

## **Tutoring in Open and Distance Learning: Challenges in the Use of Internet Based Platforms in Two Selected Regional Centers of the Zimbabwe Open University**

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**Abstract:** *This survey was carried out at the Zimbabwe Open University's Mashonaland East and West region and sought to establish the challenges affecting the full implementation of internet based tutoring in ODL. The population for the study was 28 tutors and 700 students. A stratified simple random sample by faculty of 50 respondents was used for this study. Data were solicited from the respondents through telephone interviews and questionnaires. Results from the study show that a number of factors have affected the full utilisation of internet based technologies in tutoring. Socio-economic factors such as salary levels of respondents and cost of the gadgets affect adoption and use of the internet based platforms. Most learners did not possess the basic ICT gadgets such as computers. The younger respondents, however, have embraced the electronic gadgets more than the older generation which is fearful of the new technology. The study, therefore, recommended that there be training in the basic computer usage. The institution should provide gadgets at district centres to reduce on the distances travelled by students. Students need assistance to facilitate acquisition of ICT gadgets from the providers at concessionary rates as has been the case for tutors.*

**Keywords:** *Tutoring, Open and Distance Learning, Internet based platforms*

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### **1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is characterised by the separation of the learner from the tutor. These are separated both in terms of distance and space. In order to bridge the distance between the two, ODL has thus to adopt and rely heavily on the use of internet based technologies for communication and provision of instruction. The use of internet based systems has been effectively utilised in the developed countries unlike in the developing world where the traditional face to face mode of instruction remains the major method of lesson delivery. This has been despite the opportunities that have been brought about by these internet platforms. At the Zimbabwe Open University, attempts have been made to avail new technology so as to bridge the geographical distance between the tutor and the student. Computer laboratories have been established in all the regional centres, but uptake in terms of use of these has not been satisfactory. This study was therefore undertaken to establish those factors that have given rise to non-usage and adoption of the internet based tutoring platforms when conditions have necessary for use have been put in place.

### **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The advent of new technology has and a far reaching impact on the lives of people in all sectors of the economy, as they jostle to garb the latest offering of these gadgets available on the market. However, their use and adoption have been far from satisfactory more so in the distance education, where their use should take centre stage. This study, therefore, aimed at answering the question: What could be the challenges affecting the use and adoption of internet based tutoring platforms in Open and Distance learning?

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

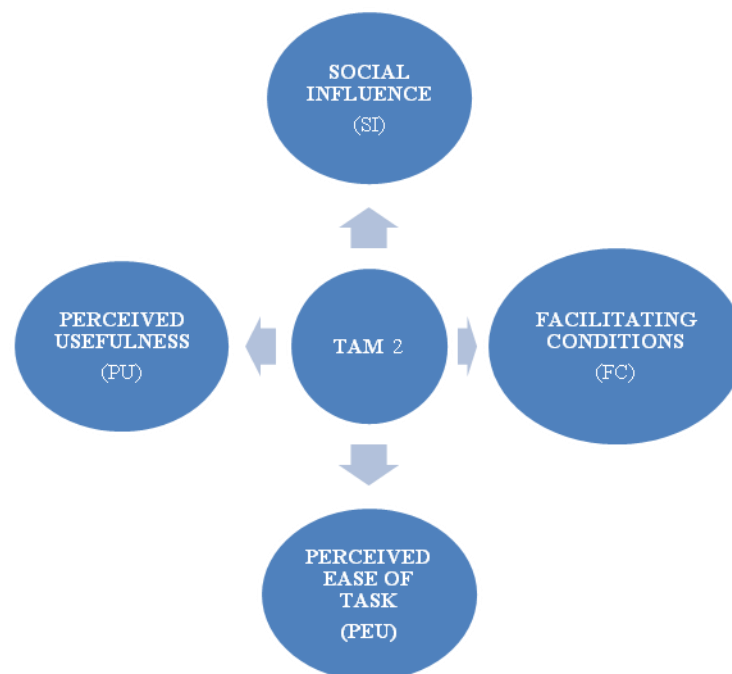
This study sought to answer the following sub problems in an attempt to address the main research problem:

- To what extent has the organisation provided the facilitating conditions necessary for the adoption and use of internet based tutoring platforms?
- Which personal factors affect the adoption and use of internet based tutoring platforms?
- To what extent do demographical factors inhibit the adoption and use of internet based tutoring platforms in ODL?
- What socio-economic attributes affect the use of internet based tutoring platforms in ODL?

