

## **Contextual analyses of Open and Distance Learning policies in Malawi: Towards the reconstruction of distance education policies in public universities**

**Mackenzie Ishmael Chibambo**

Department of Education and Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of  
Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa  
Email: [mackchibambo@gmail.com](mailto:mackchibambo@gmail.com)

**Joseph Jinja Divala**

Department of Education and Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of  
Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa  
Email: [j.divala@uj.ac.za](mailto:j.divala@uj.ac.za)

### **ABSTRACT**

This contextual study aimed to analyse the open, distance and e-learning (ODeL) landscape in Malawi in terms of its current state and guiding policies based on best global practices. It also attempted to explain and understand how the knowledge, attitudes and practices of university staff play out in the implementation and success of ODeL in Malawi. Using qualitative research design, especially descriptive phenomenology and discourse analysis, mainly through literature analyses and lived experiences of the researcher, as suggested by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (1913), this study established that ODeL in Malawi, although it is a relatively new construct within higher education institutions (HEIs) contexts, was making significant strides amidst staid challenges. Despite the increased adoption of ODeL by learning institutions and society, the study also established that HEIs in Malawi were offering ODeL without any national or institutional ODeL policies as the available ones were still in their base forms. This is contrary to the recommendations by the SADC and UNESCO ROSA 2020 studies, which urged African governments and their respective HEIs to design and harmonise their ODeL policies based on the continental (African Union/AU), regional (SADC) and national ODeL policies, which will eventually ensure that ODeL offerings and qualifications are credible, transferable and harmonised to minimise replications and disparities. Such policies would also help in the credit transfer systems for ODeL graduates while restoring public trust. This study further demonstrated that the available draft policies were not only inconsistent but also bleak and unstructured, due to a lack of relevant knowledge by the framers and dogmatic institutional policies. Precisely, it further established that, in Malawi, three universities had unratified draft ODeL policies while the other three did not have any policies other than generic policies designed for face-to-face institutions. This reality exposed ODeL students and graduates to epistemological injustices and harms, both within and without the university spaces. It is finally recommended that HEIs should expedite the process of developing and enhancing their ODeL draft policies since universities are now being compelled to increase student enrolments every year through ODeL against limited funding from the state. This reality has further driven universities into pursuing business-like models aimed at generating income for running their institutions as well as self-sustenance, mainly through commodification of knowledge. This paper then calls for custom-made policies that will regulate ODeL processes, practices and offerings, to ensure that students receive equitable and epistemologically just education.

**Keywords:** access; curriculum justice; epistemological access; ODeL; inequalities

## INTRODUCTION

This contextual analysis and baseline assessment sought to analyse ODeL institutions in Malawi concerning available policies and/or possibilities for developing and enhancing available ODeL policies. Currently, there are about five public universities in Malawi, namely: the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS), the Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (KUHES), the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR), the University of Malawi (UNIMA) and the Mzuzu University (MZUNI), excluding seventeen private universities. While all these universities have introduced ODeL at different periods, it is not clear if indeed all or some of these universities had any policies specific to ODeL given a lack of research focusing on these issues. This study is indeed the first of its kind in Malawi as far as understanding the ODeL policy landscape is concerned. Moreover, the findings of previous studies that tackled this topic at a regional level have revealed that, in the SADC region, different countries were clustered into three positions. For example, the study established that some countries had their HEIs operating without any ODeL policies and that such countries were using generic policies designed for conventional face-to-face programmes. The second group of countries had developed and enhanced their ODeL policies, and such countries experienced improved ODeL offerings and graduate experiences. The final group of countries had developed ODeL policies but such policies were still in draft forms awaiting enhancement and refining. In the case of Malawi, three universities had already developed their ODeL policies although they were in base forms waiting for enhancement and refining, while the other three were still in the preparatory phase and had no any ODeL policies. It is for this reason that this study was initiated, to analyse the ODeL policy landscape in Malawi's HEIs and understand how best universities could be guided in coming up with ODeL policies that would regulate educational offerings within these institutions. In the event that some had draft policies ready, this study sought to analyse such draft policies and compare them with SADC protocols on ODeL and the African Union (AU) ODeL policy statements (see SADC and UNESCO Rosa (2020) alongside global best practices. This study further sought to fully understand the genesis of ODeL in Malawi and in some selected universities, the current state of ODeL in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and possible future projections using the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) matrices. This study also analysed different instruments and policies that guide Malawi's HEIs and ODeL at both macro and micro levels.

As Schenflen (1963) contended, sound contextual analyses should utilise specialised research methods to analyse the external (macro) and internal (micro) environments in which different institutions and/or businesses operate. While environmental scanning generally focuses on businesses' macro-environment, contextual analyses target the entire business environment in terms of its internal and external contexts as key elements for institutional planning and actions. On this basis, the easiest approach to doing contextual analysis is to use the SWOT analysis model, which helps businesses deeply understand available competition, possibilities and impossibilities for their success. Contextual analyses therefore help businesses explain and understand the environment in which they operate so that they can develop strategic plans of action for their success. For Kendon (1990, p.16), any given action or thing—be it a glance, movement of the body or gesture, or any remark about weather—has no intrinsic meaning unless interpreted in relation to other external systems. Accordingly, for us to fully understand the context in which ODeL operates in Malawi, we needed to analyse the macro and micro contexts in which HEIs are situated, since such contexts can directly or indirectly affect ODeL in different ways. Furthermore, since ODeL in Malawi operates alongside the traditional face-to-face (f2f) delivery mode (dual-mode) and there is pressure from minimalist state policies, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and external competition from private HEIs, this contextual analysis was

necessary for us to understand the available challenges and opportunities that would impact on the relevance, quality and growth of ODeL in Malawi.

## **Background to ODeL in Malawi**

### *Distance Education at Basic and Secondary Levels*

According to Chimpololo (2010), Msiska (2013), Zozie (2020) and Chibambo (2023), distance education (DE) started around 1965 in Malawi under the Malawi Correspondence College (MCC), which later became the Malawi College of Distance Education (MCDE). The mandate of MCC was to offer programmes at secondary school level through the correspondence model, which mainly utilised printed instructional media that were delivered to students through the post office. As argued by Chibambo (2023), Chimpololo (2010) and Msiska (2013), the MCDE employed the first generation DE model, reminiscent of the first industrial revolution or the Pitman model (see Homburg, 2003; 1995). It was also in this period that UNIMA was established, as the first public HEI, to offer diploma programmes, following Malawi's liberation from the British protectorate. In this case, it was in anticipation of a shortage of semi-skilled workers who could do basic mathematics, speak, read and write for purposes of business and communication in the available industries. This was only achievable through the use of distance education at basic and secondary education levels in the short term, while the UNIMA would train skilled workers in the medium and long term. Interestingly, the UNIMA had up until 2023 not introduced any formalised distance education programmes, owing to its conservative nature and prejudice against this delivery mode on the bases of feasibility, achievability, quality and relevance (Msiska, 2013).

### *Distance Higher Education Levels: Reflections from Selected Universities in Malawi*

Distance education had been restricted to secondary education in Malawi until 1997 or so. Between 1998 and 2013, Domasi College of Education, MZUNI, LUANAR and MUBAS introduced the first ever ODeL programmes at higher education level, respectively (see Chimpololo, 2010; Zozie, 2020; Chibambo, 2023). At that time, there was a reported shortage of almost 10,000 teachers needed to teach in secondary schools. This shortage was mainly attributed to the introduction of free primary education and the universal access to basic education movement (see UNESCO, 2000; 2005), which saw numbers of school leavers disproportionately rising to unimaginable levels in many African countries (Chibambo, 2009; Chibambo, 2023). Furthermore, Msiska and Kayambazinthu (2004) report that both the Domasi College of Education and MZUNI were founded in response to the need for teachers in the newly introduced community day secondary schools and the increased brain-drain due to teachers migrating abroad for greener pastures and/or for well-paying jobs in the private sector within Malawi (Nsapato, 2017); high teacher death rates due to HIV and AIDS; and sharp increases in student enrolments at both secondary and basic education levels. Msiska (2015; 2013) further observes that both the Domasi and MZUNI began with education programmes, since education was highlighted by donors and the government as the priority area for Malawi's growth and development strategies. Following donor endorsement and support, the Domasi College of Education became more vibrant than any of the public universities. This tells us that educational financing and policy development in Malawi have mainly depended on donors (see Nsapato, 2017).

