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External Degree Programme Graduates' Perception of Students' Support Services in the Faculty of External Studies, University of Nairobi (Pp. 208-226)

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Abstract

The first locally organized external Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree programme in Kenya was started in 1986 in the Faculty of External Studies (FES) of the University of Nairobi. Five components of students' support services were incorporated in to the programme so as to enhance the teaching- learning process. These were: continuous assessment tests, face-to-face tutorials, provision of study materials to the learners, guidance and counselling services and library facilities in the Regional Study Centres. However, students' performance in the first semester exams was dismal in some subjects which seemed to suggest that the support services had not achieved their intended objectives. This study was, therefore carried out to determine the way the first graduates of the BEd programme perceived the effectiveness of the support services and whether these perceptions were influenced by marital status and the subjects the students had studied in the BEd course. Using a mailed questionnaire, data were collected from 170 graduates who were selected from a total population of 200 graduates through simple and systematic random sampling techniques. Data were analysed through, frequency counts, percentages, t-test and ANOVA. The key findings revealed that marital status and the subjects studied were not significant determinants of graduates' perception of the effectiveness of the support services. However, on the whole, face-to-face tutorials were rated more favourably by married graduates and those who had studied either

mathematics or combinations in which one of the subjects was mathematics. Similarly, library facilities were rated more favourably by linguistic graduates compared to their non-linguistic counterparts. However, humanities graduates rated learning materials less favourably compared to their non-humanities counterparts. These findings may give insight to the FES and other distance teaching institutions with a similar support system into those aspects of students' support services to improve on in order for students to achieve the desired learning outcomes, irrespective of their marital status and subjects they have registered for.

Key words: Graduates; Perception; Support Services

Introduction

The history of locally organized external degree programmes in Kenya goes back to 1964. In that year, the Ominde Commission proposed that there was need to start off-campus based degree courses in the country (Republic of Kenya, 1965). The idea gained support in the then University College, Nairobi (precursor to University of Nairobi) whose Academic Board recommended that such programmes could be started in the faculties of Arts, Science, Commerce and Architecture (Young, 1976).

Interest in establishing external degree courses however, did not die. For instance, in 1976, the open university team from Britain carried out a feasibility study in the University of Nairobi (UoN) on the possibility of starting an external degree programme (hereinafter EDP) in the institution (Young, 1976). The study recommended that such a programme could be established in the Institute of Adult Studies, UoN (University of Nairobi Students' Handbook, 1995). However, due to high financial implications this recommendation was shelved. Interest in starting off-campus based degree programmes nevertheless was expressed by subsequent Education Commissions, namely Gachathi Report (Republic of Kenya, 1976) and Mackay Report (Republic of Kenya, 1981).

A break through was eventually made in 1983 following the recommendation of a Task Force that had been set by UoN Deans Committee (University of Nairobi Students' Handbook, 1986). This recommendation was adopted by the University Senate and thereafter submitted to the government. The government accepted it and voted money for the establishment of an EDP in the institution during the 1985/86 academic year. The initial beneficiaries of

the programme were 592 students who were admitted in 1986 for a six years Bachelor of Education (BEd) arts programme. The course was placed under the Faculty of External Studies (FES) in the College of Education and External Studies (Kamau and Odumbe, 1991).

The course was expected to achieve three major objectives. First, it was perceived as an alternative route for accessing university education by aspiring Kenyans who despite having met the minimum entry requirements could not be admitted in public universities in the country due to limited accommodation and teaching space (University of Nairobi Students' Handbook, 1986). Secondly, the programme was expected to meet the needs of secondary school teachers (non-degree holders) in the country who aspired to enhance their professional skills and promotion opportunities in the teaching profession (Reche, 1995). Thirdly, the course was viewed as a novel way of optimal use of limited resources in the UoN since a small number of tutors would deliver lessons to a large number of students in their homes and workplaces (Kinyanjui, 1986).

Since the students were to study at a distance from the UoN, the FES incorporated a number of students' support services in the programme. These were: continuous assessment tests (CATs), face-face tutorials, provision of study materials, namely study guides and audio-taped lectures to the learners, guidance and counselling services and library facilities in the regional study centres, which were located in Nairobi, Nakuru, Kisumu, Nyeri, Kakamega and Mombasa urban centres (University of Nairobi Student's Handbook, 1986).

