Staff Development Practices of Open and Distance Learning Institutions in Ghana: The Case of the Distance Education Programme of University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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Abstract

Staff development plays a crucial role in Open and Distance learning programmes because most of the staff working on these programmes are products of the conventional face to face system. Lack of proper training of staff in ODL can lead to high dropout rate among distance learners. The purpose of this study was to investigate staff development practices of the Distance Education programme of the University of Education, Winneba. The study adopted the quantitative methodology which employed survey questionnaire to collect data from 39 administrators of the Distance Education study centres. The study found among others that, the University does not have a strong pre-service programme for the administrators at its study centres. It also found that, the administrators were satisfied with the first in-service training organised for them. Based on these findings, it was recommended that, the University should put in place strategic human resource development policies in relation to distance education for teaching, technical and administrative and part-time staff and institute regular in-service training programmes for its administrators at the distance Education study centres.

Keywords   Staff development, Open and Distance learning, Distance Education, pre-service, in-service, study centres

1. Introduction

Distance education as an alternative mode of delivery of higher education has gained increasing attention and patronage in various countries (Perraton, 2004). Ghana is no exception to this trend and several factors can be attributed to this increase. According to Hannay et al. (2006) distance education has provided opportunity for a wide range of people who, due to such factors as employment, marital status, family responsibilities, and distance would not have been able to access formal education. In addition, a number of media such as print, radio and television have been used to deliver distance education. Again, distance education has been propelled by the increasing realization of the need and pursuit of continuing learning (Garrison, 2000).

Earlier attempts at distance education in Ghana were met with some difficulties. However, there was strong conviction on the part of the Government of Ghana that Distance Education remained a viable complement to conventional education especially at the tertiary level. Currently, distance education has become prominent in the Ghanaian educational system with four of the nine public universities in Ghana providing tertiary education by distance, in addition to a number of private tertiary institutions.

One key aspect of open and distance learning is that it makes new demands on both the providers and learners, which in turn affects their way of working and learning respectively. It is fast changing the jobs of both educational and administrative staff and also requires different categories of staff to function in both single and dual modes of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) (Panda 2004). Most staff engaged in distance education received their formal education and worked mainly within the conventional face-to-face educational institutions which have different traits from distance education delivery and learners. As a result, if ODL staff are not equipped with the necessary skills, it can lead to high dropout rate among distance learners.

According to Panda (2004) the situation raises the need for institutional emphasis on staff development programmes and human resource development policy for teaching, technical, administrative staff and part-time staff associated with the operations of distance education institutions. However, some institutions give low priority to the continuing professional development of non-academic staff.

In Ghana, the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is one of the tertiary institutions providing teacher education by distance. The University has a special mandate to produce professional educators to spearhead a new national vision of education aimed at redirecting Ghana's effort along the path of rapid economic and social development. Its vision is to become an internationally reputable institution for teacher education and research.

The Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) runs the distance programmes of the UEW through its Centre for Distance Education (CDE) using the hybrid mode of print and online methods of delivery. These include diploma and post diploma programmes in Basic Education, Early Childhood Education, Business Management, Accounting and Human Resource Management. It also runs Master of Education programmes in English, Mathematics, Science and Mentorship and a postgraduate diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

As part of its support structure for the distance programme, UEW follows the UK Open University model of decentralized student support system with study centres scattered nationwide and tutors as core staff members for all enrolled students (Tait, 2003)

The UEW DE programme currently, has twenty-seven (27) study centres across the ten regions of Ghana, being managed by Study Centre Coordinators (SCCs) with the assistance of senior administrative assistants. The SCCs render very useful services to the distance learning students by overseeing both academic and administrative activities of the study centres. Out of the twenty-seven (27) study centres, twenty-two (22) of them have full time administrators who together with the administrators at the IEDE headquarters formed the focus of the study.

