

# The Challenges of Distance Education to Rural Teachers Experiences from the University of Education, Winneba

Ellen Louise Olu Fagbemi<sup>1</sup> Robert Andrews Ghanney<sup>2\*</sup>

1.University of Education, Winneba

2.Department of Basic Education, University of Education, Winneba, P. O. Box 25, Winneba

\*E-mail of the corresponding author: ghanney66@yahoo.com

## Abstract

In 2005, the Ministry of Education(MOE) ruled that the minimum teaching qualification in public basic school should be a diploma at the time, the majority of teachers at this level possess the minimum teaching qualification of a Certificate “A” and some have received no training at all. The University of Education, Winneba has been admitting teachers from all regions of Ghana onto its distance education (DE) programme for the past decade. However it is not clear what challenges they encounter as they study and teach simultaneously, often in remote and isolated communities. Although the programme has been running for some time, no such study has been conducted. Against this background, this is the first study to explore the challenges of DE to rural teachers. The study employed a qualitative methodology using the social constructivist model of seeking to build knowledge with the respondents. Thus, the major instruments employed were interviews and observations. The study found that being adult learners, the teachers had strong intrinsic motivation to succeed but also faced challenges arising from university administrative circumstantial support systems. The study concludes that such systemic support should be revisited if the DE programme is to truly serve the needs of its participants.

**Key words:** distance education, rural, teachers, and challenges.

## 1. Context

### 1.1 Distance Education in Ghana

Education has been linked to human and social development such that the United Nations (UN) emphasis on basic education as a human right has prompted many governments to pursue this goal. Thus, the tremendous increases in school enrolments since the 1990s- after the global declaration on “Education for All” (EFA), the setting of the Millennium Development Goals(MDGs) and the adoption of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in the majority of African countries, has led to a significant increases in the demand for more qualified teachers. For example, primary school enrolments in Sub-Saharan Africa(SSA) rose up sharply from 81 million in 1998 to over 100 million in 2003 (46% females) (EFA,2006) cited in Anamuah-Mensah ,(2006). It is expected that by the EFA target year of 2015, the number of school age children in (SSA) will have increased by 34 million or by 32% (UNESCO, 2004). The same report indicates that in 2003, there were over 40 million out-of-primary school children (18m males and 22 females) in the region.

However, in Ghana, such an escalation in enrolments has not been matched up by an adequate supply of qualified teachers. Moreover, the majority of those teaching at the basic school level possess the minimum qualification of a Teachers’ Certificate ‘A’ and others have received no training at all. To ensure that teachers were adequately prepared, in 2005, the Ministry of Education (MOE) ruled that the minimum qualification for teaching at basic level should be a Diploma. However, such a directive notwithstanding, the MOE seems to face several challenges in budgeting for the increased demands of higher education and teacher training (Anamuah-Mensah, 2006).

Accordingly, distance education (DE) has become a viable option for developing countries, since it provides a practical alternative to the conventional approach to higher learning and teacher training (Anamuah-Mensah, 2006) Researchers such as Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) have reported that several developing countries and governments have enthusiastically embraced DE as an affordable solution to address problems around equity and access to education. Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) further observed that DE has been used to ‘provide-cost effective teacher education and it continues to be used to train large numbers of teachers within short periods of time’.

In the context of the present study, according to Sampong (2009), ‘Distance education (DE) as a complementary mode of delivery was initiated in Ghana as an effort to overcome the challenges of access, equity, cost-effectiveness, and quality of higher education... ‘Ghana, like other industrialized and developing countries, relies on DE to augment traditional methods of teacher education. Teacher preparation is well established in Ghana with 40 colleges of education offering three-year post-secondary diplomas for teachers of basic education. Total annual graduations from these institutions has been between 5,500 and 6,000 since 1995 (Akyeampong, Furlong, and Lewin 2000). Yet there is the obvious problem of acute shortage of teachers resulting from the increased enrolments discussed earlier. Indeed, Sampong(2009), notes that, ‘there is an acute shortage of trained teachers created by an expansion of pre-tertiary enrolments due to rapid population growth, the success

of the basic education reform, the inability of colleges of education to produce the required number of teachers because of inadequate infrastructure. This situation has incited several debates among researchers. Another study conducted in 2000 found that

‘To train all untrained teachers in Ghana by the year 2005 and to achieve a gross enrolment ratio of a hundred percent by the year 2010, the total number of new teachers required per annum would be from 13,000 to 16,000, and this output would have to be sustained up to the year 2010. Considering the current total output of trained teachers, meeting the demand for new teachers is a daunting task’ (Akyeampong, Furlong and Lewin, 2000).

