



Examination of Challenges in Distance Learning Programme. Evidence from Koforidua Study Centre - Kwame Nkrumah University of Science Technology (KNUST), Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Distance Learning has become the major focus for majority of people for upgrading themselves which otherwise might be difficult if not impossible to execute by some individuals who would like to further their studies. Even though Distance Learning has numerous benefits, students are faced with a lot of challenges which is affecting their performance that ought to be addressed to enhance their studies. The purpose of the study is to find out the challenges students are saddled with during their study. The researchers made use of questionnaire and observation to collate information at the Koforidua Study Centre of Institute of Distance Learning (IDL), KNUST. The study revealed that students face various kinds of challenges which include; financial challenges resulting in difficulties in paying fees due to long term of servicing loans, inability to learn due to busy work schedules as well as managing family responsibility, inability to access additional information due to expensive nature of computers and tablets. Poor concentration level due to loud noise from the learning environment during Sunday services among others as well as uncomfortable nature of studying seats at the centre and less spacious nature of some of the classrooms making teaching and learning uninteresting. Recommendations were made on how some of the challenges could be managed by the authorities to help reduce the problem if not totally eradicating them.

Key Words: KNUST- Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

Introduction

Education for the past centuries has been the wheel on which the development of many nations, industries as well as individuals accelerates. Harber (2010) stated that “education provides knowledge and skills needed to steer the development wheels of the nation to its destination of prosperity by improving the lives of individuals and enriching the wider society”. Its importance to meaningful human living is so glaring than to be rubbished into the background. As a result education in many nations has been given so much priority such that, most national policies are derived from the ambit of education. The reason being that, education is the key to development of the all nation and any nation that relegates education to the background may not be considered serious. Besides it is a fundamental right to all and sundry who are eligible to be educated. It is for this reason that much effort has been made both in the past and present to provide quality education to all in every field of endeavour for a holistic societal development through the designing of learning to suit

everyone according to his or her needs. In this vain distance education has been incepted to bring affordable learning to the doorstep of learners for easy self-development as well as national development. Its major purpose is to increase access to tertiary learning which might be limited by inadequate facilities by the universities as well as the working condition of prospective students.

Open and distance learning was established as a programme of studies which provides opportunities for educational advancement for members of the society who find themselves in any of the following situations in life ; workers who desire education to improve their skills but who cannot afford to leave their jobs for full time study; persons who appear frustrated with the bottlenecks in the processes of seeking admission to conventional institutions; persons who began their studies in conventional institutions but had to drop for various reasons, including loss of educational sponsors/benefactors. The mass of the people who seek education to improve themselves find solace in open and distance learning programme (Omoh, 2012).

Keegan (1999) view contemporary distance learning as a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification. Tester and Blieszner (1999) stated that the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods; however, its primary distinction is the teacher and the learners are separate in space and possibly time.

Distance learning was first incepted in the 18th century in Europe. One of the earliest examples was from a 1728 advertisement in the Boston Gazette for “Caleb Philips Teacher of the new method of shorthand” who wanted to learn through weekly mailed lessons. However, the first distance education course in the modern sense was provide by Sir Isaac Pitman in the 1840s who taught a system of shorthand on postcards and receiving transcription from his students in return for correction.

In Ghana, it was first incepted in 1982 as Modular Teacher Training Programme (MTTP) which helped in training 7537 untrained teachers who were given “professional Teacher certificates A”. But the programme collapsed due to inadequate resources. However, in 1996, University of Education, Winneba admitted 196 students into the Distance Learning and other institutions also join in the provision of distance learning to their clients.

Distance learning was designed to reach the unreachable and also to enable universities to save money by delivering education to students that are unable to attend classes because of time and distance.

These are characteristic of institutional accreditation where learning is certified by an institution or agency; use of variety of media for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure tutor-learner, and learner-learner interaction; and possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials for learner-learner interaction, laboratory or practice session or library study.

