levels of skills and expertise of staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, efficiency of its administration systems, or the communications infrastructure in a country (Chikoko & Chiome, 2013). As ODL becomes more accepted as a legitimate form of education and as colleges and universities attempt to meet the growing demand for courses and programmes for distance learners, one major concern is the aspect of quality. According to Burgess (2006), the primary issue for distance learning institutions, like for conventional ones, is quality and the assurance that students are being provided with the best possible education or training with the highest possible standards. Quality in ODL is often judged in terms of the learning materials whatever the medium (Chikoko & Chiome, 2013). However, any distance education programme is more than just the learning materials but it is about the totality of experience of the learner.

**III.    Methodology**
**3.1    Design of the study**

An exploratory research design using mixed methods of survey and interviews was adopted for the study. This is because the aim of the study was to explore the perceptions of students toward ODL and challenges facing most students on the programme and to recommend ways to reduce them. ODL students of Ethiopia are spread throughout the regions of the country. However, the study area was located in the public and private institutions (Harmaya, Jimma, St.Mary and Alpha) in the Ethiopia.

**3.2    Sampling**

Both random and purposive sampling techniques were used in sampling method of 48 sample ODL students Creswell (2009) from each of the four study centres and four student leaders, 11 from each of the four centres]. The student leaders were purposively sampled because they were considered to be 'information-rich' respondents. Their responses were to be used to triangulate responses from the survey. It needs to be mentioned that the findings would be more applicable to students from these four study centres. However, other centres with similar characteristics of students may find the data relevant and valid to their students.

**3.3    Subjects**
The population for a given study was made up of ODL student participants in the Ethiopia public and private higher education institutions (Harmaya, Jimma, St.Mary and Alpha). Both stratified and purposive sampling techniques were instrumental under this study. The researcher finally decided 11 ODL students from each sample university and one student leaders from each university as the total respondents of the 48 open distance students.

**3.4    Data Collection Tools**

For the specific kind of investigation, interview and questionnaire were used. The survey questionnaire and the semi-structured interview guide were piloted on four ODL students and one student leader to establish the reliability of the 0.76. The research questions served as a guide in designing the two instruments. Piloting the instruments was to correct any ambiguity of the questions. From this, the final survey questionnaire and interview guides were developed. Furthermore, an attempt to obtain valuable information, 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. Meanwhile, document was used as sources of evidence to substantiate the finding should not be overlooked.

## 3.5 Methods of Data Analysis

In analyzing and interpreting the data both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS-version 20) was used in analysing the questionnaire data whilst the interview data were analysed manually using inductive and thematic analyses. In this regard, responses from the same question number on the interview guide were grouped together and read over several times to extra meanings and themes from the responses. Data from the analysis of the questionnaire were corroborated with data from the interviews. The researcher believes that the descriptive and inferential statistics would have the advantage to indicate the dynamics and challenges of ODL at public and private higher institutions in the Ethiopia.

## IV. Results and Discussion
### 4.1 Students' Perception on Quality Dimensions of ODL

The students were asked to give their feedback on areas like, aims and objectives of the distance courses, teaching of the course contents, curriculum, learning material, student support services, evaluation procedures, infrastructural facilities and general perspective of the overall learning environment at the end of their personal contact programme. Further, to examine the quality dimensions as perceived by the students, detailed analysis of the responses and account from the students was incorporated to see the quality dimensions of the ODL. Student respondents were also requested to complete the questionnaire on ODL related beliefs and attitudes linked to a four point Likert scale (i.e. "*strongly agree*" to "*strongly disagree*"). As the sometime, for collating the interpretation of the results, the responses for "strongly agree" and "agree" are considered as together and "strongly disagree" and "disagree" are considered as together. Results emerging from the questionnaire are shown in Tables.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Perceptions on ODL (N=48)**

| No. | Views towards Distance Education Dimensions | SA | A | DA | SDA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Open Distance Learning teaching- learning is as good as face-to-face | 17% | 48% | 24% | 11% |
| 2 | ODL increases the flexibility of teaching and learning process | 28% | 67% | 3% | 2% |
| 3 | ODL enhances the pedagogic value of a course | 9% | 52% | 26% | 13% |
| 4 | Compared to conventional classroom courses ODL creates better learning experiences | 7% | 35% | 46% | 12% |

