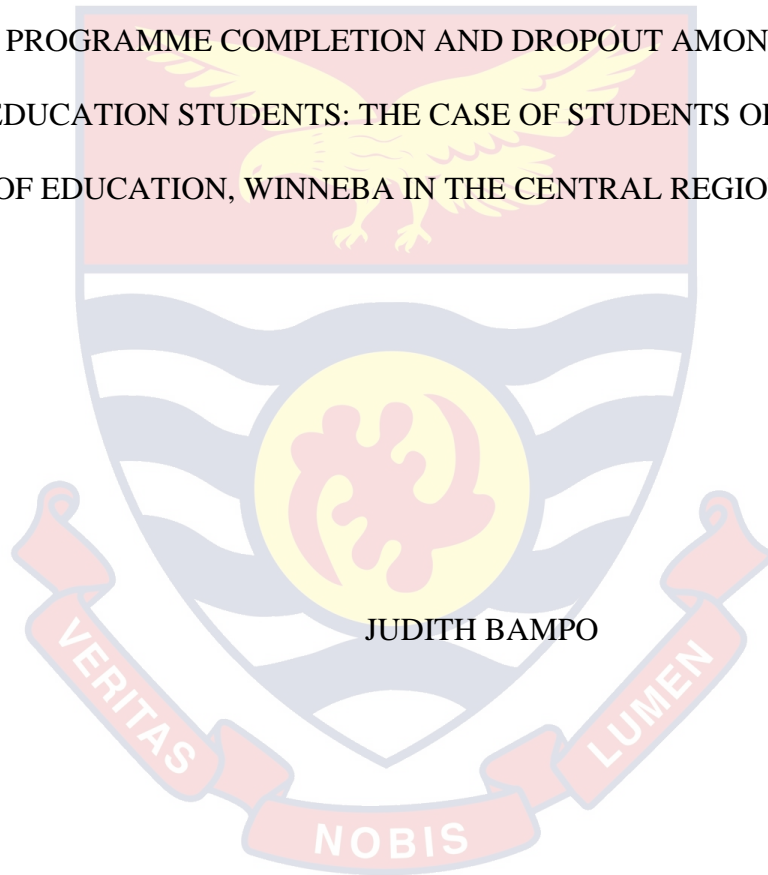


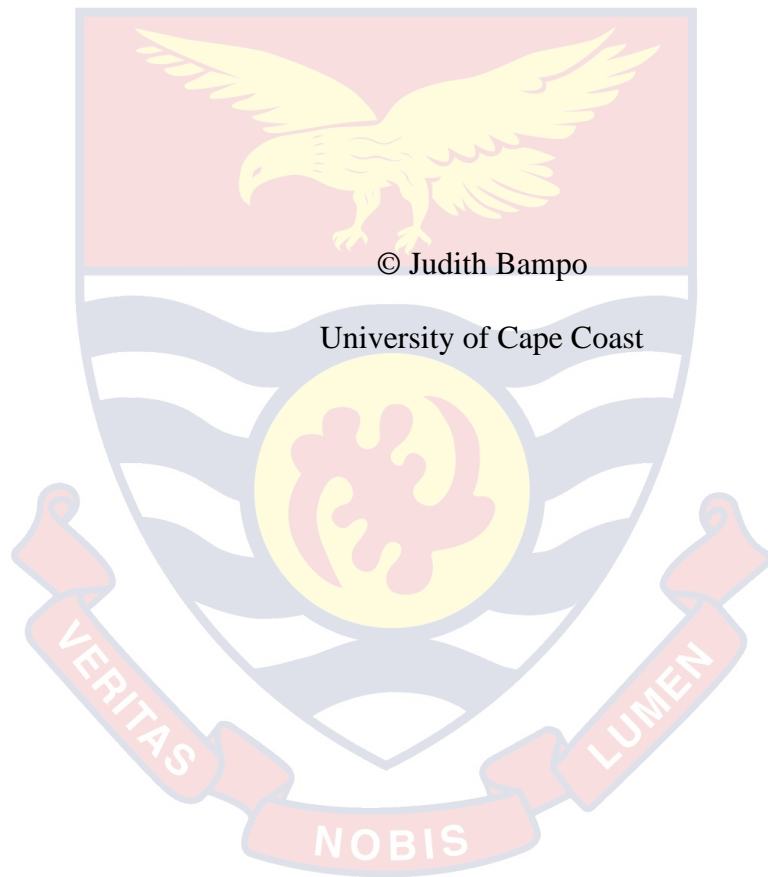
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

THE INFLUENCE OF SUPPORT SERVICES ON PROGRESSION,
PROGRAMME COMPLETION AND DROPOUT AMONG DISTANCE
EDUCATION STUDENTS: THE CASE OF STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY
OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF GHANA.



JUDITH BAMPO

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BY
JUDITH BAMPO

Thesis submitted to the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration
of the School for Educational Development and Outreach of the College of
Education Studies, University of Cape Coast, in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for award of Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Education
(Qualitative Based)

SEPTEMBER 2020

DECLARATION

Candidate's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own original work and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or elsewhere.

Candidate's Signature: Date:

Name: Judith Bampo

Supervisors' Declaration

We hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of the thesis were supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University of Cape Coast.

Principal Supervisor's Signature: Date:

Name: Dr. Albert. L. Dare

Co-supervisor's Signature: Date:

Name: Prof. Cosmas Cobbold

ABSTRACT

This study was motivated by my desire to understand the phenomenon of the Influence of Support Services on Progression, Programme Completion and Dropout among distance education students in University of Education, Winneba. I was also interested in knowing participants' perceptions about the learner support services and their contribution to distance learners' progress and programme completion. The investigation was carried out to find out why despite the provision of learner support services, there were dropouts and low completion rates in the Distance Education programme of the University of Education, Winneba. The study also identified the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services. A qualitative case study research design was applied. Group and individual interviews were conducted with participants. Data were analysed using ATLAS.ti computer software which simplified the management of the large data generated during the fieldwork. The study found that there was the need for sustained learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction and regular communication with the supporting institution during the learning process. This requires planning and aligning learner support services to identified learner needs, access to learning resources including the existence and application of effective monitoring and supervision mechanisms for academic, counselling and administrative support in order to ensure commitment and accountability of learner support providers. In order to reduce isolation which is created by the physical separation between learners and service providers, the study recommends a structure for the provision of decentralized learner support services that are near where distance learners live and work for ease of access.

KEY WORDS

Academic advisement (support)

Administrative Support

Collaboration

Computer literacy

Constructivism

Correspondence course

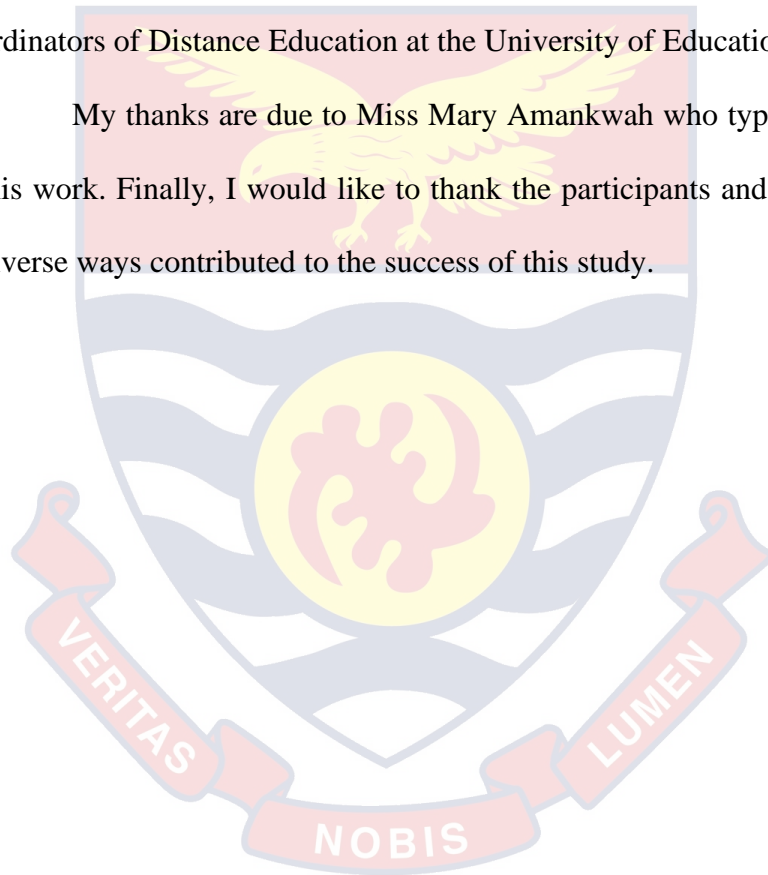


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I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the study centre coordinators of Distance Education at the University of Education, Winneba.

My thanks are due to Miss Mary Amankwah who typed and formatted this work. Finally, I would like to thank the participants and all those who in diverse ways contributed to the success of this study.



DEDICATION

To my husband Mr. E.Y. Attram, my late mother and sister, my father, my
sisters and my children Albert and Gwendolyn



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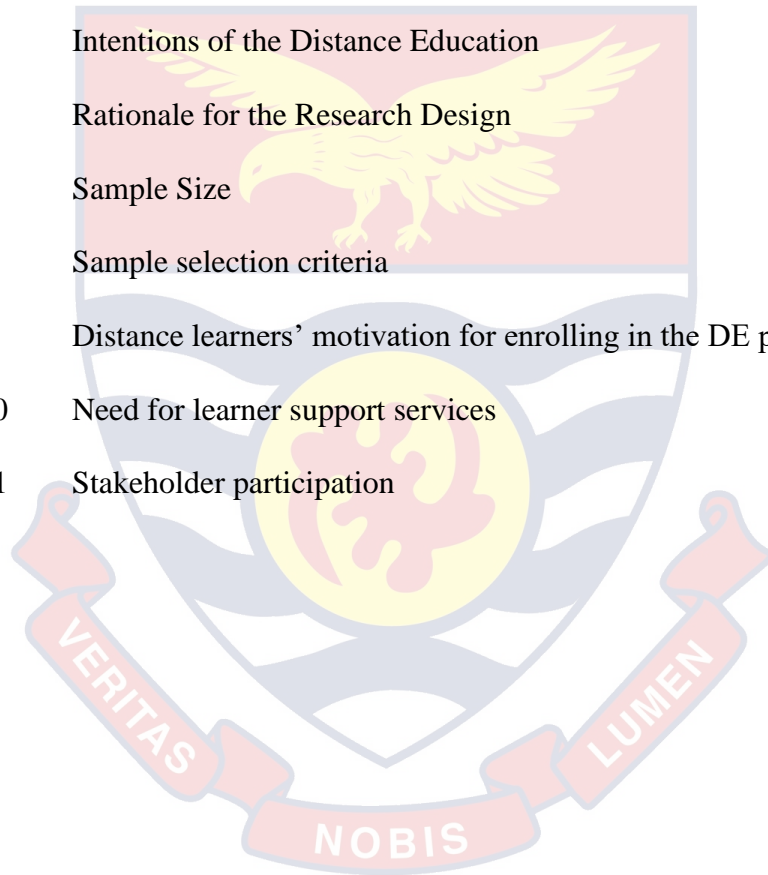
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the introduction of the study. The chapter, among other things, covers the following areas: background to the study, statement of the problem, objectives of the study, significance of the study, limitations of the study, operational definitions of terms, and finally, the organization of the study.

Background to the Study

According to Windham (2012), education is the knowledge of putting one's potentials to maximum use. It is so important in the life of people that one can safely say that a human being is not in the proper sense till he or she is educated.

This importance attached to education is basically for two reasons. The first is that the training of a human mind is not complete without education. Education makes man a right thinker. It tells man how to think and how to make decisions.

The second reason for the importance of education is that only through the attainment of education that people are enabled to receive information from the external world to acquaint themselves with the past and receive all necessary information regarding the present. Without education, an individual is as though he or she were in a closed room but with education he or she finds himself in a room with all its windows open towards the outside world.

It has been asserted that, quality education for all cannot be realised without proper emphasis on the need for well trained teachers who are of

service and have social status (Windham, 2012). The central role the teacher plays in the education enterprise in societies has been recognized by educationists the world over, especially as it affects most curricula and forms of classroom organization. This requires the teacher to do effective work in the classroom.

Teachers are expected to possess relevant knowledge and appropriate pedagogical skills to be able to run schools and specifically teach to bring about qualitative changes in learners. When the dynamic nature of society brings to the fore the need for curriculum change or innovation, considerable demands are placed on teachers' knowledge base and methodological skills. The need for systematic further academic and professional training for teachers irrespective of the level at which they teach cannot therefore be overemphasized. Also, the increasing specialization of our world is making teaching more professional and teachers all over the world are being called upon to occupy positions and perform skills that need precise preparation and training.

The professional growth of the teacher is therefore a process which must not be considered to terminate at any time in a teacher's life. Therefore, teachers' certification should not be the end of teacher education.

Firestone and Pennel (2012) supported the need for systematic continuous learning by teachers by asserting that:

Learning opportunities can contribute to commitment by expanding teacher's knowledge. They provide opportunities to learn subject content and instructional approaches that can increase classroom effectiveness and intrinsically rewarding students' feedback while

providing a sense of competence. They can increase skill variety by allowing the researcher to use new techniques or approaches and address new goals or content. Moreover, additional knowledge is central to reducing the endemic uncertainty of teaching

In the Ghanaian context, opportunities exist for the improvement of teachers' academic and professional competence. In the face of major curricular changes as occurred with the introduction of Free Compulsory Basic Education (FCUBE) in 1987, a series of courses were mounted for teachers at basic, secondary, and teacher training college levels for periods between five and ten days to equip them for the change. Various in-service teacher training programmes exist at school and district levels on the basis of training needs assessment by heads of schools and directors of education. These in-service training programmes mentioned do not take the teachers away completely from their posts. Teachers spend few hours or days for such training and do not receive academic certificates. At best, they obtain certificates of participation.

Apart from the foregoing training programmes, teachers have the chance to receive further training at tertiary level to obtain certificates, diplomas, degrees and higher degrees after initial certification. Until the 2002/2003 academic year, all certificated teachers after completing initial teacher training qualified to apply for study leave with pay when they had done three years of teaching. It is worthy of notice that under Ghana Education Service (GES) conditions of service for teachers, all teachers who qualified for admission to study education related courses at the tertiary level were automatically granted study leave with pay each year by the (GES). However,

after the 2002/ 2003, academic year, this automatic award of study leave with pay to all teachers who qualify to study at University was reviewed and study leave with pay is now granted on a quota system for specific disciplines. The GES was obliged to renew the study leave conditions because of the alarming rate at which teachers were leaving the classrooms on study leave with pay without corresponding replacement (Budu-Smith, 2002). This has resulted in the revision of the GES study leave policy for teachers. The policy indicated that with effect from 2002/2003 academic year, study leave with pay would become demand-driven, based on the quota system. (Budu-Smith, 2002).

The new directive means that teachers are no more to enjoy wholesale approval of study leave with pay for programmes of their own choice. Rather, from time to time, programmes for which teachers need to train would be known to avoid over producing teachers for some curricular areas. Directors of education in the regions and districts are also to assess their human resource needs each year to determine how many teachers of a particular category can be allowed to leave the classroom for full- time further studies.

It is observed that although the new study leave policy intends to solve the problem of lack of qualified teachers in our schools, most teachers who wish to further their education might be demotivated for being denied the opportunity at the right time. Moreover, the widely accepted idea of continuing learning in the teaching profession might be defeated. The other issue is that despite the importance attached to the systematic training of teachers, not all who qualified gain admission to the institutions of higher learning or the Universities to upgrade themselves for their teaching tasks.

Statistics on admission to the University of Education Winneba (UEW) confirm that there are limited places for qualified applicants and for that matter teachers (Planning Unit, UEW, 2014). The number of qualified applicants to the University is far more than the number admitted yearly. Less than 50% of the qualified applicants are admitted yearly. The available academic and non- academic facilities needed to be able to admit all qualified applicants in some cases is inadequate. If, indeed, teachers desire to upgrade themselves and yet the institutions responsible cannot admit 50% of their qualified applicants, then the teaching profession, our schools, children and the nation might lag behind in development. Although trends in the Faculty of Educational Studies at the University of Education, Winneba show improvement of admission in recent years, yet it reveals that between 34% and 52% of qualified applicants do not gain admission each year (Planning Unit, UEW, 2014).

