Effects of Student Support Services on Distance Learners in Selected Centres of Jackson College of Education

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Abstract: *Isolation, role conflict and stress have been worldwide debated as the numerous challenges facing distance learners. Higher education administrators have proposed student support services as a remedy for such challenges. This study investigates student support services at Jackson College of Education and their impact on students' success in the face of the numerous challenges of distance education. The research was a descriptive study that used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Two sets of questionnaires were used to collect data from 61 respondents selected with stratified and purposive sampling techniques from different centres. The study revealed that improved administrative support services, effective communication, financial support and improved learning and teaching as the four major effects of student support services on the distance learners. The study also revealed that student support services improve learning and enhance the flexibility in distance education. Out of three major support services identified JEC has a grip on pre-enrolment support services.*

Keywords: Students Support Services, Jackson College of Education, Distance Education, Distance Learners

1. Introduction

Distance learning enrolment ratios for higher education have increased due to ubiquity of technology [1] [2], increasing diversification and globalization [3] through advanced technology [4]. A key component in the success of distance education programs is the provision of student support services [5] that are appropriate to the unique needs of distance learners [6] and employs an affordable and relevant technology. Technology should always be viewed as a means of enhancing personal service [7] and improving the quality of the distance learning package. Technology should also be seen a means to facilitating effective two-way communication. Student support services are all kinds of services other than the coursework rendered by the institutions to distance students/ learners to facilitate learners' success on a program. It is a mechanism to support the learner to learn effectively.

The Jackson College of Education is the teacher education division of the Jackson Educational Complex (JEC) which runs a three-year Diploma in Basic Education by distance learning with no permanent campuses of its own. Students travel from both far and near to approximate institutions for face-to-face lectures and examination. However, the most challenging moments are the face-to-face lectures and examination where distance students have to sift active learning from multiple responsibility and role laden circumstances. [8] remarked that across distance education as a whole, 'the rationale for student support in Distance Learning has been weakly conceived over the last twenty years, and, not surprisingly, in many Distance Learning systems, weakly realized, and subject to wild fluctuations in terms of financial support'. The trickling effect from the

aforementioned is augmented by role conflict, stress and the usual isolation canker associated with distance learning. This is to say that most of the students of Jackson College of Education are likely to be loaded with multiple activities, roles and ventures at the same time. Hence, the distance learner of Jackson College of Education will need something more than the weekends face-to-face to progress.

Even though there have been quite a number of research works on distance learning and student support services, such research works, most often than not, focused on distance learning institutions with already existing campuses for regular university education. The issue of isolation is therefore just a tip of the iceberg to the woes of the distance learner with little support services. The main purpose of the research was therefore to investigate the effects of student support services on distance learners in selected centres of the Jackson College of Education.

2. Theoretical underpinning

[9] investigated the association between student support services and its component with academic achievement in distance education. The study was conducted on the Tehran province Payame Noor University students in 2008/2009 academic years. The study used the Cochran's sampling formula and arrived at 1098 participants selected from print-based population through cluster sampling and 172 participants selected from web-based population through random sampling according the share of tow population. Correlation analyses was then run on the data which was collected through paper questionnaire and web based electronic questionnaire respectively. The result gathered "via Pearson correlation showed that: relations between

students support services and its components with academic achievement were statistically significant" [9] and that student support services affects academic achievements.

[10] assessed the impact of student support services on student retention, persistence and achievement. In the study, special attention was given to students with varied and diverse background. The study revealed thirteen action propositions. Ten out of the thirteen suggested ways of assimilating diverse students into existing institutional cultures whilst the remaining propositions concluded that higher education providers should amend policies and practices to conform to the cultural capital brought by their diverse students. The study supported that the kind of student support services offered have significant impact on the learners taking into consideration the background on the learners.

3. Methodology

Exploratory and Descriptive Research Designs were employed for this study. These methods were very appropriate for this particular study on the Jackson College of Education since they are suitable for researching a problem that is new [11] or that has very little research on the main subject. The study employed the Stratified Random and Purposive Sampling Methods. Students from the selected centres were grouped into stratum according to their year of study (level 100 to 300). The simple random sample was used to draw the sample. With the stratified simple random sampling, first the population was divided into strata and then individuals were randomly sampled from each stratum of the population [12].

The composition of the Jackson College of Education centres were defined in terms of students and staff (supervisors, coordinators and the head office staff) assigned to those centres. Random sampling without paying attention to these unique features could have rendered the study skewed towards one direction. This called for restricted but intelligently targeted collection of data [13] [18]by the purposive sampling approach.

Table 1: Population and sampling of students and staff (Lecturers)

Centre	Population			
	Year 1 (5%)	Year 2 (5%)	Year 3 (5%)	Total
Somanya	93 (5)	107 (5)	104 (5)	**15**
Kumasi	76 (5)	89 (5)	74 (4)	**13**
Tamale	136 (7)	122 (6)	150 (8)	**21**
Respondents				
Students	16	16	17	**49**
Staff				**12**
Sample Size				**61**

Table 1 shows the stratified sampling of students at the selected centres and the purposive sampling of the staff. In all, 49 students and 12 staff making a total of 61 formed the sample size. The rule of thumb approached which in this case was fixed at 5% of each of the population of each of the

years (levels) at a particular centre was applied. Two set of questionnaires were used for the study. One set was used for the staff whereas the other was used for the students. The items included both open-ended and close-ended questions woven concurrently.

