

Challenges Confronting Study Centre Coordinators of the Distance Education Programme of the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Francis Owusu-Mensah^{1*} Jerry Addison Anyan² Charles Denkyi²

1.Centre for Teacher Development and Action Research, Institute for Educational Development and Extension, University of Education, Winneba, PO box 25, Winneba, Ghana

2.Institute for Educational Development and Extension, University of Education, Winneba, PO box 25, Winneba, Ghana

Abstract

One major aspect of the student support system of the distance education programme of the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is the management of study centres. When Study Centre Coordinators are overwhelmed with challenges, the quality of the support services they provide for the Distance Education students is affected negatively. The importance of this study therefore, lies in the fact that it is a wake up call for Distance Education managers to adequately resource Study Centre Coordinators to enhance the quality of education delivery to the Distance Education students. The study sought to find out the challenges confronting the Study Centre Coordinators (SCCs) at the various study centres. The study employed qualitative methodology, which made use of semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions to collect qualitative data. Seventeen out of the 27 Study Centre Coordinators participated in the study. The challenges during the study included, delays in supply of materials such as modules, inadequate facilities and communication gap between the headquarters [Institute for Educational Development and Extension/Centre for Distance Education] (IEDE/CDE) and the study centres as well as delayed payment of financial claims. Based on the findings, it was recommended that UEW and other distance learning institutions should ensure effective communication with the study centres, devise more efficient means of making prompt payment of tutorial and all claims, and ensure that course modules, tablets and other related materials are dispatched early enough and in sufficient quantities to the study centres for distribution to students.

Keywords: Study Centre Coordinators, Open and distance learning, study centres, learner support services

1. Introduction

The myriad of benefits derived from education has made it imperative for democratic societies to provide their citizens with the education they need throughout their lives. This has made education a top priority on the agenda of most developing countries including Ghana (Akrofi, 2010).

Until the last decade, formal education at tertiary level in Ghana had been mainly residential, campus-based, with face-to-face interactions with lecturers for the full duration of chosen programmes (Lawoe, 2005). The search for alternative implementation agent for the educational policies gave rise to the evolution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in the sub-Saharan African countries (Onwe, 2013).

Distance Education (DE) as an alternative approach to the conventional face-to-face approach to education has witnessed wide acceptance and sustained growth all over the world. This has been necessitated by the increase in population and increased demand for higher education, which cannot be met without developing alternative strategies to provide for time and space adjustments (Rashid and Rashid, 2012; Perraton, 2004).

In Ghana, the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is one of the tertiary institutions providing teacher education by distance. The University has a special mandate to produce professional educators to spearhead a new national vision of education aimed at redirecting Ghana's effort along the path of rapid economic and social development. Its vision is to become an internationally reputable institution for teacher education and research.

The Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) runs the distance programmes of the UEW through its Centre for Distance Education (CDE) using the hybrid mode of print and online methods of delivery. These include diploma and post diploma programmes in Basic Education, Early Childhood Education, Business Management, Accounting and Human Resource Management. It also runs Master of Education programmes in English, Mathematics, Science and Mentorship and a postgraduate diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

As part of its support structure for the distance programme, UEW follows the United Kingdom (UK) Open University model of decentralised student support system with study centres scattered nationwide and tutors as core staff members for all enrolled students (Tait, 2003).

The UEW Distance Education programme currently, has twenty-seven (27) study centres across the ten regions of Ghana, being managed by Study Centre Coordinators (SCCs) with the assistance of senior

administrative assistants. The SCCs render very useful services to the distance learning students by overseeing both academic and administrative activities of the study centres.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Even though the SCCs are expected to play their role as indicated above, they are not living up to expectation following some observed shortcomings such as delays in responding to communication, inability to effectively handle student complaints and lack of effective supervision of tutorials. Informal discussions with some of the coordinators revealed that they had some challenges.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study therefore, was to investigate the challenges faced by SCCs of the UEW Distance Education programme and make recommendations for improved management of the study centres.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the research objectives were to:

- i) Establish the challenges faced by UEW Study Centre Coordinators in the discharge of their roles and responsibilities
- ii) Find out how effectively they have managed the challenges and
- iii) Make recommendations for improving on the management of the study centres of UEW and other distance learning institutions.

