Learner Support Gaps in Distance Learning: The Case of Institute for Distance Education and e-Learning, University of Education, Winneba

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to measure the extent to which the learner support needs of distance education learners in the Institute of Distance Education and e-Learning (IDeL) in the University of Education, Winneba were met. The explanatory sequential design under the mixed method approach was adopted. The study sampled 623 students randomly to respond to a questionnaire adapted from Ozoglu (2009). A qualitative data was (subsequently) collected through a focus group discussion with 18 (eighteen) students and an interview with the Registrar of IDeL. *The interview data was analyzed thematically. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for the quantitative data.* The study revealed that the support needs of the learners were largely unmet. A need gap analysis revealed a huge difference in terms of e-learning portals, educational software produced by IDeL, communication with course instructors, face- to face academic counseling (tutoring), counselling services to promote students' self-confidence and help with the admission/registration process. The study further revealed that though sex, age and certificate enrolled for all might predict distance leaners' support needs, it was age that was statistically significant. *This study, therefore, recommends that IDeL expand its support services to match the specific needs of the learners.*

Key words: Leaner support, Distance learning, Distance education, Transaction, need-gap

INTRODUCTION

The perennial demand for education and training in the of face limited education infrastructure to accommodate the surge in population expulsion coupled with the growing number of individuals seeking more knowledge and credentials have led to the establishment of distance education centers throughout the world (Gregori, Zhang, Galván-Fernández & Fernández-Navarro, 2018). In Ghana especially, the quest to train competent and knowledgeable teachers for the classrooms as well as other sectors of the nation led to the introduction of distance learning in the 1990s. According to Latchem and Robinson (2003),

distance learning is an instructional process in which teachers and students are segregated for some or all of the study period in space and/or time and in which the teaching materials take over some of the teacher's traditional position.

The University of Education Winneba was established on 30th September, 1992 under the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Law 322 to train competent professional teachers for all levels of education as well as conduct research, disseminate knowledge and contribute to educational policy and development (University of Education, Winneba, 2018). In line with this mission of training competent and professional teachers, the Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) was established in 1993 with the overriding purpose of developing a Bachelor of Education degree by distance programme to enable teachers to study part-time for degree without undue disruption in their work schedule (Owusu-Mensah, Owusu & Agyei-Bieni, 2014). However, the actual distance programme was launched in 1996. As a pilot project, the first batch of 196 students enrolled in April 1998, to undertake courses in English, Mathematics, Science and Home Economics Education. By the year 2002, 248 students have successfully completed their various programmes of study. At the moment, the institute has established 41 centers throughout the country.

Over the years, the institute has diversified its programmes and expanded some of its study centers to meet the changing academic demands of people as well as to meet the country's growing demand for higher education. Currently, IDeL runs a number of Diploma, Post-Diploma, Post-graduate Diploma in Education and Masters in Education (M. Ed) for its clients who remains working adults, unemployed individuals and school leavers who need tertiary schooling (Nsamba, 2016). As a consequence, their learning generally takes place outside the traditional classroom where teaching is normally mediated through improved technology despite sometimes face-to-face interactions between students and teachers. It, therefore, places a herculean task on the 'mother institution' (UEW) to provide the learners with adequate support facilities. These support services are regarded crucial if the learners are to effectively finish their study programmes.

Majority of the students of Institute for Distance Education and e-Learning's (IDeL) programmes are working adults, unemployed individuals and school leavers who need tertiary schooling (Nsamba, 2016). As a consequence, their learning generally takes place outside the traditional classroom where teaching is normally mediated through improved technology despite sometimes face-to-face interactions between students and teachers. It, therefore, places a herculean task on the 'mother institution', University of Education, Winnenba (UEW) to provide the learners with adequate support facilities. These support services are regarded crucial if the learners are to effectively finish their study programmes.

