

An Appraisal of Students' Level of Satisfaction of Support Services of Distance Education at the University of Education, Winneba

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Abstract

In recent times, Distance Education has become a critical component of tertiary education delivery around the globe. This mode of learning system has taken systematic teaching and learning processes to persons living in isolated areas where facilities for the traditional form of classroom teaching are not adequately provided.

This study was conducted among 564 Post-Diploma distance education students of the University of Education, Winneba study centres of the Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE). The study investigated students' level of satisfaction of the support services provided them by the University. It was structured within the framework of descriptive survey and employed the use of questionnaire for data collection. Both descriptive and multivariate statistical methods were used to analyse the data collected. It was found that the most important factors influencing students' level of satisfaction of distance learning support services are self check questions and exercises, readiness of help desk staff and instructor demonstration of knowledge in the subject area. It is recommended that every effort should be made by Universities or Distance Education institutions to provide learner support systems that are learner centred in order to enhance learners' service experience. Institutions providing distance education should endeavour to undertake an in-depth study of learner support services provided at the various study centres to enable them to align these learners support services with peculiar learners' requirements and expectations.

Key Words: Distance Education, support services, satisfaction, scale reliability coefficient

1.0 Introduction

Over the years, the need to provide quality and more accessible educational facilities or opportunities especially in developing countries have become a great challenge. The cost of providing classrooms, lecture theatres, laboratories, residential facilities, etc in response to rapid surge in demand for education is a source of worry and burden to many governments (Ahmed, 2011). As a result of these and other factors, Distance Education continues to become critical component of tertiary education delivery around the globe in recent times. This mode of learning system has taken systematic teaching and learning processes to persons living in isolated areas where facilities for the traditional form of classroom teaching are not adequately provided. Internationally, Distance Education is now recognized and accepted as an alternative channel for providing broader access to education in a cost effective manner; wider and diversified curricula and a means for continuing lifelong education (Rai, Bajpai and Singh, 2007). Distance Education has the potential and capacity to provide general education and professional education useful for the application of the latest technology in the new millennium in all sectors of the development and face the force of globalization, deregulation, privatization and fast socio-economic changes through continuous education in latest developments to personnel engaged in these areas provided we maintain distance education system perfect, practical and operational (Geol and Geol 2000). Furthermore, distance education provides independent, student centered and tutor guided engagement that facilitates interaction with instructors and students which may not always be possible within the traditional classroom setting (Michailidou & Economides, 2003).

As distance learning addresses the needs of specific target groups, eliminates the barriers to the access and extends the geographical reach, every effort should be made by Distance Education institutions to ensure efficiency in access, student support services, quality control and other vital auxiliary services. Students support services according to Molefi (1998), are any systems or procedures that are purposively created and effectively utilized by an institution to support and or facilitate teaching and learning at a distance. Donald (1997) sees students support services as more overreaching involving the entire setting in which learning takes place ... the discipline that provide the knowledge learning support, the learners and the arrangements made for them, the teaching and learning process and the assessment of learning, institution and programmes.

Although student support services may differ from one institution to another they help students overcome isolation and have a feel of belonging. Tong (1994) acknowledges the role of support services to students and

posits that they help them to overcome difficulties that affect the quality of their academic work. Through the provision of quality support services students have the confidence that they are not being left on their own in the academic journey, but that the institution is interested in their academic progress. In their survey of students' perceptions on quality in higher education, Hill, Romich, Seagull, Peebles and Strecker (2003) found that the most influential factors in the provision of a quality education are the quality of the lecturer and the student support systems. Lea and Farbus (2000) have also observed that support services for distance students are 'an educational necessity'. These findings are consistent with the observation of Sweet (1986) that without student support services, distance students are likely to drop out due to difficulties such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. This implies that students support services are crucial component of any distance education programme. It is in the light of this that a study of the satisfaction of students of these services is essential in designing appropriate services that meet their peculiarities wherever they may be found. Besides, it is worthy of note that students' satisfaction with support services may be likened to customer satisfaction of goods and services as in business and this has the tendency to affect the credibility and reputation of any institution that provides distance education. Furthermore, in to order enhance learning experience and performance of distance learners it is imperative to fully understand their satisfaction of support services provided by distance education institutions.

