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Characteristics of Distance Learners In The Case Of External Degree Programme of the University Of Nairobi

Ouma Omito[1] & Jane Kembo[2]

[1]PhD Scholar of Information, Communication and Technology, Rongo University College, Kenya
[1]Chairperson, Department of Curriculum Instruction and Media, Rongo University College, Kenya

Abstract

The study was based on the characteristics of distance learners at the School of Continuing and Distance Education at the University of Nairobi. The particular case under study was the Bachelor of Education (Arts) students who are taking their studies by distance mode. The study was set to achieve the following objective: To investigate the characteristics of distance learners. The study design used was cross sectional survey with well deigned questionnaires and an interview schedule. The study population was 500 external degree students in their final part of the study. The study sample of 217 students was arrived at by the use of a sample table provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).The sampling technique was simple random. To test on validity and reliability a pre-test was conducted, that is split-half method was used to establish the effectiveness and internal consistency of the questionnaire. Content validity was used on the results and comments from the pilot study. The study found that distance learners' characteristics are varied. In the first instance, both 59 (51.3%) male and 56 (48.7%) female are almost in equal demand for distance learning. Gender is not a factor when it comes to enrolment in distance learning. It also emerged that distance learners are aged hence are adult learners. Majority of the 41 (35.7%) respondents were aged between 36 and 40 years. On the other hand, 111 (96.5%) distance learners at the University of Nairobi were found to be employed with the majority of the 104 (90.4%) employees drawn from the Teachers Service Commission of Kenya. 102(88.7%) students were found to be married. It was therefore concluded that:
•Distance learners cuts across gender (male and female) almost on an equal measure
•Majority of distance learners are adults
•Majority of distance learners are employed
•Majority of distance learners have some work experience.
•Most distance learners are married
It was recommended that a similar study be extended to other universities and may include the adult teaching and learning styles. Distance learners' lifestyle and ability to meet the cost distance learning needs to be investigated.

Introduction

Background of the Study

According to Reddy and Manjulika (2002), scholars of theology adduced that the seeds for receiving and delivering instructions by distance mode were sown through two major events that took place during the time of Moses. Moses received a set of instructions through two tablets of stone engraved on sides, front and back, by the finger of God at Mount Sinai. In addition, sacred letters of St. Paul to churches of God in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Thessalonica represented the earliest form of correspondence education which was a version of distance education.

In 1840, Sir Issac Pitman, the English inventor of shorthand, came up with an ingenious idea for delivering instruction to a potentially limitless audience: correspondence courses by mail. This was also called as the postal system. Pitman's concept was so hot that within a few years he was corresponding with a legion of far-flung learners (Phillips 1998).In the European and German context, using the new postal system was made possible by the rail system that was beginning to make travel and communication across England and Germany respectively quicker than ever before (Shrestha, 1997, as cited by Tait, 2003). The crucial dimension of Pitman's system was that he corrected students' work and sent them back to them. This is called turnaround time in the present distance learning. It is also important to note that, although students were separated from the teacher, students received feedback from the teacher which in essence is a core component of distance learning.

The invention of educational radio in the 1920s and the advent of television in the 1940s, (Ascough, 2002), created another important new forms of communication for use in distance education. Educators used these new technologies to broadcast educational programs to millions of learners, thus extending learning opportunities beyond the walls of conventional teaching institutions.

The development of reliable long-distance telephone systems in the early 1900s also increased the capacity of distance educators to reach new student populations. But telephone systems never played a prominent role in education until the introduction of new teleconferencing technologies in the 1980s and 1990s. Teleconferencing systems made it possible for teachers to talk with, hear, and see their students in real time - that is, with no delays in the transmissions - even if they were located across the country or around the world.

The present distance education increasingly uses combinations of different communications technologies to enhance the abilities of teachers and students to communicate with each other. With the spread of computer-network communications in the 1980s and 1990s, large numbers of people gained access to computers linked to telephone lines, allowing teachers and students to communicate in conferences via computers.