According to Tait (2000), learner support refers to "the range of services both for individuals and students in groups which complement the [mass-produced] course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offerings of institutions using ODL [Open and Distance Learning]" (p. 289). Tait and Mills (2003) also defined learner support as the entire provision of learner support by an institution other than generic teaching materials produced by educational designers/course producers. It can be said, therefore, that learner support refers to the subsystems provided by an institution to help an individual student learn from the mass-produced teaching material (Ozoglu, 2009). Arko-Achemfour (2017) sees learning support as a generic word that applies to the range of services that institutions develop to help their learners achieve their learning goals, acquire understanding, expertise and abilities, and achieve success on their programmes of study.

Student support services could take the form of feedback, tutoring, assessment, contact between students and support staff, peer contact, study centres, library resources and materials (student manuals, etc.) designed to support the students throughout their study period and even beyond. Other support services include face-to-face instructional courses, workshops, guidelines and advice, telephones, ICT and audio-visual technology.

Despite the countless number of support services provided by institutions to support their distance education learning, it appears there is a huge gap between the services provided and the needs of the individual learners. For example, in Turkey, a study conducted by Ozoglu (2009) revealed that the support needs of the learners were largely unmet. The study identified a need-gap for counseling services to promote student motivation, face-to-face academic counseling and communication with course instructor orientation to the course media/delivery format. Similarly, a study conducted by Arko-Achemfuor (2017) on distance learners in South Africa revealed that while the majority of support facilities are available, learners are not in a position to access them properly, which has a negative impact on their academic work. In Ghana, it appears there is dearth of literature with regard to learner support gaps in distance education. It is the quest to fill this gap that has necessitated this study.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The days where distance education was seen as inferior alternative to traditional face-to-face education seem to be over (Scheer & Lockee, 2003). These days, distance education is considered a major component in higher education. Evidence from IDeL as presented in Table 1 shows that the number of students enrolled on the distance programme continues to surge annually.

Table 1: IDeL Admission Statistics from 2010-2019

Academic Year	Total Applications Received	Number of Admission Offers			Number of Registered Students		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2009/2010	9,250	3,715	4,347	**8,062**	3,378	3,982	**7,360**
2010/2011	17,050	5,844	6,465	**12,309**	4,958	5,813	**10,771**
2011/2012	12,951	4,234	5,074	**9,308**	3,611	4,453	**8,064**
2012/2013	12,337	3,551	4,439	**7,990**	2,711	3,143	**6,454**
2013/2014	9,232	4,112	3,994	**8,106**	2,809	3,241	**6,050**
2014/2015	13,002	5,702	5,991	**11,693**	3,571	4,320	**7,891**
2015/2016	13,705	5,464	5,607	**11,078**	4,181	4,677	**8,858**
2016/2017	10,369	3,968	4,593	**8,561**	2,933	3,702	**6,635**
2017/2018	10,743	4,020	4,871	**8,891**	3,011	4,035	**7,046**
2018/2019	15,203	5,416	7,048	**12,464**	4,511	6,184	**10,695**

Source: IDeL Admission Office (2019)

In order for the students of distance education to become sophisticated like their colleagues on alternative programmes, it is expected that the 'mother institutions' provide them with the needed support mechanisms. Again, the provision of the necessary support systems to distance learners are very crucial if one distance institution does not want to lose its students to competing institutions (Lee, 2003). Despite the criticality of support needs to distance education learners, research has shown that most distance education institutions cannot provide the needed support mechanisms to support their leaners (Lee, 2003; Ozoglu, 2009; Arko-Achemfuor; 2017). In Ghana, while the entry statistics continue to demonstrate an increase in the number of individuals registered in the programs, extant literature has not studied the accessibility of learner support mechanisms provided by IDeL. In view of this, the current study sought to assess the extent to which the support schemes in the distance education programme match the students' needs.