For the teaching-learning process to succeed in a distance education mode of teaching, the teaching institution needs to provide quality services to the learners (Robinson, 1981). This has the implication that a distance teaching institution needs adequate financial resources in order to provide for the necessary infrastructure and personnel. Available literature on the external BEd course however, indicates that soon after the programme was launched, the FES began to experience financial constraints which impacted negatively on the services provided to the learners (Kidombo, 1995; Odumbe, 1995). This indicates that the programme managers performed below the expectation of students. This observation is indeed vindicated by the proceedings of a meeting held by the managers on 2nd march 1988 (min. 218/3), which indicated that the FES was behind schedule in delivering study materials to the students due to inadequate funds to repair the printing equipment.

Kamau (1994) has further noted that very few students in the programme came from areas that were served by public libraries. Therefore, there is a likelihood that delayed delivery of learning materials impacted negatively on the learning process since the students had limited access to alternative learning facilities. A similar opinion was expressed by the UoN Senate in its meeting held on 14th April 1989 (min4/ii) following dismal performance in semester examinations by students who were taking Mathematics and History subjects. The opinion of senators was that the poor performance in the two subjects could have resulted from inadequate preparation by students due to belated dispatch of study materials.

Financial constraints did not only impair the study materials production and distribution system but also interfered with face-to-face tutorials and students' counselling services in the regional centres. The proceedings of a meeting held by the programme managers on 21st October 1987 (min 286/i) for instance demonstrates that some part-time tutors in the regional centres had withdrawn their services due to delayed remuneration for the services rendered to the FES. Due to persistent constraints in paying part-time tutors, field tutorials were finally discontinued in 1990 (Karani, 1994; Kidombo, 1995).

It is important to note that tutors play a critical role in a distance education mode of learning. This is because, they do not only offer counselling services to the learners (more so on examination and study skills) but also give them feedback on performance which has a valuable motivational value to the learners (Rouse, 1986). It can, therefore, be deduced that withdrawal of tutorials in the regional centres denied the students an essential support resource for their studies.

Available literature further demonstrates that although the six regional study centres were designated as services delivery points, some students did not benefit fully as expected due to the long distance between their working stations and the study centres. For example, Kamau (1994) has pointed out that a large number of students were unable to visit the centres regularly since their working stations were located far away from them. Since the regional centres were the major distribution points for study materials and carry-away assignments, there is a possibility that some students were unable to follow their studies systematically for they might have received the two belatedly. Indeed, Kidombo (1995) has observed that some students who

worked in schools that were remote from the centres were compelled to transfer to schools that were closer to the centres.

Distance learners, it needs to be emphasized, study at a distance from each other and from their tutors. For this reason they need adequate support so as to enhance their capacity to learn and thus achieve the goals which motivated them to join the programme they are enrolled in (Guri-Rozenblit, 1993). If this observation is anything to go by, the aforesaid dismal performance by the first cohort of BEd students could indicate that the support services in the programme were less effective in meeting the needs of students.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate how the first graduates of the external BEd programme perceived the students' support services in terms of whether or not they were effective in facilitating their studies. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following objectives.

1. To find out whether there was any significant difference in the way married and single graduates perceived the students' support services.
2. To establish whether there was any significant difference in the way graduates who had studied different subject combinations perceived the students' support services.

Hypotheses of the Study

The study tested the following null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Ho₁: There is no statistically significant difference in the way married and single graduates perceive the students' support services.

Ho₂: There is no statistically significant difference in the way graduates who had studied different subject combinations perceive the students' support services.

Conceptual Framework

Unlike their campus-based counterparts, distance learners have unique problems which tend to have a negative effect on performance and progress in their studies. For instance, they have a high likelihood of being affected by a feeling of isolation since they study at a distance from each other and from their tutors (Akinpelu, 1995). Moreover, they are more often than not distracted from their studies by family and work commitments (Kinyanjui, 1986).

