



Academic Challenges Facing Distance Education Learners: Empirical Evidence from Jackson College of Education Centre in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Publication Online: 28 March 2019	The study sought to find out the academic challenges facing distance education learners at Jackson College of Education in the Brong Ahafo Region. The study employed descriptive survey design employed and stratified sampling technique in selecting a total sample size of 335. Questionnaire was the main instrument used for this research. The study found out that academic challenges facing the respondents included residential facilities, classroom facilities, communication/feedback, learning and assessment, and course modules. There were statistically significant differences between male and female distance learners' challenges in three out of the five areas, namely, classroom facilities, learning and assignments, and feedback/ communication. The main coping strategies adopted by the learners included obtaining assistance from tutors before face-to-face sessions, having modules and other reading materials for use, formation of discussion groups and engagement of services of housemaids. Orientations and matriculations, payment of fees in installment/financial aids, examination questions based on modules and provision of teach guides, information provision via notice boards, car parks and canteen services were identified as the commonest learner support services available at the College. Based on the findings for the study, the following recommendations were made: Authorities of the Jackson College of Education should as a matter of urgency begin to arrange for residential accommodations for learners especially mothers and those from afar at a more considerate cost, spacious classrooms should be acquired and used for face-to-face sessions by the college authorities, distance learners should be counselled and encouraged to read their modules and other relevant materials before attending face-to-face tutorials, learners should also consider forming cluster discussion groups and college authorities should prioritize issues of learner support services. For policy, it was recommended that management of Jackson College of Education must begin to dream about building their own hostel facilities for their learners to reduce the residential challenges that they normally face and the National Accreditation Board and University of Education, Winneba (the affiliation institution of Jackson College of Education) should make learner support services a core of the requirements for accreditation and affiliation, respectively.
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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Distance education in the country continues to receive a lot of patronage due to inadequate numbers of lecturers, large numbers of qualified applicants, insufficient residential facilities and lack of infrastructure and logistics. Government is therefore using this mode to promote continuing education. According to Badu-Nyarko (2010), distance education is growing rapidly in African universities

and colleges, and governments are actively exploiting this new mode of transmitting knowledge. In an attempt to promote adult continuing education in the country, distance education is one form of modes of instruction and learning. Previously known as correspondence education, distance education is an avenue through which a number of workers and professionals upgraded themselves. The practice of open and distance education has brought in its wake great

challenges to the fields of education, psychology, educational psychology and social psychology. These challenges are manifested in the notion that distance education is a multi-faceted discipline. Parroton (2000) said that distance education is a discipline with numerous and quite distinct curriculum clientele.

The high cost of education affects many learners in higher education, to which distance education has been an alternative in order to provide some relief. Distance education has been a more cost-effective form of learning, and can sometimes save learners a significant amount of money compared to traditional education. Ghanaian universities have been involved in Distance Education for some time now. The Government of Ghana through the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 1991 and 1994 sponsored a number of surveys to assess the distance education needs of Ghana. Two important international organizations which were involved in these surveys are the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the United National Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Based on the recommendations from these surveys, Distance Education programmes are being pursued by four of the nine public universities in Ghana. These are the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), University of Cape Coast (UCC), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) and the University of Ghana (UG) (Ministry of Education, 2003). The University of Cape Coast, for instance, offers programmes like Diploma in Basic Education, Psychology and Foundations in Education, Commerce, Management Studies and bachelor's programmes and even post-graduate programmes. Similarly, KNUST runs both undergraduate and post-graduate programmes, while the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) offers diploma and bachelor's degrees in diverse fields of study (Kokutse, 2013).

Akrofi (2010), of the four Universities, only the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) was able to take off in 1996 as a result of assistance from the then British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) now Department for International Development (DFID). The University through the Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) developed a distance education programme to increase higher educational opportunities for Teachers. Thus, distance education is extending the boundaries of UEW by providing an alternative to Ghanaian teachers to have the chance to further their education while they remain on their job. The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) took off by admitting a first batch of 196 learners to pursue Post-Diploma Bachelor of Education degree in four subject areas, namely, English Education, Life Skills Education, Mathematics Education and Science Education. Similarly, the University of Cape Coast (UCC) and University of Ghana (UG) now run distance education programmes. The

University of Cape Coast's (UCC) College of Distance Education (CoDE) also offers, among others, a three-year Diploma and Post-Diploma programmes. These programmes aim at upgrading the academic and professional competence of basic school teachers. Thus, the two universities target the same population, which therefore brings about healthy competition in programme design and fees.

The mission of Ghana's distance education programmes is to make quality education at all levels more accessible and relevant to meet the learning needs of Ghanaians so as to enhance their performance and improve the quality of their lives (Ministry of Education, 2003). According to Mensah and Owusu-Mensah (2002), all the institutions running distance education programmes have the advantages of providing opportunity for a large number of qualified applicants, who do not get admission into regular programmes as a result of limited facilities, to have access to tertiary education; providing opportunity for working adults to combine work and study; and creating an avenue for income generation by the universities.