### 4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

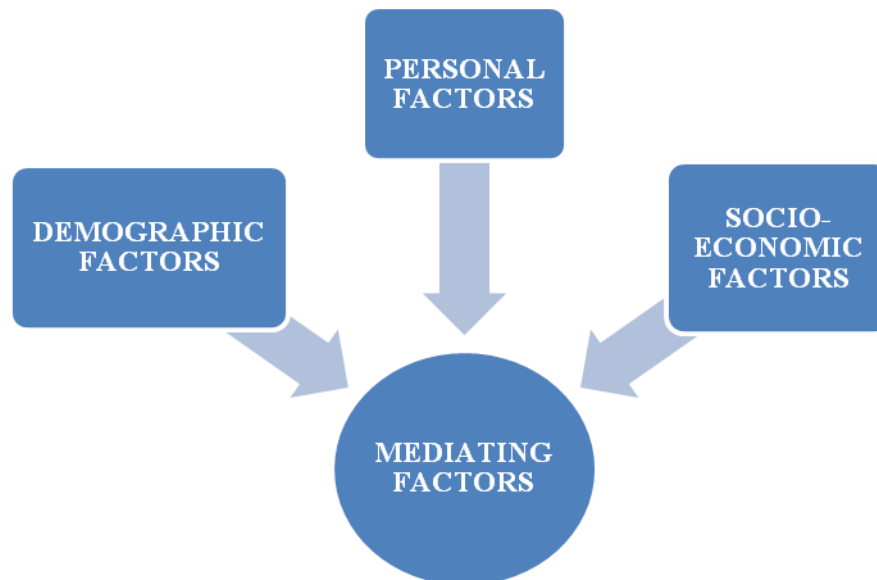
#### 4.1. The Extended Technology Acceptance Model (Tam-2)

The study aims at to establish the challenges affecting the full implementation of internet based tutoring in ODL. Therefore, technology acceptance models can best explain the existence of some of these challenges. The study adopts The Extended Technology Acceptance Model (TAM-2) first proposed by Venkatesh and Davis (2000) and developed by Van Biljon and Kotze (2008). The model postulates that adoption and use of technology is encompassed in a multi-dimensional setting in terms socio-cultural, gender and income criteria. The model identifies a number of factors influencing adoption and use of technology, in the case of the present study, the internet based social media platforms. These factors are Social Influence (SI), Facilitating Conditions (FC), Perceived Ease of Use (PEU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU). These four factors make up the determining factors as shown Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** *The Extended Technology Acceptance Model (TAM-2)*

Social influence is the pressure exerted on the potential user by the opinion of others, and facilitating conditions include the necessary infrastructure. Perceived usefulness is the extent to which a user believes he/she will benefit from the technology. Perceived ease of use is the extent to which the user is capable of manipulating the gadget to be adopted. However, the model also has mediating factors. Where determining factors influence adoption and use, mediating factors hold back adoption and use. Figure 2 below shows these mediating factors.



**Figure 2.** *The Extended Technology Acceptance Model: Mediating factors*

Mediating factors identified in the model are personal factors which include preference and beliefs about the technology; demographic factors such as age, gender and education; and socio-economic factors which include income and occupation.

## **5. FACILITATING CONDITIONS**

Most countries, even the least developed countries have not been left out of the computer craze (Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2011). However, issues of competence and availability are still a challenge. Several other researchers have established that having access to ICT and using it in any process are a challenge since the ICT smacks of more problems than solutions (Olaofe, 2005; Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010). Studies on access to internet based platforms have revealed that challenges in the usage of these internet based network platforms arise from lack of access to the internet itself and lack of training in platform usage. These studies have established that despite the Internet based platforms being mostly used for communication lack of access is the major problem confronting users (Adika, 2003; Al-Ansari, 2006).

Ogiegbaen and Uwameiye (2006) assert that lack of access to information technology impedes success in academic pursuit, the skills necessary to work in knowledge driven society, and ability to prosper in modern society.