Off-campus learners, therefore need a lot of support by the host institution in order to enable them achieve the desired learning outcomes. If the support falls short of learners' expectations, (in terms of its capacity to facilitate learning) they are likely to perceive it negatively. This has a likelihood of counteracting the smooth progress of learners in their studies.

Literature on distance education seems to show that students' perception of the effectiveness of support services is influenced by two personal characteristics: marital status (Kiumi, 1999) and the subjects they are registered for (Tsui-chen *et al*, 1994; Herman *et al*, 1994). On the basis of this observation, the study hypothesized that graduates' perception of the support services was a function of marital status and the subjects they studied in the BEd course. The conceptualized relationship between the two personal characteristics and graduates' perception of the support services is shown in Figure 1 below.

Methodology

The study utilized the survey research design. This is a type of design in which the investigator gathers data from a large number of people on their behaviours, attitudes and opinions (Marczyk *et al*, 2005). The design has an advantage in that it offers a simple and straightforward approach when selecting information from a large population (Bryman, 1989; Robson, 1993). In this regard, the design was found appropriate since a large number of graduates (200) were expected to participate in the study. Data for the study were collected from 141 respondents. This represented 83% of the selected sample size of 170 respondents, initially determined using a sampling fraction of 85% of the total (N=200) population of the graduates (Mitchel and Jolley, 1988).

Data were collected using a questionnaire that had two sections labelled A and B. Section A gathered data on respondent's, age, marital status and the subjects (besides Education) they had studied in the programme. Section B had 27 closed items which were rate on a five-point Likert scale. The items were designed to elicit data on the effectiveness of the support services as measured by graduates' perception of the extent to which the services helped them to progress successfully in their studies. A reliability analysis on the items yielded a coefficient value of 0.93 using Spearman–Brown prophesy formula (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1976). According to this formula a reliability coefficient close to 1.00 is regarded as adequate. Since the items

gave a coefficient of 0.93, they were regarded as reliable in collecting the data required for this study (Marcsk *et al*, 2005).

Data extracted from the questionnaires were analyzed through frequency distributions and percentages while hypotheses were tested using the independent samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance. (ANOVA)

Results and Discussion

Data on respondents' sex, age, marital status and the subjects the studied in the Bed course were analysed and subsequently summarised in Table 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Sex Distribution

Table 1 indicates that majority (69%) of the graduates were males. This has the implication that females were underrepresented in the B.Ed programme.

Age Distribution

The data presented in Table 2 shows that most (75%) of the graduates were in the middle age of 35 to 44 years while very few (6%) were below 34 years.

Distribution by Marital Status

An examination of the data in Table 3 shows that majority (87%) of the graduates were married while only 13% were single. This indicates that most of the graduates had family commitments as they pursued their Bed course.

Distribution by Subject Combination

A closer examination of the data in Table 4 reveals that most (59%) of the graduates had studied humanities combinations (History, Geography and Religious studies) followed by those (28%) who had studied double mathematics or mathematics with one of the other subjects offered in the BEd programme. The table further shows that only 16% of the graduates had studied languages (Kiswahili/Literature, and English/Literature). This implies that the most popular subjects among the graduates were humanities while the least popular were languages.

Results from Hypothesis Testing

The Influence of Marital Status on Graduates' Perception of the Effectiveness of the Support Services

The extent to which marital status influenced graduates' perception of the effectiveness of the support services was determined by carrying out the independent samples t-test. In this analysis, marital status and graduates scores on the 27 closed items were the independent and dependent variables respectively. The results of this analysis is presented in Table 5

Degree of freedom (df): 139, t-critical: 1.65

The data displayed in Table 5 shows that the computed t-values for the five components of the support services between married and single graduates are lower than the t- critical value. This implies that the mean perception scores between the two categories of graduates were statistically not significantly different at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, H_{01} was accepted and conclusion made that graduates' perception of the effectiveness of the support services was not dependent on marital status. A closer look at the data, however reveals that save for residential face-to-face tutorials there was a tendency for the married graduates to rate the support services less favourably than their single counterparts.

The Influence of Subject Combination on Graduates' Perception of the Support Services

Apart from education courses which were common to all students, each student was expected to take two academic subjects. It was hypothesized that subject combination would not influence the way the graduates perceived the five components of support services.