Using the Ghanaian context and the case of the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) Distance Education programme, this study sought to examine how administrators at the UEW distance study centres are prepared upon appointment to handle distance learners.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The administrators at the UEW distance study centres have received formal education with the requisite academic qualifications and may have worked in different positions in other organizations and tertiary institutions. However, to handle distance education students requires that they are trained in dealing with distance learners due to the peculiar characteristics of the latter. It has been observed that administrators at the UEW distance study centres have been experiencing some difficulties in attending to the distance learners at their study centres which seems to suggest that they lack the competence in handling the students. It is against this background that this study sought to investigate the staff development practices of UEW DE programme.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study therefore, was to investigate how administrators at the UEW distance study centres were prepared or developed before assignment and whether the training given them met their needs on the job and make recommendations for improving on the staff development practices of the University for its distance programme.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the research objectives were to:

1)   Ascertain the perception of administrators at the UEW distance study centres about the training they received before they were assigned on the job.
2)   Find out whether the first in-service training organised for the administrators met the training needs of the participants who had worked for some years as distance administrators

1.5. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1.   What is the perception of the administrators at the UEW distance study centres about the pre service training organised for them?
2.   What is the administrators' evaluation of the first in-service training organised for them?

1.6 Significance of the Study

With increasing investment in distance education by a developing country like Ghana, with its staggering economic problems with the intent of enhancing human resource development, it is imperative to identify appropriate ways of developing the ODL staff for effective delivery. Failure to do this will result in high drop out rates among distance learners, which will be a big waste of human and financial resources. The government of Ghana has over the past ten years shown a high degree of commitment to expanding access to university education through distance education. It is, therefore, crucial that the development of ODL staff is subjected to critical evaluation to ascertain their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the learners, so that the findings can be used as the basis for improvement. This, it is hoped, will help reduce the incidence of drop out thereby making the investment of the government worthwhile. The findings will again, assist the University of Education, Winneba and other distance education institutions to improve on their distance education staff development practices.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

2.1 Distance Education

The terms "distance education (DE) or distance learning (DL) have been used and applied interchangeably by many different researchers and institutions to a number of programmes, providers, audience and media. Perraton (1988:43) defines distance education 'as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner'. Keegan (1996) goes further to identify the key characteristics of distance education. According to him, distance education is a form of education characterised by:

- the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education);

- the influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach yourself programmes);

- the use of technical media-print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;

- the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education); and

- the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings, either face-to-face or by electronic means, for both didactic and socialization purposes (Keegan, 1996:50).

According to Perraton, Ministries of Education have found distance education methods attractive because these methods,

- make it possible to reach students who cannot get to college

- lend themselves to part-time education so that students are not taken out of the work force in order to study and

- appear to allow economies of scale, in part by avoiding the need for new buildings including housing for students (Perraton, 1993:3).

Distance Education or Distance Learning is therefore, a form or mode of educational delivery where the student and the tutor are not in a fixed place regulated by time and space.

2.2 Challenges and Problems of Distance Education Students

Research indicates that there are demographic and personality similarities among many distance learners that provide the basis for the description of a typical distance learning student (Tait, 2004). An understanding of the demographics and characteristics of distance learning students can help in relating to them and providing them with information they need to succeed in their courses.

Evidence from research indicates that distance learning students tend to be, on average, older than typical students in campus-based programmes. For example, Owusu-Mensah, (2007) found that one-third of a sample he picked from University of Cape Coast (UCC) distance education programme (42% of males and 37% of females) fell within the 30-39 age range while over half of the sample from the University of Education, Winneba, (51.7% of males and 54.9% of females) fell within age group 40-49. Thus, the majority of the population in both institutions are adults above thirty years, with less than 10%, on the average, falling within the 20-29 age groups. The adult nature of the population of the two institutions confirms the assertion that distance education students are normally adults who combine work with studies (McGivney, 2004; McIlroy and Walker, 1993). Similarly, in a 2004 survey of potential graduate school students in WPI's campus-based graduate programs, it was found that 73% of the students were under the age of 35. In an April 2007 survey of distance learning students at WPI, it was found that only 58% of students are under the age of 35. (WPI)

In most distance learning programs, the students are predominately female, with different studies indicating that between 60% and 77% of students are female. (WPI) At UEW for example females constitute about 63% of the DE student population (UEW Basic Statistics, 2014).