According to Adika (2003) challenges to internet usage include lack of access to the Internet and lack of training in internet usage. Al-Ansari (2006) argues that despite the Internet being mostly used for communication slow speed, lack of time, and lack of access from home are the major problems confronting faculty in the use of the Internet. Studies ascribe the challenges in the use of the Internet platforms to shortage of computers and slow speed of Internet and the shortage of e-books and subscription to e-journals is expensive (Bhatti, 2006). Lack of time and inadequate knowledge about information retrieving techniques from Internet was found to be the problem for some users (Adika, 2003; Al-Ansari, 2006; Ogiegbaen and Uwameiye, 2006; Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2011).

## **6. PERSONAL FACTORS AFFECT THE ADOPTION AND USE OF INTERNET BASED TUTORING PLATFORMS**

### **6.1. Preferences and Beliefs**

Some studies show that users have the knowledge to use the media but they have avoided the use of social networking because of the strain it bring about between students and tutors as well as between and among students. In academic circles, faculty have the knowledge but avoid the use of

social media for fear of showing dissatisfaction with management on a public forum of social media which tarnishes image of the institution (Kim and Sin, 2013). Students new to a particular technology may initially exhibit some concern about the role of technology in the learning experience. If this occurs, these students typically demonstrate a reluctance to actively participate in the distance classroom areas (CEDL 1999). Mastrian and McGonigle (1997) found out that the most frequent negative comment related to the overall experience was the early frustration with the use of computers and other related technological gadgets, which in other instances may not be available. Most ODL institutions and students grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide; access to instructional technology and capacity to use such technology is negligible compared to those of developed nations (Yusuf and Falade, 2005) and as such would therefore, prefer printed media as opposed to internet based resources.

Some students are confronted with early frustration in the use of computers and other related technological gadgets (Mastrian and McGonigle; 1997). However, in some countries, the use of ICTs is one of the reasons leading to favourable findings on why students indicated their preference towards ODL (Ojo and Olakulehjin; 2005). In the USA, twenty-four percent of distance students have high speed bandwidth at home (Gunawardena; 1988; Bukaliya and Musika, 2011), hence their perceptions towards adoption and use are positive.

## **7. DEMOGRAPHICAL FACTORS AND THE ADOPTION AND USE OF INTERNET BASED TUTORING PLATFORMS IN ODL**

### **7.1. Age, Gender and Education**

In terms of technology appreciation, adoption and use, age plays a very significant role (Coen et al, 2002). While the young generation is at ease in the use of internet based platform, the elderly refrain from their use only to use them to check on the safety of their children ((Ling, 2001) According to Ziefle and Bay (2004) technology use is hampered by age through a decline in memory capacity and weakened visual capacity. Bukaliya and Dzimano (2012) established that contrary to the findings by Agbatogun (2006), the young breed of lecturers did not access the web/internet more than their elderly lecturers. It would have been expected that this young generation play a leading role in web/internet usage as is the trend when it comes to playing games on the computer.

Other studies have shown gender related differences in the adoption and use of internet based platforms. Females have been heavily addicted to trendy technology and have spent heavily on the technology. Wei et al (2006) established that women used internet platforms to show affection for their families while men used the same for information searches. Yusuf and Onasanya (2004) established that in terms of gender more males used the Internet than females. Boudette in Markwei (2001) concurs that males used the Internet more than females. Markwei (2001) established that male respondents in the case of staff members use the Internet more than their female counterparts. However, her study indicated that female student respondents used the Internet more than men. Castells et al (2007) have argued that men are significantly more interested in adopting internet mobile services.

The use of Internet platforms has also been affected by the level of education (Ho and Kwok, 2003). Studies have shown that better educated people adopt the platforms more and have positive attitudes towards their use (Bina and Giaglis, 2005; Adomi, 2006). Studies have shown that the use of internet media platforms to a large extent, has been affected by technical difficulties presented the gadgets as well as by the lack of experience by users in using digital resources to support academic tasks (Moreira and Monteiro, 2010). This therefore, calls for knowledge and skills to operate the ICT needed in the use of social media.

In ICT the competences required include competence to make personal use of ICT, competence to master a range of educational paradigms that make use of ICT, sufficient competence to make use of ICTs as mind tools, competence to make use of ICT as a tool for teaching, competence in mastering a range of assessment paradigms which make use of ICT, competency in understanding the policy dimensions of the use of ICT for teaching and learning. However, Newhouse (1995) notes that lack of computer literacy is an obstacle to their using computers. Studies by Ya`acob, et

al (2005) and So and Swatman (2006) on readiness for ICT generally, suggest that there is still a long way to go before modern technology among which is the internet, can be embraced.