Apart from the GES study leave policy and inadequate opportunities for teachers to study full time at the Universities, economic trends and job positions also prevent some teachers from undertaking full- time further studies. Some teachers are compelled to engage in other income generating activities like teaching extra hours for a fee, trading or farming. These teachers would remain at post and run the risk of not benefiting from new knowledge and skills with which to improve the quality of their teaching. Also, most female teachers tend to settle with their families after initial teacher training thus, they are unable to pursue the conventional on-campus education to upgrade themselves, because of child rearing and other domestic commitments.

Teachers, like other workers, desire job satisfaction through promotions, enhanced status, increased salaries and allowances. These benefits, to a large extent, are possible when teachers pursue higher education not long after initial training and certification. The current limited opportunities for teachers to study full time and the pressure on the universities in admitting all qualified applicants, coupled with the problem of some teachers who find it personally difficult to study full-time, provide justification for the adoption of an efficient and effective alternative mode of educational delivery to complement the conventional mode at the university level. It was for this reason that the Ministry of Education, the GES and the universities adopted and are implementing Distance Education DE Programme.

Lack of effective learner support is observed to be a major contributing factor to students' drop out in distance education (Owusu Mensah, 1998). Studies in University of Cape Coast distance education show that there is hardly any distance education institution in the world that does not supplement its course materials with learner support as a way of ensuring persistence on, and success in, the programme.

The learner support services provided in the DE programme are intended to offer distance learners opportunities to interact with tutors and other learners. Specifically, support services were set up to:

1. Provide personal and peer contact between learners, tutors and the stakeholder institutions during the learning process;
2. Enable tutors to provide additional advice and learning materials to distance learners over and above the instructional package;

3. Facilitate the organisation of study groups at designated study centres for ease of access by distance learners;
4. Ensure that distance learners have access to learning resources such as libraries, tutor/counsellors, laboratories and equipment for practical work
5. Encourage tutors to give timely and constructive feedback to learners on learning activities. (International Extension College and Institute

of Education, University of London,1998)

Studies conducted earlier on distance education within the Western, Central and Greater Accra Regions in Ghana (Mireku- Gyimah, 1998; Sam Tagoe, 2000) indicate that teachers, among others, perceive the distance education programme positively and find it acceptable if their needs are adequately considered in the implementation.

However, according to Anamuah- Mensah (2002), the dropout rate was high at university of education winneba, when he registered and matriculated 196 students on the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) Distance Education programme, which took off in 1997. Out of this number, 134 completed their courses. This suggested that the dropout in UEW distance learning programme was serious from inception and deserves to be investigated. Table 1 and 2 show similar dropout problems.

Table 1: UEW, IDeL, Students' Enrollment and Graduation Statistics (2009-2014) Diploma (Basic Education)

Year	Male		Female		Total	
	Enrolment	Graduated	Enrolment	Graduated	Enrolment	Graduated
2014	407	338	646	593	1,053	931
2013	459	405	807	765	1,266	1,170
2012	949	712	1,971	1,613	2,920	2,325
2011	1,042	894	2,001	1,820	3,043	2,714
2010	1,579	1,102	2,308	1,855	3,887	2,957

Source: IDeL Planning Unit, 2014

Table 2: B.Ed (Basic Education)

Year	Male		Female		Total	
	Enrolment	Graduated	Enrolment	Graduated	Enrolment	Graduated
2014	3,400	3,150	4,184	3,929	7,584	7,079
2013	4,594	4,104	5,236	4,954	9,830	9058
2012	2,918	2,628	3,178	2,878	6,096	5506
2011	893	812	1,319	1,239	2,212	2051
2010	524	199	923	346	1452	545
2009	353	349	391	387	744	736

Source: IDeL Planning Unit, 2014

Statement of the Problem

Keegan (2002) and Bunker (2004) have pointed to the importance of student support services in delivering DE. With regard to UEW DE, I had interaction with some of them and they expressed concerns about difficult concepts in the learning materials, they also complained about tutors' lateness, absenteeism, cancellation of tutorials without prior notice. Further concerns were over delayed marking and feedback, lack of constructive comments on continuous assessment, lack of keeping correct up to date records and late

processing of final results, which in turn prolonged their stay on the programme and frustrate some of them making them to dropout of the programme. The problem is, what influence does support services have on progression, programme completion and dropout among distance education students at university of education winneba? Since I don't know how effective these support services have influence on the students, I want to research into the problem. Also going through Anamuah's work, he did not indicate the influence of support services on dropout among distance education students.

Also looking at table 1 and 2 the statistics suggested that dropout was a problem, however, to the best of my knowledge, no studies had addressed the issue of influence that support services have on progression, programme completion and dropout among distance education students at UEW distance programme. Existing research has focused on the availability of support services but in the Ghanaian context much less is on how serious the problem of dropout is. With regard to UEW, the research gaps are:

The magnitude of the dropout among Distance Education students of UEW is not known. Students' perception of the effectiveness of learner support services in UEW is not known, therefore there is the need to investigate into the problem.

Distance learners on the UEW DE programme are adults who are returning to school after a long period of time, who had family, work and other commitments, in addition to their part-time studies. Due to the lapse of time, these learners need to be oriented in their studies by receiving academic support in the form of appropriate study skills. In this regard, this study would examine how the learner support providers monitor the various learner support

activities, such as attendance at tutorials by both learners and tutors, the turnaround time for assignments, feedback mechanisms and record keeping, and whether these services would be provided in an empathetic and helpful manner. It would also be necessary to hear from the participants how the support services contributes to distance learners' progress and programme completion. To make progress in their studies, distance learners needed access to learning resources for practical subjects. I thus had to find out from the participants whether distance learners interfaced with the learning resources and, if not, to establish the constraints which they would experienced.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of support services on dropout among distance education students of university of education winneba, and their perception about their learner support services in the DE programme. The focus of this study are academic, administrative and counselling services that are provided for UEW DE students and influence and effectiveness in facilitating distance learners' progress and successful completion of the DE programme was not known. I therefore needed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the support services in terms of facilitating interaction between learners and their tutors and the supporting stakeholder institutions, taking access to learning resources as a measure of good practice, so as to diagnose and suggest improvements toward learning problems before they intensified. This would shed light on how management structures contributes to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

Objective of the Study

The study sought to:

1. investigate the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DE programme of UEW that impact dropout
2. examine distance learners' and dropouts perceptions of the effectiveness of learner support services in the DE programme in terms of their adequacy, quality and accessibility towards progression and programme completion
3. investigate tutors and other stakeholders roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression and programme completion
4. examine the barriers that influence the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression and programme completion
5. investigate opportunities that exist in the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression and programme completion

Research Questions

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DE programme of UEW that impact dropout
2. What are distance learners' and dropouts perceptions of the effectiveness of learner support services in the DE programme in terms of their adequacy, quality and accessibility towards progression, and programme completion ?

3. How do tutors and other stakeholders perceive their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?
4. What barriers influence the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?
5. What opportunities exist in the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?

In formulating these research questions, my main aim was to find out why, despite the provision of such support services, some distance learners were dropping out and not completing their studies as scheduled.

My research was designed to find out the influence of support services on progression, programme completion and dropout among UEW distance students, and also to find out the perception learners hold about the support services whether the learner-tutor and the learner-learner interactions enabled distance learners to complete their programme of study as scheduled. I also assessed whether the nature of the learner support services offered enabled distance learners to engage in self-help study groups where they lived and worked, as one form or peer support.

Significance of the Study

This study was intended to find out, the influence of support service on dropout among distance education students at UEW and their perceptions on learner support services in the DE programme.

The participants were given a voice to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services and to suggest changes which could be implemented to improve the effectiveness of such services in the DE programme. By researching the stakeholder involvement in the provision of learner support services, I was able to show the benefits that could be reaped through the shared use of resources and the constraints, due to a lack of clear management structures and lines of communication, which prevented learners from benefiting from institutional resources. The recommendations derived from participants' perceptions and experiences proposed a theoretical structure for the implementation of effective learner support services which is a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field of DE programmes.

Although as a case study, my research is not generalisable, nonetheless it will bridge the existing gaps in literature, it will contribute to the existing body of knowledge, could inform policy formulation and insight into distance education for practitioners in similar contexts elsewhere to reduced dropout rate in other DE programmes.

Delimitation of the Study

This study focused on the influence of support services on dropouts among DE students and perception they hold about learner support services in the DE programme of the University of Education Winneba.

In carrying out this research, I selected participants who were directly involved in the provision of learner support services on this programme. Other universities distance education programmes were excluded, since including them would have generated massive data which would have been difficult to process given the time constraints. In this regard, I make no claim that my findings could be generalized to all other distance education programmes in Ghana. However, my assumption is that these findings could be transferred to DE programmes in similar contexts.

Finally, the study was designed specifically to seek in-depth information about the influence of support services on dropouts among UEW DE students and perception they hold about learner support services in the DE programme. It was not compared to any other programme, since a comparative study could not have addressed this concern adequately.

Focus of the Study

The main focus of the study was to find out, the influence of support services on dropout among DE students of UEW and also to found out their view of how learner support services influence distance learners' progress and programme completion. I targeted distance learners (both dropout and those on the programme), tutors and other stakeholders so as to explore the challenges that learners faced and how these were addressed, and as a result, gain a balanced view of the effectiveness of the available academic, administrative and counselling support. I was curious to know why despite the provision of learner support services in the UEW DE programme, many

incidents of dropout and incomplete results were reported by both learners and stakeholders.

At the stakeholder level, my research was focused on tutors and programme coordinators with whom the learners interacted during tutorials and in the supervision of research projects, in order to understand how these processes contributed to distance learners' progress and why they dropout. A further focus was on institutional management and policy implementers at the various study centres, where the academic tutorials and administration of assignments, tests and examinations were conducted. At the management level, it was important for these senior managers to shed light on the availability and access to learning resources for distance learners and the monitoring mechanisms which they were enforcing to ensure that the support activities were carried out as scheduled.

At the University of Education Winneba, I focused on service providers to establish whether the learner support services provided were fit for purpose in terms of their relevance, timeliness and appropriateness. In this regard, I concentrated on the UEW DE programme, the coordinators, learner support staff at the Centres, and the quality assurance office to find out their views about the strengths and bottlenecks that may have influenced the provision of effective learner support services and how these affected distance learners' progress and programme completion. According to the Quality Assurance office, officers from UEW were to monitor the implementation of assessment processes and procedures, which entailed the timely marking of assignments, tests and examinations, supervision of research projects and completion of teaching assignments. It was therefore necessary to find out

from the Quality Assurance office, how the execution of these processes and procedures contributed to distance learners' progress and dropouts.

DE Definitions and Learner Support Services

'Distance Education', which is used in this study as DE, has attracted different meanings. Generically, the term is defined as a delivery mode in which the learner and the teacher are separated from each other in time and space, while the term 'open learning' is used to refer to the relaxation of barriers such as age and physical distance to enable learners to access educational opportunity in a flexible learning environment. In an attempt to develop a more embracing definition of distance education, Keegan (1996) identified its major elements as the separation of the teacher and the learner; the influence of an educational institution; the use of technical media (print and electronic) to unite the teacher and the learner and to carry the educational content; the provision of two-way communication so that the learner may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and the opportunity for occasional meetings with tutors and learners for didactic and socialisation purposes. This physical and psychological distance between learners, their teachers and other learners, which often leads to feelings of isolation and anxiety for distance learners, offers a justification for the provision of effective support services. A further justification for the provision of such support services is given in the theoretical framework, which provides a basis for this study.

Definitions of key Terms

Academic advisement (support): Encouraging distance learners to participate in communities of learning such as formal and informal discussion groups. This support may be in form of tutorial support during contact sessions, marking and providing feedback and constructive commenting on assignments and promoting participation in peer support sessions (Holmberg, 2013).

Administrative Support: Refers to the clarification of the obligations and responsibilities of learners and the education provider during the admission, registration and orientation stage and throughout the learning process including advice on assessment structures (Holmberg, 2013). It also entails making arrangements and providing learners with information about access to physical facilities and other learning resources such as libraries and necessary equipment for learning such as computers and science laboratories.

Collaboration: Refers to the partnership between the stakeholders in the provision of learner support services on the DE programme.

Computer literacy: Refers to the knowledge and skills that distance learners are supposed to acquire from the prescribed computer course.

Constructivism: Refers to the theory of learning that stresses the importance of experiences, experimentation, problem solving, and construction of Knowledge by the learner, (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013).

Correspondence course: Refers to distance education delivery mode where the learning materials and assignments are mailed to the learner. The learner completes the assignment and returns it to the instructor (tutor) for marking. Feedback is provided through mail and the next assignment is mailed to the

learner. The cycle is repeated until the course is completed (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013).

Counselling Support: Learners are given counselling support to enable them to solve personal difficulties and advice related to their study before and during their course or programme, (Simpson, 2013).

Delivery system: Refers principally to the physical delivery in terms of originating, distributing, and receiving and using study materials (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013).

ODL: An educational process in which the significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and/or space from the learner (UNESCO, 2002). The student and the instructor are physically separated by distance. All communications are mediated by some form of media in real or in delayed time. Technology i.e. voice, video data or print is used to bridge the instructional gap (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013).

Flexible Learning: Refers to the removal of barriers to accessing higher education and the use of various media for the delivery of the curriculum and teaching and learning (Edwards et al., 2002).

Formative evaluation: Evaluation conducted during the development or improvement of a programme or product (or a person, etc.) (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013).

Learner support: entails providing learners with opportunities for two-way communication through participatory and interactive learning materials, tutorial contact mentoring, counselling and organisation of peer support structures (Robinson, 2012 and Simpson, 2013). Also, distance learners have access to physical facilities and other learning resources.

Learner Support Coordinator: Refers to the person responsible for the coordination of learner support services at the providing institution, colleges of education and other study centres.

Learner autonomy and independence: Refers to the level where the learners feel well equipped in terms of study skills and access to learning resources to be able to learn on their own as self-directed learners. In this study, the theory of autonomy and independence of the learner is discussed in Chapter 2 under the section on theories of distance education.

Learning Experience: Refers to how distance learners felt or perceived the learning events. In this case it was important for me to know if learners were satisfied or dissatisfied with the academic, counselling and administrative support during the learning process.

Learning Activity: This refers to ways in which learners are involved in their own learning either alone or with small groups (Simonson 2013). In this study it was necessary to find out the type of learning activities the learners engaged in such as group discussions or self-help groups and their experiences with those activities. Self-help Study.

Groups: Interactive learning activities either in formal or informal, as in peer groups where participants play both the role of the learner and the teacher for purposes of exchange of information (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013).

Learning Contract: An agreement between the learner and the instructor (tutor) of what and how to master the learning performance objectives (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013). **Monitoring:** Refers to monitoring learner performance and providing timely remedial assistance to improve and reduce dropout rates.

Non-Completers: This term refers to the category of distance learners who had completed the four year duration but still had incomplete results having failed one or more subjects in levels 1 to 4 or had not completed the research projects and/or the teaching assignment portfolio

Open Learning: Refers to organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which barriers to studying in terms of either access, or of time and place, pace, methods or study or any combination of these are minimised (UNESCO, 2002).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL): This term is used as an umbrella term to cover open and distance learning activities where learners can learn without attending learning institutions or where new opportunities are opened up to enable learners to learn no matter where or when they want to study. Often, ODL makes use of various media such as print, audio tapes, broadcasts, and the internet and through occasional face-to-face meetings with tutors and with other learners (UNESCO, 2002).

Programme Coordinator: The person responsible for the coordination and the management of the DE activities in the providing institution and at colleges of education. **Scaffolding:** Refers to building on prior knowledge so as to provide the foundation for new knowledge (Simonson & Schlosser, 2013). On the DE programme, the Certificate 'A' qualification was assumed to provide adequate scaffolding or requisite knowledge for the diploma curriculum.

Tutor: Refers to a lecturer or a teacher who is engaged on a part time basis to provide tutorial support, mark and provide feedback to distance learners.

Tutorial Support: Refers to a learning environment in which tutors carry out tutorial responsibilities of conducting scheduled tutorials, marking and providing timely feedback and constructive comments on assessment work.

Turnaround time: Refers to the speed the tutor marked assignments are returned to distance learners from the time they were submitted for marking.