2.0 Literature Review

To Keegan (2003) view student support services as either learner support or learning support. According to him, learning support includes all the help and assistance provided by a distance education system. Learning support enhances the supportive functions during 'the actual process of learning', helping students to act for their best. On his part, Simpson (2000) defines the learner support system as including all activities beyond the production and the delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. These could be either in the form of academic or non academic support. Academic support assists students with cognitive, intellectual and knowledge related issues of specific courses (Simpson, 2000). These may include printed modules, multi media academic materials, tutorials and other facilities which help students to gather knowledge. Non-academic support assists students in their ability to be organised and effective in their studies (Simpson, 2000). The above is contrary to Garrison (1989) who considers learner support as a wide range of human and non-human resources that help students to finish and pass their educational transaction. Tait (2003) has identified three roles that support services play in distance education. First, support services encourage the cognitive (learning) development of students; secondly, support enhances the self-esteem of students therefore building their confidence; thirdly, support for students is systematic in helping students meet the required standard expected of them so that they do not fall behind or redraw from their programme of study.

Koul (2006) also asserts that learner support services should be provided on the basis of a thorough understanding of learner's circumstance, their abilities and requirements. Since students' personal characters, their characteristics, circumstances and true needs vary, proper consideration beforehand of all these factors is necessary if we want to design and effective and efficient learner support system. Almost all institutions offering distance education generally appreciate the crucial role that learner support plays in distance education programmes. A survey conducted by Mireku-Gyimah, (1998) during the pre-implementation state of distance education for teachers of University of Education, Winneba (UEW) and University of Cape Coast (UCC) emphasized that provision of support services could encourage students' acceptance of distance education programme at the tertiary level. The study also revealed that well equipped regional and district libraries, well stocked study centres and occasional contact constitute support services necessary for a distance education programme.

Owusu-Mensah (1998) in his study of support services at Lawrentia University has noted that efficient library service with on-line computer access to the university library. Off Campus library services were extended to students living far away. In addition, photocopies of articles from magazines and newspapers were made available to students upon request. In a comparative study, he found that Makerere University external students did not have the best library services because most of the University's student centres in the rural communities did not have libraries and the few ones who had current books were hard to come by. However, the library and text books situation for distance students in Namibia looked better than that of Makerere University.

Lucia (2005) in her study of support services at the University of Namibia found that students of the University placed much emphasis on students support services such as orientation, contact and communication with tutors and fellow students as well as face-to-face tutorials. Young and Norgard (2006) have confirmed the importance of three types of interactions for student satisfaction with distance education. These are timely and quality

interaction among students and between students and their instructor and finally between students and their course content.

Bampo (2008) opined that distance learners placed high premium on students support services such face-face-tutorial sessions. This according to him, create opportunity for student-student and also student-tutor interaction and as such services as a means of getting feedback from students. He also observed the significance of student-tutor interaction in distance education programme revealing that 86% of students enjoy helpful interaction during face-to-face. It is in consonance of this that Lewis (2002) advised distance education providers to take face-to-face tutorial seriously.

Willis (1993) intimates that the strategies which are effective in distance learning include developing appropriate methods of feedback and reinforcement, optimizing content and pace and adapting to different learning styles. Feedback has the potential of assisting students assess their academic progress or performance on their own.

Students' interactions through course discussions seem to be one of the vital features of distance courses (Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz & Maher, 2000). Consequently, course design must have rich communication potential as the level of communication has a clear impact upon students' learning, satisfaction and retention in on-line courses (Irani, 1998). Again, Swan (2001) has found that the three factors which significantly influence students' satisfaction and perceived learning are interaction with instructors and active discussion among course participants and clarity of design. In consonance with the above was a study by Afzaal, Muhammad and Mudasar (2010) who found that enough interaction that takes place between students and their instructors, well designed and up to date courses, devoted, motivated and well equipped instructors with the required skill and knowledge significantly influence students' satisfaction.

To Levin Kim and Reil (1990), students perceive that discussions in distance learning are more equitable and democratic than face-to-face classroom discussions. Swan et al, (2000) argued that students preferred consistent course structure so that navigation does not change from one course to another. On the contrary, Yang and Cornelius (2004) opined that most students became frustrated when their courses were poorly designed and when instructors did not participate in discussions or respond to questions within a very limited time.

From the review it can realised that provision of support service is an integral component of any distance programme or course. Support services such as feedback to students, tutor-student interaction, library services, face-to-face tutorials, etc are crucial in sustaining students' interest in distance learning and retention. Therefore, more emphasis should be placed on provision of focused learner support services could have a more lasting impact retention rates if approached in a holistic manner and integrated fully into the learning process.

