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Critiquing the Role of Field Facilitation in Open and Distance Learning Within a Resource-Constrained Environment in the Global South

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Abstract

Field facilitation is a crucial pedagogical intervention aimed at supporting student learning in resource-constrained open and distance learning environments, particularly in the Global South. This study used second generation activity theory to analyse a field facilitation intervention in an education faculty at a Malawian university, particularly the ways in which student learning and understanding was enabled or undermined while implementing field facilitation. The findings showed that many of the benefits of field facilitation were constrained for a number of reasons related to recruitment and training, pedagogies and understanding of student needs, and the materials and approaches used in field facilitation. For the field facilitation intervention to be fully effective as a means to deepen student learning, it needs to be embedded in the curriculum rather than implemented as an add-on activity, field facilitators need to be fully supported in their role, and the tools and materials available for teaching and tutoring need to be carefully designed within the resource constraints of the learning environment. These findings may inform reflection and further action in similarly resource-constrained contexts that are working to improve the success of open and distance learning.

Keywords: activity theory, epistemological access, African higher education, open and distance learning, peer tutoring, field facilitation

Introduction

Open and distance learning (ODL) requires students to engage either asynchronously or synchronously with a range of learning resources, which could be available online or via paper textbooks and physical learning packs (Bozkurt, 2019). This means that although in many ODL programmes there are in-person blocks of teaching and/or opportunities to be tutored in peer groups at satellite learning centres, the main mode of engagement is asynchronous and self-directed (Bozkurt, 2019; Lumadi, 2021), and that this form of education has a "learner-centred philosophy" (Santhi et al., 2014, p. 417). This sets ODL providers the challenging task of engaging students in their learning consistently, and providing necessary support, especially at the first-year level (Mittelmeier et al., 2019). This challenge is exacerbated by limited institutional capacity in universities in the Global South, where ODL higher education provision has struggled to make the desired impact in enhancing student learning, success, and throughput (Bozkurt, et.al, 2020). ODL provision has struggled with high dropout rates (low retention) and delayed or late completion of qualifications, meaning students stay in the system for longer than planned (Musingafi et al., 2015). This situation is obviously worrying, especially given the demand for university-level qualifications from industry as well as the public and private sectors, pushing many more students, both early and mid-career, into higher education. This situation is especially concerning in the developing countries of the Global South, such as Malawi where this study was done, and where large numbers of students are enrolling in ODL programmes (Mittelmeier et al., 2019).

To address the need for some in-person teaching and learning to supplement self-directed learning, the universities such as University of South Africa (UNISA) and Zambia Open University (ZOU), that offer ODL, have set up satellite learning centres to which students can come during the semester for structured tuition in a group setting (UNISA, 2023; Mpolomoka et al., 2022). Mzuzu University in Malawi, the focus of this paper, makes similar provision. This form of ODL tuition in resource-constrained contexts is critical for ensuring accessibility, flexibility, equity, and inclusion (Lumanta & Garcia, 2020; Pearson & Koppi, 2002). This is, in part, because of forms of digital poverty experienced in the Global South, such as poor Internet connection, limited access to personal computers or laptops at home, and limited skills in using information and communication technologies and tools effectively for learning (Lumadi, 2021). This makes using online technologies for delivering course materials and learning a significant challenge (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021), thus necessitating supplementary tutoring to ensure students are learning effectively and feel supported throughout their degree. It is hoped that increased engagement in field facilitation—the form of supplemental tutoring used at Mzuzu University—will decrease attrition and improve completion rates, too.

To explore the extent to which supplemental tutoring is achieving these aims, this study analysed a field facilitation intervention implemented in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) (Science) programme offered through an ODL mode of delivery at Mzuzu University in Malawi. The ODL provision was introduced in the BEd (Science) programme in the Faculty of Education in 2014 to meet the increased demand for qualified mathematics and science teachers in secondary schools in Malawi. Field facilitation was introduced as part of the broader ODL offer to improve student retention and success, through providing more in-person opportunities for tutoring and peer engagement (Kalima, 2023). Using second generation activity theory to deeply explore the context of field facilitation practices and perceptions, this study found both affordances as well as constraints in the field facilitation intervention which are presented in the sections that follow.