Research Questions

1. What difference is there between the support needs of distance education students and the accessibility to the support systems provided by the Institute of Distance Education and e-Learning, Winneba?
2. What is the effect of the distance education students' demographic characteristics on their support needs?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was underpinned by the Theory of Transaction Distance (Moore, 1993). The theory takes it roots from the concept of transaction derived from Dewey and Bentley which connotes the interplay among the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviours in a situation (Boyd & Apps, 1980). The hub of the theory revolves around the argument that the distance between the learner and the structure of teaching must be mediated by dialogue, offering the learner the opportunity to be an active participant. According to Moore (1993), distance learning has the special characteristic of creating a distance between teachers and learners who are most often separated from the other. As a result of this separation, both the learner and the teacher are likely to develop certain behaviours and characteristics that are very uncommon in conventional classrooms. Arguably, this distance between the teacher and the learner would affect teaching and learning. Various barriers would be created for the learner as a result of the distance. Moore (1993) argues, therefore, that distance creates a psychological and communications space to be need to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner. Apart from the psychological and communication challenges, Unisa (2007) identifies a physical distance barrier which tends to create fear and anxiety among distance learners, by preventing them from benefiting from any form of dialogue during the learning process. In order to close the transactional distance between the learners and the teachers, it is expected that distance education institutions provide the needed support mechanisms.

Using this theory as a lens for this study, it is argued that IDeL as an institute that runs distance education has the mandate to ensure that students have access to the support systems, they deem very critical for their success on the programme they have enrolled. Essentially, how students fare on the programme depends largely on the support mechanisms they have access to whilst on the programme. This further raises the question of whether the distance students have the necessary support equivalent to their counterparts on conventional programmes. The inaccessibility to the necessary support systems may further widen the variables the bridges the transactional distance such as dialogue, structure and learner autonomy (Moore, 1993; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). In view of this, it is important for a need-gap analysis to ascertain the support systems available that increases the transactional presence and decreases the

transactional distance in order to offer the necessary recommendations to guide policy and practice.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adopted the explanatory sequential (Quan - qual) design based on the pragmatist epistemology. This design was considered the most appropriate for the study as it allowed for triangulation purposes where the inherent weaknesses of one of the methods was catered for by strengths of the other. Again, the design enabled further explanation of the quantitative results by using certain more detailed emerging trends in a focus group discussion and interview with regard to the support needs of the distance students vis-à-vis the accessibility to the support systems provided by the Institute of Distance Education and e-Learning (IDeL) of the University of Education, Winneba. The target population of the study was comprising all distance students in the 41 study centers. Twelve (12) were randomly selected with accessible population of 2,650 from which 623 were randomly selected.

Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Table for Determining Sample Size, a total of 623 respondents were sampled for the quantitative phase of the study where the students were made to respond to an adapted questionnaire from Ozoglu (2009) requiring them to show the level of importance they placed on the different support services needed and the extent to which each service is accessible. In sequence to the quantitative results, qualitative data was collected from 3 (three) focus groups made up of 6 students in each group as well as interview with the Registrar of IDeL to explain the quantitative findings. Both the students in the focus group as well as the Registrar were sampled purposely for the study. The data were analysed in two phases. The first phase dealt with the use of descriptive and inferential statistics, specifically, means and standard deviation and Linear Regression. The second phase of the analysis involved content analysis of quotes from respondents' interview responses. Integration of the two data sets was done by first reporting the quantitative statistical results with subsequent support and explanations with the qualitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The demographic characteristics of the respondents as well as analysis of research questions are presented. Regarding the demographic characteristics, data on sex, age and the academic programmes they enrolled for are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Sub-scale	N	%
Sex	Male	150	24.0
	Female	474	76.0
Age	22-25	69	11.1
	26-30	240	38.5
	31-35	171	27.4
	36-40	72	11.5
	41-45	72	11.5
Certificate Enrolled for	Diploma	269	43.1
	Degree/Post Diploma	277	44.4
	Post-Graduate Diploma	21	3.4
	Master	57	9.1

Source: Field Data, 2019

Table 2 shows that majority (76.0%) of the students who participated in the study were females whilst a few (24.0%) were males. It can, therefore, be argued that there are more

female students involved in IDeL, UEW than males. Impliedly, the distance education programme has given majority of the women who used to be marginalized in the educational front like petty traders and nursing mothers the opportunity to receive tertiary education in the comfort of their homes.

