Stakeholders' Perception of Quality in Distance Education and its Implications for Educational Administration in Ghana

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perception of quality in a distance education programme of a Ghanaian university. The study adopted a case study research design to collect data from 320 students, 56 facilitators and 24 administrative Staff selected randomly from one centre of a Ghanaian university involved in Distance education. The data were collected through the administration of questionnaires. Factor Loadings for the Items of Distance Education Quality was performed. The factor analysis was performed using the Principal Component Analysis extraction method with varimax rotation. The findings indicated that students' level of awareness of quality assurance practices at the Institute of Distance Learning (IDL) in the Ghanaian university was very low as compared to facilitators and administrators. Regarding stakeholder perceptions of quality of distance education, students rated Support Services high whilst Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige had a lower scoring. Facilitators' also rated Support Services higher and rated Infrastructure and Learning Environment lower. Administrators, on the other hand, gave Support Services the highest rating whilst Infrastructure and Learning Environment was rated the lowest. Further analyses revealed that there are significant differences between the mean ratings of Indicators by different stakeholders. The study recommends that educational administrators must have systems in place to ensure adherence to quality standards, build the capacity of staff in modern trends in distance education, and periodically plan and evaluate quality assurance practices among stakeholders.

Introduction

The quest for higher education continues to increase with economic and industrial development which inevitably leads to mounting demands on higher education and this would require skills normally attained through higher levels of education (Trow, 2005). Acquiring higher education is, therefore, both good for the economic health of nations and for the economic competitiveness of society (Delbanco, 2012). Higher education has over the years, been delivered through the primary

mode of the traditional lecturer-student interaction in a formal classroom setting, often referred to as "sage on the stage" (O'Malley and McCraw, 1999 as cited by Shachar and Neumann, 2003). The learning environment for higher education has largely been a "face-to-face" interaction between students and teachers at a physical site. However, higher education in the 21st Century is adjusting gradually to new modes of delivery that capitalize on technological advancements to achieve expected goals in a more convenient and flexible manner. These trends in higher education have consequences for stakeholders who are connected to higher education. In view of these developments, higher education institutions have sought to reconstruct curriculum, pedagogy, assessment policies and delivery methods directed at improving efficiency while making education accessible (Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007). The major issue is that the traditional mode of delivery has not only been inadequate to match the changing trends on the higher education landscape, but has also proved unsuccessful in providing adequate access to higher education seekers in some instances. The ever-increasing social demand for higher education has challenged the limited facilities (Howell, Williams & Lindsay, 2003), bringing to the fore, the concept of distance education which offers greater access to higher education in a more convenient and flexible manner. The perception of stakeholders is critical for educational administrators who must plan and put systems in place to ensure quality in education and customer satisfaction.

The distance education concept, which is not a recent phenomenon (Kretovics, 2003) has been embraced by stakeholders as a viable complement (Twigg and Valentine, 2002). Distance education has, over the last decades, assumed greater importance in tertiary education in Ghana. Currently, Ghana has the following major public universities, namely, the University of Cape Coast (UCC); the University of Education, Winneba (UEW); the University of Ghana (UG); and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi (KNUST) running distance education at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Ohene & Essuman, 2014). Although Ghana continues to make modest strides in the provision of distance education, there appears to be very little research on quality issues for distance education in Ghana, due to the fact that most of the distance education programmes are

relatively new (Ohene & Essuman, 2014); and the concept generally is also new in the Ghanaian context.

As distance education becomes a viable option, quality assurance issues have become critical for institutions and stakeholders (Ogunleye, 2008). Even though a number of researches have been conducted on several aspects of distance learning at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, there is no research that addresses how the diverse users of the distance learning perceive quality and its implication for educational administration. Lerra (2014) asserts that out of the various problems of today's distance education, the most critical one is how it is perceived by the individuals involved in it. According to Birnbaum (2001) and Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) there is little evidence that the views and perspectives of stakeholders have been given any significant consideration in the planning and implementation of higher education in the distance mode. It becomes prudent, therefore, to seek user perceptions and opinions in quality matters as universities in Ghana in particular and other institutions around the world continue to implement quality policies. This will serve as a feedback mechanism for educational administrators for quality improvement, thus, assuring the various stakeholders of the effectiveness of the quality practices that would meet their expectations.

The main objective of this study is to examine stakeholders' perception and expectations of quality of distance education programme in a Ghanaian context. The specific objectives of the study are to ascertain user awareness of existing guidelines and practices for quality at the distance learning programme and determine how stakeholders perceive the quality of distance education in a Ghanaian university.