| 5 | ODL increases the quality of teaching and learning because it integrates all forms of media: print, audio, video | 7% | 43% | 36% | 14% |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | Open distance learning improves performance of educators | 9% | 50% | 25% | 16% |
| 7 | Higher education students perform better through ODL as compared to fulltime classes. | 7% | 17% | 59% | 17% |
| 8 | When compared to traditional education, ODL provides students with a higher quality of course materials | 4% | 45% | 33% | 18% |
| 9 | I am motivated to learn ODL courses | 26% | 54% | 9% | 11% |
| 10 | I have adequate ODE learning experiences | 28% | 41% | 20% | 11% |
| 11 | The advantages of ODL outweigh the disadvantages | 13% | 50% | 24% | 13% |
| 12 | I would rather learn in a face-to-face environment rather than through ODL | 28% | 19% | 39% | 14% |
| 13 | Learning through ODL programme is stressful | 6% | 34% | 30% | 30% |
| 14 | ODL takes a lot of time from my full-time study responsibility | 13% | 26% | 46% | 15% |
| 15 | I would stay away from ODL as much as possible | 2% | 5% | 56% | 37% |
| 16 | ODL causes the quality of education to decline | 4% | 11% | 52% | 33% |
| 17 | I would like to know more about ODL | 30% | 52% | 12% | 6% |
| 18 | My tutors received training in their role as tutor | 20% | 36% | 28% | 16% |

*SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, DA= Disagree, SDA= Strongly Disagree*

**Willingness towards Tutoring in ODL:** Results in this study portray a very positive attitude towards ODL. This is evident from items 1 to 3 in Table 1. Student respondents have agreed or strongly belief 65% (17%+48%) that ODL is as good as face-to-face; it is flexible in teaching and learning 95% (28%+67%) and enhances the pedagogic value of a course (61%). The respondents (58%) disagree in the statement "Compared to conventional classroom courses ODL creates better learning experiences." There is even a further respondents (59%) belief that distance education can increase the performance of educators. This aligns with Abedalaziz and Muaidi (2012) who are of the view that a person's willingness to support a course is determined by their beliefs, which informs attitudes.

The results from this study provide findings that are on the contrary. In item 9, 80% (26%+54%) of participants indicated that they are motivated to learn in ODL. About 69% (28%+41%) in item 10 indicated that they agreed the view of adequate ODE learning experiences. In item11, 63% of respondents strongly agree or agree on the statement "the advantages of ODL outweigh the disadvantages". In item 13, 60% of the respondents opposed that the statement "learning through ODL programme is stressful" which could also be associated with the statement -ODL takes a lot of time from full-time study responsibility. In addition, in item 15, 93% of the respondents strongly disagree or disagree their willingness to stay away from ODL as much as possible. In addition, most of respondents (82%) are like to know more about ODL. From this group of participants, it seems that there is a strong sense of willingness among academics to be part of an ODL system. Being willing is one side of the coin; engaging actively with a quality approach is the other side of the coin that needs further investigation.

**Ability in the Role of a Tutor:** According to Bandura cited in King (2012) self-efficacy is concerned with a person's perceived ability to execute a particular behaviour that will produce certain outcomes. The confidence that an individual has in their skills to perform a particular behaviour will motivate them to perform such behaviour (Romi and Leyser, 2006). It is critical to point out that although participants in this study indicate a strong sense of confidence in tutoring in ODL, a mere 56% indicated that their tutors practically received training in their role as tutor. Does this create an impression that anyone can tutor in an ODL programme without specific training? King (2012) highlights that much understanding is needed on the role and functionality of interaction and interactivity in ODL as such traits affect ODL completion success rates among the students. Chikoko and Chiome (2013) also elaborate that it is very important to train tutors on adult and distance education methodologies, including modern technologies constitutive of protocols in ODL teaching. This point is further illustrated in item 10, where 69% of the participants believe that they have ODL related experiences.

**Views on Challenges in ODL:** Challenges in this study are hitches experienced by students and tutors in the ODL environment. Bezuidenhout (2013) narrates that students and tutors in ODL institutions are experiencing feelings of self-doubt, alienation, dehumanisation and loss of esteem in their day to day operations. Regardless of the strong sense of willingness portrayed, a relative proportion (47%) of the participants indicated in item 12 that they would rather learn in the conventional face-to-face mode than tutor through ODL. This could be influenced by the perception in item 13 that learning through ODE is stressful (40%). About 39% indicated in item 14 that learning through ODL takes a lot of their time. Nearly half (49%) of the participants believe that materials provided to distance education is not of a high quality. Even in item 4, 58% of the participants indicated that distance education does not offer a rich learning experience. It is inevitable that participants would view ODL in a negative sense if the pedagogical experience is not rich and if the material is not of a high quality, considering that students heavily depend on such materials. This factor could further exacerbate the challenges

in distance education and subsequent feeling to rather learn through the conventional face-to-face mode.

