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ABSTRACT

The opinions of distance educators and practitioners around the world were surveyed regarding availability of research information, areas in which research efforts should be concentrated, and priority to be given to these research areas. The sample was randomly selected from registered members of the International Council for Distance Education. The questionnaire collected biographical information and opinions on the three areas of interest and required respondents to rank difficulties in research in distance education. Of 102 returned questionnaires, 89 from 23 countries were accepted for data processing. Results indicated that distance experts believed the following: (1) the level of information from research was inadequate; (2) more research was required in all areas of distance education; and (3) priority should be given to the areas of evaluation and systems for the provision of feedback to students. Experts felt that funding and time allocation were the two greatest difficulties encountered in research. Differences were apparent between experts from developed and developing countries with respect to their responses, especially with their ranking of the difficulties faced in research. The comparison of results on the basis of the independent variables of gender, present position at work, area of specialization, highest qualification, etc., did not yield any significant differences when submitted to analysis of variance. (Appendixes include 14 references and 4 data tables.) (YLB)

Subtheme: Research and Development

A DISTANCE EDUCATION RESEARCH AGENDA: A SURVEY OF EXPERT OPINIONS FROM DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.

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Abstract

The enormous upsurge in demand for learning at a distance and the concerted effort made by distance education providers to meet this need has led to a situation in which research activities in distance education seem to have been relegated to the background if not completely neglected. This has led to a wide range of practices within distance education without any empirical support.

The literature examined reveals the tendency to regard research as relatively ancillary to descriptions of distance education practice. Further, much of the research in distance education is neither planned nor conducted in a systematic manner. The emerging political and economic pressures being brought on distance education in many countries of the world demand that more than ever before, decisions should be based on solid empirical research evidence. Distance educators need to determine their research priorities to achieve this.

This study reports on an investigation of the opinions of a cross section of distance education practitioners drawn from several countries with regard to the availability of research information, areas in which research efforts should be concentrated, and the order of priority to be given to such research areas.

The results analysed using independent variables, such as years of working experience, qualifications, gender, and specialisation within distance education, are discussed and their implications for the continued practice of distance education highlighted.

Introduction

Research, a consequence of the innate curiosity of human kind, attempts to record and communicate our questions, ideas, observations and experiences about the environment in which we live. Although it is as old as human kind and has variously been linked with the search for truth (Bronowiski, 1961), and regarded as much a natural human function as breathing (Candy, 1991), research did not attract universal usage as a systematic means of reasoning, gathering empirical evidence or organising personal experience until the emergence of Aristotle and the Greeks (Best & Kahn, 1989). Its development through the times of Francis Bacon, John Dewey and recently Lee Cronbach has popularised and legitimised research as a necessary part of trading in the commodity of knowledge.

The inclusion of research in almost any endeavour humans undertake underscores the significance attached to its utility value. Within education, research has impacted on knowledge about education and its practice. In specific terms research should influence, directly or indirectly, the processes of teaching and learning (Borg and Gall, 1983). Research within conventional face-to-face classroom-based education has a long history and has witnessed major achievement and advancement. The literature is replete with a plethora of educational research both in methods, variety and contributions to knowledge about education (see the reviews by Walberg, Schiller and Haertel, 1979, and Jackson, 1990). Compared with research in conventional education, research in distance education has neither been as pervasive, rigorous nor taken as very consequential if what obtains in the literature is anything to go by. A number of reasons might account for this state. First, the field of distance education is comparatively young and therefore requires time for maturity. Second, distance education providers and practitioners are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume, complexity and variety of activities involved in the provision of education at a distance. As a consequence, the time is not always available to address issues relating to research. Third, a related reason is the tendency to regard research as ancillary to distance education (Coldeway, 1990).

The above reasons could in part be responsible for Coldeway's criticism of distance education research as not planned, conducted, and or reported in a systematic manner. One other result is the lack of explicit philosophical paradigm driving distance education research. These lead to lack of priority, clear direction, poor research design and focus, to mention but a few, and ultimately result in a paucity in quality and quantity of research reports on distance education. Yet, there is no gainsaying the fact

that embarking on research illuminates the various transactions which go on in distance education. In particular, the choice of learning and teaching strategies, instructional design, development, production and delivery of instructional materials using any form of communications technologies or the multimedia approach would require that empirical evidence be generated to support their educational significance. This could only be done through enquiry.