In view of the pressures on the two teacher-training public universities and 38 colleges of education, the Jackson College of Education was established in 2009 by the Jackson of Education Complex (JEC) as the first private teacher training college in the country to run a three-year Diploma in Basic Education by Distance Learning. This institution is affiliated to the University of Education, Winneba and accredited by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) (Baidoo, 2013). The College was established with 284 learners in three face-to-face study centres in November 2009. Learner enrolment at the beginning of the 2014/2015 academic year was 5,570 (Jackson College of Education, 2015). There are now 34 study centres spread across all the 10 regions of Ghana; indicating the successful take off of the institution and must be encouraged to help the country in its training of teachers. It also uses the same modules as the public colleges of education whose tutors also take up part-time teaching appointment at Jackson College of Education. The College aims to fill the void of teacher supply in the country by providing a diploma programme in basic education through distance learning. It also hopes to further expand into other areas such as pre-school and degree programmes to give learners skills, which provide hope for a brighter future. Currently, Jackson College of Education has its head office in Kumasi (JEC, 2014).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Asabre-Ameyaw (2008), about 20,000 teachers (both certificated and 'pupil') leave the classroom every year to upgrade themselves in tertiary institutions thereby creating vacancies whose filling will put financial strain on government's purse. This phenomenon also puts unbearable strains on the already over-burdened facilities in these

institutions. Therefore, the establishment of the first private college of education by the Jackson Education Complex called the Jackson College of Education came as a relief for teacher education in the country. Despite the laudable aims of the establishment of the College which include; to train especially the youth to acquire high quality academic standard of education and/or vocation as a good foundation to enable the learners achieve a brighter future through distance learning; equip learners to gain admission to tertiary institutions to further their education; and also to provide weekend training to enable trainees to be at workplaces, while pursuing further studies (Jackson Education Complex, 2014).

Just as their counterparts who are in the mainstream regular programmes, distance learners are faced with several academic challenges including delay in the production and distribution of course modules, inadequate classrooms and hostel facilities, and poor communication. As a part-time tutor with the college, my formal interactions particularly with female learners with kids revealed that they have challenge in securing residential facilities when they come for face-to-face tutorials during the weekends. However, learners’ academic achievements will be negatively affected if these challenges were not clearly identified through research and dealt with effectively through effective policy and decision making processes.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to find out the academic challenges facing distance education learners at Jackson College of Education in the Brong Ahafo Region.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the conduct of the study:

1. What are the academic challenges facing distance learners at Jackson College of Education?
2. In what ways are the academic challenges of female distance learners different from the male learners?
3. What coping strategies do distance learners adopt in addressing their academic challenges?
4. What are the institutional learner support services that exist at Jackson College of Education to help learners cope with academic challenges?

Hypothesis

Ho: There is no significant difference in the academic challenges of female and male distance learners.

Significance of the Study

Distance education is now gaining popularity in the country (Mensa, Ahiatrogah & Deku, 2008). However, due to its numerous challenges, it has not achieved its expected results. The increasing demand for further studies coupled

with the high cost of regular education has made distance learning a popular choice for many especially the working population. Therefore, the findings of the study could help the Jackson College of Education and by extension all universities and private colleges of education to improve on their distance education policies, practices and programmes. Specifically, the study would help the college to examine the major academic challenges associated with its programme and to devise strategies to address them to make it more effective to prospective trainees.

Moreover, it could also serve as a guide for prospective learners on the possible academic challenges they might encounter. It could also help worker-learners on how best to strategies and strike a fine balance between their academic activities and job. In addition, the study findings could inform policy makers and administrators of distance education in the formulation of policies concerning distance education for teachers and learners.

Investigating the challenges facing the distance learners could also enable the tutors at Jackson College of Education to improve upon their skills and styles of teaching to help mitigate them. The study recommendations could profess suggestions on how the challenges would be mitigated or solved for both the learners and tutors to engage in an effective academic work. This could encourage the re-examination of the College’s operations towards maintaining and attracting more learners to be able to remain competitive. Finally, the study would serve as a basis for future research and add to the existing literature on distance education in the country and beyond.

Delimitation of the Study

This study was delimited to only learners and tutors of the Jackson College of Education in the Brong Ahafo Region. Also, only second and third year learners were included because of their familiarities and experiences in the college over the years compared to first year learners.

Limitations of the Study

It was found that some of the selected learners and tutors did not complete the instrument for several reasons. These included apathy over responding to questionnaires without any meaningful impacts and also fear of victimization.

Literature Review

This section of the study will focus on reviewing relevant literature for the study. For the purpose of the study, literature will be reviewed in relation to the research questions that were formulated to guide the study.

Academic Challenges Facing Distance Education Learners

Knowles (1980) argued that distance learners’ behaviour is influenced by a combination of factors including their needs, characteristics and situation. Some of the factors include, institutional barriers, level of education prior to joining

distance education, financial, and support services. According to Moodley (2002), the negative attitudes to and stereotyping difference to distance learning include: an inflexible curriculum, inaccessible learning materials, socio-economic barriers, poverty and underdevelopment and factors which place the learner at risk. He further argues that effective learning is directly related to and dependent on the social and emotional well-being of the learner. It is important to recognize that particular conditions may arise within the social, economic and political environment in which the learner lives, and which impact negatively on the learner's social and emotional well-being, thus placing the learner at risk of learning breakdown. He further indicated that such factors either influence learners or their family or community directly.