To ascertain the truth of the aforesaid assumption ANOVA test was run on the scores accruing to graduates in the different subject combinations. The objective was to ascertain whether the mean scores for graduates in the ten subject combinations would significantly differ. The analysis was first carried out on continuous assessment tests followed by face-face-face tutorials, study materials, guidance and counselling services and lastly regional study centres' library facilities. The details of these analyses are discussed below.

(i) Continuous Assessment Tests

The extent to which subject combination influenced graduates' perception of the effectiveness of continuous assessment tests is presented in Table 6.

From the data presented in Table 6, it is clear that the mean rating on continuous assessment tests by graduates who took different statistically subject combinations were more or less the same. The data also reveals that the computed F-ratio is not significant ($P > 0.05$). It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that subject combination had no significant influence on graduates' perception of continuous assessment tests. Consequently, the second null hypothesis-in regard to continuous assessment tests- was accepted and conclusion made that subjects studied by the graduates were not a significant determinant of the extent to which continuous assessment tests were perceived as a helpful service by the graduates. This may imply that there were no marked differences with respect to the quality of tutor comments on marked assignments and management of continuous assessment tests in the ten subject combinations.

(ii) Face-to-faceTutorials

The extent to which subject combinations influenced graduates' perception of face-to-face tutorials is presented in Table 7.

Table 7 shows that the mean scores for graduates who pursued different subject combinations were more or less homogeneous. The data further indicates that the F-ratio was not significant ($P > 0.05$). In this regard, the second null hypothesis (H_{02}) was accepted with respect to face-to-face tutorials and conclusion made that graduates' perception of the extent to which face- to- face tutorials enhanced their academic progress was independent of subject combination.

A closer inspection of the data in Table 7, nevertheless indicates that graduates who had taken combinations that were mathematical in nature tended to rate face-to-face tutorials more favourably compared with their counterparts who had studied other combinations. This is reflected by the high mean scores for graduates who took Double Mathematics (mean = 4.401); Mathematics/Business Studies (mean = 4.264); Mathematics/Geography (mean = 4.097) and Mathematics/Economics (mean = 4.044).

(iii) Learning Materials

The result of data analysis in regard to the influence of subject combinations on graduates' perceptions of study materials is presented in Table 8.

From the data in Table 8, it is clear that the mean rating on study materials by graduates in the ten subject combinations was somewhat homogeneous. In addition, the data reveals that subject combination did not significantly influence graduates' perception of the study materials ($P > 0.05$). For this reason, the second null hypothesis in regard to study materials was accepted and conclusion made that subject combination was not a significant determinant of the extent to which study materials were perceived as a helpful resource by the graduates. A detailed perusal of the data in Table 8, however, shows that the lowest rating of study materials was by graduates who took Geography/History (mean = 1.983) and History/Religious Studies (mean = 2.301) subject combinations.

(iv) Guidance and Counselling Services

The outcome of data analysis with respect to the influence of subject combinations on graduates' perception of guidance and counselling services is summarised in Table 9.

An examination of data presented in Table 9 shows that the average scores for graduates in the ten subject combinations were almost the same. This observation is authenticated by the computed F-ratio which indicated that statistically, the mean scores were not significantly different ($P > 0.05$). For this reason, the second hypothesis was accepted in regard to guidance and counselling services and conclusion made that graduates' perception of the effectiveness of guidance and counselling services was independent of subject combination. This may imply that there was no marked discrepancy with respect to the quality of guidance and counselling services that had been availed to graduates in different subject combination in the course of pursuing their BEd course.

(v) Library Facilities

The result of data analysis with respect to the influence of subject combination on graduates' perceptions of regional centres' library facilities is presented in Table 10.

From Table 10 it can be learnt that the average scores on library facilities were almost equal. The computed F-ratio further shows that statistically the average scores were not significantly different ($P > 0.05$). Consequently, the second null hypothesis with regard to regional centre's library facilities was accepted and conclusion made that perception of the library facilities was not

dependent on subject combinations. A closer examination of the mean scores in Table 10, however, shows that comparatively, the library facilities were rated more favourably by graduates who were studying English/Literature (mean = 3.514) and Kiswahili/Literature (mean = 3.200) subject combinations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Students' support services are critical determinants of successful learning in a distance education mode of teaching. It is in this respect that a distance teaching institution should offer quality services to learners. However, in order to determine whether or not the support services are facilitating the learning process, learners' perception of the same should be sought with a view to discern areas to improve on. In this regard, this study was carried out to determine the way the first graduate of the external BEd programme in the UoN perceived the support services and whether these perceptions were influenced by marital status and the subjects the graduates had studied in the programme.

