

Tutorial Needs of Distance Education Students in Ghana

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Abstract

Distance education at the tertiary level is increasing at an alarming rate in Ghana although it took off in the late 1990s. In order to support students to succeed in their academic pursuits, the Universities had adopted face-to-face tutorial sessions to supplement the independent study. This study addresses two such institutions in Ghana – University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. The study adopted the cross-sectional descriptive analytical survey research design using a multi-staged sampling method. In all, 120 distance education students responded to the questionnaires. Data was analyzed using both descriptive statistics and narratives. The major findings were that weekend tutorials, regional study centres and availability of modules were not the most vital needs of the distance students as they prefer face-to-face to online support. Also, direct phone calls and text messaging were the most preferred means of communication within the tutorial support system. Students would like tutorials to run throughout the academic year. They prefer at least between five to six “Tutorial sessions” per course per semester. It was concluded that tutorial sessions are vital to the sustainability of the distance education programmes in the two universities as it gave the students opportunity to interact with peers and tutors in improving their learning and academic work.

Keywords: distance education, tutorials, tutorial needs, distance education students, teaching and learning needs

INTRODUCTION

The success of distance education is seen to be based on the content of dialogue between the teacher and the student and the effectiveness of the communication system in the educational process (Moore, 1990). Learning at a distance becomes difficult for most learners particularly the new ones who have not experienced the distance education programme. In view of this, most distance education programmes have made available some support services to assist the student in the learning process. Some of these support services include orientation, administrative assistance, tutorials and counseling (Tong, 1994).

For many distance education programmes today, tutorial contacts have a major role to play on the progress of learners’ performance. Tutoring at a distance can be through the face-to-face or online through different media. Tutoring refers to course-related support provided by an individual for a particular learner or group of learners who are also using prepared materials as a resource. Tuition is usually focused on facilitating the learning of a known group of learners to achieve goals of [independent learning](#) and not on replacing the study materials. It usually involves a local tutor with whom learners have indirect or infrequent contact, and whose role may be defined variously as interpreting course materials, enriching course content, diagnosing learning problems, helping with study skills and practical activities (Thorpe, 1990). Hence,

face-to-face contact session in distance learning is seen as a form of tuition that lessens the feelings of isolation which the distance students experience while reading alone. During this session, the student is able to ask the tutor questions on areas in the text that seemed difficult. Learners also experience peer-group interaction where they are able to discuss ideas with fellow learners; gets the opportunity to compare progress with fellow learners (peer-group evaluation) and a means of developing re-assurance and belonging as a student. (Evans, 1994; Idle, 1979; Sciaciwena, 1983 all cited in Okunuga, 2000;)

Learners’ Needs in Distance Education

In Sampson (2003), Garrison (1990) states that, "the majority of distance education is concerned with meeting the educational needs of adults" (p. 103), and Holmberg (1986) states that "distance teaching will support student motivation, promote learning pleasure and effectiveness if offered in a way to make the study relevant to the individual learner and his/her needs" (p. 123). Distance education offers students an opportunity to "study and learn in a peer-free environment, when and if they prefer it", while also providing support during the learning experience in terms of guidance, planning, and feedback that is necessary for continued student motivation and completion of the course (Sampson, 2003).

Sweet (1993) wrote that too often, institutions plan for only one type of student. The vast majority of students believe that face-to-face meetings with the

tutor and fellow students are an essential component of education. Such group meetings can greatly help understanding and morale, but not all students thrive in such situations. Some actually prefer the isolation that distance education offers while group dynamics can be intimidating and distracting. For others, attending group meetings may be a burden financially, or in terms of time and effort.

Sampson (2003) further stated that, one way to counterbalance the absence of dialogue in distance learning is to institute sufficient student support services. Tait (1995) categorises student support as advice/counseling, tutoring (individually or in groups), the learning of study skills, peer group support, feedback concerning assessment and progress, language support and administrative problem-solving, where the aim is to support students' individual learning whether alone or in groups. Student support is a key issue in the provision of distance education, and three services appear repeatedly in the literature: timely student feedback, on-site support, and access to library materials (Sampson 2003). The response of tutors and "turn-around time" for comments and grading is cited continuously as being a critical component of student support, with students who receive timely feedback on assignments responding more positively to the course than those who have to wait for feedback. The support provided by on-site facilitators has also been consistently cited as crucial to the effectiveness of a distance education programme. Burge and Howard (1990), study of audio-conferencing in Canadian graduate education, found that the effective utilization of local tutors (or on-site facilitators) increases student satisfaction with courses.