Field Facilitation in Open and Distance Learning

Field facilitation is synonymous with tutoring (McCaughan, 2013; Mosely et al., 2018), which is an additional academic support strategy aimed at enhancing student learning and engagement or interaction, with study materials and tasks and with peers. In this study, the term field facilitation has been used rather than tutoring for two main reasons. The first is that Mzuzu University adopted the term field facilitation to distinguish the additional student-centred academic support strategies for BEd students, led by facilitators, from the formal lectures led by subject lecturers. The second reason is that learning support has not been provided at the main university campus; it has been provided remotely in the satellite learning centres located in the regional areas in which students are based, in other words, in the field.

The word facilitation means helping someone achieve something which would be a challenge to achieve without that help. In an educational context, a facilitator is someone who helps a student learn or study. Though the word facilitator is often used synonymously with the word tutor, there is a slight difference. A tutor plays a limited role in the learner's learning process and experience, while a facilitator is accorded more authority and a more formal role (Le Ha, 2014). In the case of this study, the facilitator supported the course lecturer. As Karachristos et al. (2020) argue, facilitation aims to motivate, engage, and support the learners, to enhance their communication and collaboration throughout the course, but might not provide expertise in the subject of the course. However, field facilitators have the autonomy to structure and design field facilitation sessions based on their pedagogical knowledge and skills unlike tutors who tend to receive instructions from course lecturers each time they engage students (Reeve, 2006). Drawing on this more sociocultural understanding of facilitation means that just assembling field facilitators and science and mathematics students in one room is no guarantee that learning will take place; the field facilitators need support from the lecturers and subject experts as well as relevant pedagogical knowledge and support.

There are many types of field facilitation models which reflect economic and infrastructural developments of a region or country. Malawi, a developing country in the Global South, has faced its own challenges, reflected in the educational practice in general, and in ODL practices in particular. One challenge has been the large student-to-lecturer ratio (Chibambo & Jere, 2018) which has complicated quality distance education delivery (Tembo & Mwale, 2019). A related challenge has been the support lecturers are able to offer field facilitators, to ensure that they are working together as a united team. This study used second generation activity theory as a theoretical as well as methodological tool to analyse and understand the extent to which field facilitation at Mzuzu University has been effective in promoting student learning and retention thus far (Kalima, 2023). It is important to underscore that this study took place in a resource-constrained context, in which many students did not have reliable Internet access or sufficient support away from university campuses, and therefore greatly relied on field facilitation to support their learning.