Distance education is said to be open because of students’ freedom and programme flexibility. It is flexible and opens in terms of its admission requirements, that is, not as rigid as in conventional institutions, freedom in terms of place of study, time, place, and composition of study programme, content and didactic approach.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Even though, much effort and resources have been dedicated into ensuring that, distance education is delivered at the optimum level of quality for development of adequate human resources through policies formulated. It seems distance students are not being able to cope with distance learning programmes. Also, the mode of delivering the distance learning is not achieving the intended objectives or aim. This is worrisome to students undertaking the distance education programme. The study therefore seeks to achieve these objectives:

1. To find out the learning challenges students are facing on distance learning programme.
2. To find out the financial challenges facing students on the distance learning programme.
3. To come out with suggestions and recommendations to salvage the situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First Generation Distance Education

The information and communications technology of first generation distance education was written and printed material distributed through the postal system which developed in every country from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Known as correspondence courses, students generally were provided with study guides and textbooks and sometimes with supplemental reading lists. In these courses students were expected to respond to questions that distant teachers then read and assessed. Though correspondence study did not disappear, but in fact continued to grow in most countries, after the radio was invented in the 1920s and the TV in the 1950s, these “new” information and communication technologies were applied to distance education in the form of radio-based study talks and TV-led video based courses. Sometimes print and local study groups were included.

In this era students did not have the opportunity to meet tutors as a result they were faced with many challenges whenever they encountered difficulties in their studies. This is because the media of instructions were mainly responding to questions. There was no face to face interaction for tutors to identify the challenges students are encountering hence the need for restructuring.

Since face-to-face was lacking in this era with its associated challenges there was the need to re-establish another generation of Distance Education hence the introduction of the second generation of distance education to help reduce these problems.

The Second Generation Distance Education

The setting up of the Open University in the Great Britain in 1969 marks the beginning of the second generation of distance education. Though the dominant technology remained print and the medium text, this was the first time an integrated multiple-media approach was applied on a large scale. The Open University was known for developing large quantities of high quality materials designed especially for distance education. Both one-way (from university to students in the form of print, broadcasts, and audiotapes) and two-way communications (between tutors and students through correspondence tutoring, face-to-face tutorials and short residential courses and in more recent years by telephone, video and computer conferencing) were applied cited by UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education, 2002

It was also noted that in this second generation majority of the students also suffered various challenges due to problems in areas where students do not have adequate internet facilities and computer accessories. Besides, some students were far removed from the institutions that were offering course on distance since there was no study centres as it is now it was making learning very difficult.

Third Generation Distance Education

The third generation of distance education uses ICTs that are interactive, electronic, and computer-based as its basis for distributing information and facilitating communication between learners and teacher and learners and learners. Here ICTs provide for two-way communications that are either synchronous (‘at the same time’ as in videoconferencing or audio-conferencing) or asynchronous (‘not at the same time’ as in electronic mail or most computer-based discussion forums). These technologies are sometimes added to courses characteristic of earlier generations, but they can also be used by themselves. Although computer-aided instruction was already in place in some institutions by the 1980s, only after the introduction of the World Wide Web (WWW) did computers and telecommunication systems have a significant teaching-learning function in distance education. With the introduction of the WWW in 1993, web-based distance education and training have grown tremendously. A primary reason for this is the Web’s ability to facilitate interaction and interactivity through networking. This facilitates faster communication and interactivity between learners and instructors, hence representing an improvement from former generations of distance

education. In fact, now a high level of interactivity is even possible among learners as well as between learners and instructors (UNESCO, 2002).

This also could not satisfy the demand for the interpersonal relationship that might have existed between learners and tutors thereby facilitating adequate teaching and learning

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was used as the research paradigm. This approach was used to gather an in-depth data from the respondents in order to get accurate data on the study which may be difficult if not impossible to infer from quantitative analysis. The research design was a Case study. It is defined as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. (Yin, 1984, p.23) as cited in Authur (2012). Primary and Secondary data were used in carrying out the research. The tools used were observation and structured questionnaires. The questionnaire was both close and open-ended. Besides, secondary data was consulted to throw more light on the subject under study. The total population for the study is 295 at the Koforidua Study Centre. Koforidua-Centre was selected as the focus of the study. This was done on basis of proximity and the purpose of the study. These are probability or non-probability methods of selecting participants for the study or a short cut method for investigating a whole population.

