Teachers' Perception on Sustainability of Distance Education in Ghana: Evidence from Ashanti Region

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Abstract

The study examined the sustainability of distance education in the context of finance, management and availability of support services in Ashanti region of Ghana. Data for the study were obtained from five groups of respondents namely; centre coordinators, educational administrators, facilitators of distance education programme, potential and current students pursuing distance education. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The results revealed that current management and support services are adequate and sustainable. In the case of finance management, it is believed that financial resources generated by the programme through students' fees would sustain the programme. However, potential, and current students pursuing distance education viewed the private cost involved as high. Hence for sustainability of the programme, it is important that school fees charged are reviewed in order not to negatively influence students' access to distance education.

1. Introduction

Simonson e t al (2009) defined distance education as institutionally approved method of teaching a course using one or more institutionally approved and supported analog or digital communications technologies, which provide synchronous /or asynchronous means to deliver and receive text and audio visual course materials and assignments and promote interaction between instructor and student and student to student, who are separated by location and / or time of attendance. Ghana's tertiary education reform which was launched in 1991 has led to an increase in access to tertiary education. Although enrolment had increased, the institutions are still unable to absorb all the students who qualify, due to inadequate academic facilities and space. For this reason, distance education has been explored as a possible alternative to the traditional campus type of education because; it provides opportunities for working adults like teachers to update their skills (Saif, 2005) and (Saint, 2000) and provide means of having access to tertiary education for teachers(Perraton, 2007), (Robinson, 2007) and (Jegede, 2001). However the constraints those countries in sub-Sahara African faced in providing distance education are well documented (Agunga, 1997).

For distance education programmes to be sustainable quality assurance is a centrally important and wide ranging aspect to be considered. It is therefore seen as a critical mechanism to be built into every practice of distance education including curriculum design, course delivery, learner support, tutor training and the use of information and communication technology, library facility, qualifications of the lecturers and effective, efficient management and administrative systems need to be put in place.

To give this socio-political justification to substantiate the idea of the distance education as an educational strategy, the case study of Ghana and other developing countries background in distance education has been examined and discussed. Distance education is now a permanent feature in the educational system of Ghana. It is practiced in batches by some of the leading tertiary institutions namely; University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Winneba and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology to help

qualified applicants who could not get access to tertiary education as a result of limited space and other facilities to acquire knowledge and skills to upgrade themselves especially teachers. Distance education has many benefits if properly implemented, yet it is beset with many challenges. Crucial issues like sustainability in terms of feasibility and affordability are the factors influencing the expansion and success of distance education in Ghana.

Thus the objective of this paper was to examine the teachers' perception on affordability of tertiary education through distance learning, since, this is critical with regards to sustainability of the programme.

2. Materials and Method

The sample for the study was drawn from a total of ten out of eighteen districts with five classified as urban and five also as rural districts in Ashanti region. These districts were selected because it is believed to have many subjects needed for the study and highly accessible for convenient administration of questionnaire by researchers. Here five broad categories of stakeholders were purposively selected. The total sample size was 489.

The sample comprises 100 teachers who are currently pursuing distance education programmes and 360 teachers who are deemed to be potential users of distance education. In addition 17 educational administrators, 10 facilitators at the distance learning centres within the study area were also interviewed.

The instruments used for the gathering of data for the study were questionnaire and interview guide. These instruments asked for specific factual information concerning the respondent perception about sustainability of distance education in terms of financing, support services, management and funds availability.

In order to achieve the objectives stated above, a set of questionnaire was designed to capture information about respondent's perception on sustainability of distance education. In all 14 questions / variables on sustainability perception were derived using five point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Out of the 14 questions 4 relate to financing, 6 relate to support services and management and 4 relate to funds availability. Final section was used to capture background information on the respondents such as gender, location and educational status. Data was analyzed in the form of reliability test, descriptive statistics, hypothesis testing and chi-square test. The statistical package used for the analysis is Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16 software. Differences observed in the responses of the various categories were further analysed to determine whether they are significant. This was done by comparing the observed frequencies with the expected frequencies.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Reliability Analysis

The questionnaire adopted for the purpose of this study consists of fourteen (14) questions made up of four (4) for Financing; four (4) for funds availability and six (6) for Support Services and Management of Distance Education. Reliability of the measures was ascertained by the use of Cronbach's coefficient alpha. Cronbach's coefficient α measures the reliability of the responses or different variables. It consists of how much variation in scores of the responses or different variables is attributable to chance or random errors (Selltiz *et* al., 1976). As a general rule, a coefficient greater than or equal to 0.7 is considered acceptable which gives an indication of construct reliability

The Cronbach alpha values for Financing; funds availability and Support Services and Management of Distance education are 0.874, 0.734, 0.803, and a sum total of 0.861 respectively as seen in table 1.