Bukaliya and Musika (2011) found out that lack of access and incompetence in the use of web and other forms of technology were an inhibiting factor towards their use. Zimbabwe, like any other Third World country, where most students grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide; access to instructional technology and capacity to use such technology (Yusuf and Falade, 2005).

## **8. SOCIO-ECONOMIC ATTRIBUTES AND THE USE OF INTERNET BASED PLATFORMS**

People in the high economic status are the leading users and adopters of wireless data application technologies (Fitcahrd, 2002, Valor and Sieber, 2003). Rogers (2003) has argued that the higher the socio-economic status, the higher the propensity to adopt and use internet technology. Studies on internet usage have shown that costs of acquiring ICT equipment and training have been identified to be high so much that some potential users cannot meet the expenses of making provisions. This is particularly peculiar to the third world countries especially in the teaching and learning process where the procurement of gadgets has been hampered by lack of financing. Where users are to cater for their own training in the use of electronic gadgets, expenses are unbearable. Even where funding for purchase and training has been organised organisations, affordability has been a limitation (Jegade, 2009). However, the ICT gadgets among which are computers and mobile phones, are symbols of status and they symbolise status (Green, 2003; Skog, 2002; Taylor and Harper, 2001).

## **9. METHODOLOGY**

The study was a descriptive survey carried out at the Zimbabwe Open University's Mashonaland East and West regions. The survey assisted to assess respondents' views of the challenges faced in the use of internet based platforms. As such the survey was the most appropriate for searching and looking into perceptions held by faculty and students (Creswell, 2000). The survey was factual and its collection presented relatively few problems because questionnaires and interviews were used. Data were solicited from the tutors through telephone interviews whereas students' data were obtained through questionnaires. The use of multi techniques in data collection enabled data triangulation in which the responses were cross validated for reliability and validity. Data were presented both qualitatively and quantitatively.

## **10. POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

The population for the study was made up of 28 tutors and 700 students in the two regions. The choice of the population was made with the view that these prospective respondents were information rich on the issues pertaining to challenges confronting them in the use of internet based platforms in tutoring. A stratified simple random sample by faculty of 40 students was used for this study. The sample of tutors was conveniently sampled to accommodate 5 male and five female tutors from across the faculties of the Zimbabwe. Hence the total sample size for the study was 50, made up of 10 tutors and 40 students.

## **11. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**11.1. Sub problem 1:** To what extent has the organisation provided the facilitating conditions necessary for the adoption and use of internet based tutoring platforms?

**Table1.** below, presents the responses on the organisation's attempts to prepare tutors and students in the use and subsequent adoption of internet based platforms in tutoring.

(N=50)

Question	Yes		No	
	F	%	F	%
Has the organisation provided the necessary gadgets for internet based tutoring?	28	56	22	44
Did you receive any training in the use of internet based	2	4	48	96

tutoring?				
Are there any courses on the use of internet based tutoring platforms?	2	4	48	96
Are you conversant with e-marking?	3	6	47	94
Are you conversant with e-tutoring?	0	0	50	100

Asked if the organisation provided the necessary gadgets for internet based tutoring, the majority of 28(56%) respondents the organisation has done all it can to make provisions for the necessary gadgets to enable all aspects of e-tutoring to take off. Twenty-two (44%) said no. Most of the negative sentiments were from the students who felt that not much had been done. Tutors indicated that the institution had arranged for the acquisition of laptops and Ipads from local dealers of a credit scheme that was very affordable. All the 10 tutors also indicated that the regional computer laboratory had been equipped with computers for use by all students and tutors. However, some 33 students felt that these computers were out of reach for them since they were stationed far away from the regional centre. Another concern was that some 37 students felt that the computer laboratory was not open during weekends and in the evenings when they were free from their work place.

