WOMEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The pursuit of education has undergone many revolutions over the decades. Technological innovation has created more dynamic platforms for learning. Full time on campus student learning is now giving way to non-traditional online studying. 21st century changes in communication technology are paving the way for more dynamic study on campus. In modern times and with the evolving multiplicity of roles, women seek to maximize their time, effort and energies to enable them meet diverse goals and objectives in terms of work, career, family, and social responsibilities. Distance Education has come to be accepted as a viable alternative for providing higher education particularly to those marginalized sections of the population including women, who otherwise cannot make it to universities and colleges as full-time students. The uniqueness of Distance Education lies in its use of pre-produced courses as the basis of study: Due to its ability to liberate learners from the constraints of time, space, age and study mode, unlike the traditional system, it is particularly appealing for women whose higher education may be interrupted by marriage, childbirth, child care, etc. Understanding the experiences of students in distance learning is paramount to ensuring a progressive, effective and successful programme. This paper explores the realities of female students in distance learning. The paper highlights female students’ experiences with online learning, tutoring approaches and teaching styles within the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme (UGDEP). It throws more light on the positive stories as well as highlights the challenges and the potential barriers to distance learning from the female perspective, altogether providing resourceful information for improvement in decisions and policy making. It uses the qualitative approach through Narratives to gather information from 15 randomly selected female students who study different courses at the Accra Learning Centre at Accra City Campus, University of Ghana. Respondents were engaged in in-depth face to face interviews lasting about 10 – 15 minutes and were asked open ended questions. Responses were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Data was analysed by coding and using thematic categories. Some of the key findings were that there still exists some gender gaps in fully embracing technology as a useful means of study. This has major implications for providing technological support and tutoring support to female students. The paper recommends the integration of learning technologies into the curriculum as this will aid in the development of women’s skill building and confidence and enhance full participation. It further recommends a critical look at the content, structure, and lecturing styles of the Distance Education Programme. It suggests the development of a more coherent strategy to enhance its overall effectiveness.

Keywords: Distance education, female experiences, online learning, teaching styles.

1 INTRODUCTION

As education revolves and evolves in a globalised world, Distance Learning has become an all-important core in the acquisition of knowledge in higher institutions. It is viewed by many as one of the most innovative approaches to education and has been described by Zigerell as the “Information Age Approach” to learning in his study on Distance Learning and Adult Education. [1]. Distance Education has several facets and lends itself to different interpretations and meanings. Holmberg’s perspective has been defined to include the “various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial system.” [2] This includes online education to imply instruction through a connection to a computer system at a venue distant from the learner’s computer.

This kind of education suggests a move towards self-directed study which forms the basis for adults’ self-concept in learning: as people mature, their self-concept moves from one characterized by independence and self-direction than total dependence on the instructor. This kind of study emphasizes a progressive philosophy of learning that is learner centred and uses an experiential problem solving approach to learning where learners take the initiative for learning and responsibility
for its completion. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner articulate that exploring how technology relates and affects self-directed learning can expand our understanding of adult learning in formal and informal settings. [3]

“Isaac Pitman the inventor of the Shorthand system that bears his name is credited with being the first to use the Distance Education starting in the 1840’s. He used the newly created “penny post” for the dispatch and return of study assignments. It is believed that many of Pitman’s students were the women who flowed into the offices of the nineteenth century industrial Britain.” [4] This form of education served women who for one reason or the other were and are unable to participate fully in educational systems designed around male life and work patterns. The uniqueness of Distance Education lies in its use of pre-produced courses as the basis of study: existence of organized two way communication between students and a supporting organization with its tutors and counsellors: and planned explicit catering for individual study. [5].

Feminist theories suggest that women view social interaction as very important to their learning process. Women prefer to discuss issues, and communicate face to face as it enhances their learning abilities. This definition thus raises issues on the effectiveness of the method of study in relation to the learning styles of women: Feminist theories on learning styles reveal that women prefer a learning style that has been called “Social Learning”. Compared with men, they focus more on the interactive elements of the teaching-learning process in achieving connectedness with the institution, tutors and other learners, in co-operation. [6]. they prefer supportive environments where they can share their problems and achievements.

The use of technology has implications for women and e-learning. It is generally believed that women are less likely to become involved with computers than men. “The attempts to explain this phenomena have focused predominantly around the question of differences between the sexes in their approach, attitude towards, and cognitive abilities with computers.” [7] For example, the theory that men have “focused worlds” while women cover more than one activity at one time and have “diffused worlds” has been offered to explain gender differences in this context.

