



MERITS AND CHALLENGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS IN ONE STUDY CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST, GHANA

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Abstract:

This study sought to explore the perspectives of the University of Cape distance students in the Bolgatanga Girls Senior High School Study Centre on the merits and challenges associated with distance education programme mode of studying. A qualitative case study design was adopted for the study. The sample size was made up of ten (10) participants: Five student leaders and five-course tutors, one of them being the Centre Coordinator. All ten participants were selected using the intensity case sampling technique of purposeful sampling. An interview guide was the sole data collection instrument. The study revealed that students' challenges included difficulty comprehending course modules, family pressures and home responsibilities taking a toll on their studies, the lack of student support facilities was also a challenge. Per the findings of the study, recommendations are that the course tutors should provide prompt feedback to students' assignments and quizzes, course structure guidelines should include information on course format, and the students should be encouraged to form study groups and learn together. Finally, there should be student support services such as library and financial services. These would address their difficulties to a large extent.

Keywords: distance students, study centre, face-to-face interaction, module, course tutor

1. Introduction

According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2003), distance education is education or training delivered to students who mostly are adult learners in off-campus locations through video, audio or computer technologies including both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. It generally has a quasi-permanent separation of the teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process. This distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education. Keegan (cited in Moore & Anderson, 2003),

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intimate the features of distance education as a quasi-permanent absence of a learning group throughout the length of the training period.

It is imperative to note that distance education is practiced in all parts of the world to provide study opportunities for those who cannot or do not want to take part in typical classroom teaching. This form of education normally provides prescribed texts with or without study guides. It is also seen as a system of teaching and learning that includes specially prepared study materials and regular mediated contact between the students and the tutors either individually or in groups. Some universities in the world offer distance students printed and recorded courses but no mediated communication, although they provide, sometimes, face-to-face teaching (Holmberg, 1995). Distance Education has three major elements. They are the separation of the teacher and the learner during the learning process, the use of technological tools to determine content and also connect teacher and learner and finally, the provision of a two-way interaction between teacher and learner. Jedge (2000) notes that some factors which have encouraged distance learning include the ability to effectively cope with mass education and the presence of varied learning styles of students. However, it is also worth noting that in many parts of the world, distance education mode of learning has faced some challenges relative to its accessibility and mode of delivery.

2. Statement of the Problem

The Universities in Ghana close to two decades, were always overwhelmed by the number of qualified applicants seeking admission into citadels of higher learning to access education to meet their interests and varied needs. However, the difficulty has always been the issue of inadequate infrastructural facilities in the mainstream campuses of these universities.

As a result, the University of Cape Coast and other sister universities developed distance education programmes in education, business and the sciences among others programmes in their study centres across the country. This then created the opportunity for those qualified applicants who could not be admitted directly into the main campuses for the regular programmes to have an alternative route to higher education.

However, anecdotal evidence did indicate that students at the Bolgatanga Girls Senior High Schools Study Centre of the University of Cape Coast have over the years raised concerns about the challenges that confront them in the pursuit of their academics. Therefore, this study delved into the perspectives of participants to ascertain from them what they considered to be the advantages of the distance mode of learning and the challenges that they encountered that had negative effects on their studies.

2.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The specific objectives that the researcher set out to achieve were, to establish the worth and challenges of distance learners at the University of Cape Coast Distance Education Programme in the Bolgatanga Girls Senior High School Study Centre in Ghana. As a

corollary, the following two research questions were posed to direct the focus of the study.

- 1) How advantageous is the distance education programme to the student?
- 2) What challenges do students encounter in relation to the distance education programme?

2.2 Significance of the Study

First, the study would contribute to the body of knowledge on distance education in the country. Specifically, it would bring to the fore, the challenges and how to resolve same as well as the merits that are associated with adult learners in their quest to access higher education. Second, students would be better informed as per the recommendations of the study about what they themselves can do in order to improve upon their learning goals and outcomes. Finally, the study would inform policymakers and implementers at the University of Cape Coast College of Distance Education (CoDE) and the relevant authorities of the University on the measures needed to put in place so as to expand and make the programme more successful and attractive to prospective applicants.