The study showed that married graduates rated the support services less favourably than their single counterparts. Similarly, humanities and linguistic graduates rated face-to-face tutorials less favourably than their counterparts who had studied either double mathematics or combinations in which one of the subjects was mathematics. In addition, the rating of study materials was lower among humanities graduates compared to their non- humanities counterparts. It also emerged that linguistic graduates rated regional centres library facilities more favourably compared to their non-linguistic counterparts.

These findings have important implications and lessons in regard to the management of students' support services in the FES and other distance teaching institutions in Kenya and other parts of the world. One significant observation is that marital status and subjects being studied by learners have a bearing on the extent to which the support services will accomplish their objectives. This has the implication that the two factors should be taken into account when designing the students' support system. Specifically, support system should be organised in such a way that all students benefit irrespective of their marital status and the subjects they have enrolled for. In order for the distance teaching institution to accomplish this task, there is a need to carry out an evaluation study regularly with a view to determine the

needs of different categories of learners. If this task is prioritised, the institution will be better placed to identify areas in the support services to improve on. This will in turn go a long way in sustaining learners' motivation to learn, and complete their studies successfully.

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Figure 1: Relationship between graduates' personal characteristics (marital status and subject combination) and their perception of the support services.

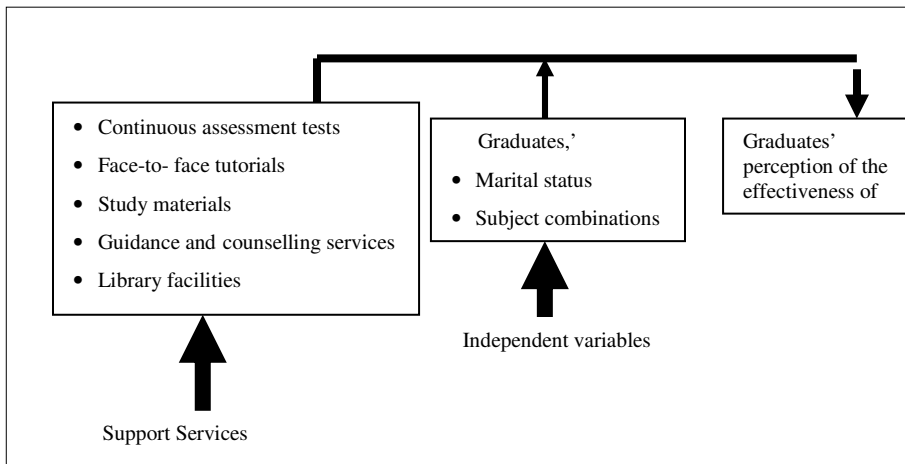


Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Sex

Sex	N	%
Males	97	69
Females	44	31
Total	141	100

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Age

Age group	N	%
30 – 34	8	6
35 – 39	43	30
40 – 44	63	45
45 – 49	17	12
50 – 54	10	7
Total	141	100

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status

Marital status	N	%
Married	123	87
Single	18	13
Total	141	100

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Subject Combination

Subject Combination	N	%
History/Religious studies	28	20
Geography/Economics	23	16
Economic/Business Studies	22	15
Double Maths	21	15
Geography/History	12	8
Kiswahili/Literature	11	8
Mathematics/Economics	10	8
English/Literature	7	5
Mathematics/Business studies	4	3
Mathematics/Geography	3	2
Total	141	100

Table 5: Independent Two Sample t-test on Graduates Perception of the Support Services by Marital Status

	Marital Status				t-value
	Married		Single		
	N=123		N=18		
Support Services	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Continuous assessment tests	2.735	0.644	2.746	0.466	-0.07
Face-to face tutorials	4.016	0.558	3.811	0.580	1.45
Learning materials	2.566	0.696	2.700	0.430	-0.79
Guidance and counselling	2.008	0.717	2.033	0.871	-0.14
Library facilities	2.800	1.135	2.922	1.136	-0.43