According to UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education, that is, IITE (2002), distance education is evolutionary. It has undergone three main generations. The first generation was correspondence education majorly based on print, followed by the second generation which witnessed the opening of the first Open University (Open University of London) in 1969.UNESCO 2002, observed that the main difference between the first and second generation was the use of an integrated multimedia approach. The third generation of distance education uses ICTs that are interactive, electronic, and computer-based as its basis for distributing information and facilitating communication between learners and teachers, learners and learners. Here ICTs provide for two-way communications that are either synchronous ('at the same time' as in videoconferencing or audio-conferencing) or asynchronous ('not at the same time' as in electronic mail or most computer-based discussion forums).

Distance Learners at the University of Nairobi

University of Nairobi remains the first and oldest university in Kenya. The university was formerly known as the Royal Technical College of East Africa which started in 1952 with their first intake for students

realized in April 1956. The Royal College was later renamed "University College, Nairobi" and began to prepare students for the bachelor's degrees awarded by the University of London alongside college diploma courses. Further, the University of Nairobi (UoN) through its Institute of Adult Studies initiated extra-mural education in 1973. The program covered professional subjects such as law, auditing, taxation, public and business administration through part-time classes (Rambo and Odundo, 2010, p.45).

In delivery of distance learning to students, the School of Continuing and Distance Education currently use print and audio materials. And because the program uses a distance mode of instruction, a number of learner support services have been put in place. The support services are in the form of face-to-face tutorials, counseling, administrative and centralized library support. Face-to-face tutorial sessions are conducted for all groups of students who are mainly primary school teachers. To cater for the needs of these students, whose majority, are employed teachers (Omito, 2010), the three school holidays in a year in Kenya is the most convenient time for tutorial sessions and other forms of learner support. A semester runs for 8 months and going by the school holidays, there are three face to face tutorials in a semester. Tutorial sessions are conducted at the central campus in Nairobi City and are attended by all active students. Counseling and administrative support services are provided throughout the semester at the central campus and regional study centers, across the country (Bowa, 2008) as cited by Bowa 2011.

Problem Statement

The thirst of education is outpacing the supply. More and more admissions of students in distance learning programs in the whole world are on the rise. Each and every student opting for distance learning has a reason for it but little has been known about them. The study therefore seeks to establish some characteristics of distance learners at the University of Nairobi.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed at establishing the characteristics of distance learners

Literature Review

The growth of distance education courses has prompted educational research focusing on learners 'characteristics and learning differences in the past twenty years (Hills, 2003; Khan, 2005). Approaches to learning emphasized the importance of taking learners into consideration when designing instruction. Learners' characteristics have always been an important concern for educators, designers, and researchers. Distance learners have unique learning traits and may need a tailored learning design. Each and every individual distance learner's learning differences and styles must be taken into account by the institutions providing distance education.

Distance learning can substitute, compliment or strengthen conventional education. It is not aimed at lowering the quality of education. Distance learners are expected to measure up same learning experiences as conventional students. They are expected to acquire degree certificates of same value as conventional learners; however, distance learners may not share same characteristics with regular students. Many scholars of distance learning (Lapadula, 2003; Kemp, 2002) refer to distance learners as adult learners. This means that majority of distance learners may be adults' learners. Kemp (2002) went ahead to say that adult learners would like to take full control of their learning, but often have no one from whom to seek help from in

case of learning difficulties in the process of learning. Taking full control of learning requires high degree of autonomy and independence (Keegan, 1996).Distance learners are isolated from the teacher and the learning group and depending on the distance learning technology in use, distance learners have no specific place and time for learning. Distance learning can take place in a moving bus, church or mosque, an institution or any other convenient place for the learner. Any institution offering DE must ensure that the content to be studied and the technology to be used for distance learning must suit the individual needs of distance learners. Distance learning contents and technology should be dialogical and transactional (Moore, 1993).