3. Literature Review/ Theoretical Framework

3.1 Meaning, Merits and Challenges of Distance Education

3.1.1 Meaning of Distance Education

Distance education, often known as online learning or remote learning, is a form of education that enables learners to continue their education even when they are not physically present in a typical classroom. It makes use of a variety of technology and teaching techniques to reach students who are geographically distant from the teacher or the institution. According to Simonson, Smaldino and Zvacek (2015), distance education is a method of offering education and instruction, frequently on an individual basis, to learners who are not physically present in a typical setting like a classroom. Additionally, UNESCO (2002) defines distance education as the methods that put emphasis on expanding access to education and training possibilities, liberating students from location and time restrictions and providing personalised and group learning opportunities. In brief, it is aimed at reducing gaps in communication between students and institutions, academics, course materials, peers, time, space and communication.

It is pertinent to note that this mode of learning has a long history. It dates back to the early 19th century when correspondence courses were first launched. It has since undergone several stages of evolution (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). The programme has significantly grown in popularity and recognition over the past several years, particularly with the development of technology.

3.1.2 Merits of Distance Education

Moller, Foshay and Huett (2008) assert that to preserve the integrity and quality of online programmes, institutions and accrediting agencies have created norms and guidelines to

ensure a smooth run of distance learning programmes. Quality assurance is thus crucial in distance learning to guarantee the delivery of high-quality education. Its flexible nature is also another major benefit. Garrison and Vaughan (2013), intimate that learners can frequently pick or choose when and where they study. This allows learners to integrate their education with employment, family, and other commitments. Additionally, Students who are enrolled in distance learning have the flexibility to access course materials and complete tasks on their own time and schedule. Both students and institutions find distance education to be more economical. Students spend less on accommodation and transport expenditures. Universities spend less on facilities and on administrative work (Allen & Seaman, 2020). Through distance education, a wide spectrum of people can learn. This includes those who are differently abled, those who live in remote locations and working professionals who require flexible schedules (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Thus, it makes higher education more inclusive by enabling students to access educational opportunities they might not have had.

Further to the above, distance education mode usually provides a wide range of multimedia resources such as videos, simulations and interactive modules to boost learners understanding of the disciplines (Li & Irby, 2008). It enables students to explore diverse subjects and specialties that may have been difficult to do in conventional local institutions (Pittman & Gaines, 2017). Furthermore, Learning is more individualised and is tailored to meet the unique needs of the individual (Means *et al.*, 2014).

In sum, distance education is an alternative for individuals for whom on-campus learning may be unavailable or, more importantly, undesirable. For example, working professionals may require information carefully tailored to their occupation and professional interests. By supplying learning opportunities without disrupting the flow of everyday activities, distance education learners benefit from the situatedness of learning and that helps to bridge the gap between work and school (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

3.2 Challenges of Distance Education

Regardless of the many advantages that distance education wields, studies also indicate some challenges that conflict with its success. For instance, it is the case that not all learners have access to dependable internet connectivity and equipment. Therefore, this near absence or unreliable nature of the internet hinders the capacity to engage fully in online courses (Seaman & Seaman, 2018). The distance learning experience is also hampered by other technical obstacles like incompatible software and hardware restrictions.

Distance education mode will usually require learners to have a high level of self-discipline and drive to stay on track with their studies. However, this usually is not the case as it appears that oftentimes, students lack the motivation and self-discipline to shoulder on (Artino, 2008).

In order for facilitators to successfully teach online or on weekends, they may need additional training. This is because these situations frequently call for distinct teaching

methods as compared to traditional classroom teaching (Bates, 2015). Delays in asynchronous responses can also cause students to lose interest, which can lead to feelings of frustration and isolation. Isolation is a significant issue in distance learning (Contreras-Castillo, Favela, Pérez-Fragoso, & Santamaria-del-Angel, 2004).

Lack of casual interaction is another issue with communication in distance learning. Building a community requires informal interaction, which is explained as interactions that do not have a defined schedule or place. Such interactions are spontaneous, not planned and brief (Contreras-Castillo *et al.*, 2004). Informal connection can assist students in learning from one another, validating their own opinions, and exposing them to and understanding those of others by sharing personal experiences (Bober & Dennen, 2001).

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Theory of Connectivism

George Siemens and Stephen Downes in 2005 propounded the learning theory of connectivism. This theory focuses on the notion that learning happens through networks of connections, especially in the digital era. The internet and technology influence on how students learn and use information is emphasized. Knowledge is not stored in an individual mind but distributed across networks of people and digital resources. To obtain knowledge and skills, learners are urged to connect with these networks. Learning happens when students build and develop links between the nodes in their own learning networks, which might be people, digital tools, or information sources. There are two types of connections: official (courses, textbooks) and informal (blogs, social media). Connectivism places premium on being able to see patterns in data. Students need to learn how to sort through, assess, and interpret massive volumes of information. According to this view, students must be flexible and keep up with new information due to the quick rate of technological development. The connections learners have made throughout the cycle of knowledge acquisition enable them to stay current in their profession.