**Table 2: Feedback Relating to Tutor's Presentation**

| No. | Views towards Feedback Relating to Tutor's Presentation | SA | A | DA | SDA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | The tutor states and explains the outcomes of the module | 22% | 48% | 16% | 14% |
| 2 | The tutor is well prepared to use the study module and additional materials to provide guidance in terms of realisation of outcomes | 22% | 47% | 16% | 15% |
| 3 | The tutor uses a level of language I can understand | 40% | 45% | 9% | 6% |
| 4 | The tutor presents stimulating content and examples | 23% | 42% | 23% | 15% |
| 5 | The tutor listens to students to determine their needs in terms of study assistance | 26% | 36% | 24% | 14% |
| 6 | The tutor encourages students to participate in class discussions | 22% | 37% | 25% | 16% |
| 7 | The tutor makes the link between study units clear and logical | 18% | 45% | 21% | 16% |
| 8 | The tutor refers to relevant and recent developments in the subjects | 20% | 51% | 21% | 8% |
| 9 | The tutor encourages me to think about the content discussed | 22% | 35% | 26% | 12% |
| 10 | The tutor utilizes the majority of time allow to  content presentation | 21% | 40% | 24% | 15% |
| 11 | The tutor is friendly and approachable for students in my ODL | 29% | 43% | 15% | 13% |
| 12 | The tutor communicates in a clearly audible and understandable manner | 25% | 43% | 22% | 10% |
| 13 | The tutor explains how the different outcomes will be assessed | 26% | 50% | 26% | 8% |
| 14 | The tutor gives appropriate guidance on the completion of assignments | 24% | 41% | 24% | 11% |
| 15 | The tutor prescribes a fair volume of study material | 23% | 47% | 28% | 2% |
| 16 | The tutor is comfortable and competent to teach via the inter active ways. | 16% | 40% | 23% | 21% |

The majority of respondents 70 %( 22%+48%) agreed or strongly agreed that tutors explained the outcomes to them and 66% of the respondents said that the lecturer/tutor clearly explained to them how the different outcomes will be assessed (Table 2). This is an important finding because Moore cited in King (2012) clearly stated that when you want dialogue to succeed between

lecturers and students you want students to know what is expected of them. Although the majority of respondents (69%) stated that the tutors were well prepared for their session it is still a concern that 31% stated that they feel the lecturers were not so well prepared. This can contribute to the communication gap that Moore cited in Chikoko and Chiome (2013) referred to.

In a very positive response 85% of the respondents indicated that the lecturer/tutor used a level of language that they could understand. This is an important aspect because many students are from rural areas and from different cultural groups and languages but it is pleasing to see that they feel comfortable with the level of language and this can contribute improving quality dialogue (item 3). Sixty five percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the lecturers present stimulating content and examples (item 4). Again it is interesting to see that 39% felt differently. The next statement asked the respondents to rate the lecturer/tutor according to his /her ability to determine the needs of the students. A relatively low 62% said that the lecturer listen to their needs in terms of the studies (item 5). This is a worrying factor because support is important in ODL to determine the needs of the students so that assistance can be provided. If the educational needs of the students are not identified it can lead to a weaker dialogue between student and lecturer. The next response link closely with the previous one in that only 59% of respondents stated that lecturers encouraged them to participate in class discussions during a tutorial session (item 6).

The majority of respondents (63% and 71% respectively) felt that the lecturer links the different study units effectively and referred and used recent developments in their subject (items7&8). It is further positive to see that 59% of the respondents indicated that lecturers encourage them to think more deeply about the work (item 6). This statement supports Falloon's (2011) claim that the quality of dialogue depends on the depth of understanding. It is important for students to reflect on the content because that can lead to better understanding and internalisation of knowledge. Reflection is also a sign of self directed learning and therefore important that distance education students develop the ability to reflect. The data indicate that 61% of the respondents felt that lecturers encourage them to think more deeply about the content (item10). This percentage is average and one would have like to see it higher. A relative large number of respondents (72%) felt that lecturers were friendly and approachable when using the tutorials again it is important with open distance learning that lecturers are always approachable because that is basically the only link with the University of Faculty for students (item11). In a very positive response 68% of students agree or strongly agree that their lecturer communicates clearly and understandable (12). It is a good indicator that proof the foundations for effective dialogue are present in the teaching-learning situation.

