

Student-Workers' Perception towards Distance Education in Ghana

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Abstract: Ghana's distance education program is significantly flooded with varied perceptions. The constant variations in perceptions could stem from rapid physical and social changes within the education sector. The purpose of this study was to discover student-workers views about distance education in contemporary times. Informed by the pragmatism philosophy, the study employed the explanatory mixed methods to gather data from randomly selected student-workers and study center coordinators in the University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and University of Ghana. The study found that student-workers still preferred distance education over the regular program in spite of its steady challenges. The perceived main reason for opting for distance education was their desire to obtain higher education while doing other necessary activities. The sex of student-workers played a significant role in their desire to obtain higher education in UCC but the same could not be said in KNUST and UG. The study concluded that younger student-workers pursuing distance education in UG desired higher education more than the elderly but this relationship was non-existing in UCC and KNUST. It was revealed, in all institutions, that single student-workers desired higher education more than the married. Generally, the socio-demographic characteristics of distance education student-workers in Ghana have changed significantly over the years. The study recommended that university authorities in collaboration with the management of distance education should make the conscious effort to sensitize males, elderly and married workers, to enroll onto the distance education programs to bridge social disparities in distance education.

Keywords: Perceptions; student-workers; distance education; preference.

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Introduction

Over the years, continuing professional development in higher education institutions has become popular among workers. One of the notable avenues to pursue higher education courses while working is distance education. Today, workers in schools, districts, the military and large corporations pursue distance education courses organized by public and private universities; that has ultimately led to the popularity of distance learning. Its acceptance and recognition over the years can be attributed to its multidimensional status. The multidimensionality of distance education can be

related to its definitions and transformation and/or development over generations.

The Commonwealth of Learning (2000), the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (2001) and Peters and Britez (2008) described open and distance education/learning as a way of providing and receiving learning opportunities characterized by the separation of the teacher and the learner in time and/or place, the use of media, including print and electronic, two-way communication that allows learners and tutors to interact, the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings and a specialized division of labor in the production and delivery of courses. Quite recently,

the UNESCO (2010) viewed distance education as one of the approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities to both individual home-based learners and groups of learners in remote classrooms.

In addition to describing distance education via definitions, Simpson and Anderson (2012) explained how distance education has evolved from one generation to the next. They used the concept of generations (the First, Second and Subsequent) to probe the history behind distance education. The first-generation of distance education was characterized by print technology and postal services. It combined the use of print technology and postal services to design correspondence studies for educators and educates. First-generation distance educators aimed at providing educational opportunities to the less privileged, especially women, children and the working class, so that they could have easy access to education. The second-generation, an advancement of the first-generation, was characterized by broadcast using technologies such as radio and television. These broadcast technologies considerably improved distance education (Evans & Nation, 2007); but, interactions between the teacher and the learner or between learners reduced to the barest minimum.

The subsequent generation, a generation after the first and second, sought to enrich delivery through conferencing and online interaction. For instance, the third generation focused on asynchronous computer conferencing to enrich delivery (Nipper, 1989). This is a form of communication that does not require face-to-face conversation and can last for a long time. It has mostly been useful for online discussions and sharing ideas between the teacher and the learners. In the fourth generation, however, Taylor (2001) emphasized on the synchronous possibilities of teleconferencing (audio and video) which run counter to the flexibility of asynchronous distance education. A significant feature of this generation was the potential use of teleconferencing. Teleconferencing is meetings through a telecommunication medium that links people between two or more locations by electronics. There are at least six types of teleconferencing: audio, audio graphic, computer, video, business television (BTV) and distance education (Taylor, 2001). Due to the evolution and the varied descriptions of distance education, there is the need to investigate student-workers

perceptions of the distance education in modern times. Hence, this study.

Literature Review

This section focuses on the literature related to the study.

Characteristics of Distance Education Student-Workers

In 1989, Rogers identified seven characteristics used to describe the majority of distance education learners. These characteristics are: The students are adults by definition (maturity), the students are all engaged in a continuing process of growth (value learning), the students bring a package of experience and values (experience), the students usually come with set intentions (motivated), the students bring mature expectations about education itself (realism) and the students often have competing interests (employment, family and social life).

Quereshi et al. (2012) indicated that distance learning students have similar demographics, personalities, experience and motivation that often differ from traditional students. These characteristics can be viewed in terms of age, gender, employment status and marital status, among others. In a similar vein, WPI Academic Technology Centre (2012) and Galusha (2012) observed that distance learners shared similar demographic and situational characteristics that often provided the basis for profiles of the typical distance learner in higher education. The Centre added that understanding distance learning students can help tailor distance learning course logistics, syllabus and course design to meet their needs and identify their barriers to learning.