Methodology

Research Approach

A quantitative, non-experimental research approach with a case study research design was employed. The use of the case study design was necessitated by the need to undertake a detailed empirical examination of how the different stakeholders perceive the quality of distance education at a particular university.

Population

The target population of the study includes all students, facilitators/ instructors and administrators of a distance education programme in a Ghanaian University. Based on the target population of the study, a sample size of 400 individuals consisting of 320 students, 24 administrative staff and 56 facilitator/instructors were considered.

Sampling Method and Data Collection

The stratified random sampling method was used to select the various participants. Both primary and secondary data were collected for the study. The primary data were obtained through a field survey after administration of a questionnaire developed from Conceptual Model for Stakeholder's Quality Dimensions in Distance Education (Mbwesa, 2014). This was used in examining perception of quality among stakeholders. The primary data included socio-economic data of respondents, data on respondents' perception concerning support services, institutional credibility, academic integrity, infrastructure, cost effectiveness, reward and motivation, and other information relating to stakeholders' perception of quality of distance education at the Institute. Secondary data were collected from review of key documents like distance learning policies and student handbooks. Questionnaires were reviewed by experts to ensure validity. For the Likert Scale constructs, data from the pre-testing exercise were used to test the reliability and internal consistency of the items used by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients using the Statistical Package for Social Science software (SPSS version 20).

Statistical Analyses

Data collected for the study were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science software (IBM version 20) and Microsoft Excel (2010 version). In the first place, data on multi-item constructs (Likert Scale) were tested for the level of internal consistency, reliability and validity by computing and comparing their Cronbach's alpha values to acceptable test scores. Factor Loadings for the Items of Distance Education Quality was performed. The factor analysis was performed

using the Principal Component Analysis extraction method with varimax rotation.

Results and Discussion

User Awareness of Existing Quality Guidelines and Practices

The majority of the facilitators (75%) and the administrative staff (80%) affirmed that they were aware of the mission and vision statement of the Institute responsible for the distance learning programme of the university. More than half (51.7%) of the students indicated that they were not aware of the mission and vision statement of the Institute. This result implied that a significant number of the students were unaware of the mission and vision statements. Majority (58.6%) of students became aware of the vision and mission of the Institute through their orientation while the remaining 41.4 percent were informed through personal inquiries. With regard to the facilitators, the highest proportion (42.9%) of them also got informed through their orientation and quite a significant number (38.1%) through personal inquiry. Majority (62.5%) of the administrative staffs got informed about the mission and vision statements of the Institute through available documents and records. The results above seemed to reflect the proximity of the various stakeholders to the Institute. Students, due to their distance away from the Institute, were informed through student orientations whereas the facilitators and administrative staff, due to their proximity to the Institute, had the chance to be informed not only by orientation and personal inquiries but also through review of the Institute's records and documents.

Awareness of Quality Assurance Practices

With regard to respondents' knowledge of the quality assurance practices implemented at the Institute, majority of the facilitators and administrative staff, 78.6% and 70%, respectively, responded in the affirmative whereas only 18.4 percent of the students indicated they were also aware of them. This meant that as high as 81.6% of the students were unaware of the quality assurance practices at the Institute. The implication is that, students would not be able to defend or demand

actions that could guarantee the quality of their learning experience they received from the Institute. In respect of quality assurance activities/ practices in place, respondents indicated they were aware of the following: provision of relevant teaching and learning materials; high standards in the conduct of examinations and supervision of theses; marking of assignments and giving feedback to students on time; training of staff, facilitators and supervisors; assessment of facilitators; high standards in student intake through interviews; easy access to facilitators anytime on either phone or the internet; provision of virtual classroom for online learning and provision of professional add-on seminars, among others.

User's Knowledge and Awareness of Existing Quality Assurance Practices

The results on user's knowledge and awareness of existing quality assurance practices at the Institute as obtained from the analysis of empirical results collected are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: User's Knowledge and Awareness of Existing Quality Assurance Practices

		Students (N=147)		*Facilitators (N=28)*		*Administrators (N=20)*	
Variable	*Response category*	*Freq.*	*%*	*Freq.*	*%*	*Freq.*	*%*
Knowledge on Mission and vision statement of IDL	Yes	71	*48.3*	21	*75*	16	*80*
	No	76	51.7	7	*25*	4	*20*
Source of knowledge on Mission and vision statement of IDL	Orientation	41	58.6	9	42.9	2	12.5
	Personal inquiry	29	41.4	8	38.1	4	25
	Documents/records	0	0	4	19	10	62.5
Knowledge of Quality Mechanism and practices	Yes	27	18.4	22	78.6	14	70
	No	120	*81.6*	6	*21.4*	6	*30*

Source: Field Survey Data (2016).

