LEARNERS' PERCEPTION OF THE QUALITY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perception of distance learners about the quality of distance education in Ghana. Using a sequential explanatory mixed method approach and data from 500 randomly selected distance learners at the University of Ghana, the study found that the contents of the teaching sessions, the Sakai Learning Management System, and the delivery of course contents met the expectation of the majority of distance learners. However, most learners were dissatisfied with the face-to-face teaching due to frequent cancellations and rescheduling of tutorials, unavailability of facilitators, and the limited number of face-to-face tutorials. Additionally, most distance learners did not receive prompt feedback on their assignments. Also, the study found that distance learners did not receive the needed academic guidance but relied on their peers for such support. Therefore, the study recommends that the management of distance education should invest in student support services such as ICT infrastructure,

the provision of the necessary academic and non-academic counselling, and guidance services to support distance education learners.

INTRODUCTION

One of the growing paradigm shifts in higher education in recent years has been the focus on distance education and e-learning (Behera, 2013; Panchabakesan, 2011; Richard & Haya, 2009; Traxler, 2018). Distance education (DE) is not a new phenomenon in education and has existed for years with its root in European correspondent courses (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Sherry, 1995). Higher institutions have realised the need to streamline higher education within the national educational policy framework by making university education accessible to all qualified students, especially in this era of e-learning. In line with this, distance learning has become part of the educational lexicon and an important field of education. The scholarship around DE, in recent times, has focused on the benefits and challenges associated with dual-mode (conventional and distance learning) tertiary education (Delaney & Brown, 2018; Nage-Sibande & Morolong, 2018).

With the rapid development in the physical reach and the scope of courses and programmes offered by higher education, DE is becoming very popular than before (Rena, 2007; Bušelić, 2012). Given this, learner-centredness is placed at the core of DE, albeit it is not only peculiar to DE, and it creates an enabling environment for learners since they are far from the instructor (Bozkurt, 2019; Chang & Smith, 2008; Gravani, 2019; Todhunter, 2013). As a growing field of education, distance learning is flexible. It is situated in an environment that makes it easy to integrate knowledge transfer and develop online pedagogy skill sets in higher education (Panchabakesan, 2011). In this regard, the development of DE marked a huge educational and structural dynamics in the short term than the preceding schools of education (Harry, 1992 cited in Rena, 2007). This development has necessitated open, distance, and e-learning in contemporary higher education. Students of DE normally have their course materials on DVDs, CDs, and online course portals. The development of e-learning has tremendously facilitated DE in diverse ways. Through e-learning, universities can reach out to thousands of students learning at a distance. What has gained and continues to gain the attention of faculty, students, and accrediting agencies of DE and e-learning is the debate on the quality of education to meet the overall expectation of students, who are the major stakeholders. It is, therefore, imperative to develop course content, provide the necessary support services and create a sound learning environment to meet students' academic and general needs of students. It is for this reason that considerable attention has been given to DE and e-learning studies in the Ghanaian higher education context, with various scholars exploring both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the subject matter (Amponsah et al., 2019; Asante, 2008; Biney & Worlanyo, 2015; Badu-Nyarko & Amponsah, 2016; Darko-Adjei & Ankrah, 2020; Kwapong, 2008; Tagoe & Abakah, 2014; Quansah et al., 2017; Tagoe & Cole, 2020; Yeboah et al., 2012).

Higher institutions of learning in Ghana have welcomed distance education as part of complementing the efforts of the government of Ghana in achieving its goal of increasing access to tertiary education (Kwapong, 2008). This has seen most of the public universities in Ghana widening the net to offer distance education to students who meet admission requirements. The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) was the first to run a DE programme in 1996, followed by the University of Cape Coast (UCC) with a Diploma in Basic Education, the University of Ghana in 2001 with a Diploma in Youth Development Work, and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in 2005 (Osei et al., 2013). However, as the premier university in Ghana, the University of Ghana started running the DE programme degree in 2007. Thus, so far as the degree programme is concerned, the University of Ghana became a dual mode of learning in 2007.

The University of Ghana runs the DE programme through its School of Continuing and Distance Education under the College of Education. The university's experience with official e-learning systems dates to 2004 with the introduction of the Knowledge Environment for Web-based Learning (KEWL). The university currently uses the Sakai Learning Management System (LMS), which was introduced in the 2014/2015 academic year. The University of Ghana DE programme is a hybrid or blended learning which is made up of face-to-face teaching and online teaching. Prior to the inception of the blended learning mode, for instance, efforts were made to improve the quality of the DE programme. One worth mentioning is the quality assurance programme implemented by the university with the aim of improving the quality of the programme. However, some studies have identified several challenges that stifle the quality of the University of Ghana DE programme (Badu-Nyarko, 2013; Biney & Worlanyo, 2015; Badu-Nyarko & Amponsah, 2016). As a result, through research and policy dialogue, several reforms have been made over the years by the University to improve the quality of its DE programme including the creation of eleven (11) learning centres across the various regions as a means of democratising education, creation of the Department of Distance Education to provide both teaching and service support to distance students and the introduction of the Sakai Learning Management System to facilitate online teaching and learning among others.

Therefore, there is a need for both scholars and practitioners of DE to constantly pay attention to the extent to which the various interventions have improved the quality of the University of Ghana's DE programme from the perspective of the students. This will help address both short-term and long-term challenges facing the University of Ghana's DE programme to meet the academic needs of the students. It was, therefore, necessary to conduct this research to ascertain the perception of University of Ghana distance learners about the quality of the DE programme considering the various interventions implemented by the university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to note that DE has attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners in the field of education. Thus, as Bušelić (2012, p. 25) puts it, "the literature and studies related to distance learning expanded considerably in the last years." Therefore, the study reviews the literature in line with the three objectives.