Workload: Refers to distance learners, tutors and programme coordinator's ability to combine their normal teaching loads with learning, tutoring and assessment and coordinating the DE programme on a part time basis.

Organisation of the Thesis

The Thesis is organised into five chapters as follows:

Chapter One gives the background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, objective, research questions, significance of the study, limitations, focus of the study, DE definitions and definitions of key terms .

In Chapter Two, I explore the literature relating to learner support services, from the global perspective and identify the knowledge gaps that are addressed in the study. Issues relating to the effectiveness of academic, administrative and counselling support are discussed, with examples from various DE institutions. I also discussed Theoretical and conceptual framework.

Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the research design, study area, population, sampling procedure, data collection instrument, data collection procedures, data processing and analysis and methods that were used to solicit data from the participants.

Chapter Four presents results and discussion of the findings and interpretation. Data patterns are explained in relation to the research questions. The criteria for developing codes, categories, and subcategories and for grouping data into themes are also discussed. Chapter Five presents the summary of the research process, draws conclusions, makes recommendations and suggestions for further research.



CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter, I review the literature relevant to the provision of learner support services in DE programmes. In order to find a basis on which to discuss the influence of support services on dropouts among UEW DE students and perception they hold about learner support services to distance learners in the DE programme of the University of Education Winneba, It was necessary to assess how such services are conceptualized in the DE discipline. Understanding the different meanings of learner support services was critical to this study, considering that, as reported by Bunker (2003), there was little emphasis on delivering such services in DE. The following were also review:

1. The concept of Distance Education
2. Theoretical Underpinnings of DE Programmes
3. Theoretical and Conceptual frame work
4. Learner profiles as a basis for determining learning needs
5. Effects of learning challenges on programme completion in DE
6. Learner support services
7. Types of learner support services in DE programmes and their role
8. Administrative support and Stakeholders involvement
9. Determining access to learning resources
10. Providing decentralized learner support services
11. Distance Education as a system
12. Profile of Distance students:A Theoretical Approach
13. The concept of perception
14. Causes of dropout

1. DE Policies and the provision of effective learner support Services
2. Role of Technologies in the provision of learner support services

The Concept of Distance Education

Distance education has been in existence for a long time and many terms have been used for it. However, there appears to be some confusion about terminology as well as the relationship between distance education and other forms of non-conventional methods of education.

Kaye (1989) points out that distance education, in contrast to traditional classroom or campus-based education, is characterized by a clean separation and time of the majority of teaching and learning activities. He continues that teaching is to a large degree mediated through various technologies like print, audio, video, broadcasting computers and generally learning takes place on an individual basis through supported study in the students' home or workplace Perry and Rumble (1987) in support of the foregoing, assert that in distance education, the learner and the teacher are not face-to-face but in order for two way communication to take place between them, a medium such as computers, print, radio or telephone has to be used.

Steiner (2002) also adds that distance education is an instructional delivery mode that does not constrain the students to be physically present in the same location as the instructor. She adds that, distance education meant correspondent study but today the common delivery mode includes audio, video and computer technologies.

Moore (1994) states that distance education is planned learning that occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special

techniques of course design, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well a special organizational and administrative arrangements. Bunker (2003), on the other hand, asserts that distance education should not be mistaken as correspondence courses because of opportunities for students' interaction. He distinguishes distance education as the process and distance learning as the receiving end of distance education.

In support of Bunker (2003), Keegan (1996), notes that distance education refers to teaching and learning situations in which the instructor and the learner are geographical separated and therefore rely on electronic devices like computers and print materials for instructional delivery. To them, distance teaching is the instructor's role in the process while distance learning is the students' role.

From the foregoing, it is clear that several definitions exist for distance education and distance learning but all touch on common characteristics, identified by Keegan (1993) comprising the following:

1. The quasi- permanent separation of the teacher and the learner throughout the length of the learning process.
2. The influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and
3. preparation of learning materials and the provision of students' support service
4. The use of technical media- print, audio, video or computer to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course
5. The provision of two- way communication so that the students' may benefit from or even initiate dialogue

6. The quasi- permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length for the learning process so that role are usually taught as
7. individuals and not in groups with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

The basic characteristics of distance education as enumerated by Keegan (1996), provides the operational guidelines for the delivery of distance education to effectively deal with issues regarding the separation of the teacher and the learner which to a large extent, affects how she or he plans their own learning.

The academic aspect of DE consists of the development and preparation of course materials. There is also an industrial aspect which includes the production and distribution of the course materials. For these reasons distance education is conceptualized to represent distance teaching and distance learning (Sampson, 2003).

In explaining the terms distance learning and learners, Hodgson (2013) points out that distance learners are part time students' with work and family commitments so the time they can devote to study is limited. He described such learners as people who may be returning to formal study with little preparation or very rusty study experience. There are therefore likely to be considerable difference between these learners and full- time based students. In contrast with Hodgan's assertions my observation made in UEW DE students shows that most of the DE students enrolled in the programme as soon as they complete Colleges of Education and some from Senior High Schools.

The differences have implications which are of much importance for the design of self instructional materials and learner support service. Evans and Nation (2014) comment on standards in distance education in their description of the University of New England's dual-mode of education. They point out that internal and external students enroll in the same courses and face exactly the same forms of assessment, are taught concurrently by the same staff and external students are required to attend compulsory vacation residential schools among others.

They add that in the first decade of the University of New England, its major group of student clients representing 80% of the total enrolments were primary and secondary school teachers who were in to upgrade their qualifications through the distance mode. Yet, the comments by Evans and Nation suggest that the quality of DE at the University of New England is comprised and probably lacks adequate support systems to provide the upgrading regions. For this reason, it is plausible to assume that a well planned DE programme with adequate support systems would motivates distance learners to persist on the programme till completion.

Contextualising Learner Support Services in the DE Discipline

There is considerable controversy regarding the definition of DE. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek, 2006). The debate on the interpretation of DE centres on finding a clear meaning which could relate to the general education system.

DE has attracted different definitions ranging from correspondence education, home study, or external study, where the provision of learner support is minimal or totally absent (Bunker, 2003; Holmberg, 2003; Peters,

2000), to distance learning, and distance instruction (Keegan, 1996), which acknowledge the need for the provision of learner support services.

According to Keegan (1996) the term 'distance education' implies a quasi-permanent separation between the teacher and the learner throughout the learning process, and the participation of an educational institution in the planning and provision of learner support services. Keegan (1993) and Garrison (1993) viewed the separation between learners and their tutors and the DE institution as geographical, while Sauv  (1993), supported by Moore, (1994), viewed it as a psycho-social or transactional distance. Other scholars (Holmberg, 2003; Rowntree, 1992; UNISA, 1997a:56, 1997b, 1997c) describe the physical distance as a barrier because it tends to create fear and anxiety among distance learners, by preventing them from benefiting from any form of dialogue during the learning process.

To reduce the learners' isolation, Keegan (1996) recommended two-way communication, so as to create dialogue between learners, tutors, other learners and the DE institution. Nunan (1993) and Nunan, Reid & McCausland (2002) maintain that creating opportunities for occasional meetings for didactic and socialisation purposes could reduce learners' isolation in this highly individualised delivery mode. In this learning context, distance learners receive instructional materials at a different time from when the study package was developed, thus creating a distance of time (Simonson et al., 2006). To neutralise the physical distance, Holmberg (1995), Keegan (1996), Moore (1994), Moore & Kearsley (1996), Simonson et al. (2006) argue that distance learners should interact with instructional media, either synchronously or asynchronously, thus acknowledging that distance learning

is a mediated form of teaching and learning. The ideas of the authors cited suggest the presence of a teacher, one or more learners, a course of study (content to be taught and learnt), a learning process, and interaction, on the one hand between the teacher and the distance learners, and on the other with the DE institutions further stressing the need for learner support services in the DE learning context. It is perhaps based on these ideas, that Holmberg (1995) defined DE as a non-contiguous learning process, taking place in the absence of a tutor but preceded by planning, guidance and teaching from the supporting institution. The point of departure of Holmberg is that he has developed the presence of a teacher.

Perraton (2000) describes distance education as an educational process in which a large portion of teaching is conducted by someone who is removed from the learners in time and space. This infers that learners are on their own because of their physical separation, but can be taught, assessed and given guidance at anytime, anywhere, either individually or in groups, thus setting the scene for distributed learner support services in decentralised study centres (Rennie & Mason, 2007; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Peters (2000) sees distance education as an industrialised way of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes in a learning context characterized by a division of labour, where, in order to realise economies of scale, electronic and other media are used to reach large numbers of students. This implies that academic, administrative and counselling support are likely to be provided by people who are not themselves necessarily the developers of the learning materials.

With the arrival of newer technologies, such as radio, audio, and other electronic media the DE attracted other definitions, among them the notion of

'open learning' (Taylor, 2001). This term refers to the relaxing of policies and practices, removing barriers such as age, gender, or time constraints, geographical distance and personal barriers, such as family confinement, lack of educational infrastructure and reduction of costs. It recognises prior and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2002), thus allowing many more people entry to learning (COL, 2000). No one is excluded in such a learning environment, which is defined by life-cycles, locations and time, allowing learning to take place at anytime, anywhere (COL, 2000; Peters, 2000, 2003), and the recognition of the notion of prior learning.

Another term used to describe DE is 'flexible learning' (Farrell, 2003; Garrison, 2003; Gibson, 2003; Peters, 2000). This refers more to scheduling of activities and self-pacing than to any particular delivery mode. It allows distance learners to learn what they want, when they want, and to decide how they want to learn. In so doing, they take responsibility for their learning (Garrison, 2003; Peters, 2000). Flexible learning is associated with the relaxation of administrative structures and curricula, as well as with methods of teaching and learning using the emerging technologies (Simonson et al., 2006), thus accommodating both on-campus and off-campus learners, particularly in dual-mode institutions. Open and flexible learning offers widening access and participation to educational opportunity through DE (COL, 2000; Farrell, 2003; Garrison, 2003; Peters, 2000; Simonson et al., 2006), because they open up opportunities for lifelong learning. In this context the Ministry of Education, the Ghana Education Service and the Universities adopted and are implementing the distance education programme, without leaving their families to attend training in a conventional institution.

The definitions of DE discussed above have a bearing on the effectiveness of support services for distance learners in the DE programme. Here, the learners are adult teachers who are studying on their own, and are separated from their tutors, peers and the DE institutions giving the support services. They enroll in the DE programme because it gives them the flexibility to learn while keeping their jobs and taking care of their families. In contrast with the definitions, UEW DE tutors meet their students every fortnight.

A further consideration is that, through the DE facilitation methodology, they are able to study for a diploma and upgrade their qualifications from the Certificate to the diploma and degree level. However, since they are returning to studies, some after a long time, they need to be provided with learner support to reduce the physical and psychological gap, as explained in the DE definitions and the literature on learner support needs (Hope, 2006). Furthermore, these definitions of DE are relevant to this study since distance learners are separated from their tutors and study alone in isolation from each other and the DE-providing institutions. As indicated in the reviewed literature (COL, 2000; Farrell, 2003), the flexibility of the DE delivery mode allows them to study part-time as they continue to serve their employers and take care of their families (Dearnley, 2003).

Meanings of learner support services

To answer the research question, which sought to understand the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DE programme, I needed to know what the term 'learner support services' referred to in the context of DE. In this regard, different definitions were explored.

Simpson (2002), defines learner support services as comprising all those activities beyond the production and delivery of learning materials.

He categorizes learner support specifically as academic support, consisting of tutorials where tutors help learners to understand the learning materials by defining and explaining content and by providing appropriate study skills. Sewart (1993), Thorpe (2001, 2002a, 2002b), supported by Kelly & Watts (2001), describe learner support services as institution-based, with clearly defined systems. The definition by Simpson is not different from what UEW DE tutor practice in Ghana.

Learners are helped by the staff in the institution to interpret and understand the learning materials and make use of educational resources in handling learning difficulties. To address such problems, Thorpe (1994) suggested introducing correct information and DE skills at the pre-enrolment, registration, and orientation stages. Tresman (2002) and Usun (2004) maintain that distance learners should receive an explanation of their content workload, plus any other information about opportunities for interacting, sharing ideas and encouraging each other during the course of their studies. In this view, learner supporters are seen as intermediaries who are able to talk the language of the learner in accessing services and resources from complex and bureaucratic institutions (Ashby, 2004; Lewis, 1995; Tait, 2000, 2003; Tresman, 2002; Usun, 2004). Although learner support services were incorporated in the DE programme, their strengths and weaknesses in addressing these issues had not been evaluated, thus creating a gap between service delivery and its effectiveness.

The UNISA Teaching and Learning Policy (UNISA, 1997a) defines learner support services as helping learners by giving tuition support, peer support to promote dialogue, and administrative support through the provision of timely, accurate and accessible information about all aspects of the learning process. Hodgson (1993), Simpson (2002) and Thorpe (2002a, 2002b) examine the nature of support (academic and non-academic) and the providers (tutors and the DE institution), and suggest the need for learner support services so as to close the gap between learners, DE providers and other learners, as discussed in section below. A running theme in these different meanings of learner support services (Keegan, 1996; Sewart, 1987, 1993; Tait, 2003a, 2003b; UNISA, 1997a) is that support services are an essential component of DE. The reviewed literature confirms that they help learners solve both academic and non-academic problems, so as to succeed in their studies.

In this study, these definitions offered a platform on which the effectiveness of the functions of learner support services in the DE programme could be discussed. By emphasizing that learner support services should respond to a known learner or group of learners in a specified time duration, Thorpe (1994) stressed the need for DE providers to compile and use profiles of distance learners for formulating learner support services. These would facilitate the provision of effective academic and non-academic support and feedback within a specified timeframe (Keegan, 1996; Tait, 2003b) and within an institutionalized support system (Sewart, 1993).

Given the low completion rates and the high incidence of dropout and incomplete results in the DE programme, the concerns raised in the reviewed

literature (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009), justified the need for this study to assess the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

From these definitions it was also necessary to discover whether learner needs and expectations in the DE programme were known, understood and met in an empathetic manner, as outlined by Holmberg (1988) in the theory of distance education based on empathy, which is discussed in detail. The reviewed literature (Holmberg, 1988; Hope 2006; Saba, 2000; Tait, 2003a; Tresman, 2001) stresses that, in order to reduce the physical and psychological distance, tutorial, counselling and administrative support are needed. Interaction between learners, tutors and the DE institution would be promoted with the provision of timely and constructive feedback, through which learners would be able to judge their own learning progress. In this regard, it was necessary to understand learner support services in the wider discipline of DE.

There was also a need to establish whether learners had access to the learning resources required for their practical work. On the basis of these assumptions, I reviewed the relevant literature to determine the criteria for effective learner support services.

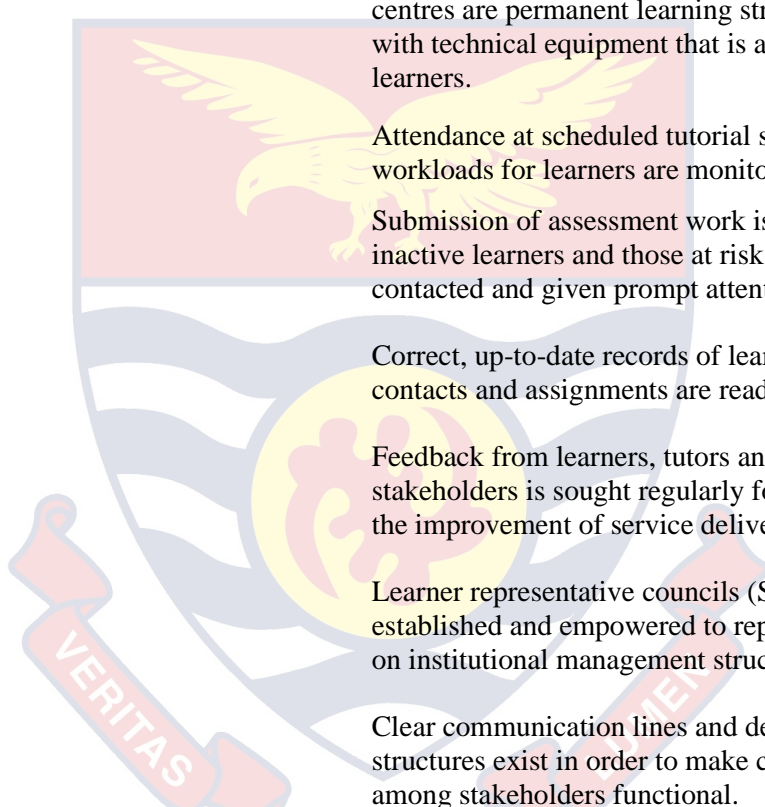
Welch and Reed (2010 p.32-34) describe certain criteria and qualities of effective learner support services, which were adapted for the purposes of this research, as explained in Table 3.