Peckham et al. (2004), Rovai (2001) and Jun (2005) identified gender as a predictor of performance in distance learning. They observed that in most distance learning programs in North America, distance learning students were predominantly females since between 60 percent and 77 percent of students were females. However, the distance learning programs of the WPI Academic Technology Centre (2012) did not sustain this trend. It was reported that, out of the students who responded to the April 2007 survey of distance learning students, 75 percent were males. This could imply that males and females value and patronize distance education and are willing to enroll irrespective of their gender roles.

Dubious (2003) observed that distance education encourages older people to seek higher education. Specifically, Park (2007) and Dutton et al. (2002) indicated that most distance education students are adults between the age of 25 and 50 and are unable to enrol in traditional undergraduate programs due to other responsibilities. They further added that they have jobs, childcare responsibilities and computer experience. Osei (2012) stated that distance learning is most patronized by older (> 30 years) and married student population.

Some scholars have argued that the structure of the distance education program makes it more convenient for mature or elderly people, who are often workers, to enrol, which are clearly in line with the foundation upon which it was initiated (Osborne, et al., 2001). The majority of the mature/elderly who patronize the program is within the category of working-class, looking for opportunities to enroll back to school. That is, higher distance education students (both full time and part-time) in colleges tend to be older than standard university entrants and are therefore more likely to have children, family and work commitments.

WPI Academic Technology Centre (2012) reported that distance learning students tend to be, on the average, older than traditional students in campus-based programs. Boston and Gibson (2012) indicated that older undergraduates and those with a dependent, a spouse or full-time employment participated in both distance education classes and degree programs relatively more often than their younger counterparts. In as much as these assertions may be factual, the trend has changed over the years. Currently, younger people, below the above-mentioned age range, enroll in distance education properly because they could not get admission into the regular programs.

In relation to marital status, WPI Academic Technology Centre (2012) reported that more than half of distance learning students are married with dependents. Qureshi et al. (2012) remarked that it appears students enrolled in distance education are motivated adults aged between 18 and 40, mostly females, who because of their family and work commitments, lack time to participate in on-campus studies. However, these authors added further that demographics of distance learners may be changing over time and that this is an indication of

convergence in characteristics of the independent students and on-campus population.

Preference for Distance Education

This section of the literature explores the reasons why people prefer distance education. Since the inception of distance education, a lot of people have expressed interest in it over the conventional education. Although most students prefer conventional education, a substantial number also opt for distance mode due to peculiar reasons (Sekyi, 2013). Hosteltler et al. (2007) and Sekyi (2013) identified several reasons why both students and employers prefer distance education. For students, distance education provides the free will in deciding where and when to study; they can benefit from the modular form of credit accumulation which makes it possible for students to know their credit scores over the years of their studies; they benefit from reaching greater academic achievement without leaving their job; people who are disadvantaged by their family roles especially women or hindered by physical disability from accessing conventional education have the choice of studying at a distance in the comfort of their places of abode (Hosteltler, et al., 2007).

Employers prefer distance education because their workers who hitherto would have applied for study-leave with pay to enhance their academic skills and qualifications can continue to be at post and still pursue their education via the distance mode. Employers benefit from skilled workers, which increases productivity. Again, the time and other resources that employers would have used to organize on-the-job training for workers can be invested into other human resource activities since distance education serves this purpose.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2004) proposed several reasons for the preference of distance education among student-workers. First, it gave opportunities for workers who missed out in their earlier years of basic education and will make it possible for more teachers to be trained. Secondly, distance education offered younger and older workers the chance for adult education and higher education. Another concern that UNESCO proposed was that distance education encouraged relevant changes in the provision of conventional education. The fourth concern was that distance education offers the opportunity for teachers to undertake further studies to enhance their skills.

Although similar to the comments by Sekyi's (2013), Anhwere (2013) explored into detail factors influencing teachers' motivation for continuing professional development through distance education in the East Akim Municipality in Ghana. To Anhwere, distance education in Ghana has addressed distance and time barriers associated with the conventional system of learning. For instance, teachers in remote areas such as Upper East, Upper West and Western Regions who cannot be on a campus-based institution like the University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology or the University of Cape Coast can be at their various geographical locations and still have access to higher learning. Thus, distance education can operate over long distances and cater for widely scattered students' bodies.