This current study hinges on this theory because it emphasises the value of giving learners in distance education the opportunity to participate in worthwhile activities, collaborate with peers, and reflect on their learning. This is accomplished in distance learning through tasks including group discussions, problem-solving exercises and project-based assignments. The idea is to inspire students to conduct independent research, ask questions, and learn things for themselves.

5. Methods and Materials

This study adopted the qualitative research approach. The single case study design was utilized. This design is characterized as being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic (Merriam, 2000). The sample size was ten. The breakdown is five-course tutors and five

student leaders all at the Bolgatanga Girls Senior High School Study Centre of the University of Cape Coast. All the participants were drawn using the intensity case sampling technique of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Participants were seen as information-rich cases because the five-course tutors were selected based on their longevity in teaching at the centre. The students selected were the student leadership of the programme and were very likely to mirror the views of the general student body when interviewed. The collection of data was done using an in-depth interview guide.

The choice of the in-depth interview guide for data collection is its ability to gather vital but unanticipated information from participants. The time spent on each interviewee was approximately an hour. Before the granting of the interviews, the researcher observed the needed protocols, courtesies and permission.

The researcher took a few minutes to explain to the participants about the rationale for the study and assured them of the confidentiality of their responses. Data collection and analysis were done concurrently. The data were analysed by first transcribing the audio recordings, then followed by a line-by-line coding strategy, from the coded information, categories were developed by clustering similar codes. Finally, the categories were pieced together to answer the research questions. The issue of rigour or trustworthiness in qualitative studies was dealt with through the use of the member-checking approach and audit trail strategy.

6. Results and Discussion

As indicated earlier, two research questions directed the focus of the study. Responses of participants are discussed as seen below:

Research question one: How advantageous is the distance education programme to the student?

In response to this question, an in-depth interview was granted to the participants selected for the study. Their responses were very similar and on the same issues. The participants intimated that the merits include;

The comfort and convenience of not having to travel long distances to access higher education might be the case for those who are admitted to study on the main campuses. They further indicated that studying at home is also convenient and economical for them on the grounds of feeding. Feeding in the main university campus is usually expensive and many a time, students are exploited by food vendors. Accordingly, Allen and Seaman (2020) assert that distance education is relatively less expensive as students spend less on feeding, accommodation and transport.

A participant stated that;

“There is flexibility in the nature of the distance programme. Unlike the regular students on campus, we only meet for the weekly face-to-face on weekends. Therefore, during weekdays, we attend to other important assignments. I have enough time for my activities

because for the whole of the five working days, I will be free and so use those five days to wash, clean and also, to work."

Another participant had this to say;

"I study in my own time and comfort. I am not pressured to study. Apart from that, there is not much workload on me compared to those on campus."

The above two positions buttress Garrison and Vanghan (2013) when they intimate that distance education allows learners to integrate their education with family and other related commitments.

All in all, the participants alluded to the case of not being personally removed or detached from family members. Therefore, distance education students are able to perform family roles and responsibilities without delay because they are present at home at all material times. Accordingly, these types of programmes provide adults with a second chance. Distance education mode also caters to differently-abled individuals and the working class who do not qualify for study leave to still access higher education.

Again, the participants intimated that there is less competition when it comes to the admission of students into their preferred programmes.

Accordingly, a participant said;

"How was I going to get the programme I am reading through the regular mode or admission into the main campus? Hmmmm..... It would be very difficult. A lot of students always apply for the regular programmes and the university cannot admit the majority of the students to the regular programmes due to inadequate classrooms. So, I see the distance programme as an opportunity for some of us."

This view as expressed is consistent with the stance of Pittman and Gaines (2017). They posit that through distance education, potential applicants have the opportunity to explore subjects and specialties that they hitherto would have had difficulties accessing through the regular mode.

Research question two: What challenges do students encounter in relation to the distance education programme?

In answering this question, the perspectives of participants were sought. As regards the students, they intimated the issue of the lack of prompt feedback on their quizzes and assignments. This has made them unable to rectify their mistakes and to be able to perform better in subsequent class exercises and assignments as well as end-of-semester examinations.

One student participant specifically said;

“When you don’t point out my mistakes to me now, how will I know that I was wrong here or there? So, we need to get our quiz papers on time so that we get to know our mistakes and correct them before the end of sem.”

