Perceptions of Students Towards Use of Distance Learning: The Case in an Executive Masters Business Program in Ghana

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Abstract

Distance learning has become a recognized method for delivering educational content in institutions of higher education. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions held by graduate students about distance learning offered by the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. The survey utilized a 20 question survey with 691 respondents, who were adult learners enrolled in an Executive Masters of Business/Public Administration Program. The results of the study indicate that distance learning is most patronised by an older (>30 years) and married student population largely because it allows them to combine work and study. The data indicate that student perceptions of distance learning were positive. Respondents indicated that they are satisfied with teaching and learning by distance and also satisfied with learner support provided by the host institute.There remain concerns, however, regarding the provision of prompt feedback on assignments by facilitators, lack of enough study facilities to help students with their program and difficulty they experienced with learning materials that were not self explanatory. Addressing these concerns will improve students' distance learning experiences and enhance students learning by distance.

Introduction

Distance Learning (DL) has become a recognized method for delivering educational content in institutions of higher education. According to Allen and Seaman (2007), improving students' access to higher education has been cited as a major reason for offering DL courses and programs. Distance Learning involves a student-centred approach in which the instructor takes the role of the facilitator and students engage in peer learning (Maor, 2003; Mitchell *et al,* 2005). The literature on education cites several examples of research that has been conducted on DL (Chambers, 2006; Hagel and Shaw, 2006; Liao, 2006; Muilenburg and Berge, 2005).There is emphasis in the literature on the importance of research for improving students' DL experiences (Levin and Wadmany, 2006; White, 2005). According to Sahin and Shelley (2008) students' needs and perceptions should be central in the design, development and delivering distance education courses. Overall, the literature suggests that there is a need to understand better the variables that affect student enjoyment of distance learning courses. This may lead to a greater understanding of the benefits and limitations of learning by distance and could be useful to programs considering the implementation of DL initiatives and/ or students planning to enrol in DL.

From the early 1990s, DL began to receive the attention of the Government of Ghana (Spronk, 1999) to address the excessive demand for tertiary education in the country. Distance Learning has since emerged as a tool for widening access to higher education for personnel in employment and those who could not be accommodated in the conventional tertiary education process. The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana, provides tertiary education in both conventional university classroom setting and distance learning modes. The University offers its DL programs through the

Institute of Distance Learning (IDL). Among the 15 programs offered by the IDL is the Commonwealth Masters in Business Administration and Public Administration (CEMBA/PA) whose students have had prior experience in a traditional classroom learning mode during their undergraduate studies. The mode of delivery of the CEMBA/PA program is predominantly by print medium and is supplemented by the electronic medium (virtual classroom and telephony) and occasional face-to-face tutorials. The program provides access to higher education for students who cannot attend traditional on-campus courses due to employment and family responsibilities.

With DL opportunities increasing in tertiary institutions in Ghana, there is need to understand students' perceptions regarding DL in order to implement successful programs. Sahin and Shelley (2008) contend that it is important for researchers and social scientists to explore the relationship between student satisfaction and DL. Accordingly, the study sought to assess students perceptions about distance teaching and learning to determine their level of satisfaction in DL mode compared to their experiences in conventional university classroom settings.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What demographic characteristics exist for distance learners?
2. Why did students choose the distance learning mode formats?
3. What are the student perceptions of teaching by distance?
4. What are the student perceptions of learning by distance?
5. What are the student perceptions of learner support services?

Methodology

The survey population was identified as all students enrolled in the Executive Masters of Business/Public Administration Program (CEMBA/PA) of the KNUST in the 2009/10 academic year. Data were collected from the 691 graduate students using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The use of students of the (CEMBA/PA) in the study was to achieve a more realistic picture of how students perceive DL, since they had participated in traditional on-campus programs earlier in their undergraduate studies**.**

The survey utilised a 20 close and open-ended and Likert-type scale questions to collect data for this study. It contained four selected participant demographics: gender, age, marital status and work experience. In addition, Likert-type items with a four point scale: strongly agree (a value of (1), agree (2), disagree (3) and strongly disagree (4) were included. The original questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 respondents after which revisions were made to clarify some questions.