Respondents were also asked if they had received any training in the use of internet based tutoring. Only 2(4%) indicated they had and the majority 48(96%) said they did not. Asked if there were any staff development courses on the use of internet based tutoring platforms, the majority 48(96%) said no and only 2(4%) agreed. Only three (6%) stated that they were conversant with e-marking none (0%) indicated they were conversant with e-marking. This goes to show that tutors and students alike have not yet been exposed to significant aspects of e-learning. Asked why the tutors were conversant with e-marking and e-tutoring, 5 of them indicated that they level of computer literacy had not reached such levels as to allow them to be conversant with such issues.

Respondent were asked which internet based platforms they had adopted for communication and discussion. Figure 1 below shows the responses.

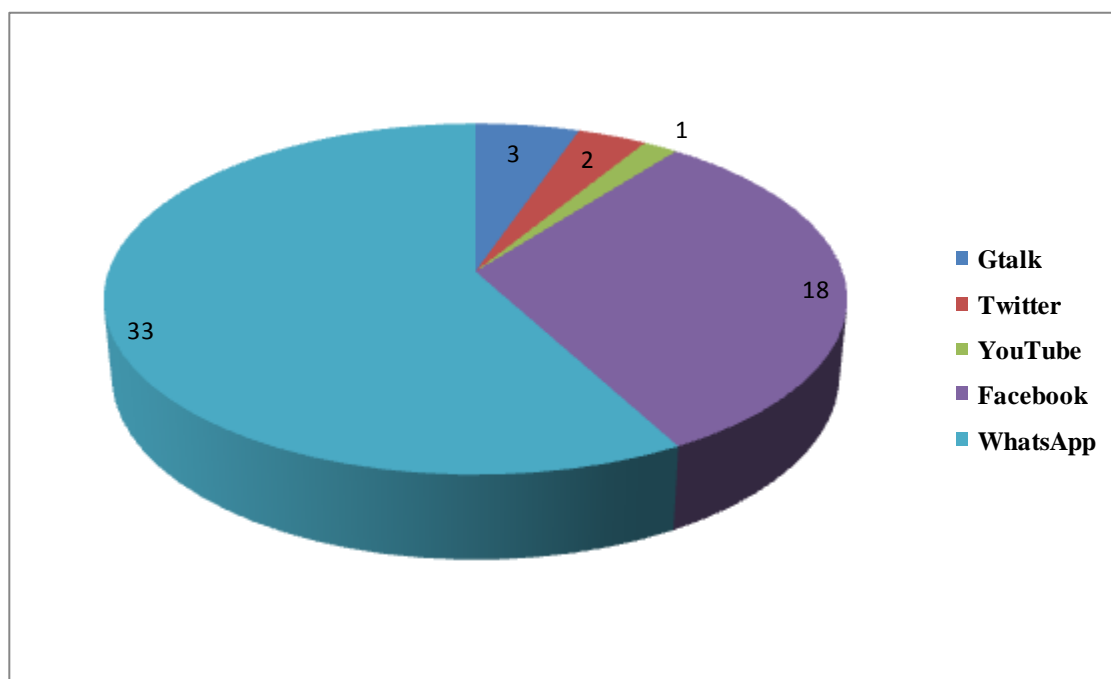


Figure 3. Internet based platforms adopted by respondents

Figure 3 shows that WhatsApp was the most popular with 33(66%) followed by Facebook which had been adopted and used by some 18(36%) respondents. Gtalk had 3(6%) respondents while Twitter and YouTube had 2(4%) and 1(2%) respondents respectively. However, it is apparent from Figure 1 that some respondents adopted and made use of more than one platform.

Asked how they had come to know about all these and other forms of internet based platforms, the majority 47(94%) indicated that it was due to personal initiative. WhatsApp, for example, was introduced to some 5(10%) respondents by colleagues while only 2(4%) tutors indicated that they had come to know about these platforms from the institution's computer technician, on an informal basis.

### **11.2. Sub Problem 2: Which Personal Factors Affect the Adoption and Use of Internet Based Tutoring Platforms?**

Prevalent among the responses on which personal factors affected adoption and use were lack of interest which was indicated by 31(62%) respondents. Fear of the use of electronic gadgets was indicated as a factor by 23(46%) while the majority of 43(86%) indicated that they were still stuck in the traditional way of doing things which they considered to be hassle free. Probed further, some respondents had this to say about the internet based platforms:

**Respondent 1:** I don't need to use these because they present a lot of problems. Firstly, you will need the computer and connectivity which are not always there. Electricity is a problem these days and during e-marking, for example, my laptop goes out of power, what do I do?