Again, Sweet (1993) indicated that, it is important to keep in mind that not every student will feel participating in group meetings (tutorials) as important. Any group support system needs careful consideration before making attendance compulsory. To this extent, Sweet (1993) further states that, needs that can be addressed by groups and often it seems the only justification for organizing students into groups for lectures, tutorials or exercise classes. Given the resource limitations for institutions and students, it is essential that every element of a course meet a real need, in particular so that resources can be appropriately allocated. Sweet (1993) further grouped these needs into the following:

Teaching and Learning Needs and Social Needs

In terms of teaching and learning needs indicated that parts of the syllabus may require students to work together in groups to provide a more practical experience for students. Most common student errors, problems, misunderstandings and queries can be predicted and covered in the course material, but not all. The effort required to provide additional

explanation in the material may not be efficient, particularly given the many ways that students can interpret content. Discussing one student's difficulty in a group can efficiently answer several students with the same difficulty, and reinforce the understanding of those without the problem (Sweet, 1993)

The tutor can sort students into mixed-ability groups to encourage peer tutoring. Sometimes tutors find it difficult to simplify their language to a level everyone can relate to, but students who have mastered a concept will usually describe it in terms that other students can understand. A student is more likely to appreciate the nature of the difficulty that another student is trying to explain. Even when there is no student with all the answers, discussing a problem as a group can discover the answer or a deeper meaning through brainstorming or debate (Sweet, 1993).

Left to their own devices, students can be convinced that they can satisfactorily answer any self-assessment questions in the course material. However, when faced with the task of publicly explaining or defending their understanding, the students may realize their comprehension is not as deep as the course requires. By encouraging students to challenge each other's understanding, the group benefits from peer tutoring in two ways: those who don't understand hear explanations in language they can appreciate, and those who do understand, get to test their arguments. Of course, care has to be taken by the tutor to ensure the arguments accepted by the group are accurate (Sweet, 1993).

Studying in isolation can be dangerous. Isolated students can become demoralized by their difficulties, believing that they alone find the subject difficult (Badu-Nyarko, 2010). Being able to see in a group that other students are also struggling reassures them that they are not alone. On sharing the problem with others, it becomes less daunting; comprehension can result from peer debate. Of course, it can be a major blow to morale if a student is alone in the group in finding something difficult. It is crucial that the tutor step in at this stage to provide individual attention and reassurance (Sweet, 1993).

In another development, Race (1989) grouped Learners' Needs into Mid-Course and End of the Course Needs;

In the case of Learners' needs into mid-Course, learners often get 'mid-course blues'. Some of the novelty may have worn off, the subject matter is getting a bit harder, and the tutor may be getting a bit tougher as assessment targets become more important. They may now be feeling:

- Fed-up; the work's getting harder and slower. The path ahead seem like work and more work
- Intimidated; the material's getting harder. The assignments are getting tougher. The marks may be getting lower
- Pressurized; the pace may be getting more 'forced'. Whatever happened to that "freedom of pace" which was supposed to be the essence of open learning?
- Alone. Many learners may be feeling isolated- wondering if everyone else is having the same doubts, fears and even triumphs
- Should I really have started this; other pressures such as domestic social, job may all seem to be greater than ever.

Again, of course, if learners have an open relationship with tutors, these feelings can be dealt with appropriately as and when they arise (Race, 1989).

Learners' Needs toward the end of the Course shows that they may get frightened of forthcoming examination or assessments. They may need study skills advice relating to revision strategies and examination technique. It may be many years since they prepared for an examination. For some, their last experience with examination may have been disastrous. They may be unsure about what to do next. They may need the tutors' help in sorting out the options they have for further studies. Many open learners (despite many traumas!) become addicted to open learning; it becomes a valued part of their lives. They want to continue and they want the tutors' advice on what they can do next.

Other needs of learners were identified in Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour, (2003) as means of receiving an e-mail message from their academic department about distance course offerings; registration for the course electronically, and basic information on what to expect, available on-line resources (e.g., bookstore orders, technical support, student accounts, enrolment services), and a university staff contact list. A hyperlink to all resources available to them on the Department of Distance Education (DDE) Web page was embedded in this e-mail.

