

Observations of distance learners on the commonwealth youth programme at the University of Ghana

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Abstract: The University of Ghana has since 2001 been delivering a Commonwealth Youth Programme Diploma in Youth in Development Work through distance learning. Among the main aims of the study were to find out the learners' opinions on the suitability of the resources of the University of Ghana available for the programme, and to assess learners' perceptions of support services. This article summarises the results of a study in which a questionnaire was used to elicit learners' opinions on various activities and facilities that characterized the delivery of the programme. Some of the main findings are that tutor-marked assignments, tutorials, timed-tests and semester examinations were beneficial to the students. However, a substantial number of learners did not have access to the library facilities. The majority thought facilities and resources provided by the University for the programme were adequate and satisfactorily. It recommends among other things that since learners are found in all the 10 regions of Ghana, the venue for the tutorials should be decentralized. Also to cover all regions, the timed-tests should be written during the end of semester revision period to serve as mock examinations for the learners before they write the end of semester examinations.

Keywords: Youth Development Work, Distance Learners, Facilities, Support Services

1. Introduction

The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) from 1974 to 2001 delivered professional certificate and diploma level training in youth work to youth workers and leaders through the face-to-face mode of education. As demand for youth workers grew, it became clear that the classroom face-to-face mode of education could no longer adequately serve the needs of various Governments that sent learners to CYP Centres in Guyana, India, Solomon Islands and The Zambia. Therefore in 1995 all the Centres were mandated to switch over to the distance learning mode in delivering the programme. The number of institutions running the programme in Africa was also increased from one to four.

The University of Ghana was one of the four universities chosen to deliver the programme in Africa. The others are the Open University of Tanzania, University of South Africa and Zimbabwe Open University. The role of the University of Ghana for the delivery of the programme in Ghana includes: providing tutorial support to learners and making available the resources of the University to the learners (Commonwealth Youth Programme, 2002). The first offering at the University of Ghana took off in August

2001 with 50 learners and ended in July 2003 with 44 learners writing the final examinations.

The delivery of courses at a distance presents major administrative challenges, which conventional educational institutions do not face. Once course materials have been produced they must be stored and then delivered to learners either through the mail, via study centres, when learners attend tutorial sessions or where appropriate through broadcasting organizations. Learners must also have a means of submitting assignments to the tutors and having them marked and returned to the learners. In the case of the first offering of the CYP diploma programme most of the learners submitted their assignments during tutorial sessions. A few however, mailed the assignments or dropped them in person at the Distance Education Unit at the University of Ghana campus at Legon. The marked assignments are normally returned to the learners during the tutorial sessions, after the tutors have explained the tutor- comments made in the assignments.

A number of questions have been raised about the potential of several aspects of the distance education system. One such question is how to sustain learners' motivation to enable them continue with their studies till

completion. Studies by Sahoo (1985) and Balasubramania (1986) revealed that distance education had a high rate of dropouts. According to Sahoo (1985) major problems coming in the ways of dropouts were non-attendance at tutorial sessions, lack of using library facilities, lack of proper teacher-student contacts, non-availability of reference materials, not submitting the required number of tutor-marked assignments and difficulties in studying the instructional materials.

Student support services frequently offer learners the opportunity to visit study centres for tutorial and counseling support, to meet fellow learners, and to use facilities not available to them at home; facilities like library services, including a postal loan service of books and videos, are offered in some countries (IGNOU, 1995). Obviously, student support services help learners overcome their feeling of loneliness and isolation which may prove harmful for their studies and lead to drop outs.

In contact programmes or tutorial sessions normally, major issues are taken up and discussed. These contacts assume that the learners would have thoroughly gone through the instructional materials sent to them and attend the contact programme with specific doubts to be clarified by the tutors. The purpose of tutorial sessions is partly to bring in peer group interaction and look into such difficulties which may have remained unresolved and partly for appropriate orientation with regard to end-of-term examinations (IGNOU, 1996).

Distance teaching institutions also require setting up library-cum-study centres, which make library facilities and teacher guidance accessible to the learners as in some Indian institutions, while others do not because of various administrative difficulties. The major difficulties faced by these institutions in this regard are inadequate financial support, difficulty in obtaining leave by the learners and problems of accommodation, board and transport.

Assignments hold central position in distance education and thus serve as a means for motivating distance learners. They enable tutors to evaluate learners' achievements so that they can give each student the appropriate help. Tutor-comments on assignments give the learners the necessary feedback. Academic communication is thus effected. It is necessary that the tutor-comments on assignment responses, should be diagnostic, providing the learner with reasons why his answers are right or wrong. This implies, among others, that adequate quantum staff should be provided for the purpose, so that assignments could be marked and returned to the learners on regular basis. The tutors also need to be trained for their task of tutoring distance learners (IGNOU, 1995).