While MZUNI initially founded ODeL in 2006, it actually admitted the first cohort of 37 students in 2011 under the Faculty of Education (Chibambo, 2023; 2018; Zozie, 2020; Msiska, 2015; 2013; 2007; 2006). Essentially, MZUNI took five years to enrol the first cohort due to institutional politics and culture, management prejudices, lack of instructional materials and absence of well-tailored ODeL policies. Msiska (2015) and Zozie (2020) further observe that

ODeL at MZUNI was perceived as a project and a cash-cow that was run on a trial-and-error basis, and hence remained as a breeding ground for epistemological injustices (also see Chibambo, 2023; 2020). Due to the lack of sound ODeL policies, at MZUNI for example, there have been a lot of conflicts and tension between management and academics, students and management, and academics and the ODeL secretariat. These demonstrate that the ODeL programme has not been without challenges in the absence of guiding policies. For Msiska (2013) and Zozie (2020), one of the reasons ODeL has experienced serious challenges both at HEI and society levels, is that HEIs have operated without any specific ODeL policies other than those policies designed for the f2f programmes. As Makoe (2018) contends, in the absence of custom-made ODeL policies, a lot of inconsistencies may occur during the operationalization and management of ODeL. Furthermore, Gatsha and Makoe (2020) observe that the lack of ODeL policies has led to systems failure in terms of student support services (SSSs), examinations procedures, compensation for self-instructional materials (SIMs) development, compensation for programme facilitators and markers and lack of quality assurance frameworks (QAFs). Similar problems were also reported at LUANAR, which founded its ODeL programmes around 2013 without any specifically tailored ODeL policy. These practices contradict the recommendations made by Gatsha and Makoe (2020) and UNESCO ROSA (2021), who urged African nations to draw from the SADC ODeL policy to develop their national ODeL policies which will eventually inform individual institutional ODeL policies. These studies also emphasised the need for ODeL policies that draw from macro and micro policies, as these have implications for programme harmonization, quality assurance (QA) concerns, credit transfers and recognition of ODeL qualifications, among others.

#### *Distance Education at LUA NAR and its Issues*

LUANAR was officially created through Act of Parliament No. 22 of 2011 and started operating on 1 July 2012 at the then Bunda College of Agriculture as its main campus. Although the Natural Resources College (NRC) was established in 1969 by the Ministry of Agriculture to provide certificate programmes in agriculture for technicians, it later became part of LUANAR in 2014 following Bingu wa Mutharika's proposition to unbundle the University of Malawi. The unbundling was aimed at addressing problems of access to higher education and the creation of well-trained human resources who could help accelerate the socio-economic growth and development of Malawi. Other universities that emerged from the delinking process included Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (KUHES), which combined the Kamuzu College of Nursing, College of Medicine and Kamuzu College of Health Sciences; the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS) and the UNIMA.

LUANAR has five faculties, which include the Faculty of Agriculture (1967), Faculty of Natural Resources (2001), Faculty of Development Studies (2004), Faculty of Food and Human Sciences (2013) and Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (2013). The University also offers Masters and Ph.D. programmes in collaboration with the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) (see Kaude, 2015; Nyirenda and Tostensen, 2009; Atim, 2017). Since then, LUANAR has emerged as an innovative and fast-growing research university in the fields of agriculture, aquaculture and animal sciences. Through research collaborations, the Bunda Farm, which was once a liability for the university, became a limited company in 2005 (Atim, 2017). For example, the Bunda Filling Station now serves the public as well as students studying business management programmes. Importantly, LUANAR established the ODeL Directorate in 2016 with an initial enrolment of 441 students. Since then, LUANAR has managed to provide education to different groups of people including marginalized individuals such as women and people with disabilities. As the philosophy of ODeL demands, LUANAR has continuously valued openness, integrity, collaboration, innovation and excellence (Holmberg,



2005). As of January 2020, student enrolment rates had reached 1500, signifying an accelerated increment in enrolment.

In terms of programmes and admission criteria, LUANAR through ODeL offers degree and master's programmes. Students are admitted into these programmes through generic and mature programmes based on LUANAR admission policies designed for the f2f systems. This kind of arrangement raises a lot of questions in terms of achieving increased access to equitable education through ODeL and epistemological justice (see Chibambo, 2003; Chizengo, 2023). Since ODeL has its own philosophies, such as making sacrifices and compromises in terms of admissions and participation in education, it is not clear how LUANAR has managed to balance the need for increased access against the quality education and national regulatory frameworks often reflected in f2f systems. Since LUANAR is still utilising policies designed for f2f programmes, the majority of staff supporting ODeL were originally employed for f2f programmes, and most of them were trained using the f2f model, it is critical that the university should design tailor-made ODeL policies to regulate this system. In addition, regulatory bodies such as the NCHE and the National Quality Assurance Frameworks (NQAFs) have continued to put pressure on ODeL institutions, forcing them to act against their own ethical and moral responsibilities. Even then, several studies have shown that the lack of custom-made ODeL policies at national and institutional levels has given rise to many challenges in terms of operations and management of ODeL, self-instructional materials (SIMs) development, compensation of programme facilitators and student support services and, more broadly, curriculum justice (see Chibambo, 2023; 2020; 2018; Chizengo, 2023; Zozie, 2020, Makoe, 2018; Gatsha and Makoe, 2020). What is pleasing is that at the time of this study, LUANAR had just developed custom-made ODeL policies funded by the Commonwealth of Learning and the SAVE Project.

#### *Distance Education at the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS)*

Formerly known as the Malawi Polytechnic, MUBAS was established under Act No. 19 of 2019, after being de-linked from the UNIMA in 2021. MUBAS has about 7000 students from around the globe, and it is strategically located in the commercial city of Malawi. By 2021, this university had fifteen departments offering programmes in accounting, business management, architecture design, land management, ICT, journalism, language and communication, mathematics and statistics, physics and biochemical sciences, technical education, quantity surveying and engineering. It also offers postgraduate programmes in business management, infrastructure development and transport management in response to the need for skilled workers for national development. MUBAS's strategic location and the nature of its programmes put it at an advantage when compared to UNIMA, MUST and MZUNI, which are located in underdeveloped cities. Additionally, MUBAS is located near industrial areas, which have helped the university build relationships and collaborations with the industries for the purposes of work-integrated learning (WIL) and internships. Such a strategic location has also helped students and staff gain part-time employment and consultancies, which eventually increase their visibility and prospects for future collaborations and engagements.

In terms of ODeL at MUBAS, it was established in 2019 driven by the institution's strategic plan, and with financial support from USAID through the Strengthening Higher Education Access Malawi Activity (SHEAMA) Project, and the Skills for a Vibrant Economy (SAVE) Project. The SAVE project mainly focused on imparting critical market-relevant skills to the youth at all levels for them to contribute towards the growth and development of the economy. SAVE also aims to increase access to quality and equitable higher education in Malawi through supporting universities and colleges. According to Chiwayula (2022), SHEAMA is a joint project funded by the Arizona State University and USAID, which seeks to increase access to market-relevant and

skills-based programmes for the youth. It collaborates with the government and universities to offer undergraduate technical programmes through ODeL. Precisely, the Department of ODeL has facilitated the development and management of instructional media and provision of student support services (Chizengo, 2023). Its main goal has been to increase access to equitable, quality and relevant education, as articulated in the MGDSII (see World Bank, 2014). Owing to its nature, ODeL has provided the most feasible option for enhancing innovation, entrepreneurship, industry engagement, community outreach programmes and institutional governance at MUBAS. It has also managed to strengthen financing and resourcing options as reiterated by the MUBAS strategic plan and World Bank Report of March 2014 (World Bank, 2014; Nsapato, 2017; Chizengo, 2023).