Thorpe, (1987) cited in Bird and Morgan (2003) indicated that, individual student motivation and commitment are not static. Over the span of a three to five year program of study, distance learners' motivations may change enormously, due to the nature of their incremental achievements, shifting perspectives, and family and financial circumstances. For some, once the initial curiosity and desire to prove something to themselves is extinguished, they

may need to seek out more practical or tangible outcomes, such as improved career prospects, in order to persevere to completion

Another expectation Cain, Marrara, Pitre Armour, (2003) pointed out was that students should be kept informed about current campus events, in particular, those that affected distance learners. Effective communication is significant because it has been found to be highly correlated with teacher effectiveness (Young & Shaw, 1999). Effective communication is a major concern when considering support services because it can be more challenging at a distance. Although some mentioned the importance of being kept informed, few said they would actually participate in on-line-related campus activities. Bird and Morgan (2003) brought to the view that, adults entering university without pre-requisite information technology skills are at considerable disadvantage initially, which may compound their sense of being overwhelmed or not 'belonging.' Their ability to overcome these initial hurdles will be closely related to the level of understanding and practical support offered by the university.

Okopi (2010) and Nartkel et al (2009) have shared similar views on distance learners' needs in the study of challenges facing technologically driven counseling services in National Open University in Nigeria and assessment on distance learning programmes of distance learning for Health Care Workers in Mozambique respectively.

Thus, the success of any distance learning programme mostly hinges on the availability of student support services. These services include administrative support, family support and support from peers. However, the role that tutorial systems play cannot be over emphasized. Tutorial system is considered as part of administrative support system to the student, where students receive extra tuition to support learning materials given. It serves as a supporting factor in the realization of the overall mandate to which the programme was instituted. For this reason, the study sought to find out the tutorial needs of distance learners in Ghana and how they are met.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were to;

1. Identify distant learners tutorial needs in Ghana
2. Find out which of the learners tutorial needs identified in the tutorial systems organized are met.

METHODOLOGY

The cross-sectional descriptive analytical survey research design was adopted for the study. The Multi- Staged Sampling Method was employed for the

study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the institutions for the study which were UG and KNUST. The reason for UG and KNUST was to have a representative of institution with a social science and applied science backgrounds. Further, stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to select respondents on the chosen distance education programmes. Information was collected from 120 DE respondents through a designed questionnaire. The questionnaire generated both quantitative data which were analysed using a combination quantitative methodology. The quantitative data were edited, hand coded and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for analysis. Descriptive analysis such as frequency tables, mean rankings and standard deviations were used to analyse the data. Analysis showed the frequency of responses to the issues that rose in the questionnaire. In all alpha (α) was at 0.05.

RESULTS

The result of the study is presented to provide evidence of students’ tutorial needs from the Ghanaian context using institutions which included University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. In all data was collected from 120 respondents.

Tutorial Needs of Distance Learners

To be able to provide adequate tutorial service to distance learners, there is the need to know their varied needs and put them into consideration. There the study sought to identify the tutorial needs of distance learners and results are shown in table 1, figure 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1 displays tutorial needs of learners and these included the need for regional study centre, weekend tutorials, weekday evening tutorials, access to marked assignments scripts, revision with course-writers, information dissemination, availability of modules, on-line tutorials, orientation, counseling and study groups. A question was posed in this categorization and learners were asked to tick as many as applicable to them.

Table 1: Tutorial Needs of Distance Learners

Needs Identified	Responses	
	F	%
Regional study centre	74	61.7
Library facility in study centre	28	46.7
Weekend tutorials	87	72.5
Weekday evening tutorials	16	13.3
Access to marked assignment scripts	63	52.5
Revision with course-writers	59	49.2
Information Dissemination	70	58.3
Availability of modules	74	61.7
On-line tutorials	35	29.2
Orientation	43	35.8
Counseling	40	33.3
Study group	48	40.0

Source: Field Data 2011

From table 1, it could be noted that weekend tutorials was highly ranked by respondents with 72.5%. The next in rank of needs were availability of regional study centres and availability of modules with 61.2% in each case. However, on-line tutorials, weekday evening tutorials and library facility at the study centre were least ranked.

Learners’ Preference for Tutorials Periods

Learners’ needs for tutorials were also grouped in terms of the periods that were most preferable to them. The results are displayed in Figure 1.

