

The Challenges Distant Students Face as They Combine Studies with Work: The Experience of Teachers Pursuing Tertiary Distance Education at The University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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Abstract

Majority of distant students are adults. Such people have many responsibilities; they have families, jobs, social life and other commitments. The ability to manage and co-ordinate their enormous activities will determine how successful they would be in their studies. The primary role of the student is to learn. To enable the students to achieve this challenging task requires motivation, planning, and ability to analyse and apply the information being taught. The distant student who receives support from his family, friends, fellow employees, employer, instructors and fellow students is likely to successfully go through the course. At the beginning of the course distant students should be told the challenges they are likely to face. All distant students should be assigned to counsellors and they should be given the opportunity to contact them at any time either through the e-mail or telephone. The students should also be encouraged to form study groups and get in touch with their study group members through the e-mail and mobile phone whenever they are in need. The providers of distance education should give constant feedback to the students and offer them support services such as counselling and this will go a long way to reduce attrition rate.

Keywords: Work, challenge, distance students, support service, teacher

Abstrak

Kebanyakan pelajar jarak jauh adalah golongan dewasa yang mempunyai tanggungjawab, keluarga, pekerjaan, kehidupan sosial dan tanggungjawab lain. Keupayaan untuk mengurus dan menyusun aktiviti-aktiviti yang banyak menentukan kejayaan mereka dalam pelajaran. Peranan utama pelajar adalah untuk belajar. Oleh itu, bagi membolehkan pelajar-pelajar tersebut mencapai tugas yang mencabar ini, ia memerlukan motivasi, perancangan dan keupayaan untuk menganalisis dan mengaplikasi maklumat yang diajar. Pelajar jarak jauh yang mendapat sokongan dari keluarga, kawan, rakan sekerja, majikan, tenaga pengajar, dan rakan pelajar lebih cenderung untuk berjaya melalui kursus yang dijalankan. Di peringkat permulaan kursus, pelajar jarak jauh perlu dimaklumkan mengenai cabaran yang akan mereka tempuhi. Semua pelajar jarak jauh perlu diberikan kaunselor dan diberi peluang untuk menghubungi kaunselor pada bila-bila masa melalui e-mel atau telefon. Pelajar ini juga perlu digalakkan membentuk kumpulan belajar dan saling menghubungi di antara satu sama lain melalui e-mel dan telefon bimbit bila-bila masa. Pihak yang menawarkan pendidikan jarak jauh perlu memberi maklum balas yang kerap kepada pelajar dan menawarkan perkhidmatan sokongan dari segi penasihat dan perlu dilakukan untuk jangka masa yang panjang supaya pengurangan pelajar dapat dielakkan.

Kata kunci: Kerja, cabaran, pelajar jarak jauh, perkhidmatan sokongan, guru

Introduction

Many adults embark on distance education with varied reasons (Schuemer, 1993) some students are interested in obtaining a degree to qualify for a better job. Many take courses to broaden their education and are not really interested in attaining a degree. Many distance education students are older, have jobs and families and must therefore co-ordinate the different areas of their lives, which influence each other- their families, jobs, social life, spare time and their studies. The primary role of the student is to learn. To enable the student to achieve this challenging task requires motivation, planning, and ability to analyse and apply the information being taught. The distant student is usually isolated. Moreover the motivational factor from the contact or competition with other students is absent. The student also lacks the immediate support of a teacher who is

present to motivate and, if necessary, give attention to actual needs and difficulties that crop up during study. Teaching and learning at a distance is demanding. However, learning will be more meaningful and “deeper” for distant students, if the students and their instructors share responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives; actively interacting with class members; promoting reflection on experience; relating new information to examples that make sense to learners; maintaining self-esteem; and evaluating what is being learned. This is the challenge and the opportunity provided by distance education.

The question is how does the student manage him/herself so that his study does not suffer. Time management is vital in the life of the distant students if she/he is to successfully go through the course.

The researcher conducted a study on how distant students of University of Cape Coast, Ghana Distant Students combine their studies with their work and the results of the study would be used as a case study in this paper. The study looks at the following:

1. How most distant students go about their studies.
2. The best way distant students should go about their studies.
3. The role significant others should play in the life of the distant student.
4. Time management and organization.