This study sought to investigate the experiences of Distance Education students in the light of the goals of Distance Education, to find out the issues that significantly affect female students’ online learning. It investigated the teaching approaches and explored the nature and quality of teaching. A general investigation of the needs of women in the distance learning programme was undertaken.

1.1 Goals of distance education: Democratisation, liberal education and instructional quality

The goals of Distance Education have been examined from 3 different perspectives: Democratisation, Liberal education, and Instructional quality. These are argued to be goals and guiding principles in the rhetoric of educational institutions and agencies that support online initiatives. “Democratization in this context means increasing the access to higher education of populations that would otherwise be excluded or increasing the range of people who might be served by elite institutions. [2]

“Liberal education refers to an education that is broad, deep and philosophically anchored to a sense of purpose and general utility.” [2] Liberal education in its classical sense is education necessary to the making of a free human being and is often contrasted with training for a particular profession. It generally attempts to shape a person’s critical and analytic competencies with respect to disciplinary knowledge.

This suggests that the Distance Education programme promotes a Liberal kind of education: a liberal kind of education produces a teacher centred focus of study where the teacher is given much prominence. Inferring from the various definitions however, the Distance Education programme seems to support a progressive approach or a more learner focused approach where study materials are given online and students are required to take the initiative in controlling their studies. The nature of self-study on its own though enables the student to develop critical thinking abilities which enhance the liberal approach.

Instructional quality, refers to concerns and considerations about the effectiveness of teaching or instructional environments in the light of particular learning goals and educational standards. [2] Quality can be considered in terms of three major dimensions referred to as product, service, and outcomes. “It is believed that the delivery media for instructional content is unlikely to dramatically impact the learning outcomes, whereas content, teaching methods, communication, and learner support are extremely important for student satisfaction.” [8].
The product could be looked at in terms of the course content. “The design of learning experiences can greatly influence the success of distance learning program. By clearly articulating what is to be taught, i.e. the content and the mode of delivery to students (pedagogy and technologies).” Educators should design learning experiences to take advantage of the various modalities that best fit with learning objectives and student styles. For individual learning situations, the instructors must ensure that interaction opportunities are available to students.

The quality of service rendered could also be examined in terms of the role played by the school’s Faculty in ensuring effective creation and delivery of instruction, evaluation of instructional effectiveness and student achievement, innovation in instructional processes, consistency with schools expectation and students demand.

2 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was undertaken to solicit views from participants. The study adapted a Narrative approach where students’ experiences were captured through their individual stories. A random sampling of 15 female students at the Distance Education Programme was conducted. An interview guide was used in soliciting views from students through open ended questions allowing an in depth exploration of their experiences. The study was done through observation at the Accra Learning Center Campus and personal interactions and interviews were conducted. The interviews which lasted 10-15 minutes were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Data was coded and developed into broader categories and themes to form a fuller picture of participants’ experiences. Interpretations and meanings were given to the data gathered.

The use of “voice” has been employed in this study through the use of quotation marks. Interviewees were assured of anonymity and their consent was sought before interviewing.

Much of the focus of this research would pivot on the feminist philosophy. Feminist ontology draws on the fact that the reality we perceive is only presented in part. Feminist theory provides the opportunity to step back to see what the fuller version of reality is. Feminist theory is interested in incorporating the least told stories, interested in creating nuances by adding to the mainstream. “Feminists understand their work as critical interventions – they seek not just to generate more knowledge but also and centrally to question and transform existing modes, frameworks and institutions of knowledge production.” This study attempts to project the female Ghanaian student’s perspective on Distance Education. It attempts to provide through the eyes of the female student, a fuller or broader perspective on what reality is for students embarking on the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Distance education as an alternative to regular campus study

On the subject of choice of Distance Education as an option for study, some students intimated that they had no particular reasons for opting for the programme. They would have preferred the traditional campus learning however, their grades did not meet the required standard and so they were given the distance program instead. Other students noted that they worked during the week and so found the study time during the weekend very suitable as they could still pursue their career goals whilst working. Some students indicated that the distance learning programme enabled them to work and earn some income to fund their education. A student commenting on her preference for the Distance Education programme noted:

“I work as a secretary from Monday to Friday so the programme enables me to have time to develop my academic career as well”

Another student claimed access to the Distance Education programme was much easier than the regular campus programme. This student noted she would not have secured admission to the regular programme since she applied with her diploma certificate. She noted

“If your grades are not too good and you push a little bit you can still get admission.”