World Bank (1998) identified three main reasons why people prefer distance education. First, it is economical because it does not strictly require school buildings, teachers and administrators to handle students than they can accommodate in a school. Second, it is flexible as such allows student-workers to undertake studies at their own pace and convenience. Thirdly, it can be operated over long distances since it is not limited by space. In this regard, workers can still further their education irrespective of the location of their workplace. In this regard, workers can still further their education irrespective of the location of their workplace. This confirmed the assertion of Trait (1992) and Anhwere (2013) that distance education extends access to education for people who live in sparsely populated areas within a short time.

The majority of non-traditional students enroll in college courses because of their career (Kasworm, 2003). They could be seeking further education to advance in their current place of employment or switch to a different career field. Many employers may include job benefits or training through college courses as a bonus for employees (Hosteltler, et al., 2007). In addition, life stage transitions, such as divorce or launching children, and proactive life planning (e.g., setting personal or professional goals) may influence an individual's decision to return to school (Aslanian, 2001; Kasworm, 2003). Some parents who stay at home with their children take the opportunity to further their education once their children become old enough to attend school daily. Others make plans in their lives to purposely incorporate a college education. They are likely to make a move to a community with a college campus

or seek a job with a company that encourages its employees to further their education (Kasworm, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

The role expansion theory and the Caroline Moser's Triple role framework guided the study. The role expansion theory follows the logic that occupying multiple roles as a distance education student-worker has positive effects on the individual (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). This implies that performing multiple roles generate social and economic resources. For example, a student-worker can work to earn an income to financially support his or her academic career development and the family as well. Second, it produces outcomes such as social support and increased self-complexity that generate a feeling of personal worth and life satisfaction (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). This can be realised when the student-worker finally obtains his or her certificate and gain promotion at the workplace. The person eventually gains respect from family members, superiors and colleagues at the workplace. This theory relates with the study in the sense that when people perceive these benefits ahead of enrolment, they will be motivated to opt for distance education programs. In addition, Moser's (1993) Triple role framework sought to liberate women from their subordinate status and help them in their fight for equality, fair social status and empowerment. Moser's gender planning would perceive pursuing distance education as an avenue to empower women, help them to obtain a higher social status and demand for equality.

Methodology

The research methods covered the design, population and sampling technique, research instruments, its validity and reliability, statistical treatment of data and ethical considerations.

Design

The study used the explanatory survey design. The mixed approach was employed in the study. The choice of the design was informed by the pragmatism philosophy which covered the strict adherence to qualitative and the quantitative approaches.

Population and Sampling Technique

The population comprised all student-workers whose centers were located at the various campuses in the selected universities of Ghana. Their population totaled 14247. Using the simple

random technique, 1070 students were selected from the three universities namely, University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Questionnaires and interview guide were used to solicit data.

Validity and Reliability

The instruments were validated through experts. The questionnaire was pre tested at the University of Education, Winneba for reliability with the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.76, 0.77 and 0.81. Therefore, the instrument was considered reliable.

Statistical Treatment of Data

The quantitative data was analyzed using cross tabulation and chi-square test while qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed thematically. The weighted mean ascertained average scores of student-workers with respect to their preference to distance education.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher presented the letter of introduction from his department to the selected universities. The existing protocols in each of the selected universities were followed to interact with student-workers on the purpose of the study. The time schedule for appointment in the universities did not affect learning. Voluntary participation of the respondents was encouraged as student-workers were allowed to withdraw their participation at any point of the data collection period. Student-workers were also assured that all the information collected from them would be treated with utmost confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study were based data gathered from student-workers. The study presented the background of respondents and further examined the perceptions of student-workers on distance education.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Student-Workers

Characteristic	UG (n=362)		KNUST (n=354)		UCC (n=354)		Total (N=1070)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
Sex								
Male	176	48.6	171	48.3	173	48.9	520	48.6
Female	186	51.4	183	51.7	181	51.1	550	51.4
Age (years)								
< 20	3	0.8	6	1.7	3	0.3	12	1.12
20-29	182	50.3	219	61.9	301	85.0	702	65.6
30-39	141	39.0	107	30.2	40	11.3	288	26.9
40+	36	9.9	22	6.2	10	2.8	68	6.35
Marital status								
Not married	212	58.6	195	55.1	230	65	637	59.5
Married	138	38.1	148	41.8	86	24.3	372	34.8
Divorced	-	-	4	1.1	8	2.3	12	1.1
Widowed	-	-	-	-	2	0.6	2	0.2
Cohabiting	12	3.3	7	2	28	7.9	47	4.4
Living with my family								
Yes	259	71.5	206	58.2	219	61.9	684	63.9
No	103	28.5	148	41.8	135	38.1	386	36.1
Number of Children								
0-2	285	78.7	307	86.7	336	94.9	928	86.7
3-5	77	21.3	47	13.3	16	4.5	140	13.1
6-8	-	-	-	-	2	0.6	2	0.2