Table 1. Reliability statistics

Variables	N	Cronbach Alpha
Respondents perception		
Financing of Distance Education	4	0.874
Support Services and Management of Distance	6	0.734
Funds Availability in Distance Education	4	0.803
Total	**14**	**0.861**

3.2 Financing of Distance Education

In order to expand access to tertiary education through distance education in Ghana, distance education needs to be sustainable to the users. Concerning financing of distance education in Ghana, respondents views were sought on the following issues; institutions' access to adequate funds from government, students enjoy subsidy from the government and donors such as NGOs. (see Table 2).

Table 2. Financing of distance education

Statements	Category	SD	D	UN	A	SA
Institution have enough funds	EA	3(17.6)	5(29.4)	8(47.1)	1(5.9)	-
	F	1(10.0)	5(50.0)	-	3(30.0)	1(10.0)
	PU	96(26.9)	91(25.5)	115(32.2)	31(8)	24(6.7)
	PT	33(33.0)	17(17)	20(20.0)	22(22.0)	8(8.0)
Students enjoy subsidy from the govt	EA	8(47.1)	9(52.9)	-	-	-
	F	2(20.0)	8(80.0)	-	-	-
	PU	121(33.9	73(20.2)	72(20.3)	56(15.7)	35(9.8)
	PT	54(54.0)	11(11.0)	18(18.0)	12(12.0)	5(5.0)
NGOs financially support the institution	EA	3(17.6)	5(29.4)	8(47.1)	1(5.9)	-
	F	1(10.0)	5(50.0)	-	3(30.0)	1(10.0)
	PU	106(29.7)	74(20.7)	133(37.3)	33(9.2)	11(3.1)
	PT	39(39.0)	29(29.0)	21(21.0)	8(8.0)	3(3.0)
Students are paying affordable fees	EA	1(5.9)	4(23.5)	2(11.8)	5(29.4)	5(29.4)
	F	2(20.0)	2(20.0)	2(20.0)	2(20.0)	2(20.0)
	PU	66(18.5)	58(16.2)	58(16.2)	108(30.3)	67(18.8)
	PT	24(24.0)	8(8.0)	15(15.0)	24(24.0)	29(29.0)

EA = Educational Administrators

PT=   Professional teachers pursuing distance education.

F =   Facilitators.   PU=   Potential Users

D=   Disagree.   SD=   Strongly Disagree.

D.E=   Distance Education.   UN=   Uncertain.

A=   Agree.   SA=   Strongly Agree.

NB: Numbers in brackets are percentages.

From the table 2, majority of respondents were in disagreement to the view that distance education institutions have enough funds. This issue of inadequate funds confirmed the notion expressed by the respondent that distance education in Ghana involves high private cost. However, majority of the respondents supported the view that students do not enjoy subsidies from government on the purchase of books and equipment. More so, majority of respondents were in disagreement to the view that nongovernmental organizations are giving enough funds to support distance education institutions. This issue of no support from non-governmental organizations is confirming the views expressed by the respondents that distance education is not affordable in Ghana due to high private cost involved. Moreover, majority of the respondents agreed to the view that distance education students were paying less fees than the regular students. These reasons given by the respondents affirmed what the centre

coordinators stated during an interview conducted personally by the researcher. According the centre coordinators, the institutions are believed to have enough funds to run the programmes because their main source of funds is from the tuition fees students pay and distance education in Ghana is affordable, since government has promised and agreed to help prospective teachers who enrolled in it.

These views expressed by respondents (see Table 2) from the four various categories on financing distance educations as a means of expanding access to tertiary education for teachers in Ashanti Region of Ghana also affirmed the views of the following writers that distance education is more cost effective and can expand access to education for the disadvantaged group. (UNESCO, 2010), (Downes, 2007), (Sujatha, 2002) and (Saint, 2000).

3.3 Support Services and Management of Distance Education

To achieve a successful distance education in the context of expanding access to tertiary education for teachers in Ghana, it must be sustainable in terms of quality and creditability. Respondent's views were sought on five main issues relating to support services and management of distance education in terms of D. E institutions having adequate manuals, lecture rooms, qualified facilitators, courses meeting the needs of the students and user agencies, admissions to D. E programmes very easy and course materials very useful. (See Table 3).