The convenient sampling technique was used in selecting the participants for the studies. Convenience sampling is a statistical method of drawing representative data by selecting people because of ease of their volunteering or selecting units because of their availability or easy access. This method was used because the programme is on the weekend basis and the researcher may not have the opportunity to meet all students at a time to use the simple random sampling technique. The researcher did the selection by picking the students when they came for tutorials.

The researcher selected 165 students for the study of which 89 were males and 76 were females. This sampling is based on the sample sizes for given population sizes chart made available to students for research purposes. The respondents were selected using the convenient sampling technique by picking students that come for weekend tutorials. Those that agreed to partake in research were given the questionnaires to fill. This is to bring out holistic information from the respondents to enhance effective and efficient data analysis and decision making process.

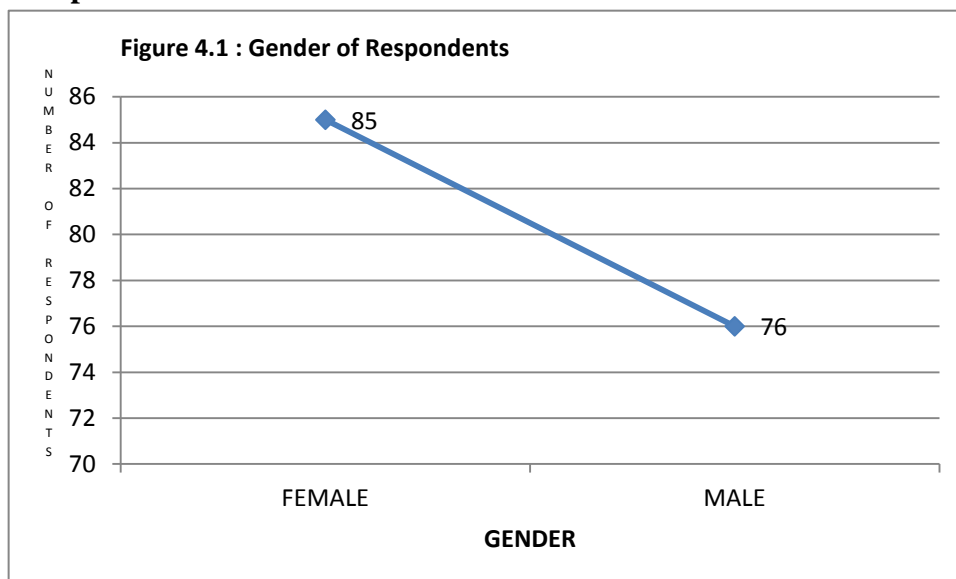
The data collection techniques used was questionnaire and observation. The questionnaire was structured and it involved both open ended and close-ended questions.

The researcher gave the questionnaires to the respondents after they have agreed to respond to them and gave them guidelines to fill them. The questionnaires were received after completion. The researcher also took notes of other vital information using observations during tutorials and through interaction with respondents. The observation was guided with questions in order to extract the needed data. However, the data was captured to reflect the main objective of the study which is to find out the challenges facing students on the Distance Learning programme. The researcher presented the data collated in a detailed descriptive form with the help of tables and charts to reflect the actual issues on the ground.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

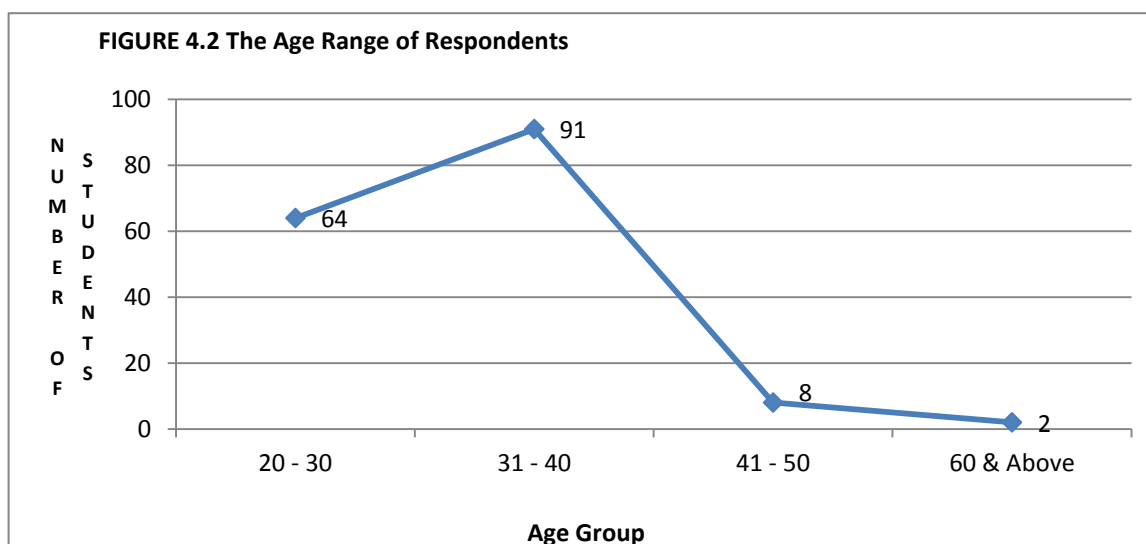
The data gathered under the various sub-topics have been analyzed in a descriptive form with the help of tables and charts discussed into details by the researcher to enhance the understanding of the concepts. Data Analysis essentially, qualitative data analysis involves defining, categorizing, theorizing, explaining, exploring and mapping vast quantities of data (Huberman&Miles, 2002).