It was apparent that most students did not enrol on the programme by reason of their own choice. However we could deduce that the goals of democratization that the Distance Education seeks to achieve was prevalent. Inferring from the reasons given, this medium of education as mentioned
previously, enables increased access to certain population of students that would otherwise not have enrolled on university degree programmes. Some of the obstacles that would have hindered students’ access to degree programmes include low grades, work occupations, family responsibilities, etc.

3.2 Students experiences with teaching approaches

Students iterated that the approach to teaching allowed them to do a lot more work on their own. They were given slides to study during the week which formed the basis for their lecture discussions. They described a learning process where they were made to take a lot more responsibility for their learning and described the lecturers as some kind of facilitators providing direction where needed. They very aptly described a progressive style of tuition which in their view was useful. The freedom to explore and lead the learning process also enabled them to develop critical and analytical competencies thus enhancing liberal education.

Students iterated:

“You need to study before you come to class, we do most of the learning on our own”

“when you’re home, you research a lot, when you’re reading the slides and you do not understand, you do some more research on the internet, it enables you gain more understanding for yourself”

“Factors such as adult learners’ fluency and perception in using Information and Communication Technology (ICT), particularly in network literacy, and their self-directed learning readiness can be critical elements in determining the effectiveness of online learning.”[3] This presupposes that students competency in online learning will enhance greatly their ability to adapt to the teaching approaches in Distance Education. The Distance learning programme in the view of the students facilitated their adult characteristics of being self-dependent and leading the learning process. Most of them viewed this as critical for their learning and a means of developing knowledge seeking skills.

3.3 Student experiences with quality of teaching

In terms of the quality of teaching, on a scale of 10% – 100%, most students rated their lecturers between 40-60%. Sentiments were expressed regarding some lecturers inability to open up during discussions. Some of the students were quoted as saying:

“Some of the lecturers end up not saying anything. If you ask them questions, they tell you to go and read it on your own. At the end of the day you end up not understanding what the teacher is trying to say. Sometimes we do the readings but we need further explanations, and we find it difficult understanding such courses”

Other students described the teaching style as normal and open. They indicated that they were allowed to ask questions and if they had any difficulties the lecturer would open the floor for discussions. They indicated their preference for lecturers that allowed open communication and free flow of questions. They however noted that some of the lecturers did not encourage class interactions. One student describes her experience with the teaching style:

“Our lecturer does not even smile. We don’t get the concepts well, He always talks and doesn’t allow us to ask questions.”

Another student comments:

“.There is no time for interactions. Initially we were told we had 2 hours for each lecture session, now it has been changed to 3hours, we seem to be behind and when you ask questions, the lecturer would say we are behind and move on”

Students suggested that lecturers should combine the processes of teaching and lecturing.

“They should teach a little and lecture a little, just asking questions does not help us that much.”

Students indicated their preference for a kind of interactive learning. Empirical studies continually support positive associations between interactive learning and students’ development of interest, critical thinking and learning outcomes. [10]. The students called for active and participatory learning styles where the lessons are reinforced through continuous engagement with lecturers.
3.4 Students experiences with online learning and discussions

In terms of their experiences with e-learning, some female students admitted that they had some prior knowledge about computers and online learning and so were conversant with the use of these online tools. They however intimated that a number of their female colleagues were struggling with online learning, hardly visited the Sakai platform (the online learning platform for Distance Education Students) and sometimes ended up not using the tablets given.

“Some of us just use these tablets for reading the slides, whereas we should be going on to Sakai to read announcements, resources, and other information, I don’t really go there for discussions. I have only been there 3 times during the whole semester.”

Another student comments:

“I don’t normally go for online discussions. Sometimes I don’t have the time...in fact I hardly use the online platform”

A student purported:

“I don’t go there unless lecturers request. The online discussion is not a good forum. As for assignments, we haven’t submitted any yet”

Students complained about time being a factor. They purported that sometimes when they post things on line, it takes about a week before responses are provided. Some students indicated that feedback for assignments and Interim Assessments was encouraging. Others noted that they had a total of 3 courses for the semester yet online discussions were being done for only 1 course.

Some students lamented about their experiences with the online learning. They cited instances where the network was not stable and as a result, it took them a longer time to send assignments, making their work more cumbersome. They indicated that the online discussions were not that effective. They purported that the process of asking questions, typing and scrolling up for responses and making suggestions online was very tiresome and created a lot of inconvenience due to the time lags and difficulty in following up with responses.

Commenting on the use of the tablets, they purported that the network connections on campus was poor.