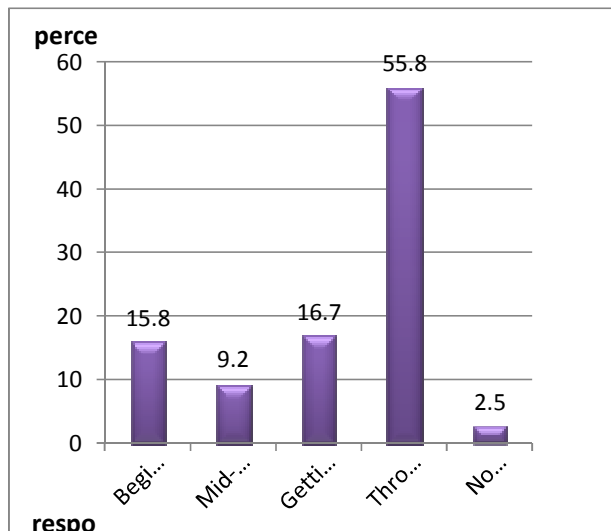


Fig. 1: Respondents Preference for Period for Tutorials

Source: Field Data 2011

Fig. 1 shows learners preferred period for tutorials. It was deduced from Fig.1 that the majority of the respondents representing 55.8% preferred tutorials to be organized throughout the semester. Also, 16.7% preferred tutorials to be organized at the end of the semester. With organizing tutorials from the beginning of the semester, about 15.8% preferred it. However, it was worth noting that other respondents representing 9.2 preferred tutorials to be organized within mid-semester.

Reasons why Learners Preferred such Periods for Tutorials

Results showed less than half of the respondents 46 responded to this question. From these responses, the most prevalent reason given by 68.2% respondents why they preferred tutorials to be organized throughout the semester was to get more time for studies. Some of their comments are indicated below:

- *I don't get much time to study due to work and home responsibilities, this will give me more time to study (respondent 14)*

- *It will help me to learn throughout the semester without limiting myself (respondent 21)*
- *For more contact with my tutors and colleagues (respondent 86)*
- *To keep me busy with my books always (respondent 102)*

Another reason in support for organizing tutorials throughout the semester was to understand the course better. Two of them had these to say:

- *Frequent weekend tutorials will assist me to understand the course better (respondent 1)*
- *To give us more understanding to the modules (respondent 13)*

It was again revealed that 21.3% who preferred tutorials to be organized at the beginning of the semester preferred that so as to get assistance on the course from the beginning to understand the concept well. Some of their comments are indicated below:

- *Because it would enable me to understand the core value of the course (respondent 12)*
- *I will get to know the concept of the course before I start my personal reading (respondent 32)*
- *So that we can be introduced to the courses and know areas to read (respondent 35).*

Other reason to preferring tutorials from the beginning of the semester was to help in completing the course on-time.

In another case, 13.6% respondents preferred tutorials to be organized getting to the end of the semester so as to get prepared for examinations. Some of their comments are indicated below:

- *Because tutorials will be fresh in mind as I write my examinations and this will help me (respondent 4)*
- *This will ease the workload as students prepare for examinations (respondent 51)*
- *It gives me retentive memory to write examinations well (respondent 66)*
- *It prepares me for examinations (respondent 98)*

Nonetheless, 16.5% respondents preferred tutorials to be organized in mid-semester with the reason as the time they are prepared for tutorials. Some of their comments included the following:

- *It gives one room to prepare adequately for tutorials (respondent 7)*
- *Fees, collection of modules as well as other family issues will be sorted out before tutorials starts (respondent 29)*

Learners Preference of Medium for Tutorials

With the medium for tutorials, the study set out to find out learners preference for the medium for their tutorials and the results are indicated in fig 2.