4. Results and Discussions

Provision of appropriate student support services should include, but not limited to, accessible online application, useful fresher's orientation, timely provision of academic calendar and scheduled face-to-face facilitation meetings for distance learners in higher education institutions. These realizations enable smooth progression of learners on the distance education ladder and present relatively higher convenience and flexibility to learners as supported by [14]. The findings of the study confirmed that the students also benefit from academic counselling (69%) and career guidance (55%). The provision of academic counselling and career guidance begin right from the period of orientation through the face-to-face meetings to graduation; centre supervisors and head office staff assigned to centres ensure this provision.

The study revealed that student support services promote effective communication at Jackson College of Education. This is achieved through accessible student portal (confirmed at $\chi2$ (4) = 469.390, p = 0.000 by 92% of students). Eighty-eight percent (88%) of students said the student portal is not only accessible but also beneficial. Benefits of the student portal to students include semester online registration, fee status confirmation, appraisal of supervisors and course tutors, viewing and printing of end-of-semester exams results, online application to patronize products and services including re-sit examination registrations. This confirms the ideas of [8] that distance education should rather be looked at as industrialized teaching which is based on an objectivized, rationalized, technologically-based interaction. The current trend in technological advancement [4] and learning by distance [5] favors a more flexible learning in which advanced computers and internet connections are engaged in the provision of student services. With the aforementioned provisions, effective two-way communication is aided through simple tools such as text messaging, direct voice calls, memos and letters to and from centres. In terms of effective communication and centre supervision, the results of this study are not different from that of [15] [16] that the student portal, website, study centres, coordination, supervision, memos and correspondence, direct voice calls, bulk text messaging, television and radio publicity, students' representative council are interventions in distance education to eradicate the issue of isolation whilst encouraging effective communication and learning [19].

Student support services provides financial relief to students. This is realized through access to scholarship and student loan facilities. Staff members (92%) and students (58%) indicated scholarship opportunities are available at JEC. The institution itself provides scholarship to some students whiles the opportunity is also offered for students to apply to scholarships granted by other agencies and institution.

Majority of students (61%) confirmed that they have benefited from the student loan financial services available at JEC. The institution is enrolled on the Student Loan Trust Fund (SLTF) of the Ghana government by courtesy of institutional and programme (Diploma in Basic Education) accreditation by the National Accreditation Board (NAB). The student loan trust fund and scholarships aided by JEC provide financial support to the distance learners in the institution.

Generally, learning and teaching in distance education are improved by the availability of effective student support services ($\chi2$ (4) = 227.282, p = 0.000). Staff members (58%) indicated that without the needed student support services students will either be frustrated and discouraged or will be disorganized and irresponsible. This accession proves the benefits of the academic counselling and career guidance offered to students by the institution. This, however, does not suggest the one-on-one access to academic advisors through chat rooms and emails as argued by Wagner (2001) cited in [17].

4.1 Implication to Research and Practice

Higher education providers should keep up with the organization of face-to-face meetings for distance learners at various study/regional centres. However, the central administrations should empower supervisors to play a major part in the provision of student support services. In this regard centres should be encouraged to, based on the prevailing institutional climate at the centre, provide effective and affordable student support service packages to students. The central administration or head office, through the centre supervisor(s), should endeavor to check the type of interventions and packages presented to students in the name of student support services [20].

Higher education providers including distance learning institutions should consider the possibilities of including recorded lectures and course videos to already flourishing face-to-face meetings to enhance the flexibility in teaching and learning. Partial coverage (to include specifically seeded courses or specific topics of courses) or Complete coverage (to include all topics of all courses) could be considered [21]. Effective and accessible student portal as well as the use of text messaging and direct voice calls to interact with distance students is encouraged. Semester online registration, fee status confirmation, appraisal of supervisors and course tutors, viewing and printing of end-of-semester exams results, online application to patronize institutional products and services including re-sit examination registrations online using the student portal should be maintained and continuously reviewed and improved to meet the demands of globalization [22].

The Ghana government through the Student Loan Trust Fund (SLTF) should continue to include accredited private distance education institutions such as JEC on the SLTF since the loan facility provide lots of financial relief to the Ghanaian students in such institutions.

Ghana Education Service and the Ghana government should partner with donor agencies and non-governmental agencies in providing more scholarships for students in accredited distance learning institutions [23] [24].

4.2 Conclusion

The provision of academic calendar, study time table, teaching and learning unit-by-unit guide and the provision of course models at the beginning of the semester facilitate students' preparedness for effective course work in the semester. It also imbeds discipline and orderliness in the conduct of students towards successful learning and teaching. Face-to-face meetings organized regularly at regional and study centres and the use of regional supervisors enhance accessibility and flexibility in distance education. The fluency of face-to-face meetings promote learning and teaching in purely distance education institutions. Frustration of students and stress are normalized through proper counselling and career guidance enabled through such media. The student portal is an effective tool for communicating and diffusing innovative interventions from administration to students and all stakeholders. The provisions of semester online registration, fee status confirmation, appraisal of supervisors and course tutors, viewing and printing of end-of-semester exams results, online application to patronize institutional products and services including re-sit examination registrations reduces the melanoma of isolation in distance education. Text messaging and direct voice calls, though basic, are effective tools for communication in distance education institutions. In the case of direct voice calls, distance education students are provided with the opportunity to call back and seek for further enquires.

Student loan and scholarship facilities are needful in enhancing financial support for distance education students. In Ghana, the Student Loan Trust Fund is available to Ghanaian students in accredited tertiary institutions. A comprehensive student support plan should include conditions necessary to qualify distance education institutions to be enrolled onto established loan and scholarship facilities.

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