Promoting equal learner support in Distance Learning: A study of Distance Teaching Universities in Central Region, Ghana

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Abstract

The study explored stakeholders' perspectives and experiences on promoting equal learner support in distance learning in Distance Teaching Universities in Central Region, Ghana. Qualitatively, the study adopted a multi-site case study approach based on constructivist epistemology using multiple sources of qualitative data collection namely, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documents that addressed learner support in distance teaching universities. Respondents for the study were selected from within the case institutions using a stratified sampling technique. The stratification involved different categories of the university staff and students namely distance education students' leaders, senior-level administrators, faculty members involved in distance education, and senior members (management) from the College for Distance and eLearning and College of Distance Education. This selection method was used to obtain information from 21 purposively selected key informants (principal officers) from both universities. Interview data and focus group discussion were analysed thematically and augmented with documents. The study found among others that access to promoting equal learner support is challenging as learner support in distance learning was largely unmet. The study recommends Distance Teaching Universities to ensure the provision of equal opportunities that relate to equal learner support on the basis of policy of non-discrimination regardless of the location of learners and programme.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Learner Support, Distance Teaching Universities, Central Region.

Introduction

Due to institutional diversification and challenges of contemporary changes in World Higher Education for sustainable national development, globalization requires the adoption of a new vision of functioning higher education in society to address and promote inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, some well-established universities across the globe have embraced distance learning, otherwise known as distance education, to achieve institutional mission, vision and strategic goals (Otoo, 2022). Thus, Ghanaian distance teaching universities have identified distance education as a policy initiative for meeting institutional goals (Osei et al., 2013). Among these goals were expanding access, improving quality, and reducing cost all at the same time (Reju, 2021). Mishra (2021) underpinned that universities are adapting distance education methodologies and their fundamental principles to attract students, generate revenue, and remain in business.

Distance education (DE) a "planned learning that normally occurs in a place that is different from where teaching takes place" (Elassy, 2015, p. 1), has gained prominence as one of the most successful modes of extending higher education system in the context of reach, acceptance and productivity (Lerra, 2014). In the context of reach, DE has been instrumental in addressing the educational needs of speckled communities on different continents (Mitchell, 2009). With acceptance, DE has emerged as a viable alternative delivery system to conventional systems (Rao, 2006). And with productivity; DE has contributed in many ways to general education, research, and development (Spector, 2009).

Despite considerable progress made over decades in the development of competitive higher education, effective and efficient distance education at a global scale cannot be achieved without explicitly providing learner support services aimed at accomplishing enhanced and sustained quality teaching, learning, and research within the distance education discourse. This perhaps underscores the very need for stakeholders' concerns on promoting equal learner support in distance learning programmes. This is on account that success in distance education is obtained with institutions including universities that incorporate more appropriate learner support services. Such services and facilities should easily be accessible, and effective and should meet the current trends (Otoo, 2022). This is why Darojat (2013) avers that responsive distance teaching universities in that wise must be adaptive in their orientation to a variety of activities, strategies, and administrative systems that are designed to support and facilitate the learning process.

Contextualizing Learner Support and its Significance

Concurring with the above assertion, Dampson et al., (2019) citing Tait defined learner support as:

> "Range of services for both individuals and groups of students which complement mass-produced course materials or learning recourses that are uniform for all categories of learners, and which are often perceived as major offerings of institutions using distance learning" (P. 448).

The above view does seem to regard learner support as a subsystem, distinguishing it from the most well-known element in distance education, which is the mass production of instructional materials. It can be said, therefore that learner support refers to the subsystems provided by institutions to help an individual student learn from mass-produced teaching material (Ozoglu, 2009). The rationale for such a distinction, according to Tait (2000) is that the focus of learner support is on the individual learning of students whether alone or in groups, whereas the focus of the mass-produced materials is on the mass of students. It is within this context that Arko-Achemfour (2017) surmises learning support as a generic word that applies to a range of services that institutions develop to help learners achieve learning goals, and acquire understanding, expertise, abilities, and success in their programmes of study.