Galusha (2012) opined that there are many barriers in teaching and learning process of distance education. He argues that the most common being the unawareness of the roles as teachers and learners. Further he asserts that studies show that the barriers of distance education fall into such categories as cost, motivators, feedback and teacher contact, learner support and services, alienation, lack of experience and training. In addition, course content on the other hand constitutes another barrier and should be modified in distance education. Therefore, to create effective and qualified distance education all barriers must be identified and eliminated. However, it is worth noting that these challenges usually overlap and merge together at some point.

According to Galusha, learners' age, type of work and marital status constitute an important aspect of situational barrier. Lack of adequate money to cover the cost of the programme constitutes yet another aspect of situational barrier and the financial barrier. The level of one's salary, access to loan and the desire to improve one's self for a better future may determine the urge to go for a loan to pursue further education.

Similarly, Lehman (1998) also in writing about barriers to distance education, categorizes the teacher related barriers as philosophical, logistical, administrative, technological including existing telecommunication systems, ergonomic concerns and lack of funds for new devices; and the learner related barriers as lack of interaction (i.e., feedback) with instructor and classmates, lack of support services, resistance to change and lack of training in technical issues. He argues that many learners, like the faculty, are used to and are comfortable with traditional classroom education; and that: distance education has failed to become integrated into the academic culture, not as a result of the commonly cited factors of cost and faculty resistance, but rather due to the insistence of distance educators on perpetuating a culture that is out of touch with the driving force of higher education.

However, according to researchers (e.g., Manu, 2005; Adra, 2000; Nanor, 2005; Badu-Nyarko, 2006 cited in Badu-Nyarko, 2010), Ghanaian learner learning at a distance is not completely isolated. This is because apart from the modules (learning materials) given to them, they occasionally interact with either peers or tutors during face-to-face tutorials organized fortnightly or on monthly basis. The transactional distance is shorted as they engage in their learning. There exists poor communication link between learners and the tutors and among learners. Many found the modules too technical requiring explanations. Once they are learning on their own they learnt them without any meaningful understanding of the text.

The major problems facing the learners were isolation in the learning process, difficulty in managing their time to study, while encouragement is lacking especially among those in the remote and rural areas. In fact, many of the learners needed personal help to remain in the programme. It was also found that the learners lack access to library facilities. Almost 60% of learners in Nanor's study in Accra hardly contact their tutors or colleagues throughout the semester. Thus, a low level of interaction was recorded in the study. Torto (2000) also found that 53.4 % of part-time learners in Accra learn in isolation, while Badu-Nyarko (2006) study revealed that 68% of distance education learners of University of Cape Coast studying on their own. Many learners therefore find it difficult to seek clarifications on lessons provided in the modules. This makes them have difficulties in understanding certain concepts and issues in the courses they are pursuing at a distance.

Adra (2000) found that 55% of learners surveyed in his study only used 2 hours a day in studying, while Nanor (2005) found that 47% used between 2 and 3 hours a day in studying. It was also found that 82% of the learners' workload at school affects their learning (Nanor, 2005), while in Adra's case 67% were affected. Also, 86% complained about inadequate library facilities while 61% found the delivery of study materials inadequate.

Findings from Badu-Nyarko (2006) from four regions on 240 University of Education, Winneba and University of Cape Coast Learners showed that they rely mostly on tutorials where (91%) find it adequate and most appropriate to learn. Counselling services were not adequate to (76%) of the learners with 78% not happy about the number of assignments and time of marking. On return of assignments 96% were not enthused about the delivery. Inadequate library facilities accounted for 82%. Three quarters of the learners in Adra's study were in the urban centres, have access to electricity, radio and television but not computers. They largely depend on private internet cafes. Hill (1996) revealed that in distance learning environment, one complaint often voiced by learners is that they feel isolated and unconnected.

In their studies, Keegan (1986) and Tinto (1975) believe that the lack of feedback on performance or contact with teachers also constitute a barrier to distance learners. Keegan (1986) further said that the link between the teacher and the learner constitutes a vital link in teaching-learning transaction and that the link, which is broken by distance, must be restored one way or the other. This particular barrier creates the problem of evaluation for the learner.

Coping Strategies in Addressing the Academic Challenges of Distance Learners

Attri (2012) discussed the problems faced by distant education learners and suggested possible solutions. These problems and possible solutions were;

Nature of Study Materials

This problem is common with newer distance learners. Study materials must take into account the significant proportion of learners who enroll with little or no experience of distance study. Wood (1986) said learners are at risk of dropping out unless they develop study survival skills as rapidly as possible. The background of the learner is important in the preparation of the learning materials. It is difficult to prepare lessons according to the individual differences of the learners. Moreover, we are providing similar material to rural and urban learners having different needs, experiences and learning environment. However, he suggested that if distance learning institutions are serious about providing equity of educational opportunity to all, then careful consideration must be given to the special needs of learners undertaking distance education for the first time. Of particular importance is the design of study materials for distance learners. No doubt at particular level we have to attain similar learning experiences so content for all learners should be same but examples, activities and experiences should be included in learning material according to their needs, learning experiences and expectations.

Lack of Multi-Media Instruction

There is more stress on sending of printed materials. But there is a dearth of facilities of multi-media instruction. The variety in the learning materials also improves the quality of learning. The lessons written for the learners usually are written by the teachers belonging to the traditional system and therefore these materials normally lack in itself instructions methodology. According to Attri (2012), we should use multi-media technologies during PCPs, otherwise learners limited experiences will delimit to lecture method only. Moreover, multisensory instructions are very useful to provide concrete experiences to distance learners and for multisensory instruction we require multi-media approach.

