GOAL SETTING, DECISION-MAKING SKILLS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF UNDERGRADUATE DISTANCE LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR RETENTION AND SUPPORT SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

The study adopted an Ex-post facto research design. Randomization sampling technique was used to select 346 undergraduate distance learners and the learners were grouped into four, High and Low Goal setter learners and High and Low Decision-making skills learners. The instruments for data collection were Undergraduate Academic Goal Setting Scale (UAGSS), Undergraduate Decision-making Skills Scale (UADMSS) and Semester Examination Course Result Grades in four courses. The instruments were validated with face and content validity and a test re-test administered after three weeks. The obtained alpha value were 0.77 and 0.84 while, Semester Examination Course Result Grades for the four courses that formed the academic performance (Use of English and Communication skills 1, Use of English and Communication skills 11, History and Philosophy of Science and the Good Study Guides) were moderated by External examiners appointed by the Senate of the University. t – test for unequal samples and Pearson Moment Correlation Coefficient statistical method were used to analyse the data. The findings indicated statistically significant difference between high and low goal setter undergraduate distance learners academic performance ($t = 4.01 < 0.000$), statistically significant difference between high and low decision – making skills undergraduate distance learners academic performance ($t = -3.35.93 < 0.001$), statistically significant positive relationship between high goal setter undergraduate distance learners and high decision-making skills undergraduate distance learners academic performance ($0.297 < 0.000$) and statistically significant negative relationship between low goal setter undergraduate distance learners and low decision-making skills undergraduate distance learners academic performance ($-0.307 < 0.000$). Recommendations were made towards learners' retention and provision of support services.

KEYWORDS

Goal setting, Decision-making skills, Academic performance, Retention and Support services.

1. INTRODUCTION

Setting achievable goals are vital to human success and achievements in life. Executing a set of achievable goals will automatically depend on a foundation of taking effective decision towards actualization of the set goals. Since goals contribute to success, it must also influence students' academic performance particularly in distance education. When learning goals are formulated by learners, it must be carried out with efficient decision-making skills (Aminu &Gali, 2012). Education and Counselling psychologists believed that learning to formulate goals and developing efficient decision-making skills are some of the basic training that should be inculcated in learners, if there must be successful academic records (Shertzer & Stone, 1976; Saka, 2006; Sambo, 2008 and Aminu & Gali, 2012). Setting attainable goals, determines the success of any activity, engagement or commitment. When goals are clearly mapped out, it must be accompanied with efficient decision-making skills so as to ensure it achievable implementation (Mind tools, 2014). Students' academic performance in learning tasks and exercises like any other worthwhile activities must therefore be planned and properly guided. Distance learners all over the world are characterized by different engagements and commitments at a given time, as most of them combine work and study together (Ipaye,2003). Assisting distance learners set achievable goals as well as develop efficient decision-making skills is crucial toward meeting up with the increasing demand for distance related academic programmes all over the world. Distance learners need to work towards the achievement of these formulated goals regularly at the beginning

of the programme, during and at the end of the programme, if the learner wants to get the most out of them. Learners that set realistic goals can be more motivated than those learners that set unachievable goals (Ipaye, 2003). Setting realistic goals have been traced to effective motivation. For example, Locke & Latham's theory, 1960's (cited in Mind Tools, 2014) showed that clear goals and appropriate feedback motivate individual. For undergraduate distance learners in open and distance education to set realistic goals, Locke and Latham (1990) outlined five principles of goal setting that need to be examined. The five principles outlined by Locke and Latham (1990) that were researched to improve individual chances of success are: Clarity, Challenge, Commitment, Feedback and task complexity. The researchers' view was that, the application of these principles to learners will improve academic performance. Undergraduate distance learners in open and distance education and institutions may find these principles difficult to understand comprehend or apply due to their numerous engagements combined with learning at a distance. Apart from having a set of realistic goals as a distance learner, the other related and intervening variable is the learner's decision-making skills (Aminu &Gali, 2012). Learner decision-making skills are vital in carrying out set goals. For distance learners to develop effective decision-making skills needed for goal setting, the learner must learn to take the following stages of decision-making: Efficient evaluation of problems, list of possible solutions in term of merits and demerits, application of the most appropriate solution, acceptance of the outcomes and acting upon the outcomes (Shertzer & Stone, 1976; Okon, 1983; Denger, 1986; Saka, 2006; Sambo, 2008; Aminu & Gali, 2012). According to Mind Tools (2014) stages involved in making efficient decision are: Establishing a positive decision-making environment, generating potential solutions, Evaluating alternatives, Deciding, Checking the decision, Communicating and Implementing.