Additionally, all five students also posited that they need academic counselors to advise them when they have academic difficulties but this has not been catered for. Again, four out of the five student participants spoke about the difficulty in comprehending the course modules. Three out of the five tutor participants confirmed this as a challenge and advocated the need to review the course modules so as to facilitate reader understanding.

Both students and tutors also spoke about the loaded nature of the course modules and the short duration needed to cover the modules in all the prescribed courses. Accordingly, a student said;

“Lectures are loaded because lessons that ought to use six (6) credit hours are put together for one credit hour making learning very unattractive and difficult. We go through emotional stress as students and this makes us get worried when we think of our workload and our not good performance in the courses sometimes.”

Moodley (2002) points out that ineffective learning is occasioned when the learner lacks social and emotional well-being.

Further to the above challenges, all ten participants identified the lack of a library facility for research as a problem. Galusha cited in Dabaj (2011) intimates that the barriers to distance education are the lack of library facilities, experience and training. Therefore, all barriers must be identified and eliminated in order to have a quality distance education programme.

Again, all five student participants intimated that studying at home is full of interruptions, distractions and family pressures (load). A student had this to say;

“I do not feel comfortable studying at home. Assuming I pick a module to read and my mother-in-law calls me to go somewhere or my child is crying, I will not concentrate well in my studies.”

This assertion buttresses the position of Galusha (1998) when he asserts that students' ages, the type of work they do and their marital status constitute important aspects of situational barriers.

Additionally, the issue of ill-prepared teaching on the part of some course tutors was seen as a major challenge to students' understanding of the courses. All ten participants acknowledged the fact that some tutors were teaching courses with no requisite expertise and so had difficulty in explaining lucidly concepts in the various subject areas. As a result of this, many students do not actively engage in the teaching and learning process during the face-to-face sessions. Bates (2015) explains that for

facilitators to be successful in teaching weekends or online programmes, they need to be supported with additional training. This implies that facilitating distance education programmes calls for a distinct teaching methodology which unfortunately appears to be absent. Most teachers recruited to teach in distance programmes lack this quality and many others.

Lastly, all ten participants asserted that the new policy of the university regarding the assessment criteria which makes it mandatory for students to do presentations, has become a major challenge. This is in view of the unavailability of projectors and other supporting infrastructure in the study centre.

A tutor lamented;

“Well..... the idea is good as it seeks to help learners acquire 21st-century skills. But where is the infrastructure say good and functioning laptops, stable internet connectivity and reliable power to embark upon such a venture? Some of us are even not good at ICT. How to do PowerPoint presentations will not be easy because we ourselves do not have the skills aside from the issue of infrastructure so how can we then prepare the students? hahahahalet’s wait and see.”

Seaman and Seaman (2018) assert that learners' lack of access to dependable internet connections and other facilities limits them from fully engaging in online or distance education.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Distance Education programmes of the University of Cape Coast have gained popularity over the years. To this extent, the University continues to be a trailblazer of distance education in the country. Notwithstanding some benefits that emanate from this mode of learning as espoused by both tutors and students, there are some challenges that students encounter in their quest to pursue tertiary education. Per the findings that have been revealed, the following recommendations have been proffered to address the challenges.

- 1) Course tutors of the programme should be easily accessible to the students. This would pave the way for meaningful, helpful and prompt feedback to questions, assignments and quizzes of students. Timely communication from tutors that engage students and offer remedial actions would contribute to positive interactions and students’ subsequent success in the courses.
- 2) Students should develop the concept of the self-motivation and commitment needed to be successful in the programme. Moreover, authorities should develop course structure guidelines that will capture information on course format, teaching methods, teaching aids and course assignments from the start for students to interface with.

- 3) Authorities of CoDE of the University should admonish students to form study groups and learn together. This strategy will increase their enthusiasm to interact, learn the course content and share knowledge.
- 4) University management should acquire a more robust learning management system or technology platform that is dependable for the delivery of courses to augment the face-to-face interaction that exists currently.
- 5) The management of the University should provide some support services such as a library and some sponsorship/ scholarship packages to students enrolled in the distance learning programmes. These would help address both the learning needs and financial difficulties of students respectively.
- 6) Authorities of CoDE of the University should insist on following standard guidelines regarding the recruitment, selection and placement of course tutors for the face-to-face sessions. This would ensure that qualified people are employed for the facilitation of the various courses.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

I hereby declare that there has not been any potential conflict of interest in respect of this study before and during the process of authorship and publication.

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