Such a problem is not limited to Ghana, but, rather, it is prevalent in all countries in SSA (DeJaeghere, Chapman, and Mulkeen, 2004; 2006). In this regard, Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) report that some African countries like Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda have initiated large-scale and successful DE programmes. Moreover, Darling-Hammond (1998) cited in Sampong(2009) argues that the introduction of the DE in Ghana was intended to not only reduce the shortage of teachers but also the high attrition rates often associated with study leave. Implicitly, therefore, focused DE has the potential to reduce the migration of teachers from the basic school classrooms to secondary school or college after they have received higher qualifications and additional experience. However, it has been argued that DE has not always lived up to its promise. One may question whether the mass production of teacher education guarantees sufficiently high quality of training. It is also difficult to gauge whether teachers enrolled on DE have successfully graduated. Furthermore, it may be assumed that if teachers study at home, the home environment plays a significant role in such success. By extension, those living and working in rural and isolated communities might face particular problems. Therefore, one of the major issues of concern is to examine the challenges faced by such teachers.

## 2. Research Design

In researching the challenges of the rural school teacher on a DE programme, the goal of this study was to rely as much as possible on the views and experiences of student teacher themselves. We thus adopted a social constructivist model based on the assumption that individuals seek understandings of the world in which they live and work, and develop ‘subjective meanings of their experiences-meanings directed toward certain objects or things’ (Creswell (2009, p 8). Accordingly, the study sought to explore the ways in which student teachers interacted with their social and cultural environment, as well as the meanings they drew from their own practices.

## 3. Study Sample

The study sample was made of 10 rural teachers comprising 7 females and 3 males enrolled on University of Education (UEW), Winneba DE programme. The teachers were resident in Gyahadze, Esuekyir, Worabeba, Ateitu and Osobonpayin. The participants were purposely selected for the study so that they could provide such data concerning the research topic.

## 4. Data Collection Procedure

Interviews with participants were held in an office at the University of Education, Winneba based on a suggestion and agreement of the participants. Interviews with each participant lasted 1 hour and were conducted in English Language since all the participants could speak it. Study participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity as part of ethical consideration.

Again, we observed study participants in their villages and on UEW campus as they went about attending to their assignments and other domestic duties.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Challenges to Rural Teachers

All teachers interviewed cited the absence of a village library as a major constraint to their private study. This meant that they had to travel to the nearest well-resourced town to conduct further research and write assignments, which exacerbated the problem of finding time to study outside that reserved for professional and domestic duties. One participant remarked, “It is not easy to combine all these roles, but what can you do?” This finding is corroborated by Kember’s (1998) who argues that, “learners engaged in DE are usually adults who require the ability to integrate the demands of off-campus study with family, work and social commitments”. Yet, the point is made clear in the earlier remark “(what can one do?)” which indicates that the teachers had an overriding intrinsic desire to upgrade their qualification. Such a notion is echoed by Fjortoft(1995) cited in Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009), who found that “An internal desire for satisfaction and challenge in one’s career motivated adults to continue in their education more than a desire for enhanced salary and career mobility”.

The next biggest challenge was the timing of the arrival of study materials. All study participants were of the view that late arrival of course materials had a negative impact on their studies. Materials that should have served as their ‘teacher’ were usually handed out when a module was almost over. For example, in a particular

semester, the materials for a course ‘curriculum development’ had arrived on the last day of the module. Students had no choice but to resort to reading any material they could find. This, they described as frustrating. Assignment questions were also apt to arrive very late. This resulted in further frustrations as it puts pressure on learners- and here the rural student teacher is likely to feel the effects of such stress most deeply. Submitting an assignment on time could be an even bigger challenge. One likely result is that in a desperate bid to meet the deadline, some students have their assignments written for them. Kamau’s study on Nigeria, notes that “failure of trainees to receive learning materials on time and poor learner support services especially where study centres are under resourced and over stretched” leads to high non-graduation rates amongst teachers enrolled on the DE courses. Clearly, programme implementers should seek to correct such anomalies, and improve the timing of the dispatch of materials and assignments questions.