Activity Theory as a Framework for Analysis

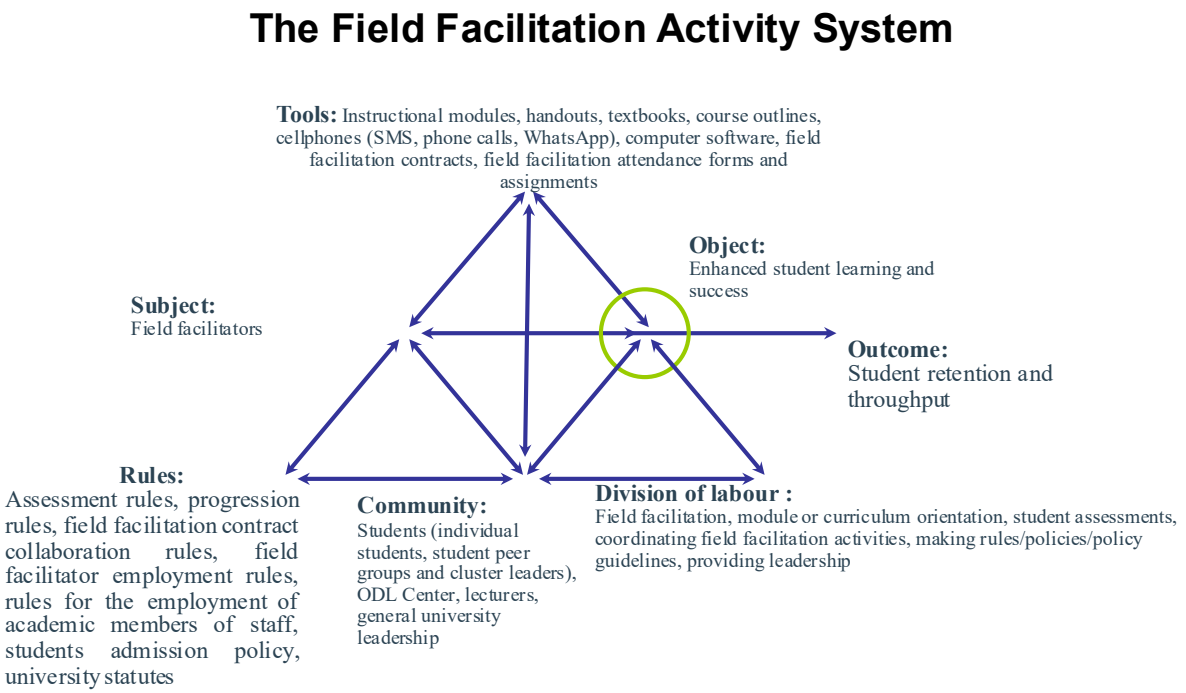
Activity theory (AT) conceives of practices as occurring within an activity system with well linked and coordinated elements. These are understood as comprising different role players and parts, namely the *subject*, an *object* mediated by the tools, *rules* or regulations, a *community* engaged in and surrounding the

activity, and a certain *division of labour* aimed at achieving a particular shared *outcome* (Engeström, 1987). We have used what is termed second generation activity theory (Engeström, 1987) to make sense of the field facilitation activity system at Mzuzu University. This framework enabled us to illustrate often invisible tensions between what was intended for student learning and engagement and what was happening in practice at the time the study was conducted. Figure 1 depicts the specific activity system at Mzuzu University.

An example of such a tension might be that between the intentions and plans of the lecturer and the understanding of these by the field facilitator, such that the lecturer's intentions are not effectively realized. An AT analysis might find that this tension arose because of a lack of clarity in the rules, for example, or poor communication about the division of labour and the intended outcome. Understanding these gaps and tensions may then motivate positive and necessary change. Although this kind of analysis is relatively new in studies on ODL teaching and learning, we would argue that this is a useful, practice-oriented way of exploring open and distance learning set-ups, like the one at Mzuzu and the focus of this study.

Figure 1

Field Facilitation Activity System at Mzuzu University



Note. Adapted from *Field facilitation in open and distance learning in resource constrained environments, a case of Mzuzu University in Malawi* (p.112), by R. Kalima, 2023, Rhodes University. CC BY-NC-SA.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a research design and methodology derived from activity theory, specifically contextual profiling and interviews to generate what is known as mirror data, and online change laboratory

workshops (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). Mirror data is data generated to find out what is happening in the activity system (in this case the field facilitation activity system) from the perspective of the subject(s) of that system and members of the community involved in the labour being done to achieve the shared outcome. These data were collated and then shared with those in key roles—in this case lecturers, field facilitators, and students—to bring to the surface and discuss tensions, or points of challenge or difficulty, and find shared and mutually beneficial ways to improve the activity system's functioning. This was done through virtual change laboratory workshops, where participants saw the data, discussed it, and shared their views and perspectives with one another and the facilitator (the first author of this paper). Change laboratory workshops are not typically conducted online, but with the university closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the only way to meet with lecturers, students, and field facilitators to share the mirror data and get their impressions and thoughts was on WhatsApp, in dedicated groups. Although this part of the research was limited due to the nature of WhatsApp and the general stressors created by the pandemic, the findings pointed to important tensions and challenges that needed to be understood before relevant solutions could be created. These are discussed in the next section of the paper.