Assisting learners to effectively set realistic and achievable goals and developing in the learner efficient decision-making skills is one of the roles of distance learning institutions, particularly in the National Open University of Nigeria (Ipaye, 2003). The convention that learners must set goals and make rational decisions that will enhance their academic performance have generated different but related studies (Tanglang & Aminu, 2014;Joo, Bong & Choi 2000; Chan, Yum, Ran, Jegede & Taplin 1999). In another study, Roblyer (1999) worked on factors that motivate community college and virtually high school students to choose online or traditional course formats. The findings indicated that for students who choose distance learning, control over face and timing of learning was more important; for students who choose face-to-face (FTF) course interaction with instructor and students was paramount. Cheners, Hu, & Garcia (2001), Pajares & Kranzler (2002), McIsaac, & Gurawerdena (1996) discovers that self-efficacy was related both to academic performance (r=38) and to persistence (r=34). Michael (2013) examined the evidence for the effectiveness of active learning. It defines the common forms of active learning most relevant for engineering faculty and critically examined the core element of each method and found that there is broad but uneven support for the core elements of active, collaborative, cooperative and problem-based learning. Examining these findings, none have specifically investigated goal setting and decision-making skills in relation to academic performance of undergraduate distance learners. The need to assist the distance learners to set realistic and achievable goals and acquire appropriate decision-making skills related to the demand of distance learning and education becomes necessary.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The negative trend in the completion rate of learners in distance education programme when compared with general enrolment prompted this research study, cited in Tanglang &Aminu (2014). Many of learners don't realize the importance of setting goals that will guide their learning activities, learning style and other activities that they combined with learning before and during the programme. From the researchers experience while interacting with undergraduate distance learners, many of these learners who were able to set realistic and attainable goals still lack the appropriate decision-making skills to carry out the set goals. Based on this, goal setting, decision-making skills and academic performance of undergraduate distance learners are been investigated in an attempt to draw implications for distance learners retention and support services.

1.2 Research Hypothesis

The following null-hypothesis was formulated for the study:

i. There is no significant difference between the academic performances of High and low goal setter distance learners, ii. There is no significant difference between the academic performances of High and low decision-making skill distance learners, iii. There is no significant relationship between the academic performance of High goal setter and high decision-making skill distance learners, iv. There is no significant relationship between the academic performance of Low goal setter and low decision-making skill distance learners.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

Ex-post factor research design was adopted for the study.

2.2 Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The population consisted of an estimated Three thousand (3,000) One hundred levels undergraduate distance learners of the National Open University of Nigeria Lagos Study Centre (NOUN: Academic office, 2014). Three hundred and forty-six (346) One hundred level undergraduate distance learners were randomly sampled.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments consisted of Undergraduate Academic Goal Setting Scale (UAGSS), Undergraduate Academic Decision-making Skills Scale (UADMSS) and End of semester examination course result grades in the four core compulsory courses. The Undergraduate Academic Goal Setting Scale and Undergraduate Academic Decision-making Skills Scale were modified scales designed by Mind Tools (2014), a web-based programme for training individuals on how to develop realistic goals and make effective / good decisions. The modified UADMS scale was first used by Tanglang &Aminu (2014). The UAGS scale consisted of eighteen statements on a format of Not at all with score of 5, rarely with score of 4, sometimes with score of 3, often with score of 2 and Very often with score of 1. The UADMS scale also consisted of eighteen statements on a format of Not at all with score of 1, Rarely with score of 2, Sometimes with score of 3, Often with score of 4 and very often with score of 5 on which the samples responded by honestly ticking the type that best describe their levels of goal setting and decision-making skills. The UAGS scale followed the five principles (clarity, challenge, commitment, feedback and task complexity) required for improved personal goal setting (Lock and Latham in Mind Tools, 2014). The statements on the scale were designed to measure: A). Preparing to set goals B). Forming goals C). Motivation D). Achieving Goals. The UADMS scale on the other hand, measures the following skills that were theoretically believed to form good /effective decision-making skills of individuals. Shertzer and Stone (1976); Okon (2003); Denga (1986); Saka (2008); Sambo (2010); Aminu, and Gali (2012); Mind Tools (2014) and Tanglang and Aminu (2014): A) Establishing a Positive Decision-Making Environment B) Generating Potential Solutions, C) Evaluating Alternatives D) Deciding, E) Checking the Decision f) Communicating and Implementing. Undergraduate learner with score range of 18 to 66 were interpreted as Low goal setters and low decision- making skill learners, while undergraduate distance learners with score range of 67 to 90 were interpreted as High goal setters and high decision-making skill learners. The interpretations served as basis for grouping the samples with One hundred and fifty-five High goal setters, One hundred and ninety-one Low goal setters, One hundred and forty-seven High decision-making skills learners and One hundred and ninety-nine Low decision-making skill leaners. The mean age was 20.31.