The primary purpose of this paper is to investigate the opinions of the community of experts in distance education around the world regarding the availability of research information, areas in which research efforts should be concentrated, and the order of priority to be given to such research areas.

The evolution of distance education from correspondence education which emerged over two centuries ago is still continuing at different paces and directions in various parts of the world. Although it now seems a truism that the growing interest in distance education by both developing and developed countries has been primarily stimulated by evidence, and or belief, that distance education is a cost effective means of meeting the demand of education (Taylor, 1989), its implementation, philosophy, role, usage and definition are as diverse as the number of countries that adapt this form of education. The variations and diversities within distance education around the world are probably a realistic reflection of the political, socio-economic, educational and cultural circumstances within each region and each country. Further more they indicate the availability and use of communications technologies in the delivery of distance education, as well as inform on the presence and growth of the communities of distance educators and practitioners and the expertise within such communities. All these aggregated would serve as an indicator for determining the place of research in distance education in the different countries of the world.

The information available indicate that research is only just being given some mention within national or regional frameworks. For example, the first time American leaders in distance education got together to review and discuss research in distance education was in 1988 (Moore, 1988). Moore is of the opinion that this was probably the first time that such group met for such a purpose anywhere in the world. A similar symposium held for the first time in Australia at Deakin University in 1989 and was followed by the second one in 1991. In the Latin American region, a workshop was organised in 1990 to analyse the results of research carried out to diagnose the current situation of distance education in the Americas (Villarroel, 1992). With regards to Africa, The first Pan-African meeting on distance education took place in Tanzania in 1990 under the auspices of UNESCO. The materials presented at the meeting pointed

to the fact that information and research is one of the three important factors on which distance education in Africa depends. In India the first comprehensive project in distance education was launched very recently by the Indira Ghandhi National Open University (Singh, 1992). There could therefore be obvious level of differences pertaining to how the developed and developing countries are addressing the issue of research in distance education. A secondary purpose of this paper therefore, is to compare expert opinions in developing and developing countries with regard to the availability of research information, areas in which research efforts should be concentrated, and the order of priority to be given to such research areas in distance education. The information would also be examined in relation to some independent variables including years of working experience, qualifications, gender, and specialisation within distance education.

Methodology

Sample

All the distance educators and practitioners who are registered as individual members of the International Council for Distance Education formed the population of the study. Using the 1992 membership list, 200 members were randomly selected across the various regions of the world as sample.

Instrumentation and Procedure of Administration

The instrument consisted of a five-page questionnaire divided into five sections. Section A related to biographical details while sections B, C and D sought opinions regarding level of research information, where research effort should be concentrated upon, and areas needing priority research attention respectively within distance education. Section E required respondents to rank the difficulties faced with research in distance education. The instrument underwent a series of validation by a panel of judges selected from a cross section of experts in distance education, research methodology, communications and data analysis. The questionnaire was mailed to the subjects of the sample within a 3-day period accompanied by a letter requesting that they send the questionnaire back as soon as completed.

Results and Findings

Of the 200 questionnaires mailed out, 102 were returned. Considering the problems usually encountered with mail questionnaire administration, language problems, incomplete or change of address, etc, the 50 percent response rate was judged to be satisfactory. 13 returned questionnaires were discounted due to factors such as incomplete number of pages sent back, more than half the items not responded to. 89 duly completed questionnaires from a total of 23 countries were finally accepted for data processing. The sampie contained 50 males and 39 females. Using the globally accepted United Nations definition of developed and developing countries (Osmanczyk, 1990), 10 countries with 56 respondents (male = 30, female = 26) were classified as developed, and 13 countries with 33 respondents (male =20, female = 13) were classified as developing.