Teaching by Distance

One of the standout differences between traditional face-to-face and distance education is the mode of teaching and the relationship between the teacher and the learner. It is in this sense that the definition of distance education derives its true meaning (Bušelić, 2012; Forsyth et al., 2010). Thus, unlike conventional education, in distance education, the teacher or instructor and the learner are separated by distance. In this context, Bušelić (2012, p. 24) for instance, defines distance education as "a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology to deliver teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom". Distance education, therefore, requires the adoption and implementation of the right teaching pedagogy so that both the instructor and the student will have a sense of physical interaction, although separated by distance (Burns, 2011; Kiryakova, 2009; Panchabakesan, 2011). Teaching by distance must therefore be designed to promote effective learner ownership, independence, and autonomy (Keegan, 1996; Saba, 2003). To ensure this, several variables such as the competency of tutors to ensure effective facilitation of learning (Campbell et al., 2019; Lee et al.,

2017), the content of learning materials (Bol & Garner, 2011; Sadeghi, 2019; Xiao, 2017), the ability of instructors to engage students with tests and assignments and provide prompt feedback (Edge & Loegering, 2000; Price, 1997) and the effective face-to-face sessions. These factors are regarded as very imperative for effective teaching. Therefore, fundamentally, teaching by distance encompasses all aspects of distance education and is the primary basis for assessing the quality of distance education.

It is not surprising that various components or aspects of teaching by distance have attracted considerable empirical studies all over the world. In a study, Alam et al. (2012), for instance, tackled the perception of distance learners about the effectiveness of face-to-face sessions and the level of satisfaction of learners about the competence of facilitators in their overall assessment of distance education in Pakistan. Their study showed that most distance learners in Pakistan were satisfied with their facilitators. Generally, from their study, distance learners were highly satisfied with the effectiveness of the face-to-face teachings offered by universities. However, empirical evidence has proven that there is a relationship between the instructor's feedback on the assignment and the performance of learners (Eom et al., 2006; Uribe & Vaughan, 2017). In the African context, there is a general dissatisfaction among learners about feedback on their assignments (Kintu & Wanami, 2019; Shikuo et al., 2020). Kintu and Wanami (2019) examined the perception of students about distance learning at Kyambo University in Uganda. Their study revealed that feedback on assignments and examinations was unsatisfactory, and students were not satisfied with the presentation and the delivery of study contents.

Shikulo et al. (2020) also found out in their study that distance learners at the University of Science and Technology - Centre for Open and Lifelong learning (NUST-COLL) in Namibia were not satisfied with the feedback on assignments. On teaching by distance, Messo (2014) also examined students' perceptions of the quality of open and distance learning in Tanzania and his study revealed that distance learners were not satisfied with their learning materials. The findings of Kintu and Wanami as well as Messo (2014) are in sharp contrast with a study by Biney and Worlanyo (2015) in the Ghanaian context. They investigated the prospects and challenges of the University of Ghana Distance learning by relying on the exploratory qualitative design. Their study revealed learners were largely satisfied with the reading materials and course contents. Similarly, Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah (2016) identified inadequate tutorial periods and dissatisfaction with assignments as the key challenges that faced University of Ghana DE learners. Also, Asante (2008) in his study on assessing distance education at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) revealed that the majority of distance learners expressed high perceived satisfaction with tutorials.

Student Support Services as an Essential Component of Distance Education

One of the crucial conditions for ensuring and achieving effective and quality distance education is the availability of the necessary learner support services by service providers, in this case, universities. LaPadula (2003, p. 119) defines student support services as the "assistance and guidance that students are offered above and beyond the learning materials". It is in line with this that both theoretical and empirical literature on learner support services in distance education continues to expand over the years (Brindley, 2014; Gil-Jaurena, 2014; LaPadula, 2003; Mills, 2003; Tait & Miller, 2003). Mills (2003) has emphatically argued that student support service is the central element in open and distance education. Tait and Miller (2003) argue that one of the critical issues providers of distance education must consider is student support services to ensure quality distance education. LaPadula (2003, p.3) argues that learner support services are important for enrolment enhancement, decrease in attrition and provision of

"a well-rounded program" toward the overall importance of students' academic success. Brindley (2014) opines that the availability of learner support services such as libraries, academic skill assessment, peer-to-peer support, advising, and counselling promotes learners' motivation and satisfaction.

The availability of the necessary learner support services in African and other developing contexts is more challenging than in advanced societies largely due to financial and other environmental and structural differences. For this reason, this aspect of distance education has attracted considerable attention from scholars and educators in developing countries and Africa (Ouma, 2019; Shikulo et al., 2020). Ouma (2019) revealed that the availability of the needed student support services is the major challenge facing DE programmes in Uganda. Ouma (2019) identified inter alia limited counselling and guidance due to time and poor counselling skills by staff, acute lack of ICT skills among students, and inadequate library support as the main challenges hindering effective learning support services. The findings of Shikulo et al. (2020) showed that the overwhelming majority of students were aware of the diverse support services available at the NUST-COLL, Namibia learning centres and were satisfied with the implementation of the support services.

In the Ghanaian context, studies on learner support services for distance students reveal an unsatisfactory assessment of learner support services available for students. For instance, Asante (2008) revealed that distance learners were not satisfied with library facilities and services at UEW. Several studies on student support services at the University of Ghana have been conducted (Amponsah et al., 2021; Amponsah et al, 2019; Badu-Nyarko & Amponsah, 2016; Biney & Worlanyo, 2015; Tagoe & Abakah, 2014). Amponsah et al. (2021) assessed the availability of learner support services to facilitate the hybrid learning environment of the UG distance education program. Their study revealed that learners frequently used face-to-face` tutorials as the available physical and technological support. Overall, they noted that learners' interaction with tutors and their peers constituted the main available learner social support service while counselling and guidance support services were inaccessible to learners. Generally, the challenges facing the University of Ghana distance education as revealed by Biney and Worlanyo (2015) and Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah (2016) included academic facilities and logistics, cumbersome registration procedures, especially at the beginning of the semester.

