

## THE PERCEPTION OF THE DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST ABOUT THE QUALITY OF SUPPORT SERVICES PROVIDED FOR THEIR LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

*Ghana has introduced distance education at the university level as a result of the inability of the existing universities to admit about 60% of qualified applicants each year. The University of Cape Coast (UCC) is one of the public universities which have taken the challenge to deliver distance education for basic school teachers to help upgrade their academic and professional competence. It currently offers a 3-year diploma course leading to the award of a Diploma in Basic Education (DBE) and a 2-year post-diploma Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) for these teachers.*

*The study focused on the suitability of learner support system of this university in meeting the needs of distance education students by investigating the perceptions of the students*

*The study adopted quantitative methodology which employed survey questionnaire. Two hundred and ninety-four (294) students made up of 170 males and 124 females selected from five study centres participated in the study.*

*The study found among others that majority of the student respondents were highly satisfied with tutorials, counseling, and assignments and feedback in terms of meeting their learning needs. However, most of them expressed low perceived satisfaction with available financial support, library service study centre and students group interaction.*

*The study again found that the study centre where a student is registered and the type of community in which student resides (rural/urban) were significant factors influencing satisfaction with learner support services.*

### Introduction

Peraton (1988:43) defines distance education 'as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner'. Keegan (1996) goes further to identify the key characteristics of distance education. According to him, distance education is a form of education characterised by:

- the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education);
- the influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of

learning materials and the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach yourself programmes);

- the use of technical media-print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;

- the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education); and

- the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings, either face-to-face or by electronic means, for both



didactic and socialization purposes (Keegan, 1996:50).

Distance education as a teaching-learning organization, is made of a number of subsystems which ideally work in a coordinated manner to ensure the success of the whole programme. Even though many subsystems can be identified within distance education, they can be subsumed under three main subsystems namely, the course materials subsystem, management and administration subsystems and learner support subsystem (Owusu-Mensah & Mensah, 2002). It can thus, be argued that one of the key aspects of distance education is the provision of learner support.

Learner support has been conceived as encompassing the entire interaction that takes place between the personnel of a distance teaching institution and students with the aim of assisting the students to achieve their objectives at every stage of their life cycle of their studentship and beyond (Brindley, Walti & Zawacki-Ritcher, 2004). This definition is similar to that of Thorpe (2003:20), who defines learner support as 'all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process'.

Brindley & Paul (2004:44-45), argue that effective learner support in open and distance learning (ODL),

- Personalises the learning process so as to be responsive to different individuals and groups
- Encourages and facilitates interaction among and between student(s), faculty, tutor, institutional support persons and academic content.
- Exists to further the goals of a particular institution and serves the needs of its learners within its specific context.
- Facilitates learning within courses and addresses broader issues of student skill and personal development.
- Evolves continuously to accommodate new learner populations, educational developments, economic conditions, technological advances, and findings from research and evaluation.

Involves a high level of inter-functional collaboration and is seamless to the learner.

According to Rowntree (1992), open learners need support because firstly, the course materials are inadequate and secondly distance learners face a number of problems. Again, research evidence has shown that 'isolated, unsupported and/or ill-prepared learners struggled to cope with the learning materials with little or no assistance from the institution' (Brindley & Paul (2004:41).

Allen (2004) provides one of the strongest theoretical bases for the provision of learners support in distance education. According to her, '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 affect the student's work. (Allen, 2004).

The three categories of problems can also be classified as academic, administrative and personal respectively.

Based on the above theoretical analysis, Allen (2004) argued that provision of learner support should be targeted at meeting the academic, administrative and personal problems of distance education students.

Most distance education programmes seem to have suffered a great blow not due to the learning materials used, but rather due to the inability of their respective support systems to effectively meet the needs of their students. The results of such a situation are high attrition rates and long completion times. Belawati (2000), for instance, found that the major cause of low persistence at the Indonesian Open University (Universita Terbuka) was the poor quality of support services that were offered to the students. He concluded that:



The adaptation of the distance education system was uneven and denied the crucial elements of the system. Only the method itself, studying at a distance was used. The support system required by this method, such as tutorials, counselling, feedback and payment flexibility was disregarded (Belawati, 2000).