Figure 1 about here

The analysis of the frequency of responses to the items in the various sections of the questionnaire indicated that majority of the experts are of the opinion that the level of information available from research in distance education is inadequate. More than 50 percent of the respondents all over the world agreed that more research is needed in all areas while they rated the areas of Evaluation (60.2%) and System for the Provision of Feedback to Students (58.9%) as requiring the highest priority research attention. The areas of Theory and Philosophy (36.3%) and Relationship between Open Learning and Distance Education (35.8%) were judged by the experts as requiring lowest priority in research.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

The response of the experts with regard to the periodicals/journals relevant to distance education they regularly read, is as shown in Figure 1. Distance Education journal attracted the highest reader followed by the International Council for Distance Education Bulletin and the American Journal of Distance Education. The results of the data analysis comparing the opinions of experts in developed and developing countries are as shown in Tables 1 to 4. Out of the 22 broad areas of research listed in the

questionnaire, the respondents from developed and developing countries differed significantly in their responses to seven, four and ten areas with regard to the level of information available, areas in distance education requiring concentration of research effort, and areas in distance education requiring priority research respectively (see Tables 1, 2 and 3).

Table 3 about here

Table 4 about here

With regard to ranking the difficulties researchers in distance education often face, Funding and Time Allocation were the two greatest difficulties nominated. When the results were compared on regional basis, experts from developed countries ranked Time Allocation and Funding as the top two difficulties they face. The experts from developing countries ranked Lack of Personal Interest in Research Projects and Finding a Researchable Problem as their top two difficulties (see Table 4).

The comparison of the results on the basis the independent variables of gender, present position at work, areas of specialisation, highest qualification, etc, did not yield any significant differences when submitted to ANOVA.

Summary and Implications

The results of the study have indicated that distance education experts around the world are of the opinion that (a) we do not have anywhere near adequate level of information from research, (b) we need to embark on more research in all areas of distance education, and (c) priority should be given to the areas of Evaluation and Systems for the provision of Feedback to Students. The experts are also of the opinion that Funding and Time Allocation are the two greatest difficulties encountered in research. Differences abound between experts from developed and developing countries with regard to their responses to certain items on the questionnaire most especially with their ranking of the difficulties faced with research. Four major implications are obvious amongst many, from these results. First, very little has been accomplished by way of research in distance education and there is therefore a need to embark on research into all areas of distance education, Second, the low level or near absence of research neither provides practitioners with valuable information nor an empirically rooted basis for our actions in the effort to provide education at a distance

to the teeming population requesting for it. Third, the differences in opinions between experts from developed and developing countries point to the need for a concerted, unified global action towards distance education. Last but not the least is, as mentioned by Moore (1988), the academic need for review and analysis of research and for the organisation of a research agenda for the distance education practitioners and providers all over the world.

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Periodicals/Journals Relevant to Distance Education Regularly Read