Insecurities about Learning

More so than traditional learners, distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988). These insecurities are found in personal and school related

issues such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These pressures often result in higher dropout rates than among traditional learners (Sweet, 1986). Sweet, however, proposed proper planning and cooperation on the part of all those who are associated with distant learners.

Lack of Feedback or Contact with the Teacher

Since there is no daily or weekly face to face contact with teachers, learners may have trouble in self-evaluation. The separation of learner and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital link of communication between these two parties. The link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be reintegrated (Keegan, 1986). Citing Tinto (1975), Keegan hypothesized that learners who did not receive adequate reintegration measures such as electronic or telephone communication, would be less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life. Consequently, such learners would be more likely to drop out (Sheets, 1992). Attri (2012), however, believed that this problem can be tackled through technological methods such as e-mail, telecommunication and postal mail by integrating these into the delivery of the course to provide the missing interactivity.

Lack of Support and Services

Provision of learner services such as advisement, library services, admissions and financial aid is a critical aspect of any distance learning programme. The isolation that results from the distance learning process can complicate the learning process for adult learners. It was suggested that support and services such as providing tutors, academic planners and schedulers, and technical assistance for distance learners should not be neglected when planning distance programmes. Learners need tutors and academic planners to help them to complete courses on time and to act as a support system when stressed up.

Lack of Social Interaction

Learners of all kinds want to be part of a larger school community, and simply a member of a correspondence course. For many traditional learners, this is the part of their social lives. The “distance” aspect of distance learning takes away much of the social interactions that would be present in traditional learning environments. Geographical isolation has been identified as one of the major problems for distance learners. In addition to the practical problems of contacting academic and administrative staff, obtaining study materials and borrowing library books, distance learners suffer from the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other learners and are often denied the view that they belong to a scholarly community. This may lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities (Wood, 1996).

This problem must be moderated by institutions providing a sense of personal involvement between the learner and the institution. One way to solve this problem is through the use of tutors that communicate with learners electronically, by phone or personally at personal contract programme. Learners believe that having a good tutor is vitally important in helping them get the most out of a course and to achieve a credit (Meacham & Evans, 1989).

Lack of Learner Training

Many adult learners are not well versed in the uses of technology such as computers and the Internet. Using electronic medium in distance learning can inadvertently exclude learners who lack computing skills. These skills are required if computer technology is used. Learners will typically be offered volumes of electronic-based information. Using this information will be a problem for some non-technical learners. They must be taught how to manage, not only their study time, but the materials presented as well. Attri (2012), nevertheless, said that if learners are undertaking distance learning courses that require knowledge of computers, then the learners must be taught, at a minimum, the fundamentals of operating the system of choice of the distance-taught course. If distance learning is to be successful, technical problems must be made a non-issue.

Learner Support Services for Distance Learners

According to Molefi (cited in Sakyi, 2013), learner support services are “any systems or procedures that are purposefully created and effectively utilized by a distance education institution to support and or facilitate teaching and learning at a distance” (p. 1). Tong (1994) also regards support services as essential in helping learners overcome difficulties that affect the quality of their academic work. This gives learners the confidence that they are not being left on their own but the institution is interested in their progress. Donald (cited in Sakyi, 2013) sees learner support as more overreaching involving the ‘entire setting in which learning takes place, the disciplines that provide the knowledge learning support, the learners and the arrangements made for them, the teaching and learning process, and the assessment of learning, institution and programmes.

Jung and Hong (2014), while conventional universities may regard learner support as ancillary because they assume that the on-campus learners have regular face-to-face contact with their tutors and peers, when it comes to DE institutions, as Thorpe (2002, p. 106) points out, ‘all aspects of an institution’s provision should be supportive in the sense of fostering high quality learning’. A survey conducted with Asian distance learners by Jung and Fukuda (2011) support this view by revealing that learner support is the learners’ core concern in assessing quality in DE and that they expect clear and adequate study guidance;

appropriate DE study skills training; continuous media/technology support; needs-based social, administrative, financial, and psychological support; flexibility and fairness in learning provision and evaluation; and frequent feedback. One can probably argue that learner support and learning support could be used interchangeably. According to Sakyi (2013), learner support is generally viewed in two components comprising of academic support and non-academic support with an objective to help learners learn successfully. Learning support on the other hand is more learning specific. It refers to support systems intended to enhance and improve learning.

The principal objective of learning support is to produce distance learners who are able to progress through their programmes learning successfully, able to be independent learners who have good learning skills and strategies, and able to interact effectively with tutors, learning materials and other learners at any time. Tait (2003) identifies three roles that support services in DE play: first, support services encourage the cognitive (learning) development of learners; secondly, support enhances the self-esteem of learners therefore building their confidence; thirdly, support for learners is systematic in helping learners meet the required standard expected of them so that they do not fall behind or withdraw from school. In his study to appraise learner support services among 144 University of Cape Coast Distance learners and 20 tutors, Sakyi (2013) found that most learners (95.1%) did not know about the existence of guidance and counselling services at their centres. The few (4.9%) learners who had benefitted from guidance/counselling services indicated that it involved largely their academic and social lives. The study further revealed that distance learners were generally satisfied (Mean = 2.3615) with access to academic progress reports, provision of timetables and the assistance they received from staff. It was also revealed in the study that there was no library support for distance education (DE) learners at their study centres (all learners attested to this fact). Also, most learners (66%) therefore used other libraries to satisfy their library needs. They preferred libraries which were located not far from their homes. They, however, cited library collections, book loans, photocopying as well as opening and closing hours as important aspects of library support to their learning (Mean = 2.32972).