Data in the first phase were collected from students in the BEd courses through surveys and focus group discussions; semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data from field facilitators and lecturers. The field facilitators were science and mathematics teachers teaching in secondary schools close to the field facilitation venues (i.e., satellite learning centres). The lecturers were the science and mathematics teachers based at the main campus of Mzuzu University. Research participants were purposively and conveniently sampled for the research project; they had knowledge and experience of the field facilitation work in the BEd programme for pre-service mathematics and science teachers. Document analysis was also used to substantiate the data from students, field facilitators, and lecturers; specifically, university ODL policy documents, course handouts, and student modules. The analysis of the data in this first phase provided the mirror data which served as a stimulus for the change laboratory process.

The analysis in the second phase of the study was guided by the points of tension that became apparent from the WhatsApp posts shared by lecturers, field facilitators, and students as they responded to the mirror data. For example, we examined change laboratory conversations in WhatsApp to hear what lecturers believed the role of field facilitators was or should be and then hear how field facilitators responded to either agree or challenge the lecturers' views. Pulling out possible tensions then led to consulting relevant documents and the comments made in the surveys and interviews to dig deeper into understanding why the tensions may have manifested as they did, and what may have led to them (e.g., lack of clarity in policy, or communication lines being unclear). To present the multiple forms of data clearly in the analysis, codes were created to point to the site at which the speaker, namely students (S) and field facilitators (FF) were based: Mulanje (MJ), Balaka (BLK), Lilongwe (LL), Mzuzu (MZ), and Karonga (KA). FGI indicates comments from focus group interviews with students and FF simply indicates comments made by field facilitators in the WhatsApp conversations and in the interviews. Lecturers' (L) excerpts were presented using course codes such as P for physics, C for chemistry, M for mathematics, and B for biology. Hence, an interview/WhatsApp comment from a field facilitator based at the Lilongwe satellite learning centre would be FF-LL, and a Physics lecturer's comment would be LP. The next section discusses the insights gained from the combined analysis of the mirror data and the change laboratory conversations with the participants.

Findings and Discussion

The shared object of the activity system analyzed in this study was facilitating student learning to enhance students' success in the BEd (Science) programme, offered through ODL at Mzuzu University. However, although this object was shared, there were tensions between the different role players' understanding of how to achieve this object, and how the system itself should and did work. If the object was to facilitate better learning, there would need to be a close alignment among what was happening during field facilitation sessions at the learning centres; the teaching and assessment processes and practices designed by the lecturers (both part of the division of labour, and implying rules and regulations being enacted, such as policy); the expectations of the schools the teachers will end up in (part of the community, and reflected in the curriculum and assessment), and an understanding of who the students were and their learning needs. Furthermore, field facilitation as a practice would need to be supported and quality assured by the university (community) to enable it to achieve this object and thereby support the outcome of enhancing retention and throughput (rules and regulations).

There was ample evidence that a clear understanding of the object of the activity system was not shared by all parties, and that this restricted the full potential of field facilitation. As we will illustrate, this was evident in the way in which the field facilitators were appointed, trained, and rewarded in the undertaking of their activities (affecting their *role and credibility*); the *pedagogies* of the field facilitators, including in the division of labour between the field facilitators and the lecturers; lecturers' and field facilitators' understandings and *students' learning needs*; and the *tools* available for field facilitation. The rest of this section thematically explores the affordances and constraints of field facilitation using these four sets of tensions to structure the analysis of the data.

Credibility, Identity and Roles of Field Facilitators

Credibility in this study was directly related to how field facilitators were recruited and prepared for their facilitation roles. In this ODL programme, at the time the study was undertaken, students initiated the recruitment process of field facilitators by identifying individuals to be considered for these posts. Although the aim may have been to include student voices in this process, the way it unfolded raised questions for students about the quality of the field facilitation, as their understanding was that the lecturers or heads of department should be responsible for the recruitment of field facilitators, whose work was similar to that of adjunct lecturers. The students' comments pointed to a mismatch in expectations regarding the implementation of the rules in this activity system (i.e., hiring policies) and the division of labour, namely whose responsibility it is to hire staff and assure quality.