Source: Fieldwork, Darko-Asumadu (2023)

Related themes on perceptions included whether student-workers still preferred distance education, their reasons and which of their background characteristics related to their desire to obtain

higher education. The findings were related to empirical literature.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

The socio-demographic characteristics is in relation to sex, age, marital status, number of children, living

with family and number of children. As seen in Table 1, the sex categories of student-workers in the study universities showed similar outcomes as the majority of respondents (UG=51.4%; KNUST=51.7%; UCC=51.1%) were females. In sum, 51.4 percent of student-workers were females as compared to 48.6 percent males. This could mean that female workers patronize distance education more than their male counterparts. The reason could be that the structure of the program is more flexible and thus, favors females who appear to take advantage of it to advance in education (Rovai, 2001).

The majority of student-workers (almost 93%) aged between 20 and 39 years (UG=89.3%; KNUST=92.1%; UCC=96.3%). The least recorded ages were below 20 years and beyond 40 years and this was observed in almost all the institutions. The data distribution depicted that a little above half of the sample in UG (58.6%), KNUST (55.1%) and UCC (65%) were not married. Almost 72 percent, 58 percent and 62 percent of student-worker in UG, KNUST and UCC respectively attested to the fact that they lived with their families of orientation. It can be deduced that the majority of the student-workers had at most two children with UCC student-workers recording the highest number of children.

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of Student-Workers on Distance Education?

To find answers to this question, the study explored student-workers' preference for distance education. The study initially gathered responses on whether they still preferred distance education, the reasons for their preference and measured their socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, marital status, position at the workplace, monthly income, type and nature of employment) against preference for distance education. A cross tabulation and chi-square test were used to establish a relationship between these independent variables and the dependent variable, preference for distance education.

Reasons why Student-Workers opt for Distance Education

Student-workers were asked whether they still preferred distance education to the regular programs and further indicate the reasons why they opted for distance education. Their responses to whether they preferred distance education were categorized into 'yes' or 'no' (Figure 1). As indicated in Figure 1, the majority (64%) of student-workers in

UG, KNUST and UCC still preferred the distance education programs over the regular programs.

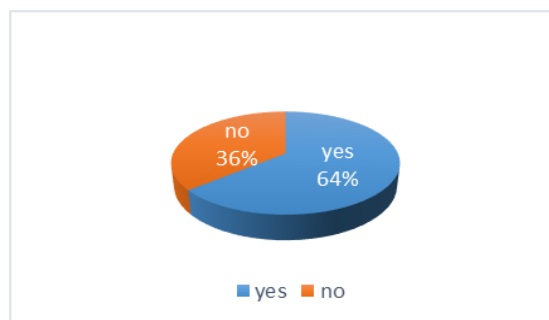


Figure 1: Preferred distance education to regular program

Of interest is why they preferred distance education. Their responses were captured into disagreed (D), neutral (N) and agreed (A) as displayed in Table 2. The findings depicted that 65.1 percent agreed that their job demands were so high that they could not opt for a regular program where classes are organized during the weekdays. Almost half (47%) of the sampled respondents from the study population said that the distance education program is flexible. The findings of this study depict that distance education program is not entirely flexible. On one hand, the current study supports Anhwere's (2013) argument that student-workers prefer distance education because of its flexibility as it allows them to undertake studies at their own pace and convenience and combine it with other social and paid work activities. On the other hand, this finding contradicts the argument of Zorn et al. (2018) that the benefits of distance learning to learners is it offers flexibility for those who cannot attend regular face to face session due to work commitment, caring responsibilities or disability.

An overwhelming majority (89.3%) of the respondents agreed that they opted for distance education because of their desire to obtain higher education while still maintaining their jobs. This finding is similar to the proposition made by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2004) that distance education offers younger and older workers the chance to access higher and adult education. The proportion (49.1%) of student-workers who agreed that they choose distance education because they did not want to lose their jobs was higher than the proportion (38%) who disagreed. The majority of student-workers (57.2%) in these universities disagreed with the fact that getting admissions into the distance education program is easy. This contradicted previous studies by Mensah and

Owusu-Mensah (2002), which asserted that distance education was an easy avenue for gaining admission so that student-workers can manage their paid jobs,

pay for their school fees and be in school and with the family at the same time.