The majority of the respondents (65%) indicated that they received appropriate guidance to do their assignments (item 14). Successful lectures and quality dialogue via the tutorial depend largely on how competently lecturers use video clips and general internet resources. Most 70%

respondents indicated that lecturers/tutor prescribes a fair volume of study material (item 15). This is quite a low percentage and a hindering factor for interactivity and a possible sign that the tutorials are not used to its full potential. Linking to the previous result is the response from the next statement (item16) where 56% of the tutorial respondents stated that lecturers are comfortable and competent to teach in active ways.

**Table 3: Feedback Relating to Student's Experience**

| No. | Views towards Feedback Relating to Student's Experience | SA | A | DA | SDA |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | I, the student read the relevant learning material prior to the tutorial session | 23% | 44% | 22% | 11% |
| 2 | I, the student ask questions via the white board if I don't understand the work during the tutorial session | 7% | 35% | 28% | 29% |
| 3 | I, the student benefit from the tutorial session rather than tradition | 17% | 32% | 26% | 25% |
| 4 | I, the student feel the tutorial session was give me valuable information | 15% | 29% | 29% | 27% |
| 5 | I, the student feel the time allocated for the tutorial session was too short | 24% | 36% | 22% | 18% |
| 6 | I, the student was allowed to interactively participate through the tutorial with the tutor | 14% | 28% | 27% | 31% |
| 7 | I, the student prefer tutorial contact sessions more than traditional contact sessions | 15% | 25% | 22% | 38% |
| 8 | I, the student would like to present my questions during tutorial sessions to the tutor | 13% | 39% | 22% | 26% |
| 9 | I, the student find the call centre useful if I want clarification on issues | 23% | 44% | 17% | 16% |

It is important for any student to come prepared to a lecture but with ODL it is even more important because of the relatively short period of contact time between student and lecturer and that the lecturer want to use the time as productively as possible. To prepare the content before the lecture also demonstrate some kind of learner autonomy. Therefore the students were asked if they come prepared to the white board contact session. In a positive response the majority of respondents (67%) indicated that they read the study material prior to the session (item 1). Asking questions is also an important component of self directed learning. More than a half of respondents disagree or strongly disagree (57%) in that the student ask questions via the white board if they don't understand the work during the tutorial session (item 2). Less number of the respondents (51%) indicated that the student benefit from the tutorial session rather than tradition (item 3). It is a concern that the percentage is quite low because tutorial sessions are such an important part of the curriculum.

Fifty six percent of the respondents said that the tutorial sessions were valuable to them (item 4). It is important that students understand and are familiar with the structure of the curriculum and what is expected of them and it would be interesting to investigate it further at a later stage. In an interesting outcome 60% of the respondents viewed that the time allocated for the tutorial session was too short (item 5). It is quite low and need further investigating. One can assume the reason for this is that this method of delivery is new to the students. It is also important information that can be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of the contact sessions. While, more than a half (58%) of respondents disagree or strongly disagree on the statement "student was allowed to interactively participate through the tutorial with the tutor." A slight majority of respondents' (60%) said that they prefer traditional contact sessions with facilitator's more than tutorial sessions (item7). As mentioned earlier the mode of delivery via the tutorial was a new phenomenon and it is expected that students will feel uncertain about this but that is why this research was so important so that improvements can be made where needed.

Fifty two percent of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the student would like to present their questions during tutorial sessions to the tutors (item 8). Again it is interesting to see that 48% felt differently. This is an important factor that can contribute to self directed learning. A student that present their questions during tutorial sessions to the tutors tend to be more positive towards their work and can become more self directed in their learning. Participation in class discussions is important to develop confidence and also self directed learning. Sixty seven percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the student find the call centre useful if they want clarification on issues (item 9).

## 4.2   Institutional Support in Open and Distance Learning

On the issue of institutional support and whether there are structures in place to support teaching and learning, Table 4 depicts the students' responses. The highest percentage of the respondents that have high supports are occupied in adequate of individualized academic supports, feedback for assignments, and sufficiency of academic support which account 73.7%, 72.9% and, 66.8% strongly agree or agree respectively (Table 4). Similarly, majority of the respondents (74%) strongly agree or agree that the programs run in regular time-tables to support the ODL programmes as well as the assignments were submitted on time (70%). It could be gathered from the undecided and disagree categories that they might be comparing the support given to regular students to that of ODL which is usually not very clear. Institutional support in this context refers to the counselling services, study centre locations and learning facilities available at those centres. On campus, regular students seem to have all that they need for their studies around them whilst ODL students would have to travel to access them.