Table 3. Sustainability of Distance Education in Terms of Support Services and Management

Statements	Category	SD	D	UN	A	SA
D.E Institution have adequate resources	EA	1(5.9)	4(23.5)	4(23.5)	3(17.6)	5(29.4)
	F	-	1(10.0)	2(20.0	2(20.0)	5(50.0)
	PU	26(7.3)	80(22.4)	105(29.4	122(34.2)	24(6.7)
	PT	18(18.0)	19(19.0)	9(52.9)	2(11.8)	23(23.0)
Institutions have adequate lecture rooms	EA	3(17.6)	9(52.9)	2(11.8)	2(11.8)	1(5.9)
	F	3(30.0)	4(40.0)	1(10.0)	1(10.0)	1(10.0)
	PU	86(24.1)	91(25.5)	75(75.0)	75(75.0)	27(7.6)
	PT	35(35.0)	29(29.0)	9(9.0)	18(18.0)	9(9.0)
D.E Institutions have adequate qualify facilitators	EA	3(17.6)	5(29.4)	2(11.8)	2(11.8)	-
	F	1(10.0)	-	2(20.0)	6(60.0)	1(10.0)
	PU	34(9.5)	61(17.1)	77(21.6)	122(34.2)	63(17.6)
	PT	19(19.0)	12(12.0)	8(8.0)	40(40.0)	21(21.0)
Courses are meeting the need of their students	EA	3(17.6)	5(29.4)	8(47.1)	1(5.9)	--
	F	1(10.0)	5(50.0)	-	3(30.0)	1(10.0)
	PU	106(29.7)	74(20.7)	133(37.3)	33(9.2)	11(3.1)
	PT	39(39.0)	29(29.0)	21(21.0)	8(8.0)	3(3.0)
Admission to D.E programme is very easy	EA	1(5.9)	6(35.3)	3(17.6)	7(41.2)	
	F	1(10.0)	4(40.0)	2(20.0)	2(20.0)	1(10.0)
	PU	57(16.0)	74(20.7)	37(10.4)	118(33.1)	71(19.9)
	PT	9(9.0)	6(6.0)	11(11.0)	29(29.0)	45(45.0)
Course material are very useful	EA	-	-	-	9(52.9)	8(47.1)
	F	-	-	1(10)	3(30)	6(60)
	PU	58(16.2)	96(26.9)	86(24.1)	77(21.6)	40(11.2)
	PT	4(4.0)	3(3.0)	11(11.0)	39(39.0)	43(43.0)

F	=	Facilitators.	PU=	Potential Users
D	=	Disagree.	SD=	Strongly Disagree.
D.E	=	Distance Education.	UN=	Uncertain.
A	=	Agree.	SA=	Strongly Agree.

NB: Numbers in brackets are percentages.

In general, majority of the respondents saw distance education in Ghana as sustainable. Here they agreed to the view that distance education institutions have adequate manuals for their programmes. This issue of availability of manuals as a learner's support system to distance education indicates that distance education Ghana is feasible. However majority of the respondents supported the view that distance education does not have adequate lecture rooms.

More so, majority of respondents agreed to the view that distance education institutions have adequate qualified facilitators. Qualified staff personnel with requisite skills, knowledge and experience are important aspects of effective management of distance education institution. Moreover, most of the respondents agreed that courses provided by distance education institutions are meeting the needs of students, user agencies and the government. Also majority of the respondents agreed that admission to distance education programmes in Ghana are very easy. Majority of the respondents were in agreement to the view that course materials given to facilitators and students are very useful. These reasons expressed in support of the sustainability of distance education in Ghana in terms of support services and management affirmed what the centre coordinators said during the interview conducted. These views expressed by respondents from the various categories and commitment shown by the government of Ghana also confirmed the views of the following writers that sustainability of distance education programmes depends on effective and efficient quality assurance, administrations and management of distance education. (UNESCO, 2010), (Robinson et al, 2007, 2009), (Union-Onnka and Out, 2001), (GDEnet, 2001), (Ko et al, 2003), (Foley, 2003) and (Bagwandeenm Bojuwoye, Letsie and Matobaka, 1999). It is also reported that the need for students support services like the provision of libraries and study centres in ensuring a successful distance education has also been noted in Ghana by (Aggor *et al.,* 1992) (Sitali, 2008) and (Keegan, 1990). An appreciable number of the respondents from the various categories also disagreed to the view that distance education in Ghana is sustainable in terms of management and support services, (See Table 2). These challenges outlined above by the centre coordinators and respondents affirmed what these writer stated concerning problems involved in distance learning (Peters, 2003), (Akunade, 1998), (Agunga, 1997), (ADEA, 1999) and (Kinyanjui, 1998).