Until today, SHEAMA and SAVE have played a critical role in kick-starting ODeL activities at MUBAS by ensuring that the university realises its dreams and visions. The efforts made by SHEAMA, SAVE and MUBAS have substantially helped ODeL take a positive shape. Chizengo observes that through SHEAMA's support towards capacity building trainings and module development, MUBAS has so far graduated 155 students. Similarly, Chiwayula (2022) reports that the mandate of SHEAMA has been to increase access to marketable skills-based programmes among the youth, who will in turn create the much-needed human capital development encapsulated in the Malawi 2063 Vision Plan. Chiwayula also reports that SHEAMA has focused on technical colleges, since their graduates fill the much-needed skills gap. Likewise, COL and MUBAS have embarked on the preparation and development of ODeL, OERs and employability policies, among others (see Chizengo, 2023), all of which have aimed to improve the quality of the education offerings and graduate experiences in Malawi.

While SAVE and SHEAMA have mainly provided technical and financial support for materials development, COL has picked the development of ODeL policies and Open Education Resources (OERs) as critical components of ODeL systems. Similar observations were made by Zozie (2020) and Chibambo (2023), who reported that ODeL in Malawi has operated without any policy at all levels (also see MZUNI ODeL Draft Policy, 2022). This is worrisome considering that governments, donors and HEIs have all acknowledged the importance of ODeL for socio-economic development as articulated in the MGDs II (see World Bank Report, 2014; Chiwayula, 2022). Accordingly, policy oversights such as these can derail Malawi's efforts to achieve equitable access to epistemologically just education (du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014; Morrow, 2009). It is against this background that this study was undertaken: to analyse and understand different contextual realities of HEIs providing ODeL in Malawi and their policy stances. This analysis will then help make recommendations for developing and/or enhancing specialized ODeL policies.

### **Phenomenology as a Methodological Consideration for Analysing ODeL in Malawi and the SADC Region**

Firstly, I needed to fully understand the three selected universities (MUBAS, MZUNI and LUANAR) about their history, establishment location and delivery modes, including ODeL. This was aimed at understanding their institutional set-up, culture, operations, opportunities and challenges through the use of PESTLE and SWOT analyses. I also set up meetings with heads of ODeL for information regarding ODeL in their jurisdiction and to inform them of what I expected of them and what to expect from me. I mainly needed to gain access to various institutional policies, strategic plans and handbooks. I also visited websites trying to locate necessary data regarding their history, programmes and management structures. I also visited the Deputy Director of ODeL and the student support services managers in Mzuzu, Lilongwe and Blantyre who provided necessary documentation related to ODeL policies for comparative reasons. I later visited the COL website for available ODeL policies, employability toolkits and OER policies. Furthermore, I visited websites for UNESCO, the University of Rwanda, SADC, DEASA, UNISA,

IGNOU, the Open University UK, and the Seychelles and Malawi governments to access different education policies. In this way, document analyses played an ultimate role in gaining access to relevant data about ODeL policies and instructional materials. These documents were mainly available under the Creative Commons licences, which allowed free access and manipulation, subject to acknowledgement (Kumah, 2014; 2011; Creswell, 2014; 2013). In general, this study took a conceptual qualitative research design under the phenomenological tradition, and the results were thematically analysed based on the research objectives.

According to Thompson (1990) and Annels (1996), phenomenology is qualitative research which refers to research approaches that focus on understanding and examining individuals' lived experiences of a specific phenomenon. Grounded in philosophy, phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of human experiences, and how individuals make sense of the world around them. Phenomenology goes beyond describing observable behaviours by delving into the subjective and personal meanings that individuals attach to their experiences. Thus, researchers aim to bracket or temporarily set aside their preconceived notions and assumptions to approach the phenomenon with fresh eyes. This process is often known as *epoche*, which helps researchers explore the phenomenon as it is experienced by the participants. The goal is to uncover the essential structures of the lived experiences and to grasp the underlying meanings that individuals attribute to those experiences.

To collect data, one can use in-depth, open-ended interviews with individuals who have directly experienced the phenomena. These interviews encourage participants to reflect on their experiences, emotions and perceptions, providing rich, qualitative data. Researchers may also analyse other sources of data, such as written accounts, diaries or artistic expressions, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

During the analysis phase, researchers may systematically identify and cluster themes or patterns within the data. Researchers also look for commonalities in participants' descriptions to distil essential aspects of the phenomenon. The result is a phenomenological description that captures the shared meanings and structures of the lived experiences, providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it. Phenomenology has also been employed in various fields such as psychology, sociology, education, philosophy and healthcare, where researchers seek to explore the subjective dimensions of human experiences. By focusing on the essence of lived experiences, phenomenology contributes valuable insights that can inform theory development, counselling practices and the understanding of complex human phenomena.

Key traditions include the interpretive tradition and critical hermeneutics. The interpretive tradition was developed by Heidegger, who was a student of Husserl, and it falls under the critical tradition. Just as Aristotle challenged Plato on idealism, Heidegger challenged Husserl on how to use phenomenology, especially on the notions of subjectivity and objectivity (see Cohen, 1987). Within phenomenology, hermeneutics emerged from the word 'Hermes,' the Greek god who used to interpret messages between gods and man (Thompson, 1990). Ideally, hermeneutics endeavours to extract deep meanings embedded in human-lived world experiences through multiple sources of text (Lopez and Willis, 2004). Heidegger used the term 'life-world' to suggest that individuals' realities cannot be separated from their environment. Heidegger further argued that human subjectivity is not important in research, but rather individuals' life-world and personal integrity. He also argued that people should stop claiming that human researchers can fully be objective since they are naturally subjective animals who have vested interests in anything they do including their own research processes. This approach is applicable for the current study because it accepts my insider knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Smith, 2003; Annels, 1996). While interpretivism sometimes requires participants' engagement through empirical interviews, this

current study nonetheless adopted it for its acceptance of subjectivity, a priori knowledge and interpretation.

On the other hand, critical hermeneutics is an advanced level of the interpretivist tradition, which is concerned mainly with power-relations, subjugation, alienation, emancipation and transformation (praxis). Critical hermeneutics assumes that any act of interpretation is invariably influenced by socially accepted ways of viewing reality (Thompson, 1990). Since the lived experiences of society tend to reflect the values of the powerful individuals in society, voices of the powerless are often suppressed, hence the need for emancipation through critical conscientisation. In considering policy documents within the HEI context in Malawi, this study sought to explain and understand if there were any policies at all governing ODeL practices, how such policies were governing and their role in curriculum (in) justices among students and staff. As Stevens and Hall (1992) had argued, once oppressed groups become aware of their status in society, they may begin to liberate themselves through internalised conscientisation, planning and action (praxis). Thus, critical hermeneutics critiques the historical bases of the conditions and practices that can influence curriculum (in)justices as people experience them in their contexts (see Smith, 1987).