User Perceptions of Quality at the Institute of Distance Learning (IDL)

In order to better examine the perception of users on the quality of distance education at the Institute of Distance Learning, a confirmatory factor analysis was first conducted with the view to establishing the quality dimensions for distance education quality at the IDL. The factor analysis was performed using the Principal Component Analysis extraction method with varimax rotation. As presented in Table 2, the main dimensions and components of distance education that influence stakeholders' perception on quality included: Cost Effectiveness and Access to Services; Support Services; Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige; and Infrastructure and Learning Environment. The factors or indicators that loaded strongly on each of these components are presented as follows:

Cost Effectiveness and Access to Services

As the results presented in Table 2 show, eight (8) indicators load strongly on the Cost Effectiveness and Access to Services component of distance education quality at the IDL. The internal consistency of the indicators as measured by the Cronbach alpha was 0.908 which indicates an 'excellent' internal consistency and reliability based on the interpretation of George and Mallery (2003). Among the indicators that load strongly on this component of quality, Access to Reliable Internet Facilities had the highest factor loading (0.784), followed by Access to State-of-the-Art Computer Laboratories (0.771) and then Access to State-of-the-Art Computer laboratories (0.767). The indicator with the least factor loading on this component was Flexible Fee Payment Systems (0.559).

Cost effectiveness and Access to Service is an important component or dimension of quality in distance education. The fact that availability of financial support systems for students (0.755), cost of services which reflect the standard of services delivered (0.705) and institutional practices and procedures help to reduce learner costs (0.702) load strongly on this component supports the assertion that Cost Effectiveness is an important dimension of quality at the Institute. According to Shea *et al*. (2001), distance learning providers around the world are beginning to explore cost-effective ways of providing demand-driven and learner-

centered supports to satisfy this high-rated distance education quality dimension. The result of this study, therefore, corroborates the assertion that Cost Effectiveness and Access to Services and Facilities remain a major dimension of quality perceived by stakeholders.

Support Services

The second dimension or component for distance education quality at the IDL as identified from the factor analysis was Support Services. In all, ten (10) indicators loaded strongly on the Support Services dimension, with internal consistency scoring 0.865 (Cronbach alpha). The multi-item construct of the Cronbach alpha value of 0.8 to 0.9 is considered to have very good levels of reliability. The result, therefore, shows that internal consistency and reliability of the items on Support Services was very good. As indicated in the results (Table 2), the three indicators with the highest factor loading on the Support Services component were existence of complaint procedures, complaints are given timely attention; and, registration processes are convenient and flexible, with factor loadings of 0.805, 0.760 and 0.662, respectively. Other factors that loaded strongly on Support Service included timely provision of course modules materials (0.605), effective and timely flow of information to students (0.596), availability of student advisory services (0.586) and effective interaction between students and programme coordinators (0.517).

Many studies on distance learning quality recognise Support Services as key component of quality in distance education. According to Jung (2012), different kinds of Support Services are needed for success in DE, including student support, faculty support and institutional support services. From the findings of this study, it is noted that student complaint processes, timely attention to complaints and other student support services load strongly as factors for distance education quality at the Institute. The findings, therefore, support the position of Engleman (2005), Clark *et al.* (2009) and Jung (2012) that Support Service is part of the principal components of distance education quality.

Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige

The study also identified Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige as a principal component and dimension for quality at the IDL. The

factors that loaded strongly on this dimension were five, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.597. By an interpretation by George and Mallery (2003), a Cronbach alpha of 0.5 and above has an acceptable level of internal consistency and reliability. The multi-item construct on Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige could be said to be reliable. Among the items that loaded strongly on this component (Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige) were mechanisms for validating and verifying student admission, with a factor loading of 0.826; mechanisms for validating and verifying registration, 0.797 and Institute engages highly qualified staff (0.724). These indicators of Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige are consistent with Jung's (2012) observations.

In the findings of Jung (2012) whose study was similar to this particular work, the Quality of Staff loaded strongly on the Institutional Credibility dimension of quality in distance learning. In Jung's (2012) study, it was found that Institutional Credibility di-mensions were powerful indicators of distance learning quality as perceived by the Asian learners; and, each explained about 85–86% of the domain's variance. Several distance education educators and researchers, including D'Antoni and Mugridge (2004), have noted that there is a constant struggle for parity of esteem in distance education. According to Jung (2012), programme recognition and satisfaction of national and international accreditations, showing strong leadership, and guaranteeing member qualifications promote distance education institutions' public credibility and perceived quality. The result of this study, therefore, is clearly in tandem with the preponderance of views on the Academic Integrity and Institutional Credibility dimension of distance education quality.

