EXAMINING POLICY GUIDELINES FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN DUAL MODE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA: A CASE STUDY OF KNUST

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ABSTRACT
The study reports a case of distance education policy in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), a dual mode University in Ghana. The interview method was used to obtain information from 21 purposively selected key informants in the University. Policy documents that addressed Distance Education (DE) were reviewed. The study showed that KNUST has identified DE as a policy initiative for meeting institutional goals. The current DE policy focus was on student support services. However, policy areas under Governance/ Administration and Academic/Faculty/Department were yet to be fully developed. The study recommended a systematic review/audit of existing institutional policies to take care of the needs of distance learners. These needs include addressing key issues of facilities and resources in the Regional centers and documenting policies that showcase the benefits of individual and departmental efforts relating to workload to increase interest, satisfaction and participation in the DE programmes by the various Departments.

Keywords: *Policy guidelines, distance education, dual mode Universities*

INTRODUCTION
The Ghana Government policy on tertiary education provides the policy framework for Ghanaian Universities to increase access to tertiary education. Ghanaian Public Universities have therefore responded to the national aspiration by pursuing DE programmes since 1996. In 1996 the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) became the first tertiary institution in Ghana to start DE programmes followed by the University of Cape Coast (UCC) and the University of Ghana (UG) in the 2001/2002 academic year with diploma programmes in Basic Education and Youth in Development Work respectively (Mensah and Owusu-Mensah, 2002). The KNUST however started its DE programmes in 2005 with emphasis on science programmes. Thus the Public Universities became dual mode institutions, providing conventional and distance education programmes simultaneously.

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST)
As a dual-mode institution, the KNUST uses the same curriculum, course structure and cou-

rse structure and course content for the on-campus and the DE programmes. By 2010/2011, the KNUST was offering eleven undergraduate and seven postgraduate programmes by distance to 5,200 students (IDL Reports, 2011). The rationale for the DE programmes was to provide opportunities for large numbers of qualified applicants who do not get admission into the traditional face-to-face programmes as a result of limited facilities to have access to tertiary education. DE was also to provide opportunities for working adults to combine work and study (IDL Strategic Plan, 2008).

KNUST offers its DE programmes through the Institute of Distance Learning (IDL). The Institute provides the administrative structure for implementing DE in the KNUST. The mode of delivery of the programmes is predominantly by print medium which is supplemented by the electronic medium (virtual classroom and telephony) and occasional face-to-face tutorials. Even though IDL had ten Regional learning centers by the 2010/11 academic year, its administration was highly centralised at the main campus in Kumasi. The Institute makes use of faculty members whose programmes are offered by distance as facilitators and writers of course materials.

There is emphasis in the literature on policy issues in DE. King *et al.* (2000), defined policy in terms of DE/DL as a written course of action such as a statute, institutional mission, procedure, guidelines or regulation adopted by institutions to facilitate programme development and delivery in DE. According to Bottomley and Calvert (2003), 'in most dual mode institutions, policy is based on the needs of on-campus students and faculty, as DE is a small, peripheral component or may be a recent addition to the institution's programmes.

In 2005, University of Botswana (UB) issued a report on mainstreaming DE into its policymaking process. It emphasized the integration of DE into institutional culture so that University

rules, regulations and bureaucracies, budgetary and student services and administration decision-making processes could be aligned with the needs of distance learners (UB, 2005). A policy environment friendly to DE delivery and practice must contain values among which is guaranteed access for DE students and faculty to a range of services comparable to those available for on-campus students (Bottomley and Calvert, 2003). King *et al* (2000) in their report on a case study of DE policy framework indicated that many questions basic to DE remain unanswered in the policy arena.

Research Problem
Distance Education is different from on-campus education in its mode of delivery; the way it is taught, how the material is delivered to learners, and how the students actually learn and interact with their tutors/facilitators and with each other. However these differences between the two modes of teaching and learning may not be taken into account when many dual mode institutions develop policy for DE.

A major challenge to the success of DE in public Universities in Ghana is that policy on DE is based on the needs of on-campus students and faculty. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (2003), it is problematic to apply established on-campus education policy to DE without adapting it to the DE context. Policy audit is usually not conducted when an institution changes from single to dual mode delivery. The lack of a systematic review of an institution's existing policies to find any contradictions, redundancies and omissions does not ensure that policies consistently support all of a dual mode institution's goals and objectives. This study examined existing forms of policies guiding the implementation of DE in KNUST and identified areas of shortfalls in the DE policy environment.

Specifically, the study was aimed at answering three research questions:
1. To what extent is DE an integral part of the University's Organisational structure?

2. What policy areas in DE are addressed by KNUST current policy?
3. Where are the short falls (gaps) in DE policy development in KNUST?

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a single-case study method with a qualitative orientation as an appropriate strategy to understand in-depth the issues of policy in a dual mode institution in Ghana. According to Yin (2003), lessons learnt about single cases can be assumed to be informative about the experiences of an average institution while Wolcott (2003)indicated that the case study approach can be useful for understanding the process of DE policy development, policy changes over time and what the changes reveal.