These criteria were informative in assessing the effectiveness of learner support services in meeting distance learners' needs in the DE programme.

Table 3: Criteria for effective learner support services

Elements of effective learner support services	Criteria for effective learner support services
Academic support	<p>Tutorials are conducted, and teaching on assignments and mentoring are provided.</p> <p>Self-help study groups create communities of learning through active learner participation. Learners are given orientation on the learning materials and appropriate study skills to help them cope with their studies in the DE delivery mode. Decentralised learner support services are provided close to where learners live and work, to save on their time and travel costs.</p> <p>Learners are given the opportunity to interact with tutors actively in the interpretation of study materials through participatory facilitation techniques.</p> <p>Learners receive timely and constructive feedback from tutors on a regular basis. The tutor-learner ratio is sufficiently small to enable tutors to give learners either individual or group attention and to monitor their learning progress.</p> <p>Contact sessions are integrated into the programme design, instead of being an add-on. Teaching-learning activities used during contact sessions acknowledge distance learners' previous educational backgrounds and experience in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.</p> <p>Learners have the opportunity to contact tutors regularly, either by phone, email, by appointment or through any other means.</p>
Counselling support	<p>Learners have access to counselling support in resolving personal difficulties they may encounter in the course of their studies.</p>
Administrative Support	<p>Clarified at the registration stage. Learner support services are integrated into the institutional core business.</p> <p>Tutorial and assessment support and counselling activities are regularly monitored and feedback given to learners and tutors for improvement.</p> <p>The number of tutors (most of whom are part-time to the programme) is sufficient to provide for individual needs of learners, such as supervision of research projects.</p> <p>Required learning resources, in the form of libraries, laboratories and the equipment necessary for successful learning, are accessible to learners.</p>

Table 3: Contioued)

 The logo of the University of Cape Coast is a watermark in the background. It features a shield with a yellow eagle with wings spread, a yellow gear, and a yellow sun. Below the shield is a red banner with the Latin motto 'VERITAS NOBIS'.	<p>Learners are provided with technical support (literacy skills) in the technology needed for the programme, and equipment is in place to facilitate learning.</p> <p>Procedures and processes for receiving, recording and dispatching assignments for marking and returning to learners are in place and communicated to tutors and learners.</p> <p>Activities that take place at learning/study centres are clarified at registration stage, and study centres are permanent learning structures/ homes with technical equipment that is accessible to learners.</p> <p>Attendance at scheduled tutorial sessions and the workloads for learners are monitored regularly.</p> <p>Submission of assessment work is monitored, and inactive learners and those at risk are identified, contacted and given prompt attention.</p> <p>Correct, up-to-date records of learners profiles, contacts and assignments are readily available.</p> <p>Feedback from learners, tutors and other stakeholders is sought regularly for review and for the improvement of service delivery.</p> <p>Learner representative councils (SRC) are established and empowered to represent learners on institutional management structures.</p> <p>Clear communication lines and decision-making structures exist in order to make collaboration among stakeholders functional.</p>
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Adapted from Welch and Reed (Eds) (p 32-34).

Table 4 present the issues that needed to be investigated in addressing the support services to distance learners in the DE programme.

Table 4 : Issues that guided the investigation in this study

Learner support issues	Implementation and support strategies	Perceived benefits
What contribution did learner support services make to the DE programme?	What strategies were in place to facilitate the implementation of Learner support services?	What were participants' views about the learner support services in the DE programme?
What influenced distance learners to enrol in the DE programme?	What information were learners given prior to enrolment in order to prepare them for their studies?	How did this information prepare learners for their studies in DE?
How was distance learners prepared before they enrolled in the programme?	What information were learners given prior to enrolment in order to prepare them for their studies?	How did this preparation assist distance learners to achieve their expectations?
What were the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services provided?	What strategies were in place to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services?	What were participants' perceptions of the benefits and/or constraints of learner support services to distance learners? What were the benefits of decentralised support services for distance learners?
What feedback was solicited from learners, tutors and other stakeholders about the effectiveness of learner supportservices to distance learners?	What strategies were there to ensure successful progress and programme completion for distance learners? What strategies were used to get this feedback	How did distance learners benefit from these monitoring mechanisms? How was feedback used to improve service delivery
What accountability mechanisms were there to ensure that tutors attended scheduled tutorials and gave timely and constructive feedback?	What measures were in place to ensure that learners received tutorial assistance and timely feedback on assignments and other assessment work from tutors?	Was the feedback given perceived by learners as timely and constructive? How did learners benefit from feedback on marked assignments?
What measures were in place to ensure access to learning resources?	What strategies were there to ensure that learners had access to learning resources?	What were distance learners' views about the benefits of accessing learning resources?
What provision was made to reach learners located in remote areas?	What strategies were in place to maintain regular contact with learners where they lived and worked?	How did learners benefit from self-help study groups?

Table – 4 (Continued)

What procedures and processes were there for record keeping?	How were assignments received, recorded and dispatched for marking, and returned to the learners?	How did record keeping influence learners' progress and completion?
What was the MoE and the Universities intended to achieve?	What was the implementation strategy? How was it monitored to ascertain the extent to which it was achieved?	How did the implementation of the MoE benefit learners, tutors and programme coordinators?

Theoretical Framework

In order to investigate the problem: influence of support services on Progression and Programme Completion and dropout among distance education students of university of education Winneba, It was vital to locate the problem within a relevant contextual or theoretical framework and theories of DE. The purpose of the theoretical framework was to give the study a logical structure, starting with identifying the problem under investigation, followed by selecting the relevant literature, deciding the research questions and formulating the research design, which guides the selection of data collection methods, analysis and the presentation of the findings. I explored the relevant literature to identify the most appropriate structure to guide the study, including theories of DE that justified the provision of effective learner support services for the DE programme. This framework also helped me to select theories of DE which were relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The theories of independence and autonomy of interaction and communication, of the industrialization of teaching, and of distance education based on empathy all helped to guide this investigation. In my view, these theories form the background to this research, since they express the need to

mediate a learning context in which learners and their teachers are separated in the process of studying the content of the programme.

Furthermore, these theories recognise the circumstances of distance learners and how learner support services influence them in the form of academic advice, counselling and administrative support. The theories further express the need to promote dialogue through feedback which is given in a friendly and conversational style, and in an environment in which learners interact with their tutors and other learners, thus giving form to the concept of participation in self-help study groups. The physical separation of distance learners from their tutors, other learners, and the institutions providing the support in the DE programme created the need for tutorial contact sessions at some colleges of education and some senior high schools. The interaction of learners and their tutors (academic support), among the learners themselves (peer support), and with the institutions (stakeholder support) on the DE had not previously been scientifically investigated. In addition, there was a need to understand tutors' views and those of the stakeholders to find out their roles and responsibilities in the provision of support in the DE programme

Theoretical underpinnings

The intention of this research was to find out why, despite the provision of learner support services in UEW DE programme some student had incomplete results leading to some of the learners to dropout of their studies.

The purpose of this study was to help me to delimit the research problem and develop relevant research questions and concepts to guide the

investigation. The review of literature and my own experience in DE interpretation of the academic puzzle enabled me to formulate the theoretical framework. This involved analyzing concepts in DE which were relevant to the problem under investigation. The literature review was selected from descriptions of the meanings of learner support services, definitions of DE and the role and nature of learner support services, so as to highlight concepts that were relevant to the effectiveness of learner support services in the DE programme. The theoretical framework further enabled me to select the most appropriate research design and to develop a logical structure which would guide data analysis and presentation of the findings. The theories of DE discussed in this section provide a basis for the phenomenon under investigation by foregrounding the role and nature of learner support services in DE.

Simonson, et al. (2006) posit that although the DE discipline has been in existence since the 1840s, it lacks a theoretical basis to inform its practice. As a result, scholars such as Holmberg (1985, 1988), Keegan (1986), Moore (1993) and Peters (1993), articulate the need for a theory of DE which could provide this field with an identity. To arrive at a practical DE methodology, a touchstone was needed, against which political, financial, social and educational decisions could be made with confidence (Holmberg, 1986, Keegan, 1986). The existence of such a theory, it was argued could reduce the trial-and-error approach which had for a long time, characterized decision making in DE (Peters, 1993, 2000, 2003; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006; Simonson et al., 2006).

Towards the attainment of an adequate theory, theoretical underpinnings in DE have tried to explain how DE could be systematically ordered to reduce learner isolation and marginalization (Amundsen, 1993; Keegan, 1986), creating an environment in which learners could study at anytime anywhere (Saba, 2000; 2003). These theories set out to understand the distance that isolated learners are from their teachers and from other learners, seeking to explain it from a theoretical perspective.

Given the thrust of this study, five theories in the DE discipline are considered appropriate, namely:

1. Theory of independence and autonomy
2. Theory of interaction and communication
3. Theory of industrialization.
4. Theory of distance education based on empathy
5. Constructivist Theories

Theory of independence and autonomy

The theory of independence and autonomy advocates a learning context in which the learner is self-paced and in control of his/her learning process. Developed by Wedemeyer in the 1960s and 1970s, it predicated an environment in which the learner could study at anytime, any where, while being in control of the pacing of the learning process (Saba, 2003; Wedemeyer, 1974). According to Wedemeyer (1974), the essential elements of the independent and autonomous theory include placing greater responsibility on the learners, providing an effective media mix and methods, and catering for distance learners' different learning styles. Because learning

is considered to be non-contiguous (Holmberg, 1986), this theory advocated the facilitation of mediated two-way interactive communication between the learner and the teacher. Peters (2000) describes an ‘autonomous or independent learner’ as a person who is no longer the object of educational guidance but the subject of his/her own education, and takes responsibility for pacing his/her own progress since such learning is individualised most of the time.

Advancing this theory further, Moore (1994) and Saba (2003) underscored the need for effective learner support services, to bridge the psychological gap for distance learners who study in isolation, and to help them to solve cognitive, affective and personal problems. In so doing, the theory placed the distance learner at the centre of the learning process.

According to Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek (2000), two-way communication (dialogue) is required to bridge the physical and psychological divide between the learner and the teacher, and create a learning context where autonomous learners are self-paced and assumed to be in control of the learning process (Moore, 1993; Schlosser and Simonson, 2006; Wedemeyer, 1974). Carrying this argument further, Craig and Perraton (2003: p107-110) suggest that, although well-designed instructional materials may encourage participation and dialogue, the use of face-to-face tuition, or any other media, is inevitable if learners are to derive meaning from their study materials.

The theory of independence and autonomy has a bearing on my study. As discussed in the definitions, distance learners in the DE programme are separated from their teachers, the DE institution and from each other most of

the time. They need to be given appropriate study skills in order to develop into independent and autonomous learners. In this study, I needed to find out if distance learners in the DE programme applied the study skills acquired during learner-tutor interaction in order to become independent and autonomous learners. Thus my research addressed the knowledge gap relating to the dropout among DE Students and the perception they hold about learner support services.

Theory of interaction and communication

One of the issues raised was the need for tutor-learner interaction to help distance learners with the course content, and the lack of immediate feedback to their assessment work. The theory of interaction and communication is related to the theory of independence and autonomy since it argues for a didactic two-way communication between learners and tutor/counsellors (Holmberg, 1986). Such an interaction would assist learners to make sense of the content of instruction (Saba, 2003). Sewart, (1993), Thorpe (1994) and Hope (2006) contend that the essence of learner support services is to enhance interaction and communication between learners, their tutors and the DE providers in an empathetic learning context (Holmberg, 2003). The need for interaction is further supported by Knowles (1980) when he argues that distance learners are mainly adults and, according to the principles of andragogy, need to be supported in a manner which promotes feelings of mutual respect, collaboration, trust and openness.

Prior to this study, these attributes of learner support services had not been documented in the UEW DE programme and thus needed to be addressed.

In summary, both the theory of autonomy and independence and the theory of interaction and communication are relevant to my study because they underscore the need for learner support services that promote interaction between learners, their tutors and the providing institution (Holmberg, 1995; Moore, 1993; Garrison, 2003). These theories created a platform for me to assess the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DE programme, and to understand the role of tutors and stakeholders in the provision of such services.

Theory of industrialisation

This theory is relevant to this study because the implementation of the DE programme involves a division of labour in which different responsibilities are carried out by different people, hence the need to assess how the providers perceive their responsibilities. The theory of industrialisation of teaching, was pioneered by Otto Peters in Germany, and has influenced DE since the 1960s and early 1970s (Peters, 2000). It describes DE as the most industrialised form of education (Simonson et al., 2006). In this theory, (Peters 1993, 2000) likens the execution of different functions in DE to the division of labour in industry. Applying this theory to DE, Simonson et al. (2006) and Schlosser and Simonson (2006) compared tasks such as materials development and production, learner support services, assessing and keeping records of assessments to the industrial production of goods because these activities are carried out by different people and hence the need to assess their effectiveness. The organisation of DE is also influenced by institutional structures similar to those of an industrial organisation (Anderson, 2003; Saba, 2003).

The theory of industrialisation is relevant to this study, as it provides a basis on which to assess the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in the DE programme. It was necessary to discover whether the stakeholders understood and executed their roles and communicated with each other in a collaborative environment (Masalela, 2007; Paul, 1990). The theory of industrialisation thus strengthened my resolve to interrogate the research questions, which sought to understand participants' perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the provision of learner support services, the barriers that were encountered, and the opportunities for the improvement of service delivery in the DE programme.

Theory of distance education based on empathy

The theory of distance education based on empathy (Holmberg, 2003) was also selected as relevant to this study, since it embraces many aspects of the theories discussed above. It advocates the introduction of academic support to promote tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction and the provision of timely and constructive feedback in an empathetic and friendly manner, using a conversational style, so that the student may derive pleasure from the learning process (Holmberg, 2003). This theory was considered relevant to my study because it advocates short turnaround times for assignments, thus enabling distance learners to judge their own progress (Holmberg, 2003).

According to this theory, the DE:

1. Serves individual learners who are unable to attend face-to-face institutions for one reason or another.

2. is guided and supported by non-contiguous means, mainly pre-produced course materials and mediated communication between learners and a supporting institution (school, university, etc.) which are responsible for course development, instructional learner-tutor interaction, counselling and administration of the teaching-learning process inclusive of the arrangements for the study.

3. is open to behaviourist, constructivist modes of learning;

4. enhances personal relations between the parties concerned, by providing study pleasure and empathy between learners and those representing the supporting organization.

5. fosters empathy through learning materials that are presented in a friendly conversational style and mediated with friendly interaction between distance learners and tutors and other staff from the supporting institution

6. puts in place a learning process that includes short turnaround time for the assignments, suitable frequency of assignment submission, constant availability of tutors and other advisors, and includes frequent communication with the supporting institution.

By advocating interaction between learners and service providers, provision of timely and constructive feedback and short turnaround times for assignments Holmberg's (2003) theory envisions learner support services which could improve distance learners' progress, completion and success rates. For the present study, this theory offered a means of measuring the effectiveness of academic input, counselling and administrative support, and determining whether the distance learners in the DE programme received timely and constructive feedback from tutors and other service providers. It

was assumed that such interaction through tutorial support could encourage dialogue between learners, tutors and the DE institution (Garrison, 1993 and Schunk, 2000), and as a result, help learners to achieve their goals.

Constructivism and learner support services

Holmberg (2003) contends that the theory of distance education based on empathy is open to behaviourist and constructivist modes of learning since it emphasizes interaction between learners and the supporting institution. Tau (2006), supported by Amey (2005), Gatsha (2007), and Gatsha and Evans (2010), argue that interaction is essential, given that DE caters for diverse groups of learners who, although they are expected to learn on their own, still associate learning with a teacher who is physically present. The presence of tutors as part of the provision of appropriate learner support services is therefore essential to correcting this misconception. The constructivist epistemology argues that humans construct meaning from available knowledge according to their needs, circumstances and life experiences, even without the assistance of the teacher, since learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge (Morrow and Brown 1994). Instruction is a process of supporting that construction, rather than communicating knowledge, as is the case in the behaviourist context (Duffy and Cunningham 1996).