Precisely, critical hermeneutics probes beneath the claims embedded in documents related to the phenomenon to extract hidden power-relations to generate emancipatory knowledge. Accordingly, critical hermeneutics becomes emancipatory (action) research, since it helps one view ontology and axiology in a new and useful way (see Thompson, 1990). Since it probes beneath the surface of ideologies to unearth harmful power-relations, it has also been referred to as the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (see Cohen, 1987). As Thompson had contended, any specialised use of interpretivism will lead to critical hermeneutics. This is because any act of interpretation is invariably influenced by socially accepted ways of viewing reality and truth. Since socially accepted worldviews reflect the values of privileged individuals of any society, then the voices of ODeL students and academics in Malawi may often be silenced, hence the need to help them liberate themselves by way of helping them formulate well-tailored ODeL policies that serve their interests and those of the state. This is the reason critical hermeneutics has become the core tool of analysis in this study. Specifically, this study utilised document analyses, observations, informal conversations with academics and managers and insider experiences in order to understand and explain the available ODeL policies and the potential for developing and enhancing new policies, with a broader aim of improving ODeL offerings and quality graduates.

### **Trustworthiness and Limitations of This Study**

The findings of this study are credible since I have only used authoritative documents that are broad and reliable such as university websites, policy documents, journal articles, institutional minutes, peer-reviewed books on ODeL and official communication within and without HEI contexts in Malawi and elsewhere. I also have viewed this phenomenon from an insider’s lens, having worked in Malawi and South Africa under ODeL for over sixteen years. This means any misleading claims were cross-checked and often dropped as unreliable claims. Regarding abstract ideas (see Annels, 1996 and Thompson, 1990), I have used clear and simple expressions to help ordinary readers understand the arguments. I also have adopted the transformative paradigm to provide an actionable plan for policy reformations as opposed to a mere critique of ODeL policies and implications. Most importantly, all ethical concerns were considered to achieve transparency, credibility, transferability and confirmability of the findings. The findings and all documentation that led to these findings are available at the Commonwealth of Learning as well as MZUNI and MUBAS in Malawi, and can be accessed by anyone wanting them. Where pictures and individualised accounts were required, consent forms were signed and deposited to COL.



Additionally, this study mainly utilised available research findings to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. There were also continuous dialogues, conversations and inquiries between the researcher and ODeL practitioners from MZUNI, LUANAR and MUBAS as flag-carrying HEIs championing ODeL in Malawi. These conversations mainly centred on the status of ODeL in their universities, its guiding policies and its prospects and challenges, among other things. The outcomes of such conversations alongside literature reviews and my insider experiences immensely informed me on the state of ODeL in Malawi, and I was able to question my own knowledge, biases and understanding of the ODeL landscape in Malawi. As argued by Heidegger (1962) and Cohen (1987), insider knowledge is not only limited to conceptual research but also applies to other forms of research, and it does guide the research process. It is therefore important to accept that all human beings have personal interests, motivations, beliefs, misconceptions and expectations for doing research, yet what matters is responsible use of that insider experience. In terms of limitations, there was an over-reliance on published literature and lack of adequate funding to physically engage various stakeholders during the conversations as well as during the actual policy formulation stages. To offset these, I had to include balanced sources of literature on ODeL such as research articles and institutional documents on ODeL and education policies. I also analysed literature on global trends and issues in ODeL in order to make solid conclusions and recommendations. While critical interpretivism, as the key research paradigm, could not usually present normative bases for actionable plans that can free ODeL from systemic and systematic ideologies (Thompson, 1990), its use alongside the transformative paradigm helped me move beyond mere critique of ODeL policies to actually making recommendation for plans of action. On the use of dense language, conformity to elitist norms, noncommittal to facts and heavy politicisation of critical inquiry, as argued by Gibson and others (see Gibson, 1986; Goodman, 1992), I resorted to using simplified language and tried as much as possible to recommend actionable plans through the transformative paradigm. Although this study was limited to ODeL in Malawi's HEIs, these findings may be generalised to other universities in many other countries so long as they have appropriate conditions and characteristics.

### **Drivers of Access to Higher Education in Malawi and Distance Education**

To fully understand the HEI context in Malawi and its genesis, one needs to unpack how the University of Malawi (UNIMA) was conceptualized and why it had to be unbundled. The case for Malawi was not unique as many countries that achieved independence from colonialism had resorted to having one mega national university in their countries. For example, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Malawi and others had mega universities named after their respective countries. These universities had multiple campuses or constituent colleges headed by college registrars and principals. The central office housed the vice chancellors, DVCs and university registrars, among others. The centralized arrangement subsumed top-down management, which usually limited autonomy and creativity. Agreeing with this, Agabu (2021) reiterates that the unbundling of the UNIMA was aimed at increasing access to education; improving leadership and governance structures; enhancing standards of teaching, learning and research; and providing institutional autonomy for growth and development. In the time of UNIMA, the centralized management system restricted any innovative ideas even when such ideas were needed. This further hindered equitable access to higher education, infrastructure development and innovations due to its conservative nature. It was not surprising then that the UNIMA, despite being founded in 1965, did not want to adopt ODeL until 2023, despite public calls and research recommendations arguing for it to relax its stance on innovative delivery modes. Interesting MZUNI, which was founded in 1999 or so, and the Domasi College of Education had

all embraced ODeL soon after their establishment. Moreover, LUANAR, MUBAS and KUHES, all former constituents of the UNIMA, have since 2016 embraced ODeL, soon after they were delinked from the UNIMA. Beyond this, Malawi now has six autonomous public universities and over seventeen accredited private universities, most of which have embraced f2f and ODeL delivery modes in order to enhance access to equitable and quality higher education for the citizenry. Even then, access has still remained a challenge in Malawi, prompting researchers to question the effectiveness of the strategies and efforts made by government and the private sector in promoting epistemological access to higher education. For example, as of 2023, access to higher education was still as low as 4% (see Chibambo, 2023), although some statistics give us more or less than the 4% enrolment rate, and about 50% in 2024.

For Zozie (2020), Nsadala (2018), the World Bank Report (2014, March) and Chibambo (2023; 2009), prior to 2018, access to higher education has been as low as 0.4%, which is one of the lowest enrolment rates globally. Essentially, Malawi's HEIs have only managed to enrol about 80,000 students per every 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 211,000 for the whole sub-Saharan region (World Bank, 2014, p.2). The Bank further observes that the Malawi Sustainable Development Goals II (MSDGs II) have provided an ideal framework for guiding reforms in higher education including the adoption of ODeL as an official delivery mode of education. It therefore recommended development of comprehensive quality assurance frameworks (QAFs) for guiding public and private HEI operations. It also urged that governments should balance physical access with epistemological access by availing sustainable financing options (Nsapato, 2017). It also recommended introduction of good governance structures, which would improve management of HEIs and their delivery modes. The Bank also made some observations and suggestions for increasing access to quality higher education in Malawi. Thus:

- MSDG II has recognised higher education as a key driver for economic growth and development.
- HEIs in Malawi require overhauling to accommodate more students, achieve equitable enrolment rates and offer higher-quality programmes relevant to market needs.
- Malawi has too few qualified graduates to address socio-economic development and growth challenges.
- HEIs must collaborate with the private sector to ensure learning is delivered efficiently, and is aligned with the needs of the job market.
- Malawi should encourage private educators and explore sustainable financing and resourcing options to bridge the gaps in education (Nsapato, 2017; Chibambo, 2023).
- HEIs should explore utilization of feasible and sustainable delivery modes such as ODeL and block-releases to fast-track access to equitable higher education in the short, medium and long terms.

From the above discussions, it is clear that despite Malawi's efforts to address access to quality education concerns, the country has made limited progress. This clearly demonstrates that the f2f delivery mode has failed to deal with access problems. And even with the liberation of public education and introduction of private universities and ODeL delivery modes, limited progress has been registered, bringing in concerns of inequalities in education. Moreover, the need for ODeL has been reinforced by governments, donors and HEIs as the best option for offering higher education to the public amidst resource constraints. However, ODeL alone is nothing if it is not guided by specialized policies that would inform provision of epistemologically just education. Ultimately, the MSDGs described above suggest that HEIs need to design policies that will facilitate effective provision of ODeL within their circumstances.