To select a case for this study, the determining criteria were that it must be seen as either offering education in the dual mode; offering science or humanity-based programmes or both; and have study centers spread in all the Regions in Ghana. Based on these criteria the KNUST was selected as the case for this study.

The study involved the use of multiple sources of qualitative data collection, namely interviews and review of policy documents. Respondents for the study were selected from within the case institution using a stratified sampling technique. The stratification involved different categories of the University staff namely senior level administrators, faculty members involved in DE programmes, and senior members of the Institute of Distance Learning. This selection method was used to obtain information from 21 purposively selected key informants in the University.

Policy documents (mission statements, strategic plans, university recorders, etc.) that addressed DE/DL were collected and reviewed. According to Merriam (1998), data found in documents can be used in the same manner as data from interviews or observations.

To provide a basis for comparison of content of DE policies across different policy areas, policy statements that addressed DE in KNUST were classified into three policy areas with identified key issues. The classification was based on an adaptation of theoretical frameworks by King *et al.* (1998) and Berge (1998).The policy areas include:

i. Governance/Administration–This includes institutional mission and operational plans, University support, Recruitment/Employment contracts. Facilities and technological infrastructure for distance learners and Student recruitment, admission and graduation requirements policy,

ii. Academic/Faculty and Department- Programme Development, Material development and Review, Academic Support, Assessment and Examination*,* quality assurance and compensation/rewards for work load.

iii. Student Support-These include Programme Management, Programme Delivery processes, Learner support services, Marketing and promotion of DL programmes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussions presented here are based on the data obtained from the interview of respondents and review of policy documents from the KNUST and in direct response to the research questions.

To what extent is DE an integral part of the University's organizational structure?

One objective of this study was to find out whether DE has the due recognition and support that it is supposed to have within the University's administrative structure. Review of relevant KNUST policy documents indicated that recognition and support for DE in KNUST were either expressed explicitly or implicitly. The overall mission statement in the strategic plan, *KNUST Corporate Strategic Plan: 2005-2014,* provides an explicit policy objective for using DE to increase access of learners to sci-

ence and technology programmes. The statement provides a guiding principle for IDL Mission Statement of 'Increasing access to relevant and flexible tertiary and continuing education and training through the distance mode'. Table 1 shows some DE policy statements expressed explicitly or implicitly in KNUST policy documents.

What policy areas in DE are addressed by KNUST current policy?
To identify key areas in DE addressed by the University, data were obtained through interviews and reviews of relevant policy documents.

The KNUST DE policy focused on student

Table 1. DE policy statements expressed in KNUST policy documents

Policy Document	DE Policy Statement
Corporate Strategic Plan: 2005-2014	To increase access to science and technology programmes through DE.
RECORDER NO. 322, Feb. 2010 VOL. 43	Emphases on use of DE to achieving increased access to tertiary education in KNUST
RECORDER NO. 337, Sept. 2010 VOL 44.	Membership of the Dean of IDL in the composition of the Academic Board and Executive Committee of KNUST
Institute of Distance Learning STRATEGIC PLAN (IDL PLAN 2K12)	IDL MISSION STATEMENT: 'Increasing access to tertiary and continuing education and training through the distance mode'

The expressions in the policy documents indicate an appropriate placement of DE within the organizational structure of KNUST. They also indicate the University's commitment to DE. However, information on DE hardly appears in internal promotional documents such as the University diary and calendars (2005-2011 issues).

During the interviews 86% of the respondents indicated that DE in KNUST was given the necessary recognition and acceptance. A senior Administrator of the University shared his insight regarding the representation of the IDL in major decision making bodies of the KNUST.
'The Institute of Distance Learning is represented in major decision making bodies of the KNUST. The Dean of IDL is a member of the higher decision making bodies such as the Academic Board and the Executive Committee of the University. This is an indication of recognition of DE in KNUST'.

support issues with emphases on programme management, programme delivery processes and learner support services (Table 2).

Policies in these areas probably have the most widespread impact on students' attitude towards DE in KNUST. The student support policies were found to be operationalised by the daily activities of IDL and were explicitly spelt out as rules and regulations in the Learners handbook for undergraduates and postgraduates students. The policies in the student support area include the following:

• Face-to-Face Sessions: All DE students participated in facilitated face-to-face sessions in order to discuss study problems and experiences with facilitators and other learners.

• Institutional Identity: Since KNUST distance learning programmes have the same status as the programmes run on-campus,

learners will study the same courses and take the same or similar examinations as on-campus students.

• All DE students will be taken through orientation, matriculation and finally graduation and will have access to all facilities that are used by on-campus students including the library, university hospital and ICT facilities.

structures, regulations, rules and policies to integrate a distance education approach' Review of KNUST policy documents revealed a lack of written DE policy for Departments offering DE programmes. Majority (70%) of the interviewees indicated a lack of agreed rules on the working relationship between IDL and Departments offering DE programmes. Current operating arrangements however have the support of the University administration.