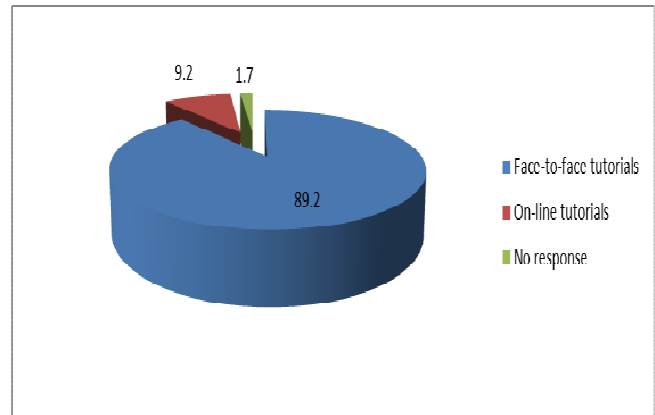


Fig 2: Learners Preference for Medium for Tutorials
Source: Field Data 2011

Table 2 shows learners' preference for medium for tutorials. It is evident from the table that the majority of respondents representing 89.2% preferred face-to-face. Only 9.2% preferred on-line. However, the rest could not indicate their preference.

Reasons for Learners Preference for Medium for Tutorials

Indications from the field showed very little variations. Thus, it was indicated that, about 90% respondents from both institutions preferred face-to-face for clarification and personal interactions with tutors and colleagues. Some of the comments stated in support of this reason were:

- *To get direct feedback for my questions (respondent 1)*
- *Am able to interact more with the tutors (respondent 2)*
- *I believe word of mouth or face-to-face tutorials is more powerful to boost our morals and make us eager to learn more (respondent 6)*
- *Face-to-face will help with more clarification of issues bordering students (respondent 7)*
- *Questions are properly answered (respondent 11)*
- *I prefer face-to-face tutorials because it makes you conversant with tutors (respondent 12)*
- *For easy interactions with tutors and colleagues (respondent 15)*
- *For personal interactions with facilitators (respondent 14)*

Other respondents of 10% preferred face-to-face because of inaccessibility to internet. Their comments were as follows:

- *Internet is not at my place (respondent 3)*
- *Internet is not reliable in Ghana (respondent 10)*

Other reason to preferring face-to-face was, not being conversant with e-learning. Some of their comments included:

- *I do not have much knowledge in computer so I can't study on-line (respondent 21)*
- *Not abreast with internet (respondent 99)*

On the other hand, out of respondents who preferred on-line tutorials, about 10% respondents preferred this medium so as to get access to tutorials everywhere. Some of their comments included:

- *Because one's physical presence will not be needed at the tutorial grounds (respondent 20)*
- *Most convenient as my workplace is far from my study centre (respondent 43)*
- *Can be part of tutorials no matter where I am (respondent 56)*
- *Travelling to tutorial centres waste time (respondent 81)*

It was however noticed that, despite the development of Information Communication Technology in Ghana learners still preferred meeting tutors on face-to-face basis other than having on-line tutorials.

Learners Preference for Means of Communication

In distance education the institution and learner are said to be geographically separated (Keegan, 1990). This separation is to some extent bridged by dialogue hence, the need for a reliable communication channel through which information could be disseminated to and from learners and the institution. The means learners prefer most for communication or information and this illustrated in figure 3.

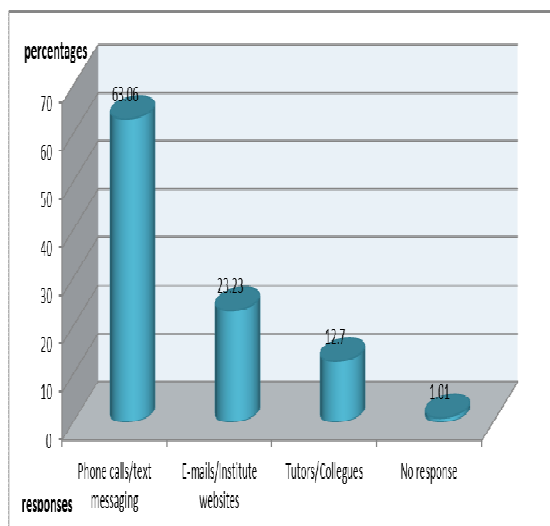


Fig. 3: Learners Preference for Means of Communication
Source: Field Data 2011

Figure 3 shows learners preference for means of communication within the tutorial systems. It was revealed that the majority of respondents, 63.06% preferred phone calls and text messaging as a means of communication and information dissemination. Tutors and colleagues as the rallying form of communication was least rated by 12.7% respondents. E-mailing and the use of websites were also not favourable to them.

Tutorial Services for Distance Learners

Providing of tutorial needs may take various forms and include various tasks as well. To be able to know which of the needs identified by learners are being met, there was the need to find out the various services available for them in meeting their tutorial needs. Hence, learners from the two institutions were further asked to identify the various services provided by their institutions. The results are indicated in table 2 and 3, and figure 4.