Some remarked that they had not gone online for discussions before because they thought students were making light use of the platform and having fun. They relayed that:

“......people are joking with it, and the lecturers don’t want to come on there and see students having fun”

Other students commented on the usefulness of the tablets:

“......they help me personally, I don’t need to buy textbooks, everything is installed so I can learn as and when I want to”

Still on the online learning, a student indicated that she hardly visited the Sakai platform:

“I just go there to search for assignments. I haven’t seen any online interactions”

The issue of women and technology springs up in the light of these discussions. It could be deduced that a number of female students do not participate effectively in the online aspect of learning and development that the Distance Education programme provides. As acknowledged by Whitehouse, “the degree of technological sophistication within any learning environment depends on many factors, such as the instructor’s level of knowledge and comfort, and the learner’s ability to adjust to these technologies.”[11]. Some feminist critics employing the socialization theories argue that women learn differently from men, i.e. their communication preferences differ and therefore require technological approaches that facilitate a learning style sensitive to their specific needs.

3.5 Discussion

The issue of women and the digital divide comes up very strongly in distance learning. All the interviewees were women whose comments suggest that they had very little activity when it comes to online learning. Students felt they needed some kind of support in terms of training on the use of Sakai (the University’s online learning system) to facilitate their online learning. There is the need for the school’s Management to take a critical look at providing effective support and training on online
learning and the use of the Sakai platform for all its students particularly the female students. There is the need to focus on strategies for increasing women’s use of technology. Some feminist educators suggest part of the problem can be resolved by partially integrating learning technologies into the curriculum as this will aid in the development of women’s skill building and confidence.

The apt and candid descriptions of the nature of academics also provide some exposure on the quality of teaching. As discussed by the students the structure, content and the lecturing styles could be further improved. The school’s Management may need to get to the grassroots and do a “needs assessment” using a “bottom up” approach. Students have very useful information which Management could use to determine the effectiveness of the course content, the quality of teaching and the structure of the academic work. An opinion survey could be conducted on a much larger scale to sample the views and opinions of the students. Useful decisions can then be made with regards to the schools operations.

There is the need for Management to do a SWOT Analysis i.e. a structured planning method where the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the Distance Education Programme can be identified. The strengths can be matched to the opportunities, and threats and weaknesses can be identified for mitigation. Most of the students complaints centred on the unstructured nature of things. They nonetheless clearly noted the benefits and advantages that the system provided. A thorough analysis of these issues would enable the institution revisit its goals and objectives and develop a more coherent strategy to enable it gain competitive advantage on the market.

Education can be used as a tool for creating awareness within the student populace, the faculty populace and the school’s Management Populace. Management and faculty need to be consciously made aware of the present state of the programme from the perspective of the students through workshops. Alongside Management, they can work out modes of improving the quality of service rendered to their students. The role of Adult Education is to develop individuals to gain knowledge that leads to positive changes in behaviour. It is very obvious that student attitudes towards e-learning needs to go through some level of transformation. Faculty and Management through Adult Education can conscientize the student populace through programmes, seminars, workshops, trainings, etc. on the need to adopt positive attitudes towards e-learning.

There are also implications for adult educators in the sphere of adult learning: The approaches to teaching adults in the University of Ghana Distance Education programme needs to be reviewed. Students called for participatory, open and free styled approaches in the teaching. There is the need to understand the adult learner and the approach that best suits their learning styles.

There are also implications for communication in Adult Education. Communication is key to successful collaboration in educational environments. As adult educators there is the need to close the gaps in communication between Faculty, Management and the Students. Effective communication enables parties to gain fuller understanding of each party’s needs and concerns. Effective communication management can produce useful information such as new and improved ideas for enhancing an organization’s performance. Communication should always be top-down, and bottom-up. Faculty and Schools Management should be able to communicate with students and make changes and adjustments based on issues communicated.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The study which focused on exploring the experiences of female students in distance learning has highlighted some positive variables and major challenges that are being encountered via this mode of teaching and learning. The experiences shared by these students seem to call for a paradigm shift in several areas including teaching approaches, online learning, and administrative structures. The findings have provided insights into students’ engagement with learning platforms and experiences with teaching styles and has provided further insights into what is expected of Faculty and Management. The findings have illuminated the need for technological support for female students to enhance their learning abilities. It has also emphasized the need for faculty to review their teaching styles from the adult learner’s perspective. Although most of the interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the school system, they also stressed the benefits and opportunities that the distance mode provides. It is therefore important for stakeholders to provide necessary interventions to improve the experiences of these learners and to enhance the quality of services thereby enhancing their competitive edge. It would also be interesting to investigate the lecturers’ experiences with
Distance Learning, their perspectives on students learning, how they engage students online, how they initiate learning processes, and moderate students’ participation in online and distance education.

REFERENCES