In discussing the distance education programme in Ghana, one factor that always came up was the lack of trained administrative personnel to run the programme (Adda, 1998). Fortunately, all the staff of the Distance Education Unit were trained in various aspect of distance education. In an interview with the staff they observed that though the distance education unit has logistics and trained

personnel to provide adequate student support, they need to attend regular refresher courses to keep them in shape for their work. This is a laudable suggestion which should be considered by the Distance Education Unit and the University of Ghana, who were the organizers of the CYP diploma in Ghana. There is the need for refresher training for the staff because knowledge is dynamic.

The above studies show the important role of the various activities and facilities in the delivery of a successful distance education programme. They therefore provide information upon which generalisations may be built about this aspect of distance education.

2. Methodology

An instrumental qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) approach was employed so as to understand the experiences of individual learners as they progressed through the Commonwealth Youth Programme Diploma studies at the University of Ghana. The researcher used the questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaires were distributed to all the 44 learners who wrote the final examinations in 2003 (Adda, 2005).

The questionnaires contained mostly open-ended questions, which enabled learners to express their own opinions about certain issues of the programme. But there were a few closed-ended questions with possible answers provided for learners to make a choice.

The researcher administered the questionnaires to the learners over a two-week period. This was during the face-to-face tutorials and revisions for the final end-of-semester examinations in July 2003. A total of 29 questions with the following distribution of topics were asked: 18 questions were about the support services provided to learners (like tutor-marked assignments, tutorial sessions, timed-tests, end-of-semester examinations, academic assistance, staff attitude) and 11 questions were on facilities and resources provided by the University for learners (like library, classroom, toilet and residential accommodation facilities)

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents findings relating to learners observations of tutorial support and resources provided by the University of Ghana for the distance learners on the Commonwealth Youth Programme. They are organized using the core components of activities involved in supporting learners on a distance education programme. These are tutor-marked assignments, timed-tests, end-of-semester examinations, tutorial sessions, reading materials, academic assistance, attitude of staff, and classroom, library, residential accommodation and toilet facilities. All the 44 learners', to whom questionnaires were sent, answered and returned them. This figure was considered enough basis for generalizations to be made for the entire learners at the time. The results are presented and

discussed under sub-headings as shown below.

3.1. Tutor-Marked Assignments, Timed-Tests and End-of-Semester Examinations

3.1.1. Tutor-Marked Assignments

The learners were asked whether the tutor-marked assignments should be maintained. All the 44 learners approved this statement and provided various reasons indicated in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, 44.12 % of the respondents felt that the tutor-marked assignments motivated them to do further reading. Interestingly, the above finding is similar to a report by IGNOU (1995) cited above that "... assignments serve as a means for motivating distance learners". Nearly 30% of learners thought that the assignments helped them assess their performances and correct their mistakes. This result is similar to what was obtained by IGNOU (1995), that "tutor-comments on assignment responses, should be diagnostic, providing the learner with reasons why his answers are right or wrong". IGNOU (1995) also indicated that "assignments enable tutors evaluate learners' achievements so that they can give each student the appropriate help". It is worthy to note that 8.82% of the learners in Table 1 supported this assertion.

Table 1. Reasons to maintain tutor-marked assignments

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Made learners do further reading.	17	44.12
Helped learners assess their performance and correct mistakes.	9	20.59
Helped learners have idea of nature of questions for examinations.	6	17.65
Helped tutors assess learners' level of understanding of modules.	5	8.82
Helped learners better grades in examinations.	5	8.82
Total	44	100

Table 1 also shows that some learners did the assignments because they felt the assignments helped them have an idea of the nature of questions for the end-of-semester examinations and so will be able to get better grades.

In order to improve the tutor-marked assignments, eleven learners suggested the submission of assignments before tutorials, while six learners said it should be after the tutorials. They also stated that tutors should provide adequate tutor-comments and use grades instead of numerical marks in grading assignments.

3.1.2. Timed-Tests

This section deals with the issue of time-tests which constitute 30% of grading each course at the University of Ghana. The learners are part-time students with many social and family responsibilities; however they make time to study and prepare for the timed-tests. It was therefore not surprise when all the 44 learners said the timed-tests should be maintained. Their reasons are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Reasons to maintain the timed-tests

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Motivated learners to study.	18	40.90
Assessed learners understanding of the modules.	12	27.30
Prepared learners for end of semester examinations.	11	25.00
Supplemented learners end-of-semester examinations marks.	3	6.80
Total	44	100

The main reason learners gave for maintaining the timed-tests is that it motivated them to study. However, some of the learners observed that timed-tests assessed their understanding of the modules and also prepared them for the end-of-semester examinations.

On ways of improving timed-tests, 20 of the responses are that the timed-tests were all right. Twenty other responses suggested that the timed-tests should be marked on time; fourteen said they should be conducted during revision period for end-of-semester examinations. Ten learners suggested that appropriate answer sheets should be provided for the timed-tests instead of the foolscap ruled sheets.