Table 2: Reasons for Distance Education

Reasons	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)
Demands of my job did not allow me to apply for the regular program	270 (25.2)	104 (9.7)	696 (65.1)
It is flexible	352 (32.9)	220 (20.6)	498 (46.6)
Desire to obtain higher education	55 (5.2)	59 (34)	956 (89.3)
I don't want to lose my job	407 (38)	138 (12.9)	525 (49.1)
Time to study, work and be there for my family	612 (57.2)	187 (17.5)	271 (25.4)
Easy to get admission	612 (57.1)	187 (17.5)	271 (25.4)
It is closer to my place of residence	689 (64.4)	109 (10.2)	272 (25.4)

Source: Fieldwork, Darko-Asumadu (2023)

More than half (57.2%) of the student-workers said that the nature of distance education gives them the opportunity to study, work and perform family responsibilities concurrently. This finding fits into the role expansion theory. The role expansion theory argues that occupying multiple roles in both paid work, academic and social lives have positive effects on the individual (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Thus, occupying these statuses (worker, student and family member) benefits the individual (Scharlach, 2001) as it allows student-workers to have time to study, work and perform social responsibilities concurrently. It confirms Kasworm's (2003) assertion that it gives working parents the opportunity to stay at home with their children, attend school and further education.

About 64.4 percent of student-workers were of the view that they did not opt for the program because of proximity. Therefore, student-workers in the current study were more focused on obtaining higher education regardless of the proximity. This finding contradicts Anhwere's (2013) study that proximity was the major reason why teachers opted for distance education. Thus, it lends credence to the fact that the findings of this study contradict the findings of that study. It can be deduced that the major reason why student-workers opted for distance education was to obtain higher education, an objective which was somewhat difficult to achieve had they applied for the regular program. To obtain a detailed explanation of the reasons for their preference for distance education, interviews were conducted. The responses from the interviews were similar to the reasons in Table 2. The following are some of the responses gathered. The first narrative considered the flexibility of the program

and the fact that distance education would allow her to perform other responsibilities:

Yes, because of err...I opted for it because I didn't want to be stressed out. As much as I am working, I didn't want to be also locked up in school for the whole day...I will be in school and also at the same time I will have to be at work....So when they said err they will have some small classes or small lectures on weekends I preferred that and I felt that I will be more relaxed in going to...in taking that course. (42-year-old female immigration officer, UG).

However, a 30-year-old male pension officer expressed a contrary view that it would help him combine academics with other responsibilities. But a critical analysis of his narrative would confirm the earlier responses made by the immigration officer that distance education would not lock her up in school the whole day. This implies that she would get the chance to attend to other social and work responsibilities.

I opted for it because, it will help me combine my work and school and also because I cannot come and do regular. It has offered me the opportunity to still engage in my work, still make my money, and pay the fees for the school that I have enrolled on (A 30-year-old male pension officer, UG).

Responses from participants in a focus group discussion showed that student-workers opted for distance education because of financial difficulties and difficulty in getting admission for the regular

program as well as the desire to obtain higher education. Student-workers who felt they could not afford the regular program and had to work during the week and make some money to pay for distance education expressed these sentiments:

Sometimes it's based on financial support. Me, I wanted to go to the regular, but we (I and my family) considered certain things. The regular one you pay fees alongside the hostel. The hostel fees koraa can pay a distance fees for that year and the school fees can take another year. So, I combine those 'wei na' or maybe I will not get all the support that I want. So, I think of working and getting my personal fees. (21-year-old teacher, FGD, KNUST).

The interviews also confirm responses in Table 2 that student-workers opted for distance education because of the desire to obtain higher education. This was reiterated by a 30-year-old finance officer during the focus group discussion: "I have always wanted to obtain university certificate. Hmm, unfortunately some of us didn't get the opportunity to enter like the others have. So, when I heard about distance education, I did everything I could to. And I am here now..."

An assessment of the descriptive statistics and narratives presented valuable information regarding reasons for opting for distance education. It can be observed that there are several reasons why student-workers preferred distance education. It appears distance education is serving the purpose for which it was established as it has become an important avenue for student-workers to benefit from higher education. These benefits student-workers accrue from distance education essentially draw our attention to the role expansion theory. It has indeed increased access although there were contradictory views from student-workers.