Constructivist theorists further argue that learning is a social process (Farrell, Ryan and Hope 2004; Granger and Bowman 2003; Morrison and Collins 1996; Reeves and Okey 1996; Sahin 2007; Terblanche 2010), in which the instructor assumes the role of a coach, offering guidelines and

creating an environment in which learners can engage in a dialogue, enabling them to draw constructive conclusions from the teaching and learning experience. According to Beck and Kosnik (2006), learners construct knowledge according to their needs, their circumstances and life experiences.

Chaille (2008), Driscoll and Wood (2007), Jonassen, Myers and Killop (1996), Lentell (2004) and Wilson (1996), all postulate a learning experience in which learners are able to construct knowledge on what they already know from interpreting their own experiences, rather than having the teacher interpret the reality for them, as is the case in behaviourist learning contexts.

One of the differences between behaviourist and constructivist theories, as suggested by Duffy & Jonassen (1992) and Schunk (2000), is that constructivist theories allow learners more latitude to construct knowledge on the basis of their own experiences and the learning context than is the case with the behaviourist model.

According to Schunk (2000), the behaviourist view is that learning is more effective when learning materials are presented in small chunks, with clear and measurable objectives, where learners can move at their own pace in a context where teachers give immediate feedback (Lentell, 2004). Distance scholars who lean on the constructivist theory (Duffy and Jonassen 1992; Elden, Pea and Gomez 1996; Gunawardena, Wilson and Nolla 2003; Saba 2000, 2003; Sammons 2003) argue that distance learners should be given opportunities to construct knowledge by engaging in active dialogue with tutors and other learners. In this manner, they will be able to develop a deep understanding of knowledge by collaboratively deducing solutions to their

learning problems through meaningful construction of ideas based on both current and past knowledge (Moore and Kearsley 2013; Sammons 2003).

Through building communities of learning, with more opportunities for dialogue, they will derive greater meaning from the content of their studies.

There is a link between constructivism and the theory of independence and autonomy, because advocates of the two theories, agree that learning is more effective in learner-centred environments (Curry 2003), where the learner studies independently, is self-directed and autonomous. Given the behaviourist and constructivist points of view, it was necessary to establish whether learner support services in the DE programme prepared distance learners to construct their own meanings from the learning materials, rather than relying on their tutors for interpretation.

Since I needed to establish whether learner support services in the DE programme prepared learners to construct their own meanings. I assumed that the support services were meant to facilitate interaction between learners, tutors and the DE institution (Kamau 2010; Wright 2013), and that this interaction would equip the learners with the study skills needed to develop independence and autonomy. In my view, theories of DE recognise the circumstances of distance learners and infer support in the form of academic advice, helping them to become independent and take control of the learning process. These theories form the background to this research, expressing the need to mediate a context in which the learners and their teachers are separated in time and space for most of the learning process.

These theories further reflect the need to promote dialogue through feedback which is provided in a friendly and conversational style, thus

bringing in the concept of participation in self-help study groups. In the DE programme, distance learners were separated from their tutors and from other learners, as well as from the institutions providing support. There was a clear need to give them opportunities to interact with tutors and other learners for academic support, with other learners in self-help study groups, and with the DE stakeholder institutions. Against this background, I needed to investigate participants' feelings about the effectiveness of learner support service in the DE programme.

Effects of learning challenges on programme completion in DE

Regarding the challenges that hinder the completion of DE programme, in DE. (Dirr 2003),(Mills et al.,2006),(Mostert 2006), Sharma 2002) and Simpson (2013) noted that unsuccessful learners attributed programme non-completion to changes in family circumstances, illness or bereavement, inappropriate course choice, feelings of isolation, boredom, difficulties in self- and time management, and poor support from the DE institution. Scholars such as Ojo and Olakunlehin (2006), Smith and Kelly (1987), Reid (1995) and Tait (2003a) cited poor previous educational backgrounds and lack of timely and constructive feedback as among the factors which interfered with programme completion. However, Simpson (2002) and Tait (2003a) warned that distance learners' concerns about lack of time could be a symptom of other underlying causes, including intellectual difficulties, lack of preparation, negative attitudes to studying and poor study habits, all of which they could perceive and misinterpret as a lack of time.

A study by Mehrotra, Hollister, and McGahey (2001: p141) on factors which contribute to retention and completion rates in DE programmes found that learners' and tutors' characteristics, access to learner support services, and the nature of DE itself influenced programme completion or non-completion.

These authors argued that students' approaches to studying are among the best predictors of completion rates. For example, students with incomplete results tended to be less aggressive in their study habits and not to participate in self help study groups. According to Mehrotra et al. (2001), such learners did not allocate enough time to their studies. To improve programme completion, Mehrotra et al. (2001) proposed a thorough assessment of students' needs, perceptions and preferences prior to programme launch.

Describing learners' experiences Ashby (2004), supported by Harrison, Laster, Stennet and Carnwell (2004), and Henri and Kaye (1993), cited the demands of employment, needs of dependants, workload, financial problems, academic difficulties inherited from previous educational backgrounds, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with tutors and tutorials, time and work pressures, geographical location, unhelpful course information, and personal problems such as balancing part-time studies with family obligations, as among the key factors contributing to incomplete results and early withdrawal from courses.

Morgan (1999) identified dispositional barriers, such as lack of confidence and inappropriate learning styles, situational barriers such as sickness in the family, institutional barriers such as insufficient learner support services, unhelpful information, and difficult content, as among the impediments that could explain distance learners' failure to complete their

studies. To assist learners in completing their studies, Kember (1995) and Tinto (2000) developed a model in which they urged educational providers to understand distance learners' characteristics both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which motivated them to enroll in an DE programme. Kember (1989) asserted that individual relationships, family and home life, work, educational background, age and other intrinsic factors were major determinants of distance learners' persistence in a programme of study. Such learners valued interaction with teachers who helped them to clarify content (Bray, Aoki and Dlugosh 2008), since this enabled them to study more effectively on their own. Judging from the literature, I concluded that for this study I needed to discover whether learner support services on the DE programme were assisting distance learners to reach their intrinsic and extrinsic expectations.

Another study by Tresman (2002) about improving students' retention in programmes of the Open University in the UK described non-completers as those who had participated but failed to reach the required standard (standard to me meaning completion of a programme of study).

This study was about attrition from a programme of study, I found that studies by Ashby (2004), Morgan (1999), Smith & Kelly (1987) and Tresman (2001) on factors which affect retention, completion and success rates in DE programmes were relevant, since I specifically needed to find out how learner support services assisted learners to complete their studies in the DE programme.

In another study by Lephoto and Mohasi (2009) at the National University of Lesotho, it was found that challenges which interfered with

distance learners' progress and programme completion in Lesotho included lack of permission from employers to attend scheduled tutorials.

Learning contexts such as remote rural areas with no electricity or public transport, which were far from the schools and study centres where support services were located and mountainous terrain made some areas inaccessible by radio and/or telephone. To improve learners' progress and completion in DE programmes, Tresman (2002) and Usun (2004) proposed the implementation of completion and non-completion strategies. These would include providing distance learners with accurate and relevant information about their courses during registration and orientation, as well as addressing issues of content workload and density of concepts.

The literature on DE suggests a knowledge gap about the demographic profiles, academic background and learning styles of distance learners, enrolled for DE programmes . (Munger 1995), Republic of Botswana, (1993, 1994), Sedisa and Bogopa, (2008), Sikwibele & Mungoo (2009) and Wright (2008). Given this lack of established learning needs, together with the high incidence of dropouts it was necessary to investigate dropouts among DE students and the perception they hold about support services in addressing the needs of distance learners on this programme, especially as stated by Kamau (2004), some of the learners had taught for over twenty years after their initial teacher training.

Although the support services gave learners an opportunity to interact with tutors and other learners, this interaction had not been evaluated to establish its effectiveness in meeting the needs of distance learners, nor did it appear from the review of literature. The question then arose as to whether the

learner support services in the form of academic, counselling and administrative support assisted or failed to assist distance learners' progress and programme completion. The present study set out to address this gap.

Learner Support Services

In the distance education system, learner support services play an instrumental role in making two-way educational communication possible. Tait (2003a) states that learner support means the range of activities which complement the mass produced materials which make up the most well-known element in distance learning. They cover a wide range of functions, starting from producing the learning materials and making them available to distance learner up to arranging contact programmes and conducting examination and providing the final results.

The complementary services are tutoring and counselling, whether face to face, by correspondence, telephone or electronically, interactive teaching through television and radio and other similar activities. These activities have the key conceptual component of supporting the individual learning of the learner whether alone or in groups, while in contrast the mass produced elements are identical for all learners.

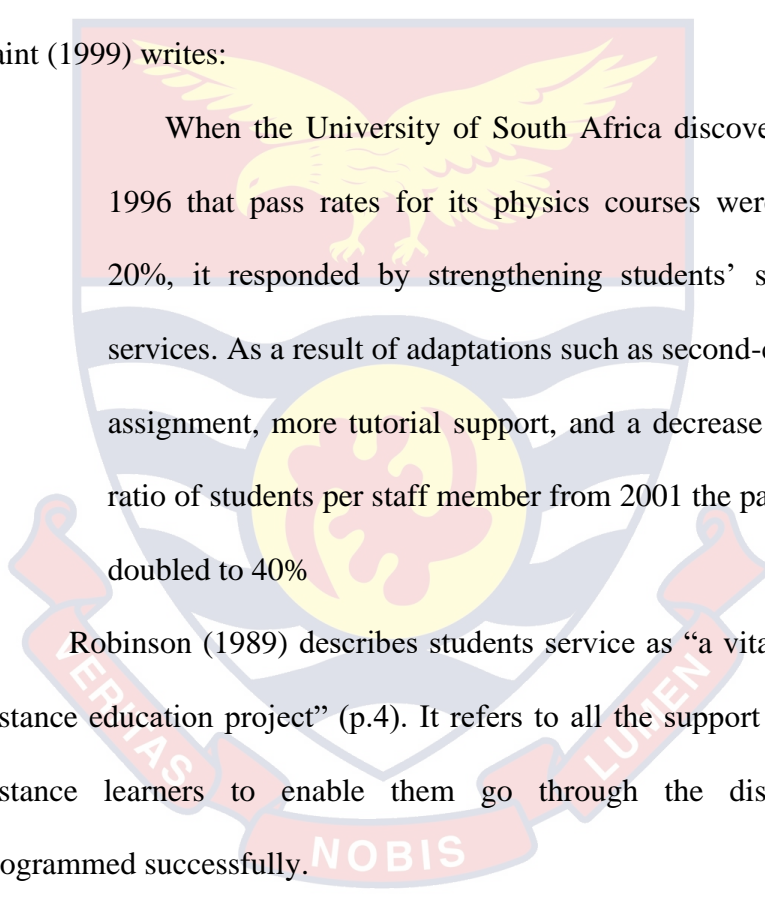
According to Keegan (1993), it is the provision of learner support services that distinguishes distance education from private study and teach yourself programme. The main objective of these support service is to motivate learners keep them on the right track, encourage them to make use of the facilities provided and above all facilitate their learning.

The central figure in an educational enterprise is the students. The systems and structures are developed and finally aim at the success of the

students. Mounting distance education programme does not end with the production of course materials. An important ingredient is the support system put in place. It refers to all the services that are given to distance learners to ensure effective learning. This type of support is to help make up for the opportunities that distance learners lack.

The importance of students support for successful learning is also illustrated by the following experience from the University of South Africa.

Saint (1999) writes:

The watermark is the crest of the University of South Africa, featuring a yellow eagle with wings spread, perched on a shield. The shield is divided into four quadrants with different colors and symbols. Below the shield is a banner with the Latin motto 'VERITAS LIBERABIT VOS'.

When the University of South Africa discovered in 1996 that pass rates for its physics courses were only 20%, it responded by strengthening students' support services. As a result of adaptations such as second-chance assignment, more tutorial support, and a decrease in the ratio of students per staff member from 2001 the pass rate doubled to 40%

Robinson (1989) describes students service as “a vital element in any distance education project” (p.4). It refers to all the support that is given the distance learners to enable them go through the distance education programmed successfully.

As Wright (2013) explains, support services is ‘the requisite students’ services essential to ensure the successful learning at a distance’ (p.59). What Wright meant here is that for distance learners to succeed, support is essential. In support of this Rumble (1992) writes that these services:

Exist to ensure that students are admitted to the institution and enrolled on courses, allocated to tutors

and, where appropriate, counselors, told what is expected on them in terms of their formal commitment to the institutions, told where and when to appear to sit any examination and generally provided with help to get them through the system (p.6).

It is clear that support services help individuals and groups to learn at a distance. It is therefore necessary for distance education institutions, especially as pioneers, to understand whether support is important at all and if so when it should commence in a learning programme.

The issue of whether student support is necessary or when it should commence has been a popular debate among distance education (Shale 2013). The literature available in the respect indicates that one group maintain emphasis should be placed on the production of high quality course package which can offer self support to learners engaged in distance education.

Bame (2012) points out that well developed self-instructional material can ensure the necessary two-way communication at a distance. The implication is that, to Holmberg, there is no need for separate support services. Writing in defence of this Bame (2012) writes:

Distance education can be, and is often, exclusively based on non-continuous communication and on individuals. It can, on the other hand, be supplemented by face- to face teaching, laboratory exercise in groups and teachers (p. 53).

Bame (2012) views distance education as an educational method that makes used of largely course materials with other features like face- to face, and group work as being supplementary. The author further makes it clear that

in actual fact there are only a few institutions that offer distance education with enough support services.

According to him, the fundamental essence of distance education remains the correspondence. The second position of the debate comprises those who believe support services outside the course package as very necessary. Some of these authors include Robinson (2012), Paul (2014) and Keegan (1996). Despite these diversified views, most writers see this support-system as being crucial to the effective functioning of every distance education programme. Keegan (1996) highlights this point when he states:

It is mainly through them (support services) that two-way communication is established between students and institution, the provision of students support services distinguished distance education from publishing honest and other products of leaving materials

The need to provide student support services have been viewed from different angles and the debate continues. The underlying philosophy of the students support services is to provide a measure of human contact and to help students overcome their learning barriers. These barriers result from the loneliness and isolation of working alone without the face-to-face support from fellow students and teachers. In the conventional system, the barriers are overcome by the presence of a teacher in the classroom providing the necessary support.

Robinson (2012) argues that “distance students face not only the problems that conventional students face but also those generated by distance education itself” (p.141). He groups the problems associated with study techniques and

learning as including (a) students' difficulty in managing their time and expressing their views in written form,(b) students' problems with understanding texts and (c) some students' lack of reading skills.

Commenting on the problems, which arise from trying to interact with a distance institution, Robinson explains that unlike conventional students, distance students' lack facilities such as access to tutors and friends.

Sometimes even encouragement is lacking especially for those in remote areas. Without the necessary support services studying at a distance could become complicated and frustrating. Among personal problems that Robinson identifies is lack of a convenient place of study, lack of access to library facilities, conflict between work and study as well as financial constraints.

Perraton (2012), supporting Robinson's (2012) assertion opines that studying at a distance is like any other type of part time studies. He observes that students face problems like lack of time, interest and personal help. These views are similar to those expressed by Burge (2012).

In the study of problem areas of students in the United Kingdom Open University, Robinson (2012) identifies the following problems of students in decreasing order of frequency: Lack of time; Difficulties in concentration; Family commitments; Organization of time and planning; Low levels of motivation; Study skills; Resources; Anxiety; Isolation.

The list of problems goes to show that it cannot be assumed that the learning enterprises are easy for distance students. Lack of time and poor organization of time and planning mean that devotion to study is bound to suffer. Family commitments will add to the drawback. Difficulties in

concentration, low level of study skills and of motivation will combine to diminish learning output. Put together, a providing body has to set up efficient support services in order to encourage the students to persist in their studies, and make the learning process less tedious.

Similar, Paul (2014) outlines the reasons why students services are necessary as; Isolation of the learners; Lack of self-identify on the part of the students', Demands of the affective domain, Financial demands and Students' advocacy role.