Dampson et al., (2019) stressed that learner support could take the form of feedback, tutoring, assessment, contact between students and support staff, peer contact, study centres, library resources and materials (student manuals, etc.) designed to support students throughout their study period and even beyond. Other support services include face-to-face instructional courses, workshops, guidelines and advice, telephones, ICT, and audio-visual technology (Dampson et al., 2019). It is in light of this, that writers classified learner support services into two main modes: academic (tutorial) and non-academic (counselling) support. Academic support provides students with cognitive and meta-cognitive tools and resources needed for improving their performance on the stated course objectives. Tutoring and feedback are two major academic support services provided in most distance education systems. Non-academic support addresses

the affective and organizational development of students and assists them with administrative needs such as registration and fee payment. Student orientation, personal counselling, and technical support are some common non-academic support services available in most distance education systems.

The rhetorics about learner support services in distance teaching universities are many and this study does not intend to delve into these controversies on what learner support depicts, rather, the interest is how to promote equal learner support in distance learning. This represents the growing reality that students without adequate support are likely to delay the completion of their studies or drop out from distance programme (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2018). This resonates with the assertion of Otoo (2022) that providing support for distance learners is a vitally important component of the delivery of distance education, as it contributes to the academic, personal, and career development of students and assists them in overcoming the inherent difficulties of studying at a distance, resulting largely because of feelings of isolation. Moreover, learner support contributes directly to two key issues of distance education: recruitment and retention (Kenney et al., 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the above, and taking a cue from empirical studies such as Dampson et al., (2019), concerns have been noticed that learner support for distance learning in distance teaching universities was largely unmet. This challenge also mirrors the study finding by Otoo (2022) that distance learners are not given, at minimum, the same level of support equal to their counterparts on residential campuses. On a similar note, a study by Arko-Achemfuor (2017) on distance learners in South Africa provided that while the majority of support facilities are available, learners are not in a position to access them properly, which hurts their academic work including likely delay to completion of their studies or drop out from distance learning (Essel, 2020). Despite the criticality of learner support services to distance education learners, research has shown that most universities offering distance education cannot provide needed support mechanisms to support distance learners (Darojat, 2013).

Given the above challenges that face effective delivery of distance and continuing education, Egenti (2010) suggested strict adherence to the factor of "quality" in quality assurance using the yardstick of global best practices with regards to provision of the learner support by universities. This to some extent, is believed to serve all stakeholders including students as key partners both in distance and residential status. This resonates with the postulate of Yankson (2013) that established educational systems which also include education at a distance must be provided with facilities and services required to enhance and sustain quality.

All these influences internal efficiency which depicts a measure of how successful the system is in processing inputs and churning out products. Much as this learner support is needed,

a study by Dampson et al., (2019) confirms the continued existence of learner support gaps in distance learning, thus giving rise to the relevance of the sector being questioned as to whether it is possible to deliver the expected within the given conditions (Otoo & Bosu, 2015). This may not be significantly distant from what is obtained in other African universities in terms of learner support provision. Yet, researchers of this paper have not found any empirical study in the knowledge database within the Ghanaian context that focuses on promoting equal learner support in distance learning in distance teaching universities, thus making this study real, cogent, and demanding not only for policy and practice but to provide a link to closing the gap. Against this considered view, there is a felt need by the researchers to find out how to promote equal learner support in distance learning programme.

Study Purpose

The study explored stakeholders' perspectives and experiences on promoting equal learner support in distance learning programmes in distance teaching universities in Central Region, Ghana. The study specifically centered on the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast, and the College for Distance and eLearning, University of Education, Winneba respectively. The study followed Egenti (2010) established four indicators used for determining the extent of promoting equal learner support in distance learning in higher education institutions offering distance education. These indicators were access, teaching and learning, funding, and governance. To what extent these indicators promote equal learner support in distance learning in distance teaching universities was the guiding research question.

Theoretical Framework

The study was underpinned by the Theory of Equivalency (Simonson, Schlosser & Hanson, 1999). Fundamentally, this theory revolves around the argument that distance learners should be given, at minimum, the same level of support as campus students (Burns, 2011) and that distance education should be built on principles of equivalency of equal learning experiences (Otoo, 2022). Garrison (2000) submitted that the more equivalent learning experiences of distance learners are, the more equivalent will be the outcomes of educational experiences for all categories of learners. The researchers considered this theory as appropriate as it shares a link to challenges that the study seeks to address. Beyond this, the theory is imperative in the current study because of its application in the development of efficient and effective distance education in distance teaching universities (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2018; Darojat, 2013).

