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Students' perceptions about a distance learning programme: A case of the open, distance and E-learning programme at Kyambogo University, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The perception of students regarding a distance education programme has implications for the quality of training because it influences their motivation and commitment to learning, helps to inform course design practices and to develop faculty trainer development programs. This paper explores students' perceptions about an Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) programme at Kyambogo University-Uganda. A total of one hundred and fifty students were purposively and randomly selected to participate in the study. Data was collected using a researcher constructed questionnaire basing on the assumptions of Holmberg's theory of interaction and communication. Results established that the most crucial items necessary for quality distance learning education were positively perceived. However, four key items were negatively perceived, namely; timely feedback on assignments and examinations, course assessments, methods of presentation and delivery of content and lack of enough peer support. The study concluded that ODeL administrators should put emphasis on the negatively perceived items to motivate learners and improve the quality of delivery. The study recommended that trainers ensure timely feedback for assignments and examinations, the training staff be facilitated to attend regular refresher pedagogical courses, administrators to nurture practices of peer support among the students and the trainers.

Keywords— Students, Perception, Distance education

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Distance learning education: A brief overview

The earliest form of distance education in Scandinavia was found in folk high schools started in Denmark in 1844 to cater for informal education for adults. It was formulated by N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), with particular emphasis on the pedagogy of active participation and experimentation of learners during their studies. In 1898, an institute named Hermods was created in Malmo Sweden with similar ideas to those of N.F.S Grundtvig, where teaching materials and feedback were mailed back and forth between teachers to students (Milrad & Flensburg, 2007).

The use of computers and the internet has become an essential part of many activities today. In education, computers and the internet have offered new ways for people to interact, create dialogues, share information and generate new means for learning, including distance education (Wang, 2014).

According to Servage (2005), the terms distance education, e-learning, web-based training, and online learning are often used interchangeably. Servage further explains in his research that one of the main challenges encountered with e-learning and distance learning is deciding on an appropriate nomenclature that clearly defines the concept. The concept of distance learning has been defined by several scholars but as Phipps & Merisotis (1999) argue, the definition of distance learning keeps changing as technology evolves.

In 1997, a workgroup of adult educators developed the following definition of distance learning for the California Distance Learning Project (CDLP): "Distance Learning is an instructional delivery system that connects learners with educational resources. It provides educational access to learners not enrolled in educational institutions and can augment the learning opportunities of current students. The implementation of distance learning is a process that uses available resources and will evolve to incorporate emerging technologies."

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) defined distance learning as "the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance". Distance

education takes place when a teacher and students are physically separated, and technology (i.e., voice, video, data, or print) are used to bridge the instructional gap (USDLA Glossary, p. 192)

UNESCO (2002) notes that “the terms open learning and distance education represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners”. Distance education as a form of education is characterized by:

- Quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education)
- Influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from the private study and teaches yourself programmes)
- Use of technical media print, audio, video or computer to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course
- Provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)
- The quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes (Keegan, 1990).

Many institutions around the world now offer online or a combination of online and offline courses for learners of every age from elementary school students to adults (Wang, 2014). In the U.S. between 2002 and 2008, colleges and universities, both public and private, reported a 260% increase in the number of students enrolling in online courses instead of enrolling in traditional face-to-face courses because of a shift in strategy by higher education institutions to meet the increased student demand by increasing online course offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the monograph, “Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Learning” (2002), made the argument: “Accreditation examines and makes a judgment about how the fundamental features of an institution’s operation that are important to quality are affected by distance learning challenges” (p. 1). The monograph emphasized the use of seven accreditation processes in ensuring quality within distance and online courses. These are:

1. Institutional mission: Does offering distance learning make sense in this institution?
2. Institutional organizational structure: Is the institution suitably structured to offer quality distance learning?
3. Institutional resources: Does the institution sustain adequate financing to offer quality distance learning?
4. Curriculum and instruction: Does the institution have appropriate curricula and design of instruction to offer quality distance learning?
5. Faculty support: Are faculty competent and engaged in offering distance learning courses, and do they have adequate resources, facilities, and equipment?
6. Student support: Do students have needed counselling, advising, equipment, facilities, and instructional materials to pursue distance learning?
7. Student learning outcomes: Does the institution routinely evaluate the quality of distance learning based on evidence of student achievement? (2002, p. 7)

In Africa, before the emergence of distance learning providers, many African students acquired various qualifications through distance learning providers in Europe and North America. One of the oldest distance education universities that emerged in the African continent is the University of South Africa (UNISA), which has been offering correspondence courses since 1946. UNISA’s success has, as a result, spurred the establishment of other distance learning providers in the African continent. Examples of these are the open universities in Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, which started out as providers of residential programmes and have now diversified into providing distance learning as well (Juma, 2003). The most recent ambitious distance education initiative on the continent to date is the African Virtual University (AVU) Project. It was the first satellite-based attempt to harness the power of information technologies to deliver university education in the disciplines of science and engineering, non-credit/continuing education programmes, and remedial instruction to students in Sub-Saharan Africa. The project represented the essential instruments for sharing resources at affordable prices to large numbers of people. The AVU project delivered instructional programmes, strengthened the capacity in African partner institutions, implemented a network infrastructure, and implemented a digital library programme (Darkwa and Mazibuko 2000).