E-learning and Learning Management System (Sakai LMS)

Distance education is growing on a faster note in this era of e-learning. Behera (2013, p. 67) defines e-learning as the adoption and use of knowledge administered and facilitated primarily by electronic means". Thus, online education has become a necessary part of distance education. This growth is largely attributed to the development of information technologies such as computers, smartphones and most importantly the advent of the internet. The era of e-learning, therefore, requires instructors and students, especially to develop a new set of learning skills and knowledge to be successful (Romiszowski, 2004 cited in Olojo et al., 2012). For e-learning to be effective, several conditions must be met, which include the availability of computers, stable internet connectivity; reliable electricity; appropriate e-learning policies, improved e-learning teaching training and lower prices for connectivity among others (Olojo et al., 2012). In the view of Manjengwa (2011), an important aspect of DE is to lessen the distance between the student and the teacher by bridging the gap. This has therefore necessitated the development of online learning management systems (LMSs) to create a virtual classroom for both the teacher and the student. Turnbull et al. (2019, p. 1)

comprehensively define learning management systems as "web-based software platforms that provide an interactive online learning environment and automate the administration, organization, delivery, and reporting of educational content and learner outcomes". Over the years the advancement in educational technology has seen the development of various LMSs and popular among them include Moodle, Atutor, Claroline, Docebo, Blackboard, ILIAS, Schoology, Cornerstone, Skillsoft, Sakai etc. Generally, LMSs promote an equitable learning environment built on supportive institutional structures (Chugh et al., 2017 as cited in Turnbull et al., 2019). The development of e-learning or online learning has therefore given rise to blended learning in higher institutions in both conventional and DE education systems.

Undoubtedly, the Sakai LMS is one of the popular LMSs and as such has attracted some considerable studies. Given this, the impact of the Sakai LMS on the University of Ghana DE program has been studied from diverse angles (Amponsah et al., 2019; Biney, 2020; Tagoe & Cole, 2020; Darko-Adjei & Ankrah, 2020). Tagoe and Cole (2020) through a qualitative descriptive case study research design explored the impact of the Sakai LMS on the University of Ghana DE nursing students. Their study found that the use of the Sakai LMS is very convenient, flexible and provides easy means of accessing course materials. With regards to the challenges, the study revealed unstable internet connectivity, high cost of internet bundle, and absence of interaction with tutors and instructors among others as the main challenges reported by participants with their experience with the Sakai LMS.

The findings of Darko-Adjei and Ankrah (2020) on the perception of DE students on the use of the Sakai LMS at the University of Ghana are not significantly different from Tagoe and Cole (2020) and Darko-Adjei and Ankrah (2020) and Biney (2020). Darko-Adjei and Ankrah (2020) found that students' level of awareness of the Sakai LMS was moderate and faced challenges such as the problem of internet connectivity, lack of computer skills, system failure, and inadequate training on the Sakai LMS platform and unstable power supply among many others. Biney (2020) also reported that adult learners faced challenges such as poor internet connectivity, unreliable electricity, poor and difficulty in accessing computers. Despite all the challenges the adult learners indicated some of the positives of the Sakai LMS including increased interaction with instructors and peers, easy accessibility of reading materials and the facilitation of independent research and learning.

From the review of the literature, it is very important for scholars of higher education to constantly explore the views of distance learners to address some of the pertinent challenges facing them and thereby come out with practical recommendations to improve the quality of distance education. This makes this paper relevant as it not only contributes significantly to the existing literature but, specifically, provides a comprehensive assessment of the quality of teaching in distance education and the provision of learner support services as well as their experience with the Sakai LMS. The timing of the research is also deemed important since the data collection was carried out more than five years after the inception of blended learning at the university

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study was cross-sectional by design, and the data were sourced using a sequential explanatory mixed-method approach. This suggests that the quantitative facet of the data collection process preceded the qualitative phase. The quantitative approach was used to examine distance learners' perceptions of the quality of distance education whiles the qualitative approach was used to give in-depth insight into the experiences, perceptions, and experiences of the study participants on the quality of distance

education in Ghana. Some studies recommend the use of pluralistic approaches when a study aims to comprehensively achieve its objectives (Morgan, 2007; Creswell, 2014). Thus, triangulating qualitative and quantitative methods in this study helped draw on the strengths of both approaches while complementing each other's weaknesses (Teye, 2012).

The target population for the study were registered distance learners of the University of Ghana. These distance learners were the only group targeted because of their exposure and experience with hybrid or blended learning. Before the pandemic, distance learners of the university were among the group of students whose mode of delivery was hybrid. Therefore, their responses were deemed appropriate and reflected the issues this study sought to examine. The online survey was administered from September 2019 to January 2020. With an estimated population of 9,311 and using Yamane's (1967) sample formula to determine the sample size, a total of 500 distance education learners of the University of Ghana were randomly sampled for the study. The link to the survey questions was shared on their WhatsApp platforms and Learning Management platforms through their respective course instructors and course representatives. Initial consent was sort from their course instructors on the Sakai LMS, and the link to the google form was sent to the students to complete. They were encouraged to share the link with their colleagues to make sure a representative number of students completed the questionnaire. As indicated, 500 valid responses were received in all. The distribution of study participants along various levels of study is presented in Table 1. All the questionnaires were completed and returned within twenty weeks

For the qualitative phase of the study, 4-separate focus groups were held with some selected respondents across the four different study levels (i.e., levels 100, 200, 300, and 400). A maximum of 8 study participants were selected from each level of study for the four focus group discussions. Each group comprised males and females, and young and adult learners. Also, 8 separate in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents.

The study used a self-designed questionnaire and interview guide to obtain primary data for the study. The questionnaire included 20 closed-ended questions and Likert scale type questions. The questionnaire consisted of four sections in line with the study objectives. The first part primarily elicited the socio-demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. The second section focused on the perceptions of learners toward teaching and learning by the distance mode, and the third section elicited information on learners' perception of learning support services. The last section sought information on the experience of learners of the Sakai learning management system adopted by the University of Ghana. The questionnaire was hosted online using google forms and was administered online through their Sakai learning management system and social media platforms like WhatsApp. The questionnaire was pretested on 42 diploma students from the University of Ghana on August 20, 2019, to ascertain the reliability of the questionnaire using the Cronbach alpha. The test yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.68 suggesting that the questionnaire was reliable to use for the survey. The survey instrument was also subjected to a face validity test to ensure the efficacy of the items in achieving the study's objectives. Both reliability and validity tests have been used extensively for validating research instruments in developing countries (Sangoseni et al., 2013). The interview guide was used to collect detailed explanations from the respondents.