Of critical importance is the need for distance education to be considered of a higher standard and comparable to campus-based traditional education (Akuamoah-Boateng 2018). Often the term equivalency is used when a distance education programme is compared to a campus-based programme. Otoo (2022) explained the equivalency theory by emphasizing that distance learners and conventional campus-based students have fundamentally different environments in which to learn and operate. Yet, just as triangles and squares are considered equivalent if they have the same surface area even though they are quite different, distance learners and residential learners

should be provided with the same equivalent learning experiences and support that may be quite different but cover the same area with equivalent equal learning outcomes comparable to that of campus-based (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2018).

Using this theory as a lens for this study, it is argued that distance teaching universities that run distance education have the mandate to ensure that students have access to equal learner support systems, which they deem very critical for their success on the programme they have enrolled. Essentially, how students fare on the program depends largely on the support mechanisms they have access to whilst on the programme. This further raises the question of whether distance learners have the necessary support equivalent to their counterparts in conventional programmes. This would offer necessary recommendations to guide policy and practice (Otoo, 2022).

Methodological Consideration

Qualitatively, the study adopted a multi-site case study approach based on constructivist epistemology using multiple sources of qualitative data collection namely, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documents (policy, mission statements, strategic plans, university recorders, etc.) that addressed learner support in distance teaching universities. Respondents (principal officers) for the study were selected from within the case institutions using a stratified sampling technique. The stratification involved different categories of the university staff and students namely DE students' leaders, senior-level administrators and faculty members involved in distance education, and senior members (management) of the College for Distance and eLearning and College of Distance Education. This selection method was used to obtain information from 21 purposively selected key informants (principal officers) from both universities. Demographic data on the profile of respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, and graphs). Interview data and focus group discussion data were analyzed thematically and augmented with documents.

Study Trustworthiness

The researchers used trustworthiness to ensure the authenticity of the study findings. Trustworthiness in this study was used to establish that the research findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The issue of trustworthiness of the study was done in line with the criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) thus, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Kusi, (2012) asserts that the use of reliability and validity in qualitative research is unjustified on axiomatic grounds. This is due to differences that exist between axioms of interpretivism and positivism and therefore, "accommodation between and among paradigms on axiomatic grounds is simply not possible" (Kusi, 2012).

Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a credible conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participants' original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established mainly through member checking and individual debriefing. Member checking was used in two ways at the various stages of data collection and data analysis:

(i) at the pilot stage the interviewers (researchers) discussed the interview question with participants at the end of each interview; (ii) during formal interviews, the interviewer posed ideas back to participants to refine, rephrase and interpret. Besides, to ensure the credibility of the research findings, recorded tapes of individual interviews and focus group discussions were played back to participants and written transcriptions of the interviews and discussion protocols were given back to participants to check whether what was transcribed was a true reflection of their responses. They were allowed to offer comments on whether or not they felt the data was interpreted in a manner congruent with their perspectives and experiences. Gaining feedback on results from participants increased the credibility of the findings.

Transferability is the degree to which the results of a research study or experiment can be generalized to other groups, settings, or situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The transferability of this study was ensured by the rich description and reporting of the research process. The researchers used thick descriptions to substantiate and illustrate assertions made by individual and group participants to illuminate context. Participants' statements during interviews were quoted verbatim to convey their true emotions and opinions. During the interviews and focus group discussion, participants were probed further when the need arose for clearer explanations and deep understanding.

The dependability of qualitative research findings corresponds to the reliability of findings in quantitative research (Kusi, 2012). Quality control measures were instituted for data collection from participants. The researchers had personal interaction with the interviewees from whom the data was collected through unambiguous questions. In addition, an independent audit of the research methods and data analysis was carried out by a Senior Research Fellow from the Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) of the University of Cape Coast who has much interest in qualitative studies and based on established precedent in qualitative research, dependability was established.

In terms of confirmability, the general methods and procedures of this study have been explicitly described in detail and can be corroborated by others. The researchers were also aware of personal assumptions, biases, and subjectivity that could easily affect the outcome of the study. As a result, researchers placed themselves on an emphatically neutral ground, seeing their respondents as autonomous beings to obtain an accurate data void of biases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)'

Results and Discussion

As indicated earlier, learner support services and facilities are required to enhance and sustain quality teaching, learning, and research in all educational systems. These services and facilities, according to Quality Evaluation Guide (2007) should easily be accessible. The study found access as the first indicator to promoting learner support challenging as respondents illuminate that learner support in distance learning programmes were largely unmet. This avers with the study finding by Dampson et al., (2019) that there exist learner support gaps in the distance

learning programme. Their finding further revealed that lack of accessibility to learner support systems such as orientation and technical support that address the affective and organizational development of students and assist them with their administrative needs such as registration and fee payment may restrict the efficiency and effectiveness of the graduates produced through distance education mode. Commenting, the study by Otoo (2022) submitted that distance learners lack the presence of a modern and well-equipped library and there is difficulty in accessing efficient ICT facilities as well as students' financial support. This is in congruence with the position of Appiah-Boateng (2015) that the issue of barriers confronting all adult learners who which to access learning support remains a powerful concern, particularly for adults in rural and disadvantaged areas.