1.2 ODeL Centre at Kyambogo University

Kyambogo University (KyU) is the second largest public university in Uganda. The ODeL Centre in KyU was inaugurated in 2007. It is a centre in KyU that manages and administers open distance and e-learning. Courses offered by ODeL are flexible, accessible and cost-effective. The Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) centre is a centre mandated to manage and administer the bachelor of education science degree program through a blended distance mode, which currently includes the use of print materials and delivery of materials through online media.

Unlike the traditional classroom-based courses, the ODeL mode of learning is an alternative to those who prefer to stay in their homes or workplaces while studying. It gives the opportunity to study away from the classroom without interrupting their day to day activities. Delivery is enhanced by computers (online), audio conferencing, two-way video, or other electronic means. The delivery mode encompasses e-technologies to reach learners at a distance and aims at encouraging learner interaction and certification of learning. The importance of the ODeL programme in terms of skills development among the students cannot be underestimated, yet there has been a lack of theoretical and empirical research conducted regarding students’ perceptions of the programme. Understanding students’ perceptions about the ODeL distance education programme has implications for the quality of

training because it influences their motivation and commitment to learning, helps to inform course design practices and to develop faculty trainer development programs. The purpose of the paper was therefore to examine the students' perceptions about the ODeL distance education programme at Kyambogo University. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What do you think about the organization of the ODeL programme at Kyambogo University?
- Do the instructional methods of the ODeL programme make it easy for students to understand the content?
- Are you satisfied with the assessment and evaluation of the ODeL programmes?
- How easily do students adopt and use online distance learning technologies?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was based on Holmberg's theory of interaction and communication. Holmberg (1983) coined the theory of interaction and communication. The theory implies that

“the character of good distance education resembles that of a guided conversation aiming at learning and that the presence of the typical traits of such a conversation facilitates learning. The distance-study course and the non-contiguous communication typical of distance education are seen as the instruments of a conversation-like interaction between the student on the one hand and the tutor counsellor of the supporting organization administering the study on the other. There is constant interaction ('conversation') between the supporting organization (authors, tutors, counsellors), simulated through the students' interaction with the pre-produced courses and read through the written and/or telephone interaction with their tutors and counsellors” (Holmberg, 1983).

Holmberg's theory of interaction and communication further defines seven background assumptions for distance education:

- The core of teaching is the interaction between student and teacher
- Emotional involvement in the subject matter and a personal relationship between student and teacher contribute to learning the pleasure
- Learning pleasure encourages student motivation
- Student participation in decision making concerning their study supports student motivation
- Strong student motivation aids learning
- Learning pleasure is supported by a friendly personal tone and easy access to the subject matter
- The effectiveness of teaching is demonstrated by students' learning of what has been taught.

(As cited in Simonson et al., 2011, p. 48). These seven background assumptions for distance education are closely related to the research questions that this paper addressed.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been conducted about student perceptions of distance learning programmes.

Simpson (2012) researched about student perceptions of quality and satisfaction in online education. Out of a total of 157 responses, the results of the study confirmed with statistical significance that students who were more comfortable with distance learning reported higher satisfaction with their online course. Further, the results of the study also indicated that online courses that have undergone a formal peer review may lead to higher student satisfaction in the course.

Tamara (2014) examined online degree students' perceptions of online student support services using grounded theory and rasch analysis to determine the most important online student support services from students' perspectives, students' perceptions of quality of services offered and, correlations between perceptions of importance and satisfaction. Data were collected through semi-structured phone interviews as well as through an online survey. A total of 22 fully online degree students were interviewed and 206 fully online degree students completed and returned the online survey. Findings indicated that online services could be improved by integrating more options for live interaction with online support services staff. Furthermore, the results revealed that online degree student satisfaction is highly dependent on receiving timely responses from online services staff.

Lowenthal et al. (2015) analyzed student perceptions of online learning course evaluations. The analysis of seven years of student evaluations at a metropolitan research university was to better discern students' experiences online as well as to address commonly held assumptions about online learning (e.g., that teaching evaluations are lower for online courses). The results indicated that students in the sample actually do rate online courses lower than face-to-face courses.

