Impact of Distance Learning on Students' Academic Performance in Universities in South-East, Nigeria

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Abstract: The study examined the impact of distance learning on student's academic performance in Universities in South-East, Nigeria. The study was guided by two purposes and two research questions. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of 293 respondents comprising 208 students and 85 adult education facilitators in the selected universities in South-East, Nigeria. The population size of the study can be managed and therefore there was no sampling. The instrument for data collections was structured questionnaire with 25-items statement developed by the researchers. The instrument was face validated by three experts. The instrument was trail tested using Cronbach's alpha techniques with a reliability coefficient of 0.79. The research questions were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings of the study revealed that distance learning allow learners to learn from anywhere, any time and much more affordable than former education system. The findings of the study also revealed that distance learning does not always offer all the required coursework online for every degree programme and may not be acknowledged by all employers. Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations were made among others that universities in Nigeria that offers distance learning should introduce self-made, customized educational policies, development guidelines and educational management systems that should lead to a fundamental change in the system.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of distance learning in universities in Nigeria is speedily becoming persistent in every aspect of education both in private and government owns universities across the nation, especially on professional courses and programmes with the use of information technology facilities to enables self-paced learning with

some degree of distance from teaching professionals. Nevertheless, distance learning can be defined as education of learners perhaps not constantly in attendance at the learning environment. Similarly, it involves the use of online education facilities during teaching and learning process between distance learners and the facilitators. According to Buselic[1] defined distance learning as a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting. The author further sees distance learning as an approaches that focus on opening access to education and training, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place which offers flexible learning opportunities to individual and group learners.

Interestingly, Joshua[2] defined distance learning as education that takes place through the use of internet. The author further posited distance learning as e-learning (electronic learning) that takes place across distance and not in a traditional classroom which include: Correspondence courses that is conducted through regular mail with little interaction; Tele-courses where content is delivered via. radio or television broadcast; Compact Disc Read-Only Memory courses where the distance learners interacts with static computer content; online learning where internet-based courses offered synchronously or asynchronously and mobile learning that is devices such as cellular phones and digital audio players like iPods, MP3 players, etc., to interact with each others. Operationally, distance learners are those students or learners registered on courses which are delivered from a distance through online platform without physical contact with the facilitators or instructors. Presently, distance learning is the most hastily increasing part of education which also contributes towards academic performance of distance learners irrespective of their locations through the development of internet-based technologies for teaching and learning.

Undoubtedly, Sadeghi[3] posited some benefits and contributions of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities. The author further assets that these benefits might not be the choice for some students seeking to pursue a degree programme in the universities which the author listed as follows:

Study from anywhere, anytime: One of the benefits of distance learning is that it allows the distance learners to learn from anywhere and at any time. It does not matter which part of the country the learners is located. It also allows the learners to acquire knowledge and training anywhere on the planet.

Saving money: According to Bijeesh[4] posited the school fee of distance education programme may be much more affordable than school fee of regular on-campus degree programme. Thus, students who are looking for economically viable options can go for a distance learning programme. Moreover, the course offered at distance learning is cheaper than the courses provided at traditional education environment[5].

Flexibility to choose: Learners follow a set schedule of learning as per the curriculum of the school if they are following traditional ways of learning. Though some distance learning allow learners to set their learning schedule without following regular schedule of learning. Thus, offers students flexibility to choose learning programmes[5].

Saving time: Bijeesh[4] argued that there is no time to waste in attending on-campus degree programme or waiting for school bus. Distance learning provides the learners a classroom right in their bedroom why the learning materials are forwarded through learner's email. However, students who do not have enough time on their hands can turn to distance education as an option and pursue it from the comfort of their homes.

Interestingly, Buselic[1] put forward benefits of distance learning such as: increases access to learning and training opportunity, provides increased opportunities for updating, improves cost effectiveness of educational resources, supports the quality and variety of existing educational structures and to enhance and consolidates the learners capacity. Another advantage of distance learning is its convenience because many of the technologies are easily accessible from home. Distance learning also provides students the opportunity to participate whenever they wish, on an individual basis because of flexibility. This kind of education is quite affordable as many forms of distance learning involve little or no cost. Distance learning is also multi-sensory. However, there is a wide variety of materials that can meet everyone's learning preference that is why some students learn from visual stimuli while others learn by listening or interacting with a computer programme. Similarly, UNESCO[6] posited that distance learning offers a myriad of advantages which can be evaluated by technical, social and economic criteria. Also, distance learning methods have their own pedagogical merit, leading to different ways of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition. Similarly, Kiryakova[7] cited more fundamental advantages of distance learning such as flexibility and independence; it provides wide learner's audience as compared to traditional education; it is accessible by older people and people with disabilities; people who live in remote places; it provides life-long learning in different fields of knowledge and it also provides economical effectiveness which cuts down expenses for learners and the institution which organizes this form of education.

Undoubtedly, Sadeghi[3] suggested disadvantages of distance learning and how it affects student's academic performance which the author posited as follows:

High chances of distraction: According to Bijeesh[4] with doubt faculty around for face-to-face interaction or absent of classmates to help with constant reminders about pending assignments, the chances of getting distracted are high.