Several studies indicate that more than half of distance learning students hold full-time jobs outside of the home, with some programs reporting as many as 90% of their students being employed full-time (McGivney, 2004).

Various studies indicate that more than half of distance-learning students are married with dependents. This means that they are often juggling a family and a job with their coursework (Tait, 2004).

The above characteristics imply that Distance Education students are somewhat different from conventional students and so should be handled with tact and patience. It further implies that those who work with Distance Education students need some skills and knowledge and competence, which those who deal with conventional students do not have. This has implications

for staff development for the staff of Open and Distance Learning.

2.3 Staff Development of Distance Education Staff

The importance of people (staff) to the creation, existence, success and progress of organisations including educational institutions such as distance education providers cannot be overemphasized. In spite of technological advancement, faculty plays very critical role in distance education. Faculty has responsibility to ensure institutional quality and improvement of learning. (Dicoh and Wright, cited in Panda, 2004) Equally important is the role performed by other key staff whose role is governed by the institutional mission, goals, policies, distance education definition and organizational structures.

The growth and increased acceptance of distance education practice and potential has been pitched against the conventional classroom system of education on one hand and a blurred distinction between classroom distance education and technology based learning. This has implications for those working in distance education (Tait, 2004). Institutions therefore need to have strategic human resource development policies in place in relation to distance education for teaching, technical and administrative staff and part-time staff. This allows for investment in people both for their individual professional development and institutional effectiveness. However, many institutions give low priority to the continuing professional development of non-academic staff. Panda (2004) emphasizes the importance of every staff member going through an induction on areas of distance education, institutional strategic goals and operations before placement and should be followed by appraisal at regular intervals, continuous training or updating on areas of information technology, and staff members' specific training needs. Promotions should also be preceded by attendance at refresher programmes, followed by induction to the new job. Thus to Panda (2004), staff development should be seen as organizational change of which teaching and other professional staff constitutes a crucial part of it.

Robinson (1998) has provided comprehensive strategic guidelines for staff development with steps for implementing staff development plan for open and distance learning. She also stresses that staff development should not only be continuously evaluated but should also ensure transfer of training to real work situations.

Caruso (2004) summarizes the exact role staff development plays in ODL as follows:

"Academic institutions and other learning organizations will need qualified administrators managing their distance education programs. Education has always needed administrators, but the fast paced growth of e-learning has complicated the task of traditional education administration. E-learning is rooted in rapidly evolving technologies, an element that traditional administrators are not accustomed to managing. E-learning also caters to a diverse, geographically dispersed student population. Once again, traditional education administrators are not accustomed to providing adequate support services for a growing group of diverse, geographically dispersed students. These new administrative challenges can best be met by administrators who possess four traits: they have developed a specific set of competencies that qualify them to manage distance education programs; they understand the learning theories that support distance education; they have the ability to effectively manage change; and they are able to guide their organization toward a future that is being shaped by advancing technology.''

O'Rourke (1993) on her part identifies the following as some of the key competencies required by ODL administrators. She identifies that those in direct contact with learners, in teaching, tutoring and student support roles, require the following competencies and attributes:

- Be at ease with adult learners; aware of particular needs and circumstances of adult learners; (even if the distance project is serving young school-age learners, experience with adult learners provides skills in dealing with more open ended learning situations, handling logistical arrangements, etc.);
- Knowledge about how distance education works, and about the kinds of resources and time frames needed for distance education course delivery;
- Ability to work as a member of a team;
- Knowledge of administrative systems within one's own organization;
- Ability to communicate needs of learner to institution and institution's perspective to learner;
- Interpersonal skills in student advising, counselling, problem solving.
- Ability to foresee and plan for logistical needs of distance education, schedule, allocate resources and anticipate potential difficulties;
- Ability to communicate equally with clients, learners and with teaching and administrative staff within the institution to address problems and issues of concern and help to resolve them.

It is against this background that this study sought to find out whether the administrators of UEW distance programme were adequately prepared to carry out their responsibilities.