Mahan (2001) also argued that learner support services are to among others increase college retention and graduation rates for eligible learners; increase the transfer rates of eligible learners from two-year to four-year institutions; and foster an institutional climate supportive of success of low-income and first-generation college learners and individuals with disabilities.

In Namibia, Mowes (2005) evaluated learner support services provided at the northern campus of the University of Namibia from a learner perspective. Using a

combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, data were collected from second- and third-year B. Ed learners. She revealed that there was enough evidence to conclude that adult distance education learners indeed value the provision of learner support services.

According to her, learners in the study placed the greatest importance on learner support services related to getting started with their studies, for example orientation sessions about available learner support services and contact and communication with tutors and fellow learners by means of vacation schools, face-to-face tutorials on Saturdays at regional centres and support through study groups. One of the conclusions of the study was that the institutional policy and the role of management are crucial in the establishment of an effective learner support model to facilitate distance learning.

Mowes (2005) therefore recommended that the University's Centre for External Studies (CES) should conduct periodic and regular evaluation studies of its distance education learners to design, develop and provide learner support services that will be tailored to learners' specific needs and expectations. Also, the centre should pay attention to support services that help reduce barriers if it is to attain its mission of making quality higher education more accessible. University's Centre for External Studies should provide adequate training to tutors to prepare them for the special challenges presented by open and distance learning and also design and implement an appropriate information and communication technology (ICT) course to empower distance education learners adequately for the use of modern ICT.

Methodology

A descriptive survey design was employed in the conduct of this study. This was because the study aimed at describing the academic challenges facing distance learners at Jackson College of Education, and their coping strategies. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006), the descriptive survey is often directed towards determining the nature of a situation as it exists at the time of the study. Cresswell (2008) adds that the descriptive survey design is used to determine individual opinion about a policy issue or programme. The study population was made up of 935 distance learners from all five learning centres in the Brong Ahafo Region. These centres were; Sunyani with student population of 128, Atebubu with student population of 109, Berekum with student population of 334, Drobo with student population of 188 and Bechem with student population of 176. In selecting total sample size for the study, a decision was taken to check for the respective sample sizes that agreed with the various students' population using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for determining sample size. On the basis of that, it was discovered that a sample size of 46 was appropriate for a population of 128, a sample size of 39 was appropriate for a

population of 109, a sample size of 120 was appropriate for a population of 334, a sample size of 67 was appropriate for a population of 67 and a sample size of 63 was appropriate for a population of 176. These various sample sizes amounted to a total sample size of 335. Questionnaire was the main instrument used for this research. The questionnaire was divided into sections with each of the sections relating to the research questions that were formulated to guide study. The study adopted a four point likert-type scale. The response choice was; “Strongly agree (SA) =4, “Agree” (A) =3, “Disagree” (D) =2 and “Strongly Disagree” (SD) =1.

To establish the content validity of the instruments, few other professionals apart from the supervisors examined the data collection instruments and their suggestions were effected. For instance, initially, all the items on academic challenges were lapped up together. However, the supervisors advised that they should be separated under the four constructs, namely, course module, classroom facilities, learning and assignments, residential facilities, and feedbacks. With regard to the interview guide, some items were deleted and replaced by their suggested ones after the researcher also recognized the need to do so. In terms of reliability, the instruments were piloted among some selected learners from the Saint Louis College Centre of the Jackson College of Education in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Forty-five learners were involved in the pilot-testing. The data from the learners were captured in the SPSS, and the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test was performed. A coefficient of 0.849 was obtained; indicating that the questionnaire for learners had adequate internal consistencies since it exceeded the minimum cut-off value of .600 proposed by Cohen (cited in Leech, Barrett & Morgan, 2005). Before collecting the data, a copy of the proposal with the data collection instruments were submitted to the University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board for approval. After obtaining an approval, an introductory letter was requested from the Director of the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA), University of Cape Coast before embarking on the data collection exercise. This was to enable the researcher to secure permission from the Governing Board of Directors of Jackson Education Complex, owners of the Jackson College of Education, in order to carry on with the study. The researcher personally collected all data for the study. The data collection was done only on Saturdays and Sundays because there were the face-to-face tutorial days at the centres.

Therefore, three weekends were used to collect the main data. These were 7th-8th, 14th-15th and 21st-22nd of April, 2015 as the first, second and third weekends, respectively. The ample time used yielded a positive result as out of the 335 distance learners who were administered the questionnaires, as many as 330 of them completely filled

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and returned their copies. This constituted a 98.5% questionnaire retrieval rate. Data analysis was done with the use of Statistical Package for Service Solutions (SPSS version 23.0). After the data had been collected, they were edited and then coded. The coded values were input into the value view of the SPSS after which the actual data collected from the field in coded format were input into the data view of the SPSS. Mean of means, standard deviation and Independent samples t-test were used to analyze the results from the research questions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

This section deals with the discussion of the data from the field to address the research questions that were formulated to guide the study. The four point Likert scale questionnaire that was administered was analyzed using mean of means and standard deviations. From the analysis, a mean value of 3.50 - 4.0 showed that the

respondent strongly agreed to the statement, a mean value of 2.5 - 3.0 showed that the respondents agreed with the statement, a mean value of 1.5 - 2.0 showed that the respondents disagreed with the statement and a mean value of 1.4 - 1.0 showed that the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. A standard deviation below 1.0 showed that the responses from the respondents were homogeneous and heterogeneous when it was above 1.0.