Table 2: Factor Loadings for the Items of DE Quality

***Preliminary statisticsKMO=0.80Bartlett's test of sphericity [approx chi-square=3592.737, df =1326, p-value=.000*]**

Dimension 1: Cost Effectiveness and Access to Services (*Cronbach Alpha* =0.908)

Indicators	*Factor loading*
Access to reliable internet facilities	.784
Access to state-of-the-art computer laboratories	.771
Financial support systems are available for students	.755

Costs of Services reflect the standard of services delivered	.705
Institutional practices and procedures help to reduce learner costs	.702
Flexible fee payment systems	.559

Dimension 2: Support Services (*Cronbach Alpha* = 0.865)

Indicators	*Factor loading*
Systems for handling complaints	.816
Existence of complaint procedures	.805
Complaints are given timely attention	.760
Registration processes convenient and flexible	.662
Programme coordinators are available and are introduced to students at the beginning of studies	.616
Timely provision of courses/modules materials	.605
There is effective and timely flow of information to students	.596
Student advisory services are available	.586
Effective interaction between students and programme coordinators	.517

Dimension 3: Academic integrity and institutional prestige (*Cronbach Alpha* =0.597)

Indicators	*Factor loading*
Mechanisms for validating and verifying student admission	.826
There are mechanisms for validating and verifying registration	.797
The Institute engages highly qualified staff	.724
Course/Learning materials are distributed early	.573
Programmes of study are recognized	.507

Dimension 4: Infrastructure (*Cronbach Alpha* =0.713)

Indicators	*Factor loading*
Facilitators/Instructors have access to library resources	.745
Learners have access to library resources	.647
Students have access to utility facilities	.610
The institution has pleasant aesthetic designs (landscape, buildings etc.)	.596

Source: Field Survey (2016).

Infrastructure and Learning Environment

The fourth dimension of distance education quality noted was Infrastructure. Infrastructure, as a component of distance learning quality was loaded strongly by four indicators, namely, Facilitators/Instructors have access to library resources (0.745), access to library resources (0.647), utility facilities (0.610) and pleasant aesthetic designs [landscape, buildings etc.] (0.596). The internal consistency and reliability of the items was good and acceptable with Cronbach alpha value of 0.713. According to Jung (2012), ensuring the reliability and security of technology systems, as well as, the provision of physical spaces, helps to improve stakeholders' perception of distance education quality. The results of this study, as presented in Table 2, validate this position. Jung (2012) classified Institutional Credibility and Infrastructure dimensions of distance learning quality under the Environmental Domain which he noted as a crucial attribute for quality in distance education.

According to Daukilas *et al.* (2008), the underlying structure of any distance course is the technological infrastructure that supports student learning and success. In the case of the IDL where the dual mode of distance education delivery is adopted, both technological infrastructure and physical infrastructure have a great influence on quality perceptions. Al-Salman (2011) has noted that distance education succeeds in an environment supported by technological infrastructure and physical structures that allow for technical skills development and flexible learning. The finding of this study does not contradict the above assertions but rather supports the views of the Infrastructure dimension for distance education quality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of the study, it is noted that few students were aware of existing quality assurance practices at the Institute. On the other hand, majority of facilitators and administrators had knowledge of the existence of quality assurance practices. Regarding stakeholder perceptions of what assures of/accounts for quality in distance education, students and facilitators rated Support Services high whilst rating Academic Integrity and Institutional Prestige low.

The following are therefore recommended based on the findings and conclusions.

1. Institutions of higher learning around the world must constantly review and improve delivery of orientation ceremonies for students, facilitators and administrative staff; provide timely support services to students and facilitators. Educational administrators must therefore factor this in their strategic plans. Educational leaders must have systems in place to monitor persons who constantly interface with students in service delivery and implement effective communication strategies on operations of their institute.
2. Appropriate quality assurance policy and mechanisms must be communicated to all staff.
3. Institutions offering distance education programmes must recognise that improvement of the systems has to be managed and adopt modern methods of supervision and training.
4. Administrators must remove all barriers that prevent stakeholders from receiving the best of services from the institution.
5. Lastly as a long-term measure, educational administrators must lead a process that will develop a systematic approach to manage the implementation of Total Quality Management in their institutions.

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