Literature Review

How Most Distance Students Go about Their Studies

Distant students and their teachers often have little in common in terms of background and day-to-day experiences and therefore, it takes longer for student-teacher rapport to develop. Without face-to-face contact distant students may feel ill at ease with their teacher as an individual and uncomfortable with their learning situation.

In distance education settings, technology is typically the conduit through which information and communication flow. Until the teacher and students become comfortable with the technical delivery system, communication will be inhibited. Beginning students may have some

difficulty determining what the demands of a course of academic study actually are because they do not have the support of an immediate peer group, ready access to the instructor, or familiarity with the technology being used for delivery of the distance-education course. They may be unsure of themselves and their learning. Morgan (1991) suggests that distant students who are not confident about their learning tend to concentrate on memorizing facts and details in order to complete assignments and write exams. As a result, they end up with a poor understanding of course material. He views memorization of facts and details as a surface approach to learning and summarizes it as follows:

1. Focus on the ‘signs’ (e.g., the text or instruction itself).
2. Focus on discrete elements.
3. Memorize information and procedures for tests.
4. Unreflectively associate concepts and facts.
5. Fail to distinguish principles from evidence, new information from old.
6. Treat assignments as something imposed by the instructor.

This is external emphasis focusing on the demands of assignments and exams leading to knowledge that is cut-off from everyday reality. In this sense the student may not come to grips with the essentials or significance of the studies which he can apply in the future.

The Best Way Distant Student Should Go about Their Studies

Distant students need to become more selective and focused in their learning in order to master new information. The focus of their learning needs to shift them from a surface approach to a deep approach. Morgan (1991) summarizes this approach as follows:

Focus on what is signified (e.g., the instructor’s arguments). Relate and distinguish new ideas and previous knowledge.

1. Relate concepts to everyday experience.
2. Relate and distinguish evidence and argument.
3. Organize and structure content.
4. Internal emphasis focusing on how instructional material relates to everyday reality.

When distant students learn by this approach then real studies have taken place and they can apply what they learn in the future. This type of studies is related to reality.

The Role Significant Others Should Play in the Life of the Distant Student

Brundage, Keane and Mackneson (1993) suggest that adult students and their instructors must face and overcome a number of challenges before learning takes place. These include: becoming and staying responsible for themselves; identifying their strengths, skills, and needs; maintaining and increasing self-esteem; relating to others; clarifying what is learned; redefining what legitimate knowledge is; and dealing with content. These challenges are considered in relation to distance education.

High motivation is required to complete distant courses because the day-to-day contact with teachers and other students is typically lacking. Instructors can help motivate distant students by providing consistent and timely feedback, encouraging discussion among students, being well prepared for class, and by encouraging and reinforcing effective student study habits.

Students need to recognize their strengths and limitations. They also need to understand their learning goals and objectives. The instructor can help distant students to explore their strengths/limitations and their learning goals/objectives by assuming a facilitative role in the learning process. Providing opportunities for students to share their personal learning goals and objectives for a course helps to make learning more meaningful and increases motivation.

Distant students may be afraid of their ability to do well in a course. They are balancing many responsibilities including employment and raising children. Often, their involvement in distance education is unknown to those they work with and ignored by family members. Student performance is enhanced if learners set aside time for their instructional activities and if they receive family support in their academic endeavours. The instructor can maintain student self-esteem by providing timely feedback. It is critical for teachers to respond to students' questions, assignments, and concerns in a personalized and pleasant manner, using

appropriate technology such as fax, phone, or computer. Informative comments that elaborate on the individual student's performance and suggest areas for improvement are especially helpful.

Distant students should relate to each other appropriately. Students often learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with other students. Interaction among students typically leads to group problem solving. When students are unable to meet together, appropriate interactive technology such as e-mail should be provided to encourage small group and individual communication. Assignments, in which students work together and then report back or present to the class as a whole, encourage student-to-student interaction. Ensure clear directions and realistic goals for group assignments (Burge, 1993).