Again, the age brackets within which the respondents fall lay credence to the fact that most of the students in IDeL are mature. In essence, they may form part of the working class in the society. Without the necessary support systems to meet their academic, personal and administrative needs, majority of them are likely to suffer in their quest to combine parenthood, work and academic activities on part-time basis. Undoubtedly, the ever-evolving educational landscape has provided an alternative platform for the matured without which study would not have been possible (Sekyi, 2013; Arko-Archemfuor, 2017). As a result, providing the necessary support systems for these categories of respondents is very crucial if they are to attain the academic laurels that the programme seeks to provide.

Research Question One: What difference is there between the support needs of distance education students and the accessibility to the support systems provided by the Institute of Distance Education and e-Learning, Winneba?

The research question was to ascertain whether differences existed in terms of the support needs of the distance education students and the accessibility to the support systems provided by the IDeL. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire ranging from 1 (Unimportant/ Not Accessible) to 5(Very Important/Highly Accessible) was administered to distance education learners between January-April, 2019. Descriptive statistics was first computed to find the means and standard deviations ratings for the levels of importance and accessibility to the support systems. In this study, a mean score of 3.5 and above represented a high degree of importance/accessibility. A mean score between 2.5 to 3.4 indicated medium importance/accessibility whilst a mean score of 2.4 and below represented a low level of importance/accessibility. In addition to the importance and accessibility ratings, the need-gap analysis was conducted to determine the gap between the importance and accessibility ratios. The results from the analysis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Learner Support Needs and Accessibility to the Various Support Systems

Type of Support or Assistance		Mean	SD	Needs Gap for means
Help with the admission/registration process	Importance	4.3	1.1	.8
	Accessibility	3.5	1.2	
Assistance in overcoming technical problems	Importance	4.1	1.2	.4
	Accessibility	3.7	1.4	
Orientation to the course media/delivery format of IDeL.	Importance	4.2	1.0	.6
	Accessibility	3.6	1.4	
Administrative services provided at the IDeL	Importance	4.0	1.2	.8
	Accessibility	3.2	1.3	
Mobile-Quest Information Services	Importance	3.7	1.2	.6
	Accessibility	3.1	1.5	
Counselling Services to promote students' self confidence	Importance	4.0	1.2	.9
	Accessibility	3.1	1.4	
Counseling Services to promote students' motivation	Importance	3.8	1.4	.6
	Accessibility	3.2	1.5	
Counseling services to overcome students' concerns about their education	Importance	4.1	1.1	.7
	Accessibility	3.4	1.3	
Information about IDel related activities	Importance	3.9	1.3	.8
	Accessibility	3.1	1.4	
Activities to promote social interaction among students	Importance	3.6	1.2	.6
	Accessibility	3.0	1.5	
Local study centers with comfortable working arrangements	Importance	3.8	1.2	.6
	Accessibility	3.2	1.5	
Face- to Face academic Counseling (tutoring)	Importance	3.5	1.6	1.2
	Accessibility	2.3	1.3	
Online academic Counseling (Tutoring)	Importance	2.8	1.5	.8
	Accessibility	2.0	1.1	
Academic support through TV programs	Importance	2.8	1.2	.8
	Accessibility	2.0	1.0	
Academic support through radio programs	Importance	2.8	1.3	.5
	Accessibility	2.3	1.4	
Educational software produced by IDeL	Importance	3.4	1.6	1.3
	Accessibility	2.1	1.5	
Local computer labs for student use	Importance	3.2	1.7	1.2
	Accessibility	2.0	1.5	
E-learning portals	Importance	3.8	1.3	1.8
	Accessibility	2.0	1.2	
Online practice question and tests	Importance	3.5	1.8	.4
	Accessibility	3.1	1.5	
Communication with course instructors	Importance	4.3	1.2	1.4
	Accessibility	2.9	1.4	
Communication with other distance learners	Importance	3.5	1.5	.8
	Accessibility	2.7	1.4	