Research Question One: What are the academic challenges facing distance learners at Jackson College of Education?

Research question one sought to find the academic challenges facing distance learners at Jackson College of Education. These academic challenges were categorized into three areas namely; challenges with respect to modules and classroom facilities, learning and assignment challenges and residential facilities and feedbacks. The results are presented in Table 1-3.

Table 1- Academic Challenges Facing Distance Learners (Modules and Classroom Facilities)

Challenges	M	SD
Course Modules		
I have difficulties in understanding the contents of the modules	2.36	0.647
Our course modules are not detailed enough	2.35	1.521
Our course modules are not self-explanatory	2.14	0.681
Course modules delay unnecessarily	1.66	1.618
Classroom Facilities		
The absence of well-equipped computer laboratory affects my academic performance	3.25	1.788
Non-availability of internet facilities at the study centre is affecting my ability to do independent research	3.15	1.358
Classrooms are not conducive for effective teaching and learning	2.56	1.633
Classrooms/lecture theatres are over-crowded	1.83	0.954
The use of projectors by tutors make understanding of lessons difficult	1.69	0.562
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.62	1.143

Source: Field Data, 2019.

Table 1 shows the academic challenges facing distance learners in terms modules and classroom facilities. The results indicated that majority of the learners agreed that they were confronted with academic challenges as far as modules and classroom facilities and their responses were heterogeneous (M=2.62; SD=1.143).

These findings resonate with the findings of Neilson (cited in Mensa et al., 2008) who observed that the full benefits of distance education programmes have not been realized as a

result of numerous problems. Distance learners struggle with a unique set of challenges that often lead to non-completion of courses. High attrition rates of learners enrolled in distance education courses are a concern feature of distance educators (DAPQA, 2011; Wickersham & Dooley, 2001). Badu-Nyarko (2010) mentioned that three quarters of the learners in the urban centres have access to electricity, radio and television, but not computers and those they rely on private internet cafes.

Table 2- Learning and Assignment Challenges Facing Distance Learners

Challenges	M	SD
High school fees disturb my academic performance	3.37	0.236
Lack of library facilities is affecting my academic work	3.07	0.672
The marking of our examinations is usually unfair	3.06	0.456
Study groups are not available for me to join	2.14	0.681
The absence of academic counsellors is affecting my studies	3.02	1.005
Our End-of-Semester Examinations are difficult to pass	2.94	0.310

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Time allocated to courses is not adequate	2.52	0.966
Quizzes are always difficult	2.39	0.459
My programme of study in secondary school level is unrelated to my current programme so I find things difficult	2.32	1.008
My tutors are too strict	1.93	0.453
I have a lot of re-sit papers to take	1.83	0.944
Tutors are not punctual to lectures	1.61	0.563
Most tutors are not qualified and suitable to teach me	1.53	0.988
I have chosen the wrong programme	1.49	1.142
My tutors are not friendly	1.40	0.673
Tutors are irregular to lectures	1.39	0.649
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.25	0.700

Source: Field Data, 2019.

Data from Table 2 display the responses of the distance learners on the learning and assignment challenges they are confronted with. The results revealed that challenges such as; High school fees (M=3.37; SD=0.236), lack of library facilities (M=3.07; SD=0.672), unfair in their examination scores (M=3.06; SD=0.456) unavailability of study groups (M=2.14; SD=0.681) and the absence of academic counsellors (M=3.02; SD=1.005). Other challenges the distance learners were confronted with included; difficulty in passing end of semester exams (M=2.94; SD=0.310), inadequate time allocated to courses (M=2.52; SD=0.966), difficulty in passing quizzes (M=2.39; SD=0.459) and mismatch between the programmes studied in the second cycle level and the tertiary education level (M=2.32; SD=1.008). The above challenges notwithstanding, majority (M = 1.93, SD = 0.453) indicated that their tutors were not strict. Following the responses of the distance learners on they also added that they were not faced with the challenges such as; having a lot of re-sit papers to take (M=1.83; SD=0.944), tutors not being punctual to lectures (M=1.61; SD=0.563) and unqualified tutors (M=1.53; SD=0.988). In the same direction, majority of the distance learners disagreed with challenges such as; chosen the wrong programme (M=1.49; SD=1.142), unfriendly nature of the tutors (M=1.40; SD=0.673) and tutors being irregular to lecturers (M=1.39; SD=0.649).

The overall mean and standard deviation values of the distance learners on the learning and assignment challenges rated (M=2.25; SD=0.700). This implies that majority of the distance learners are encountering learning and assignment challenges and their responses were homogeneous. In line with these findings, Gilbert and Moore (1998) found out that small group discussions in a class might have high social inter-activity at the same time that learners are actively engaged in comparing opinions about content and objectives of the key courses. According to Galusha, lack of adequate money to pay school fees is both a situational and financial barrier to many distance learners. Nanor (2005) revealed that many distance learners in Accra lacked access to library facilities. Torto (2000) also found that 53.4% of part-time learners in Accra learn in isolation, while Badu-Nyarko (2010) study revealed that 68% of distance education learners of University of Cape Coast study on their own. This, therefore, underpins the relevance of well-stocked library facilities for distance learners to enable them to read further for deeper understanding of concepts. Badu-Nyarko (2010) found in his study that counselling services were not adequate for University Education, Winneba distance education programme.