1.5 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the challenges encountered by SCCs of the UEW distance education programme?
- 2) How have the SCCs been managing the challenges?
- 3) What are the solutions to the challenges of SCCs/administrators of the UEW distance education programme?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The findings will assist the UEW and other distance education institutions to improve upon the delivery of support services through the study centres.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

2.1 Meaning of Distance Education

Keegan (1996) provides a comprehensive description of distance education. He perceives distance education to have the following characteristics:

- Quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process. This distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education.
- Influence of an educational organisation both in planning and preparation on learning materials and in the provision of student support services. This distinguishes it from private and “teach yourself programmes”.
- Use of technical media-print, audio, video and computer as means of content delivery.
- Provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate a dialogue. This distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education.
- Quasi-permanent absence of learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for teaching and socialisation purposes.

2.2 Learner Support Services in Distance Education

One important aspect of distance education is the provision of learner support system, which is indicated in the second point of Keegan’s definition. Learner support encompasses all of those interactive activities and services in education intended to support and facilitate the learning process. According to Alan Tait, (1995:232) the elements of Open Distance Learning (ODL) which are commonly referred to as student support are made up of tutoring, whether face-to-face, by correspondence, telephone or electronically; counseling; the organisation of study centres; interactive teaching through Television (TV) and radio, and other activities.

As pointed out by Tait, organization of study centres constitutes a key component of student support system and this forms the focus of the study.

From the discussions of the concept of distance education and learner support system, four key issues are worthy of mention. These are:

- Distance education represents substantially an industrialised process of teaching and learning, and support to students is conceived within the framework of a service industry (Sewart, 1993)
- Support to students is often delivered within a decentralised, distributed or franchised model, and accordingly many of the core activities like tutoring and counseling are ‘invisible’ to those with management responsibilities.
- There are specific issues with regard to the ways in which support services as a sector of activity relate to others within an ODL institution, conventionally divided into course production, operations and administration
- In ODL as well as elsewhere in education, there is rapid change and at present considerable confusion about the relative status of students, clients and customers, which makes management problematic (Tait, 2000).

2.3 Justification for provision of learner support in distance education

Thorpe (2002:108) nicely poses the question about the importance of learner support in distance education when she asked, ‘if we can no longer assume that there will be two distinct sub-systems with contrasting roles, does it imply that we no longer need a concept of learner support?’

The above question has often been addressed in relation to the problems and needs of distance education students. According to Robinson (1981:141), students in distance-learning systems face not only the problems of conventional students, but also those generated by the system itself. She argued that the problems distance education students face can be put under three main categories, which are:

- those relating to study techniques and learning difficulties, which may well increase in complexity with the range of media being used;
- those arising from an individual trying to interact with a distant and sometimes impersonal institution;
- personal problems which affects the student’s work.

The three categories of problems can also be classified as academic, administrative and personal respectively. She identifies some of the study and learning problems as effective time management, difficulty in expressing their thought in written work and developing adequate reading and comprehension skills to facilitate effective application of what they read and also coping with the volume of reading required.

2.4 Challenges facing management of distance education

Distance education is plagued with many drawbacks. The major challenges to distance education according to Galusha (1997), [as cited in Akrofi (2010)], are student, faculty, organisational and course-related.

In the distance learning environment, administrators, teachers, and learners must attend to multiple tasks and responsibilities in personal and professional lives while providing and pursuing education. Despite the great convenience and benefits of distance learning opportunities, there are problems and challenges that Distance Learning Administrators (DLAs) actually face in leading units, departments, and institutions offering distance education (McFarlane, 2011).

As in the case of traditional educational administrators, DLAs or leaders should expect to meet a variety of problems and challenges in the course of ensuring the effective and efficient operation of distance learning schools. Valentine (2002) has identified five major problems and challenges to distance learning that administrators must deal with: quality of instruction, costs effectiveness, misuse of technology, role of technicians, and problems with equipment.