Mathurin, M. E (2013) explored the students' perceptions of online distance learning and its impact on the participants' learning experiences at the University of Regina. The study adopted the social constructivist grounded theory principles developed by Kathy Charmaz. Twelve participants from international studies, economics, education, business administration, and human resource development graduate and undergraduate degree programs were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that students' concerns were more related to the pedagogical practices used in the online environment.

Artino (2011) explored students' perspectives about the quality of online courses using the quality matters standards for online course design. The participants were undergraduate students at a Midwestern Urban University- Ohio. There were 135 participants with 128 valid response yielding to the questionnaires distributed. The findings revealed that there is a significant difference in the perceptions of the quality pertaining to online courses between students who have had an online course with those students who have not had an online course.

Simpson (2012) examined student perceptions of quality and satisfaction in regionally accredited online courses. A total of 157 responses were obtained from the student satisfaction questionnaire. The results confirmed with statistical significance that students

who were more comfortable with distance learning reported higher satisfaction with their online course. Furthermore, the study also indicated that online courses that have undergone a formal peer review may lead to higher student satisfaction in the course.

4. METHODOLOGY

According to Crotty (1998), a research methodology includes the strategy, plan of action and process for choosing particular methods that lead to the desired outcomes. A methodology validates the truthfulness of the research. It is a theoretical predisposition towards which the research is weighted. The research design is a theoretical structure within which research is conducted (Roberts & Taylor, 2002). The study adopted across sectional survey design because it provides a description of trends and attitudes or opinions of a population allows generalization from a sample to a population so that inferences can be made about some characteristics, attitude or behaviour of that population (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Further, as highlighted by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) a research design involves gathering primary data from part of a population and then determining the incidence, distribution and inter-relations of the variables within the population. These key attributes were suitable for this study and provided an understanding of the context of students’ perceptions about the ODeL distance learning programme at Kyambogo University-Uganda.

4.1 Respondents of the study

A total of one hundred and fifty students were purposively and randomly selected to participate in the study. The only requirement applied was that one should be a fully registered student and completed at least a year on the ODeL programme at Kyambogo University. The requirement ensured that the respondent was conversant with all the teaching and learning activities of the programme.

4.2 Data collection

A researcher made questionnaire was the instrument used to gather data for the study. The questionnaire was constructed basing on the seven background assumptions of Holmberg’s theory of interaction and communication for distance education. After constructing the instrument, the researchers distributed draft copies to members of a masters’ class of vocational pedagogy at Kyambogo University in order to determine validity. The questionnaire was also pilot tested at another institution that offers distance education to test for reliability. The instrument attained a reliability index of 0.84, a requirement enough to confirm that it is reliable. After getting administrative clearance, the researchers went to the ODeL department at Kyambogo University and obtained a list of names for the students together with their e-mail addresses and telephone contacts. One hundred and fifty (150) students were randomly selected and contacted on phone to get their consent. Questionnaire documents were then sent to their e-mail addresses for them to fill in and e-mail back their responses. Participation in the study was purely voluntary and the respondents were free to withdraw from the study at any point without reprimand. One hundred and forty 140 (93%) questionnaires were properly filled and returned. The entire data collection exercise took two weeks.

4.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed by the use of descriptive statistics due to the nature of the design. After gathering the data using the questionnaires, the researchers then coded and analysed it using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The researchers used descriptive statistics in form of means and standard deviations and grand means for interpretation of the data in relation to the research questions.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 1: Demographic Information

Variable	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	68
	Female	32
Year of study	Year 1	42
	Year 2	31
	Year 3	27
Age of Respondents	18-35	85
	36-45	14
	46-55	01
	56 and Above	-

Table 1 shows that out of one hundred and forty students who participated in the study, 68% were males while 32% were females. This indicates that the number of male participants in the study was higher than that of their female counterparts. The majority of the participants were in year one (42%), whereas year two had (32%) participants and year three had the least number of participants (27%). 85% of the students were between the age range of 18 -35 (early adulthood), 14% were in middle adulthood 36-45 years while only 1% were in late adulthood 46-55 years. None was indicated in the age brackets of 56 years and above.