Table 3- Academic Challenges Facing Distance Learners (Residential Facilities and Feedbacks)

Challenges	M	SD
Residential Facilities		
I find it difficult to secure a lodging place in my study centre since I am not from there	2.95	0.884
Lodging for the weekend classes is expensive	2.93	0.782
My place of residence is far from the study centre	2.72	0.346
Feedbacks		
The late release of examination results is a problem	2.76	1.119
Poor communication by school authorities affects my academic performance	2.34	1.023
Imposition of rigid rules by school authority is negatively affecting my studies	2.34	0.675
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.67	0.804

Source: Field Data, 2019.

Table 3 shows the academic challenges facing distance learners in terms of residential facilities and feedbacks. The results designated that majority of the learners agreed that they were confronted with academic challenges as far as residential facilities and feedbacks were concerned and their responses were heterogeneous ($M=2.67$; $SD=0.804$).

These findings resonate with the findings Badu-Nyarko (2010) who mentioned that insufficient residential facilities, lack of infrastructure and logistics as some of the critically needed facilities that distance learning institutions should provide. The late release of results, poor communication between college authorities and learners were influential in this regard. Tinto (cited in Keegan, 1986) mentioned that distance learners who did not receive

adequate reintegration measures such as electronic or telephone communication, were less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life.

Research Question Two: In what ways are the academic challenges of female distance learners different from the male learners?

The study sought to determine if there were any significant differences in the academic challenges of distance learners based on gender. Therefore, the study compared their academic challenges using the independent samples *t*-test at a .05 significance level. Table 4 presents the details.

Table 4-Gender-Based Comparison in Academic Challenges of Distance Learners

Challenges	Gender	Mean	Std. Error	T	P
Modules	Males	8.42	0.226		
	Females	8.57	0.194	-0.510	.610
Classroom facilities	Males	11.98	0.208		
	Females	12.81	0.187	-2.907	.004
Learning and Assignments	Males	35.90	0.381		
	Females	34.17	0.501	2.802	.005
Residential facilities	Males	8.30	0.140		
	Females	8.84	0.266	-1.902	.058
Feedbacks	Males	7.83	0.167		
	Females	6.95	0.184	3.559	.000

Source: Field Data, 2019.

The results from Table 4 revealed that there was no significant difference in the mean ratings of both males and female respondents with respect to module difficulties encountered. This is because $t(=328)=-0.510$ and $p=.610$; implying no significant difference. However, descriptive statistics (mean values) showed that the female distance learners (Mean=8.57) were more concerned about challenges about modules compared to their male colleagues (Mean=8.42). Comparing their ratings on classroom facility challenges, the males assigned a mean value of 11.98, while the females assigned 12.81. This produced a significant result since the *t* and *p*- values obtained were -2.907 and .004, respectively. The results further indicate that the female respondents were more concerned about classroom facilities than the males. The finding is inconsistent with Leach’s (cited in Jung & Fukuta, 2011) results. He found that males rated issues concerning classroom environment as their main difficulties than female learners.

The comparison between the males and females perceptions about learning and assignments showed that males (Mean=35.90) considered the challenges to be more profound compared to their female counterparts (Mean=34.17). Furthermore, the test result produced a *t*

(328) = 2.802 and *p*-value of .005 indicating a significant difference.

Meanwhile, there was no significant difference between the challenges of male and female distance learners concerning residential facilities as the *p*-value obtained was greater .05. Although the females (Mean=8.84) expressed a higher concerns compared to the males (Mean=8.30), their mean ratings were almost the same. This challenge as shown in Table 13 emerged as the main challenge of the respondents. There was a statistically significant difference between the mean ratings of males (Mean=7.83) and females (Mean=6.95) with regard to feedback challenge. The *t*-test results further showed $t(328) = 3.559$ and $p=.000$. The implication is that the male respondents considered issues bordering on feedback as a bigger challenge than the female learners.

Research Question Three: What coping strategies do Distance Learners adopt in addressing their academic challenges?

The aim of this research question was to find out how distance learners were able to cope with the various challenges identified in research question one. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Coping Strategies of Distance Learners

Coping strategies	Frequency	Percentage
I have assistance from tutors before face-to-face sessions	173	52.4
have modules and other reading materials for my personal use	64	19.4
I have a discussion group	30	9.2
Engaging housemaids (nannies)	26	7.8
I have a smart phone or laptop for my internet research	18	5.3
I use the library	10	2.9
Others	10	2.9
Total	330	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2019.

As shown in Table 5, more than half of the respondents (52.4%) said they sometimes had assistance from tutors and other private persons before going for face-to-face sessions. This is to get them prepared for lessons to be taught them during face-to-face tutorials. As discussed earlier, one main complaint of tutors was the inability or refusal by learners to adequately study and understand lessons in their modules before coming to tutorials. This strategy, if when employed, would help them contribute positively to discussions.