The challenges associated with the administration of learner support to distance education students through the study centre concept has been universally found to be typical of dual mode institutions (institutions which offer both conventional and distance learning programmes). According to Paul (1988) when dual mode distance teaching institutions face tighter budget, it is invaluablely, student support services that suffer cut back first. He attributes this unfortunate situation to what he calls “politics of decision making”. This view is again, supported by Dekkers and Sharma (1988) who found that funding for support services in dual mode institutions is often on ‘an adhoc basis’ and for some providers, there is competition for the same funds between materials production and support services.

Potashnik and Capper (1998) have also argued that the type and extent of support provided at the study centres vary widely and that this variability is due in large part to the increased cost associated with providing support which causes institutions to be more concerned with generating income than providing support needed by the student.

From the above review, it has become evident that the administration of distance study centres has certain challenges. The literature has shown that provision of learner support at the study centres often face financial difficulties. It is not planned as an integral part of the programme at the initial stages but it is often an afterthought. In Ghana, and most developing countries, universities which offer distance education programmes,

operate the dual mode system which makes the administration of support at the study centres problematic. However, some may be general while others are context specific. This study therefore, seeks to find out the challenges associated with the administration of study centres of the UEW distance education programme and draws implications for other distance education providers in Ghana and other developing countries.

3. Research Method

The study was a descriptive survey, which was intended to identify the major challenges of Study Centre Coordinators in managing the study centres of the UEW distance education programme. In order to gain a rich picture of the challenges of the Study Centre Coordinators, we chose a qualitative approach and employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges.

3.1 Population and Sample Size

The study covered Study Centre Coordinators of the 27 study centres of IEDE distance programme. They were purposely selected because they were the managers of the study centres and had gained varied experiences over the years on the programme. The target respondents were the Study Centre Coordinators who participated in the 2014 annual review retreat of the IEDE.

Seventeen (17) out of the 27 Study Centre Coordinators were involved in the interview. This consisted of 7 from the northern sector and 10 from the southern sector. Three of the Coordinators had just been recruited so they were not included in the interview.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

The researchers conducted interviews during the 2014 annual review retreat organised for the Study Centre Coordinators by IEDE. The first two days were used for the interview while the third day was used for two focus group discussions, which was meant to further clarify some of the issues that emerged from the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.3. Data Analysis

The taped interviews were reviewed immediately after recording and the interviewers took note of the major themes that emerged. After the interviews, the tapes were reviewed and coded by each interviewer. The themes were then compared to identify the dominant themes (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). This was used to do partial transcription of the data through which specific examples were identified to illustrate the coded themes (Punch, 2005).

The transcripts were read iteratively to identify a number of common trends in Study Centre Coordinators' challenges. These trends are described in the Findings section below and illustrated with quotes from Study Centre Coordinators. The aim was to paint as full a picture as possible of the variations in perspectives of respondents based on the principles of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The use of specific examples to illustrate generic themes was also used as a way to focus on developing coordinator-led narrative (Punch, 2005).

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1: Challenges faced by Study Centre Coordinators

A number of issues emerged from the interviews with the SCCs. These have been categorised into eight (8) main thematic areas. These have been elaborated on as follows:

4.1.1 Ineffective communication between IEDE and study centres

The majority of the SCCs expressed concern that decisions taken at the headquarters were not communicated to them in good time. This inhibited their ability to adequately respond to students' questions on certain issues. The quotations below illustrate these concerns:

"Letters from the Institute through the postal system sometimes delay unduly before it gets to our study centre. As a result, I often rely on colleague study centre coordinators to get information"

"I do not receive regular advice on payments made to tutors which creates a communication gap between us and the Institute."

The need for effective communication in distance education cannot be over-emphasised. Tait (2004), for example, argues that since it is accepted that successful and satisfied students represent primary institutional goals, and also since effective communication between a distance teaching institution on the one hand and tutors

and students on the other has the effect of motivating the latter, it is essential that open and distance learning institutions foster the needed communication with their tutors and students. The essential role effective communication plays in the successful delivery of distance education has also been supported by Bof (2004).