5.2 Students’ responses to questionnaire statements about their perception

Table 2 below reveals the students’ responses to the statements about their perception of the ODeL distance education programme at Kyambogo University. As seen in the table, the values of the standard deviation for all items are less than the mean value, indicating the appropriateness of using the mean values for the analysis.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics table for the student perceptions of the ODeL programme (N=140)

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
ODeL programme offers enough time for learning	3.78	1.14
The course materials and online resources are adequate for learning	3.65	1.13
The tasks and assignments given are easily understood and facilitate learning	3.64	1.17
Feedback on assignments and examinations is timely	2.94	1.35
ODeL programme course assessments are done well	2.91	1.25
Course instructors are accessible for interactions	3.65	1.09
ODeL programme course instructors are friendly	3.57	1.17
Methods of presentation and delivery of content are appropriate for learning	2.82	1.35
We are comfortable with online distance learning technologies	3.73	1.21
Other services necessary for distance learning such as library services, technical support and bookstore services are available	3.68	1.12
Programme organization is good	3.69	1.13
ODeL programme is cost effective	3.59	1.17
I would recommend the programme to others	3.81	1.11
There is enough peer support on the ODeL programme	2.85	1.34
Grand Mean	3.45	1.20

As shown in table 2, from the given items, 10 were positively perceived, whereas the remaining 04 were negatively perceived. The grand mean for the student perception of the ODeL programme is 3.45. Even though the grand mean shows positive students' perception, the negatively perceived items are also vital for distance learning education. The negatively perceived items by the students were, 'feedback on assignments and examinations is timely (2.94)', 'ODeL programme course assessments are done well (2.91)', 'methods of presentation and delivery of content are appropriate for learning (2.82)', and 'there is enough peer support on the ODeL programme (2.85)'.

6. DISCUSSION

The study found out that the feedback on assignments and examinations was negatively perceived implying that feedback is not delivered on time. This was contrary to Tamara (2014) analysis of online degree students' perceptions of support services using grounded theory and rasch analysis that revealed that online degree student satisfaction is highly dependent on receiving timely responses from online services staff. At the University of Reading (2018), the same issue of feedback is consistently mentioned as one of the areas that require improvement during their annual national student surveys. The importance of feedback is underscored at the university. It notes that 'feedback is an essential part of effective learning. It helps students understand the subject being studied and gives them clear guidance on how to improve their learning. Feedback can improve a student's confidence, self-awareness and enthusiasm for learning'.

The study revealed that most students negatively perceived the methods of presentation and delivery of content. This was similar to Mathurin (2013) research findings of the students' perceptions of online distance learning and its impact on the participants' learning experiences at the University of Regina where it was found out that the students' concerns were more related to the pedagogical practices used in the online environment.

Another major finding revealed that most respondents agreed that they would recommend the ODeL programme to others. This was in contradiction to Lowenthal et al. (2015) research study who analyzed student perceptions of online learning course evaluations and indicated that students in the sample actually do rate online courses lower than face-to-face courses.

Another major finding revealed that most students had a negative perception about peer support on the ODeL programme. This was contrary to Wang & Eccles (2013) who are of the view that support from teachers and peers can have a profound influence on students' success, well-being, and overall adjustment in school. Interactions with teachers and peers play a central role in supporting young peoples' academic motivation, classroom engagement, and sense of school belonging (Wentzel, 2012). Additionally, the National Middle School Association [NMSA], argues that teachers and peers may support students' academic motivation, classroom engagement, and school belonging by promoting a learning environment that is responsive to their unique needs (NMSA, 2010). Peer support is therefore vital for students who face similar challenges because it brings them together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experience (Riessman, 1989).

Another major finding revealed that most students negatively perceived the way course assessments are done. This was contrary to Angelo (1994) suggestion that the assessment provides trainers and students with information and perceptions needed to improve teaching effectiveness and learning quality. The emphasis should be more on finding out *what* and *how much* (or how little) students have learned between points A and Z, that is, to establish accountability and improve efficiency (Angelo, 1994). Similar views are shared by the South African Qualifications Authority's (SAQA) (2001) policy position on assessment which posits that assessment in education and training should involve gathering evidence of learners' work so that judgements can be made about their achievements or non-achievements. Thus university students should ideally be more involved in their assessment on the grounds that they are the relevant stakeholders.

7. CONCLUSION

The study established that most items crucial for quality distance learning education were positively perceived. However, the negatively perceived items are also vital for quality distance learning education. The negatively perceived items were; feedback on

assignments and examinations is timely, ODeL programme course assessments are done well, methods of presentation and delivery of content are appropriate for learning, and there is enough peer support on the ODeL programme. It is therefore important that ODeL administrators put emphasis on those items which were negatively perceived to motivate learners and improve the quality of delivery.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The study recommends that the trainers ensure that the students receive feedback on their assignments and examinations on time.
- The study recommends that the training staff on the ODeL programme are facilitated to attend regular refresher pedagogical training on the delivery of open and distance learning techniques to improve their competencies.
- The programme administrators should ensure that they encourage practices of peer support among the students and trainers.
- The study further recommends that the assessment on the ODeL programme should be a two-way effort between the trainers and students in order to produce the best performance, and lead to a common understanding on proper criteria and standards in teaching and learning.
- The study recommends that the ODeL administrators should mobilize resources from various stakeholders to cater to the constant changes in information and communications technology so as not to compromise on the quality of delivery of the ODeL programme.

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