Source: Field Data, 2019

Results from Table 3 shows that there is a huge gap between the needs of the distance learners and their accessibility to the support mechanisms provided by IDeL. Evidently, the students placed high level of importance on help with admission/registration (Mean = 4.3, 1.1), assistance in overcoming technical problems (Mean = 4.1, SD = 1.2), orientation to the course media/delivery format of IDeL (Mean = 4.2, SD = 1.0) and administrative services provided at IDeL (Mean = 4.0, SD = 1.2). Orientation coupled with other administrative procedures are critical for students at the initial stages of enrolment on a programme. It is, therefore, expected that educational institutions make them available for students. However., the accessibility

ratings students attached to help with admission/registration (Mean = 3.5, 1.2), assistance in overcoming technical problems (Mean = 3.7, SD = 1.4), orientation to the course media/delivery format of IDeL (Mean = 3.6, SD = 1.2) and administrative services provided at IDeL (Mean = 3.2, SD = 1.3) were moderate. This presupposes that though the level of importance associated with these support services are high, the accessibility to these services remain moderate. The need gap analysis further revealed gaps of .8 to .4 between the four items on the questionnaire. The interview with the Registrar of IDeL further revealed that the administrative support and orientation for students may not be adequate. He said:

> *Only one day is used to organize general orientation for the students. After wards, the programme coordinators and tutors at the centres are expected to provide the necessary orientation and administrative practices to support the learners.*

The lack of accessibility to these critical nonacademic support systems may restrict the efficiency and effectiveness of the graduates produced through the distance education mode. As indicated by Ozoglu (2009), nonacademic support systems including orientation and technical support address the affective and organizational development of students and assist them with their administrative needs such as registration and fee payment.

In addition, the students revealed a high level of importance on counselling services to promote students' self-confidence (Mean = 4.0, SD = 1.2), counseling services to promote students' motivation (Mean = 3.8, SD = 1.4) and counseling services to overcome students' concerns about their education (Mean = 4.1, SD = 1.1). The accessibility ratios indicated a moderate level of accessibility for counselling services to promote students' self-confidence (Mean = 3.1, SD = 1.4), counseling services to promote students' motivation (Mean = 3.2, SD = 1.5) and counseling services to overcome students' concerns about their education (Mean = 3.4, SD = 1.3). Interestingly, the need gap analysis shows a gap rating of .9 to .6 to three items. Invariably, the students may struggle to deal with role-conflict they may encounter whilst studying on the distance programme. This means also that the performance of the students may not be at the desired level as a result of lack of counselling support in their various study centers. Without the support of appropriate counselling for the students, there is the likelihood that majority of the students will delay in their graduation or eventually drop out from the distance programme (Reid, 1995). In the focus group discussions, the students revealed that their counselling needs were never addressed by the institute. The only counselling support they received was from their peers. For example, the students mentioned:

> *There are no professional counsellors in this study center. When you have a problem, the only person you talk to is your friend. Some of us at times contemplate changing schools or dropping out eventually as a result of the problems we counter in the attempt to combine family, schooling and work.*

Another group also indicated:

> *When we have problems, we talk about it among ourselves. There are no professional counsellors with demarcated offices that we can go to. Sometimes, it is very difficult because of the caliber of people in this study center.*

Commenting on the lack of professional counsellors in the study centers which might lead to drop out among the learners, the Registrar said:

> *Though the dropout rates have reduced, I have to admit that some students spend more than the stipulated time to complete their programmes of study. In as much as we cannot wholly attribute the dropout rate to the lack of counselling services in the study centers, we can also not rule out the fact that it may be part.*

He did, however, indicate that efforts are underway to ensure that each study center has a professional counsellor to offer the necessary counselling support for the students. He maintained that:

> *All tutors have been asked to reapply. We want to make sure that the right people are put in place to offer counselling for the students whilst at least teaching some of the courses.*

The role of technology in distance learning has been clearly articulated in the literature. From the results, the students placed high importance on E-learning portals (Mean = 3.8, SD = 1.3), Mobile-Quest Information Services (Mean = 3.7, SD = 1.2) whilst the rate of accessibility for E-learning portals (Mean = 2.0, SD = 1.2) and Quest Information Services (Mean = 3.1, SD = 1.5) were low and moderate respectively. Impliedly, though the students would have wished to study on e-Learning portals and other Quest Information Services, they are not at the disposal of the students. This is evident from a need analysis gap for e-Learning portals (1.8) and Quest Information Services (.6). The quantitative results were further corroborated by the Registrar of IDeL as well as the focused group interview with the students. The Registrar said:

> *Currently, IDeL does not have e-Learning portals and other Quest Information Services for the students. The reason is that, majority of our students come from the remote part of the country. You agree with me that most of these villages do not have electricity or network coverages.*

Though the students agreed with the view of the Registrar, they asserted that efforts had not been made to even create alternative platforms to assist the learners in their studies. The students commented:

> *We only learn from the printed materials. We don't have any digital means to access the materials online. We have to add that IDeL has failed to get the students hooked to one platform where students can have access to various support systems to aid our studies.*

The students would, therefore, be confined to the printed materials and the face to face tutoring provided by the institute to support their learning. Such form of learning may have detrimental effect on students' learning as they become confined to one mode of learning. It can also be argued that IDeL does not ensure inclusivity in the provision of the support mechanisms for their learners.

Moreover, computer labs for students to use at their study centers (Mean = 2.0, SD = 1.5), educational software produced by IDeL (Mean = 2.1, SD = 1.5) are not accessible to the students, thereby, revealing high need-support gaps of 1.3 and 1.2 respectively. The cascading effect of this lack of technological support for the students learning remains very negative. The students may not have the opportunity to interact with education technologies in their learning, and since majority of these students are being trained for the teaching profession, their subsequent practices in their classrooms are likely to be based on textbooks. On the contrary, the students showed a high level of importance with the practice of questions and tests online (Mean = 3.5, SD = .18) and a moderate level of accessibility (Mean = 3.1, SD = 1.5) whilst the need analysis gap remains relatively low (.4). This does not in any way suggest that the students have the opportunity to ask content-related questions to the subject matter experts online both synchronously and asynchronously. It only suggests that they use social media to interact with some alumnus of the programme on questions they don't understand. The absence of these critical support mechanisms makes it impossible for students to become more autonomous, cooperative and efficient learners (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000).

The most profound revelation from the results relates more to face- to -face academic counseling (tutoring) and communication with instructors. The analysis show that the students place high level of importance on face- to -face academic counseling (tutoring) (Mean = 3.5, SD = 1.6) and communication with instructors (Mean = 4.3, SD = 2.9). However, the accessibility ratios for face- to -face academic counseling (tutoring) (Mean = 2.3, SD = 1.3) and communication with instructors (Mean = 2.9, SD = 1.4) show that the students are deficient in accessing these critical support systems. The need-support gaps further lay credence to the fact that though instructors have been provided at the various study centers, only 3 hours are earmarked for each course every weekend. This 3-hour period may not be enough to handle the average number of students in each study center. This was further confirmed in the focus group discussion. The students affirmed:

We are too crowded in classrooms. Besides, the time for face-to-face with the tutors is very inadequate. We cannot even ask all questions during tutorial sessions. Apart from that, there is no other time to meet someone else for further explanation concerning a course when we need help.

Another group also intimated:

In fact, the face-to-face with the instructors are not adequate. Sometimes we have to shelve all our questions due to time. Apart from the study center, there is no other avenue or platform to share your questions and contributions with the tutors.

Ideal patterns of communication are essential for a wider understanding of teaching, for the promotion of inherent interests and for the promotion of inner or outside dialogues. The lack of opportunities for student-teacher interaction further affects the interaction even among the learners themselves. This further means that student-student collaborations and tutor-student collaborations may be lacking in distance learning. However, Gao (2012) cautions that the perfect support scheme for learners should encourage efficient collaborative learning among learners as it will provide the circumstances or possibilities needed for learners to communicate or to communicate with other individuals (teachers or pairs) through efficient collaborative teaching operations and/or efficient teaching atmosphere. The findings of this study agree with Tait (2000) that cognitive component (guidance, counseling, assessment, coaching, etc.) and affective characteristics (need to belong, interact with each other, and being part of a community that results in the feeling of the students at home, where they feel valued, and finding the learning process manageable) are usually not given much attention as the systemic component of the learner support system such as orientation and registration.