Ranking of Tutorial Services Provided by Institutions

Table 2 displays the tutorial services provided to distant learners in Ghana. These services included the provision of regional study centre, weekend tutorials, weekday evening tutorials, access to marked assignment scripts, revision with course-writers, information dissemination, availability of modules, on-line tutorials, orientation, counseling and study groups.

Table 2: Ranking of tutorial services provided by respondents

Services	f	%
Regional study centre	65	54.2
Library facility in study centre	24	40.0
Weekend tutorials	90	75.0
Weekday evening tutorials	2	1.7
Access to marked assignment scripts	16	13.3
Revision with course-writers	40	46.7
Information Dissemination	37	30.8
Availability of modules	46	38.3
On-line tutorials	3	2.5
Orientation	37	30.8
Counseling	15	12.5
Study group	15	12.5

Source: Field Data 2011

It was revealed from table 2 that the provision of weekend tutorials was highly ranked by respondents with 75.0%. Study centres and availability of modules were ranked 2nd and 3rd respectively. This could mean that study centers and modules are provided to learners to their expectation. The result clearly shows that the provision of on-line and

weekday evening tutorials were lowly ranked by respondents.

Thus, these results are reflective of what might be happening with the distance education programmes. This necessitated the need to delve into the number of tutorials organized by the institutions per course. The results are provided in table 3.

Table 3: Number of Times Tutorials are to be organized per Course per Semester

Number of sessions per course/semester	f	%
3-4 sessions	15	12.5
5-6 sessions	64	53.3
7 sessions and above	34	28.3
No response	7	5.8
Total	120	100

Source: Field Data 2011

Table 3 shows that as a large number of 53.3% respondents wanted between 5-6 sessions of tutorials per course. This was followed by 28.3% respondents who requested 7 sessions and above. Each session lasts for two hours. The result is an indication of how students demand regular interaction with tutors and course mates in order to excel.

Means of Communication or getting information

In many distance education jurisdictions, getting information is a challenge particularly the means through which it is communicated. Students responses indicated that they get it through three main ways as indicated in figure 5.

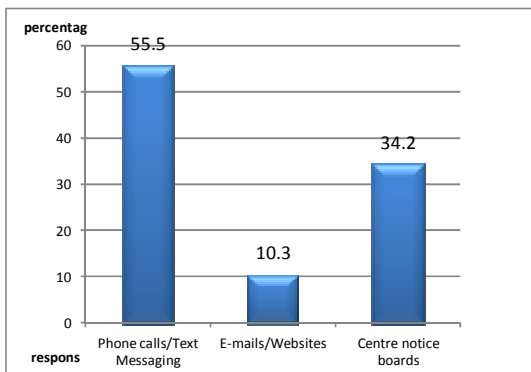


Fig. 5 Means of Communication to Learners by Staff Source: Field Data 2011

Figure 3 depicts the means through which staff communicates to learners. Results from Fig 5 show that the majority of students 55.5% received information through phone calls and text messaging. While the remaining respondents consisting of 34.2% and 10.3% indicated the use of centre notice boards and e-mailing respectively as the means through which they get information.

DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS

In Sampson (2003), Verduin & Clark (1991) stated that, distance education offers students an opportunity to study and learn in a peer-free environment, when and if they prefer it. In this view, the study found out that weekend tutorials were highly ranked among learners with over 70 percent of respondents indicating it as the most needed tutorial support service. This makes it very evident that weekend tutorials play a very significant role in the learning process of distance education. This could be a reason that since majority of distance learners are workers and would not be available during weekdays for tutorials; weekends are the most favourable times they could get for their learning activities though a few of 13.3 percent preferred weekday-evening tutorials. Parr (1996) and Galusha (2008) confirms in their studies that distance learners typically must study at night and on weekends when it is convenient for them to study. Also, study centres and availability of modules were the second ranked needs of distance learners. This goes to confirm the theoretical foundations of the study of Gorsky and Capsi (2005) and Badu-Nyarko (2010) who pointed out the importance of regional study centres and study materials for learning to occur.