**Respondent 2:** I am computer literate to that extent and besides, I am comfortable with the way I have been doing things. My students too are also not that computer literate.

**Respondents 3:** I believe in the traditional way of doing things. There are no hassles when I use my traditional methods and equipment.

The respondents were asked how they perceived the usefulness of the internet based tutoring platforms. Among the responses 34(70%) seemed to understand the fact that internet based platforms could cut on students' movement to and from the tutor's workplace while some 4(8%) indicated that there could be speedy feedback to the student and 15(30%) suggested that the platform could be used to communicate to all students and tutors at little cost to the institution.

### **11.3. Sub Problem 3: To what Extent do Demographical Factors Inhibit the Adoption and use of Internet Based Tutoring Platforms in ODL?**

The respondents' average age was 33 with the oldest respondent, a student being 53 years old. There were 21(42%) female and 29(58%) male respondents in the study. All the tutors had a master's degree whereas the majority of students, 37 were working towards attaining a first degree from the different faculties of ZOU.

While only 19(38%) were located in the urban centre, the majority, 31(62%) all of whom were students were located in rural areas with the one located nearest being at a school located some 96 kilometres from the regional centre. Asked whether age, gender, educational attainment and location mattered in their levels of computer literacy and use as well as adoption of internet based tutoring platforms, most of the elderly indicated that in deed age was a determining factor unlike aspects such as gender and educational attainment. This is in line with the findings of that Coen et al (2002) who have argued in terms of technology appreciation, adoption and use, age plays a very significant role. In support, Ziefle and Bay (2004) established that technology use is hampered by age through a decline in memory capacity and weakened visual capacity. To the contrary, however, Bukaliya and Dzimana (2012) established that the young breed of lecturers did not access the web/internet more than their elderly lecturers. Some of the responses provided are given below, verbatim:

**Respondent 1:** We grew up without this technology and to try and use them now will yield nothing at all. My eyes are not accommodative of what I see on computer.

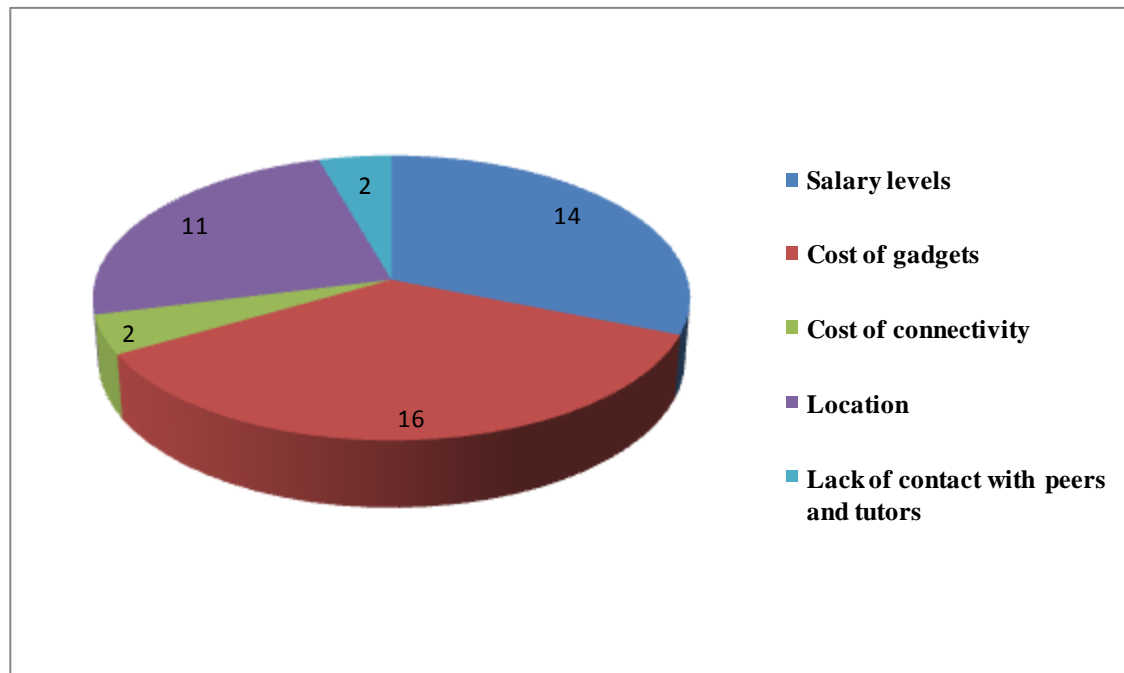
**Respondent 2:** I have tried to punch a few letters on the computer but age has caught up with me. I am no longer flexible and I am better of writing with pen and paper.