Another driver of ODeL in Malawi has been the increased need for democratized models of offering education championed by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), World Bank, African

Development Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO. Furthermore, international legal agreements, such as the UN Human Rights Charter on Education and Education for All, and national constitutions have all recognized education as a human right, to be accessed by all peoples (Moriarty, 2019). Despite these realities, access to equitable and quality education remains an illusion amidst neoliberalism and epistemological capitalism (see Vally and Spreen, 2012; Chibambo, 2023). The issue here is that ODeL, being a novelty delivery mode in Malawi's HEIs, risks facing the same pitfalls that have caused many universities in Oceania, Asia, Africa and Europe to stumble, and the source of these troubles was a lack of comprehensive ODeL policies informed by critical research. Accordingly, this contextual analysis focused on ODeL in Malawi's universities, especially those offering ODeL programmes to understand and explain their contextual realities as the basis for formulating and/or enhancing specific ODeL policies that will help improve ODeL operations, offerings and graduates. It was for this reason that this study gained its backing and momentum.

### **The Question of Equitable Access to Higher Education within ODeL Contexts in Malawi**

Equitable access to higher education is critical for the sustainable development goals, and attaining a knowledge-based economy still remains an issue in many countries (World Bank, 2014). To this end, SADC developed a regional policy framework for guiding ODeL programmes in order to harmonise and increase access to quality higher education within its jurisdiction (SADC, 2022). The SADC ODeL policy was essentially adapted from the African Union (AU) continental ODeL policy, and it aimed to enhance equitable access to quality higher education within the region. In a nutshell, SADC member countries are required to tailor their national ODeL policies in line with regional ODeL policy. Equally, national ODeL policies tap into the SADC ODeL policies, and these inform individual HEI ODeL policies. It is further argued that individual HEI ODeL policies will help guide systematic delivery of ODeL programmes with limited barriers. Again, the growing thirst for higher education in Malawi, and the limitations of the f2f delivery mode to accommodate all eligible students, have justified the need for robust ODeL policies within the context of HEIs (see Msiska, 2015; 2013; 2007; 2006). The issue however is that, though Malawi universities have some draft ODeL policies in place, such policies are inconsistent with macro- and micro-level policies and instruments. When compared with continental and regional policies, it was evident that serious gaps and oversights still existed in Malawi, requiring serious attention. Essentially, both the ODeL national and individual HEI policies were not tactically benchmarked on regional and continental ODeL instruments, but rather generic f2f tools, despite it (ODeL) being unique. Likewise, there was no any evidence that the policies had been benchmarked on certain proven critical theories of education to guide ODeL offerings and experiences within distinctive educational contexts. Furthermore, the draft policies lacked proper structure, and ignored critical aspects such as achieving epistemological access in education within democratic spaces (See Chibambo, 2023; World Bank, 2014; Moriarty, 2019; du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014; Morrow, 2009). Importantly, the draft policies did not indicate how quantity and quality could be reconciled and achieved within different ODeL contexts, as suggested by the regional and national ODeL policies (see Makoe and Gatsha, 2020; SADC, 2020; Gamede, 2005; Morrow, 2009). Given these problems, it was evident that such policies were developed in the absence of philosophers of education, sociologists, curriculum specialists, ODeL experts and critical stakeholders who would have offered alternative voices. Policies of this nature need a combination of mainstream and marginalised experts who understand different aspects of education and its epistemological demands. This fact was also admitted by a large number of participants during the verification presentation of the findings at MUBAS in October 2023. During these conversations, it was acknowledged that universities in Malawi were increasing their enrolments through ODeL even though they did not have any operational policies. In the absence

of solid ODeL policies, such enrolment increases will complicate the provision of student support services, data management and general administration. This means designing comprehensive policies will help ensure that staff and students are consistently and effectively supported with a clear vision and mission.

### **Analysing the State of ODeL in Africa and the Globe**

This section mainly presents results from different studies on the state of ODeL within the SADC region and around the globe. The findings mainly emanate from other baseline studies funded by the SADC and UNESCO Regional Office of Southern Africa (ROSA) (2020) and the Commonwealth of Learning among others (See Makoe and Gatsha, 2020). This approach is meant to provide necessary data for comparative purposes in order to benchmark our local policies at the HEI level in Malawi.

According to SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020), out of sixteen countries that were studied within the Southern Africa Development Cooperation (SADC) region, six had ratified their ODeL policies; another six had their policies in draft form, while four countries were yet to develop their policies. It was encouraging to establish that most of the countries that had ratified their ODeL policies had linked their policies to continental and regional policies, the MSDGs and other emerging technologies. The study further established that institutional policies were useful for enhancing implementation of ODeL at national, regional, continental and global levels, while also cognizant of the demands posed by neoliberal–globalism. Since these policies were mere visions of nations, some countries faced challenges in terms of infrastructure, financing, staffing and natural disasters. Some countries reported problems of poor coordination and contradictory policy focus due to dissensions which frustrated successful implementation of ODeL. SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020) and Simui et al. (2018) further identified inadequate external and internal support mechanisms for countries that did not have draft ODeL policies, especially Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania. They finally recommended SADC, UNESCO, AU and non-governmental organisations partner with governments by providing necessary supports for the development of national and institutional ODeL policies. Furthermore, Makoe and Gatsha (2020), Makoe (2018) and Vurayi (2022; 2023) established that the lack of comprehensive ODeL policies in Africa has negatively affected different countries' responses to problems of education inequalities. Vurayi (2020) observed that Zimbabwe failed to provide equitable e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic due to universities' unpreparedness, poor ICT infrastructure, poor institutional support, the digital divide and the lack of good ODeL policies, all of which rendered HEIs dysfunctional. SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020) equally argued that due to different waves of Covid-19, all ODeL systems that were unprepared were destabilised and paralyzed. They recommended that governments should expedite the development of ODeL policies that can withstand such uncertainties. Makoe and Gatsha (2020) further observed that governments and HEIs have since then focused more on improving skills development, recovery plans and delivery options for increasing access to education than they have invested in ODeL policy development and enhancement.

On the other hand, SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020) established that many SADC countries had established and/or were still establishing their national qualification frameworks (NQFs) and quality assurance frameworks (QAFs) for enhancing education quality within ODeL systems. It also found that Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania were running ODeL programmes without any policy. Makoe and Gatsha (2020) and Isaacs and Mohee (2020) similarly observed that some SADC countries did not even have rubrics for guiding the provision of ODeL. They further observed that poor infrastructure threatened successful provision of equitable quality education through ODeL. Likewise, Vurayi (2022; 2021) identified that a lack of ICT



infrastructure for students and staff was common in the SADC region making e-learning an illusion. Although the SADC and UNESCO ROSA studies reported some availability of ICT infrastructure for minimizing the digital divide at national levels, that was absent at university and family levels due to lukewarm policies.

For Malawi, it was established that in many universities, ICT policies were available although access to actual digital services still remained problematic at HEIs and family levels. For example, poor bandwidth, internet costs and inconstant energy supply threatened the success of ODeL programmes. Ironically, when HEIs fail to meet the costs of ICTs, it is the poor students that shoulder such costs, hence deflating the whole purpose of an equitable ODeL delivery mode (Sehloko, Chibambo and Divala, 2023; Ngobeni et al. 2023). Moreover, as Makoe and Gatsha (2020) and Olcott (2020) established, most SADC countries did not have any budget lines for ODeL programmes, except for a few countries that outsourced non-core services. This concurs with the findings that ODeL, within dual-mode universities, has operated using a single budget line, and that its income has been used to finance university-wide activities to the detriment of ODeL activities (see Chibambo, 2023; Chizengo, 2023; Zozie, 2020).