3. Methodology

The study employed the quantitative methodology which made use of survey questionnaire to collect field data.

3.1 Population

The study covered the administrators from 22 UEW distance study centres and 17 at the IEDE headquarters. They were purposely selected because they were the administrators of the study centres who provided administrative support to the distance learners. The target respondents were administrators of 22 UEW distance study centres and those at the centres of IEDE in Winneba who participated in the 2014 capacity building workshop for IEDE/UEW distance education administrators.

3.2. Sample and Sampling

The study adopted captive audience sampling which was made up of all the 39 administrators at the study centres and the IEDE Centres/Sections/Units in Winneba who participated in an in-service training programme.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The researchers administered questionnaires during the 2014 capacity building workshop organized for the administrative staff of the IEDE/UEW distance programme.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Analysis of research questions

Research Question One 1: What is the perception of the administrators at the UEW distance study centres about the pre service training organised for them?

Responses to the question of whether any pre service training programme was organised for them before assuming duty are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Whether Study Centre Administrators were given training before assuming duty

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	17	43.6
No	20	51.3
Somewhat	2	5.1
Total	39	100

Responses in Table 1 show that slightly over half of the respondents (51.3%) indicated that they were not given any pre service training as against 43% who indicated that they were given training before assuming duty. The responses from the table imply that not all the administrators were given pre service training. The most probable reason for this situation may be that these administrators were employed in batches and the first batch was given pre service training after which no such training was organised again for the subsequent batches. This explanation is supported by an earlier study by Owusu-Mensah (2007) which revealed that while University of Cape Coast (UCC) has a programme of continuous professional development, the staff development policy at the UEW is episodic. At UCC, there is a policy of organising training sessions for study centre staff at regular intervals. On the other hand, workshops at UEW are organised in response to particular situations such as the introduction of a new policy.

The study again sought to find out the content and adequacy of the pre service training workshop and when the respondents who claimed to have received training were asked to indicate the topics which were covered during the training, the following were mentioned:

- Time management
- General routine administration
- Planning towards retirement
- How to save
- How to comport one's self at the work place

The responses further show that out of the 17 respondents (43.6 %) who indicated that they received pre service training (refer to Table 1), 14 of them responded to the question of whether the training was adequate. Table 2 shows that 71.4% of the respondents felt that the training did not adequately prepare them for their job. The remaining 28.6% felt the training was adequate.

Table 2. Respondents' views on the adequacy of pre service training

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	4	28.6
No	10	71.4
Total	39	100

When asked to give reasons for their views about the adequacy or otherwise of the pre service training, the minority who felt the training was adequate could not give any reasons. The majority who opined that the training was not adequate based their reasons on the topics covered. There was 100% agreement among them that the training did not have any bearing on the actual work they are doing. They again felt that the topics were too general and that it benefited those in the regular university setting.

Still in relation to research question one, when respondents were asked to indicate topics which they wished had been covered in the pre-service training the following five topics were mentioned:

- Channels of communication
- Characteristics of DE students and how to manage them.
- Filing
- How to handle correspondence form headquarters
- Handling students complaints

From the responses so far, it is fair to conclude that the kind of pre-service training which was given to the administrators did not equip them with the skills and competencies which they needed to start work. The training therefore cannot be said to have achieved the expected outcomes. The implication is that the administrators did not have the knowledge and competencies of handling DE students as identified by O'Rourke (1993) before they started work. This may account for challenges they are facing at their various centres because as argued by Panda (2004) in ODL, it is crucial for every staff member to go through an induction on areas of distance education, institutional strategic goals and operations before placement.

4.2 Research Question 2: What is the administrators evaluation of the first in-service training workshop organised for them?