3.0 Methodology

The current study was conducted at the University of Education, Winneba located in the Central Region of Ghana. For the purpose of the current study, the Winneba Study centre of the Institute of Educational Development and Extension (I.E.D.E) of the University of Education, Winneba was selected. However, I.E.D.E has several study centres numbering twenty-eight (28) which are scattered all over the ten (10) regions of Ghana.

The study which was conducted during the 2014/2015 academic year collected data from 564 distance students using convenience sampling method through the use of a structured questionnaire covering the various support services provided by the University that students perceive as satisfactory. Additionally, the questionnaire elicited information on the respondent's socio-demographic profile, *i.e.* his/her age group, gender, educational background, occupation, marital status, etc. In all, a total of 650 questionnaires were administered out of which 564 were actually completed and returned.

3.1 Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was done through the use of descriptive and multivariate statistical methods. Distance learners' level of satisfaction of each of the support services offered to students was measured with a Likert-type instrument consisting of 11 items with 4-point rating scale ranging from (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). The reliability test using the Cronbach's coefficient Alpha was performed to ensure internal consistency of the Likert research items. The Cronbach's Alpha measures how much variation in scores of the responses or different variables attributable to chance or random errors (Stellitz et al., 1976). Cronbach's Alpha in the present study yielded a scale reliability coefficient of 0.80 indicating good reliability among the items in the scale. Thus all the 11 items in the scale were considered to be valid and reliable.

These eleven (11) items were further subjected to exploratory principal component analysis (PCA) to evaluate distance students satisfaction of the support services they receive from the University of Education, Winneba. PCA is a multivariate statistical method for compressing a large number of variables to fewer common underlying factors (Field, 2009). To achieve this, we initially included all the 11 learners' satisfaction using Varimax rotation since PCA identifies meaningful factors of items and includes only items that are interrelated and excludes items that are not related and/or have a large overlap with other items (Field, 2009). Factors with Eigenvalues more than one (indicating the importance of a particular factor) were retained for further analysis and items whose factor loading exceeded 0.6 were maintained. An item with low factor loading implies that particular item is perceived to be less important in determining level of satisfaction respondents for the students support services provided at the study centre.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-economic profile of the respondents involved in the study. It can be realised that out of 564 respondents who participated in the study, (31.6%) of them were within the age range of 18 and 29 years. However, (54%) of them fall within the age bracket of 30 and 49 years. The above results indicates that greater percentage of the respondents of working age transact business with commercial banks in one way or the other. The demographic analysis also show that many (64.4%) of the respondents were actually married with (35.6%) of them single.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Item	Scale	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Age	18 – 29	197	34.93
	30 – 39	160	28.37
	40 – 49	135	23.94
	50 >	73	12.77
Marital status	Married	374	66.31
	Single	190	33.69
Gender	Male	348	61.81
	Female	215	38.19
Education	SHS	195	34.57
	Diploma	369	65.43

Source: Field Data, 2015

The male respondents (61.81%) constituted the majority compared to the female respondents (38.19%). It is important to note that many (66.31%) of the respondents were married as compared to (33.69%) who are unmarried. This shows the caliber of students who patronize open and distance education are mostly matured men and women. Considering the educational level of students (65.43%) are diploma holders who are pursuing post-diploma programmes and (34.57%) senior high school leavers. This indicates a changing trend in distance education which was hitherto the preserve of matured trained teachers.

Table 2 shows the Eigenvalue of all factors measuring various aspects of expression of students' satisfaction of distance learning support services. It can be realised that the Eigenvalue of four aspects of student support services are greater than one indicating that there are four key learning support services that are students are satisfied.

Table 2: Eigen Values of Student Support Services

Factor No.	Support Services	Eigen value	% of Variance	Cum. % of Variance
1.	Self Check Questions & Exercises	4.5575	41.43	41.43
2.	Information dissemination	1.8695	10.79	52.22
3.	Instructor Inform Progress of Work	1.0487	9.53	61.76
4.	Relevant Assignment	1.0306	9.37	71.11
5.	Clear Evaluation Procedures	0.9626	8.75	79.88
6.	Instructor's Encouragement	0.8729	7.74	87.81
7.	Readiness of Help Desk Staff	0.6123	5.57	93.39
8.	Orientation Activities	0.2934	2.67	96.05
9.	Admission Procedures	0.1728	1.57	97.63
10.	Punctuality of Instructors	0.1311	1.12	98.82
11.	Instructor Demonstrated Knowledge	0.1301	1.12	100.00

Source: Field Data, 2015

The overall total variance of the four factors was 71.11% of the characteristics of the actual data used for the study. The characteristics of the actual data possessed by each of the four factors are 41.43 percent, 10.79 percent, 9.53 percent and 9.37 percent respectively.