3.1.3. End-of-Semester Examinations

One other major issue considered by the study was the end-of-semester examinations. Learners were asked whether the end-of-semester examinations should be maintained. The information obtained indicated that all the 44 learners were in favour of end-of-semester examinations. They said through the examinations learners' performances were assessed by the tutors and also they were motivated to learn. However, seven learners did not provide any responses.

The learners suggested ways to improve the examinations as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Suggestions to improve end-of-semester examinations

Suggestions	Frequency	Percentage
Examinations timetable should be spaced.	11	26.83
Revision period should be extended.	7	17.07
Assignments and timed-tests should be marked and given out to learners before end-of-semester examinations	5	12.20
Examination questions should be related to real life situation and issues.	5	12.20
Examinations timetable should not be changed at the least reason; it should be respected.	5	12.20
Mobile phones should be switched off during examinations	4	9.75
Examinations were conducted well	4	9.75
Total	41	100

Table 3 reveals that some learners want the assignments and timed-tests to be marked before end-of-semester examinations. This is so because they felt the assignments

helped them have an idea of the nature of examination questions thereby they are able to obtain better grades in the end-of- semester examinations.

3.2. Tutorial Sessions

Another issue that was considered by the study was whether the tutorial sessions should be maintained. All the 44 learners found the tutorial sessions useful and therefore recommended it to be maintained.

3.2.1. Reasons for Maintaining Tutorial Sessions

The various reasons the learners gave for the maintenance of the tutorial sessions are seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Reasons for tutorial sessions

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
The tutors' clarified issues not clear in the modules.	24	54.55
Afforded learners the opportunity to share their experiences and ideas.	13	29.55
Equipped the learners for the end of semester examinations.	7	15.90
Total	44	100

As many as 24 out of the 44 learners said during tutorial sessions the tutors clarified issues not clear in the modules. This confirms IGNOU (1996) assertion that tutorial sessions look into difficulties which remained unresolved by the individual learners on their own. Therefore, tutorial sessions afforded the learners the opportunity to share experiences through peer group interactions. Some respondents attended tutorials because they are equipped at the tutorials through appropriate orientation for the end-of-semester examinations (IGNOU, 1996).

3.2.2. Ways to Improve Tutorials

The learners were further asked to suggest two ways to improve the way the tutorial sessions were held. Their responses are indicated in Table 5.

Table 5. Ways to improve tutorial sessions

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Duration of the sessions should be three days	20	25.97
Irrelevant contributions by learners should be discouraged	16	20.79
There should be group discussions	15	19.48
The venue should be decentralized	13	16.88
Tutorials should be held at end of month	13	16.88
Total	77	100

Some learners suggested that there should be group discussions during tutorial sessions. This would bring in peer group interaction to discuss difficulties in studying the instructional materials (Sahoo,1985) There was a suggestion by some learners that the venue for tutorials should be decentralized to enable learners who find it difficult in obtaining leave to travel over long distance to attend tutorials to do so at a nearby venue. When tutorials

are held at the end of the month most learners, who are workers and are paid their salaries at the end of the month, could attend tutorials because they could afford the high transport fares as well as board and lodging costs.

3.2.3. Relationship between Tutors and Learners

To ascertain the nature of relationship that existed between the tutors and learners the study asked the learners to rate the relationship. Forty-three respondents observed that the relationship between learners and tutors was cordial. Only one learner was of the opinion that the relationship was average.

The respondents were further asked to explain their rating. Twenty-two learners explained that the tutors were very friendly; eight said they were very understanding and six stated that the tutors treated learners with respect. However eight respondents did not answer the question.

3.2.4. Performance of Tutors

Learners were asked to indicate the performance of the tutors at tutorial sessions. Their responses are seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Performance of tutors at tutorial sessions

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	26	59.1
Good	15	34.1
Fair/Average	3	6.8
Poor	-	-
Total	44	100

It is important to note that no respondent stated that tutors performed poorly at the tutorials. These observations did not surprise the researcher because all the tutors were experience senior faculty members of the University of Ghana.

3.3. Additional Reading Materials and Academic Assistance for Learners

3.3.1. Additional Reading Materials

Even though the Distance Education Unit provided additional reading materials to the learners, the study revealed that some did not use them. However, most (41) of the learners used the additional reading materials. The learners who used additional reading materials were asked the source of the materials. Fifteen said they bought them from bookshops, 31 indicated they got them from the library and 27 indicated that their friends donated the reading materials to them. It is important to note that only three learners said they got the additional reading materials from the Distance Education Unit of the University of Ghana

The three learners who did not use additional reading materials observed that they did not do so because they did not have access to suitable books or reading materials.