Table 6: ANOVA Summary on Graduates' Perception of CATs by Subject Combinations

Variable	Subject	N	Mean	SD	df	F-ratio	P-value	
		Combination						
Graduates' Perception	History/Religious Studies		28	2.704	0.538	140	0.778	0.634
	Geography/Economics		23	2.752	0.719			
	Economics/Business Studies		22	2.734	0.546			
	Double Maths		21	2.952	0.572			
	Geography/History		12	2.751	0.681			
	Kiswahili/Literature		11	2.597	0.685			
	Mathematics/Economics		10	2.486	0.639			
	English/Literature		7	3.020	0.858			
	Mathematics/Business Studies		4	2.786	0.742			
	Mathematics/Geography		3	2.714	0.143			
TOTAL			141	2.737		0.623		

Table 7: ANOVA Summary on Graduates' Perception of Face-to-face Tutorials by Subject Combinations

Variable	Subject ratio	P-value	N	Mean	SD	df	F-
Combination							
Graduates' Perception	History/Religious Studies		28	3.842	0.370	140	1.079
	Geography/Economics		23	3.808	0.601		
	Economics/Business Studies		22	3.800	0.519		
	Double Maths		21	4.401	0.559		
	Geography/History		12	3.867	0.710		
	Kiswahili/Literature		11	3.846	0.559		
	Mathematics/Economics		10	4.044	0.779		
	English/Literature	7	3.930	0.559			
	Mathematics/Business Studies	4	4.264	0.825			
	Mathematics/Geography	3	4.097	0.116			
TOTAL			141	3.990	0.563		

Table 8: ANOVA Summary on Graduates' Perception of Study Materials by Subject Combinations

Variable	Subject	N	Mean	SD	df	F-ratio	P-value
Combination							
Graduates' Perception	History/Religious Studies	28	2.301	0.575	140	1.079	0.382
	Geography/Economics	23	2.713			0.529	
	Economics/Business Studies	22	2.536			0.677	
	Double Maths	21	2.752			0.792	
	Geography/History	12	1.983			0.575	
	Kiswahili/Literature	11	2.346			0.664	
	Mathematics/Economics	10	2.440			0.609	
	English/Literature	7	2.743			0.395	
	Mathematics/Business Studies	4	2.700			0.887	
	Mathematics/Geography	3	2.667			0.305	
TOTAL			141	2.583		0.668	

Table 9: ANOVA Summary on Graduates' Perception of Guidance and Counselling by Subject Combinations

Variable	Subject	N	Mean	SD	df	F-ratio	P-value
Combination							
Graduates' Perception	History/Religious Studies	28	3.100	0.745	140	0.344	0.959
	Geography/Economics	23		3.052		0.855	
	Economics/Business Studies	22		2.846		0.776	
	Double Maths	21		2.876		0.531	
	Geography/History	12		3.050		0.832	
	Kiswahili/Literature	11		2.964		1.073	
	Mathematics/Economics	10		3.160		0.497	
	English/Literature	7		3.143		0.395	
	Mathematics/Business Studies	4		3.050		0.854	
	Mathematics/Geography	3		3.200		0.200	
TOTAL			141	2.737		0.623	

Table 10: ANOVA Summary on Graduates' Perception of Library Facilities by Subject Combination

Variable	Subject	N	Mean	SD	df	F-ratio	P-value
Combination							
Graduates' Perception	History/Religious Studies	28	2.657	1.140	140	0.652	0.751
	Geography/Economics	23		2.626		1.223	
	Economics/Business Studies	22		2.864		1.199	
	Double Maths	21		2.933		0.906	
	Geography/History	12		2.583		1.036	
	Kiswahili/Literature	11		3.200		1.159	
	Mathematics/Economics	10		2.800		1.251	
	English/Literature	7		3.514		1.409	
	Mathematics/Business Studies	4		2.650		1.379	
	Mathematics/Geography	3		4.733		0.306	
TOTAL			141	2.816		1.132	