**Table 4: Status of Tutorial Support to Open Distance Learning Students**

| No. | Views towards status of intuitional support relating to student's experience | SA | A | DA | SDA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Individualized academic supports was adequate | 29% | 44.7% | 16% | 10.3% |
| 2 | Feedback for assignments were immediate | 27.9% | 45% | 18.1% | 9% |
| 3 | The academic support given to the students was sufficient | 24.8% | 42% | 25% | 10.2% |
| 4 | The programs run in regular time-tables | 35% | 39% | 19% | 7% |
| 5 | Assignments were submitted on time | 34% | 36% | 18% | 12% |

Krishnan (2012) defines student support services as cluster of facilities and activities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more interesting for the learners. In distance education, they serve as the interface between the institution and the learner. At the time of admission, students are given prior intimation of the personal contact programmes schedule and learning material for the first semester is also given. This enables students to make arrangements for attending the mandatory contact programme. However, majority of the students emphasized that assignment for the subjects should be given to them before the personal contact programme so that they get enough time to prepare them as the assignment work is to be submitted during the contact programmes only.

The students were of the opinion that the contact programme not only breaks their isolation from studies but also provides them opportunity to interact with the fellow students and share experiences with them. Social interaction in this manner, acts as support for the learners as they seek help from the fellow students when they encounter any problematic situation. Even though the efforts are directed towards making the learner comfortable, but some aspects do irk learners when they come for the contact programmes. In particular, the students were not satisfied with the facilities available in the library. Also, the laboratory equipments were not sufficient to do the practical work and they face problems in tasks associated with the practical components. Respondents that disagree to the institutional support could be arguing from the angle some interviewees talked about concerning the late release of quiz and examination results. This was considered as problematic as students who had to re-sit examinations do not get to know early enough to prepare for them.

## 4.3    Challenges to Students as they Embark on their ODL Programmes

ODL programme face various challenges as students embark of their programmes. As such the survey questionnaire and the interviews were to explore these factors and propose suggestions for minimizing these problems. The thematic approach was used in the analysis of the data. The findings that emerged from the data centre on lack of institutional, psychological, social, financial and instructional support. It is worth noting that some responses cut across some themes and these were discussed under one theme.

**Table 5: Open and Distance Learning Students' View towards their Challenges**

| No. | Challenges to ODL Students | SA | A | DA | SDA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Regarding Instructional Challenge to ODL Students** | | | | |
| 1.1 | There are good structures in my university to support the ODL programme. | 9.6% | 52.6% | 28.8% | 9.0% |
| 1.2 | There are positive directions in my university to support the ODL programme. | 14.7% | 47.6% | 23% | 14.7% |
| 1.3 | I appreciate the direction of my university in its ODL programme. | 16.6% | 57.7% | 17.3% | 8.4% |
| 1.4 | In my university there is a good relationship b/m tutor and students | 48.1% | 45.5% | 5.1% | 1.3% |
| 1.5 | In my university there is an effective teaching-learning during tutorial session | 10.9% | 47.4% | 21.2% | 20.5% |
| 1.6 | In my university tutors give me constructive feedback. | 15.4% | 59.0% | 23.0% | 2.6% |
| 1.7 | My tutors are tolerating me in class and this helps me to boost my confidence. | 25.0% | 60.3% | 14.1% | 0.6% |
| **2** | **Regarding Financial Challenge to ODL students** | | | | |
| 2.1 | In my university there is reasonable fee structure for the ODL programme | 8.3% | 39.7% | 34.7% | 17.3% |
| 2.2 | I believe that reasonable fee arrangement help students | 7.7% | 44.2% | 35.9% | 12.2% |
| 2.3 | In my university there reasonable cost structure for academic materials | 3.2% | 51.0% | 33.0% | 12.8% |
| **3** | **Regarding Psychological Challenge to ODL Students** | | | | |
| 3.1 | There is a conducive academic atmosphere in support to students ODL. | 18.6% | 49.4% | 21.2% | 10.9% |
| 3.2 | Effective counseling unit in my university support of student's non-academic and psychological issues | 4.5% | 23.5% | 36.7% | 35.3% |
| 3.3 | There is an available avenues for distance students to report their concerns with regards to their academic work | 10.9% | 40.4% | 28.8% | 19.9% |
| 3.4 | There is an effective counseling init in my university to support distance students' academic work. | 7.1% | 23.5% | 29.7% | 39.7% |
| 4 | **Regarding Social Challenge to ODL Students** | | | | |
| 4.1 | In my distance learning I satisfied with informal support/social support. | 12.2% | 60.9% | 18.2% | 9.0% |
| 4.2 | In my distance learning I satisfied with support form significance others at home. | 10.3% | 55.9% | 22.9% | 10.9% |