The instrument was administered face-to-face to distance learners enrolled in the CEMBA/PA program through the assistance of the IDL program coordinators in each of the seven KNUST DL study centres. In addition to administering questionnaire, the researcher was given the permission to review students' records to verify information such as gender, birth date, years of work experience. The addition of record review introduced multiple-data-collection methods, commonly referred to as triangulation. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

Results

Demographic Variables

Table 1. Variable Labels and Descriptive Statistics

Variable labels	Frequency(N=691)	% of Respondents
Gender		
Male	515	74.5
Female	176	25.5
Age (years)		
<30	130	18.8
30-40	400	57.9
41-50	147	21.3
>50	14	2.0
Marital status		
Married	460	66.6
Single	220	31.8
Divorced	9	1.3
Separated	2	0.3
Work Experience		
<3 years	60	8.7
4-6 years	224	32.4
7-9 years	120	17.4
10 or more years	287	41.5

The results indicated a total male dominance of the program (74.5%) with majority (98.0%) of respondents within the age group 30 to 50 years. According to Dubios (2003), DL encourages older people to seek higher education. The majority (66.6%) of respondents indicated they were married confirming studies conducted by Frimpong-KWAPONG (2007) and Qureshi (2002) who found that the Distance Education format attracted more married participants than single students. Most respondents (91.3 percent) indicated they were in employment and had working experience ranging from 4-10 years or more. Danesh (2003) asserts that Distance Learning is a viable solution for learners who face obstacles due to job responsibilities.

Why Students Choose Distance Learning

Table 2. Reasons for choosing Distance Learning by students

*Reason for choosing DL	Frequency	Percentage
Flexibility of use of time and location	318	46.0
Work commitments	329	47.6
Family commitments	26	3.8
Requirements in DL are more relaxed	7	1.0
Others	5	0.7

*multiple responses

A key research question of this study was to determine why students chose to study by DL mode. Students were given some options to choose from and were told to add to the options if DL because of

work commitment and the flexibility of use of time and location. According to Hannay *et al* (2006), 'Distance learning programs are generally designed to provide access to higher education for students who cannot attend traditional courses due to employment, marital status, family responsibilities and distance'. Nearly 5% of the students indicated that they were compelled to the program because of family commitments and the fact that the requirements in DL are more relaxed. Finally, others (< 1%) cited reasons such as 'CEMBA/PA program has an international touch', 'fees charged are affordable' while others indicated that it was to seek for promotion at work place. These factors which compelled students into the program can be seen as the push factors for students who pursue DL programs.

*What are students' perceptions towards teaching by the distance***?**

Table 3. Students' perceptions towards teaching by the distance mode

Statements	N=691				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The facilitator provided prompt feedback on assignments	53 (7.7%)	267 (38.6%)	164 (23.7%)	58 (8.4%)	149 (21.6%)
The facilitator used the relevant instructional medium	140 (20.3%)	400 (57.9%)	102 (14.8%)	20 (2.8%)	29 (4.2%)
The face-to-face sessions were effective	58 (8.4%)	378 (54.7%)	143 (20.7%)	23 (3.3%)	89 (12.9%)
The content of the sessions met my expectations.	72 (10.4%)	382 (55.3%)	128 (18.5%)	36 (5.2%)	73 (10.6%)

(Note: N=Number of response, SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=Disagree, and SD=Strongly disagree)

A concern of the study was to find out what Distance Learners perceptions were towards teaching by the distance mode. As indicated in Table 3 majority of the respondents agreed with the statements that facilitators used relevant instructional medium (78%), the content of the sessions met their expectations (66%), and that occasional face-to-face sessions were effective (63%). However, about 30% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that facilitators provided prompt feedback on assignments. According to Deans (1998), the feedback received from the instructor in distance education plays a part in the success of the student. The lack of effective feedback "is the potential "Achilles heel" of distance education (Willis, 2002). Therefore, instructors need to ensure that feedback is integrated into the instructional design process of distance learning classes.