Complicated technology: Brown[5] explained that any student seeking to enrol for a distance learning programme needs to invest in a range of equipment including computer, webcam and stable internet connection. There is absolutely no physical contact between students and instructors as instruction is delivered over the internet. This overdependence on technology is a major drawback to distance learning.

Lack of social interaction: Learners often study alone, so, they may feel isolated and miss the social physical interaction that comes with attending a traditional classroom. Moreover, learners don't have the chance to practice the lessons verbally. The lack of physical interaction in the education process may cause many problems such as a great degree of flaming and isolation[8].

Difficulty staying in contact with instructors: If learners ever have trouble with assignments, or questions about a lecture while in a traditional class it's generally quite simple to talk to the instructor before or after class or schedule meetings online at a different time.

Buselic[1] assets that while there are countless distance education advantages, there are also various disadvantages of distance learning that students and institutions should be aware of before starting any distance learning programme. First, the author posited that distance learning requires advance planning. Both the instructors and students involved in distance learning need to make sacrifices in order to get things done on time. Secondly, distance learning, although, affordable but does not offer immediate feedback to the learners. In a traditional classroom, a student's academic performance can be immediately assessed through questions and informal testing. Similarly, with distance learning, a student has to wait for feedback until the instructor has reviewed their work and responded to it. However, when compared with traditional course delivery method, distance learning demands a disproportionate amount of effort on the part of the instructors, namely: teaching distance courses which includes not only the time required for actual delivery of course materials but involve a great deal of time dedicated to student support and preparation. Also, time spent on e-mail correspondence is very significant. Therefore, distance learning does not always offer all the required coursework online for every degree programme but imposed physical classroom attendance as mandatory for the completion of degree programmes.

Similarly, distance learning degrees may not be acknowledged by some employers, although, most employers do accept it. However, students who want to work for a specific employer upon graduation be sure of the employer's perspective about online education. Distance learning does not give students the opportunity to work on oral communication skills. Students in distance learning courses do not get the experience of practicing verbal interaction with professors and other students[1]. Another disadvantage of distance learning is social isolation. Distance learners may feel isolated or miss the social-physical interaction that comes with attending a traditional classroom. However, many distance learning participants have reported that this sense of isolation has been decreasing with the use of communication technologies such as bulletin boards, threaded discussions, chats, e-mail and video conferencing[1]. However, to achieve effective distance learning programme in universities in Nigeria, adult education facilitators and the organized institutions are expected to introduce a self-made, customized educational policies, development guidelines and educational management systems that lead to a fundamental change in the system. Therefore, it is against this back-drop that there is need to examine the impact of distance learning and challenges militating against student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Purpose of the study: The general purpose of the study is to examine the impact of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

- Ascertain the impacts of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria
- Determine challenges militating against distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria

Research questions: The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the impacts of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria?
- What are challenges militating against distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in in South-East, Nigeria?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of 293 respondents comprising 208 students and 85 adult education facilitators of adult education programmes in Universities in South-East, Nigeria. The study was carried out in Universities in South-East Nigeria, comprised three universities, namely: University of Nigeria, Nsukka, National Open University, Enugu Study Centre and Abia State University, Uturu. The population size can be managed and therefore there was no sampling. The instrument for data collections was structured questionnaire with 25-items statement developed by the researchers. A four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), 4 points; Agree (A), 3 points; Disagree (D), 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD), 1 point was used for responses. The 2.50 was the criterion mean. The decision rule was that any item with mean score from 2.50 and above would be accepted while items with mean scores below 2.50 would be rejected. The validity of the instrument was ascertained by subjecting the initial draft to face validation. Out of the three experts, two from the Department of Adult Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and one from the Department of Science Education (Measurement and Evaluation Unit) all from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their opinions and recommendations were used to modify and produce the final draft of the instrument. The reliability of the instrument was further ascertained using Cronbach alpha method to determine the internal consistency estimates for the items and this generated an over-all reliability co-efficient of 0.79 which shows that the instrument was reliable and can be used to collect the required data for the study. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation for the research questions.

RESULTS

Research question one: What are the impacts of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria?

Table 1 showed that all the items statement obtained mean score above 2.50 which is the bench mark. The mean responses are on the positive side which indicated the impacts of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria. The result was based on the attainment of the cluster mean score of 2.80 (0.42%) for students and 2.60 (0.43%) for adult education facilitators which was above the criterion means of 2.50. This is an indication that the items in 1-14 were accepted as the impacts of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Research question two: What are the challenges militating against distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria?

Table 2 showed that all the items statement obtained mean score above 2.50. The mean responses are on the positive side which indicated challenges militating against distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria. The result was based on the attainment of cluster mean score of 2.83 (0.42%) for students and 2.61 (0.43%) for adult education facilitators which was above the criterion means of 2.50.