### 4.3.1　Instructional Challenge to ODL Students

On the questionnaire and during the interview students were asked to share their opinion on instructional challenge that they have. The responses indicate that most of them (71.4%) had issue with various aspects of instruction. For instance, two interviewees commented that:

> Instructional materials come to students late; in some cases we do not get the books at all. Due to this we have to make photocopies meanwhile we have paid our fees. [Student Leader A]

Most students complain bitterly when they are asked to consult tutors and collect their modules for photocopy. Their complains are that when modules or books are in the manuscript form they look voluminous and difficult to photocopy the document and even read and on top of that they have no money to do the copying. [Student leader B]

These concerns are genuine since under the normal circumstance, all course books for a particular level are supposed to be given out to students at the beginning of the semester. Any delay therefore poses inconvenience. However, there were positive responses about the instructional aspect of the programme (Table 5). On the issue of instructional challenge and whether they are obstacles in ODL teaching -learning, Table 5 depicts the students' responses. The highest percentage of the respondents (73.3%) appreciates the direction of their own university in its ODL programme. In addition, high supports are occupied in the good structures and in existence of positive directions which account 62.2% and, 62.1% strongly agree or agree respectively (item 1&2). Almost all respondents (93.6%) appreciated the cordial relationship that exists between tutors and students during tutorial sessions. Also, majority (63%) agrees or strongly agrees that during tutorial session teaching-learning process is an effective. Al large number of respondents (74.4%) also indicated that lecturers give constructive feedback to them, which encourages them to stay focused. In addition, lecturers tolerate (85%) their inputs in class and this helps to boost their confidence. This confirms Lehman as cited in Hockridge (2013) view that lack of feedback on performance from teachers constitutes a barrier to distance students, and that the link between the teacher and the student constitute a vital link in any teaching-learning transaction, which must not be broken especially in the ODL context.

### 4.3.2　Financial Challenge to ODL Students

On the issue of financial challenges, most respondents expressed their views in various ways as indicated in (Table 5). From the data, about 48% strongly agree or agree that the way the fees have been structured for them is acceptable; whilst 52% disagree and strongly disagree to the fee structure. While, 51.9% strongly agree or agree that the way the fees have been arranged for them is acceptable; whilst 48.1% disagree and strongly disagree to the fee arrange. This seems to

be 50:50 agreeing to disagree; which means that the arrangements are not favourable to most students. This is not surprising since most ODL students happen to be workers and have diverse commitments to meet. Galusha (2012) argues that most ODL students have age, type of work and marital status commitment to deal with and lack adequate money to cover the cost of their programmes, which constitutes an aspect of situational and financial barrier. In a similar manner, the analysis for the cost structure for the academic materials, that is, the course books indicates that 54.2% agree or strongly agree, whilst 45.8% disagree with the arrangement. Most students are not also at a level that they can access loans to upgrade themselves. This forms part of the basis for accepting the fee payment structure arrangement by the university. One interviewee commented that:

> *Students genuinely have financial problems. A number of my colleagues have come to complain about their fees and even money for transport to tutorials is a problem to them. One class prefect once said he has not paid his fees because he has to pay his children's fees first.* [Student leader E]

### 4.3.3   Psychological Challenge to ODL Students

On the issue of psychological barriers that distance education students face, factors that respondents commented on included the conducive academic atmosphere for learning, academic counselling unit, available avenues for students to report and effective non-academic counselling unit. From Table 5 most respondents, 68% were of the view that there is a favourable academic atmosphere for learning.  However, on the issue of effective counselling unit in place to support students' academic work, most respondents (72%) disagree or strongly disagreed with the statement. Most of respondents are not in favour of that statement with only 28% agreeing on statement (Table 5).

This indicates that most students' psychological needs are not being addressed. It is clear from the literature that many distance learners are working class students and at the same time taking care of their families. As such, balancing their time and other roles and responsibilities with the coursework needs real support from providers. This is a comment from a student:

> *…My children disturb me a lot, therefore I find it difficult reading at home …Family responsibilities such as taking care of children and husband is my major problem.... [Student leader G]*

An effective unit where they could access counselling support will be desirable. It is worth noting that due to the distance between the tutor and the learner, there is the need to keep the line of communication and interaction always open. More importantly, learners' assignment feedback, other learning needs and motivation, all have to be addressed at this unit. With learners

being geographically distant fromtutors, they are most times saddled with studying problems and need encouragement to meet their learning needs.