### **Critical Analysis of the Findings from the Literature Reviewed**

As Makoe and Gatsha (2020) and Vurayi (2022; 2021) postulated, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many poor countries and universities to begin building or enhancing their digital infrastructure, making it fit for purpose and accessible to different user groups (also see Sehloko, et al. 2023). Moreover, SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020; 2021) urged governments, NGOs and internet providers to consider collaborations with universities in providing subsidised data for educational purposes, as is the case in South Africa (see Sehloko, et al. 2023). Makoe and Gatsha (2020) also urged all universities to increase the use of interactive radio services, television, social media and other affordable tools for educational purposes. This was necessary because the COVID-19 pandemic had revealed substantial systematic flaws and weaknesses. Countries were further urged to invest in digital infrastructure to meet students' demands, especially of those in rural-poor areas (see Chibambo and Divala, 2022; Vurayi, 2022; 2021). Most importantly, UNESCO ROSA (2020) requested that governments and universities develop individualized ODeL policies that can work effectively during natural disasters. Other studies have equally commended universities to utilise research findings that are informed by dominant and marginalised theories of education (see Kumashiro, 2000; Chibambo, 2023) to help them develop ODeL policies that are peculiar to their contexts. For Shonhiwa and Ndudzo (2016), as cited in SADC (2022), beyond policy concerns, strategic execution remains, which requires individual competences, interpretation of plans, identification and adaptation of plans to emerging conditions, knowledgeable and engaged leadership, prudent use of available resources; and accommodation of employee buy-ins, all of which must be stipulated in the archetypal ODeL policy.

Although most of these findings have been applied successfully within HEI contexts in Africa, an examination of the Seychelles' ODeL policy, the DEASA/SADC ODeL policy, the Malawi national ODeL draft policy and some selected universities' draft policies in Malawi demonstrated that there were gaps, contradictions and disparities similar to the findings by Makoe and Gatsha (2020) and Isaacs and Mohee (2020). Moreover, Kumashiro (2000) as cited in Chibambo (2023) had already warned HEIs on the dangers of developing educational policies that lack paradigmatic and marginalised theories since such policies can create epistemological injustices in education. These findings are similar to what this contextual study has just established about policy availability and policy formulation issues, in which many universities had in place inconsistent and incoherent draft policies that did not speak to regional and continental ODeL policies. Although concepts such as access to equitable and quality education were persistently

featured within these draft policies, none of them explicated how best increasing access to education would be achieved and measured without sacrificing epistemological access (see Moriaty, 2019; du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014; Morrow, 2009). In other words, these policies did not articulate how quality and quantity would be balanced, monitored and measured, and how best these would be packaged within the bracket(s) (see du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014; Morrow, 2009).

Concerns like these necessitated this contextual study to understand and explain how such oversights would compromise the development of a responsive ODeL policy that can help harness harmonised ODeL provision in Malawi. It was clear that ODeL in Malawi was not only new but also that most academics were unaware of its anatomy, philosophies, aims and values, achievable under different contexts (see Chimpololo, 2010). Although the SAVE and SHEAMA projects provided universities with technical and financial support, such support did not go towards any staff orientation on ODeL philosophies, policy formulation and the philosophy of open educational resources (OERs). It was not surprising then that almost all academics who participated in the training works on ODeL policy formulation and enhancement in Malawi reported that they had gained new lessons on the philosophy of education and ODeL theories.

### **The Notion of Social Transformation and Policy Development Processes Explained**

While it is not traditionally mandatory that every piece of philosophical research should lead to social change or actionable plans, modern philosophical studies have gone beyond mere critique which was common of critical theorists. In recent years, modern philosophers are combining critical theories and social transformation theories. Since this study was commissioned by the Commonwealth of Learning to address three objectives—(i) carry out a contextual analysis on the available ODeL policies landscape in Malawi; (ii) initiate, organise and facilitate ten-day workshops to develop policies on ODeL; (iii) develop policies on employability and policies on open educational resources (OERS) together with HEIs and ODeL academics in Malawi—the social transformation paradigm was indispensable. Common in critical theory and critical hermeneutics, social transformation proponents argue that critique of the current social order should challenge the status quo and systems that sustain it. This way, critical hermeneutics/theory attempts to explain phenomena in society as well as establish social transformation and change. Brookfield (2005: 7) argues that critical hermeneutics should aim to explain social order in such a way that it becomes the catalyst for social transformation. This suggests that critical hermeneutics endeavours to be transformative by identifying social issues and induce social change by locating and isolating underlying causes of inequalities. It also exposes what is wrong with the current social reality and identifies actors to change it. It accords clear norms for critique and suggests action for social transformation.

For Hungwe (2018), critical hermeneutics/theory seeks to offer alternative ideas that may result in new thinking, new social orders and better social arrangements. Accordingly, critical hermeneutics has gained ground in feminism, culture, education and politics as it affords social transformation and change. The basic idea in social transformation is that critique should not only be about explanations, understanding and interpretation of ideologies but also about destabilising repressive conditions and structures and deciding the next course of action and how it can be achieved (McKernan, 2013). It, thus, achieves this by highlighting the significance of challenging norms and beliefs that account for hegemonic structures. They are such norms and beliefs that are put in place for the mechanisation of oppression and marginalisation of other social groups.

As Hungwe (2018) argues, the most important contribution of critical theory/hermeneutics is its insistence on human liberation from repressive social structures and systems. Since critical theory attaches itself to the Marxist tradition, it is not surprising that emancipation is one of the key constructs. Critical theory has also been perceived as a powerful weapon for liberating the

working class from capitalist structures. Since then, it has maintained this characteristic, and it is this characteristic that has usually foregrounded different works by different critical theorists. For this study, emancipation is perceived to be achievable through critical questioning of educational structures, policies and practices within ODeL contexts in Malawi. Furthermore, Watson and Watson (2011) affirmed that systems emancipation is important when inequalities between different groups exist due to power-relations and self-serving interests. This means identification and restructuring of social obstacles, rules, symbols, policies and practices deny human beings equal opportunities. Essentially, critique and social transformation helped me understand and explain how practices and policies serve as obstacles to epistemological (in) justices, and seek action plans for achieving social transformation and change (praxis) within ODeL contexts. It is for this reason that the coming section provides a step-by-step guide to developing and enhancing ODeL policies that are epistemological just and equalising.

### **Commonly Followed Procedures when Preparing and Designing Just and Equitable ODeL Policies**

#### *Defining the Subject and Markets*

The first step was to define the target subject to be analysed, and then focus on it. In this case, the proposed subject is ODeL in the HEIs of Malawi as units of analysis.

#### *Analysing Macro Trends and Contexts Using PESTLE*

I had to analyse macro (external) factors within the external environment of the selected HEIs through scanning the political, economic, social, technological and demographic trends, also known as PESTLE. At each level, these factors were determined according to HEIs and ODeL, scoring them in terms of relevance and causations to establish mechanisms for coping with aggressions. Thus, PESTLE was key for explaining the selected HEIs' opportunities and threats. Demographic trends mainly focused on average students' ages, education and culture for purposes of market segmentation and positioning. Alongside environmental scanning, available competition and advantages were also analysed to understand the state of ODeL in Malawi, and potential risks, and how responsive ODeL policies could be designed. Since Malawi has six public universities alongside private universities, concerns of education quality and relevance, democratisation of knowledge, competition for first-rate candidates, knowledge commodification, and graduate employability issues have increased. Accordingly, understanding these realities would help us design effective ODeL, employability and OERs policies, respectively, which would then position Malawi as a worthwhile global destination for prospective students.

#### *Analysing the Competition*

The third step was to learn about selected HEI competitors providing similar services, their business models and how they usually defend their market share while penetrating new markets. This analysis required knowing competition levels, competitive forces and competitors' behaviour and their strategies. Knowing the competition would ensure that the universities compete at different levels. This entailed identifying market needs in terms of students, parents and employer expectations and preferences. For example, do students prefer e-learning, the f2f mode or a blended mode? What type of courses do students and employers need the most? These questions would then help us enhance consumer insights, market share and positioning of our ODeL systems. Knowing competitive forces also helps us determine the power of the competition, threat of new entrants, consumer bargaining power, threat of substitute services and the role of complementary services. This could save ODeL from being cannibalised by its competitors or cannibalizing itself.