> The university should lead with the identification of field facilitators which means the university will look for good quality facilitators who can do the job well. (FGI-BLK)

> The practice of leaving the identification of field facilitators to students may lead to identifying individuals who might not be capable hence huge compromise on quality of field facilitation. (FGI-MJ)

The practice of giving students the power to identify the field facilitators also raised concerns among field facilitators and lecturers. The greatest concern for lecturers was a quality concern. The lecturers doubted if

students were in the best position to choose good quality field facilitators who would really support them in the learning process.

> I think we should not compromise on quality. I wonder how we think students would be able to identify someone who has the quality that the university would take. As an institution we technically say we would want someone who has a minimum of master's degree to be a lecturer, now we are asking students to pick on a bachelor's degree and I don't understand how they have done it, how transparent it has been. (LP)

Although leaving the responsibility of identifying field facilitators in the hands of students could have been seen as democratic and empowering students in making decisions in matters affecting their learning, this practice did not necessarily reassure students or lecturers that the right people were being recruited, which meant less trust in the field facilitators and undermined their credibility. One lecturer pointed to a possible resolution to this tension through involving ODL staff with expertise in facilitation of distance learning.

> Let the heads of departments help the ODL Centre in identifying those people [field facilitators] just like they do with the adjuncts [part-time lecturers]. Because at the end of the day they are the custodians of the academic issues anyway . . . so they need to be sure that the students are being supported as we would want at the departmental level. (LM)

While the data indicated strong support in principle by the university for the field facilitation intervention, it was evident that too little time and money was invested in ensuring that the field facilitators were suitably selected, trained, and supported. Concerns about the recruitment and training of field facilitators suggested that the potential for field facilitation to address the shared outcome of increasing student retention and throughput was constrained, as this arrangement was ultimately disempowering (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013). Further, this tension raised by students, lecturers, and field facilitators, and commented on in the change laboratory conversations as being a significant obstacle to achieving the shared outcome, pointed to a poor understanding of students' learning needs.

Understanding Students' Learning Needs

In providing student support, universities should focus on what the student needs, not on what the universities want to or are able to supply. Universities are better able to identify real needs if they know their students (Hughes, 2004). In this study, there were gaps in the field facilitators' knowledge and understanding of the students' learning needs. These gaps further revealed a gap raised by lecturers and field facilitators, between what they believe students should be able to do, and what students need help doing. A key issue here was independence: participants indicated that the students were supposed to be able to work and learn independently, given the ODL context, yet were lacking in this regard. It was evident that members of this community (students, field facilitators, and lecturers) had varying and conflicting understandings of open and distance learning and teaching. One lecturer commented that "an ODL student should be fairly independent so when they feel that 'I am not making headway' [and] they have tried all they can to go through modules then they are free to contact the lecturers here [on campus]". (LC)

Several of the lecturers and field facilitators expressed frustration in the WhatsApp groups about what they perceived as students not doing what they were supposed to, meaning being too dependent or reliant on the

field facilitators to re-teach the content of the lectures, rather than facilitating the process of working through the modules, assessment tasks, and so on (i.e., the tools). The Lilongwe field facilitator added that "the students selected are challenged in terms of content. Their overall grades could be okay but quality in science subjects on selection should be considered" (FF-LL).

Here, it is important to understand the wider environment of which this activity system is a part. The ODL students at Mzuzu University come from all over Malawi. According to the National Statistics Survey by the Malawi Government in 2018, Malawi's urban population was 15.3% of the total population. This means most of the Malawian population (84.7%) reside in rural areas. It is a challenge to access the Internet in rural areas of Malawi (Malawi National Statistics Office, 2018), and rural students are required to travel long distances to urban centres to access reliable Internet services. In this study, most students came from rural areas; 40 out of 50 respondents indicated that they came from rural areas, and most of these indicated inconsistent access to the online learning materials provided by the lecturers (Kalima, 2023). This makes the pedagogical choices in field facilitation, and solid understanding of students' contexts and learning needs, even more important to the successful achievement of the object, namely greater student success.