The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0. Simple descriptive statistics were drawn from the quantitative data in the form of frequencies and percentages, and they were presented in tables, graphs,

and charts. These variables included the sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants, their level of agreement on the quality of teaching and learner support services, and access to technological devices for online learning. For the bivariate analysis, contingency tables were generated and a chi-square test of association was computed to ascertain if the frequency with which DE students access the Sakai LMS significantly varied by their sex and levels of study. Given that both the dependent and independent variables were categorical, the chi-square test of association was more suited for ascertaining the relationship between the variables.

With the consent of the participants, the in-depth interviews were recorded, and notes were taken during the interview process. The recorded audios were transcribed, and the transcripts were subjected to a series of readings to organise, identify patterns and meanings, and generate themes for the study. Some key statements were identified and used as quotations in the analysis. The consent of participants (students) was sought before they could participate, and the element of confidentiality was strictly adhered to during the data collection. The study ensured the trustworthiness and authenticity of the qualitative dataset. To ensure anonymity, the names of participants were not captured.

Study Participants
The majority of the participants were males (59%) compared to females (41%), and a higher percentage was less than 30 years (57%), with only 5% within the 41-50-year cohort. In terms of the programme of study, a relatively higher percentage were offering Bachelor of Arts (43%) programmes. Further, the results show a fair distribution of respondents in terms of the level of study. However, a relatively higher percentage was sampled among second-year students (34%).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	295	59
Female	205	41
Total	500	100
Age		
<30 years	283	57
30-40 years	192	38
41-50 years	25	5
Total	500	100
Program		
Bachelor of Arts in Administration	67	13
Bachelor of Science in Administration	100	20
Bachelor of Science in Nursing	56	11
Bachelor of Science in Information Technology	60	13
Bachelor of Arts	217	43
Total	500	100
Level		
100	99	20
200	168	34
300	126	25
400	107	21
Total	500	100

N= 500

RESULTS

Learners' Perception of Teaching by Distance

The results in table 2 show respondents' level of agreement on teaching by distance. In all, the study measured four key variables that are considered very holistic so far as the University of Ghana DE programme is concerned. On the first variable, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on facilitators' command over course delivery to ensure effective facilitation of teaching and learning. A higher percentage (30%) of the respondents agreed that facilitators have command over courses they deliver. This is followed by 24% who strongly agreed. However, 25% disagreed and 16% also strongly disagreed. Five per cent (5%) remained neutral. Thus, the majority of the respondents representing 54% agreed that facilitators of the University of Ghana DE have command over the course whereas 41% disagreed. This was reflected in the qualitative results as participants expressed mixed feelings about the command of the tutors over the courses they teach. This is supported by the following statements:

> *From my assessment, I can say that for the past three years as a distance learner, not all the tutors have authority over the courses they teach. Whereas some demonstrate this through the depth of knowledge they have in the courses they teach, others also just read the slides without giving any proper explanations. Sometimes, they keep postponing some of the questions for clarification. So, I think the authorities must do something about this* (Participant 5).

Another respondent added:

> *I think not all the tutors handling the courses I study are competent. But generally, the few ones who have taught me are very good but like I said some are not that very good. Those who are much more competent can break down key concepts and theories that we find difficult to grasp. They can relate what they teach us to the real world, making the courses practical for us. When we ask questions for clarifications, they can address our questions well* (Participant 7).

On the second variable, most of the respondents representing 48% disagreed that the instructors provide prompt feedback on their assignments. This is followed by 23% who strongly disagreed. Furthermore, 13% remained neutral. However, 7% agreed and 9% also strongly agreed. From the results, the majority of the respondents disagreed that instructors provide prompt feedback on assignments against only 16% who agreed. These results were supported by the qualitative result from the respondents. Respondents in an interview argued that the instructors only publish their marks without giving them comments for improvement in subsequent assignments especially when the assessments are in form of essays. They argued that sometimes too it takes a very long time within the semester before assignments are marked. For instance, one respondent noted:

> *From experience, I don't think our instructors give us prompt feedback on our assignments. We know the value of assignments, but when we do not receive feedback on our strengths and weaknesses so far as our assignments are concerned it does not give us the motivation to do assignments* (Participant 9).

Respondents were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that the contents of teaching sessions meet their expectations. On this variable, a higher percentage of the respondents (29%) strongly agreed that the contents of the teaching

sessions met their expectations, followed by 25% who agreed. Twenty-one per cent (21%) strongly disagreed and 19% disagreed whiles 6% remained neutral. Thus, most of the respondents (54%) agreed that the contents of the teaching sessions meet their expectations against 40% who disagreed. In a focus group discussion with respondents, those who disagreed that the contents of the teaching sessions met their expectations expressed the view that most of the course contents that they have access to are shallow and not in-depth. The slides are not explained in detail, but they take some positives from this because it compels them to do further readings for detailed explanations. Those who agreed that the course contents for teaching and learning met their expectations argued that they were satisfied with their course contents. For instance, a respondent noted:

> *What I can say is that the course contents are in line with the learning outcomes and objectives. Most of the issues discussed in the course contents are relevant in contemporary times. I also think that the course contents broaden our understanding about key issues and the topics are very essential* (Participant 3).

On the last variable, respondents were asked to show their level of agreement on the statement that the face-to-face sessions were effective for them. A higher percentage of the respondents (43%) strongly disagreed. This was followed by 23% who disagreed. However, 17% agreed that the face-to-face sessions met their expectation and 13% strongly disagreed. Four percent (4%) indicated neutral. Thus, a significant majority of the respondents (66%) disagreed that the face-to-face teaching sessions were effective for them. Thus, to the majority of the respondents, the face-to-face sessions were not effective. In a focus group, discussion participants largely expressed the view that the face-to-face sessions as part of the blended DE programme of the University of Ghana were not to their satisfaction and thus indicated challenges such as the cancellation and rescheduling of tutorials without early notice which usually created inconvenience for them. The participants largely noted that lack of space and the unavailability of tutors were the main reasons communicated for rescheduling and cancellation of meetings. This to the participant made it difficult to have all four face-to-face meetings they were supposed to have. Some participants also noted that in some cases they had no tutors to assist them.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by the level of agreement on teaching by distance