Demographics of respondents



Source: Field data. From the Research

In reference to chart above 46% (79) of the respondents were males and 54% (89) of the respondents were females. This is reflection that more female enrolled on the course more than the males.



Source: field data, From the Research.

The chart shows the age range of respondents on the programme. 39% (64) of the respondents fall within the ages of 20-30. 55% (91) were between the ages 31-40. 5% (8) were between the ages of 41-50 and only One percent (1%) were 51 years and above. Most of the students on the programme are between the ages of 31-40.

Table 4.1 Respondents current level on the course at the Koforidua Study Centre

Compositions of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Undergraduate	65	39.4
Post graduate	98	60.6
Total	165	100

Source field data; From the Research

In reference to the table 65(39.4%) of the respondents were at the undergraduate level (Bachelor of Business Administration) level and 98(60.6%) of the respondents were at the Postgraduate level (Commonwealth Executive Master in Business Administration). Only two courses were being run by the Institute at the time of the study.

Table 4.1 Extended Study Course Content and Experience

QUESTION	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	Total
COURSE CENTRE	No.(%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	Total
The Course was well Organized	15 (9.1%)	18 (10.9%)	97 (58.8%)	35(21.2%)	165(100)
The Instructors gave clear Explanations	33 (20%)	42 (25.5%)	50 (30.3%)	40(24.2%)	165(100)
Students were kept informed of their progress	45(27.3%)	67(40.1%)	42(25.5%)	11(6.7%)	165(100)
The instructor stimulates in-depth knowledge	37(22.4%)	34(20.6%)	63(38.2%)	35(21.2%)	165(100)
The instructors summaries ideas well	45(27.3%)	68(41.2%)	40(24.2%)	12(7.3%)	165(100)
Course delivery too theoretical	23(13.9%)	40(24.2%)	67(40.6%)	35(21.2)	165(100)