The students should have a means to clarify what they learn. Distant students need to reflect on what they are learning. They need to examine the existing knowledge frameworks in their heads and how these are being added to or changed by incoming information. Examinations, papers, and class presentations provide opportunities for student and teacher to evaluate learning. However, less formal methods of evaluation will also help the students and teacher to understand learning. For example, periodically during the course the instructor can ask students to write a brief reflection on what they have learned and then provide an opportunity for them to share their insights with other class members.

There is the need for distant students to redefine what legitimate knowledge is. Brundage, Keane and Mackneson (1993) suggest that adult learners may find it difficult to accept that their own experience and reflections are legitimate knowledge. If the instructor takes a facilitative rather than authoritative role, students will see—their own experience as valuable and important to their further learning. Burge (1993) suggests having learners use first-person language to help them claim ownership of personal values, experiences, and insights.

It would be very helpful for distant students to deal with the content of what they study. Student learning is enhanced when content is related to examples. Instructors tend to teach using examples that were used when they received their training. For distance learning to be effective, however, instructors must discover examples that are relevant to their distant

students. Encourage students to find or develop examples that are relevant to them or their community.

Time Management and Organization

The factors that influence adults to embark on distance education include Self-improvement, higher qualifications and increased salary and better jobs. But it isn't just about money and jobs, it is also about feeling good about yourself by fulfilling your potential, and proving to yourself that you've got what it takes.

Distant education students are strongly advised to manage their study time carefully. A distant student should clarify his/her aims, identify her strengths and weaknesses, consider the context in which she will be studying and generate a broad strategy for successfully covering the material and completing the course. When reviewing the requirements of any particular module or unit, the student should consider her situation, workload and home responsibilities in the relevant study period, and then develop specific realistic plans for active study and writing.

The distant student might also want to set herself targets for the amount of time within which she will seek to complete a task. She can do this by working out:

1. The quantity of work she aims to do in a particular week.
2. Progress through the modules or units, bearing in mind her other responsibilities and tasks.
3. Progress on assignments.

A distant student should plan and monitor what she does, and where necessary, act to improve the process, quantity and quality of his/her work. She should make decisions about the importance she will attach to tasks, the time she chooses to allocate to them, and sequence in which she will do them. People learn in different ways. So we do not expect that all students will approach their studies in the same way, in a way we prescribe, or in an over-planned manner. Distance education providers should advise and assist the students to manage their study and be disciplined about how they do it.

Objectives and Methodology of the Study

The objective of this paper was to assess the challenges distant students face as they combine work with their studies. Suggestions are offered on how distant students can reduce if not eliminate the factors that militate against their studies. Suggestions are offered on the effective way distant students could combine their work with their studies to achieve the objective for embarking on their courses and not be a drop out.

Primary data were obtained from basic teachers pursuing distance education courses in the Kumasi Metropolis, Ghana through the administration of questionnaires. For secondary data, information was collected from available relevant literature on the subject and reviewed.

Population and Sample

The population for the study was all Basic School teachers in Kumasi Metropolis, Ghana. The sample was taken from teachers pursuing Diploma and Post Diploma in Basic Education distance programmes at the University of Cape Coast-Ghana at Kumasi study centre. The 300 respondents were randomly selected. The respondents comprised of 180 males and 120 females.

Instrument

A five-item questionnaire was designed for the student teachers. The questionnaire was in two parts. The first part sought teachers' demographic data on sex/gender, age and qualification they entered the course with. The main questions sought their opinions on how the course has adversely affected them, how they manage their time, student support services and feedback system. Data from the survey was analysed using simple descriptive statistical techniques and presented in the form of tables.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

Tables were drawn to depict the responses more clearly and to offer quick assimilation of the results. All responses were prioritised and were ranked

ordered, the highest being 5 and 4. The details of the results and analyses are presented next along with the discussions of the findings.

Table 1 Distribution of teachers by sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	180	60
Female	120	40
Total	300	100

Majority of the students who participated in the study 60% were males and the female respondent was 40%. The admission pattern is not strange as this follows the trend of admission at the tertiary institutions in the country. In all tertiary institutions in the country, the male population exceeds that of the female. There must be conscious efforts of the providers of distance education for teachers to achieve parity in the admissions in not a distance future.