Table 2: DE Policy and Key Issues in KNUST

Policy Area	Key Issues
Governance/Administration	Recruitment/Employment contract. Board oversight, Facilities and technological infrastructure for distance learners, Student recruitment, admission and graduation requirements
Academic/Faculty and Department	Programme Development, Material development and Review, Academic Support, Assessment and Examination, Rewards/compensation for work load
Student Support	Programme management, Programme delivery processes, Learner support services, Marketing and promotion of DL programmes

Within the Governance/Administration area most key policy issues that guide recruitment/employment contract, facilities for students, student admission and graduation requirements (Table 2) in the conventional system are the same procedures for distance learners. A senior member of IDL shared his insight regarding policies on DE in KNUST

> "Overall, policies that guide practices in the conventional university education systems are the same for DE. However, policies should be audited to address/accommodate DE needs".

Writing on Institutional Policy Issues for Distance Education, Simonson (2007) stated that 'instead of developing new structures and policies for DE, the intent is to modify existing

A senior faculty member who is very involved with DE in KNUST shared his insight regarding departmental support for distance learners as follows:

> "Guidelines providing a framework for working with Departments offering their programmes through the DL mode should be established to bring about efficiency, effectiveness and transparency in operational activities. The written guidelines should emphasise areas such as: compensation for work overload in teaching and writing of DE materials, rewarding departmental participation in DE, recognizing individual support for DE as service to the University".

Where are the short falls (gaps) in DE policy development in KNUST?
Finally the issue of gaps in DE policy develop-

ment was investigated. Data obtained from the interview of respondents and the review of the documents were used to identify areas of short-falls in existing DE rules and regulations in KNUST.

The study revealed that as many as 70% of the interviewees were of the opinion that distance learners had limited access to the following:

- Learning facilities (e.g. classrooms, library materials) and resources (e.g. ICT facilities) in the regional centers that constitute over 70% of the student population

- Counseling and other social support services as enjoyed by on-campus students

- Financial grants for research

Also majority (80%) of interviewees from IDL and the Departments offering DE programmes indicated that within the faculty/department category, there were no policies to address key issues such as compensation/reward for individual/departmental efforts, recognition of quality DE course materials as publications for promotion and inclusion of DE experience in criteria for promotion. Others such as guidelines on copyrights and royalties generated by DE initiatives, ICT for DE and absence of DE in mission statements of departmental strategic plans were indicated as issues that needed attention.

Discussing DE policy issues in KNUST, a senior member of IDL indicated the lack of guidelines in the areas under Governance/Administration and Academic/faculty.

> '*The current University rules and regulations that guide procedure relating to Governance and Academic issues in the conventional system are the same for distance learners but some do not meet their needs. Distance education policies must take into consideration the characteristics of the distance learner. There is therefore the need to review and make new rules and regulations on student admission, deferment and graduation*

requirements that will be flexible enough to accommodate distance learners'.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has shown that although distance learning has witnessed growth and recognition in KNUST since 2005, specific policies on key DE issues are yet to be developed.

Generally there was agreement among Senior administrators about KNUST's demonstration of support and recognition for DE in its current policy objective of using DE as a strategic tool to increase access of learners to science and technology programmes. Expressions in KNUST policy documents also indicate an appropriate placement of DE within the institutional structure. These demonstrate that DE has been identified as a policy initiative for meeting institutional goals.

By category, DE policies in KNUST were focused on student support services category emphasising programme management and delivery processes, learner support services, marketing and promotion of DL programmes. The policies are spelt out as rules and regulations in the learners' handbook.

The overall policy on DE in KNUST is based on the needs of on-campus students and faculty with little or no review of existing policies to find any contradictions/ redundancies that affect the needs of the distance learner. Current University policies are therefore not aligned with the needs of distance learners indicating shortfalls/gaps in DE policy development in KNUST.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are suggested to strengthen DE in KNUST and could be used as a model for other Universities if possible.

1. Distance education should be emphasised in the mission statements of the University and faculty/departmental strategic frameworks to

demonstrate commitment to using DE as a tool for meeting institutional goals.

2. Improve integration of DE into the University culture by aligning rules, regulations and decision-making processes with the needs of distance learners.

3. Encourage discussions and development of DE policies through systematic review/audit of existing institutional policies to identify areas of weaknesses that do not ensure support for a dual mode institutional goals and objectives.

4. Put into writing a policy document showcasing the benefits of individual and departmental efforts relating to workload in the areas of programme development, material development and academic support to increase interest, satisfaction and participation in DE programmes by Departments/Faculties.

5. Address the key issues of learning facilities (e.g. library materials, classrooms) and resources (e.g. ICT facilities) in the regional centers; financial grants for research; student admission, deferment and graduation requirements and other social support services as enjoyed by on-campus students.

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