> Some students do not attach any seriousness to the programme. Thus I suggest tutor give intermittent guidance and motivation to students to make them sit up. [Student leader F]

It needs to be mentioned that at some study centres, the tutor is available but due to distance and lack of time, learners are unable to access the services. Similarly, staff at the tutor centre who work for both regular and distance students do not show up on weekends that distance students attend tutorials. This calls for a better arrangement to be made for the use of the tutors.

### 4.3.4   Social Challenges to  ODL Students

In analyzing ODL students' social problems it came to light that 73.1% of the respondents receive social support from their mates, for example meeting with their mates for group discussions and also calling their friends for further clarification on lectures and assignments, with only 26.9% indicating that they do not receive any support. Considering the degree of satisfaction a large number of respondents (66.2%) agree or strongly that their level of satisfaction others at home.

## V.    Conclusion and Recommendations
### 5.1    Conclusion

Open Distance Learning is now gaining popularity in the country, Ethiopia; however, due to its numerous challenges it has not achieved the standard expected. The increasing demand for further studies as well as the good opportunities for those who cannot always take part in the conventional  classroom  teaching and high cost of regular education has made ODL a popular choice for many especially the working population. Hence, this study explores the students' perception and challenges faced on ODL in the higher education institutions students in their quest to study in the university.

These results are revealing in that institutional support, instructional challenges and financial challenges constitute the pillars of any ODL programme. Eventhough this study is quite an exploratory one the observations and results are real and need to be considered with all seriousness, especially the institutional support. Also most importantly, even though results of the survey showed over 50% agreeing with the prepositions, in absolute terms students not agreeing are large and the implications are varied. The inability of greater number of students to pay their fees could lead to poor management of structures, which raises questions on the sustainability of the programme.  Considering the problems students encounter while on the programme, the findings seem to inform the policy makers to re-structure and arranging activities that would render quality education to the students. Considering the demand for the ODL programme especially in Ethiopia, it is believed that this study has confirmed most of the

challenges listed in the result of study as faced by Distance Students as well as uncovered a few that are peculiar to students of Ethiopia.

This study established that student respondents have a general positive view on the contribution of ODL to higher education institutions. There is, however, a need to address specific issues related to ODL. Amongst others are the views that ODL needs no specific skill and therefore no training to be effective as tutors. In turn, this could be the very reason why specific negative views are held. It is through training that, for example, issues on quality material are addressed, creative approaches to ODL experiences are introduced and pedagogies is merged. Training also provides a broader understanding into the nature of students in ODL that would motivate educators to have a better understanding and introduce creative supporting tools (Bezuidenhout, 2013; Chikoko & Chiome, 2013). Most of the orientations offered in ODL are of an elementary nature and it is time for tutors to develop a fully-fledged accredited course in ODL. The beliefs uncovered in this study constitute an initial research agenda from which more nuanced conversations are likely to be stimulated, hence this study serves as a springboard for further research to unpack each of these perceptions in an attempt to change them. This study offers research opportunities regarding attitudes and perceptions of distance students in selected universities towards ODL. Student respondents in general hold considerable positive beliefs about ODL. There are, nevertheless, other beliefs within their experience in ODL that influences their approaches in their role as students. There is a need to further this study in examining what other realities there are in terms of workload and subsequent pressures associated with it and courses.

The course objectives directly reflect the overall picture of the course and ODL programme. It is like a blueprint for course development. The course objectives should cater to student's needs and learners should be able to anticipate what kind of work is expected from them and how should they progress towards achieving the targets they set for themselves. The ODL experiences revealed that most of the students were satisfied as far as aims and objectives of the course are concerned but, at the same time they were anxious about how many objectives would they actually be able to achieve once they are through the course.

Students want to be able to supplement, and even replace, conventional learning experiences with ODL . Students say this is because many other considerations besides personal preferences motivate them, especially considerations about where and when they learn (Picciano & Seaman, 2007). These opposing preferences pose a dilemma for the aspirants of higher education institutions enrolling in ODL.

Almost all the students were of view that the quality of teaching during the personal contact programme was excellent and they were able to understand the concepts. The students believed that the instructor was committed towards their job. The whole teaching process according to the learners was well organized, directed, and covered almost all the content. Also, the students considered the contact programme very beneficial with regard to the semester exams. One of the student comments in this regard, "Teachers here are committed towards their

job. Teacher works hard for the class which reflects from their teaching. Teachers are well informed and take their classes very seriously."

In this study, it surfaced that students are conscious about their limitation on face to face interaction among each other and with teachers. This is the reason why teachers also emphasize on interactive mode of curriculum transaction. In the situations, where the students do not meet expectations, teachers make an effort to improve the communication process.