Table 2 Distribution of respondents by age

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below 30	42	14
31–40	42	14
41–45	66	22
46–50	57	19
Above 50	93	31
Total	300	100

The retiring age for teachers is 60 years. Majority of the respondents (72%) were above the age 40. These are responsible people who are married with children. They have mortgage to pay, children in second and tertiary cycle institutions to take care of and other commitments. It is not easy for such people to combine studies with work and social commitments. Naturally older students will face many problems as many of them left school long time ago. It is therefore not strange if such students face learning difficulties. The good aspect is that despite their ages they are determined to upgrade and update themselves so that they would not be out of job due to rapid advancement in knowledge. If such older students are not taught proper time management most of them would be frustrated and abandon the course midstream.

Table 3 Distribution of students by qualification

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
4yr Cert. A	83	27.7
Post. Sec. Cert.	76	15.3
Sch. Cert/SSCE	54	18.0
Diploma	50	16.7
Others	37	31.0
Total	300	100.0

Majority of the respondents (69%) have at least initial teacher qualification. The teachers have realised the importance of adult and continuing education that is why they continue to embark on further studies even in their adult life. Such teachers seek to upgrade themselves and sharpen their teaching skills. This is a good sign for as the teachers update their knowledge and skills it will eventually impact positively on their output and lead to quality education. The qualification one entered the course with and the year one left school will determine how the one would cope with studies. Those who left school a long time and with the least qualification are likely to face difficulties in their studies than those who completed the last course not long ago and with higher qualifications.

In this section how students combined teaching with their studies is discussed. The discussion is done with reference to Table 4. The table contains the summarized frequencies and responses of both the students and course tutor respondents. In the discussion the responses of the students were contrasted with that of the course tutors.

Table 4 How students combine teaching with studies

Students-Questions	N	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean
Combining teaching with DE has adversely affected my mode of teaching.	270	20	20.2	1.1	28.7	37	3.2148
I find it difficult to combine teaching with distance education.	272	37.5	40.8	6.3	13.6	3.7	2.0882

Continued on next page

Table 4 (*continued*)

Students-Questions	N	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean
It needs discipline and planning to combine teaching with distance learning.	281	8.2	11.4	8.5	46.6	25.3	3.6940
I am a member of a self-help study group.	277	7.9	11.2	8.3	52.7	19.9	3.6534
At self-help study group meetings we discuss personal, academic problems and assignments.	286	21.3	23.8	112.2	32.5	10.1	2.8636
Distance learning has affected my social life.	277	28.2	32.5	10.5	21.3	7.6	2.4765
Counselling sessions are organised for those who need them during face-to-face sessions.	271	6.6	14	5.9	51.7	21.8	3.6750
I find self-help study group more helpful to monthly weekends sessions.	283	25.1	37.8	8.5	23.7	4.9	2.4558
Assignments are marked and returned promptly. End of semester exams. Results are released on good time.	283	27.6	40.3	7.4	20.8	3.8	2.3322
Assignments are marked and returned promptly. End of semester exams. Results are released on good time.	283	25.1	37.8	8.5	23.7	4.9	2.4558
Assignments are marked and returned promptly. End of semester exams. Results are released on good time.	283	27.6	40.3	7.4	20.8	3.8	2.3322
I have the opportunity to discuss results and remarks with course tutors.	283	21.2	37.8	8.5	23.7	4.7	2.2756
Feedback serves as an incentive and helps to improve my learning process.	281	27.6	4.3	7.4	20.8	39.9	3.794

Key to Table 4

N: Number of respondents SD: Strongly Disagree D: Disagree U: Uncertain
A: Agree SA: Strongly Agree

The first issue discussed under this section was whether the teaching of the students had been affected adversely by embarking on the course.