Methodology

Research Design

The design used in this study was a case study. Cross sectional survey was used. According to Tolmie, Muijs, and McAteer (2011 p.36),cross-sectional survey design is carried out at one point in time by individuals within selected group or cross-sections of the target population. Survey is also said to be an attempt to collect data from members of a population in order to determine the current status of that population with respect to one or more variables (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). The survey design is suitable because it is characterised by a systematic collection of data from members of a given population. Survey design was also appropriate because for this study because it described and reported the preparedness level of students under study with a higher degree of accuracy. This is because survey design is a systematic empirical enquiry in which the researcher does not have control over the independent variables because their manifestations have already occurred or simply they are inherently manipulate able. Oketch (2013) also

observed that cross-sectional survey can successfully be used in social sciences to to gather the required data for the research since it allows researchers to look at numerous variables at once (age, education level, gender), takes place at a single point in time (Tolmie, Muijs and McAteer, 2011) and often used to look at the prevalence of something in a given population. Cross sectional survey in the context of this study can measure the institutional needs of educational services as they relate to programs(Creswell, 2012 p.378). As such, inferences about relationship among variables were made without direct intervention from variation of independent and dependent variables. The final part of the Bachelor of Education (Arts) of the University of Nairobi was therefore seen as a cross section and a representative of the External Degree Program of the University of Nairobi.

Target population

Borg and Gall (1998), define target population as all the number of real or hypothetical set of people, events of objects to which a researcher generalizes the results of the research study. According to Luck and Rubin (1993) as cited by Anyona 2009, two categories of respondents are necessary in research, and these are the informed specialists and the consumers or users. Based on such facts, the consumers of distance learning programs for this particular research were the final year external degree students taking Bachelor of Education (Arts) by distance learning at the College of Education and External Studies at the University of Nairobi.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

This section describes the procedure used in sampling and gives the sample size for the final group of Bachelor of Education (Arts) students from the External Degree Programme of the University of

Nairobi. To determine the sample size, both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used. Non probability sampling was used to pick part 6 from the rest of the parts (1, 2, 3, 4 and5). For an appropriate sample size of distance learners, a table provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970)   was used. The table gives the required the sample size for various population sizes. The total number of students for this (part 6) cohort was 500.This was inclusive of drop out cases. According to the table provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size for this study was 217 students. Since the population was not homogeneous the researcher   used simple random sampling. This involved random selection of the respondents provided they were members of the group under   study (Weirsma, 1969).

Table 1Study Population

Target Population	Study Population	Sampled Size	Percentage
Distance Learning Students	500	217	43.3

Research Instruments

Since the research design is survey, the researcher used a questionnaire. A questionnaire is a data gathering instrument used when factual information is desired (Best and Khan, 2003). It was important for this study because the researcher administering the instrument had an opportunity to establish rapport, explain the purpose under study, and as well explain the meanings of items that were not clear. The researcher   used a closed questionnaire for this research.   The administered questionnaires to 217 distance learning students. The questions asked were centred more on their feelings of students on their comfort with the use

of technology for learning.

Instrument Validity

According to Weirsma (1969), validity refers to the extent to which the instrument reflects the behaviour under study. It involves a systematic investigation of the instrument's items to determine whether or not they make up a representative sample of behavioural dimensions or traits to be measured. Content validity is a measure of degree to which data collected using a particular instrument represents a specific domain of indicators or content of a specific concept (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003).The content validity was picked for use in this study as it was based on the results and comments of the pilot study.

Instrument Reliability

Reliability of the instrument is the degree of consistency that the instrument demonstrates (Best, 1998:276). Weirsma (1966) says reliability means consistency of the measuring instrument. Rose and Stanley (1954), refer to reliability as the degree to which an instrument agrees with itself. An instrument is reliable when it can measure the variables accurately and consistently and obtain the same results under the same conditions over a period of time. According to Njagi (2013) in his PhD theses, a test must be valid in order for it to be reliable. For this research, a pilot study was conducted on some External B.Ed (Arts) students from the last cohort that aimed at indicating reliability on the questionnaire. The internal consistency of data was determined from scores obtained from single test that the researcher administered to indicate whether the questionnaires were reliable tools for this research.

Data collection procedures

The administration of research data collection

instrument was done by the researcher both at the pilot and main study. The main research instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire administered to students during their residential sessions. Upon the approval of the research instruments, the researcher obtained a research permit from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The collected data were grouped and coded for data analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The researcher used a number of statistical methods to analyse the collected data. This included quantitative techniques. The data was analysed by each question asked. The researcher also used frequencies, tables, percentages, mean score and total scores.