The time allocated to field facilitation was also an issue related to understanding students' learning needs. The field facilitators were paid for a maximum of 16 hours of work with students in the satellite learning centres per semester. The decision to allocate 16 hours to field facilitation activities was not underpinned by pedagogical considerations nor was it decided in deliberation with the lecturers regarding which curriculum aspects should be focused on within the allocated time. Considering the object of enhanced student learning and success, students needed sufficient time with the field facilitators and peers so that different forms of pedagogical tools could be used to meet the diverse student learning needs. This tension between the object and the time allocated to field facilitation (i.e., rules) impacted the pedagogical choices field facilitators made, which did not necessarily meet students' needs.

> I resorted to teaching because of lack of adequate time to do facilitation. (FF-BLK)

> Time was inadequate because we [field facilitators] meet students face-to-face. To make sure that students have enough time on content learning, we [field facilitators] should give homework or assignments to students in preparation for subsequent field facilitation sessions. (FF-LL)

There was some flexibility in how the field facilitators divided up the allocated hours, which, as Chibambo (2016) and Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010) assert, is an important features of distance learning as an enabler of student learning. But these hours often had to be allocated according to the work schedules of the facilitator and the students, as both groups were working alongside studying and tutoring, respectively (Kalima, 2023). Several field facilitators worked more than their allocated and remunerated 16 hours, engaging with students one-on-one and in groups on WhatsApp during field facilitation sessions. Thus, the benefits of flexibility need to be considered alongside the extent to which the allocation of the 16 hours were sufficient to address the object (and ultimately the outcome) of the activity system and support the subjects of the activity system as they worked to contribute to the object effectively.

These findings raise questions about appropriate pedagogies for field facilitation in a resource-constrained distance learning context.

Pedagogical Choices

Student-centredness was often cited in the data as guiding the approach to teaching and learning in the field facilitation intervention, which was recognized by student participants.

> There [at satellite learning centre] it was so helpful. The field facilitators gave us a lot of activities unlike here [on campus], lecturers simply took us through the modules. They did not care whether we were following or not . . . but there, they involved us most of the time. . . . Sometimes we were given chance to identify areas where we had problems. We could give him a problem. He would then assist. (FGI-LL)

There was evidence that the focus in many field facilitation sessions was on identifying the students' learning needs and working on aspects of their studies that they had identified as problematic. Students indicated that they were invited to participate in this process.

> We . . . decided as a group where we needed support. (FGI-LL)

> On key field facilitation agenda [sic], students agree as a group on what to be covered depending on what was covered or done during module orientation on campus. Students prioritise what is not covered on campus. (FGI-MJ)

Jere (2012) argued that guided collaborative learning in academic activities can result in greater confidence and participation in class, building supportive social networks and reducing student isolation. Field facilitation offered these opportunities where lecturing appeared unable to do so. As one student focus group revealed

> We actually asked them [field facilitators] to pause, repeat statements with field facilitators . . . things that we cannot do here [on campus] with lecturers. It looked awkward to ask a lot of questions in class and even lecturers were not happy with it. It seemed as a time waster. (FGI-BLK)

It was evident that the pedagogy of the field facilitation was often collaborative and that the students were encouraged to actively engage with each other and the field facilitators to bridge or close their learning gaps.

The data also suggested that smaller size groups was a key affordance for engaged participation in field facilitation and was a key pedagogical choice for tutoring (McCaughan, 2013). Class sizes at the satellite learning centres was repeatedly noted as one of the factors that contributed to successful student learning; students noted that this enabled more student-to-student and student-to-field facilitator engagement.