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
The tutors have command over courses to ensure effective facilitation	16%	25%	5%	30%	24%	100%
The instructors provide prompt feedback on my assignments	23%	48%	13%	7%	9%	100%
The contents of the teaching sessions meet my expectation	21%	19%	6%	25%	29%	100%
The face-to-face sessions were effective for me	43%	23%	4%	17%	13%	100%

N= 500

Learners' Perception of Learning Support Service

The results in table 3 show the level of agreement of respondents on statements concerning learning support services as distance students. In all, five variables were measured. On the first variable, respondents were asked about their level of agreement on the extent to which they receive enough information about their studies from the University. A relatively higher percentage of respondents (36%) strongly disagreed that they receive enough information regarding their programme of study from the University. This is followed by 30% who disagreed. Twenty-five per cent (25%) agreed that they receive enough information from the University about their studies and 5% also strongly agreed. The results further show that 4% remained neutral. Thus, a significant majority of the respondents (66%) disagreed that they receive enough information from the University of Ghana about their study. This quantitative result does not reflect the qualitative result. In a focus group discussion, participants largely noted that sometimes if they need information regarding their studies they do not even know where to go. Sometimes too, when they send emails for information, they do not get a reply. In all, participants argued that they do not receive enough information regarding their programme of study as distance learners.

On the second variable, a higher percentage of the respondents (42%) disagreed with the statement that they receive the needed academic guidance from the University of Ghana. This is followed by 27% who strongly disagreed. Further, 14% of the respondents agreed that they receive the needed academic guidance from the school and 10% strongly agreed. Eight per cent (8%) remained neutral. Thus, the majority of the respondents representing 69% disagreed with the statement that they receive the needed academic guidance from the University as distance learners. In a focus group discussion, participants noted that they are normally left to their fates without the needed academic guidance regarding their studies. They expressed the view that sometimes they have to rather rely on their seniors to help them choose their courses, especially their electives. For instance, a participant noted:

> *Honestly, we do not receive the needed academic guidance as distance learners at all. We rely on our peers to help us choose our elective courses. I think the University is not helping us in this way. We understand that we do not have many courses at the distance level compared to the main and city campus streams but at least we must be assigned to course advisors to officially assist us with the necessary academic guidance* (Participant 5).

On the third variable, a higher percentage of the respondents (39%) strongly disagreed with the statement that they receive prompt feedback on their enquiries on their programme of study. Also, 36% disagreed. Furher, 18% agreed and 7% strongly agree that they receive prompt feedback on their enquiries on their programme of study. Thus, the majority of the respondents (75%) disagreed that they receive prompt feedback about their enquiries on their programme of study against 25% who agreed. In a focus group discussion, the following statements were made to support the quantitative results:

> *For the past three years as a distance student, I do not receive prompt feedback on enquiries regarding my programme of study. I do not know about the experiences of my colleagues. Sometimes you do not even know where to go for specific enquiries. This is not helping us get the needed support services regarding our studies* (Participant 7).

> *I do not think the University is helping us with prompt feedback on our studies. Sometimes when we complain of our delayed results, we do not receive any feedback. We send countless letters and emails but to no avail. So, it is true that we as distance learners do not receive prompt feedback regarding our studies* (Participant 9).

On the last variable measured, a higher percentage of the respondents (31%) strongly disagreed that there are enough study facilities to help them with their programme of study. Also, 28% disagreed with the statement that there are enough study facilities to aid their studies. However, 24% agreed and 10% strongly agreed that there are enough study facilities to help with their studies and 7% remained neutral. Thus, the majority of the respondents representing 59% do not think there are enough study facilities to help with studies against 34% who agreed. In a focus group, discussion respondents argued that the libraries are not well-resourced to aid their studies. Others also expressed the view that the computer labs are also not well resourced to facilitate their studies. A respondent noted:

> *Our learning centres are not resources with the needed study facilities. Some of us cannot afford laptops so we take advantage of the school's ICT infrastructure but most of the computers are not functioning. Sometimes, the internet is not stable to help us with our studies. We have to rely on our mobile data for our research and assignments* (Participant 6).

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by the level of agreement on learning support services

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
I receive enough information from the University about my study	36%	30%	4%	25%	5%	100%
I receive the needed academic guidance from the University	27%	42%	8%	14%	10%	100%
I receive prompt feedback on my enquiries on the program of study	39%	36%	0%	18%	7%	100%
My learning centre provides me with the needed support environment	26%	32%	3%	18%	21%	100%
There are enough study facilities to help with my program	31%	28%	7%	24%	10%	100%

N= 500

Learners' Perception of E-Learning Management System (Sakai)

The last objective of the study was to examine the experience of distance learners toward the Sakai LMS. As noted already, the University of Ghana DE programme is a hybrid one consisting of face-to-face and online (e-learning). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they visit the Sakai LMS as the official e-learning platform of study, and the results are presented in Table 4. The majority of respondents (76%) visited the Sakai platform very often and the remaining 24% indicated that they often accessed the platform. The sex of respondents showed no significant association with how often they access the Sakai LMS (p>0.05), considering that a significant majority of both males (73.9%) and females (73.7%) stated that they access the Sakai LMS very often. However, the level of respondents' study showed a significant association with how often respondents accessed the Sakai LMS. For example, the results in Table 4 show that, comparatively, most respondents who were in their first year (81.8%) accessed the LMS very often compared to those in the second (76.2%), third (73.8%), and final year (62.6%).