Paul (2014) singles out isolation of learner, the problem with resources which he describes as financial role and anxiety within the affective domain. He however, adds that students advocacy role is to emphasize that the student should be a person at the receiving end of a process. He is an integral part of the whole educational delivery system and should be recognized as such. Support services are expected to provide this integration.

Support services theoretically have become an integral part of distance education out of the concern for having the balance right between “interaction” and “independence”. By “interactions” is meant activity within a distance learning which bring the students' into contact with other people and by: independence, working alone, (Davies, 2013). In Davies' view, the main aim of getting the balance right between interaction and independence is for reasons of students motivation, course completion rates, costs and quality learning. Providing agencies and therefore strike a balance between these variables in order to effectively promote learning at a distance.

There are no universally established formula or recipes of the provision of support systems. A system can only be conceived in consonance with the

country and the context in which it is set. The economic, political, cultural and technological extent dictates the combination and quality of support system offered. (Robinson, 2012).

The existing range of literature on types of support services needed by the students tends to vary. Robinson (2012) identifies such services as tutoring, counselling and the use of local centres. Similarly, Davies (2013) argue that support services involves are range of services which can be grouped as:

Information – The giving of clear, accurate unbiased and relevant information to the individual learner in a form and pace that is most relevant to him or her.

Advising – That act of making suggestions to the students' based on the helpers own knowledge and expertise.

Counselling – The offering to the individual a relationship based on trust and acceptance with which he or she can explore issues relevant to his or her development and carry decision through.

Coaching – creating or structuring a learning experience so that the learner can practice and gain knowledge, skills and perceptions.

Assessment – the gathering and giving of information about the individual or about specific aspects of the individual (abilities, performance aptitude, values and interests).

Advocacy- Taking action on behalf of and with the agreement of the students.

Feedback to system – providing information to organizations on the experiences or problems of students’ and teachers that require changes in the system.

Keegan (1996) provides what he calls “a rich structure of students’ supports services” developed by the Open University of the United Kingdom:

Tutor or counsellor – one who follows the students’ throughout the programme.

Tutor available for consultation on individual regional offices providing a decentralized focus for the administration of tuition counselling and students’ support systems.

1. A study centre within traveling distance where the students’ can meet other students’ and use facilities.
2. Tutorials at regular intervals.
3. Computerized students’ records that can pick up problems in students’ progress and anticipate drop-out.
4. A residential summer school.
5. A students’ association with regional branches.

According to Tait (2012), support systems include advice, counselling, tutoring individuals and in groups, the learning of study skills-including examination skills; peer support, feedback concerning assessment and progress, language support, careers guidance and administrative problem-solving.

To my view it is clear from the example that what constitutes a students’ support service can be grouped to cover the following:

Tutoring: - One-to-one relationship between students' and tutor centred around course materials and study skills.

Face-to face: - Normally meeting of a number of students' with a tutor or tutors to discuss common problems related to the course of study.

Private study group: - The giving of specific assignment to specific group to probe and find answers to.

Library service: - Making accessible reading materials in the form of books boxes accession of books in the library or provision of handouts and short reading materials.

Types of Learner Support Service

Hui (2011), differentiates between the types of support services provided to distance learner through various stages that they go through namely, the pre-entry stage, during the course, and post course stages, face-to-face contact, text and print.

At the pre-entry level, the situation often is that the learner feels something wanting in his or her life or has a wish to change his or her situation. He or she may not be clear about what he or she want to do. At this stage the prospective learner needs a mixture of information, advice and counselling. Prospective distance learners may be waiting to know about the courses, entry requirements, application produces, the university fee charged, the teaching learning process, the recognition of the awards, employment prospect. The type of support required at this pre-entry stage would include:

1. Guidance about the types of programmes and courses available
2. Pre-admission counselling with regard to selection of courses

3. Information regarding the instructional system, entry requirements, fee structure duration of the programme of study and recognition of award.

Learner support services in DE programmes and their role

As established in the definitions of DE, distance learners study in isolated environments without encouragement from tutors, the DE institution, or their colleagues (Gibson, 1998; Hope, 2006; Martins, 2007; Olgren, 1998; Robinson, 2012; Wang, 2005). This could cause low levels of motivation, compounded by anxiety and fear of failure, and subsequently result in non-completion of their studies. This study set out to find out how support services influence learners to study in this separate context and relate this to the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DE programme.

Bernath Kleinschmidt & Walti (2003) Leem and Lim (2007) Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlop, (2003) Moon and Robinson, (2003) stressed the need for DE providers to encourage interaction of distance learners with DE institutions which otherwise could be both inaccessible and impersonal. In a study carried out to determine the relevance of learner support services at the National Teachers' College (NTI) in Nigeria, Ukpo (2005, 2006) reported that students valued the administrative, academic and counselling support they received, although they considered the materials distribution and library services poor.

In Ukpo's (2005) study, students also valued support from tutors and study centre administrators, but raised concerns about inadequate material resources at the study centres .In another study carried out to determine the quality of support programmes for distance learners at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, Adelowotan and Adewara (2009) reported that learners

appreciated tutorial and library support, including support services at the study centres, but were not satisfied with the way the personnel in the centres attended to their complaints. This study found that learners would have appreciated more contact with their tutors through mobile phone technology to supplement face-to-face contacts. Commenting on the use of mobile phones to support distance learners, Maher and Rewt (2001) and Famuyiwa (2009) noted that mobile technologies such as cell phones, personal computers, and laptops, have made pedagogies less stressful since tertiary institutions in Nigeria now use them to generate and disseminate information to learners.

The studies by Adelowotan and Adewara (2009), Famuyiwa (2009) and Ukpo (2005) demonstrate the value that distance learners attach to support services, reinforcing the need to assess their effectiveness. In another research on problems of part-time students of UEW in Ghana, Siabi- Mensah, Badu-Nyarko and Torto (2009) identified family, work, institutional chores, taking care of small children and aging parents and spouses, noisy environments, lack of time and poor time management, power cuts and social commitments as some of the constraints that prevent distance learners from completing their programmes of study.

Tait (2003b) reported low success and poor completion rates in external programmes of the University of London, which were attributed to a lack of learner support services. In a study which investigated the perceptions of decision makers, tutors and learners about the impact of learner support services in tertiary institutions in China, Wang (2005: p7) established that a learning support system which prepared distance learners to become self-directed was highly valued. Though my study could yield similar results, it is

contextually different from the ones conducted by Wang (2005) and Ukpo (2005), since it is addressed to a different target group, that of the DE programme in Botswana. In another study, Tait (2003b) attributes the low success rates at the UNISA to lack of learner support services, which were not put in place until after the apartheid era. Louw and Engelbrecht (2006) argue that the continuing low pass rates at UNISA, which has over 200,000 learners and over 600 study centres, are due to inadequate learner support services, admission policies which are too open, inadequate course materials, and insufficient formative assessment and feedback processes. Stressing the need for effective support services at UNISA, Killen, Marais and Leodolff (2003), Lessing and Schulze (2003), and Tshivhase (2008) cite lack of contact between lecturers and learners and lack of self-help studygroups as some of the major factors contributing to low performance and pass rates at UNISA. Tshivhase (2008) recommends further research to establish whether the goals for learner support at UNISA are fit for purpose, as outlined in the UNISA Teaching and Learning Policy (UNISA, 2007). From this literature review, I concluded that since distance learners on the DE programme are adults, many of whom are returning to school after a time lapse, they require effective support services to help cope with their studies (Amey, 2005, 2008a; Kamau, 2010a; Nonyongo,1999).

In order to assess the effectiveness of learner support services, I needed to understand the meaning of the term 'effectiveness'. I adopted the description by Clark (2005), and O'Neil (2005) who relate effectiveness to the successful result or outcome of an action. Oliveira and Orivel (2003) and Morrison, Brand and Cilliers (2006), relate the term to the way learning

support is conducted. For support services to be termed effective, Robinson (2012) and Hannafin (2003) maintain that there must be frequent contact between tutors, learners and their peers, regular provision of timely feedback, explanation of difficult content, and access to learning resources such as libraries, laboratories and necessary equipment.

From these definitions, I concluded that academic, advisory, administrative, counselling and infrastructural support could be termed effective if it helps to sustain distance learners in their studies, and improves retention and completion rates (Bird and Morgan, 2003; Dearnley, 2003; Robinson, 2012; Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2003a). I also concluded that promoting tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction in self-help study groups, while giving learners access to learning resources in an empathetic and friendly environment (Holmberg, 2003), could lead to effective learner support in the DE programme. Judging from the reviewed literature, the role of academic and counselling support in either helping or hindering distance learners in the completion of their studies in the DE programme needed to be established.

Since the DE programme was designed for learners with higher academic requirements, it was necessary to understand how distance learners' previous educational backgrounds prepared them for the DE diploma curriculum. In this regard, I agreed with Braham and Piela (2009), Hill and Taylor (2009) and Lezberg (2003) when they argue that an ODL institution should ascertain before admission that distance learners are qualified for the programme they apply for. It was therefore necessary to determine the nature of learner support services, which is discussed in the next section.

Academic support in DE

In this section, the literature was reviewed to establish the nature of academic support and compare it with the one given in the UEW DE programme and its effect on distance learners' progress and programme completion. Devlin (1993), Holmberg (2003) and Thorpe (1988) contend that academic support refers to interaction between learners and the tutors, where tutors enrich the learning experience through explanation and clarification of content. It also entails marking and grading assignments, and helping learners with timely and constructive feedback, as well as providing further information to supplement the pre-produced, self-paced instructional materials.

The literature on feedback mechanisms in the DE programme (Sedisa and Bogopa, 2008; Wright, 2013) indicated that there was absenteeism at tutorials, frequent incidents of lost assignments and scripts, poor entry of marks, suggesting lack of accountability, and delayed feedback from tutors and institutional managers.

As noted by Fodzar, Kumar and Kannan (2006), Fouche (2006), Freeman (2004), Tau (2006) and Thorpe (1988), distance learners invest a great deal of effort and emotion in their studies. DE institutions therefore have a moral duty to contact them and give them feedback on their performance. In this, I agree with Curry (2003) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) when they state that the provision of timely and constructive feedback, together with access to learning resources, is the backbone of interaction, since it helps distance learners develop error-detection skills on their own. Holmberg (1986) maintains that distance learners seem to benefit from feedback on assignments

in the form of comments and corrections, if the feedback is given between 7 and 14 days, reflecting the need for frequent learner-tutor contact to enhance two-way communication.

The literature further contends that improved performance in learning contexts will follow when distance learners engage in didactic, self-directed studies in groups, with or without a tutor (Holmberg, 1986; Moore, 1993; Moore and Kearsley, 2013). As argued by Holmberg (2003), Horne and Naude (2007) and Thorpe and Grugeon (1987), distance learners need to reflect on their learning if they are to develop towards becoming independent and self-directed learners. In this regard, I concur with Morrison (1996), Robinson (2003), Stark and Warne (1999), and Tait (2003b), when they assert that distance learners need to interface with learning resources in order to gain practical experience in the required subjects. However, a weakness of the tutor-led tutorial system, according to Simpson (2013), is that it may perpetuate the notion that learning is tutor-focused, rather than student-focused. This would tend to negate the theories of independence and autonomy introduced earlier which strive to develop learners towards becoming autonomous (Moore, 1994).

In another study investigating students' success or their failure at UNISA, Risenga (2010) found that factors contributing to students' success included the provision of academic advice through attending tutorials, since these offered distance learners an opportunity to interact with their tutors and their peers. Risenga (2010) cited lack of adequate prerequisite knowledge for a course, inadequate grasp of subject matter arising from difficulties in comprehending the learning materials, lack of regular assistance and timely

feedback from tutors, of contact in practical subjects and of interaction with peers, and poor time management, as factors contributing to drop-out and failure at UNISA. Commenting on the tutor-learner interaction, Robinson (2003) identified the role of the tutor as:

1. providing tutorials to help learners to understand the content through discussion, marking assignments, commenting and giving feedback on learning materials and on students' written work;
2. helping learners to form and participate in self-help study groups;
3. demonstrating and supervising practical work;
4. keeping records of students' progress;
5. answering learners' queries during face-to-face tutorials or by telephone;
6. acting as intermediaries between learners and the DE institution.

In their investigation of lecturers' expectations of post-graduate supervision in a distance education context in South Africa, Lessing and Schulze (2003) concluded that academic support is essential, particularly feedback in the supervision of research projects, since distance learners may not have adequate research skills. Lessing and Schulze (2003) also note that poor knowledge and guidance skills on the part of lecturers, inefficient systems for allocating students to supervisors, and poor quality of feedback could all contribute to distance learners' failure to complete their research projects. These views were echoed by Fouché (2006) in a study to investigate tutors' perceptions about working in isolation from colleagues, which found that UNISA tutors received under-average training and administrative support, and appreciated the regular professional support they received from their

colleagues. Although my study is not about tutor support, it was essential to understand the kind of support that tutors were given to prepare them for their new roles in the DE programme, bearing in mind that as intermediaries (Sewart, 1987, 1993; Thorpe, 1994) they are assumed to be in contact with learners in the provision of learner support services. Thompson and Irele (2003) and Terblanche (2010) emphasize that tutors who supervise research projects and portfolios need to be oriented and trained in research skills.

In summary, the reviewed literature (Botha, 2010; Lepphoto and Mohasi, 2009; Risenga, 2010) stresses the importance of both academic and non-academic support to enable distance learners to interact with their tutors and DE providers for instructional purposes and with their peers for socialisation, since it is assumed that such interaction will enhance their progress and programme completion (Amey, 2008; Simpson, 2013).

According to Botha (2010), barriers related to the lack of appropriate study skills and the challenges of difficult content include learning styles (Kurasha, 2003), institutional factors such as heavy workloads for both learners and tutors, lack of commitment by tutors, and the lack of clear information about assignments (Siaciwena, 2000). Egbert, (2000), Manning, (2001), Mayor and Swann, (2002), Mitchell, (2005) and Sampson (2013) attribute distance learners' inability to understand content and write assignments to their difficulties with the language of instruction. Lepphoto and Mohasi (2009) cite social and cultural factors such as fulfilling community responsibilities, and attending funerals. Other problems are related to low self-esteem particularly in environments where DE is perceived as of inferior quality (Dzakiria, 2004). Attitudes such as these, which are often carried over

from the conventional system, are among the challenges with which distance learners have to contend (Botha, 2010; Kurasha, 2003; Lephoto and Mohasi, 2009; Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006). The extent, to which they can be said to affect distance learners' completion of their studies in the DE programme needed to be established in the context of Holmberg's (2003) theory of distance education based on empathy.

In this study, tutors, programme coordinators and institutional managers provide learner support services in the DE programme. In order to carry out their roles effectively, Beyth-Marom, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, Bar-Haim and Godder (2006) argue that tutors, who are mostly part-time to DE programmes need to be motivated through orientation to their new duties, as well as given other incentives to exert themselves above and beyond the call of duty. In their study to assess tutors' job satisfaction and work motivation at the Open University of Israel, Beyth-Marom et al. (2006) concluded that tutors' work motivation, job satisfaction and organisational identification influence their decision to work for the institution and do more than their job description demands. Grant & Spencer (2003), Watkins & Kaufman (2003) and Wolcott (2003) assert that clear institutional commitment, adequate information and compensation guidelines are needed as incentives to encourage staff to participate in distance education programmes. Other incentives range from workload adjustments, with release time for staff to prepare for distance learners, extra financial compensation, and training in DE practices and ICT technical skills, including the skills to support distance learners and maintaining a conducive work environment.

In this context, it was important to understand the reward system in the DE programme. Apart from paying for programme coordination, tutorials and setting, marking and assessing work, the remuneration rates do not cover other services, such as counselling support, which distance learners are expected to receive from stakeholder institutions. Wolcott (2003) argued that the existence of a positive and supportive institutional leadership, particularly in dual-mode institutions of DE programmes are important.

In this study, it was assumed that payment rates influenced staff in stakeholder institutions to participate in the DE programme activities, hence the need to find the participants' views about the effectiveness of payment as an incentive in this programme. In addition, I needed to discover whether the orientation and incentives given to tutors encouraged them to participate in the provision of academic support in the DE programme, and how this affected the quality of tutorials, assessment and feedback mechanisms.