Although the student respondents varied in their responses, 56.7% indicated that the course had adversely affected their mode of teaching. On the part of course tutor respondents only 36% indicated that some of the students had complained to them that the course was having a great toll on their mode of teaching. It is not easy to combine normal teaching career with learning. The teachers were not given any concessions for their teaching because they had embarked on a course. They did the same amount of work they were doing before embarking on the course and this was putting a lot of pressure on them. They were expected to prepare lesson notes, do the required number of teaching load, give number required of exercises and mark them and participate fully in all extra curricula activities as their counterparts not enrolled in the course do.

As has been observed by Schuemer (1993), the primary role of the student is to learn. Under the best circumstances, this challenging task requires motivation, planning, and ability to analyse and apply the information being taught. In a distance education setting, the process of the student learning is more complex for several reasons.

According to Schuemer (1993), many distance education students are older, have jobs and families. They must coordinate the different areas of their lives, which influence each other-their families, spare time, and their studies.

Teachers who embark on distance learning require knowledge in the best way to effectively manage their time and how to draw a balance in their job (teaching) and their studies. If the students do not do proper planning and utilise time well, either their teaching or their studies suffers. It was clear from the responses of the students that the course was having a great toll on them as they lacked time management skills and this was affecting their teaching. There is the need for Centre for Continuing Education to incorporate a course in time management in the programme to enable the students to know how best to balance their teaching, studies and their private and social life.

In response to the question on whether the students found it difficult to combine teaching with studies, the majority of the student respondents (76.5%) indicated that it was not difficult. If the students claimed that the programme was having an adverse effect on their mode of teaching and

turned run to say that it was not difficult to combine teaching with studies then they were not being truthful to themselves. If they did not find it difficult to combine teaching with studies then they were not doing any serious studies. If this assertion that they were not doing serious studies was true then it confirms the assertion of Morgan (1991) that distant students who are not confident about their learning tend to concentrate on memorizing of facts and details in order to complete assignments and write exams. As a result, they end up with a poor understanding of the course materials. Morgan (1991) calls this type of learning 'surface' approach to learning. He suggests that the distant students need to become more selective and focused in their learning in order to master new information. As a matter of fact teaching and learning at the same time at a distance is demanding and to be able to do both effectively needs proper planning, discipline and good time management.

To the question of whether students got time do deep studies and whether this reflected in their submitted assignments, 75% of course tutors' respondents indicated that students did not get time to do deep studies and this indeed reflected in their submitted assignments. Schuemer (1993) gives the reason why most distant learners do not do well in their studies. He says in distance education, the learner is usually isolated. The motivational factors arising from contact or competition with other students are absent. The student lacks the immediate support of a teacher who is present to motivate, and if necessary, give attention to actual needs and difficulties that crop up during study.

Brundage, Keane and Mackneson (1993) assert that the shift from 'surface' to 'deep' learning is not automatic. They suggest that adult students and their instructors must face and overcome a number of challenges before effective learning takes place including "being and staying responsible for themselves, 'owing' their strengths, desires, skills, and needs, maintaining and increasing self esteem; relating to others; clarifying what is learned; redefining what legitimate is; and dealing with content."

Distant students can enhance their performance if they can set aside time for their instructional activities and must do all they can to receive family support. The course tutors also can enhance students learning by relating content to examples and receiving timely feedback from his instructors

and being counselled when necessary. One other factor that can enhance distant student's learning is group studies so therefore; it behoves every distant student to join a study group.

On the need for discipline and planning in the life of distant students, both the course tutors and students' respondents agreed that these are very important. As teaching and learning at the same time is very demanding, the distant student needs not only to plan his/her activities but needs discipline to follow the personal time table he/she draws for him/herself. To re-echo Schuemer (1993), "the primary role of the student is to learn, under the best of circumstances, this requires motivation, planning, and the ability to analyse and apply the information being taught." It must be pointed out that without planning and discipline the distant student cannot coordinate the different areas of his life, and this will go a long way to affect his family, job, spare time and studies.