Another challenge concerned financial outlay. The teachers cited the heavy costs of frequent travel to study sites, substantial photocopying of materials, and the prompt payment of course fees. In fact, they expressed the need for the government to find some support for them. They argued that as they were the actual implementers of the education policy, they deserved study leave the same as their counterpart on full-time courses.

Learners also made it clear there was practically no supervision from the University of Education Winneba, (where the DE programme main administration site was located) complaining that the director only made an appearance during examinations and at the graduation ceremony.

Finally, although women have made great strides in accessing higher education, some challenges they alone face have not been fully addressed. A male participant explained,

“My wife delivered just when examinations had begun. I sought for permission for her to write her examinations as a supplementary paper, but the coordinator claimed there was no provision for special cases” This kind of inflexibility will continue to obstruct the DE programme if it is not addressed. The implications of all these challenges are summed up in Kamau’s (2007) assertion that’

‘Without an effective learner support services system that provides on-site face-to-face tutorials, timely feedback on student performance and access to library services, student achievement will inevitably be undermined and dropout rates and procrastination will increase, while the advantages of DE including cost effectiveness, will be whittled away’.

## 6. Conclusions

The DE programme under study has achieved much to broaden access to all teachers. However, interviews with rural student teachers revealed that systemic problems within the programme design seem to have been overlooked with the result that learning has been made more stressful. These problems range from the timely dispatch of training materials to the facilitation of assignments and examinations. Such inconsistency in the course management has a direct effect on the rural teachers’ academic performance. However, wary of jeopardising the opportunities to study at all, learners are generally reluctant to voice their grievances to the authorities.

The problems listed in this paper are most significant in that the nature and purpose of DE is to ensure that students can manage their own study from a distance. Yet, the frustrations mentioned either make this goal far from met. Given that the overwhelming majority of Ghanaian children reside in rural areas, it is critical that DE programme management pay more attention to the teachers who serve such children. This critical look at Ghanaian context has shown that its situation is not different from many others. Indeed, the albeit brief review of the works of African researchers have made it clear that it is vital that the goals of DE be revisited if the problems of attrition and failure are to be mitigated.

## References

- Akyeampong, K. A. (2002). *Vocationalization of secondary education in Ghana: A Case Study*: Prepared for Regional Vocational Skills Development Review, World Bank Human Development, African Region.
- Akyeampong, K., Furlong, D., & Lewin, K. (2000). *Cost and financing of teacher education in Ghana*. A Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project: Discussion Paper 20.
- Anamuah-Mensah, J., & Erinosh, S. (2006). *Teacher education beyond university four walls*: University of Education, Winneba.
- Asabere-Ameyaw, A. (2010). *Graduation speech delivered on 06/03/2010*. University of Education, Winneba, Kumasi Campus, Ghana.
- Bell, J., & Donnelly, J. (2009). Applied Science in the English school curriculum: The meaning and significance of ‘vocationalization’. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 41, 1, pp.25-47.
- Cohen, L., Manion L., & Keith, M. (2002). *Research methods in education*. London; Routledge
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Dunne, M., Pryor, J., & Yates, P. (2005). *Becoming a researcher: A companion to the research process*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- E. F. A. (2006). Education for All.
- Herzog, M., & Pittman, R. (1995). *Home, family and community: Ingredients in the rural education equation*. Phi Delta Kappan 113 – 118.
- Keegan, D. (1990). *The foundations of distance education*. London: Routledge.
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. London: Sage Publications.
- Perraton, H. (1988). A theory for distance education. In Stewart, D., Keegan, D., & Holmberg, B. (eds.). *Distance education: International perspectives*. New York: Routledge: 34-45
- Sampong, K. A. (2009). An evaluative study of a distance teacher education programme in a university in Ghana. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10 (4): 6
- Sikiwibele, A. L., & Mungoo, K. J. (2009). Distance learning and teacher education in Botswana: Opportunities and challenges. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(4).
- Thakar, J., Zinn, D., & Wolfenden, F. (2000). Harnessing open educational resources to the challenges of teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 10(4).
- Van Den Bussche, L., Temesvan, S. & Czarnecki, D. (2007). Rural education challenges: Do declining population warrant declining standards? Winnipeg: University of Manitoba
- UNESCO (2001). *Teacher education through distance learning*. Summary of case studies.
- UNESCO (2002). *Teacher education guidelines: Using open and distance learning*. Summary of case studies

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:  
<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

**Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

## MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Recent conferences: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/>

## IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