Counselling support in DE

In this section, the literature was reviewed in order to assess the contribution of counseling support to distance learners' progress and programme completion in DE programmes. Simpson (2002) defines counselling in DE as the intervention between the learner, the tutor and the supporting institution, aimed at helping learners to solve those academic and personal problems which could interfere with their studies. Simpson (2002) further argues that counselling support is necessary in DE because distance learners study on their own for most of the time, and problems of anxiety and lack of confidence, coupled with a lack of proper study skills, can interfere

with their progress and programme completion. To help learners settle in their studies, Morrison, Brand and Cilliers (2006), supported by Thorpe (1988), posit that before enrolment, learners should be given information on course prerequisites, on how to interact with the learning materials, how to cope with the pressure of work and review their own learning progress, as well as career advice and opportunities for further qualifications. The present study aims to establish whether distance learners in the DE programme were provided with effective counseling support, as compared to the examples in the reviewed literature.

Learner support services were provided by UEW so that distance learners could benefit from available resources. It was assumed that the counselling services that were already available for the conventional programme would also be available to distance learners. However, Butale (2008) Sedisa and Bogopa (2008), have indicated that distance learners do not appear to benefit from counselling services in stakeholder institutions. This study set out to find out why this is the case and how access to or lack of access to counselling support influence distance learners' progress and programme completion. There was also the need to determine whether distance learners received emotional support from other support structures, such as family, friends and employers. Bird and Morgan (2003) indicate that employers, workmates, friends and family members are useful sources of emotional support in DE.

In a longitudinal study in a nursing programme in the United Kingdom, Dearnley (2003) investigated the impact of academic, professional and domestic networks in DE, establishing that students who had support from

their professional colleagues, supervisors, tutors and mentors were more motivated to continue with their studies than those who did not participate in similar networks. The same study also identified peer group discussions, support from spouses, family, children and friends, including institutional support as among the motivating factors which helped distance learners persist in their studies. These findings are corroborated by Bertram (2003), who reported that distance learners at the University of Natal in South Africa found learning and doing self-test activities in groups useful.

Learners gave each other emotional support by encouraging each other to persist in their studies and achieved good marks in their assessments. Similar findings were reported by Snowball and Sayish (2007), who emphasised the need for a peer tutorial and assessment system to enhance didactic interaction among distance learners. It was not known whether distance learners in the DE programme received support from their employers, families and friends, and if they did, what effects this support had on their learning progress and programme completion. In the context of this study, there seemed to be a gap regarding the type of counselling support the learners received, giving rise to questions about how this support affected their progress and programme completion in the DE programme. The present study addresses this gap.

Administrative support and stakeholder involvement

In this section, the literature was reviewed to establish the role of stakeholders in the provision, management and monitoring of learner support services in DE programmes. At the time of the study, it was not known how the stakeholders managed this support, and whether or not the administrative

support available facilitated distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DE programme. I agree with Holmberg (2003) when he insists that the supporting institution is supposed to facilitate regular dialogue between tutors and learners by developing programme management structures which ensure tutors' attendance at tutorials, learners' interaction with tutors, short turnaround times for assignments and access to learning resources. As stated by Simonson et al. (2006), administrative support in DE requires coordination of tutorial and assessment functions to ensure effective service delivery and accountability. In this respect, Haughey (2012) asserts that the introduction of DE programmes means that the participants' roles will change, calling for a re-engineering of the conventional institutions. Infrastructural adjustments and changes in traditional power structures and communication patterns are needed in order to integrate DE activities into the existing institutional activities (Haughey, 2012).

It was therefore necessary to find out whether the stakeholder institution at the planning stage clarified and communicated to learners, tutors and other stakeholders the organizational procedures for dealing with applications, pre-enrolment information, selection, registration and procedures for the dispatch of learning materials. Other questions related to the availability of learning resources, the submission of assignments, marking, commenting and turnaround times from tutors, together with record-keeping procedures and processes, and whether contractual agreements needed for part-time tutors were enforced in order to commit them to what they had signed to do. I examined the assessment and feedback structures used in the DE programme to sustain two-way communication between learners, tutors

and the DE institution. In India, the Handbook for Recognition of DE Institutions (IGNOU, 2009) outlines the mechanisms used to monitor learner support provision, to check that learners receive tutorial assistance, timely feedback with constructive comments, and access to learning resources in the form of libraries, computers and science laboratories at study centres.

For the present study, I needed to examine the monitoring mechanisms of learner support services in the DE programme. Studies carried out in Scotland by the Open University of the United Kingdom, in Australia, and at the California State University, USA (Curry, 2003), found that distance learners value academic advice sessions which highlight enrolment and orientation procedures prior to the introduction to course materials. According to Curry (2003), distance learners consider information on course materials, time management, and preparation of assignment work, as well as reassurance from institutional representatives to be very helpful because it enables them to make sound judgments when selecting their courses. Information about opportunities to interact with their tutors and their peers was also highly valued by distance learners (Curry, 2003).

Determining access to learning resources

Perraton and Lentell (2004), recommend collaboration in the sharing of institutional resources for optimal utilisation so as to:

1. develop and share clear goals and clear statement of purpose
2. define roles for administrative and academic staff for all collaborating partners
3. develop a governing and funding structure in line with the stated

4. purpose of a collaborative venture
5. understand, own and execute their roles and responsibilities effectively for the benefit of distance learners, and commit all partners and their resources.

Butale (2008), Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) Wright (2013), indicated that the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the provision of learner support services in the DE programme had not been evaluated. UNISA (1997a, and 1997b) notes that evidence for the provision of effective learner support could be demonstrated through the shared use of learning resources. In support of these views, Pidduck and Carey (2006) urge participating institutions to hunt for resources, and to guarantee that staff had the time and expertise to support distance learners. Scholars such as Hon-Chan and Mukherjee (2003), Mukamsoni (2006), Robinson (1989), Shelly, White, Baumann and Murphy (2006), and Siaciwena (2011) all stress the need for DE institutions to train staff in DE skills and not assume that because staff are qualified in other areas they are adequately prepared to offer support to distance learners.

Providing decentralised learner support services

Melton (2002) underscores the need for the decentralised learner support services to be as close as possible to where distance learners live and work. Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlop (2003) prefer the 'scaffolding' learner support structure which offers a clear and elaborate definition of functions for each stakeholder, so as to empower distance learners and reduce their frustration (Bernath et al., 2003). This claim is echoed by Duffy and

Cunningham (1996), Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlop (2003) and by Moore (1993), when they argue that empowering learners to manage their learning tasks is a critical administrative function, bearing in mind that many DE institutions utilise the services of tutors and other stakeholders who are external to the institution. Considering that distance learners in the DE programme are scattered all over Botswana (Wright, 2013), there was a need to investigate the nature of the decentralised support they received and how it contributed to their progress and programme completion.

At the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), which was established in 2000, Pfukwa and Matipano (2006) found that the ZOU experienced high dropout rates in its early years, particularly in remote rural areas, where distance learners were unable to secure resources beyond the module.

Kurasha (2003) noted that distance learners at ZOU, though motivated to learn, showed signs of wanting teachers to stand in front of them, probably as a hang-over from the conventional face-to-face system, and advised DE providers to inculcate appropriate study skills to enable distance learners to study on their own. Kurasha (2003) also reiterated the need for timely feedback on assignments to help learners judge their own progress. This included encouraging collaborative learning through the creation of self-help study groups at accessible study centres, which Kurasha (2003) claimed provided an environment in which learners could construct their own knowledge through group interaction. It should be borne in mind; however, that some of the students lived in remote rural areas with limited public transport which restricted their chances of attending tutorials at the nearest study centre (Mukeredzi and Ndamba, 2007; Ncube, 2007). At the Open

University of Tanzania (OUT), Mmari (1998) acknowledged the role of stakeholders in the provision of decentralised learner support services in twenty-two regional centres, situated in major towns in Tanzania, reaching out to students who lived in remote rural areas with a limited infrastructure. Komba (2004) noted that each study centre in Tanzania required a minimum of forty enrolled learners in order to make its operations economically viable.

Distance Education as a System

Distance education is fundamentally different in its structure, organization and delivery from conventional face-to-face instruction. It is based on the specialized division of labour in the development and provision of courses. It requires technology of some kind to mediate between tutor and students' because the two are separated by time and distance. As Saint (2013) recalls, these differences have produced specialized processes for learning design, specialized techniques of instructions, and specialized organization structures which are different for conventional tertiary institutions.

Using the systems approach Perraton (2012) explains that DE: is simply a way to develop and distribute teaching materials, to link different media and to plan occasional face- to face sessions for external students'. In consequence, it demands staff who combine educational and administrative skills in a different way from the ordinary teacher. Similarly, it demands new alliances, between educators and broadcasters

Perraton's (2012) statement adds a new dimension to the conception of distance education. This is in the areas of new demands placed on staff who organise distance education programmes, especially on the need to co-operate with various specialists to make a success of the programme.

According to Holmberg (2013), distance education providing agencies normally undertake three main jobs irrespective of goals and educational levels of operation. He mentions these jobs as, development and production of self instructional study materials; teaching at distance and provision of advice and general supports to students.

For the students, distance education is largely self- instruction and personal instruction. However, Kelly (2011) argues that even though distance education is based on self and personal instruction, it is not automatic that students would learn on their own. There is the need to provide guidance and support services.

Analyzing the interrelated nature of the system Abete (n.d) maintains that the key players in distance education are the students, faculty, facilitators, support staff and administrators. The primary role of the students' is to learn. This is a daunting task under the best of circumstances, requiring motivation, planning and the ability to analyse and apply instructional skills being taught.

Aguti (2011) notes that the success of any distance education delivery system rest squarely on the shoulders of the faculty. The faculty must develop understanding of the characteristics and needs of distance students who are normally made up of people with diverse characteristics. They must also develop working understanding of delivery technology, while remaining

focused on the teaching role: In that way then could function effectively as skilled facilitators and content providers.

In Aguti (2011) opinion, a site facilitator is to act as a bridge between the students and instructor. An effective facilitator must not only understand the students but be willing to follow the directive established by the faculty and at the same time be able to link students and the teacher who are at the head of every educational process.

Aguti (2011) regards the support as the silent heroes of the education enterprise because they ensure that the myriad details required for programme success are dealt with effectively and offer guidance and counseling to learners as well. In addition, administrators have to be consensus builders, decision- makers and referees. Above all, they must maintain an academic focus and realize that meeting the instructional needs of distance students is their ultimate responsibility.

Owusu-Mensah (1998) states that a distance education system is composed of six interacting and inter-depend sub- parts. He lists them as:

1. Educational programme planning
2. Material preparation and production
3. Students' services
4. Evaluation
5. Finance and
6. Management systems

When these sub- systems work together they ensure the running of distance education programmes. On the other hand, Perry and Rumble (1987) following the system approach identify three sub- systems in distance

education. These are the operating sub-system, the regulatory sub-system and logistical system.

The regulatory sub-system consist of training, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation. The logistical sub-system is responsible for activities like supply of paper, machinery, staff and provision of project management capacity.

Other authors like Robinson (2012) and Rumble (1987) also identify three main sub-systems relating them to specific roles. While Robinson (2012) mentions creation of materials, provision of support for the learner and finally administration and management, Rumble (1992) lists material sub-system, a students' or learner sub- system and an administration sub- system. Rumble (1987) observes that in large system the students and administration sub-systems may depend on different cultures and philosophies.

Perry and Rumble (1987), however, have come out with five main sub-systems. These are: Design of materials, Production of materials, Distribution of materials and support services, Assessment of learners and system management and lastly, Maintenance of records of the learners sub-system.

Based on the above analysis, the picture that seems to appear is that a number of sub-systems exist in delivering education at a distance. In brief, all effective distance learning programmes depend on the 'three legs' of good learning materials, effective students' support and efficient logistic (Rowntree 2013). The implication is that if the unique attributes of distance education are not recognised at the outset of policy and planning initiatives to expand its use, its potential benefits will not be realised. This over sight is perhaps the main

reason why distance education has not been as successful to date in Africa as it could have been (Saint, 1999).

Adults as Learners

Writers on adult education agree that is important for practitioners of the profession to study learner characteristics if they are to understand their clients (Knowles, 1980 and Brokfield ,1989). Since distance education favours adults, such studies ensure that programs are tailored to fit the students' concerned. Knowles suggests that there is the need for education to identify the special characteristics of mature students. He writes:

We have a holdover from long tradition, however, that complicates this picture which is that historically the role of the students' has been defined as a role appropriate for childhood and youth. Accordingly, many of the policies, rules and regulations, entrance requirements, many of the policies, regulations, entrance requirements, financial arrangement, physical facilities, curricula, instructional strategies, and graduation requirements of our educational institutions are geared to the characteristics of children and youth (p. 24).

According to Saint (1999), professional education necessarily involves the education of adults. It has therefore drawn on a range of approach taken from general adult education. These borrowings have been from such sources as:

1. The experience based learning, first proposed by Dewey (1938), in the context of children's education and adopted by adult education onwards.

2. Andragogical school of ‘self-directed learning and autonomy in learning’ (Burge, 2012; Knowles, 1980), with its emphasis on individual development.
3. ‘Learner-centred ‘approaches which have focused on the individual’s personal development, drawing on traditions of client-centred therapy and group dynamics (Burge, 2012).
4. ‘Problem-based’ learning (Knowles, 1980)

The ‘training and efficiency’ movement, which as the largest conventional research based and is currently manifested in ‘competence based approaches (Paul, 2014).

In practice, however, there are no fine distinctions between approaches and a number of these could be applied in any single teaching and organizational programme.

A tradition in adult education which professional educators have not drawn on to the same extent, though it has become more influential recently, is the ‘critical pedagogy and social action’ movement (Burge and Howard 1990). Here, emphasis is placed in critique of the social, cultural and political context in which education occurs, on the opportunities it offers for dialogue and collective action towards change, and on the ‘empowerment’ of adults through continuing education (Saint, 1999). Despite such differences of approach and emphasis, many adult educators have come to accept some common basic principles governing their activities. This is reflected in the very language adult educators tend to use. For example, instead of ‘teachers’ the use of the term ‘facilitator’ is widespread, and instead of ‘students’ they commonly refer to them as ‘learners’ and ‘adults’, Knowles’ (1980) four assumptions about the

differences between adult and child learners, for example, are widely accepted.

The assumption are that, a one matures, (1) one's self concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards on of being a self-directing human being;(2) one accumulates a growing research of experience that becomes an increasing resources for learning; (3) one's readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental task of one's social roles; and (4) one's time perspective changes from postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly one's orientation towards learning shifts from one of the subject- centredness to one of the problems- centredness these assumptions may quite closely with some principles underlying adult learning found in Brookfield (1989). According to Brokefield, adults learn throughout their lives, with the negotiations of the transitional stages in the life-span being the immediate causes and motives for much of this learning.

Adult learners exhibit diverse learning styles, diverse strategies for coding information, diverse cognitive producers and mental sets. Furthermore, they learn in different ways, at different times, for different purposes. As a rule, however, they like their learning activities to be problem- centred and to be meaningful to their life situation, and they want the learning outcomes to have some immediacy of application. The past experiences of adults effect their current learning sometimes servicing as an enhancement, sometimes as a hindrance. Effective learning is, however, linked to the adult's subscription to a self-concept of oneself as a learner. Finally, adults exhibit a tendency towards self- directedness in their learning.

Brookfield (1989) also provides six principles of effective practice which facilitates learning. These are widely accepted by professional educators and largely adopted in distance education. They are:

1. Participation in learning is voluntary; adults withdraw if the learning does not meet their needs or make sense to them. They can vote with their feet, therefore, what is to be learned should be appropriate.
2. Effective practice is characterized by a respect for the learner's self-worth. This does not rule out constructive criticism, but it does rule out practices that undermine confidence or belittle the learners.
3. Learning should be a co-operative venture between facilitator and learner. Leadership roles may be reversed at times because the venture is collaborative.
4. Learners and facilitators are engaged in a continual process of activity reflection upon activity and generating new activity. Activity in this context includes cognitive activity, for example, exploring a completely new way of interpreting one's work.
5. The learning experience aims to foster a spirit of critical reflection on professional, personal or political life. Learners should understand that values, beliefs and behaviours are culturally transmitted, provisional and relative.
6. The aim of facilitation is nurturing a self directed, empowered adult who is proactive, initiating in work personal relationship, and in society.