Table 3: Factor Loadings of Student Satisfaction of Support Services

Factor No.	Description of Item	Factor Loading
1.	Self Check Questions & Exercises	0.9174
2.	Information dissemination	0.9223
3.	Instructor Inform Progress of Work	0.1246
4.	Relevant Assignment	0.0477
5.	Clear Evaluation Procedures	0.8207
6.	Instructor's Encouragement	0.2351
7.	Readiness of Help Desk Staff	0.8917
8.	Orientation Activities	0.0398
9.	Admission Procedures	0.4474
10.	Punctuality of Instructors	0.1812
11.	Instructor Demonstrated Knowledge	0.9098

Source: Field Data, 2015

In Table 3, the factor loadings produced by performing factor analysis are presented. It can be observed the factor loadings varied from 0.92 (self check questions and exercises) to 0.04 (orientation activities). It can be realized that the factor loadings of five students support services most important items that students are satisfied with provision of self check questions and exercises at the end of each topic (0.92), reliable means of disseminating information to students (0.92), clear evaluation procedures (0.82), readiness of help desk staff to offer assistance to distance learners (0.89) and demonstration of thorough knowledge of the subject by the tutor or course instructor (0.91) respectively. Among these student support services provision of self check questions and exercises at the end of each topic and reliable means of disseminating information to students were the most influential items explaining 92% respectively of the variance while orientation sessions for learners was the least influential item accounting for 4% of the variance.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Major Students Support Services of Satisfaction

Description of Scale Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self Check Questions & Exercises	3.133	0.928
Information dissemination	2.851	0.894
Clear Evaluation Procedures	2.998	0.879
Readiness of Help Desk Staff	3.106	0.917
Instructor Demonstrated Knowledge	3.159	0.938

Source: Field Data, 2015

Table 4 shows the mean scores of the main support services that offer the highest possible satisfaction to distance learners. The mean scores of these support services range from 2.851 – 3.159. It can be seen that out of five major aspects of satisfaction of support services provided at the University of Education, Winneba, reliable means of information dissemination (2.851) and clear evaluation procedures (2.998) are within the 'disagree' range. Thus learners are dissatisfied with means of information dissemination and clear evaluation procedures of the University. On the contrary, distance students expressed their satisfaction for self check questions and exercises provided in their study materials (3.133), readiness of help desk staff to provided quick and responsive assistance in times of need (3.106) and level of knowledge demonstrated by instructors during tutorials (3.159).

5.0 Recommendations

The five factors identified above indicate the varied expression of satisfaction distance students have towards support services provided at the learning centre. Current trends in provision of tertiary education around the globe especially University education show that distance learning has become a major alternative that ensures more broader and wider access to education and means of lifelong education experience. This therefore, points to indispensable role provision of reliable and efficient learner support system plays in facilitating teaching and learning and enhancing learners' experience. Thus, there should be continuous assessment of quality assurance mechanism to monitor and evaluate the peculiarities and perspectives of distance learners. Every effort should be made by Universities to provide learner support systems that are learner centred in order to enhance learners' service experience. The institution should endeavour to undertake an in-depth study of learner support services provided at the various study centres to enable it to align these learners support services with peculiar learners' requirements and expectations.

6.0 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study has certain limitations. The study was concentrated at the Winneba study centre. Thus the results may not reflect the opinion of students from other study centres scattered across the whole country. Besides, the small sample size used in this research may not be the true representation of the majority of students of distance learning at University of Education, Winneba, hence, findings cannot be generalised.

Future research can consider the students of other distance study centres across the country and analyse their level of satisfaction towards support services provided at the various learning centres. Furthermore, exploring the reasons why students select distance learning for higher education in Ghana is also an important viewpoint for future research.

Finally, there should be regional study of support services provided at distance learning centres and the results compared to account for the regional differences in students' perception of satisfaction of support services provided.

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