Source: field data. From the Research

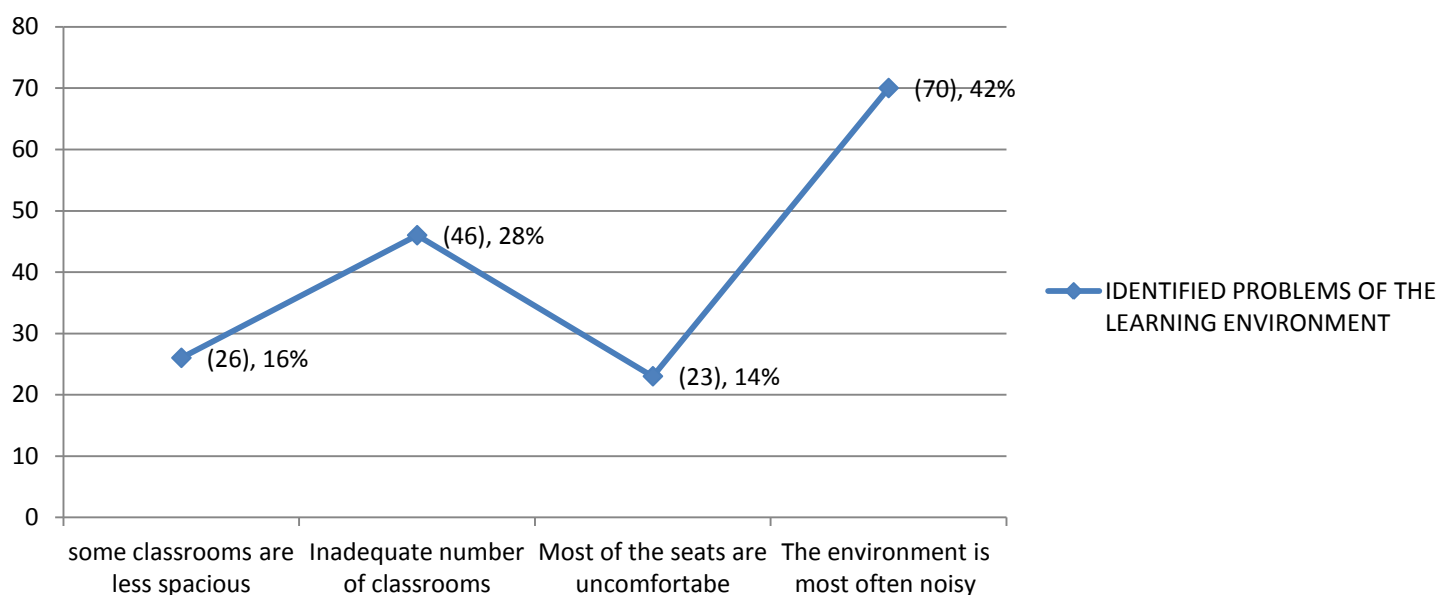
In reference to the table 112(80%) believed the courses are being organized well meanwhile 33(20%) stated the otherwise. Also,90(54.5%) of the students agree that some tutors give clear explanation on subject matter on the other hand 76(45.5) disagree that not all tutors give clear explanation of the subject matter. 103(68.56%) of the respondents disagree that ideas were summarized well due to inability of some tutors to complete the content before a period ends and the semesters as well. 52(31.5%) of the respondent stated some of the tutors summarized ideas very well. On in-depth knowledge stimulation on subject matter 71(43.0%) indicated some tutors do not stimulate in-depth knowledge on some of the topics, 98(59.4%) stated that majority of the tutors do stimulate in-depth knowledge on the topics making learning easier. 112 (67.4%) stated that they are not informed of their progress on the programme adequately whiles 53(33.2%) of the Students agree that they are inform of their progress stating that receiving their results is one of them. Besides, 63(39.1%) of the students disagree that the course delivery is too theoretical, 102(61.8%) agree that mode of delivery is too theoretical providing less room for practical activities for application purposes. Students need to be helped to practice some concepts in the classrooms to enable them execute them at their work places.

Table 4.2 Comfortability of the classrooms

RATING	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Excellent	10	6.06
Very Good	23	13.93
Good	30	18.18
Satisfactory	76	46.06
Poor	26	15.76
Very Poor	0	0.00
Total	165	100

Source: Field data. From the Research

In reference to the table above, 10 (6.1%) of the respondents rated the conditions of the classrooms to be excellent, 23 (13.93%) of the respondents stated very good, 30 (18.18%) stated good, 76 (46.06%) stated satisfactory and 26 (15.76%). None of the respondents rated the classrooms as very poor.

Figure 4.3. Some problems with the learning environment

Source field data: From the Research.

From the chart above 26(16%) stated that some of the classrooms are not spacious. 46 (28%) said most of the seats are uncomfortabe. 70(42%) indicated that, the environment is most often noisy during Saturday funerals and Sunday services and 23(14%) stated that there are inadequate numbers of classrooms. The numbers in the brackets represents the number of respondents.

Table 4.3 Students have timely access to information delivery from the main Administration

Access to timely information delivery	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	25	15.15
Agree	37	22.42
Disagree	65	39.39
Strongly Disagree	38	23.03
Total	165	100

Source: Field Data From the Research

Table 4.3 indicates that 25(15.15%) of the respondents strongly agree and 37 (22.42%) of the students agree that they have quick delivery of information from the main Administration. On the other hand 65(39.39%) of the students disagree and 38 (23.03%) of the respondent strongly disagree that information from the main administration does not get to Students timely. Students stated that every bit of information about the programme or course should be made available on the Institute's website for easy accessibility without necessarily moving to the Centre to ask. Besides the centre has no adequate notice board for posting of notices.