Table 1: Mean ratings and standard deviation of respondents the impacts of distance learning on students' academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria

Items statement	Students			Facilitators		
	M	SD	Decision	M	SD	Decision
1. Distance learning allow learners to learn from anywhere and at any time	2.80	0.42	A	2.59	0.43	A
2. Distance learning is much more affordable than the fee of a regular on-campus degree	2.71	0.43	A	2.69	0.43	A
3. Distance learning allow learners to set their learning schedule	2.63	0.43	A	2.54	0.44	A
4. Distance learning programme offers students flexibility to choose learning programmes	2.91	0.41	A	2.56	0.43	A
5. Distance learning saves time and quite affordable	2.85	0.42	A	2.60	0.43	A
6. Distance learning increases access to learning and training opportunity	2.76	0.42	A	2.63	0.43	A
7. Distance learning improves cost effectiveness of educational resources	2.68	0.43	A	2.52	0.44	A
8. Distance learning are easily accessible from home	2.99	0.41	A	2.61	0.43	A
9. Distance learning provide students the opportunity to participate whenever they wish on an individual basis	2.59	0.43	A	2.70	0.43	A
10. Distance learning offer increased interactions with students	2.95	0.41	A	2.68	0.43	A
11. Distance learning provide wide learner audience	2.81	0.42	A	2.51	0.44	A
12. Distance learning is accessible by older people and people with disabilities	2.77	0.42	A	2.57	0.43	A
13. Distance learning provide life-long learning	2.84	0.42	A	2.65	0.43	A
14. Distance learning cuts down expenses for learners and for the institution which organizes this form of education	2.90	0.41	A	2.53	0.44	A
Cluster mean	2.80	0.42	A	2.60	0.43	Accepted

Table 2: Mean ratings and standard deviation of respondents on the impacts of distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria

Items statement	Students			Facilitators		
	M	SD	Decision	M	SD	Decision
15. Distance learning requires advance planning	2.88	0.42	A	2.61	0.43	A
16. Distance learning does not offer immediate feedback	2.79	0.42	A	2.53	0.44	A
17. Distance learning does not always offer all the required coursework online for every degree programme	2.91	0.41	A	2.59	0.43	A
18. Distance learning does not give students the opportunity to work on oral communication skills	2.99	0.41	A	2.67	0.43	A
19. Students in distance learning courses do not get the experience of practicing verbal interaction with instructors and other students	2.74	0.42	A	2.70	0.43	A
20. Distance learning degrees may not be acknowledged by all employers	2.83	0.42	A	2.54	0.44	A
21. Distance learners may feel isolated or miss the social-physical interaction that comes with attending a traditional classroom	2.69	0.43	A	2.55	0.44	A
22. High chances of distraction	2.72	0.43	A	2.58	0.43	A
23. Complicated technology	2.84	0.42	A	2.66	0.43	A
24. Lack of physical interaction	2.83	0.42	A	2.71	0.43	A
25. Difficulty staying in contact with instructors	2.90	0.41	A	2.60	0.43	A
Cluster mean	2.83	0.42	A	2.61	0.43	A

This is an indication that item 15-25 were accepted as the challenges militating against distance learning on student's academic performance in universities in South-East, Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that distance learning allow learners to learn from anywhere and at any time and much more affordable than former education system. The findings of the is in consonant with the findings of Sadeghi[3] who posited one of the benefits of distance learning is that it allows the distance learners to learn from anywhere and at any time. It does not matter which part of the country the learners is located. It also allows the learners to acquire knowledge and training anywhere on the planet. The findings is also in line with the findings of Bijeesh[4] who asserted that distance education degree fee is much more affordable than the fee of a regular on-campus degree. Thus, students who are looking for economically viable options can go for a distance learning programme.

The findings of the study revealed distance learning does not always offer all the required coursework online for every degree programme and may not be acknowledged by all employers. The findings of the study is in agreement with the findings of Brown[5] who posited that any student seeking to enrol for a distance learning programme needs to invest in a range of equipment including computer, webcam and stable internet connection. This is because there is absolutely no physical contact between students and instructors as instruction is delivered over the internet. These can overdependence on technology which is a major drawback to distance learning. In case of any software or hardware malfunction, the class session will come to a standstill, something that can interrupt the learning process. The findings is also in line with the findings of Dyrud[8] who posited that distance learning lack physical interaction in the education process which may cause many problems, such as great degree of flaming and isolation. The findings is also in consonant with the findings of Buselic[1] who posited that distance learning degrees may not be acknowledged by all employers although most employers do. Students who want to work for a specific employer upon graduation should be sure of that employer's perspective about online education.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that the prospect chances for distance learning programme are unlimited irrespective of its benefits for distance learners. Undoubtedly, distance learning programmes are at this point to stay and to enlarge in the expectations. However; there are also silent issues to be explained and considered. Moreso, distance learning can replace traditional classroom learning process as the world is approaching towards the use of e-learning. Therefore, before distance learners enrol in any distance learning programme or professional courses, they must cautiously consider the disadvantages in order to be sure before they enrol on a programme that meets their personal desires and career objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Nigeria Universities that offers distance learning should introduce self-made, customized educational policies, development guidelines and educational management systems that should lead to a fundamental change in the system

- Instructors should inform distance learners that distance learning goes beyond memorization which requires application of knowledge and understanding
- Incorporating frequent online quizzes by instructors can be extremely effective in enhancing learning experience

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