The majority of students' respondents (73.5%) indicated that distant learning had affected their social lives. Due to pressure on their time, and the need to share their time among families, job, learning, and many other things their social life had been affected adversely. They used at least one weekend every month to attend face-to-face sessions and this prevented them from attending funerals and other social gathering that normally took place in the weekends. Pressure on their time also prevented most of them from visiting friends and they did not get enough time for their immediate families. This confirms Morgan (1991) assertion that distant students are often ignored by their families, as they did not get enough time to relate to them. Morgan says the performance of distance students can improve if only they will set aside time for their instructional activities and receive the support of their families in their academic endeavours. There is the need for the distant student to explain his new situation to friends and family members and solicit their support as soon as he embarks on the programme.

On the question of whether the students involved their pupils in their lessons and whether the pupils of the students found their lessons lively, most of the tutors indicated that they were uncertain. This answer was understandable, as the course tutors had not observed the students in the classroom setting. However, it was likely that the students had learned new skills and increased their knowledge and this was likely to make them

effective teachers. However, it is one thing to acquire new knowledge and another thing to be able to effectively teach it for others to understand it. It is hoped that the course would impact positively on the skills of the students and this will be evident in the way the students go about their teaching. As the students go through the programme, it will in the long run improve their teaching skills and their pupils will find their lessons lively and will get more involved in the lessons because of the improved knowledge of their teachers.

On whether it was obligatory to join a study group, 59% of the course tutors who participated in the study answered in the affirmative. Wright (1992) says in addition to study centres and residential courses are study groups. Such study groups without a teacher are somewhat more academic distance teaching projects. Students can usually help each other by sharing other study problems and their knowledge. Wright goes on to say that study groups are usually groups of students who are together at their own convenience to support each other. Some of the factors that the students consider when forming study groups are location, personality and interest. Study groups are usually small and range from two to six members. Students usually use their study groups to help them get through assignments.

Most of the respondents (72.6%) corroborated the assertion of Wright and indicated that at self help study group meetings they discussed personal and academic problems as well as assignments. Although the respondents found the study groups helpful, 60.7% of the respondents disagreed with the suggestion that the study groups were more helpful to the monthly weekend face-to-face sessions. It could be concluded from the discussions so far that study groups complemented the face-to-face sessions and could never replace them.

It came out of the study that there was no policy on counselling by the Centre for Continuing Education for the study centres and the type of counselling that took place in the centres was not well structured. The way counselling sessions were organized in the study centres was contrary to the criteria proposed by Clennell, Peters and Swart (1977). These writers assert that when distant students begin their studies, they are assigned to tutor-counsellors at their study centre. The tutor-counsellor will normally be responsible for all tuition and counselling. Clennell, Peters and Swart

say the tutor-counsellor is available on a fairly regular basis at the study centre and may discuss strictly academic matters associated with the course or may deal with study skills on much wider basis as well as reviewing and assisting with his students progress in the university unique and complex system.

It came out clearly from the study that counselling services were available only to the students who resided in the towns where the study centres were sited. Such students had advantage over those living outside the towns hosting the study centres as they could always contact the course tutors whenever they had problems. On the question of whether the students could contact their tutors after face-to-face sessions only 32.3% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. This means most of the students were denied access to counselling and either relied on friends for counselling or kept their academic and personal problems to themselves.

In the discussion so far on students support services, it could be inferred that some sort of support services were available to the students but the sort of counselling that took place during face-to-face sessions was not structured and effective. More over students did not have access to the library facility in the school hosting the study centre and this issue needs urgent and serious attention. Koomson (1998) contends that lack of effective counselling in distance programme can lead to high attrition rate. Koomson accedes to the fact that distance learners are lonely learners and this implies that the probability of dropping out of the programme is higher than that of conventional students. They require services such as counselling on the choice of programme and subjects combinations, managing their time as well as to meet the demands of the programme. According to Koomson (1998) “without a well defined, detailed and effective support system in place, training professional teachers by distance would be characterised by high attrition rate” (p.66).

On the issue of whether assignments were marked and returned on time, 62.9% of the student respondents answered in the negative, however, 76% of the tutor respondents responded in the affirmative. From all indications enough assignments were given to the students, marked and returned to the students but the issue was whether they were returned on time. Ley (1999) has suggested some guidelines to determine adequacy of assignments. He (Ley) says there should be at least three assignments

during a semester. According to Ley, the feedback should be during the semester and allow the student to use the information during the course; a final grade that the students receive too late to act upon would be in addition to the three suggested feedback messages. More frequent, corrective, feedback yields better learning outcomes than less frequent knowledge of results.