Table 4.4 Means of getting additional information on the course

Means of Accessing additional Information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Internet Cafe	17	10.3
Personal Computer with KNUST modem	15	9.1
Mobile Phones/Tablets	25	15.1
Friends from other centres	18	10.9
Slide presentations on topics and course materials.	90	54.5
Total	165	100

Source: field data From the Research

Table 4.4 depicts that 17 (10.3%) of the students indicated that they get additional information using the Internet Café. 15 (9.1)) percent stated that they use their own computers in conjunction with the modems distributed. 25 (15.1%) use their mobile phones/Tablets. 18 (10.9%) depends on friends from other centres for additional information on the course. 90 (54.5%) stated they depends solely on the slide presentations and course materials provided due to unavailability of time.

Figure.4.5 challenges with the various means of getting additional information on the course

Means of getting additional information	Challenges
Internet café	Internet cafe far from home. Expenses in printing large document from the internet. Poor network in some areas The uncomfotability and lack of privacy in some centres
Personal computer with modem	Poor network in some areas using the modem Expensive nature of computers. Tiredness in carrying computers to and from work or around
The use of mobile phone/tablets	Expensive nature of mobile phones/tablets that support large data Eyes problems associated with reading small text and the rays from the phones and the tablets
Friends from other centres	Some information are inaccurate and unreliable
Slide presentations on topics	Inadequate grasping of the concepts due to the contracted nature of slides and verbose nature of some course materials

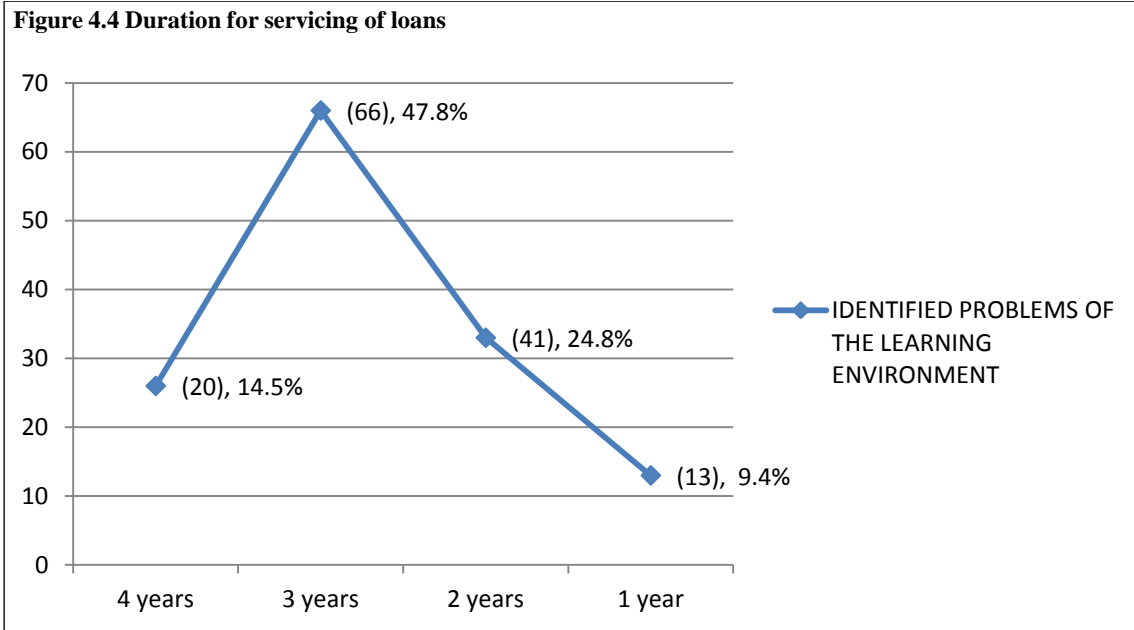
Source: field data. From the Research

Table 4.6 Means for Payment fees

ITEM	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Loan	142	86.1
Personal Savings	16	9.69
Family and friends support	7	4.2
Total	165	100

Source: field data; From the Research

In reference to the table 4.6, 142(86.1%) of the students used loan in paying their fees, these increased their financial burden. 16(9.96%) of the respondents paid their fees through personal savings. Whiles 7(4.2) were support by family and friends. It is clear that most of the students depend on loan to pay their fees hence increasing their financial burdens.



