

## To Investigate Factors Affecting the Performance of Students on Distance Learning Mode.

Gladwell Kaguu Ikinya<sup>1\*</sup> Oddillia Nabwire Okoth<sup>2</sup>

1. Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, P. O. Box 81310-80100 Mombasa- KENYA.
2. Associate Lecturer, Mount Kenya University, P.O. BOX 42702-80100, Mombasa Campus, Kenya  
\*gladwellikinya@yahoo.com / ddilliano@yahoo.co.uk

### Abstract

Distance learning programme enhances equitable access to higher education in Kenya. Distance learning was initiated at the University of Nairobi nearly two decades ago to enable teachers upgrade their skills for improved service delivery. Learners in this programme are expected to finance their education from own resources. However, the rising cost of living delays completion of the programme by up to 30% as resources are diverted to cater for immediate family needs. Although HELB was established to further higher education, limited financial support from the exchequer makes it difficult to provide assistance to learners outside regular academics programmes. The study was guided by the following objectives; assess the impact of socio-economic, academic and professional background of learners on ability to finance distance learning; establish various modes of finance adopted by learners; explore the challenges faced under the programme and coping mechanisms; evaluate the effectiveness of various funding strategies in terms of accessibility, affordability and adequacy, as well as determine the cost efficiency of distance learning. In addressing the objectives, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. These included a survey, in depth interviews and desk review to source requisite primary and secondary data impediments to effective participation in the DL included meagre incomes, inadequate time to engage in Income Generating Activities (IGAS), high cost of residential fees, and inadequacy of learning materials. In addressing the issues, a number of coping mechanisms such as disposing off properties, suspending personal development projects, venturing into IGAS such as operating nursery schools, grocery shops, cyber cafes, welding workshops and farming among others were adopted. The study findings revealed that degree programmes by this mode arose from effective cost management practices and distance learning methodologies adopted. Based on the findings, the researcher has however suggested a list of recommendations that will improve the relationship between the dependent and independent variables.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Greenberg (1998) defines contemporary Distance Learning (DL) as a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning. Teaster and Blieszner (1999) say the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods. However, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separate in space and possibly time. Desmond Keegan (1995) gives the most thorough definition. He says that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to “a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained”. From these definitions, the student and teacher are separated by space, but not necessarily by time. Electronic and distance learning in Kenya's universities is on the increase. It is now a fast becoming preferred mode of study as it has several advantages including flexibility in choice of programmes and courses especially with regard to what, where and when to take the study. In addition, a learner can study while undertaking other responsibilities at the same time. (KSPS 2009). It is in recognition of these advantages and the potentials of Distance Education that the Directorate of Open and Distance Learning (DODL) were established at Moi University in November, 2007. In some campuses, the number of students enrolled under distance learning has already surpassed those in on-campus programmes, especially for the Education and Commerce degree courses. At the Coast, Mombasa has seen a rapid increase in campuses established by public universities in the past five years. The University of Nairobi established the College of Business Studies at the Bandari College in November 2004. After offering distance learning for several years, Kenyatta University last year opened a campus in Mombasa Town. Other universities that have established campuses in Mombasa are the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, which set up a college at the Mombasa Polytechnic. The principal of the College of Education and External Studies at the University of Nairobi, Prof Henry Mutoro, also said the institution would soon establish a campus in Mombasa. Kenyatta University (KU) vice-chancellor Olive Mugenda says the greatest challenges in accessing higher education in Kenya is funding. The Kenya Methodist University also established its Mombasa campus in November 2006 and started its first Open Distance Learning Mode (ODLM) or Distance Learning (DL) programme in May 2007. The open and distance learning mode at KEMU is a modus operandi for educational provision for people wishing to pursue further training without the

benefit of regular full-time study registration. It incorporates the idea of life-long learning which is learner-centred. Thus, the learner who is mature, employed and motivated to learn is empowered through subject-centred materials to acquire education at the university level. ODLM is not a programme but a method of study. It incorporates the concept of open, distance and virtual learning. Although virtual learning has not been initiated at KEMU yet, the notion is prevalent in other parts of the world.