According to Bof (2004), effective communication in distance education is needed for all the stakeholders to feel part of the organisation and which in itself is a source of motivation.

4.1.2 Lack of certain facilities at the study centres

The SCCs mentioned inadequate places of convenience, places for nursing mothers, inadequate classrooms and furniture pieces for tutorials to cater for all distance students during tutorials. Nursing mothers attending tutorials were saddled with the difficulty of securing places for their babies and caretakers. These concerns are illustrated in the statements below:

“There is apathy in attending lectures among some students especially on the part of lactating mothers because there are no convenient places around to keep their children.”

“During tutorials, we experience pressure on existing toilet facilities which creates inconvenience to students of host institutions. Our learners at times struggle for chairs with students of the host institution”

This has arisen because the University does not have its own fit for purpose study centres with all these facilities. The senior high schools and the colleges of education which host the UEW DE programme do not have these facilities. As rightly captured in one of the quotations above, it can be a major cause of absenteeism and eventual drop out by some adults. For example Vergitis and Panagiotakopoulos (2002), found that family and personal reasons accounted for 92% of the reasons given by students who withdrew from Education Studies while the same reasons were responsible for 88% of the reasons for withdrawal from Informatics course at the Hellenic Open University, Greece.

4.1.3 Difficulty in keeping/managing records

Some of the SCCs indicated that it was difficult to maintain up to date records on students, course modules and other logistics, which made it difficult for them to readily respond to some requests from the Institute. Some comments to this effect is stated below:

“Keeping records at the centre is a big challenge because the centre lacks record keeping materials such as files, pins, cabinet, receiving and dispatching books. Everything is improvised and it makes the office cumbersome.”

“We have very limited space for storing the course modules and tablets, which has taken up almost every available space at the study centre. It makes it difficult to regularly count and update records on them.”

In distance education, student records management is one of the ingredients of quality assurance (Calder 1994). Thus for Calder, to be able to assess the quality of a programme or service, one needs to have some base line data which must form part of the records of the organisation. Similarly, Randell (2005:1) hints that records provide information about ‘diverse groups of students that help institutions provide a continuously improving quality learning experience’.

4.1.4 Delays in Supplies of essential materials

Most of the SCCs expressed concern about delays in the supply of essential supplies needed to run the study centres. They enumerated supplies such as course modules, tablets, student ID cards, and stationery items including toners for copiers among others. According to them, this affected the smooth conduct of tutorials and often created agitations among students and between them and students. These concerns are captured in the statements below from some of them:

“Module supplied to students at times were inadequate in number and in some cases arrive very late. A typical example is a book on research methods for Post Diploma I second semester, the programme has ended with over forty students without the books so we pleaded with them to make photocopies from their mates”.

“ID card generation was also another challenge where it came in bits and pieces. As we speak today some students are without ID cards.”

“Tablets supplied to students came in late and in some cases, students received them at the tail end of

their programme.”

Administratively, this challenge should be a source of concern to distance education administrators. Considering, the important role that the course modules and the tablets play in distance learning, not getting them in good time will frustrate the students as they will not be able to read their modules before attending tutorials and also be able to use the tablets to search for additional information online. Distance education is basically independent learning, which requires that, at the beginning of the programme, students should get all their course materials and other learning materials in place.

4.1.5 Delays in payment of tutors' allowances and other claims

Majority of the SCCs interviewed lamented on delays in payment of tutors' allowances and other claims such as invigilation, transport and travel claims. Others included refund for payments effected at the study centres and reimbursement of imprest to the study centre. It was also mentioned that payment advice was not forthcoming in most cases. This is reflected in the following statements:

“Payment of tutorial, T&T and script marking claims are not made regularly to tutors. It takes a long time before tutors receive their claims and this creates a lot of agitations among tutors. Some tutors are not motivated to stay on the programme”

“Imprest for managing the centre comes once a while. The Coordinator in most cases, bears the expenditure of the centre and puts in the claims later. One of the challenging expenses has been the purchasing of prepaid electric units almost every week by the Coordinator before it is refunded later.”