4.2.1 Objectives and organisation of the workshop

The participants' evaluation of the objectives of the first in service training workshop is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Participants evaluation of the objectives, logistics, duration and timing of the in-service training workshop

Item	SD	D	A	SA
The workshop objectives were clearly stated and met	1 (2.6)	2 (5.1)	14 (35.9)	22 (56.4)
The workshop objectives met my expectations	1 (2.6)	3 (7.7)	21 (53.8)	14 (35.9)
The workshop was well organized	1 (2.6)	7 (17.9)	24 (61.5)	7 (17.9)
The workshop duration was good	3 (7.7)	16 (41.0)	16 (41.0)	4 (10.3)
The accommodation was appropriate	1 (2.6)	4 (10.3)	5 (12.8)	9 (23.1)
The snack and lunch served was good	2 (5.1)	1 (2.6)	30 (76.9)	6 (15.4)
The timing of the workshop was good	2 (5.1)	7 (17.9)	21 (53.8)	8 (20.5)

Results in Table 3 show that an overwhelming majority (92.3%) disclosed that the workshop objectives were clearly stated and met. Similarly, 89.7 % of the respondents indicated that the objectives of the workshop met their expectation as against 10.3% who stated that the workshop objectives did not meet their expectations.

Again over three quarters of the respondents (79.4%) felt that the workshop was well organized. In terms of the duration for the workshop, respondents were divided in opinion. While 51.3% of the respondents indicated that duration for the workshop was good, 48.7% held a contrary view.

On the menu served during the workshop another overwhelming majority (92.3%) were of the view that the menu was good. A little under 8% were, however, not satisfied with the menu.

Concerning the appropriateness of the timing of the workshop, almost three-quarters (74.3%) indicated that the timing of the workshop was appropriate as against 23% who felt otherwise.

From responses in Table 3, it can be concluded that the majority of the workshop participants were satisfied with the entire organisation and logistics of the first in-service training workshop organised for them.

4.2.2 Content and usefulness of the workshop

As part of research question two, the participants' evaluation of content and usefulness of the first in-service training was investigated. The results are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Participants' evaluation of the content and usefulness of the workshop

Item	SD	D	A	SA
The information presented were relevant and useful	1 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	8 (20.5)	30 (76.9)
The workshop enabled me to learn new things for my work	1 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	8 (20.5)	30 (76.9)
The workshop increased my knowledge and understanding of UEW and the work of IEDE	1 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	11 (28.2)	27 (69.2)

Table 4 clearly reveals that combining percentages for "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" over 90% of the respondents felt that the duration for the presentations was good, the information presented was relevant and useful, the workshop enabled them to learn new things to help them at their various study centres and that the workshop increased their knowledge and understanding of UEW and the work of IEDE. The responses imply that the in-service workshop has equipped the participants with the knowledge and competencies they require for effective functioning at the centres, which is commendable. It is no wonder that when asked to indicate the frequency at which such in-service training should be organised for them over half of the participants wanted more than once a year and slightly below half want it annually (Table 5). The role of in-service training for ODL staff cannot be over emphasised. Again, Panda (2004) argues that induction should be followed by appraisal at regular intervals, continuous training or updating on areas of information technology, and staff members' specific training needs. Similarly, Robinson (1998)   stresses that staff development should not only be continuously evaluated but should also ensure transfer of training to real work situations.

Table 5. Respondents' expectation of frequency training workshops

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
No Response	3	7.7
Annually	16	47.2
Twice a year	10	25.6
Three times a year	1	2.6
Four times a year	8	20.5
As many as possible	1	2.6
Total	39	100

5. Conclusions and recommendations

From the analysis and discussion of the data, the following conclusions can be made

- The distance education programme of the University of Education, Winneba, does not have strong pre-service training programme for its study centre administrators.
- The University does not organise regular in-service training for its centre administrators
- The centre administrators were highly satisfied with the first in-service training organised for them and therefore, want such a programme on regular basis.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that:

- The University should put in place strategic human resource development policies in relation to distance education for teaching, technical and administrative and part-time staff.
- The University should institute regular in-service training programmes for its administrators at the distance education study centres

- The University should institute regular appraisal of staff performance at the study centres to find out whether they are translating the knowledge and skills acquired through the in-service training to their work.

6. **Recommended Area for further research**

Future study should look into a comparison of staff development practices of ODL institutions in Ghana.

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