Despite the important role learner support plays in the delivery of distance education, its rationale in distance education has been weakly conceived in the past twenty-five years, and so its functioning has been so poorly realised (Paul, 2000; Potashnik & Capper, 1998) According to Paul (2000:104), 'when distance education institutions are established, they subordinate student services to the course development and delivery system on the grounds that the latter is more cost-effective in reaching students'. He observed that when distance teaching institutions face tighter budgets, it is invariably student support services that suffer cutbacks first. He attributes this unfortunate situation to what he calls 'politics of decision making'.

The University of Cape Coast has produced self instructional materials for its distance education students and in addition, provided some learner support services. The question that arises is, to what extent are the distance education students of UCC satisfied with the services that are offered them? This question is very crucial because despite the potential advantages of distance education, this mode of study has been found to have high dropout rates (Perraton, 2004). Dropout here refers to those distance education students who register for the programme and leave at some point with the intention of not returning to study again.

In Africa, the few studies that have been conducted have reported high dropout rates in some distance education institutions. Barefoot (2002), for example, studied distance versus college training of grade 'C' teachers in Tanzania and found that the dropout rates for two cohorts of distance education students were 27.2% and 33.1%. They however reported no dropout in the residential system. Similarly, Abete (2005), studied the Makerere University External Degree Programme (EDP) for Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and Bachelor of Commerce (B.Com) and found that in 1991/92 academic year, the dropout rate for B.Ed was 51.4% while that of B.Com was 50%. The rates for 1993/94 were 25.6% for B.Ed and 21.5% for B.Com. In

1994/95 the rates were 28.1% for B.Ed and 27.5% for B.Com. According to University of Namibia (UNAM) Annual Report 1996, the average dropout rate for the Higher Primary Education Certificate (HPEC) distance education programme was 33%. Again, Perraton (2000a) reported that the average success rate at Nigeria National Teachers Institute from 1984 to 1990 was between 25-30%.

In most of the drop out studies, inadequate learner support has been identified as one of the major factors contributing to this high attrition rate (Anderson, 2004). Anderson studied the educator-learner relationship and the parts of the relationship associated with dropout from distance education. He found that perceived deficiencies in dialogue between learner and educator have been associated with dropout. Abete (2005) has also observed that the high dropout in the Makerere University External Degree Programme (EDP) was due to poor organisation of face-to-face sessions. Similarly, Anderson (2004) reported that the Higher Primary Education Certificate (HPEC) programme of UNAM experienced high dropout rates as a result of poor support given to the students.

With increasing investment in distance education by a developing country like Ghana, with its staggering economic problems with the intent of enhancing human resource development, it is imperative to identify appropriate ways of providing learner support to distance education students. Failure to do this will result in high dropout rates, which will be a big waste of human and financial resources. The purpose of this study therefore is to investigate how the distance education students of University of Cape Coast perceive the quality of support services which they are provided.

The study sought to address the following two research questions:

1. How satisfied are the students with the various support services?
2. What factors influence the students' perceived satisfaction of the learner support services?

## Methodology

### Research Design

The study was a descriptive survey aimed at describing existing condition that happened during the period of the conduct of the study. Essentially,



the study surveyed distance education students perceived satisfaction with learner support available to them. The design therefore involved collecting data from a selected sample with a view to identifying available support for students learning by distance and how they perceived such support as meeting their learning needs. The survey design was preferred because, according to Osuala (1988), it provides focus on the vital facts of people, their beliefs, opinions, attitudes, motivations and behaviour.

### Population

The study involved all distance education students of the University of Cape Coast who had registered for the diploma in basic education and had spent a year or more on the programme. The total population of this category of students was 918.

### Sample

The sample size for the study was 294 diploma in basic education students (124 females & 170

males). This number represents 30% of the total number of students in five study centres covered by the study.

Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the study sample. A list of all diploma in basic education students was collected from the Distance Education Unit of the University of Cape Coast to determine the total representative sample size of students.

The study centres of UCC have been put into 4 zones. The zones are Ashanti and Brong Ahafo; Central and Western; Eastern, Greater Accra and Volta and the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions. One centre was randomly selected from each of the four zones except the northern zone where two centres were selected. This suggests proportionate representation. The zones and the centres selected are presented in Table 1 overleaf.