In a focus group discussion, respondents noted that right from orientation, they were told that the Sakai LMS is their main classroom as distance learners. They argued that since it is the main platform for announcements and assignments, they have no option but to visit the platform regularly, so they do not miss out on relevant information regarding their e-learning.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents by how often they visit the Sakai platform

| Variables	How respondents often access Sakai		Total
	Often	Very Often	
	n= 131 (26.2%)	n= 369 (73.8%)	N= 500 (100%)
Sex			
Male	77 (26.1%)	218 (73.9%)	295 (100%)
Female	54 (26.3%)	151 (73.7%)	205 (100%)
	χ2=0.004, df= (1), p=0.95>0.05		
Level of study			
100	18 (18.2%)	81 (81.8%)	99 (100%)
200	40 (23.8%)	128 (76.2%)	168 (100%)
300	33 (26.2%)	93 (73.8%)	126 (100%)
400	40 (37.4%)	67 (62.6%)	107 (100%)
	χ2=10.71, df= (3), p=0.01<0.05		

N= 500

In terms of the medium of accessing the Sakai LMS, most of the respondents representing 75% use their smartphones to access and 25% use computers (see figure 1). Thus, smartphones are the most common gadgets used by University of Ghana distance students to access the Sakai LMS. Respondents in a focus group discussion noted that they prefer smartphones to computers because of their mobility and affordability. With the phones, they can access the Sakai LMS at any time. For instance, a respondent stated:

> *I use the smartphone to access the Sakai LMS because it is easy to afford it than buying a computer. Also with the phone, I can easily take it with me wherever I go to access the Sakai platform easily. I am the one paying my school fees so I do not have enough money to buy a laptop. Whenever it becomes necessary, I have to go to the café and use the computers there* (Participant 5).

Another participant also noted:

> *My parents cannot afford a computer for my online studies, so we settled on a simple smartphone. At least with the smartphone, I can easily access the Sakai LMS. I can also carry the phone with me everywhere. Having a computer will have been best for me because reading the lesson notes from the phone is not the best but I have no choice but to manage with the phone. I have been using it for the past two years now* (Participant 3).
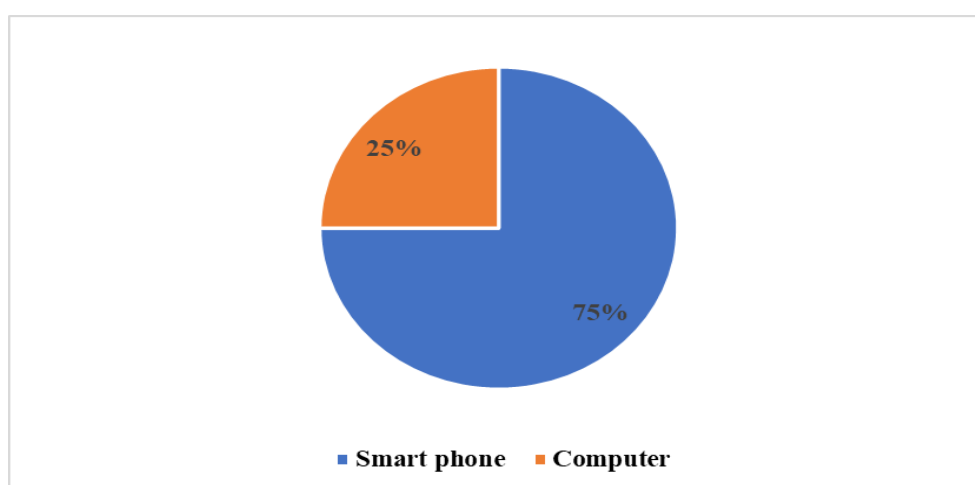
N= 500

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by the gadget used to access the Sakai platform

The results in table 5 show the various reasons why distance students visit the Sakai LMS platform. The results reveal that a higher percentage of respondents (47%) visit the Sakai platform to do their tests and assignments. This is followed by 34% who visit the Sakai LMS to chat with their peers. Further, 15% visit the Sakai platform for online lectures and 4% visit the platform to download their course materials. In a focus group discussion respondents expressed the view that although they use the Sakai platform for various academic purposes, they use it most to do their tests and assignments. Respondents in a focus group discussion gave the reasons why they use the Sakai LMS mostly for their tests and assignments. For instance, a respondent noted:

> *I use the Sakai LMS most for tests and assignments because I do not want to lose any marks for my continuous assessments. I make sure I do not miss any tests and assignments on any course. Sakai is the only platform that we can have access to our tests and assignments so I must visit the Sakai platform for the tests and assignments* (Participant 7).

Participants who use the Sakai platform to chat with their colleagues thought that they use the chat tool of the Sakai LMS to get information from their colleagues concerning

their courses. Respondents also argued that they post topics in the chat room for peer discussions regarding some topics and concepts regarding their studies*.*
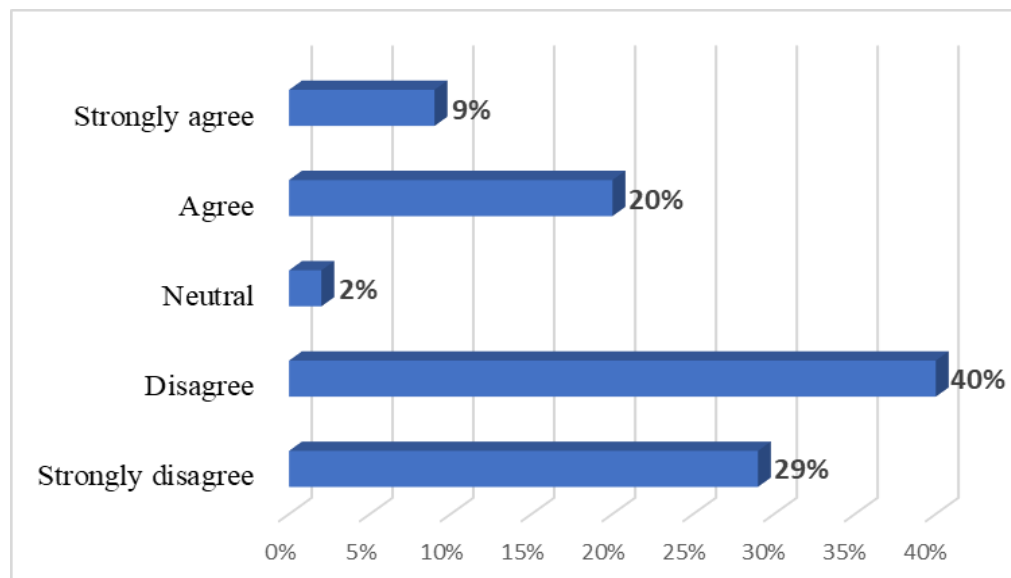
Table 5: Distribution of respondents by reasons why they access the Sakai LMS

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Download course materials	21	4.2
Do tests and assignments	237	47.4
Chat with colleagues	168	33.6
Online lectures	74	14.8
Total	500	100