In the other parts of the world, Distance learning has been defined and it is currently being defined in the literature. The term distance learning (DL) can be used to describe any of a number of instructional situations. Although it is thought of as a new term, distance learning has been around for well over 100 years. As technology has changed, so has the definition of distance learning. Videotaped lectures have been a standard in university and professional courses for the last two decades (Moore & Lockee, 1998). Audiotapes and lessons sent through the mail have been used in correspondence courses to teach subjects such as foreign language for quite some time (Teaster & Blieszner, 1999). Today, the Internet and compressed video have taken distance learning in new directions, allowing distance learning to occur in real time. Live video instruction is the most popular and fastest growing delivery mode in the United States (Ostendorf, 1997) Many of the promises of distance learning are financial in nature. Universities hope to save money by delivering education to students that are unable to attend classes because of time or distance. The theory is that class size increases while the overhead remains the same. In a 2001 article by Burton Bollag and Martha Ann Overland, they say that developing countries are turning to state run distance education programs to take the place of ever increasing enrollments and a lack of physical building space (1995). Of course there is also wide use in the Kenya both in the public and private sectors. It should be obvious by these examples and by the definition of distance learning, that it can meet the promise to deliver classes to a geographically broad and diverse population. Not only that, but the need seems to be strong for such programs. From this need, many Universities are feeling the pressure to control their costs, improve quality of instruction, focus on customer needs, and respond to the competitive pressures (Horgan, 1998).

Distance learning technologies have the potential to assist in solving these problems. In 1994, Basom and Sherritt surveyed higher education administrators and state politicians to find out what they thought would be the major problems facing American higher education in the next millennium. The findings of Basom and Sherritt were that meeting increased demands at a time of decreased resources, increasing or maintaining access, using technology more efficiently, and sharing resources across state lines so that colleges won't have to be all things to all people. However distance learning seems to address all of these issues. Administrators hope that distance learning methods will help make higher education more cost-effective (Dibiase, 2000). This type of answer may be seen as a quick fix for many administrators. If not approached seriously however, the distance programs can quickly become second rate. The convenience of time and space is a big promise made by distance learning. Students do not have to physically be with the instructor in space and, depending on the method used, they do not have to be together in time as well. This is a great advantage for non-traditional students who cannot attend at regular times.

Distance learning and its relationship to emerging computer technologies have together offered many promises to the field of education. It is now becoming a preferred mode of study as it has several advantages including flexibility. It can help in choice of a programme and courses especially with regard to what, where and when to take the study. In addition, the learner can study while undertaking other responsibilities at the same time. Despite the promises and obvious advantages to distance learning, there are problems that need to be resolved. These problems encountered by the student fall into several distinct categories; lack of financial assistance, hidden costs, lack of support and services such as providing tutors and Distance learning materials, academic planners and schedulers, students laxity, lack of financial facilities, lack of student teacher contact and feedback, attitude of instructors, students and administrators, the feelings of alienation and isolation and technical assistance.

The isolation that results from the distance learning process can complicate the learning process for adult students. Because there is not daily or weekly face to face contact with teachers, students may have trouble in self-evaluation. Keegan (1986) believes that the separation of student and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital link of communication between the two parties. Each one of these has an effect of the overall quality of distance learning as a product. In many ways, each of these issues relates to the others. More so than traditional students, distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988). These insecurities are founded in personal and school related issues such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These pressures often result in higher dropout rates than among traditional students (Keegan, 1985).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Moore & Lockee, (1998) Distance learning is used to describe any of a number of instructional situations. Although it is thought of as a new term, distance learning has been around for well over 100 years. As technology has changed, so has the definition of distance learning. Videotaped lectures have been a standard in university and professional courses for the last two decades (Moore & Lockee, 1998). Audiotapes and lessons sent through the mail have been used in correspondence courses to teach subjects such as foreign language for quite some time (Teaster & Blieszner, 1999). Today, the Internet and compressed video have taken distance learning in new directions, allowing distance learning to occur in real time. Live video instruction is the most popular and fastest growing delivery mode in the United States (Ostendorf, 1997) Many of the promises of distance learning are financial in nature. Universities hope to save money by delivering education to students that are unable to attend classes because of time or distance.