Research Question Two: What is the effect of the distance education students' demographic characteristics on their support needs?

Research Question two sought to find out whether distance education students' demographic characteristics would affect their support needs. A Linear Regression model was used to predict the extent to which these demographic characteristics i.e. sex, gender and certificate enrolled for. The predictive values are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Effect of the Distance Education Students' Demographic Characteristics on their Support Needs

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.372	.185		23.601	.000
	Sex	.142	.079	.069	1.796	.073
	Age	-.282	.033	-.369	-8.515	.000
	Certificate Enrolled for	.057	.044	.057	1.301	.194
	Number of Observations	623				
	R^2	.130				
	Adjusted R^2	.126				
	F	30.936				
	P	.000				

a. Dependent Variable: Support Needs

A multiple Linear Regression was used to predict the extent to which distance education students' demographic characteristics affected their support needs. The F statistic in the entire model is statistically significant. Invariably, the model could be used to predict learner support needs based on sex, age and the certificate enrolled for. A significant Regression Equation [F (3, 619) = 30.936, p < .05 with an R^2 of .130. This means that students' demographic characteristics explain 13% of the variation in their support needs. Impliedly, other factors account for 87% of the support needs of IDeL students. The distance leaners' support needs are equal to 4.372 + .142 (Sex) - .282 (Age) + .057 (Certificate Enrolled for), where Sex was measured as 1 = Male, 2 = Female, Age was coded as 1 = 18 – 21, 2 = 22 – 25, 3 = 26 - 30, 4 = 31 – 35, 5 = 36 – 40, 6 = 41 – 45, 7 = older than 45 whilst Certificate Enrolled for was also measured as 1 = Diploma, 2 = Degree/ Post Diploma, 3 = Post Graduate Diploma, 4 = Master's Degree. From the results it could be said that though sex, age and certificate enrolled for all predict distance leaners' support needs, age appeared to be the statistically significant predictor. This result is quite understandable given the fact that the more the age of the learner increases the more the learner requires support for learning. The focus group discussion with the students as well as the interview with the Registrar of IDeL supported the quantitative results. For instance, the students said:

> *We believe that our ages are the most significant determinant of the support we need. You agree with us that the more you grow, the more difficult it becomes for you to study.*

Another group also mentioned:

> *Most of us are parents as well as workers. We are now old. We need enough support in order to be successful on this programme. The support we need is not as a result of our programmes of study or gender but rather our ages.*

In congruence, the Registrar intimated that the results are not strange. This is because majority of the students on the IDeL programme are old. Therefore, the support they require is dependent on their gender of their choice of programme but rather their ages.

> *You see, most of our students are old. On the average, our students are around 27 years. As such, most of them have challenges with their studies. Without the necessary support, I agree, that majority of them cannot cope with the demands of the academic environment.*

Extant literature suggest that majority of distance education learners are beyond 25 years and as such, they need to be classified as adult learners (Ipaye, 2005; Qakisa-Makoe, 2005). Being

adult learners, a lot of support mechanisms need to be provided to satisfy their learning needs. However, in the provision of the support systems, Kangai (2011) maintains that providers of Distance Education have to use the students' characteristics as a basis to determine their needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The study has revealed that a huge gap exists between the level of importance the students place on the various support systems and the rate at which they are able to access the support systems. The study further revealed that though sex, gender and certificate enrolled for might predict distance leaners' support needs, age was statistically significant among the three demographic characteristics.

In view of these findings, it is concluded that the effectiveness and efficiency of the distance education learners of IDeL may not be at the desired level. Most of the students are also likely to abandon from the programme or spend more than necessary, the time required for their completion on their programmes of study. Students over-dependence on printed materials may further restrict their ability to utilize technology in their daily practices in the classroom.

The study, therefore, recommends that IDeL expand its support services to match the specific needs of the learners. In planning to provide the necessary support systems for the learners, it is very crucial that their demographic characteristics, particularly, their age is given due recognition.

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