A substantial proportion of them (19.4%) also revealed that they bought modules and other relevant books for their personal uses. According to Badu-Nyarko (2010), many learners found modules to be too technical requiring explanations. Therefore, once they are learning on their own, they learnt them without any meaningful understanding of the text. This underpins the reason for them to have other useful materials to help them to grasp lessons better. In addition, it was found that a few of them had engaged the services of housemaids to help them with house chores. This was common among the married respondents. According to Sweet (1986), distance learners find insecurities in personal and family related issues such as disruption of family life.

Another strategy adopted by the respondents was formation of discussion groups. However, only 30(9.2%) mentioned this as their coping strategy. Study or discussion groups are known to be beneficial to many distance learners. However, the inconvenience in travelling from one's area to

a centralized point is a challenge. Asamoah-Gyadu (cited in Badu-Nyarko, 2010) revealed in his study that the major problem facing distance learners in Ghana was isolation in the learning process. In addition, Nanor (2005) found that almost 60% of distance learners in Accra hardly contacted their tutors or colleagues throughout the semester. He, thus, concluded that there was a low level of interaction among distance learners themselves as well as between them and tutors.

The use of smart phones and laptops for internet research was rare among the respondents as only 18(5.3%) of them mentioned this strategy. Many adult learners are not well versed in the uses of technology such as computers and the Internet. Using electronic medium in distance learning can inadvertently exclude learners who lack computer skills. With the current trends in education, distance learners must be introduced to surfing the internet to do their own research. Attri (2012), therefore, called for training of learners in internet research.

Research Question Four: What are the institutional learner support services that exist at Jackson College of Education to help learners cope with academic challenges?

The study sought to identify support services available to learners at the college. Table 6 presents the types of learner services available at the college.

Table 6- Support Services for Distance Learners

Support Services	Frequency	Percentage
Orientations and matriculations	60	18.1
Payment of fees in installment/aids	55	16.7
Exams based on content in modules alone	55	16.7
Using learning guides	44	13.2
Information notice boards	28	8.3
Car parks	24	7.4
Canteen services	19	5.9
Security	13	3.9
Academic counsellors	10	2.9
SRC office	8	2.5

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Internet services	5	1.5
Guidance and Counselling Centre/unit	3	1.0
Hostel/accommodation services	2	0.5
Library services	0	0.0
Others	5	1.5
Total	330	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2019.

The respondents considered orientations as the main learner support service provided by the college. Sixty of them representing 18.1% said that the college organized orientations and matriculations for them. With regard to the payment of fees in installment, 55 (16.7%) of them indicated that it was available for their access.

Another common support service that the college provided was basing examination questions on modules and also providing learning guides. Sakyi (2013) found in his study among UCC distance learners that most learners (95.1%) did not know about the existence of guidance and counselling services at their centres. The few (4.9%) learners who had benefitted from guidance/counselling services indicated that it involved largely their academic and social lives (85.7%). There were indications of the existence of car parks, security guards and canteens. However, only very few respondents agreed that the college provided them with services such as internet, guidance and counselling unit, and accommodations. Meanwhile, it appears that library facilities were not available at all as none of the respondents reported of it. This is consistent with the finding of Sakyi (2013) who revealed that most UCC distance learners (66%) relied on other libraries to satisfy their library needs since they had none and therefore patronized libraries, which were located not far from their homes.

CONCLUSIONS

Residential and classroom facilities are integral parts of quality (distance) education. It, therefore, requires that these issues be given priority attention if the college intended to ensure gender parity and retention especially among female learners. Female learners are usually at higher risk of withdrawing from distance learning programmes should they encounter unbearable conditions. These academic challenges have dire consequences of compromising the quality of graduates churn out by the college. Helping learners to develop effective coping strategies is important. With effective guidance and counselling coordinators and academic counsellors, learners will be able to survive even difficult academic environment as the college authorities work to introduce more beneficial support services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made for practice and policy making:

Recommendations for Practice

1. Authorities of the Jackson College of Education should as a matter of urgency begin to arrange for residential accommodations for learners especially mothers and those from afar at a more considerate cost. This will help to reduce the difficulties they have to undergo in getting a place to lodge.
2. Spacious classrooms should be acquired and used for face-to-face sessions by the college authorities. This will prevent the situation whereby learners are over-crowded in a class and the attending inconveniences for particularly females.
3. Distance learners should be counselled and encouraged to read their modules and other relevant materials before attending face-to-face tutorials. They should be made to understand that face-to-face tutorials are meant to explain only difficult concepts to them, but not teach them everything in their modules.
4. Learners should also consider forming cluster discussion groups. This means that learners within a cluster of geographical area should form study groups in order to avoid travelling over long distances for discussion. This will encourage patronage among learners who hitherto could not attend such meetings due to distance.
5. College authorities should prioritize issues of learner support services. Support systems such as library services, financial aids (learner loans and scholarships) and payment of fees in installment must be provided for learners

Recommendations for Policy

6. Management of Jackson College of Education must begin to dream about building their own hostel facilities for their learners to reduce the residential challenges that they normally face.
7. The National Accreditation Board and University of Education, Winneba (the affiliation institution of Jackson College of Education) should make learner support services a core of the requirements for accreditation and affiliation, respectively. This is to reduce the high drop-out rate associated with distance education due to difficulties that learners usually face.

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