The theory is that class size increases while the overhead remains the same. In a 2001 article by Burton Bollag and Martha Ann Overland, they say that developing countries are turning to state run distance education programs to take the place of ever increasing enrollments and a lack of physical building space. (1995). Of course there is also wide use in the Kenya both in the public and private sectors. It should be obvious by these examples and by the definition of distance learning, that it can meet the promise to deliver classes to a geographically broad and diverse population. Not only that, but the need seems to be strong for such programs. From this need, many Universities are feeling the pressure to control their costs, improve quality of instruction, focus on students needs, and respond to the competitive pressures (Horgan, 1998). Distance learning technologies have the potential to assist in solving these problems. In 1994, Basom and Sherritt surveyed higher education administrators and state politicians to find out what they thought would be the major problems facing American higher education in the next millennium. The findings of Basom and Sherritt were that meeting increased demands at a time of decreased resources, increasing or maintaining access, using technology more efficiently, and sharing resources across state lines so that colleges won't have to be all things to all people.

However Distance learning seems to address all of these issues. Administrators hope that distance learning methods will help make higher education more cost-effective (Dibiase, 2000). This type of answer may be seen as a quick fix for many administrators. If not approached seriously however, the distance programs can quickly become second rate. The convenience of time and space is a big promise made by distance learning. Students do not have to physically be with the instructor in space and, depending on the method used, they do not have to be together in time as well. This is a great advantage for non-traditional students who cannot attend at regular times. Data from the School of Continuing and Distance Education (SCDE) and University of Nairobi Enterprises and Services Limited (UNES) for 2006 show that out of a total enrolment of 6,740 learners, only 4,467 (66%) were actively pursuing the course; implying that about 2,273 (33%) were inactive mainly because of financial constraints. The situation is attributed to limited financing programmes at the national level. Although HELB was established to further higher education, limited financial support from the exchequer makes it difficult to provide assistance to learners outside regular academic programmes.

Although distance learning is not new, it has not received respect in the academic community because of the number and seriousness of problems presented here. The dramatic growth of the adult learner population is making distance learning an increasingly popular choice of learning techniques. Further study of student demographics and motivators will help target the adult learner population and will help institutions develop course materials and techniques appropriately. Close scrutiny of the intrinsic problems in distance education will help overcome problems encountered by students and faculty. Understanding and mitigating technology problems are important, especially with the rapid expansion of technology. Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance learning classroom.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

The data was collected using both questionnaire and interview methods. Questionnaires were distributed to DL students, lecturers, management of these universities. The research was also conducted by a way of interviewing the DL students to find out if there are any challenges which they are facing.

### 3.2 Target population

The survey was carried out at Kenya Methodist University, JKUAT, Nairobi University, and Moi University (Mombasa Campuses). The research covered a target population of 100 respondents divided into several groups with distinct characteristics that forms the DL students of Mombasa campuses.

**Table 3.1 Target population**

Population category	Respondents	Percentage
Moi University	20	20%
KEMU	30	30%
KU	30	30%
Nairobi University	20	20%
Total	100	100%

**Source: Author (2009)**

*3.3 Sampling and Sample size*

From the target population of 100, a sample of 50 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure equitable distribution of respondents among the four categories as illustrated below.

**Table 3.2 Sample size**

Population category	Respondents	Ratio	Sample
Moi University	20	0.2	20
KEMU	30	0.3	30
KU	30	0.3	30
Nairobi University	20	0.2	20
Total	100	1.0	100

**Source: Author (2009)**

*3.4 Data collection Methods*

In the data collection methods, questionnaires were distributed to 100 DLM students in all the universities. Both direct, open ended questions and closed ended questions aiming at giving the respondent room to air their own views in regard to the factors contributing to poor performance. Interviews will also be used as a method of data collection.

*3.5 Sampling method*

A sample of 100 respondents was selected from a target population of 100 using stratified sampling technique. This will ensure even distribution from the four stratas that is Moi University, KEMU, KU and Nairobi University.