Essel (2020) on her part however debunks the assertion that distance learners don't lack access to learner support systems. He contends the view that the fundamental principles and methodologies guiding organization and delivery of distance education are quite different and that when there is the availability of learner-friendly modules and other learning materials, effective supervision and monitoring of face-to-face sessions, staff with required qualification and training who serve as facilitators and administrators, and provision of tutorial and counselling services are adequate to justify that there is learner support for distance learning program.

Given the above report by Essel (2020), one principal officer interviewed had this to say:

> "Although we as administrators may never directly interact with students in a distance learning programme many of the decisions administrators make directly impact every student enrolled in the programme. Therefore, administrators consider the needs of the learners, and make decisions that support such needs".

In support, Appiah-Boateng (2013) citing Lowe identified three types of learner support that must be provided for distance learners. The writer stressed that there should be institutional support which should consist of qualified faculty, quality materials, reliable technology, infrastructure, and support staff and resources. There should be instructional support which according to the writer should include a well-designed course, regular interaction with faculty or instructors, and assistance from tutors or academic support staff. There should be a rationale support which is encouragement, motivation, and moral support. According to Darojat (2013), if distance teaching universities have created and maintained a milieu that offers students everything, they need to enjoy a positive successful learning experience, then there is a clear indication that distance learning is perceived as promoting equal learner support in terms of access. It is within this context that Israel and Fugar (2013) averred that owing to technological advancement, it has now become possible to extend equal educational opportunities to all and sundry, especially those in deprived communities. According to the writers, it is through this that education has become a reality for otherwise vulnerable groups like women. One principal officer interviewed had this to say:

> "DL has given the majority of women who used to be marginalized in educational front like petty traders and nursing mothers the opportunity to receive tertiary education in the comfort of their homes".

In essence, the above quote, according to Sekyi (2013) and Arko-Archemfuor (2017) may form part of the working class in the society. Hence, without the necessary learner support systems to meet their academic, personal, and administrative needs, the majority of them are likely to suffer in their quest to combine parenthood, work, and academic activities on a part-time basis. As a result, providing necessary learner support systems for these categories of learners is very crucial if they are to attain the academic laurels that the programme seeks to provide.

With regards to teaching and learning as the second, the study found it to be moderate in promoting equal learner support in distance learning. This presupposes that though the level of importance associated with teaching and learning in distance teaching universities was high, the equal learner support equally comparable to that of the conventional system remains moderate. In the focus group discussion, some interviewees pointed out that:

> "Teaching and learning support systems have adequately not been addressed by the institutes. Very little is done to increase or provide adequate resources for teaching and learning".

Another group laments that:

> "Teaching and learning is going on but how fair is assessment? Facilitators are required to facilitate courses. Another unknown person assesses, scores, comments and makes judgments. How can he/she be fair and objective when he or she does not observe the teaching and learning process and is even not aware of the weaknesses and strengths of learners".

Even though most of the principal officers interviewed did not contest the unfair and subjective nature of the assessment system, they believed that some of the criticisms were not genuine. Notwithstanding, in the focus group discussion, the interviewees were of the view that the lack of fairness and objectivity that surrounded distance teaching and learning and assessment procedures was because distance teaching universities have no trust and confidence in facilitators and therefore expect them not to be as objective as possible. Thus, it could be said that distance teaching universities' assessment procedures in distance teaching and learning like those of British Universities, are political processes that reinforce discrimination as universities lack specific criteria against which staff assess students (Agyenim-Boateng, 2010).