Expectantly, weekday tutorials were the least ranked need by respondents. Thus looking at the status of distance learners as workers, organizing weekday tutorials for them could cause most of them from getting access to learning support service. This in the long run might lead to a high drop-out rate as learners would find the programme unfriendly. Not overlooking the fact that some learners prefer weekday tutorials despite their working conditions, distance education institutions in Ghana should also note that, Ghana does not have a favourable transportation system to support weekday evening tutorials. Hence, the stressful nature of work and transport might not permit learners to have conducive tutorials after work.

The majority of the respondents preferred tutorials to be organized throughout the semester so as to keep them always with the books. However, it is important to note the cost implications and the fact that distance education is mostly for part-time workers who might not get all the time to participate in frequent tutorials. Consistent with Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour's, (2003), students are expected to have a round-the-clock assistance available to them. With this, access to a chat room may be possible option to have frequent contacts with their instructors anytime. This implies that, though distance learners do not have all the time to engage in learning activities, they would prefer to have interactions with their colleagues and tutors mostly at their free times.

In another case, Race (1989) indicated that learners' needs are concentrated towards the end of the course. In many instances learners even with imperfect learning materials soldier on and succeed without the help of a tutor, while some may as well get frightened of forthcoming examinations or assessments and thus may need study skills advice relating to revision strategies and examination techniques. The study revealed that some learners preferred tutorials to be organized at the end of the semester as these learners have limited time to attend tutorials regularly and thus prefer intensive studies towards the end of the semester. One can argue that these learners only need study skills for examinations and not learning.

With learners' reasons for their period preferred for tutorials, it was most significantly revealed that respondents preferred tutorials to be organized throughout the semester to get more time for understanding the content. Thus, the more tutorials are organized for learners the more the courses become learner-friendly and leading to a successful completion. However, this regular face-to-face tutorials may abuse the concept of distance education. Another important observation from the study was that, learners preferred tutorials to be organized towards the end of the semester so as to get prepared for examinations. For some learners, their last experience with examination may have been disastrous and thus may be unsure about what to do next. Such learners may need the tutors' help in sorting out the options they have for further studies to be able to write their examinations.

The majority of respondents preferred face-to-face tutorials to on-line tutorials. This shows that despite the advancement in modern technology most distance learners in Ghana are yet to accept on-line tutorials. This corroborates with Zuhairi, Adnan and Thaib, (2007) study which found that in the University of Terbuka, though learners had access to on-line tutorials, the majority of them preferred face-to-face tutorials.

Probing why learners preferred face-to-face, most learners felt it gives them the opportunity to have personal interactions with tutors and colleagues and as well get direct feedback for their questions. Writers like Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour, (2003), Laith (2002) and Rekkedal and Qvist-Eriksen (2003) confirmed that distance learners need some form of personal interactions that would assist them in getting to know their instructors as well other learners involved in the study. Likewise, Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour (2003), further agreed that person-to-person contact was essential to having an enjoyable learning experience, at least at the beginning of the course.

Learners face the problem of internet access on regular basis. This, to some extent goes in line with Zuhairi, Adnan and Thaib (2007) study that though online tutorial session was available for all students in UT, only about 3% of UT students utilized it. The students' constraints to actively engage in on-line tutorials were attributed to factors relating to the cost of internet access and the limited accessibility to internet due to the poor quality of information and technology infrastructure in Indonesia.

Aside centre notice boards of which all distance institutions are assumed to be using now as a means of communicating to learners, the majority of distance students preferred phone calls and text messaging to e-mailing. The reason could be that, in Ghana, access to internet is a challenge to most people especially those in the rural areas of which distance learners could not be left out. In support to this, Okopi (2010) Nartker et al (2009) and Lalith (2002) noted that the chosen technology should be flexible to the needs of the target group. Therefore the use of internet as a source of information could not be a reliable means to distance learners across the country.

Tutorial services provided to distant learners in Ghana included the provision of study centre, weekend tutorials, weekday tutorials, access to marked assignment scripts, revision with course-writers, information dissemination, availability of modules, on-line tutorials, orientation, counseling and study groups. The provision of weekend tutorials has been overlooked in previous studies. Writers like Rekkedal and Qvist-Eriksen (2003), Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour, (2003) and Bird and Morgan (2003), in their studies focused mainly on medium than the times for tutorials. In Ghana, since the only available medium for tutorials is the face-to-face, learners have no choice than to engage in person-to-person interaction for tutorials and since most distance learners are part-time workers, the weekends and weekday evening tutorials seemed convenient to them. Hence, the study revealed that provision of weekend tutorials was highly appreciated. However, weekday evening tutorials was rarely provided in both institutions. The assumption could be that despite the fact that some learners would have preferred to engage in weekday evening tutorials, the disadvantages it comes with outweigh its advantages and thus would not be advisable to introduce it in Ghana for now as students are scattered across the country. Hence, distance education institutions should put the following disadvantages into consideration:

- The tiredness of learners after work
- The traffic nature of our roads in getting to study centres on-time
- Distance between study centres and learners workplace especially in KNUST

- The cost involved in organizing more tutorials
- Fatigue of some tutors since they are engaged as full-time in the mainstream and as part-time tutors for distance education.
- Difficulty in managing weekday and weekend tutorials together
- Since tutorials are to be put in small classes, getting venues would be a problem as they would have to be competing for lecture halls with the full-time learners

Another indication by learners was noted in the provision of on-line tutorials. The study revealed that on-line tutorials was least provided for distance learners. In developing countries, limited infrastructure and the attendant high costs of access to internet services are seen as barriers to learners' accessibility, thus, this will be very costly to bear by individual and the university (Okopi, 2010 and Laith, 2002). This is different with developed countries, as Rekkedal and Qvist-Eriksen (2003) indicated that academic support provided for NKI learners included the provision of online interactive learning environments and teleconferencing as the main medium for tutorials and supported with face-to-face sessions for learners who preferred it.

According to Zuhairi, Adnan and Thaib (2007) tutorials for learners in University of Terbuka is optional, the mechanism used to strengthen tutorials systems in UT was the idea to include 8 sessions with 2 hour duration per course per semester. However, this study observed that this was similar with tutorial systems in Ghana as majority of learners 53.3 percent indicated that tutorials were organized 5-6 sessions per course per semester. This shows that institutions in Ghana to a larger extent were meeting learners' expectations as majority preferred tutorials to be organized throughout the semester.

The means of communicating to learners in distance education programmes cannot be left out; hence, the study observed that a little more than half of the respondents 55.5 percent use phone calls and text messaging as a means of communicating to learners. This result is somehow in line with what learners in Australia use as the means of communicating to tutors. Despite other services available to them, they noticed phone calls and text messaging as the most reliable means of getting information as distance learners (Bird and Morgan, 2003). From these indications, it is noted that most distance learners would prefer to be reached through phone calls and text messaging other than the other means. Institutions in Ghana are noted to have a greater level of meeting learners' needs in terms effective communication. With the medium provided for tutorials, interactions made with programme coordinators show that face-to-face is the only

medium provided for learners. In the same vein, Zuhairi, Adnan and Thaib (2007) indicated that in UT, among several media tutorial sessions provided for learners, the most patronized one was the face-to-face tutorials. Hence, most of their media came with challenges that learners could hardly cope with. For example, with their written tutorials, there was delay in correspondence between students and tutors due to the large number of responses received by tutors. Tutorial by television was somehow difficult in terms of cost and access by the institution and students as the institution was using the national television. Providing medium for tutorials in Ghana is no different from Terbuka as learners preferred the use of face-to-face to on-line tutorials due to challenges such as cost and accessibility to on-line tutorials.

CONCLUSION

Meeting distance learners tutorial needs in Ghana is to a greater extent met by distance education institutions as learners ranked their most expected needs to include weekend tutorials, regional study centres and availability of modules. Also, learners preferred tutorials to be organized throughout the semester. The implication being that it will assist them to be with their study materials always for better understanding. Learners preference for face-to-face rested on personal contact with tutors. The inaccessibility of internet services and irregular electricity supply in some parts of Ghana can be detrimental to distance students. Information dissemination is crucial in any distance education programme. Learners indicated phone calls/text messaging should be employed to get information to them as they serve as the most reliable means of communication in Ghana today. Despite the fact that most towns have not developed to access internet services, about 75% of the total population of Ghana possess personal mobile phones which could be a channel for reaching students (Ghana Business News, Tuesday, 10 February 2011).

Tutorials are offered at weekends only in order to provide access to the large number of students who are mostly workers or unemployed but staying outside the study centres at a time. Yet, the duration and number of tutorials per course were found to be inadequate particularly for technical and mathematical courses that demand a lot of explanations and interpretations. However, the tutorial sessions currently in place are able to meet the students half way through the course.

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