Three students indicated that they stayed very far away from the regional centre and could not have time to practice using the new technology. It can be noted that all the respondents had gone past ordinary education and the majority had done diploma courses. To this end, they disputed the

view that educational standards attained had a bearing on the use and adoption of internet based tutoring platforms.

#### 11.4. Sub Problem 4: What Socio-Economic Attributes Affect the use of Internet Based Tutoring Platforms in ODL?

Respondents were asked what socio-economic factors affected adoption and use of internet based tutoring platforms. The results are shown in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 4.** Socio-economic factors affected adoption and use of internet based tutoring platforms

Figure 4 shows that only 2(4%) respondents thought that lack of contact with peers and lecturers affected adoption and use of internet based platforms whereas 14(28%) respondents indicated salary levels as affecting the same. The same findings have been established in previous studies. Fitchard, (2002), Valor and Sieber (2003) have found that people in the high economic status are the leading users and adopters of wireless data application technologies. In the same vein, the ICT gadgets among which are computers and mobile phones, are symbols of status (Green, 2003; Skog, 2002; Taylor and Harper, 2001). All the 14 respondents were students who indicated that their salaries were below the Poverty datum Line and, therefore, could not afford to enter into this technology frenzy when they were struggling to make ends meet. Rogers (2003) has argued that the higher the socio-economic status, the higher the propensity to adopt and use internet technology. Sixteen (32%) thought cost of the gadgets affected adoption and only 2(4%) indicated cost of connectivity. To demonstrate that cost is out of reach for some potential users, Jegede (2009), states that funding for purchase and training, even when organised by organisations, can be unaffordable. This is probably due to the view that most of them have mobile phones that can connect to the internet at a little cost. Some 11(22%) stated that location from the regional centre was affecting adoption and use. All of these were students who found themselves isolated for the regional centre. However, this should be motivation enough for the students to adopt the internet based platforms so that they do not have to go to the regional centre for services.

## 12. CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, it can be concluded that:

- While the organisation has provided the necessary gadgets for internet based tutoring, the students feel that not much had been done in providing the necessary infrastructure given that computers were out of reach for them since they were stationed far away from the regional centre.



- The unavailability of training and staff development courses on the use of internet based tutoring platforms affected with e-marking.
- Both tutors and students alike have not yet been exposed to significant aspects of e-learning due to low levels of computer literacy.
- WhatsApp is the most popular internet based platform to be used by tutors followed by Facebook which the majority had come to know about through personal initiation.
- General lack of interest, fear of the use of electronic gadgets and remaining intact with the traditional way of doing things are some of the challenges affecting use and adoption of the internet based platforms
- The location and age of the students matter in their levels of computer literacy and as such they were determining factors to use and adoption.
- The younger respondents have embraced the electronic gadgets more than the older generation which is fearful of the new technology.
- Gender has no bearing on the use and adoption as all respondents alike share similar sentiments.
- Socio-economic factors such as salary levels of respondents and cost of the gadgets affect adoption and use of the internet based platforms.

### **13. RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the conclusions it is recommended that:

- The institution should aim at improving the necessary infrastructure and create condition for use and access for users stationed far away from the regional centre.
- There is need to provide training and staff development courses on the use of internet based tutoring platforms to enable e-tutoring and e-marking, with regional ICT technician taking a leading role.
- The region should provide basic computer literacy courses for both the students and the tutors.
- The institution should make provision for gadgets at district centres for use by students and tutors to reduce on the distances travelled to access and use the electronic machines.
- Students need assistance to facilitate acquisition of ICT gadgets from the providers at concessionary rates as has been the case for tutors.
- There is to enter into agreements with schools and colleges in the vicinity of students for use of computer laboratories to enhance use and improvement of skills and knowledge.

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