> Since we were fewer than we were in the class here on campus . . . there [at satellite learning centres], we were able to interact with the field facilitators. (FGI-MZ)

> Because we were fewer the field facilitator assisted us individually and we were also free to ask questions. (FGI-LL)

The data suggested that small class sizes coupled with field facilitator creativity and resourcefulness generally contributed to a relaxed, engaging, and overall developmentally appropriate environment. This

pointed to an alignment, in this activity system, between the aims of the subject (i.e., field facilitators) to attain the object (i.e., facilitating successful student learning) in order to ultimately achieve the shared outcome of greater retention and throughput.

Despite this positive picture of a student-centred pedagogy, concerns were raised in the data that pointed to a possible tension between facilitation and teaching in the learning centres. In some cases, as indicated in the previous section, time constraints and students' knowledge gaps meant that field facilitators felt pushed to resort to so-called transmission modes of pedagogy, thereby re-teaching or lecturing the content of the curriculum to the students. This was indicated by one of the field facilitators, who noted that they "use the very same lecture method as used by lecturers" (FGI-LL).

Field facilitation was characterised by some students as more of the same, in which content was taught in the satellite learning centres rather than supplementing the lectures attended during the on-campus teaching blocks.

> When we are here [on campus] sometimes we just cover little content and when we go there [satellite learning centres], we have at least chance to cover some other topics that we didn't cover here. While we go there, they [field facilitators] teach. (FGI-MJ)

It is important to note that the field facilitators themselves seemed unclear as to whether their role was remedial or to address gaps in students' knowledge. As pointed out earlier, the object of this activity system was not necessarily understood in the same way by all in the community. The field facilitators noted challenges in managing the wide differentiation in students' preparedness and the various learning needs within the diverse student body. There was a real tension in the division of labour between what field facilitation was expected to be (e.g., not lecturing) and what it tended to be, namely too much lecturing, complicated by limited time available to this activity.

The data further suggested limited communication or collaboration between the lecturers and the field facilitators, indicated by the lecturers.

> There was need for some sort of linkage or collaboration between the field facilitator and the lecturer. (LP)

> Field facilitator induction, periodic reports of what they are doing would be helpful so that the lecturer can follow up with them, at least some sort of system of supervising these people. Because otherwise they may not approach the content the way intended by the university. (LB)

This was an indication that lecturers themselves had expectations that the field facilitators needed to meet concerning enhancement of student learning, underscoring this tension. This lack of communication was especially problematic when the field facilitators were not fully informed of the progression rules and assessment processes (i.e., rules). This added another layer of complexity to the instrumentalist approach sometimes used to complete the course curriculum and prepare for assessments. In addition to better and more consistent communication, the WhatsApp change laboratory conversations with the lecturers and the

field facilitators revealed a general consensus that field facilitators should be trained in their roles if they are to work with lecturers and students to successfully achieve the object of the activity system.

Such training and support for field facilitators could enable a greater range of pedagogical choices and confidence in making them, in response to students' learning needs, which is important considering the diversity in the student cohort and the self-directed, asynchronous nature of most of the students' learning activities. ODL has historically been seen as most suitable for students who cannot access on-campus education, meaning they spend most of their time managing their own learning at home (Santhi et al., 2014). Yet, these same students come to university from structured school learning environments, thus self-directing their learning is a novel way of studying. This presents challenges for field facilitators tasked with enabling their success and shapes their pedagogical choices.

> Students seem not to be ready for self-regulated learning. We do it page by page as most students are not able to identify what they can do on their own and what requires our [field facilitator] assistance. Students always say field facilitators need to teach everything because they did not understand during module orientation sessions on campus. (LL-FF)

This finding pointed to a need to consider, finally, the tools used to facilitate and enhance student learning.

The Tools Available for Field Facilitation and ODL

There was ample evidence in the data of innovative use of low bandwidth and low-tech tools such as WhatsApp; in addition, printed materials were the predominant form of instruction in the BEd programme. Besides printed modules, other forms of materials such as handouts, worksheets, and textbooks, usually in print format, were used. The handouts and textbooks were, however, not meant for self-study as they were not packaged or developed for ODL pedagogical purposes. This had an effect on how field facilitators, and by extension students, made use of these materials. This was noted in the WhatsApp group assigned to the field facilitator's online change laboratory workshop.