Research Question 2: What is the Link between Background Characteristics and Desire to obtain Higher Education?

The second part of this section tested whether the background characteristics of student-workers determine their desire to obtain higher education via distance education. The desire to obtain higher education was selected, among other reasons, because an overwhelming 89.3 percent of student-workers chose that as their major reason for opting distance education. As a result, the study used

socio-economic-demographic characteristics of student-workers to test whether there is a statistically significant difference between sex, age and marital status, position at the workplace, type and nature of employment and desire to obtain higher education. Results in Table 3 describe the relationship patterns between these variables using the Pearson chi-square test.

The findings show that, comparatively, the number of females who showed interest in obtaining higher education was higher than their male counterparts in UG and KNUST. But there was no significant difference between male's and female's desire to obtain higher education in both institutions.

The response from student-workers in UG and KNUST contradicted Peckham's et al., (2004), Rovai's (2001) and Jun's (2005) findings on male and female student-worker's desire for higher education since the relationship in the current study was not significant. Unlike UG and KNUST, the desire to complete and obtain higher education was statistically significant (0.037) among males and females in UCC. This implies that female student-workers pursuing distance education in UCC had a higher desire to complete and obtain higher education than their male counterparts. This also confirmed Packham's et al., (2004) and Jun's (2005) remarks that female student-workers aimed for higher education through distance education as compared to their male counterparts.

In the interview, most of them perceived that females were more likely to utilize distance education to opt for higher education. According to an immigration officer, it was quite clear that women would strongly opt to obtain higher education through distance education. She expressed her views comparing the responsibilities of women to men as follows:

Mmmh the females because err...we normally need more time...you know we have to go to work, go to school and come and take care of the family...the domestic chores...so sometimes when we combine all the three together is very hectic and stressful so when we have the distance course you are able to learn at your own time...ahaa you have a relaxed time table that you are able to learn and then go to write exams when the exams time is due. So, it is...is good for the females. You know the men...for the men or the males, they

normally we don't do a lot of domestic chores so from work they can go for lectures and all that...but for us we have to combine domestic chores, children and all

that so that is why I think more females opt for the long-distance education (42-year-old female immigration officer, UG).

Table 3: Background of Respondents and Desire to obtain Higher Education

Characteristics	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total	p value (χ)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	N	
Desire to Obtain higher education							
University of Ghana							
<i>Sex</i>							0.109
Male	9(5.1)	-	7(4)	49(27.8)	111(63.1)	176(100)	
Female	11(5.9)	-	19(10.2)	42(22.6)	114(61.3)	186(100)	
<i>Age (years)</i>							0.000
<20	0(0)	-	0(0)	3(100)	0(0)	3(100)	
20-29	7(3.8)	-	17(9.3)	28(15.4)	130(71.4)	182(100)	
30-39	13(9.2)	-	9(6.4)	44(31.2)	75(53.2)	141(100)	
40+	0(0)	-	0(0)	16(44.4)	20(55.6)	36(100)	
<i>Marital status</i>							0.001
Not married	13(6.1)	-	13(6.1)	37(17.5)	149(70.3)	212(100)	
Married	7(5.1)	-	13(9.4)	51(37)	67(48.6)	138(100)	
Divorced	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Widowed	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Cohabiting	0(0)	-	0(0)	3(25)	9(75)	12(100)	
<i>Type of employment</i>							0.758
Part-time	5(5.3)	-	9(9.6)	22(23.4)	58(61.7)	94(100)	
Full-time	15(5.6)	-	17(6.3)	69(25.7)	167(62.3)	268(100)	
<i>Sector of employment</i>							0.001
Private	10(4)	-	11(4.4)	72(28.6)	159(63.1)	252(100)	
Public	10(9.1)	-	15(13.6)	19(17.3)	66(60)	110(100)	