Feedback serves very important purposes, especially the return of marked assignment. Butler and Winnie (1995) say that feedback may be defined as information a learner receives about his/her learning processes and achievement outcomes. People like Mory (1996) and Smith and Regan (1992) assert that feedback is an essential part of instructional learning. Reiser and Dick (1996) on their part say feedback to learners may be essential to effective learning and Gagne (1985) says learners may find frequent feedback useful. Learner's feedback can facilitate metacognition in interactive instructional systems (Schweir, 1995) and contributes to self-regulated learning (Butler and Winnie, 1995). Feedback can reflect upon how the student feels – his response during the instructional experience (Wolcott, 1995). Feedback interacts with and contributes to support processes.

Due to the important role returned marked assignment plays in the student's learning process there is the need for the Centre for Continuing Education to make a policy on when all course tutors must return all assignments submitted to them. It would be necessary for all submitted assignments to be returned in the next face-to-face session. If a policy is made, all course tutors and students should be made aware of it. In this way it will go a long way to solve the question of when any assignment would be marked and returned and this will reduce if not eliminate the anxieties students go through in waiting for the return of submitted assignments.

To the question of whether appropriate remarks were given on all returned marked assignments, 66.6% of tutors' respondents answered in the affirmative. Remarks play very important role in students learning process. The remarks can either motivate or discourage students and affect the way they go about their studies. This assertion corroborates that of Ley (1999) that instructor feedback serves a different immediate function within the instructional system and this can go a long way to improve

student's performance. Ley goes on to argue that feedback from the instructor to the learner informs the learner how well he/she is learning and where he/she should direct his/her learning efforts. Learner feedback, which usually requires an external check, essentially closes the gap in the learning process (Gagne, 1985). Practice with feedback is one of the most powerful components in the learning process (Dick and Carey, 1990, p.165).

A greater number of the tutor respondents (79.2%) indicated that they gave fair marks that reflected students' ability. Fair assessment is important in students learning process. If a tutor marks an assignment and mistakenly marks a right answer wrong it can affect the morale of the affected student. This calls for carefulness on the part of tutors in the process of marking. It has been remarked by Rose (1995) that if the feedback system is defective and ineffective it can lead to high dropout rate. Rose is of the opinion that high dropout rate is exacerbated by lack of quick and appropriate feedback and encouragement, as well as inadequate preparation.

On the issue of whether remarks were both diagnostic and prescriptive, 60% of the tutors' respondents answered in the affirmative. A student must know why his/her answer is wrong and how he/she should have answered the question. The diagnostic aspect tells the student why she/he was wrong and the prescriptive tells the student how he should have gone about in the answering of the question. Dempsey, Drisoll and Swindell (1993) have set up four levels feedback serve. These writers say the feedback information serves cognitive knowledge of results, why an answer is correct/incorrect, how to produce a correct response, and how correct response looks like. The simplest cognitive feedback is the knowledge of result, which tells the student if a response to answer was correct or incorrect.

Butler and Winnie (1995) hold the view that feedback helps improves the learning processes, it conveys diagnostic and prescriptive information to the student' learning process. Diagnostic feedback helps expand upon knowledge of the results, and this addresses why the response may be correct or incorrect. Knowledge of the results and diagnostic feedback should begin with the first assignment and should be issued prior to the second assignment especially if the student can use the feedback

information to prepare and improve upon the second assignment. An instructor considers prescriptive feedback to suggest how a student may construct a correct response. Students who repeat a mistake across assignments may perform better after receiving prescriptive feedback since they can use prescriptive feedback to guide their work.

To the question of whether the students had the opportunity to discuss results and remarks with course tutors the students and the tutors varied in their responses. Whilst 68.9% of the student respondents indicated that they did not have the opportunity to discuss the results and remarks on assignments with the course tutors, 52% of the tutor respondents indicated that students had the opportunity to discuss results and remarks with the tutors. It could be deduced that some sort of interaction between the students and the tutors in terms of discussion on remarks and results take place. However, this appears to be selective and available to only a few privileged students.