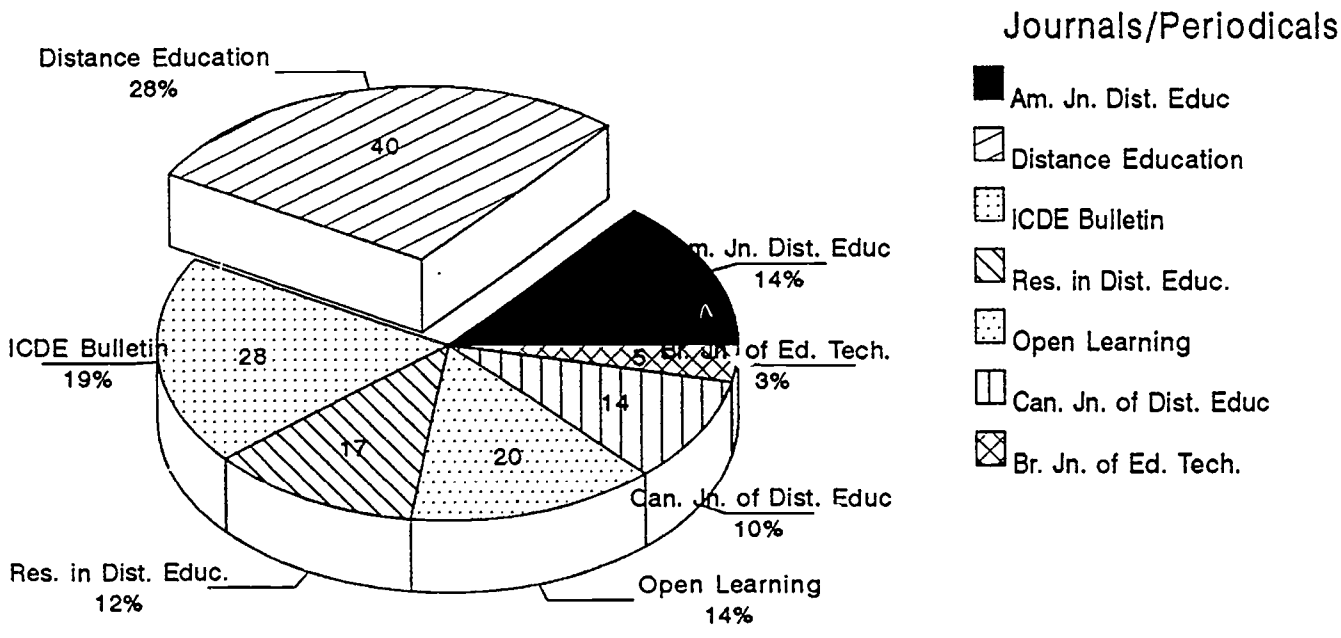

Figure 1

Periodicals/Journals Relevant to Distance Education Regularly Read

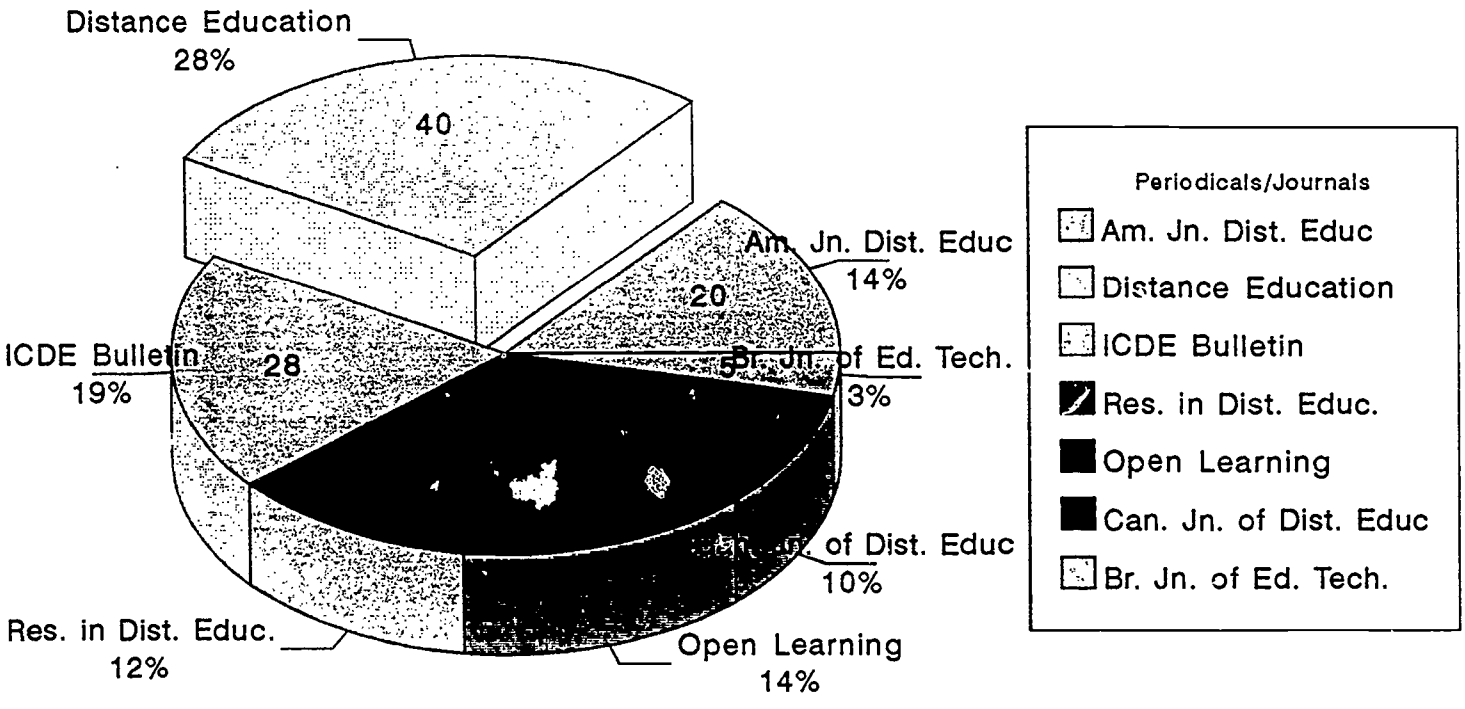

Figure 1

TABLE 1

Statistically significant differences between developed and developing countries with regard to the level of information available.

Broad Groupings of Research Areas	Developed		Developing		t
	x	SD	x	SD	
	N = 56		N = 33		
1. Theory and philosophy	4.22	0.87	3.50	1.30	2.67**
2. Equity and Access (compensating for disadvantages)	3.29	1.18	2.45	1.15	3.13**
3. Instructional communications technology	4.17	0.92	3.82	1.22	3.35**
4. Teleteaching and learning	3.88	1.01	3.16	1.16	2.87**
5. Management and planning	3.40	1.12	3.87	0.85	-2.14**
6. Interactive Multimedia	3.80	0.99	3.19	1.10	2.54**
7. Role of distance education in national development	3.01	1.16	3.75	0.95	-3.14**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

TABLE 2

Statistically significant differences between developed and developing countries with regard to areas in distance education requiring concentration of research effort.

Broad Groupings of Research Areas		Developed		Developing		t
		x	SD	x	SD	
		N = 56		N = 33		
1.	Equity and Access (compensating for disadvantage)	3.32	1.29	3.93	1.03	-2.32*
2.	Relationship between open learning and distance education	3.12	1.16	3.76	0.82	-2.88**
3.	Teacher Education	3.28	1.28	3.83	0.59	-2.54**
4.	Professional Development of distance educators	3.63	1.17	4.10	0.60	-2.37*

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$

TABLE 3

Statistically significant differences between developed and developing countries with regard to areas in distance education requiring priority research