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology

<i>Sex</i>							0.069
Male	6(3.5)	0(0)	8(4.7)	89(52)	68(39.8)	171(100)	
Female	3(1.6)	5(2.7)	4(2.2)	107(58.5)	64(35)	183(100)	
<i>Age (years)</i>							0.103
<20	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	3(50)	3(50)	6(100)	
20-29	6(2.7)	0(0)	8(3.7)	114(52.1)	91(41.6)	219(100)	
30-39	3(2.8)	5(4.7)	4(3.7)	65(60.7)	30(28)	107(100)	
40+	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	14(63.6)	8(36.4)	22(100)	
<i>Marital Status</i>							0.000
Not married	0(0)	0(0)	8(4.1)	97(49.7)	90(46.2)	195(100)	
Married	9(6.1)	5(3.4)	43(2.7)	88(59.5)	42(28.4)	148(100)	
Divorced	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	4(100)	0(0)	4(100)	
Widowed	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Cohabiting	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	7(100)	0(0)	7(100)	
<i>Type of employment</i>							0.587
Part-time	6(2.9)	5(2.4)	6(2.9)	114(54.5)	78(37.3)	209(100)	
Full-time	3(2.1)	0(0)	6(4.2)	79(55.6)	54(38.0)	142(100)	
Both	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	3(100)	0(0)	3(100)	
<i>Sector of employment</i>							0.314

Private	6(2.6)	5(2.2)	8(3.5)	115(50.7)	93(41)	227(100)	
Public	3(2.4)	0(0)	4(3.2)	78(62.9)	39(31.5)	124(100)	
Both	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	3(100)	0(0)	3(100)	
University of Cape Coast							
<i>Sex</i>							0.037
Male	4(2.3)	6(3.5)	15(8.7)	61(35.5)	87(50.3)	173(100)	
Female	4(2.2)	7(3.9)	4(2.2)	53(29.3)	113(62.4)	181(100)	
<i>Age</i>							0.497
<20	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	3(100)	0(0)	3(100)	
20-29	8(2.7)	11(3.7)	15(5)	97(32.2)	170(56.5)	301(100)	
30-39	0(0)	2(5)	4(10)	10(25)	24(60)	40(100)	
40+	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	4(40)	6(60)	10(100)	
<i>Marital Status</i>							0.000
Not married	4(1.7)	11(4.8)	11(4.8)	72(31.3)	132(57.4)	230(100)	
Married	2(2.3)	0(0)	4(4.7)	36(41.9)	44(51.2)	86(100)	
Divorced	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	2(25)	6(75)	8(100)	
Widowed	0(0)	0(0)	2(100)	0(0)	0(0)	2(100)	
Cohabiting	2(7.1)	2(7.1)	2(7.1)	4(14.3)	18(64.3)	28(100)	
<i>Type of employment</i>							0.003
Part-time	2(2.1)	6(6.4)	4(4.3)	42(44.7)	40(42.6)	94(100)	
Full-time	6(2.3)	7(2.7)	15(5.9)	68(26.6)	160(62.5)	256(100)	
Both	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	4(100)	0(0)	4(100)	
<i>Sector of employment</i>							0.044
Private	8(2.9)	12(4.3)	15(5.4)	87(31.5)	154(55.8)	276(100)	
Public	0(0)	0(0)	4(5.3)	25(33.3)	46(61.3)	75(100)	
Both	0(0)	1(33.3)	0(0)	2(66.7)	0(0)	3(100)	

Source: Fieldwork, Darko-Asumadu (2023)

There were other categories of participants who perceived that both males and females patronize distance education and that it is very difficult to pick and choose the sex group that dominates. In this regard, a participant provided a description that sought to put both sexes on the same scale.

Ok I will say both because we have the females some of them, they get married and give birth so they can't come and stay on campus while they are pregnant. The males too, some take care of themselves so they have to come and enroll in distance education so that they can pay the school fees alongside their work. (45-year-old office attendant, UCC).

A critical glance at the comments made by participants show that the conclusion in relation to sex and desire to obtain higher education is contextual. It appears that one should consider the context in which the study is carried out before concluding that the sex of student-workers plays a major role in their desire to obtain higher education. The desire for females to enroll on distance

education, as a means providing opportunities for women to pursue higher education, sits well within the objective of the Moser's (1993) Framework that advocated for women empowerment, fair social status and which sought to fight for equality to liberate them from their subordinate status.

In UG, respondent's age showed a statistically significant relationship with their desire to obtain higher education. It can be deduced that the desire student-workers from 20-39 years had on obtaining higher education differed from those in other age groups in UG. In sharp contrast to the earlier findings, there appears to be no statistical evidence that younger student-workers would have a stronger desire to complete and obtain higher education more than the elderly in KNUST and UCC. There is therefore the need to exercise caution when establishing a relationship between the age of student-workers in KNUST and UCC and desire to obtain higher education since no clear relationship exists. The findings established in KNUST and UCC have some divergence with Dutton et al. (2002), Park (2007) and Osei's (2012) assertions that most

mature student-workers fall within the ages of 25 and 50 and that these categories of people desire and patronize distance education because they are occupied with other social and paid work responsibilities.