**Table 1: Selected centres for the study**

Study Centre	Zone
Sunyani	Ashanti/ Brong Ahafo
UCC	Central/Western
Koforidua	Eastern/Greater Accra/Volta
Wa	Northern/Upper East/Upper West
Tamale	Northern/Upper East/Upper West

### Distribution of Distance Education Students by Sex

The distribution of student respondents by sex provides information about the percentage of students sampled who were males and those who were females in all the five study centres covered by the study. With the adoption of Morgan and Krejcie's (1970) 30% of population criterion for sample selection, the distribution of respondents by sex shown in Table 2 was

**Table 2  
Distribution of Distance Education Students by Sex and Regional Centre Patronized**

Regional centre	Respondents					
	Male		Female		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Cape Coast	80	47.1	63	50.8	143	48.6
Koforidua	27	15.9	11	8.8	38	12.9
Sunyani	24	14.1	8	6.5	32	10.9
Tamale	25	14.7	17	13.7	42	14.3
Wa	14	8.2	25	20.2	39	13.3
Total	170	100.0	124	100.0	294	100.0



The use of the same proportion for selecting both males and females from the existing populations provides a basis for indicating that in all the five study centres, four study centres, males outnumber the females. The difference is high in some cases but in other centres the differences is a bit low.

### Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire was the main instrument used to gather information on distance learners' perception of their support services and facilities. Relevant information from the literature reviewed guided the questionnaire development. The questionnaire on distance learners sought information on their demographic characteristics the range of learner support services offered and learners' satisfaction with support services. The questionnaire was made up of both closed and opened ended questions. These were made up of four main sections: Section A deals with bio-data of the respondents; Section B focuses on sample satisfaction of specific learner support services using the likert scale; Section C deals with their perception about face-to-face tutorial section and the last, Section D, solicit information on the respondents views on learner support services in general. The items were based on what should go into learner support as reviewed in the literature (Molefi & Tait, 2004). **Instrument Testing**

The questionnaire for distance learners was pre-tested at the Accra study centre. A sample of 70 students made up of 40 males and 30 females responded to the trial questionnaire. The responses were edited and scored. The closed ended questions were coded with ....and themes that linked the closed ended items were selected from the opened ended questions. Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) a Cronbach alpha reliability of 0.89 was obtained for the instrument used in the study. This was deemed significant since according to Cronbach, the alpha reliability level between 0.3 to 1.0 was considered reliable (Amoah & Onivehu, 2002). The validation of the content of the instruments was done with consultation with experienced senior lecturer at the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration at the University of Cape Coast.

The Likert-type scale was scored as ordinal level data, all other items were scored as nominal data. The Likert type items in Section B were weighted as follows , strongly satisfied, (5) satisfied, (4)

undecided, (3) dissatisfied, (2) strongly dissatisfied (1) while in Section C the items were weighted as follows Strongly Agree= 5, Agree = 4 undecided = 3, Disagree= 2, strongly disagree =1 for the purpose of obtaining frequency counts and percentages for the given statements. To determine the perception scores however, distance learners' questionnaire which were negative statements was weighted as follows: strongly Agree= 1 Agree=2, undecided = 3 Disagree=4, strongly Disagree=5.

The procedure of validation was followed on the basis that content validity is based on expert judgment (Best & Kahn 2001; Gall & Borg, 1998; Gay, 2000; MacMillan & Schumacher, 1997).

### Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place at the study centres with the permission of the Director of the Centre for Continuing Education, University of Cape Coast. The researcher had meetings with selected tutors and study centre coordinators to explain how the distance learners' questionnaire was to be administered. The lists of respondents/students for each study centre were given to the study centre coordinators and tutors to assist in (getting the students' assembled) contacting the students.

Thirty minutes of a day's tutorial session were used at each centre for students to complete the questionnaire. The researcher briefed the students on how to fill the questionnaire after being introduced by the study centre coordinators. The researcher collected the questionnaire the very day they were administered. Due to the on-the spot administration and collection of the questionnaire, there was, a 100% return rate.

### Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers used descriptive and inferential statistics for the analysis of data that were collected in the survey using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). A five- point Likert- type scale was the main scale of measurement for distance learners' perception of their support facilities and services. The data was run as frequencies and percentages for easy interpretations.

Relevant themes linked to the closed ended items were selected. Relative frequency percentages were also calculated for the closed ended questions. Frequency counts, percentages and mean scores were used in analysing all the research questions.