As was pointed out under the section of student support services, there is the need to allot the students to the tutors so that they can discuss their academic problems with them. This view falls in line with the assertion of Clennell, Peters and Swart (1977) that distance students should at the beginning of their studies be assigned to tutor-counsellor at the local centre. The tutor-counsellor will normally be available on fairly regular basis at the study centre and may discuss strictly academic matters associated with the course or may deal with study skill on a much wider basis as well as reviewing and assisting with the student progress in the university unique and complex system. Tutors and the student respondents accepted the fact that feedback serves as an incentive for students to improve their learning. As the importance of feedback had been established in students' learning process, there was the need to take pragmatic efforts to strengthen feedback system in the Centre for Continuing Education distance education programme. It must be underscored that it is not easy to embark on effective feedback programme. Ley (1999) has observed that a distance "feedback system depends upon a carefully planned, written assignments: specified evaluation criteria and technology. It includes documentation: progress tracking standardised responses based upon the specified evaluation criteria, and multiple assignments during a course" (p. 66).

Establishing feedback criteria system requires the instructor/designer to complete several steps. The first step is to identify every assignment and that will be required for three purposes, which are practice, assessment and fermenting positive learners' attitude. Ley (1999) asserts that feedback advances students learning but can be problematic for the distance instructor implementing a feedback system, while somewhat labour intensive to establish, allows the instructor to overcome the barriers in providing feedback to the students. Ley identifies potential feedback benefits to include clearer communication between the instructor and the students and increased instructor students connectedness.

The tutors' views were sought on attrition rate of the students but none of them seemed to know the number of students, who had dropped out since the programme commenced over two years ago. Although the entire tutor respondents indicated that there had been some dropout from the programme they were however, not sure of the approximate number let alone say which sex had the high attrition rate. When the office of Centre for the Continuing Education was contacted they too did not have the attrition rate of the programme. They indicated that they were in the process of computerising the records of the students and that the information about the attrition rate would be available in not too distant future. The organizers of the programme could be pardoned, as the programme is barely three years old.

From the discussion so far in this section it could be concluded that feedback system is very necessary and important in every institution, which, deals with learning more especially, distance learning. As has been observed by Ley (1999) if feedback system is not effective it can lead to high dropout rate. As lack of feedback system has been identified to be a major cause of dropout in distance education programmes, there is the need for Centre for Continuing Education to draw up a clear guideline on feed back systems to reduce attrition rate of the programme and to keep proper record on the students of the programme.

Conclusion

Distant students face many challenges that militate against their studies. The challenges include how to combine their work with their studies, manage family and social activities. They are often misunderstood,

isolated and finally drop out from the course. They also feel burdened with studies and do not know where to turn to for help. Those who manage and co-ordinate their activities very well, receive constant feedback from instructors and course mates as well as support from employers and family members are able to successfully complete their courses.

Recommendations

The challenges militating against distant students can be reduced if both students and distance education providers take appropriate measures. The following recommendations are therefore being offered for the consideration for both distant students and distance education providers.

1. Any person who plans to embark or embarks on distance education should inform and seek support from his family, friends, fellow employees and employer. The prospective student should inform these significant associates that his new position would limit his free time and movement and seek their understanding and support.
2. The distant education providers should teach the new students time management and encourage the students to draw private timetable and discuss it with their counsellors. The students should be told to make adjustment to the timetable whenever it is necessary.
3. All students should be assigned counsellors and should be given the opportunity to contact them at any time they encounter any problem (be it academic, personal or job related) either through the e-mail or telephone. The counsellors should give their counselees frequent feedback.
4. The students should also be encouraged to form study groups and get in touch with their study group members through the e-mail and mobile phone whenever they are in need. Students living in the same vicinity should be encouraged to meet occasional for discussions and studies.
5. The providers should offer the students support services such as counselling and this will go a long way to reduce attrition rate.

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