*3.6 Data analysis and presentation*

The data collected was coded with a view to retain and adopt only the relevant data. The relevant data collected was analyzed and the retail descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages was used for data analysis and presented inform of tables and pie charts.

**4. FINDINGS ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

The study sought to investigate factors that affect the performance of DLM students. What may we conclude from the promises and problems of distance learning? Are there possibilities for improvement in the future? The technology will undoubtedly keep improving and the price will drop, as technology is prone to do once it comes into general use. Already we see improvements in the delivery systems of compressed video and computer assisted instruction. Despite student problems with distance learning, studies indicate they are relatively satisfied with what they are receiving.

Two other findings were generally favorable and included comments on how the course could be improved. The first suggested the instructors needed to be comfortable with the medium, and that the students needed to have more guidance on how to fully take advantage of the presentation. The second showed that students were highly satisfied with the instructors and the course, but that direct interaction with the instructor played no role in the students' satisfaction. It would seem one element that needs immediate improvement is with instructors. The literature indicates a need for instructors to adapt their teaching methods to the distance learning format. Keegan (1995) shows many excellent ways that instructors can better prepare for the classroom including multimedia use, speaking voice, and even font size considerations. Instructors also need to realize that the technician is an integral part of the experience of distance learning and treat them as such. Many times opinions and communication between the technician and the instructor are not shared either because the technician's role is unclear, or there is a shared perception of a difference in status between the two.

Instructors must be motivated to prepare adequately for classes. Part of the responsibility for motivation must lie with the administration and their support of the program. Because teaching a distance learning class involves a new role for instructors, administrators must provide them with the time, the tools, and the training to meet these new responsibilities. Administration needs to train and educate instructors on this role and how to meet the

challenges. But, lacking the heart for distance education, they cannot bring themselves to support it with adequate personnel, simple supplies, and a reasonable operating budget. This sort of attitude from administration can do nothing but trickle down into the instructors and the students. Administrators need to carefully weigh their goals and objectives when taking on a distance education program. Despite the need for improvement, the future of distance learning seems bright. Increasing numbers of students enrolling in distance learning classes underscore the need for comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance education if it is to become the educational model of the future. Despite the cost, coordination, and training that must be put into a program, it has great potential to deliver and receive educational programs to and from remote sites.

### Summary of Findings

Because of its flexibility in choice of programmes and courses in regard to what where and when to study, distance learning has promised to deliver classes to geographically broad and diverse population, it is still faced with many impediments which needs to be reviewed. Despite the promises and the obvious advantages, these problems need to be resolved which the students encounter:-

a) Lack of financial assistance

Financial costs of the study is higher and the student is forced to source for the funds single handed either from savings, contributions from family and friends, fundraising, loans from financial institutions and other sources. This many demoralize the student and may lead to drop – out and performance was negatively affected.

b) Hidden Costs Involved

Some costs that are not openly included in the structure and may be required at any time to buy learning materials and any other requirement that may arise. This will inconvenience the learner at a time when such preparations are not made in advance. Generally, the performance was directly affected.

c) Lack of student

A lecture contact is a main factor in the leaning process. This direct contact assist the student to get assistance at any time of need and the lecturer is able to know the extent of his work – He is able to assist the learner who has problem, proceed to the next level of recapture where students didn't capture well. This is in contrast to distance learning where a lecture proceeds regardless of whether he/she is understood or not.

d) Altitude of Lecturer is imperative in the learning process

This is not taken into account in distance learning since video – taped lessons or lectures paged on the internet or audio tapes will not take altitude of the lecture to the student thus the student will not read the importance of a particular issue and at times the students laxity affects his performance.

e) Student training in reference to technical issues is importance such that the students must be practically on the ground to learn some operations technically to be well acquainted with his / her areas of study. This is not offered in distance learning and will definitely affect his performance. It is an important factor in self evaluation. This vital link is important since it creates an open communication between the two parties.

f) It was established that insecurity will arise as a result of disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These insecurities may result into higher – drop outs rates that the traditional students.

g) It was also established that B.E.D (Arts) through distance learning was relatively more cost efficient than the regular traditional mode due to the effective cost management practices and methodologies adopted in distance learning.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

The study was guided by the following objectives

- 1) To establish is lack of students – lecture contact contributes to poor performance of distance learning students.
- 2) To establish if lack of financial facilities from HELB affects the performance of distance learning students.
- 3) To establish whether the altitude of instructors and lectures affects the performance of distance learning students in Mombasa.
- 4) To establish whether the lack of student training in reference to technical issues is a factor affecting performance of distance learning students.