What are students' perceptions towards learning by distance?

Table 4. Perceptions of Distance Learners towards learning

Statements	N=691				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The learning materials were self explanatory	52 (7.5%)	299 (43.3%)	156 (22.6)	40 (5.8%)	144 (20.8)
Group discussions were found useful	342 (49.5%)	278 (40.2%)	49 (7.1%)	6 (0.9%)	16 (2.3%)
My use of the computer and internet were increased	236 (34.2%)	302 (43.7%)	88 (12.7%)	20 (2.9%)	45 (6.5%)
The workload in DL is too much	284 (41.1%)	238 (34.4%)	91 (13.2%)	19 (2.8%)	59 (8.5%)

(Note: N=Number of response, SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=Disagree, and SD=Strongly disagree)

Attitude toward learning in a class where members are separated by time and space is an important factor in eventual academic success. Table 4 shows that overall; students indicated their satisfaction with learning by the distance mode. Majority (about 90%) of respondents indicated that group discussions were found useful confirming earlier research which suggested that students prefer engaging in small group discussion to viewing lectures (Bland *et al*, 1992). However, there were concerns about the workload in DL being too much (75%) and learning materials not being self explanatory (27%). Respondents commented that some of the learning modules are full of assumptions making self learning difficult while others remarked that the practise of citing foreign examples is not helpful to their studies. Some respondents expressed dissatisfaction with grammatical errors and missing pages in some of the learning modules.

What are students' perceptions towards learner support system by the distance?

Table 5. Students' perceptions towards learner support system by distance

Statements	N=691				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I received enough information from IDL about my study	73 (10.5%)	343 (49.6%)	140 (20.3%)	31 (4.5%)	104 (15.1%)
I received prompt feedback about my enquiries on the program of study	74 (10.7%)	334 (48.3%)	171 (24.8%)	24 (3.5%)	88 (12.7%)
There are enough study facilities to help with my program	63 (9.1%)	232 (33.6%)	190 (27.5%)	57 (8.2%)	149 (21.6%)
Facilitation sessions are well organised	107 (15.4%)	373 (54.0%)	120 (17.4%)	16 (2.3%)	75 (10.9%)
I have recommended this program to other colleagues	229 (33.1%)	345 (49.9%)	83 (12.0%)	17 (2.5%)	17 (2.5%)

(Note: N=Number of response, SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=Disagree, and SD=Strongly disagree)

Table 5 shows items regarding students' satisfaction with learner support provided by the institute. The higher scores on the scale- 'Strongly agree', and 'Agree', indicated higher levels of satisfaction about the support services provided to students. Majority of the respondents agreed with the statements that they received enough information from IDL about their study (60%), that they received prompt feedback about enquiries on the program of study (59%), that facilitation sessions are well organised (69%) and that they will recommend this program to other colleagues (83%). According to Simmons (1991), those who have taken distance courses have generally responded positively to the experience and would recommend it to other prospective students. However about 30% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that there are enough study facilities to help with their program. They expressed dissatisfaction about lack of reading materials, reading rooms and internet facilities in study centres located outside the main campus.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The results of this study have provided evidence that Distance learning is most patronised by an older (>30 years) and married student population. The preference for distance learning by this category of students is largely because of the flexibility of use of time and location and work commitment. The study suggests that most students are satisfied with teaching and learning by distance and also satisfied with support services   provided by the host institute. However, respondents had concerns regarding the provision of prompt feedback on assignments by facilitators, lack of enough study facilities to help students with their program, the heavy workload in DL and experienced difficulty with learning materials that were not self explanatory.

With DL opportunities growing at a high rate in many tertiary institutions, there is need to ensure that prompt feedback on assignments is integrated in the instructional design process of DL courses. The provision of study facilities (computers, internet and supplementary reading materials and reading rooms) and well written instructional materials (self-explanatory, full of local examples) in the distance mode will go a long way to enhance students learning by distance.

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