The mean scores for 294 distance learners on all the Likert-type items were determined and used to further determine whether their perceived satisfaction with learner support is high or low. The determination of categories of perceived satisfaction were based on Kubiszyn and Bonich's (1984:95) assertion that "higher weights are associated with positive attitudes and lower weights with negative attitudes and as a rule, a mean rating of 3.0 is used, that is, if the score is greater than 3.0, a positive attitude exists and if the score is less than, 3.0 then a negative attitude exists".

The mean score of 3.0 and 50% proportion were used as the cut-off point to categorise the perception scores into those with high and low perceived satisfaction. Based on the proportions observed for the various categories of perceived satisfaction, the chi-square test for difference in proportions was conducted to establish the significant differences in the proportions of respondents obtained for the various categories of satisfaction. The test was used as a basis for inferring any possible association of gender, location and study centre with the students' perceived satisfaction (Brace et al, 2003; Cosby, 2007).

### Results and Discussion

The general profile of 294 distance education students who participated in the survey are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3: Profile of Survey Respondents**

Profile	No of students or participants	%
<b>Teaching Experience</b>		
Less than 5 years	81	27.6
5 – 10 years	92	31.3
Above 10 years	121	41.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Level Taught</b>		
Kindergarten	44	15
Primary	126	42.9
J.H.S	124	42.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Place of residence</b>		
Rural	168	57.1
Urban	126	42.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Distance from home to Study Centre (kilometres)</b>		
Less than 20	90	30.6
20 – 49	78	26.5
50 – 79	62	21.1
80 and above	64	21.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>100</b>

The table shows that about 41.% had taught for more than 10 years after initial training. Table 3 shows that majority of the distance education students who participated in the study were teaching at the primary and junior secondary levels. Table 3 again shows that the distance education programme of the University of Cape Coast attracts both rural and urban-based teachers, majority (57.1%) of whom are rural-based. This trend is in the right direction for the Ghana Education Service when

teacher retention in schools especially in rural communities is being advocated. This finding provides a basis for determining learner support needs of rural and urban-based teachers as indicated by Kranj (2000).

It is observed from Table 3 that the distance education students travel a wide range of distance to their study centres, 30.6% of the students travelled distance less than 20km while some of them 26.5%



covered distances between 20 and 49km. about 21% of students' covered distance between 50 and 79km and 21.8% covered 80km and above.

#### Range of support services offered to students

The study found that monthly tutorials sessions, counselling, assignment and assignment feedback, face-to-face residential sessions, financial support, library facilities and services, students group support and learner tutor interaction were the kinds of support services available to UCC distance education students.

**Students' satisfaction with learner support**  
**Students' satisfaction with learner support was measured against** gender, specific type of support, and location in terms of rural and urban environment. As explained earlier, student respondents were categorised into those who felt very satisfied and those who perceived satisfaction was low with regard to the various aspects of learner support services.

Students' perceived satisfaction with the various learner support services is presented in

**Table 4.**

**Table4: Student's Perceived Satisfaction with Specific Learner Support Services**

	High perceived satisfaction		Low perceived satisfaction		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
<b>Tutorials</b>	272	92.5	22	7.5	294	100.0
<b>Counseling</b>	224	76.2	70	23.8	294	100.0
<b>Assignment and Feedback</b>	131	44.6	163	55.4	294	100.0
<b>Study centre</b>	193	65.6	101	34.4	294	100.0
<b>Library</b>	89	30.3	205	69.7	294	100.0
<b>Group interaction</b>	194	66.0	100	34.0	294	100.0
<b>Financial support</b>	41	13.9	253	86.1	294	100.0

Table 4 shows that majority of the student respondents were highly satisfied with tutorials (92.5%), counseling (76.2%), assignments and feedback (44.6%) in terms of meeting their learning needs. However, most of them expressed low perceived satisfaction with available financial support (86.1%) and library service (69.7%) while 34.4% expressed, study centre (34.4%) and students group interaction (34.0%).