Moreover, knowing competitor strategy helped us understand how different organisations compete with their opponents to gain some advantage. For the selected HEIs, such strategies included offering low tuition fees, interest-free scholarships, referral programmes, recognition of credit transfer systems and flexible paying options among others.

### **Analysing Internal Environment through SWOT**

This stage involved interrogating the internal environment of the three selected HEIs to determine which skills, knowledge and attitudes were available within their contexts. It involved analysing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the universities (see MZUNI Draft ODeL Policy, 2022). The strengths focused on factors that can offer HEIs in Malawi competitive advantage on the market; while weaknesses examined factors that can disadvantage HEIs because they cannot meet market needs and demands. Competence analysis, however, examined knowledge, skills and technology that can give each HEI a competitive edge. This then required identifying market-related competences, integrity-related competences and functional-related competences within the context of the universities.

#### *The SWOT Matrix for ODeL in Practice*

As reported by Makoe and Gatsha (2020), Zozie (2020), Isaacs and Mohee (2020) and SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020), many HEIs in the SADC region are implementing ODeL programmes without any policies, hence risking the success of their ODeL as well as their credibility. Likewise, Malawi's HEIs are not exceptional as they risk being cannibalized by global and regional universities, especially those reputable universities. This means understanding the strengths, threats and weaknesses of other universities demands doing an elaborate SWOT analysis, similar to this one. For this study, the SWOT analysis helped us summarize the entire organisational context to develop robust ODeL policies within the HEI context. The table below offers a generic interpretation for understanding and designing SWOT analysis in higher education.

**Table 1.** Generic SWOT analysis within HEIs.

<b>Cluster Number</b>	<b>SWOT Combination</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
1	Strengths and opportunities	HEIs can use strengths to take advantage of opportunities.
2	Strengths and threats	HEIs can use strengths to overcome threats.
3	Weaknesses and opportunities	HEIs should know weaknesses that can hinder ODeL riding on opportunities, hence should convert weaknesses into strengths.
4	Weaknesses and threats	Impossible to overcome threats unless major changes and sacrifices are made.

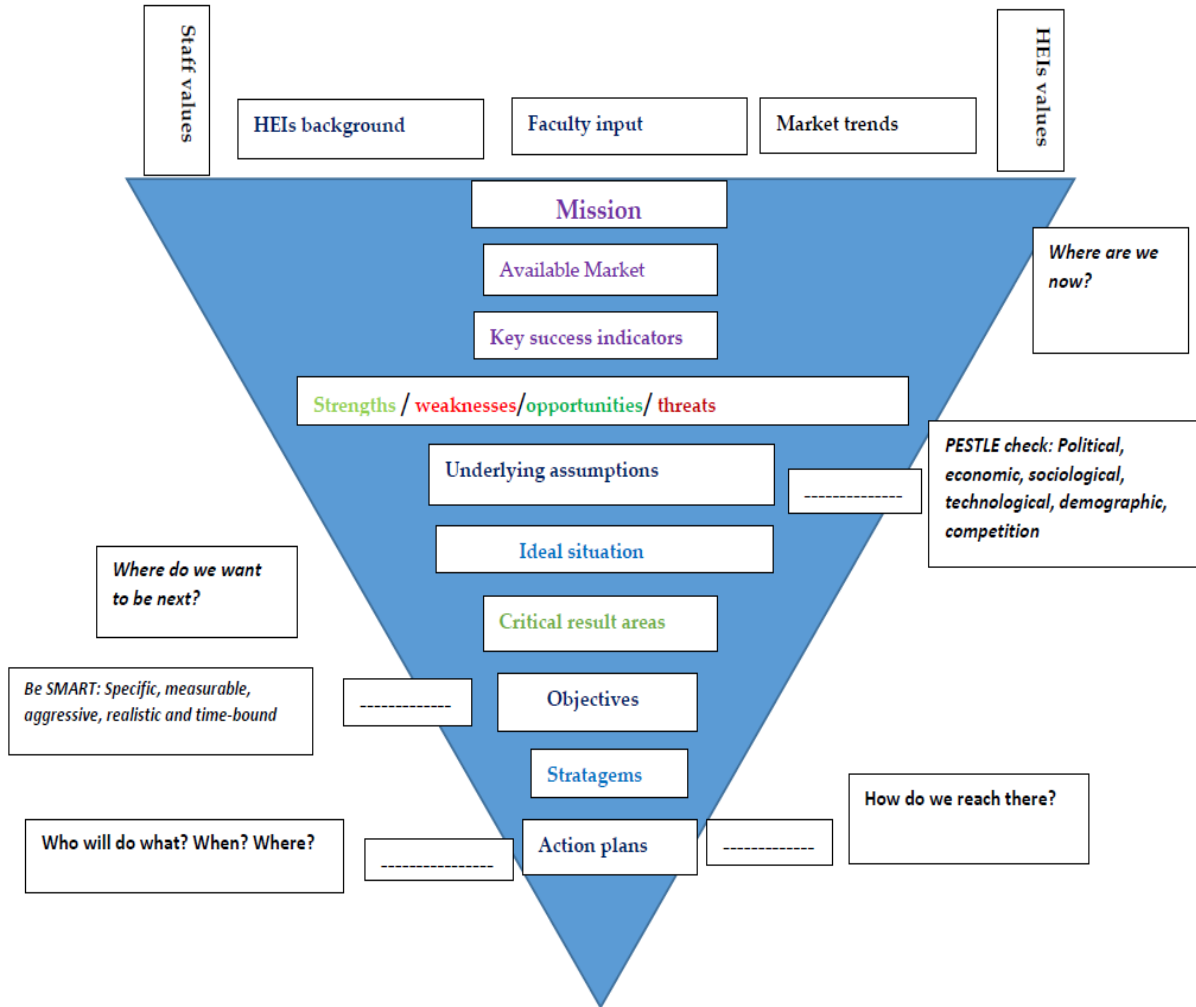
The following table provides a detailed SWOT matrix, explicating ODeL in HEIs.



**Table 2.** A specialised SWOT matrix for a given university and its interpretations.

<b>SWOT</b>	<b>Contextual Reality</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>Strengths</b>	University Y is a public HEI accredited by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). It is strategically located in the commercial city of Blantyre; has satellite centres across Malawi; has commercially viable and skills-based programmes, highly qualified academics and good infrastructure.	Its accredited status and ownership already make it a leader in education provision. Its market-relevant programmes, location and infrastructure provide graduates with industry linkages, WIL, employment and social networking.
<b>Weaknesses</b>	Insufficient funding, staffing, space and quality instructional materials; ODeL unable to be creative and expand due to its status at university Y. Competitors W and Z are established in ODeL provision and have expanded assets.	Difficult to execute ODeL functions at Y due to limited staffing levels, lack of freedom and limited supports. ODeL cannot grow due to its departmental status and space/staff limitations.
<b>Opportunities</b>	University Y management and staff support; boosted by support from donors such as COL, USAID, SHEAMA, SADC, World Bank and others. Thirst for higher education in Malawi, and marketable programmes for achieving human capital development. Increased acceptability of ODeL due to pandemics such as COVID-19. Skills-based programmes not common at W and Z.	University Y management has shown full support of ODeL through finances and technical support. Y is known for demand-driven and skills-based programmes uncommon of W and Z. Y can also learn from W and Z's mistakes.
<b>Threats</b>	There are too many HEIs offering ODeL in Malawi. W and Z have expansive experience, staffing and infrastructure on ODeL. Inflation has led to fees hikes. Minimalist policies by the state still making ODeL unaffordable for the poor.	Universities W and Z as pioneers dictate ODeL landscape in Malawi. Good ODeL infrastructure and experienced staff make them appealing, credible and trusted. Regular inflation making the market unstable.

