

Chapter 12

Learning Environment for Supporting Undergraduate Online Distance Education Students

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ABSTRACT

The University of Ghana adopted the use of the Sakai Learning Management System to create an online environment for its DE students. Based on which, this study sought to examine the support provided for online students of the University of Ghana. The study further sought to determine the association between selected demographic characteristics and student satisfaction with online pre-admission processes, usage of online learning tools, and online social environment. In total, 126 questionnaires were completed and analyzed to generate frequencies, percentages, Anova, and chi-square values. It was established that weak online learning social environment does not encourage tutors and students' interactions, which led to a generally average use of online learning support tools. This implies that academic and administrative support were practically far away from the student, which is detrimental to the development of self-directed learning. The researchers recommended training for support staff, tutors, and students to create an effective online support for online distance students.

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal four (SDG4) highlights the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning for all citizens of the world by the year 2030. This has necessitated rethinking and adoption of more flexible and innovative programmes to cater for inclusivity at higher education institutions worldwide. In this light, Van Wyk (2018) has indicated that global trends in higher education settings have moved towards a more inclusive and blended approach due to the availability and usage of more digital pedagogies that support and at the same time accelerate student learning.

To accomplish the vision of inclusivity and lifelong learning, distance education (DE) providers have expanded their learning environment from a limited geographical location to several other locations termed satellite campuses or learning centres (Agbanu, Sonyo & Ahiase, 2018). The creation of the DE learning centres have helped to increase access to education and training by freeing learners from time and place constraints as well as providing flexible learning opportunities for them. The advent of technology has further widened the learning environment by adding digital space to the limited geographical space beyond what the traditional brick and mortar institutions could provide. As noted by Kamau (2012), DE has shifted from its reliance on print media and marginal student support to the use of learning tools to provide distance learners with the needed support.

Similarly, Arko-Achemfuor (2017) remarked that the incessant demand for higher education has inadvertently initiated the start and spread of DE, making it an established and essential aspect of conventional education in both developing and developed countries. The SDG4 re-echoes the fact that more people are entering or returning to school to sharpen their skills and knowledge, which calls for technological and other support systems that allow distance instructors and learners to keep in touch with each other whether they operate in a synchronous or asynchronous mode.

The tertiary sector of Ghana's education system is broadly categorised into public and private tertiary institutions. Both categories admit students into the distance learning programmes albeit in different models. The public universities use the dual model and are heavily dependent on the print media while the private institutions are mostly dependent on the ICT. The mission of Ghana's distance education programme 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 (Government of Ghana, 2002). It also seeks to provide an alternative approach to the traditional models and ensure judicious use of physical and human resources (Government of Ghana, 2002).

Though the advent of technology has immensely contributed to innovations in learning almost on daily basis, Salih (2004) asserts that student support systems such as electronic communication technologies (ICT) are capable of easing the journey of learners as they embark on learning. Salih, however, notes that the resources at an institution's disposal and its capacity largely determine the extent and quality of the support services it can offer. Likewise, Sekyi (2013) alludes to this by indicating that student support services differ with respect to institutions and are thus influenced by fiscal strength, student preferences and administrative setup. Salih (2004), therefore, categorizes these capacities and resources into academic capacity and administrative functions. The Academic capacity covers services such as tutorials and guidance and counselling while administrative functions include record keeping, provision of information, enrolment, admission, registration and study material delivery. Two other aspects earlier established by Ellström, Ekholm and Ellström (2008) are the structural environment, which comprises

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