It can therefore be concluded that the learning support of the distance education students was not adequately meeting the students need in terms of the available financial, library, study centre facilities as well as students group support. This support Tait's (2004) model for managing students support services, which suggest that there should be continuous learner needs assessment to be able to

satisfy distance learner's support needs adequately. *This finding corroborates the results of a similar study by Sim, et al., (2005) who found that the face-to-face tutorials, counselling, and assignments and feedback components of the learner support system of the School of Distance Education Universiti Sains Malaysia were perceived to be the most useful service for the students.*

The students' low perceived satisfaction with library facilities may arguably be due to the fact that the study centres do not have library facilities which should be a matter of concern because the need for library services for distance education students has been identified by a number of authors and researchers. For example, Reid (1995), Allen (2004) and Tait (2004) 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 & Frank, 2004). In relation to financial support it can be argued that the need for distance education students to be supported financially is supported by research evidence. Johnson (2004) for example, found financial problems as one of the factors responsible for drop out among distance education students. McGivney (2004) has also observed that more mature students tend to face more acute financial problems than younger ones because they

have multiple financial commitments.

### Factors Influencing Student Perceived Satisfaction with Learner Support Services

The researchers explored the influence of such factors as gender, location and study centre on the distance education students' perceived satisfaction with learner support services using a chi-square test. The results are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5:**  
**Perceived satisfaction by Gender, Study Centre and Geographical Location**

		High	Low	$\chi^2$	P
<b>Gender</b>	Male	126(74)	44(25.19)	0.158	0.691
	Females	98(79)	26(21.6)		
<b>Study Centers</b>	Cape coast	140(51)	3(13.6)	12.361	0.015
	Koforidua	31(11.4)	7(31.8)		
	Sunyani	30(11)	7(31.8)		
	Tamale	35(12.9)	7(31.8)		
	Wa	36(13.5)	3(13.6)		
<b>Location</b>	Rural	156(92.6)	12(7.1)	6.516	0.011
	Urban	116(92.1)	10(7.9)		

The results as presented in Table 5 shows that a higher percentage of female students (79.0%) with high perceived satisfaction with their learner support services than the percentage (74.1%) of males. The percentage of males with low perceived satisfaction (25.9%) was higher than that of the female (21.0%). Further analysis using chi-square test however revealed that difference between males and females was not statistically significant [ $\chi^2(1, N=294) = 0.158, P = 0.691$ ]. It can be concluded on the basis that the difference observed among the proportions of male and female students with regard to their perceived satisfaction with learner support is not a gender related issue.

The researchers further investigated whether the difference observed among the proportions of students of the different study centres in terms of their perceived satisfaction with available learner support was significant or not. The chi-square test for difference in proportion was run. The results obtained:

From the foregoing, it is plausible to state that differences exist in the quality and scope of learner support services provided at the different study centres. Such differences work against equal access and benefits for all the distance learners contrary to the South African Quality Criteria for Distance Education Learner Support which indicated among others, the availability of satisfactory and cost effective arrangements made to meet learner's needs for physical facilities for study, tutorials and resource space as well as access to facilities like libraries and equipment necessary for successful learning.

Again Table 5 shows that an overwhelming majority of rural-based (92.9%) and urban-based (92.1%) students have high perceived satisfaction with their



available support services. However, there are more rural-based students with high perceived satisfaction than urban-based students. The fact that some of the rural-based students have low perceived satisfaction should be a matter of concern because the Ghana Education Service needs the services of more qualified teachers in the rural classrooms. The researchers are of the view that dissatisfaction among the teachers from the rural area learning by distance could make them abandon the programme and strive to go on study leave.

Further investigation to find out the significance of the difference observed in the proportions of rural and urban-based students in terms of their perceived satisfaction was carried out using a chi-square test. The following results were obtained from the chi-square test:

### **Conclusion**

The study investigated the perception of the distance education students of the University of Cape Coast about the support services which they are provided with. From the findings of the study it can be concluded that majority of the students of the UCC distance education programme are highly satisfied with tutorials, counseling, and assignments and feedback in terms of meeting their learning needs. However, most of them expressed low perceived

satisfaction with available financial support, library service study centre and students group interaction.

It can again be concluded that the study centre where a student is registered and the type of community in which student resides (rural/urban) were significant factors influencing satisfaction with learner support services.

### **Recommendations**

The findings from the study have pointed out the need for the providers of the distance education programme to pay more attention to those support services which most of the students had low perceived satisfaction with.

It is recommended that since the study centres do not have libraries on their own, they should partner with the host institutions where the centres are located to lodge relevant books in their libraries for use of the distance education students until such time that the centres will have their own books.

Concerning financial support, it is recommended that the distance education institutions should enter into a dialogue with the Ministry of Education to get the government to give financial support to the distance education students.



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