N= 500

The results in figure 2 show the level of agreement of respondents on the statement that frequent interactions with instructors are held on the Sakai platform. It is realised that a higher percentage of the respondents (40%) disagreed. Also, 29% strongly disagreed that frequent interactions with tutors and instructors are held on the Sakai LMS platform. However, 20% agreed and 9% strongly agreed that frequent interactions with instructors are held on the Sakai LMS platform. Further, 2% indicated neutral. From these results, the majority of the respondents representing 69% disagreed that frequent interactions with instructors are held on the Sakai platform against 29% who agreed. In a focus group discussion, respondents expressed their worry about the lack of frequent discussion on the Sakai platform with instructors. They argued that most times they only get themselves busy only when there are tests and assignments posted on the Sakai platform. They argued that most often than not when they post questions on the Sakai platform for tutors and instructors to help them, they do not get any response on time and sometimes too no feedback at all. They, therefore, concluded that they do not feel the hybrid programme that they have enrolled in. A participant noted:

> *In my view, I disagree that there are frequent interactions with instructors on the Sakai LMS for discussions. We only see announcement posts regarding tests and assignments. We hardly have online lectures throughout the semester which is going against us. The face-to-face session is not enough so we thought the online lectures will complement this but it does not happen that way* (Participant 9).
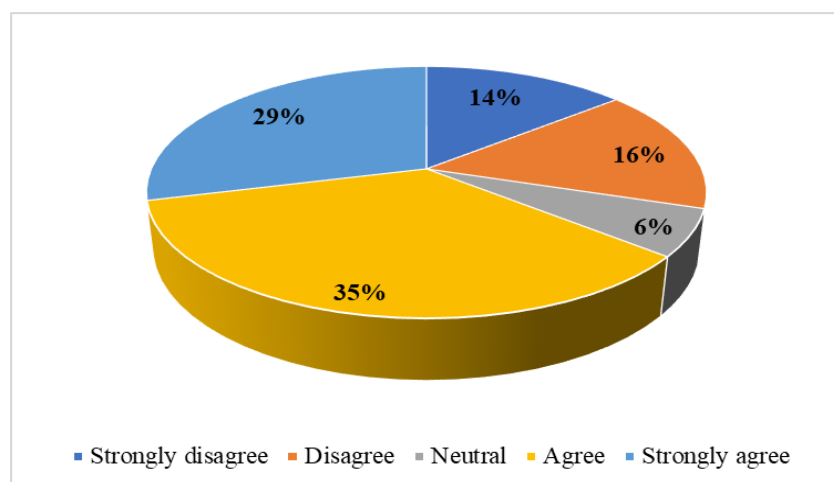
N= 500

Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by the level of agreement on frequent interactions with instructors on the Sakai LMS

The results in figure 3 show the level of agreement by respondents on the statement that the Sakai platform has facilitated their distance learning. A higher percentage of the respondents (35%) agreed that the Sakai platform has facilitated their distance learning. This is followed by 29% who strongly agreed. However, 16% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed with 6% remaining neutral. Thus, majority of the respondents (64%) agreed that the Sakai LMS has facilitated their distance learning. These results were confirmed during the focus group discussion with respondents. They expressed the view that the Sakai LMS has facilitated their distance learning despite the challenges associated with this e-learning platform. This is supported by the following statements from the respondents in the focus group discussion:

> *What I can say is that the Sakai LMS has facilitated my distance learning. It has made my learning very flexible. I can access tests and assignments at any time. Through e-learning too, I have to make sure I am conversant with the computer. I can also interact with my peers and thus, connect to a wider academic community. But the cost of internet bundles to support e-learning is very disturbing and the unstable network interrupts our tests and assignments which affect us costly* (Participant 6).

> *The Sakai LMS has made me a disciplined student. You have to make sure you submit your assignments and tests on time. The only challenge is the limited or no interactions we have on the platform. Some of the instructors use the chat room for discussion which is not effective. When learning from home the frequent power outage poses a huge challenge for us. But in all, the Sakai LMS has facilitated my distance learning* (Participant 8).

N= 500

Figure 3: Distribution of respondents by the level of agreement on whether the Sakai platform has facilitated their distance learning

DISCUSSION

The first objective of the study was to examine the perception of learners towards teaching by distance at the University of Ghana. Both the quantitative and qualitative results showed that learners were satisfied with the quality of teaching. The majority of the respondents agreed that facilitators have command over the courses they handled. This finding is consistent with Alam et al. (2012) who found that the majority of distance learners in Pakistan were satisfied with the facilitators. This notwithstanding, the quantitative result which showed that only 54% of the distance learners agreed that facilitators have command over the courses they handle should be of major concern. It can be said that this is not encouraging since a significant 41% of learners disagreed.

The ability of instructors to give prompt feedback on assignments to their students is very important. This will help the students to know their strengths and weaknesses and prepare well for future tests and assignments. The results showed that the majority of the respondents disagreed that they receive prompt feedback from their instructors regarding their assignments as distance learners. This finding is at variance with a study by Asante (2008) that found that the majority of distance learners receive prompt feedback on their assignments.

The content of delivery for distance teaching and learning is very important. Since in distance learning, students own the learning, it is very imperative to have content that is engaging and self-explanatory. Both the quantitative and qualitative results showed that most of the distance learners at the University of Ghana are satisfied with the content of teaching. This result is similar to the study by Alam et al. (2012) in Pakistan where distance learners were satisfied with the teaching contents. Although not all learners agree that the contents of the teaching sessions meet their expectations it is very encouraging to note that a significant majority of the respondents are satisfied with the teaching contents as distance learners. The traditional mode of meeting students, which is face-to-face teaching, continues to dominate the educational space. The advent of distance education and e-learning in higher education continues to keep practitioners and scholars of education at bay. It was therefore very important to assess how effective face-to-face teaching was from the perspective of learners. Both quantitative and

qualitative results showed that face-to-face teaching was not effective. Thus, it did not meet the satisfaction of the learners. Some of the reasons identified by respondents for their dissatisfaction with the face-to-face teaching included cancellation and rescheduling of tutorials without any prior notice, unavailability of tutors to facilitate their learning with some courses and the inability to meet the standard four (4) required number of times for face-to-face meetings.