The mixed responses on age and desire to obtain higher education via pursuing distance education showed in the descriptive statistics can also be verified from the interviews that further sought to obtain information on student-worker's perception about distance education. A 42-year-old female immigration officer responded:

The matured[sic]... females. Mmmmh...as I said because of the...normally the matured[sic] people have children, they are married, they have children, they have responsibilities to take care of their homes and all that so they will...for the single, those who are single they don't have any responsibility normally at home they are free so they can go for lectures the whole day. Ahaa but with the matured[sic] females they have to combine home, job and all that so that is why I think the matured[sic] females will opt for distance education and that will be their chance to get higher education.

On the downside, some participants mentioned the changing trend with regard to the age groups that are currently on the distance education program. They acknowledged that the introduction of distance education was meant to provide space for the elderly or mature to access higher education but currently, the younger ones have taken over.

At first no na they said distance is for those who are working and old people but right now no the young ones are taking over. Somebody is enrolling into distance but does not do anything, just come to the Saturday and Sunday class naa, that's all. For him or her to get time to rest for the week that's all (29-year-old female office attendant, FGD, KNUST).

Outcomes on marital status were consistent across all the study areas. The reason was that student-workers who were not married (single) had more desire to attain higher education through distance education than those married. Approximately 70.3, 46.2 and 57.4 percent of student-workers, in UG, KNUST and UCC respectively, who were never

married agreed that they had a strong desire to pursue and obtain higher education. This could probably be due to the fact married student-workers have a lot of family and social responsibilities to attend to; as a result, they may have been distracted at a stage of their academic work.

A 30-year-old male pension officer in UG was quite certain that the married used distance education as an avenue to pursue higher education. His response differed from the descriptive statistics which depicted that both the single and married desire to obtain higher education through the distance mode. Perhaps, the obvious contradiction could be influenced by a larger sample size of respondents who were not married at the period the study was conducted. He reacted as follows:

Obviously the married. This is because if you take my class for instance, I mean about 60-70 percent of the people in the class are married whereas about some few people let's say 40-30 percent are not married. So, it is obviously clear that the married people because they don't have the time so they would always want to opt for the DE program compared to the regular program. Usually you will find the single guys or ladies in the regular program more.

On married student-workers being the ones expected to opt for distance education ahead of single student-workers, the findings of this study contradict WPI Academic Technology Centre's (2012) assertion that more than half of distance education students are married with dependents and desire higher education. This also contradicts Kwapong's (2007) study of participants' experiences in a distance education program in Ghana where she found that most of the participants who desired higher education (70%) were married.

The type of employment showed no significant difference in UG and KNUST. Conversely, full-time workers had a strong desire to complete and obtain higher education than part-time workers enrolled in the distance education program in UCC. With p -values of 0.001 and 0.044 in UG and UCC respectively, there was a statistically significant difference between the views of student-workers in the public and private sectors. It was revealed that student-workers employed in the private sector of the economy had a desire to obtain higher

education more than those in the public sector in UG and UCC.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that the socio-demographic characteristics of distance education student-workers in Ghana have changed significantly over the years as the majority of them are now younger, females and have not married (have not formed their own families). Student-workers still preferred distance education over regular programs due to its associated benefits. This is because, apart from their desire to obtain higher education, student-workers had the opportunity to work and attend to family and other social responsibilities simultaneously. The sex of student-workers played a significant role in their desire to obtain higher education in UCC but this cannot be said in KNUST and UG. The study also concluded that younger student-workers pursuing distance education in UG desired higher education more than the elderly but this relationship was non-existing in the UCC and KNUST. The study also concludes that single student-workers desire for higher education more than the married in all institutions under investigation.

Based on conclusions, the study recommends that university authorities in collaboration with the management of distance education should make the conscious effort to sensitize males, elderly and married workers, to enrol on the distance education programs to bridge social disparities in education. Since workers preferred distance education over the regular mode, the management of distance education should create more centres across the length and breadth of the country for workers to easily access higher education and combine their studies with paid work and social responsibilities concurrently. University authorities and the management of distance education should organise by-quarterly seminars, in addition to annual orientations, on strategies student-workers should adopt to balance the demands of paid work, social life and academic. Again, the government of Ghana should work closely with the Ministry of Education to prioritize and promote distance education so that workers can enrol, build their capacities and improve service delivery.

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