Ethical considerations

A research permit was obtained from the Ministry of Science and Technology. A copy of this permit was presented to the Dean, School of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Nairobi. All respondents were assured of confidentiality and security. Ethical issues were considered in all components of this research. There was no academic theft. All sourced data and information were properly cited and referenced.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

Table 2 Learner Characteristics based on Gender

Gender category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	59	51.30
Female	56	48.70
Total	115	100%

Table 2 presents data on gender of the final semester of Bachelor of Education (Arts) students of the External Degree Programme of the University of Nairobi. It is observed that females represented 56(48.70%) and males represented 59(51.30%). The research findings could show that there are more males than females who were registered for this programme.

Table 3 Learner Characteristics based on Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-25	6	5.2
26-30	12	10.4
31-35	30	26.1
36-40	41	35.7
41-45	20	17.4
46-50	6	5.2
51-55	0	0.0
55 +	0	0.0
Total	115	100%

From the table, it is observable that in terms of age brackets, (18-25) years represented 6 (5.2%), (26-30) years represented 12 (10.4%) students, (31-35) years represented 30 (26.1%) students, (36-40) years represented 41 (35.7%) students, (41-45) years represented 20 (17.4%) students and lastly (46-50) years represented 6 (5.2%) students. There were no respondents for the age brackets (51-55) and (55+). It was, therefore, found that majority of the students registered for B.Ed (Arts) degree final semester were aged 36 and 40 years which represented 35.7%.

Table 4 Learner Characteristics based on Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	102	88.7
Single	13	11.3
Total	115	100%

In terms of marital status, table 4 has shown that 102 (88.7%) students were married and 13(11.3%) of the students were unmarried. There was no divorcee. In this sense, there were more married students than single students who were registered for this final semester course.

Table 5 Learner Characteristics based on Employment Status

Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Employed	111	96.5
Unemployment	4	3.5
Total	115	100.00

Table 5 presents data on employment status of B.Ed (Arts) students. It was observed that 111 (96.5%) students were employed. Similarly the unemployed constituted 4 (3.5%) of the students population. This implied that there were more employed students than unemployed students registered for this course.

Table 6 Learner Characteristics based on Students' Employer

Employer	Frequency	Percentage
TSC	104	90.4
Public service	1	0.9
NGO	2	1.7
Others	4	3.5
No employer	4	3.5
Total	115	100

In order to establish the employers for this group under study, table 6 presented data on the general information of employers. 104(90.4%) students were found to be employed by Teachers Service Commission, only 1(0.9%) of the students was employed by the Public Service, 2(1.7%) of the students were employed by Non-Government Organisations, 4(3.5%) were employed by other organisations and lastly 4(3.5%) students were unemployed. This implies that the main employer for B.Ed (Arts) students was the Teachers Service Commission.

Table 7 Learner Characteristics based on Work Experience

Work Experience in years	Frequency	Percentage
Over 20	9	7.8
11-20	57	48.7
6-10	38	28.7
1-5	6	7.8
Below one year	0	1.7
No work experience	5	43.5
Total	115	100

Table 7 presents general data on work experience for B.Ed (Arts) students. It was observed that the students with over 20 years' experience were 9(8%). Those with a working experience between 11 and 20 years were 57(50%). Between 6 and 10 years working experience were 38(33%) students, 6(5.2%) represented students with the work experience between 1 and 5 years. There was no student with a work experience of less than one year. This implied that majority of the students for this programme had a work experience between 11 and 20 years.

Conclusion

In summary, both male and female at the University of Nairobi have the urge for distance learning. Based on the percentage, 59 (51.3%) male and 56 (48.7%) for female, there seem to be no significant difference between genders. That is to say both male and female have the urge for distance learning in almost equal measure. In terms of chronological age, the majority of 41 (35.7%) distance learners fell under the age brackets of 36 and 40 years. Hence, it can be said that majority of distance learners are adults. This could be attributed to the fact that this category of distance learners was active in employment and could afford the cost of their studies. This fact was confirmed by the findings of this research that 111(96.5%) distance students were employed and particularly by the Teachers Service Commission of Kenya. Finally, in terms of years of work experience, majority of the respondents 57(59%) were had served between 11 and 20 years. This may suggest that this category of workers still had the hope of career progression and better employment terms.

Recommendations for Further Research

It was recommended that a similar study be extended to other universities and may include the adult teaching and learning styles. Distance learners' lifestyle and ability to meet the cost distance learning needs to be investigated.

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