2.4 Validation of the Research Instruments

The Psychometric properties of UAGSS and UADMSS were established through face and content validity on a pilot study that involved 50 Undergraduate distance learners of the university's study centre in Kano. A test re-test conducted after three weeks of the first administration gives coefficient alpha values of 0.712 for UAGSS and 0.831 for the UADMSS. For the individual statements that measure the processes in setting realistic and achievable goals, the following Cronbach alpha reliability estimates were obtained: A). Preparing to set goals = 0.79. B). Forming goals = 0.67. C). Motivation = 0.68. D). Achieving Goals = 0.63. Individual statements that measures the processes involved in effective decision making, the following Cronbach alpha reliability estimates were obtained: A) Establishing a positive decision-making environment = 0.77. B) Generating potential solutions = 0.71. C) Evaluating alternatives = 0.77, D) Deciding = 0.81, E) Checking the decision = 0.80, F) Communicating and implementing = 0.799. The alpha values for each item on the two scales indicated their suitability for the study. While, the validation of the 2013/2014 semester examination for the four core-compulsory courses of the academic performance were established by External Examiners in the subject areas appointed by the Senate of the National Open University of Nigeria.

2.5 Administration and Collection of Research Instruments

The researchers were personally involved in the administration of the research instruments and also collected and compiled the required academic performance course grade scores of the samples.

2.6 Methods of Data Analysis

t-test for unequal samples was used to analyse the significant differences between high and low goal setters and high and low decision-making skill learners' academic performance while, Pearson Products Moment Correlation Coefficient method was used to analyse the significant relationships between High goal setters and high decision-making skills learners academic performance and also for the analysis of low goal setters and low decision-making skills learners academic performance.

2.7 Results

The results of the study are hereby presented in table 1 and 2. The interpretation of each result follows the tables:

Table 1 contained the analysis of hypotheses 1 and 2 which states that: There is no significant difference between the academic performances of High and low goal setter distance learners and that; there is no significant difference between the academic performances of High and low decision-making skill distance learners.

Table 1. t – test Analysis of Significant Difference between the Academic Performances of High and Low goal setter Distance Learners and Significant Difference between the Academic Performances of High and Low Decision-making skill Distance Learners

Variables	N	Mean	SD	t-value	P-Value
High Goal Setter Learners	155	8.40	1.63	4.01	0.000
Low Goal Setter Learners	191	7.78	1.02		
High Decision-making Skills Learners	147	7.71	1.23	-3.35	0.001
Low Decision-making Skills Learners	199	3.20	1.44		

Table 1 shows significant differences between the academic performances of High and Low goal setter distance learners and also significant difference between the academic performances of High and Low decision-making skills distance learners.

Table 2 contained hypothesis 3 and 4 which states that there is no significant relationship between the academic performances of High goal setters and high decision-making skill distance learners and that there is no significant relationship between the academic performances of Low goal setters and low decision-making skill distance learners.

Table 2. Relationship between the Academic Performances of High Goal Setters and High Decision-making Skill distance learners and Relationship between the Academic Performances of Low Goal Setters and Low Decision-making Skill Distance Learners

Variables	N	r –value	Sig. (2-tailed)
High Goal Setter Learners			
High Decision-making Skills Learners	302	0.297	0.000
Low Goal Setter Learners			
Low Decision-making Skills Learners	390	-0.307	0.000

Table 2 shows significant positive relationship between the academic performances of high goal setter distance leaners and high decision-making skill distance learners' and also significant negative relationship between the academic performances of low goal setter s and low decision-making skill distance learners.

2.8 Discussions

The significant connection between goals setting and decision-making skills as displayed in the academic performance can be linked to what was alluded to by Tanglang &Aminu (2014) that learner decision-making skills are vital in carrying out stated goals. The findings supported Joo, Bong & Choi (2000) that student's self-efficacy for self-regulated learning positively related to his / her academic self-efficacy, strategy use, and internet self-efficacy. Cheners, Hu &Garcia (2001) was also supported by these findings which showed that self-efficacy was related both to academic performance and to persistence. In a similar context, Pajares & Kranzler (2002) on the study of direct effect of mathematics self-efficacy on mathematics performance discovered strong effect of general mental ability, this shows an interplay of self-efficacy as one of the variables of goal setting and effective decision-making skills.Similarlly, the findings supported McIsaac, & Gurawerdena (1996) that a combination of cognitive style, personality characteristics and self-expectations is asserted to be able to predict the achievement in distance education.

2.9 Implications for Learners' Retention and Support Services

The unit for learner support services in open and distance learning institutions can be used to train distance learners on setting goals and developing effective decision-making skills. First, student counsellors must first prove to the learners, the roles played by setting achievable goals and how effective decision -making skills compliment the achievement of set goals and their influence on better academic performance. Second, student counsellors can map out the components involved in goal settings and decision-making skills based on their theoretical foundations. Third, the components can be developed into steps and provided in a module to be followed in developing the skills needed for appropriate goal settings and effective decision-making skills for learners. Fourth, the student counsellors can assist learners on how the module can be acquired to arrive at setting their various goals and decision-making.

3. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study proved the advantage of goal setting and decision-making skills on academic performance of undergraduate distance learners. The study was limited to undergraduate distance learners therefore, there is the need for study that will compare goal setting and academic performance of open and distance learners with that of conventional institutions.

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