	Broad Groupings of Research Areas	Developed		Developing		t
		x̄ N = 56	SD	x̄ N = 33	SD	
1.	Discipline based context	1.93	0.61	2.35	0.73	-2.55**
2.	Professional development of distance educators	2.26	0.72	2.74	0.56	-3.50**
3.	Development of student study skills	2.26	0.70	2.75	0.56	-3.42**
4.	Cognition and metagonition	1.82	0.71	2.26	0.78	-2.49**
5.	Role of Distance education in national development	2.17	0.78	2.56	0.61	-2.47**
6.	Management and Planning	2.28	0.70	2.68	0.53	-2.90**
7.	Cost benefit analysis	2.28	0.73	2.58	0.50	-2.19*
8.	Teacher Education	1.86	0.74	2.53	0.56	-4.44**
9.	Design and development of study materials	2.37	0.63	2.71	0.58	-2.53**
10.	Evaluation	2.39	0.69	2.78	0.55	-2.82**

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$

TABLE 4

A comparison of rank orderings of difficulties faced with research in distance education between developed and developing countries.

	Difficulties with research	All Respondents N=89	Rank Order developed countries N=56	Rank Order developing countries N=33	t
1.	Competency in research methodology	7	8	6	.12
2.	Access to relevant literature	5	3	3	.83
3.	Funding	1	2	1	-.08
4.	Professional advice	10	4	6	.28
5.	Finding the right audience	6	4	7	.09
6.	Time Allocation	2	1	3	-2.30*
7.	Technical Advice	10	6	5	1.93
8.	Lack of personal interest in research projects	3	7	1	-2.07*
9.	Finding a researchable problem	4	6	2	-0.90
10.	Lack of my institutions interest in my research efforts	9	6	5	0.43
11.	Report writing	9	7	5	0.41
12.	Political interference	8	6	3	1.35
13.	Research project management	11	6	4	0.39
14.	Lack of personal enhancement from research	9	5	3	-0.37
15.	Others (please state)	12	7	8	-0.76

* significant at $p<.05$