Source: Field of data From the Research.

From the chart above majority of the students spend 1-4years in repayment of loans contracted to pay their fees which runs into the next academic year in which they will pay another fees alongside family responsibilities as well as transport fee to and from the Centre. This increases the financial burdens of students on the course.

Figure 4.7 Learning difficulties respondents encountered

Learning	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I cannot learn alone unless group discussion	35	21.1
Always get back from work late	46	27.9
Do not have means for accessing additional information	29	17.6
Hardly get enough time to rest to due family responsibilities	30	18.2
Difficulties in understanding new concepts on my own Unless explain to me.	11	6.7
Poor font size and printing of some course books	14	8.5
Total	165	100

Source: field data From the Research

It is obvious from the studies that students have challenges in their learning. From the table 4.7, 35 (21.1%) of the students indicated that they cannot learn on their own unless group studies meanwhile most students are far apart from each other. Also 46 (27.9%) stated that they usually come home late due to busy work schedules. 29 (17.6%) explain that they do not have any means to access additional information so they depend solely on course materials provided by the institute. 30(18.2%)of the respondents especially the women stated they hardly get enough time to rest to due family responsibilities hence could not learn due to tiredness. Most of the students were married and combining learning, work and family responsibilities is really hectic. However, 11 (6.7%) find it difficult to understand new concepts when doing individual studies at home unless explain to them. As result they have to engage the services of peoples to help them which

also come with a cost. Finally 14 (8.5%) stated that the font size of some of the course books is small and the poor manner in which some of the course books were printed makes learning difficult.

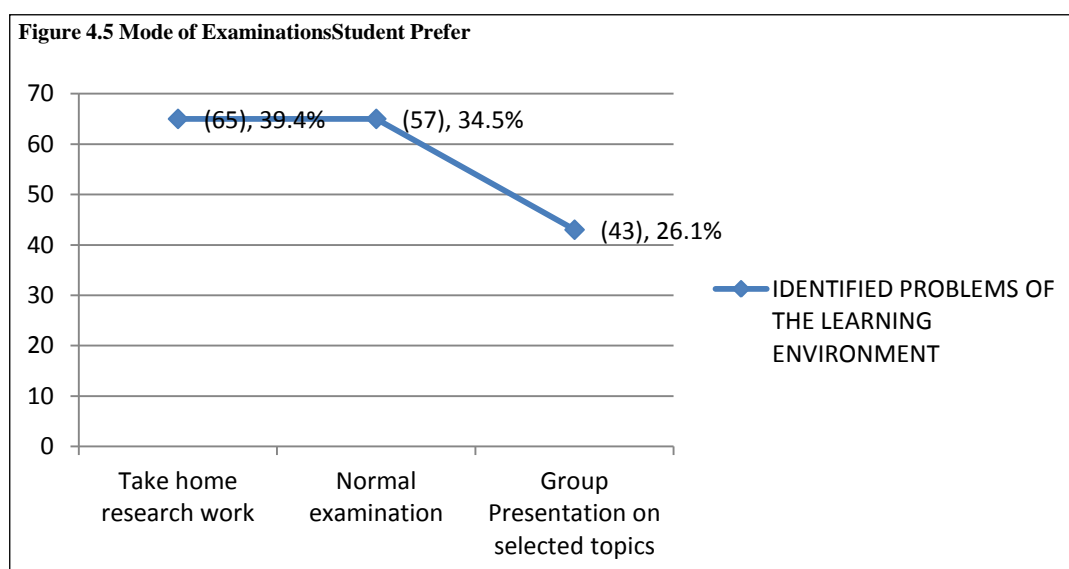
Examination

Table 4.8. Students' comfort ability of writing two papers in a week

Are you comfortable writing two papers a week?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	33	20
No	132	80
Total	165	100

Source field data; From the Research

The table 4.8 indicates that 132 (80%) of the respondents were not comfortable with writing two papers in a week. Most of the students are workers and are finding it difficult to cope with studies as a result they are unable to prepare well for the two papers a week. Meanwhile 33 (20%) were comfortable with writing two papers a week since .