“Payment of commission on sales takes too long. This should be paid early to motivate us to sell the forms”

This is consistent with a similar study, which was conducted in Nigeria by Obioha & Ndidi (2011:94), which identified irregular payment and omission of some facilitators' honorarium as one of the administrative challenges. This according to the author "... results in negative motivation of the affected facilitators. They become frustrated and their rate of work will be drastically reduced".

This finding also confirms Paul's (1988) observation that provision of support normally universally faces financial challenges because it is not considered to be cost effective. This also confirms the findings of Dekkers and Sharma (1988).

4.1.6 Headquarters not showing interest in social issues of tutors

Some respondents also expressed the concern that there was a seeming lack of interest shown by IEDE in the social issues affecting tutors and their families, which tend to affect the moral of tutors. They identified social issues such as death of a tutor or relation. The following statement reflects this concern:

“Death of Part – Time Tutors: Can IEDE recognise this in a small way? Even a consoling letter from IEDE makes the Part-time tutor recognised and motivated and the team spirit is strengthened.”

This challenge is related to institutional identity which both distance students and their tutors value so much. Distance students and their tutors want to portray to the general public that they are part of the university. This confirms Owusu-Mensah's (2011) finding that the nature of the attachment of the tutors of UEW DE programme to the university was one of the key factors of their job satisfaction.

4.1.7 Delays in feedback on student requests/complaints

All the SCCs interviewed expressed concern about delays in receiving feedback on students' complaints over issues that are sent to the IEDE headquarters. A number of such complaints bordered on rectification of incomplete grades or results (IC's) for students with genuine reasons. Others have to do with faulty tablets and sim card registration among others. They attributed this to irregular communication between study centres and the IEDE headquarters. This concern can be seen from the quotations below:

“Those problems that are within the means of the centre are responded to with little or no delay but those that need external attention are forwarded to IEDE but the concern of students is that the feedbacks delay in coming or sometimes do not come at all e.g. sim cards.”

“A number of students with ICs in their results have still not been rectified in spite of several reports made to the IEDE headquarters”

“Some of the tablets supplied to students had faulty charging systems and were returned to IEDE but

we have not yet received any feedback on them which places us at a disadvantaged position before students’

The delay in responding to students’ requests and complaints as indicated by the coordinators constitute a major administrative lapse in the provision of support services for the students. This was stressed by Thorpe (2004) in her function related definition of learner support as those entire elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners before, during and after the learning process.

Complaints from students create both systemic and cultural issues for education in general. For ODL, there is the particular issue of how easy it is for students learning at a distance to make their complaints, and the impact on their progress or conversely dropout, if channels are not created (Fage & Mayes, 1997).

4.1.8 Inadequate ICT facilities and libraries at the Study Centres

Another area of concern expressed by some of the study centre coordinators was the inadequate number of computers for ICT lessons and libraries for the students at the study centres. Some of them indicated that they had received library books but there was not enough space to display them for students. Most of them acknowledged that internet had been connected to the study centres however, they often experienced connectivity problems. The quotation below attests to the problem:

“The centre office has been relocated and our internet facility has been cut therefore, receiving and sending information has been a problem. The centre has to rely on the use of a modem which comes with a cost to the centre.”

“A room has been allocated for the ICT centre but it is yet to be furnished for use”

The need for library services for distance education students has been identified by a number of authors and researchers. For example, as mentioned earlier in the literature, authors like Reid (1995) and Robinson (1995) listed library facilities as one of the elements that make up the learner support system. Access to library by distance education students becomes more paramount in dual-mode institutions (George and Frank, 2004)

The inadequate use of ICT at the study centres is a major drawback in the distance education programme of UEW because the current trend is gradual integration of ICT into the DE programme. Thus, making it a hybrid mode. This integration will not be effective as expected so long as the University does not have its own purpose built study centres. Some of the areas where ICT is being introduced are online applications, supply of tablets with preloaded course modules and sim cards for Internet connectivity.