3.4 Funds Availability in Distance Education

Respondent's views were sought on four broad areas in relation to funds availability in distance education (See Table 4).

Table 4. Sustainability of Distance Education in Terms of Funds Availability

Statements	Category	SD	D	UN	A	SA
Students in D. E programmes pays tuition fees	EA	1(5.9)	1(5.9)	-	11(64.7)	4(23.5)
	F		1(10.0)	-	40(40.0)	50(50.0)
	PU	20(5.6)	15(4.2)	50(14.0)	124(34.7)	
	PT	7(7.0)	8(8.0)	6(6.0)	39(39.0)	40(40.0)
User agencies are supporting D E institutions	EA	3(17.6)		8(47.1)	4(23.5)	---
			2(11.8)			
	F	5(50.0)	3(30.0)	2(20.0)	-	-
	PU	108(30.3)	75(21.0)	140(39.2)	20(5.6)	14(3.9)
	PT	48(48.0)	16(16.0)	21(21.0)	10(10.0)	5(5.0)
The cost of materials are highly subsidized	EA	6(35.3)	4(23.5)	7(41.2)	-	-
	F	3(30.0)	22(20.0)	4(40.0)	1(10.0)	-
	PU	63(17.6	83(23.2)	123(35)	60(16.8)	26(7.3)
	PT	33(33.0)	16(16.0)	31(31.0)	14(14.0)	6(6.0)
Students are allowed to pay their fees in installment	EA	-	1(5.9)	3(17.6)	8(47.1)	5(29.4)
	F	-	1(10.0)	1(10.0)	2(20.0)	6(60.0)
	PU	24(6.7)	23(6.4)	68(19.0)	123(34.5)	119(33.3)
	PT	7(7.0)	4(4.0)	7(7.0)	33(33.0)	49(49.0)

F = Facilitators. PU= Potential Users

D = Disagree. SD= Strongly Disagree.

D.E = Distance Education. UN=Uncertain. A= Agree. SA= Strongly Agree.

NB: Numbers in brackets are percentages

Here majority of respondents agreed to the view that students offering distance education programmes are paying affordable tuition fees. However, most of the respondents were in disagreement to the view that user agencies are supporting the distance education institutions with funds. This issue of lack of support from user agencies likes the government, companies and institutions do affirm the notion expressed by the respondents that

distance education in Ghana is not financially sustainable. More so, majority of respondents disagreed to the view that the cost of manuals for distance education programmes is highly subsidized. Majority of the respondents agreed to the view that students are allowed to pay their fees in instalments.

3.5 Sustainability of Distance Education in Ghana

Chi square test confirmed that differences observed in the responses as to the sustainability of distance education in Ghana were significant and not due to chance. However respondents were divided in their opinion. While educational administrators and facilitators viewed distance education in Ghana as sustainable, because students who pay fees are mostly teachers who receive salaries and have the ability to pay the fees by instalments and that the institutions receive subventions from government to run the programme successfully (Sloan, 2002)**.** These views were based on the success story of distance education in some places like Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Kenya which have the same socio-economic characteristics like Ghana (Table 5).

Table 5. Sustainability of Distance Education in Ghana

Categories	Yes
No	
EA	14(82.4)
3(17.6)	
F	8(80.0)
2(20.0)	
PU	155(43.4)
202(56.6)	
PT	33(33.0)
67(67.0)	

NB: Numbers in brackets are percentages.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Potential users and professional teachers pursuing distance education did not support the view due to its high cost involved for an ordinary professional teacher without any incentives because fees are systematically increased to the disadvantage of the student and distance from study centres is very far for most teachers as a result some students have withdrawn from the programme. However, the views of majority of potential users and professional teachers pursuing distance education might have been based on the dwindling of distance education institutions in developing countries like Ghana and Nigeria in the 1960s. In the light of these findings, it has been recommended that distance education students should be given administrative and financial support by the Ministry of Education, a convenient cost sharing managements should be made, provision of adequate lecture rooms and library facilities and the establishment of distance education centres in all the districts capitals of the country should be vigorously pursued.

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