With its advantage of flexibility in choice of programmes and courses in regard to regard to what, where and when to study where learner can study while taking other responsibilities, there are problems that need to be solved for it to be successful. As the study concludes, funding is the greatest challenge accessing education. Learners are expected to finance their education in distance learning from their own sources and with the rising cost of living which delays its growth and expansion as resources are diverted to cater for immediate family needs. The study establish that affordability of a particular course through distance learning was statistically

associated with learners' gender, total number of dependants, average income and the highest educational level: learners are to outsource their funding for distance learning through loans from commercial banks, personal savings, donations, support from family members and bursaries. The study deduces that impediments to effective participation in the distance learning includes inadequate time to engage in income generating activities, merger incomes, high costs of residential fees and inadequacy of learning materials.

The study concludes that distance learning students are more likely to have insecurities about learning which are founded in personal and school rated issues such as financial cost of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their study and lack of support from employers. This exerts pressures on them and may lead to drop-outs. Because of no daily or weekly contact between student and lecture, isolation will result which may have an effect on the student to self-evaluate himself. This removes a vital link of communication where feedback at immediate effect is important between the two parties. This affects the overall quality of distance learning. Factors such as hidden costs that are involved in distance learning, students' laxity, and lack of students training in reference to technical issues which is very vital, tutors / instructors' altitude are directly correlated to poor performance of distance learning students as they are vital factors in the learning process. Because of the number of problems presented here, distance learning has not received much respect in the academic circles and community at large but on the same note, the adult learner population has been realized to get a dramatic growth giving it a popular choice of learning techniques.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The study puts the following recommendations to test where a close shouting of the intrinsic problems encountered by distance learning students are recognized and programmes put in place to alleviate the same. Based on the findings, the study recommended that the HELB Act be amended to cover distance learning learners; that annual budgetary allocations to HELB for loans and bursaries should be increased; and that a database on gender, total number of dependants, level of income and education level should be developed and used to decide on the degree of financial support to learners.

Other recommendations emphasized on formulating a national policy on financing distance learning learners; strengthening Constituency Development Fund (CDF) programmes; improving networking with stakeholders; creating special funding grants at the university and establishing a revolving fund. In further research, the study recommended the need for study on the role of employers in financing distance learning; the impact of e-learning on affordability of distance learning; factors encouraging drop out and deferment of studies and the cost-benefit analysis of the distance learning.

- a) HELB Act is amended to cover distance learning learners – Annual budgetary allocations to HELB for loans and bursaries increased.
- b) Database on gender, total number of dependants, level of income and educational level be developed and used to decide on the degree of financial support to learners.
- c) Formulating a national policy on financing distance learning learners
  - Strengthening constituency development fund programmes.
  - Improving networking with stakeholders
  - Creating special funding grants at the university
  - Establishing a revolving fund.
- d) A research should be undertaken into course development techniques which will help learning institutions understand methods that works best in the distance learning classroom.
- e) Understanding and mitigating technological problems are important especially with technological dynamic in the global arena.
- f) Both public and private universities to put together main factors affecting performance of distance learning students and formulate mechanism of mitigating the same.

### 5.3 Areas of Further Study

The following areas of studies should be put into consideration for further studies with regard to distance learning:-

- a) Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand methods that works best in distance learning classroom.
- b) A study into the impact of e-learning on affordability of distance learning should be placed.
- c) Factors encouraging drop-outs and deferment of studies especially in distance learning should be done in a complete study.
- d) There is also a recommendation on the need to study the role of employers in financing distance learning.
- e) Cost benefit analysis study should be undertaken-of distance learning.

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