Source field data: From the Research.

From the chart 65(39.4%) of the respondents indicated that they prefer some examinations should be on research work to give them extra insight of the concepts through findings. Also they hardly have time to read the course entire books during exams period. This will also ease pressure that often leads to rote learning. 57(34.5%) stated that they prefer the normal examinations because busy schedules. 43 (26.1%) stated some examinations should be in group presentations, where group members would be made to present their topics in parts to ensure that everyone partakes in the group work. This will help students to learn working in team.

Table 4.9. Overall students' Satisfaction of the Programme

Students are generally satisfied with courses under study	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	40	24.2
Agree	67	40.6
Disagree	38	23.0
Strongly Disagree	20	12.1
Total	165	100

Source: Field Data From the Research

In reference to the table 4.9, 107 (64.8%) were satisfied with the programme on offer. On the other hand 58 (33.1%) were not satisfied indicating that they are expecting the institute to introduce more courses both at the undergraduate and post graduate level to provide students with varieties to choose from.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of the research indicated that, the study centres do not have serene learning environment during tutorials as well as during examination due to loud noise from sound systems on Sundays when church service is in progress and on Saturdays during funerals services from the Jackson Park and this is affecting the concentration of the learners. In addition the classrooms are inadequate in terms of numbers and are less spacious making teaching and learning quite uncomfortable. Besides, it came to light that there was inadequate and untimely dissemination of information at the study centre. This is as result of inadequate use of the Institute's website and Centre's notice board. This has compelled students to depend on friends from other centres for information leading to dependence on unreliable information. Also some students confirmed that they hardly learn at home due to busy work schedules and family responsibilities that are inevitable as a result this is affecting their performance. It also came to light that some students could not get additional information on the courses they are undertaking due to network problems in the areas of residence, distance from home to internet cafes and inability to acquire computers and other electronic devices that support large data due to financial burden making learning quite difficulty as students could not get further explanations on concepts they are having challenges with. In additions, the study brought to light that most students took loans to pay for their admission fees as a result payment of subsequent fees was quite difficult amidst other equally important pressing issues such as family responsibilities, transport to and from the study centre, printing and photocopying of relevant documents on the courses under study. However, most of the students were generally satisfied with the course on offer except the CEMBA/PA students who stated studying an administration course without any business law components is highly undesirable. They however, wish business law course(s) will be introduced to equip the students with requisite knowledge on the legal implications of their actions and inactions as managers or prospective managers.

Conclusion

The results of the findings showed that, students on the distance education programmes are highly faced with challenges that are having a down turn on their performance. Notable among them is the combining of work schedule, family responsibilities and learning at the same time. Besides the noisy nature of the learning environment during funerals and church service are incidents to be recalled in a hurry. Also students were facing financial constraints due to servicing of loans over a period at the same time paying subsequent fees

amidst travelling to and from the centre as well as taking care of family needs is highly overwhelming. In addition busy work schedules are also affecting students' ability to learn hence poor performance. This and many others were making studies quite tough for learners.

Recommendations

Course content- the course must contain relevant law courses to provide students on the CEMBA/PA programme without any business background at the first degree level to enable them obtain a law perspective on their managerial actions when they find themselves in such positions. This will enable them to avoid actions and inactions that will implicate them legally.

The Administrators must ensure to provide all the necessary resources and support needed to run distance education programme effectively. This should be done by assigning every staff with the necessary resources to enhance the effectiveness of distance education. Since distance learning warrants vivid research the management should liaise with IT companies to provide students with computers or tablets at affordable prices payable within considerable period to enable students search for further information on the concepts they do not understand to enhance teaching and learning. There should be training and mentorship programme at regular intervals for students on modern leadership perspective and entrepreneurial skills. This will help alleviate fear and/or anxiety and boost student confidence. Confidence boosting will attract more students unto the programme. Finally, organisations must provide adequate support for their workers who are on the distance learning programme by adjusting their work schedule to enhance their learning.

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