Reacting to the teaching and learning process, Otoo and Bosu (2015) submitted that this constitutes the core or activities business of HEIs. The writers contend this to be dependent on the staff, programs, and physical and financial resources as well as the quality of governance and management. According to Agyenim-Boateng (2010), it is fair that the teaching staff (facilitators) have a say in assessment of their students in the teaching and learning process for the purposes of

reflection. Teaching and learning without critical reflection may create the topsy-turvy situations that can hinder acquisition of knowledge, skills and appropriate behaviour (Bekoe et al., 2017). Critical reflection will bring to light any discrepancies and disconnection between teaching and learning process and the performance of distance learners.

On the issue of funding, as the third indicator for promoting equal learner support in distance learning, the results of the study demonstrated that vibrant distance learning in universities thrives on a sound financial footing and prudent financial management. Literature admits that it is a good practice that prudent mechanisms are put in place for generating funds to support institutional growth. Such practice has the potential of motivating employees to improve individual and organizational productivity, effectiveness and efficiency (Agyenim-Boateng, 2010). This confirms the finding of a study by Essel (2020) that all staff (teaching and supporting) are familiar with existing financial instruments such as the Financial Regulation Act, Audit Act and Stores and Procurement Act and comply with same. One principal officer interviewed noted that:

> "Existence of clear modalities for settling financial obligations, budgeting and planning is carried out per the institution's strategic plan".

In the focus group discussion, some interviewees pointed out that they were aware of the obligation to the payment of fees. By implication, the above assertions justify the admission of literature that institutional fiscal policy of universities that cover revenue sharing of income accruing from distance education activities in the universities, persons responsible for fixing fee schedules, collection, monitoring expenditures patterns and reviews must be spelt out in fiscal policy of universities (Otoo, 2022).

Finally, on governance fourth indicator, which has to do with organizational and management structures in promoting equal learner support in distance learning, the study found that it forms an integral part of university's organizational structure. This is in congruence with postulate of Quality Evaluation Guide (2007) that HEI governance system should exhibit an organizational structure indicating hierarchy and responsibilities which are geared towards the fulfilment of vision, mission and objectives of institution. One principal officer interviewed had this to say:

> "An organizational structure, indicating relationships and functions is in place and is well published to all stakeholders".

In the focus group discussion, it was observed that students were involved in decision-making processes and were represented on appropriate boards and committees. In a study by Otoo (2022), students as key partners or customers of education play crucial leadership role because they are involved in creating, implementing, monitoring, reviewing and refining educational practices and systems so that students learning improves. Nurturing and using students' talents in this way creates a virtuous circle of motivation, the desire to learn more, commitment and

enhanced practices (Dampson, 2015). Distance education students in Ghanaian public universities play significant role in management and organization of distance education.

Conclusion

From the results and issues discussed above, the study wishes to draw the following conclusions. The study therefore concludes that:

1. Access to equal learner support required to essentially enhance and sustain success of distance learners in distance teaching universities is inadequate. This, to a large extent, renders such learner support services and facilities, thus required to ensure equal and quality delivery of distance learning programme ineffective in assessing true performance of distance learners and outcome of distance learning programme.
2. Teaching and learning is not at odds in promoting the goals and objectives of equal learner support in distance learning programme. But assessment of distance learners in distance teaching and learning process undermines professional autonomy of the teaching staff (facilitators) and academic freedom which underline the academic judgement made about what to teach or research or assess.
3. Funding mechanisms are necessary not only to promote equal learner support in the distance learning programme but to keep stringent financial systems of institutions consistently solvent.
4. Governance of distance teaching universities is strongly positioned in promoting equal learner support in distance learning programme.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are made for policy and management's consideration.

1. Distance Teaching Universities should ensure provision of equal opportunities that relates to equal learner support on basis of policy of non-discrimination regardless of location of students and programme.
2. Distance Teaching Universities should engender trust and confidence in distance teaching staff (facilitators) by diversifying policy to allow them assess the student they teach. To this end, the Directorate of Quality Assurance could be involved in the training of staff to have a certain standard of assessment training, accreditation, and a professional code of conduct. This will encourage teacher-student relationships which will lead to a reduction in the high dropout rate of learners and build a more positive image of distance teaching staff and distance learning programme.
3. To continuously ensure adequate and effective funding for equal learner support in distance learning, managements of distance teaching universities should harmonize financial education to all stakeholders. The process should ensure the expression of

appreciation of outstanding contribution and performance of all stakeholders as well as discussion of areas of possible improvement and outline plans for improvement.

4. Institutional policy on governance of distance education should consciously be monitored to ensure compatibility by hierarchically superior.

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