The content is taken up unit-wise to avoid any confusion among the learners. The instrctor takes up the task of covering up the topics as per the scheduled time-table prepared for the personal contact programme hours.

Following was the feedback of one of the students: "The class-room sessions are interactive in nature and the students are encouraged to question whenever they encounter any kind of a confusion or doubt. The students are encouraged to voice their opinion and participate in discussions." Another student remarked: "Teachers try to take up the topics in a sequential and logical manner and this helps the students ascertain that how much of the prescribed syllabus has been covered in the classes which further helps in taking the house tests and semester examinations."

The very nature of ODL discourse makes quality of the study materials as the touchstone of success and failure of any course being run in the institution. Learning material keeps the students in touch with the subject content. Students strongly believe that they could learn well and independently as long as they are facilitated by well-structured course materials, usually provided to the students in self-learning mode, which guided them step by step on how to study the content of the course. The instructor of ODL improvises on the learning materials as per the changes in the prescribed curriculum as well as according to the learners' feedback on the material during the contact programmes. The content for each subject is divided into "blocks" and each block consists of the topics prescribed in the syllabus of the course.

Students were largely satisfied with the learning material provided. As per the feedback received from a student, it remarked:

> "The content in the notes is comprehensive and extensive. It is easy to understand the concepts from the study material. I found the material very helpful" [Student leader E].

Infrastructural facilities included building, library facilities, learning resources, laboratories, hostel and accommodation facilities etc. Resources should be dedicated to improving the traditional educational infrastructure of buildings, classrooms, laboratories, and also, it should be examined whether these facilities are accessed by the learners. Students should be made aware of these facilities available to them. From the present study it emerged that the existence of and access to ICTs did not ensure their effective utilization as most of the students though being computer literate could not trust the information available on the web as because of the information overflow. One of the students reported in this regard: "I find the learning material

supplemented with the class notes sufficient for making notes and preparation for semester end exams."

Assessment and evaluation is a critical aspect associated with the quality dimension of any educational programme. This aspect affects the student learning outcome in the form of achievement motivation. Fair and square evaluation ensures that due recognition to the student efforts has been given by the teachers. Students also, like to receive good grades. Most of them work hard to deliver their best of capabilities to an assigned academic task. Internal assessment criteria is based on the following components: Classroom interaction in ODL: based on how consistent the ODL student is attending the classes and his/her behavior in the class, whether the student is attentive, whether he/she interacts with the teacher, asks questions or gives inputs in the classroom discussion and participates in activities.

It is the responsibility of the ODL student to complete assignment work in a timely manner and submit them in the prescribed time limit. The assignments are graded for originality, relevance and appropriate content. Evaluation is done on the basis of written examination during the personal contact programmes. These tests are taken for the subjects' students study in a particular semester. On combining these components student's assessment is finalized. Thus, the student evaluations are made very objectively and they can easily analyze their performance on the basis of their assessment. Examinations (theory as well as practical part) take place at the end of each semester. Students were satisfied by the assessment criteria and hardly any confusion or doubt emerged in relation to evaluation as they considered the evaluation system very transparent in nature.

## 5.2    Recommendations

The present research sought to illuminate students' perceptions of the quality of the ODL programme on the basis of their learning experiences. On the basis of the findings and the conclusion above, the following recommendation can be drawn which are directly related to effectiveness of ODL programme:

- ODL programme courses should be carefully designed and developed before teaching-learning process actually begins;
- Effective instructional strategies for learners should be designed by the teachers keeping in view the time constraint during the tutorials;
- Adequate support systems must be in place to provide the distant learner with access to learning resources such as modules, learning material etc. ;
- Interaction between the teachers and students and among students (peers) must be encouraged and practiced;
- Assessment should be designed to relate to specific learning outcomes of the learning experiences;
- There should be more flexibility in the payment of fees by ODL students since they are adults and as such have to take care of their children and family members.

- The Government should provide ODL students with the needed support as part of an effort geared towards the human capital development of the citizenry of Ethiopia.   This is essential because ODL students unlike others who come on study leave are expected to rely on student loan facilities to support their education since they are direct contributors to the system.
- There is the need to establish counseling centres in all the study centres and also employ professional counsellors to attend to the needs of the students. Counselling consists of one of the major non- academic support for ODL students where advising, exploring problems and offering directions take place.
- Basic training is given to the Study Centre Co-ordinators to offer those services.
- The ODL programme should institute a more elaborate study into the ODL programme to fine-tune the entire programme to enhance its overall quality as leader of ODL programme in Ethiopia.

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