The study further requested learners to rate the suitability of the additional reading materials they used. Thirty-seven (84%) learners found the suitability of the additional

reading materials either very high or high. However, seven respondents described the reading materials as average.

3.3.2. Academic Assistance for Learners

The Distance Education Unit staff offered learners guidance and counseling services. Providing additional reading materials or handouts was mentioned by 24 learners as one of the services provided by the staff. Six learners said the staff facilitated residential tutorial sessions during revision period for learners prior to the end-of-semester examinations. Four learners said late timed-tests were conducted for them whenever they could not attend tutorials during which timed-tests were written. One learner said learners were helped to have access to the library and another learner indicated that they were affiliated to halls of residence in the university.

3.4. Attitude of Distance Education Unit Staff towards Learners

The study requested learners to describe the attitude of the Distance Education Unit staff towards learners. Most (71 percent) of the respondents described the attitude of the staff as excellent. They went on further to make suggestions to improve the work of the staff.

Table 7. Suggestions to improve work of the staff

Suggestions	Frequency	Percentage
Staff should be given financial incentive for coming to work on weekends.	15	40.54
Efficient communication and mailing systems.	6	16.22
Staff should attend regular training workshop.	5	13.51
Increase staff strength.	5	13.51
Late submission of assignments should not be accepted.	6	16.22
Total	37	100

The Distance Education Unit staff work on weekends to organize tutorial sessions and provide other academic assistance for the learners. Some respondents therefore, suggested that they should be given financial incentive and also sponsor to attend regular refresher training workshops as a form of motivation.

3.5. Classroom, Library, Residential Accommodation and Toilet Facilities for Learners

3.5.1. Classroom Facilities

The learners were asked whether they were satisfied with the state of the classrooms provided for their tutorial sessions. Thirty-nine learners were satisfied, while five learners were not.

On ways to improve facilities in the classrooms, 15 of the learners suggested the provision of appropriate classroom furniture and the changing of window nettings. Ten other learners suggested well ventilated, lighted and spacious classrooms for tutorial sessions and examinations.

Finally, four learners wanted damaged roof-ceiling to be repaired.

3.5.2. Library Facilities

The views of learners were sought about their accessibility to the library on the University of Ghana campus. One half of the learners (50%) noted that they had access to the library, while another half (50%) did not. Learners who had access to the library said they went there to study, borrow books and make references. Learners who did not have access to library because either they did not live on campus or close to campus did their studies at their workplaces, homes or nearby school classroom buildings. Sixteen learners had access to the internet facility and they used it to acquire additional information to what they got from their modules and tutors.

3.5.3. Residential Accommodation for Learners

The Distance Education Unit provided residential accommodation on campus for learners during the end-of-semester revision and examinations. The learners were satisfied with this facility. They however, gave a number of suggestions to improve the residential accommodation facility.

Twenty respondents want the CYP learners to be accommodated in their respective halls of affiliation instead of putting all of them in one hall of residence; and also they should not be mixed with other students in residence during the period but are on different programmes. Four other learners do not want more than two learners put in a room and also should be allowed to come into residence immediately the regular on-campus students vacate after their end-of-semester examinations. Finally, five learners wanted the rooms to be cleaned and that there should be regular flow of water.

3.5.4. Toilet Facilities

The views of learners were sought on the suitability of the toilet facilities provided for learners whenever they came for tutorials and end-of-semester examinations. Twenty learners indicated that the toilet facilities were "okay", while 24 said they were not. The learners were asked to make two suggestions for improving the toilet facilities.

Table 8. Suggestions to improve toilet facilities

Suggestions	Frequency	Percentage
The toilets should be cleaned regularly	19	30.16
There should be regular flow of water.	11	17.46
The sinks and water closets should be changed.	9	14.26
Adequate toilet facilities should be provided.	12	19.06
Toilet rolls should be provided in the toilets.	12	19.06
Total	63	100

4. Conclusion

The success of any distance education programme appears to be crucially dependent upon the support services and the facilities made available to the learners on the programme by the institution running the programme.

The study considered the provision of tutorial support and facilities by the University of Ghana to the learners. The study revealed that the support services provided for learners by the distance education unit staff was beneficial to the learners. This was shown in the learners' assertion that none of the core support activities like tutor-marked assignments, timed-tests and tutorial sessions should be withdrawn. Even, when learners were asked to describe the attitude of the Distance Education Unit staff towards them, most learners described the attitude of the staff as excellent. However, learners observed that the staff should be given financial incentive for coming to work on weekends as motivation. Further, the learners observed that, the classroom, library, residential accommodation and toilet facilities provided by the University for the learners were generally suitable. However, the learners suggested that the toilets should be cleaned regularly and also regular flow of water in the toilets should be ensured. They also suggested the provision of appropriate classroom furniture in the tutorial rooms for the comfort and convenience of the learners who were mainly adults.

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