On the second objective, the study sought to examine the perception of distance learners at the University of Ghana concerning support services. Both the quantitative and qualitative results pointed to the fact that the perception of students toward support services is negative. Specifically, distance learners do not receive enough information regarding their programme of study. Respondents expressed the view that sometimes they do not know the appropriate place to make relevant enquiries. Information is very important in every sphere of human endeavour and when distance learners do not receive enough information regarding their programme it will negatively affect them since they are likely to lose relevant information. The results further showed that the University of Ghana distance learners does not receive the needed academic guidance regarding their study. The focus group discussion with respondents revealed that learners do not receive the needed academic guidance and rather rely on their peers for this kind of support. Thus, from these findings distance learners rely heavily on peer support for their studies. This finding is contrary to the findings of Kintu and Wanami (2019) whose findings revealed that distance learners' perception of peer support was negative. The results, therefore, suggest a missing link so far as information regarding the academic guidance of distance learners is concerned. Information is key to the success of distance learners since they stay away from their teachers or tutors and educational organisation (Holmberg, 1995; Keegan, 1996).

The results further showed that the majority of the distance learners disagree that they receive prompt feedback on enquiries made regarding their study. Respondents argued that the University is not providing them with prompt feedback on critical issues regarding their studies, especially on delayed and missing grades. The results further showed that learning centres do not provide the needed supportive environment for distance learners. As already indicated, the University of Ghana has about 11 learning centres nationwide for distance learners. These centres are to provide the needed support for learners. The results also showed that the majority of the University of Ghana distance learners do not think there are enough study facilities to aid their programme of study, especially at their learning centres. These findings were also identified by Biney and Worlanyo (2015), Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah (2016) and Messo (2014) who identified the limited academic facilities and logistics as factors hindering the success of DE programmes in their respective studies. Respondents expressed the view that their centres are under-resourced, especially with computers and stable networks to facilitate their hybrid education, especially their e-learning. As argued by Olojo et al. (2012), for e-learning to be effective there must be available computers and stable internet connectivity but the findings of this study clearly show that distance learners in the University of Ghana have challenges in accessing computers at their learning centres.

The last objective of the study was to examine the experience of University of Ghana distance learners toward the Sakai LMS which is the official online teaching and learning tool of the school. The results showed that the majority of the respondents visit the Sakai platform very often and the most common gadget used to access the online platform is a smartphone. Thus, the Sakai platform is used to bridge the gap between instructors and learners (Manjengwa, 2011). Respondents noted that smartphones are relatively cheaper than computers and with smartphones, they can easily access the Sakai platform at any time because they are mobile. The results also showed that the

majority of distance learners at the University of Ghana visit the Sakai platform purposely to undertake their tests and assignments. The majority of the respondents again noted that frequent interactions with instructors are not held on the Sakai platform coupled with the high cost of internet bundles, poor and unstable internet connectivity and inadequate training on such e-learning management. The inadequate training of students on the Sakai LMS as a challenge for learners was also identified by Amponsah et al. (2019). The Sakai platform is supposed to be a continuation of face-to-face interaction with instructors but as revealed in the results, the majority of the learners disagreed that frequent interactions are held on the Sakai platform which is consistent with the findings of Tagoe and Cole (2020). This notwithstanding the majority of the University of Ghana distance learners agreed that the Sakai platform has facilitated their distance learning. The participants largely noted that the Sakai LMS has made them disciplined students as they are required to submit assignments on time. Respondents also noted that the Sakai LMS has given them some kind of flexibility and compelled them to be conversant with computer literacy. Thus, this finding is supported by Olojo et al. (2012) who argue that e-learning helps students to have control over the content of the study and the ability to learn at their own pace.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Although distance education has its benefits and drawbacks, the benefits tend to outweigh the drawbacks. The study was aimed at investigating the perception of learners towards the quality of distance education at the University of Ghana. The study has shown that distance learners at the University of Ghana do not obtain timely feedback on their academic assignments. Also, the DE learners do not receieve the necessary student support services needed to enhance positive learning outcomes. Consequently, these account for the negative perceptions these learners have about the quality of distance education. These revelation from the distance learners may necessitate a full rethink and restructuring of their educational methodologies, the attitudes of their management, instructors (examiners), tutors and their competencies in pursuing distance education at the University of Ghana. The study has also empirically established the fact that the provision of learner support services should be the focus of providers of DE. This will promote learner satisfaction, motivation, and a general increase in academic performance. The decision of the management of the University of Ghana DE to use other official online meeting platforms such as the Zoom and Microsoft Teams to complement the existing e-learning platform is a laudable innovation since the Sakai LMS, based on the views of the DE learners, is not a convenient platform for teaching. Most public universities in Africa and particularly Ghana are resource constrained in terms of infrastructure, teaching, technical, administrative capacities to accommodate all prospective students. This provides an opportunity for universities to invest in DE programme to make their teaching and learning services accessible to the wider community both within and outside the country. The study recommends that the University of Ghana and other providers of DE must invest in ICT infrastructure with the provision of enough computers and internet services at the various learning centres. It is also recommended that universities should be altruistic in their devotion to distance learners. In this way, instructors and tutors should be trained and supported to employ effective teaching tools to help distance learners study more efficiently and effectively. Students must be given prompt feedback on their study enquiries and the implementation of effective measures to provide the necessary academic and non-academic counselling and guidance services to learners. It is also recommended that distance learners are given intensive training on the use of the Sakai LMS to facilitate their independent e-learning. The management of DE must also consider the need to

encourage instructors to upload all relevant readings in addition to their main reading materials to the Sakai LMS to expand the e-library for students. Also, management of the DE programmes must find ways of engaging distant students in coming out with various student support services to suit their needs so long as they do not affect the overall goal of the university. This, to a very large extent, will aid the DE providers to come out with the necessary physical, technological, and social support services that meet the needs of the learners since they are the beneficiary stakeholders. Future studies can gauge the impact of e-learning on the learning outcomes of distance education learners. Additionally, the implication of student support services on the learners' experience in a hybrid learning environment could also be qualitatively assessed by future studies.

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