The ultimate goal of any contextual analyses through SWOT and PESTLE is to develop policies and strategic plans that can guide the education system. When macro and micro environmental considerations are factored into the SWOT and PESTLE matrixes, universities can easily identify issues that need to be addressed. These issues then should be treated by formulating strategic action plans (policies) for achieving the desired objectives within the given context. Diagrammatically, the processes of drawing ODeL policy action plans are presented in the subsequent figure, where the formulation of policy and strategic plans of action is visualised.



Source: adapted from policy formulation processes emanating from SWOT/PESTLE Analyses

### Critical Consolidation of the Findings from the Contextual Analysis

As discussed in the previous sections, and according to the SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020) study and other studies, many African countries have ratified their ODeL policies, some had mere draft policies, while others had nothing to show. For Malawi, both the state and the three universities named (XYZ) had draft policies as of 2023, while the others had nothing, since they had just introduced ODeL programmes. Be that as it may, all universities were operating their ODeL programmes using generic f2f instruments, since their policies were unratified. This situation is concerning, as observed by Makoe (2018) and UNESCO (202), as it raises questions of quality, credibility and epistemological access (see Chibambo, 2023; Chibambo and Divala, 2020b; du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014; Morrow, 2009). Similarly, Shonhiwa and Ndudzo (2016) argued that it is not just a matter of having ODeL policies, but also their strategic execution, individual competences, interpretation and adaptation of strategies, knowledgeable and engaged leadership, prudent use of resources and accommodation of employee buy-ins and trade-offs. The necessity of ODeL policy development is also emphasised by the SADC Report (2021), SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2022), Makoe and Gatsha (2020), the United Nations (2021), Makoe (2018), Vurayi (2022) and Chibambo and Divala (2022), who observed that the lack of robust policies in ODeL can cause implementation of ODeL in Africa to stumble. Furthermore, ODeL programmes

without any policies have often been associated with poor quality education, poor quality graduates, poor communication protocols, delayed examination results and incessant inequalities, which can culminate into epistemological injustices (see Chibambo, 2023). For Malawi, this contextual analysis has demonstrated that ODeL still experiences similar problems due to the lack of policy guidelines. There have also been issues of insufficient funding, examination delays, inadequate staffing levels, shortages of space, delayed development of modules and slow adoption of ODeL proposed activities (see Chizengo, 2023; Chibambo, 2023). Beyond this, the draft policies at the three universities were not only inconsistent but also inadequate and lacking when compared with regional, national and global policies, and this is contrary to the recommendations made by the SADC and UNESCO ROSA (2020) studies, which urged HEIs to mainstream their policies based on national and regional ODeL policies (see Makoe and Gatsha, 2020; Makoe, 2018). This study has also established that the existence of inconsistencies and policy deficits may negatively affect provision of ODeL and public perception about the quality of its offerings and graduates. Moreover, most of the draft policies, especially the ones at universities Y and Z, did not fully align themselves with the national ODeL policy, Malawi Vision 2063 (MW2063), Sustainable Development Goals (see MSDGs 2030), the African Union Education Agenda (AU, 2063), and the SADC protocol on education, which call for harmonised provision of higher education within the SADC region (also see SADC and UNESCO ROSA, 2020; Makoe and Gatsha, 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS

This contextual study aimed to explain and understand the current state of ODeL and its guiding policies at three selected universities in Malawi utilising a phenomenological qualitative research design, involving mainly conceptual analyses (see Creswell, 2014; Kumah, 2014). It thus sought to address the following objectives:

- Analyse the current state of the ODeL landscape in Malawi in relation to other ODeL providers.
- Conduct a SWOT analysis on the competences and knowledge of academics and management at the universities.
- Explain how draft ODeL policies have been aligned with global, regional and national policies.
- Make recommendations on the areas needing adjustments so that different ODeL policies can be designed or enhanced for the advancement of ODeL quality offerings.

The findings have revealed that the development of ODeL policies, employability policies, and OER policies in Malawi has been slow, although strides are being made through support from development partners. While some countries in Africa have ratified their policies, Malawi is yet to do so despite having ODeL programmes running for a decade. As Chizengo (2023) reported, donor support has enabled HEIs in Malawi to develop instructional modules while overlooking policy development and capacity building trainings. As Shonhiwa and Ndudzo (2016) reiterated, the need for ODeL policies and resources for executing such policies should be prioritized in ODeL provision, something that Malawi has often overlooked. The Malawi case had also demonstrated that the majority of academics in Malawi, especially at Universities Y and W, did not have adequate knowledge on the philosophies of ODeL to help them understand and appreciate the unique conditions of ODeL. Moreover, the PESTLE and SWOT analyses mirrored the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for Malawi's HEIs, while also providing direction for developing successful policies in ODeL. As Dlamini et al. (2021) argued, student support services are essential for successful ODeL systems, since they enhance students' motivation to persist in their programmes, while developing a culture of lifelong learning. Such supports should aim to improve the retention and progression of students within their contexts. This means designing comprehensive policies that provide such supports and sustain them. For Chibambo (2023), Kumashiro (2000) and Tinto (1993), utilising an amalgam of marginalised and dominant theories

of ODeL and education philosophies will ultimately ensure that students and staff are adequately assisted. Since pandemics are complicating traditional education, investing in affordable technology should be prioritized by HEIs in Malawi making sure that provision of programmes through ODeL is not obstructed (also see Vurayi, 2021; Makoe and Gatsha, 2020; Isaacs and Mohee, 2020; Dlamini et al. 2021; Chibambo, 2023; Sehlako et al. 2023; and many others). Importantly, ODeL providers should provide all necessary supports to diverse groups of students to help them access equitable quality education. These together have reinforced the urgent need for comprehensive ODeL policies, open educational resource policies and employability policies that are informed by the contextual realities of Malawi and elsewhere.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD**

The literature and the SWOT analyses have together raised pertinent issues regarding ODeL and HEI contexts in Malawi and elsewhere, and finally have led to some recommendations. It is clear that HEIs offering ODeL in Malawi should aim to develop or enhance their policies to align them with ODeL philosophies and global, regional and national instruments, considering the realities of globalisation. Educators also need to fully understand the anatomy of ODeL, and how different systems within HEIs contribute towards its successes, growth and development. Policy-makers should also learn to formulate policies that are informed by critical theories of education and social transformation paradigmatic theories. Malawi's HEIs should also provide for diverse student support service to address the diverse needs of the students. Additionally, HEIs should invest in digital infrastructure to promote equitable access and participation in ODeL without necessarily sacrificing human welfare and autonomy. Finally, it is clear that the three public universities in this study had draft policies which are being continually refined with the support from the Commonwealth of Learning. Once quality assurance processes are completed, these policies should be ratified by university senators. This will be the turning point for epistemologically just ODeL provision in Malawi. As things stand, ODeL is yet to provide high quality and equitable education to all peoples. Since this study only aimed at providing the findings from the baseline studies in relation to the ODeL policies landscape, I am certain that this goal has been achieved. In the next two papers, I will provide the exact steps we undertook to develop the actual policies, and the necessary pillars that support each policy, including the formulation of the ODeL policy, employability policy and open education resources policy.

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This study was funded by the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, Canada.

### **Institutional Review Board Statement**

This study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of Johannesburg Clearance Certificate (UJREC)

### **Informed Consent Statement**

The Commonwealth of Learning drafted and provided all consent forms which were circulated by myself as the consultant and the Heads of ODeL in the study HEIs as research sites

### **Data Availability Statement**

Data, images and consent forms and all materials related to this study are available upon request at both Commonwealth of Learning, the study sites and in my custody upon request.



## Conflicts of Interest

While the Commonwealth of Learning funded this study, there was no conflict of interest with any of the parties.

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