Inadequacy of key facilities such as ICT and library appear to confirm the argument by King (1988) that most support services provided for students tend to be “added on” rather than being integral to the design of the whole system.

Research Question 2: Study Centre Coordinators management of the challenges

The response to the above research question was limited because all the SCCs interviewed indicated the same strategy, which was used to manage the challenges. They made every effort to improve public relations for the University by explaining issues to students and tutors in order to calm them and continually assured them of delivery.

While this strategy, adopted by the SCCs is commendable and in line with their role as front line support providers, it cannot be sustained. Continual assurance and promises when not backed by actual delivery will turn them into liars in which case both the students and the tutors will not take them serious again. It may also affect the image of the University, especially when students and tutors begin agitations and go public.

5. Efforts by Management to address the challenges

Management has instituted a number of measures to address the challenges facing the study centre coordinators.

To improve upon communication between the study centres and IEDE headquarters, Management of IEDE has ensured the creation of email addresses for all the study centres through which information is communicated to the study centres. In addition, IEDE Management has given the Study Centre Coordinators mobile telephones with monthly free call credits for communication among the study centre coordinators and heads of Centres/Sections/Units at IEDE headquarters.

Furthermore, the University is setting up its own printing press to ensure that course books are printed and supplied early enough to Distance Education students. This will eliminate the existing delay which has been attributed to prolonged public procurement processes. Again, procurement of desktop computers and office furniture has been initiated. Litter bins have been acquired for distribution to study centres. Management has also decided to procure and supply classroom furniture to host institutions periodically to augment the short fall arising out of breakages.

Finally, a staff welfare scheme is being instituted to cater for the welfare needs of the centre

Coordinators and tutors at the various study centres.

6. Conclusion

The study has established that the Study Centre Coordinators of the UEW DE programme are beset with real challenges, which militate against their performance and management of the study centres. The challenges mainly center around delays in supply of materials such as modules, inadequate facilities and communication gap between the headquarters and the study centres and delayed payment of tutorial claims and other allowances of part time tutors. As a result of the challenges, the study centre Coordinators are constantly doing public relations work for the University.

The management of student support services has challenges which result from competition of limited funding between student support and other component of the distance education programme and lack of proper integration of student support services into the distance programme at the initial planning stages. This has implications for distance education providers in Ghana such as University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and University of Ghana, Legon in particular, and in developing countries in general, where funding has always been the problem.

7. Recommendations

In addition to the efforts being made by the Study Centre Coordinators and Management to address the challenges, we also wish to recommend that the University of Education, Winneba, IEDE and other distance education providers in Ghana and developing countries should:

- Ensure effective communication with the study centres by keeping them informed about developments.
- Devise a more efficient way of making prompt payments of tutorials and all claims to the study centres
- Ensure that course modules, tablets and other related materials are dispatched early enough and in sufficient quantities to the study centres for distribution to students.
- Hold regular meetings with the study centres, their host colleges/school heads to foster mutual understanding and unity.
- Ensure that the study centres are well equipped with ICT and library facilities to enhance teaching and learning and for records keeping. An effective maintenance system should also be instituted.
- Ensure that proper costing of both material production and support services at the study centres is done from the initial stages because there is most often, competition for the limited funding by the various aspects of the distance education system.

8. Recommended Areas for further research

Future study should look into the training needs of Study Centre Coordinators and their Administrators as well as the quality of Students and Coordinators relationship

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Francis Owusu-Mensah obtained a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) degree in Open and Distance Learning from the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom in 2007. He is currently, the Head of Centre for Teacher Development and Action Research (CETDAR) of the Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) of the University of Education, Winneba. Ghana.

Jerry Addison Anyan obtained a Master of Public Administration (M.P.A.) degree from the University of Ghana, Legon in 2004. He is currently a Senior Assistant Registrar and Head of Registry at the Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) of the University of Education, Winneba. Ghana.

Charles Denkyi obtained a Master of Education (M.ED) degree in Administration and Management from the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana in 2006. He is currently an Assistant Registrar in charge of examinations at the Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) of the University of Education, Winneba. Ghana.

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