> There is a need to improve on how the modules are written. Make them simple or interactive for them to be self-explanatory. (FF-LL)

> The . . . curriculum tools are complicated. Not developed logically. Some topics which are meant for higher levels are being presented at lower levels. (FF-MJ)

The content of the ODL materials was quite similar to that of textbooks with few interactive exercises embedded within them. Furthermore, multimodal tools were minimally used for ODL students, though field facilitators noted that these would benefit their tutoring and students' learning. "Increasing meeting time and a variety of resources would be helpful such as using video-recorded resources, video conferencing etc!" (FF-MJ).

Several lecturers and field facilitators commented on the affordances that digital or multimodal tools could offer, enabling students to visualize abstract theoretical concepts in mathematics, chemistry, and physics. However, being a resource-constrained context similar to others in the Global South, Malawi has significant constraints around bandwidth and therefore upload and download speeds. Not all students were able to

access videos and large image or infographic files; those with stable Internet access were advantaged over those without. Technology-enhanced, flexible curriculum provision can be accessed by anyone, anytime, from anywhere, but only if resources such as a conducive learning environment, electricity, Internet connectivity, appropriate devices, and digital literacy skills are available (Magunje & Chigona, 2021). The infrastructural challenges in Malawi, where electricity supply and Internet connectivity are erratic, meant that flexible and creative field facilitation (and lecturing) was challenging as they did not benefit from the affordances of online or digital technologies, other than opportunities such as offered by WhatsApp perhaps.

These findings speak to the need for a systemic response to bridging or closing the gaps between intended ODL provision, field facilitation support, and increased student retention and throughput, and what is happening in the BEd programme at Mzuzu University. In any resource-constrained environment, sustainable solutions need a collective, systemic response, so that change is felt throughout the system, and made with equity and accessibility in mind.

Conclusion

Provision of distance learning tuition in resource-constrained environments requires specific context-relevant educational initiatives. Yet, such initiatives will only reach their potential if they are carefully integrated into the university system. Initiatives implemented without sufficient institutionalization, communication, and resources may result in failure, at great cost to the university, as well as to students looking to the university to provide them with access to a higher education and qualification. The initiative explored in this study, field facilitation, was introduced in the BEd programme for pre-service science and mathematics teachers at Mzuzu University, designed to improve student learning and success, and ultimately retention and throughout rates. However, as this paper has demonstrated, being created as an add-on rather than embedded in the BEd curriculum led to gaps between the intentions of field facilitation as a learning enhancement initiative and what it has been able to realize thus far.

The findings of this study point to a need for lecturers to be involved in the recruitment, orientation, and ongoing training and support of field facilitators so they work as teams, rather than separately. This could continue to be done in consultation with students, so that their learning needs and their views are fully considered, but with clarification around the rules, the appropriate division of labour, and the object of the activity system. Further, for this strategy to have the desired impact on students' learning and success, the university needs to make a fuller investment in field facilitation. This means, in addition to improving recruitment and training, paying field facilitators fairly and increasing the number of hours they have available in a semester to support and tutor students, both virtually via WhatsApp groups and in person at satellite learning centres. As well, their contracts need to clearly set out their role and responsibilities, so that they know what they are meant to be doing as part of a collective effort to improve student learning outcomes. Finally, the findings point to a need for the university to consider the constraints of ODL provision more fully, and work with lecturers, students, and field facilitators, as well as ODL administrators, to create embedded, contextualised materials, teaching and tutoring approaches, and peer learning opportunities. Together these will help create a more cohesive approach to successful ODL provision.

While there are gaps between intentions and realization in most education systems, we argue that understanding and critiquing these in open and distance learning is especially important given the recent growth in student numbers in open universities and universities with ODL provision. Thus, universities that create ODL provision for students, and that have some form of on-site tutoring or field facilitation amidst resource constraints, need to think carefully about how to embed tutoring within the curriculum as a whole, and support tutors and students adequately in the field so as to ensure that goals of such initiatives can be fully realized.

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