However, there are differences too. The literature on adult education does not normally assume a one- to- one relationship between facilitator and learner. In some types of adult education, whenever assessment towards accreditation is involves for example, the 'facilitator' may be required to

evaluate the adult students' work. This may militate against the kind of openness usually associated with a facilitator's roles, and will certainly have some effect on the relationship. Indeed, when adults enroll for a formal course, for example, towards a diploma or degree, it is arguable whether the term 'facilitator' may be required to evaluate the adult students work. This may militate against the kind of openness usually associated with a facilitator's roles, and will certainly have some effect on the relationship. Indeed, when adults enroll for a formal course, for example, towards a diploma or degree, it is arguable whether the term 'facilitator' is properly applicable at all, since the role inevitably involves direct teaching and the application of objective, in external standards.

Self-directed learning (learner autonomy) is a frequently studied in teacher education and continuing education, where it is often most securely grounded in theoretical work. For example, Brookfield (1989) and Knowles (1984), propose a process whereby teachers-in-training negotiate their curriculum with teacher trainers, an approach which derives from the 'critical pedagogy and social action' school of thought. The curriculum of educational practices is necessary for the development of the adult learners professional autonomy.

Knowles (1984), notes that adults as learners have maturity and experience. He argues that adults have extensive relative knowledge about individual, national and world affairs. He maintains that adults are goal- oriented and therefore, able to set their own goals, study independently and evaluate themselves. He points out that mostly adult learners exhibit high motivation, interest and discipline when they enroll in programmes that are relevant to

their situations in life, but admits that adults are also a heterogeneous group, demographically, motivationally and in entering behaviour. Consequently, they may be different as far as these characteristics are concerned. Yet, some of these characteristics are, more or less, common among distance education learners.

Saint (2013), however, argues that though self-directedness is an important goal of adult education it is not always an available means. He explains that adults are not inherently self-directed; they weigh widely in their capacity for self-directed learning and may delegate the management of their learning to others. He concludes that where self-directed learning is appropriate it tends to require a complete structure and a condition which are contrary to what is attributed to the autonomous learners and their approach to learning.

The contributions of Knowles (1984), Brookfield (1989), and Saint (2013) serve as useful guides in the investigation of characteristics of distance students. The agreement between the views expressed as well as the disagreement provide a fertile ground for trying to find out what the University of Education Winneba distance education students' have brought to the programme.

Profile of Distance Students: A Theoretical Approach

Writing on the subject, Newman (2006) observes that distance education students are older, have jobs and families. They must co-ordinate the different areas of their lives, which are interdependent, namely, their families, jobs, spare time activities and studies.

Newman (2006), also notes that DE students have a variety of reasons for taking courses. While some students are interested to obtaining a degree to qualify for a better job, others take courses to broaden their education and are not really interested in completing a degree course.

On the other hand Dhanarajan (2011) is positive that distance students are a heterogeneous group. He states that:

They are mature and have capacity for self- directed learning, and are proficient in the use of technology, have capacity of successfully access and manage information, and have capacity to analyses and identify their own personal needs throughout the duration of a programme

These general characteristics may be regarded as too flattering because they ascribe to the adult learner abilities which are not generally available in the population.

Again, it is the view of Firestone and Pennel (2012) that distance students bring basic characteristics to their learning experience which influences their succession in course work. They are, according to the authors, voluntarily seeking further education, have post secondary education goals with expectations for higher grades, are highly motivated and self- disciplined and are older.

However, Newman (2006), points out that since in distance education settings, technology is typically the conduit through which information and communication flow, until the teacher and students become comfortable with the technical delivery system, communication will be inhibited.

Harasim (2013), introduces another dimension by stating that beginning students may have some difficulty determining what the demands of

a course of academic study actually are because they do not have an immediate peer group, ready access to the instructor, or familiarity with the technology used for delivery of distance courses. In addition, they may be unsure of themselves and their learning. Harasim argues that distance students tend to be confident about their learning by concentrating on memorizing facts and details in order to complete assignments or write examinations. He explains that when this happens students may end up with a poor understanding of the course material.

Harasim (2013), regards memorization as a “surface approach” to learning. He therefore states that students need to become more secured and focused in their learning in order to master new information. What Morgan means is that distance students must shift from a “surface approach” to a “deep approach”. Other writers like Heath (2012) and Davies (2013) have made similar observations. The shift from ‘surface’ to ‘deep’ learning is not automatic. Coldeway, Mac Rury and Spencier (1980) observe that students must face and overcome a number of challenges before learning takes place, including becoming and staying responsible for themselves; ‘owning’ their strengths, desires, skills and needs; maintaining and increasing self- esteem; relating to others; clarifying what is learned, redefining what legitimate knowledge is, and dealing with content.

Koul (2013), believes that for distance students to be successful they need to become responsible for themselves. Koul explains that high motivation is required to complete distance courses because the day- to day contact with teachers and other students is typically lacking, suggesting that instructors can help motivate distance students by providing consistent and

timely feedback, encouraging discussing among students and being well prepared for tutorials.

According to Koul (2013) students need to recognize their strengths and limitations as well understand their learning goals and objectives. The instructor can help distance students to explore their strengths and limitations and their learning goals and objectives by assuming a facilitative role in the learning process. Distance students should therefore be provided with opportunities to share their personal learning goals and objectives for a course to help make learning more meaningful and increase motivation.

Futhermore, Koul (2013), advises that distance students should maintain and increase their self- esteem. They explain that the students who are largely adults are balancing many responsibilities including employment and raising children. Koul argues that often the students' involvement in distance education is unknown to those they work with and are ignored by family members. It is obvious that students' performance is enhanced if learners set aside time for their instructional activities and have family support in their endeavours.

On the part of instructor, Koul (2013) suggest that one should maintain students' esteem by providing timely feedback. When it comes to assignments teacher should provide comments which are informative, elaborate on individual students' performance and suggest areas for improvement. Such activities are especially helpful for students progress. Koul again notes that distance students often learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with other students. In effect interaction among students typically leads to group problem solving. When the students are unable to meet

together, appropriate interactive technology such as E- mail should be provided to encourage small group and individual communication. Assignments in which students work together and report back or present to the class as a whole encourage student-to-student interaction. It is, however, important to ensure clear direction and realistic goals for group assignments (Burge, 2012).

Distance students need to reflect on what they are learning. Koul (2013) point out that distance students need to examine the existing knowledge in their heads and how this is being added to or changed by incoming information. Examination papers and class presentations provide opportunities for students and teachers to evaluate learning. However, less formal methods of evaluation will also help the students and teacher understand learning. For example, periodically during the course the instructor can ask students to write a brief reflection what they have learned and then provide an opportunity for them to share their insight with other class members.

Koul (2013) argues that adult learners may find it difficult to accept that their own experiences and reflections are legitimate knowledge. If the instructors take a facilitative rather than authoritative role, students will see their own experience as valuable and important to their further learning. Burge (2012) also suggests that development of the use of the personal language by students to help them claim ownership of personal values, experiences and insight.

It is generally accepted that students' learning is enhanced when content is related to examples. Koul (2013) argues that instructors tend to

teach using examples that were used when they received their training. For distance learning to be effective, however, instructors must discover examples that are relevant to their distance students. It is also necessary to encourage students to find or develop examples that are relevant to them or their community.

Perraton (1982) argues that for distance students to be able to study effectively by themselves they need to be mature and more than adequately literate. He believes that an important ingredient for successful study at a distance is motivation. He supports this view by saying that distance programmes which guarantee students promotion or reward for qualified teachers on graduation, have high pass rates. From the discussions on improving distance learning it is clear that teaching and learning at a distance is demanding. However, learning will be more meaningful and ‘deeper’ for distance students if the students and their instructors share responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives; actively interacting with class members, promoting reflection on experience and relating new information to examples that make sense to learners; maintaining self –esteem and evaluating what is being learned. This is the challenge and opportunity provided by distance education.

The Concept of Perception

Several definitions of the term ‘perception’ have been provided by psychologists. Wagner (1997) sees perception as having something to do with our awareness of the objects or conditions about us. He explains that perception, to a large extent, is dependent on the impressions objects make on

our senses. Thus, it is the way things look to us, or the way they sound, feel, smell or taste. Other psychologists in the field of perception studies like Wolcott (2003) conceive perception in a general sense and assert that it is an experience produced by an outside stimulation of the senses.

Another dimension in perception studies by Perry and Rumble (1987) indicates that the perception process operates to minimize surprise. New experiences are assimilated easily if they are related to past experience. It involves the placement of incoming information into a network of meaningful categories developed largely from prior learning. For one to understand and accept a particular concept or even therefore, the person's environment and past experiences constitute important variables of influence. To them perception is influenced by the expectations of the individual, cognitive processes and motivational levels. The implication is that the type of perceptions teachers' exhibit may be influenced by their level of intelligence, knowledge, needs, interests and values.

Shale (2013) states that it is only through the interaction of inherited biological factors and experience that our perceptual processes unfold. Our ability to see, hear, feel and taste is in part due to how our sensory systems are programmed as well as what we are exposed to.

Several pieces of empirical evidence support the notion that the behaviour of individuals and for that matter teachers can be influenced by the way they perceive the world and the host of stimuli in it. (Hallet and Cumming 2013). In an experiment conducted by Bruner and Goodman (2011), it was observed that needs and values affect the nature of stimulus perceived. Poor children observed to be more prone to exaggerating the size of coins than rich

children. Such perceptual distortions, according to the study resulted from the emotional significance the poor children attached to money. Upon this, it is likely that teachers on the distance education programme would demonstrate such distortions irrespective of the quality of support system provided.

In another development, a study by Shale (2013) on perceptual expectancy demonstrated how an individual perceives another on the basis of information about the persons' reputation or behaviour. He observed that students reacted differently to their class teachers on the basis of being told whether their teachers were warm or cold.

Predictors of Success on DE Programmes

Some research findings and a model by Moore and Kearsley (2013) provide some factors for predicting students' success on a distance education programme. According to Moore and Kearsley (2013) factors affecting the success of students' in distance learning programmes include:

1. educational background
2. personality characteristics
3. extracurricular concerns
4. course-related problems

The emphasis that more formal education a person has, the more likely he or she is to complete a distance education course or programme. They further acknowledge Billings and other researchers who point out that Special Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and college preparation are indicators of students' success in distance learning programmes.

On personality characteristics, they indicate that individuals who are more “field independent”, less dependent on the surrounding and social environment are “better suited” to distance learning. Employment, family responsibilities, health and social interest and obligations are what the extra curricular concerns which affect students’ completion rates for distance education courses. Finally, they itemized the following academic concerns as having impact on students retention:

1. perceived relevance of the content to career or personal interest
2. difficulty of the course and programme
3. degree of students or administrative support available
4. nature of media used for course delivery and interaction
5. nature of the pacing or scheduling
6. amount and nature of feedback received from instructors/tutors on
7. assignments and on course progress
8. amount and nature of the interaction with instructors, tutors, and other
9. students.

Moore and Kearsley (2013) model is designed to predict the completion rate of correspondence courses and it holds that the single most important variable for completion is the students’ intention to complete. Other related factors include timely submission of assignments and history of previous course completion.

Series of relationships among casual, additive and correlational variables are represented in the model. The causal variables include organizational variables like Grade Point Average (GPA), class level, experience with correspondence courses, and classmate support. The additive

variables include outcome and attitudinal variables such as practical value, educational goals, loyalty and isolation. Correlational variables include environment variables such as employment, employer support, family responsibilities and support, as well as proximity to instructor.

In support of the foregoing, Moore (2013) from his personal experience indicates that the three most important factors assisting her complete her courses are prior experience, educational goals and satisfaction with course lessons. He intimates that when the model is used with institutional supports such as academic tutoring, psychological counselling, extra curricular clubs and students organizations, students completion rates can be increased. He stresses that even without his academic background and experience with correspondence courses, he would persist and complete his course because the course is so well-designed and supported: the class website is easy to navigate and complete, and the personnel are all specialists who are always eager and able to assist.

Location of students, whether rural or urban, has been found to determine what support should be given to distance learners. Studies in Athabasca University by Paul (2014) and Shale (2013) revealed that rural students are more demanding of social interaction; they are more demanding to a professor in the classroom, and to debate issues with their peers. If they cannot have this on a regular basis in their own community, they organised seminars, which will offer them an alternative to try to work through the materials in isolation. This experience is replicated in Yugoslavia, where Kranj (1988) also found out that rural students often demand face-to-face interaction more than urban students do.

A number of factors have been identified by Kember (2002) as contributing to students drop-out in distance education. These according to his study include the following:

1. financial costs such as fees, textbooks, traveling to any tutorials and residential schools the frequency and nature of contracts between students' and the institution
2. the speed of response to students initiated contracts the provision of local tutorials

Another related study conducted by Windham (2012) on students drop-out in distance education revealed the following students support related factors as contributing to the drop-out rate:

1. tutorials too few in number; too distant, at inconvenient times, and of poor value when attended.
2. problems with tutors who are uncountable, unhelpful, slow to mark tutor-marked assignments, and give poor grades
3. late mailings, ambiguous assessment questions, frequent and delayed in course materials.
4. withdrawal of financial support.
5. Lack of encouragement by spouse or employer.
6. Loss of a quiet place for study.

Rekkedal (2001) is widely cited for his studies on the correlation between turn-around time for assignments and students persistence on their courses. To him, turnaround time refers to the time lapse from when the students sends in his or her assignments and the time he or she gets the assignments back from the institution with the tutor's comments on them. A

high turnaround time means a longer time lapse and a low turnaround time indicates a shorter time lapse.

The study indicated a statistically significant relationship between turnaround time and completion rates in mathematics. It revealed that quicker handling of students assignments resulted in higher completion rates. Thus, low turnaround time reduced drop-out rate while high turnaround time led to a higher drop-out rate.

Rekkadal (2001) observed that most students appeared to be satisfied with a turnaround time of one week or less while more than one week could cause dissatisfaction among them. The need for immediate feedback on students assignments to encourage them persist on their courses is emphasised here.

In another development, Rakkedal (2001) tried to establish the effect of postcards and letters on readiness to submit assignment. He observed a significant relationship between encouragement through the postcards and letters and the students readiness to submit assignments. This study emphasizes the need for regular communication and cordial relationship between distance students and their tutors.

A word of caution has been sounded about the generalisation of Rekkedal's first study on the basis that the sample of students used were those with very poor training or ensure of their knowledge necessary as pre-requisites for the mathematics course and therefore more likely to be dependent on rapid turnaround time than mature students studying other discipline (Taylor, Barker, White, Gillard, Kaufman, Khan &Mezger 1993). In spite of criticisms against Rekkedal's study, it has been a basis for further

research among distance education on drop-out as evidenced by Taylor (1993).

The cross-cultural multi-institutional study by Taylor (2001) involved five institutions – AllamaIqbal Open University (AIOU) of Pakistan, Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (DDIAE) of Western Australia, Open Learning Institute (OLI), University of South Pacific (USP), and Tasmanian State Institute of Technology (TSIT). The study sought to examine the relationships between persistence at the unit level and factors associated with social integration (turn around time, feedback interval, and the number of additional contacts between students and institution beyond those demanded by submission of assignments). The influence of sex and age of the students was examined.

Though no consistent trend across all the institutions was determined some findings from the individual institutions are worthy of attention. Findings from DDIAE concerning the relationship between persistence and turn around time confirmed Rekkedal's conclusion that low turnaround time tends to increase students persistence. Out of 82 students who dropped out, 55 had experienced high turn around time, whereas out of 110 students who persisted, only 29 experienced high turn around time.

At TSIT, 44 out of 70 students who failed to complete requirements had experienced high turnaround time. No significant relationship between turnaround time and persistence was however recorded in the other three institutions to provide conclusive results.

In another development, Owusu-Mensah (1998) observed a variety of turnaround time for assignments in three Universities he studied. At the

University of Namibia (UNAM), Lawrentian University and Makerere, tutors marked assignments and turn around time was six weeks for UNAM, four weeks for Lawrentian, while Makerere had not established its turn around time.

Case studies have been conducted in developed and developing countries including some African countries engaged in distance education. Joshi (2002) in her case studies reveals a wide array of problems encountered by students and tutors in the University College of Distance Education in Zimbabwe. These include:

1. high travelling costs
2. long distance to regional study centres
3. lack of adequate reference books
4. limited access to library facilities
5. lack of urgency in setting up district study centres in all regions

In a comparative study conducted by Owusu-Mensah (1998) he observed that Makerere external students did not enjoy the best of library services because most of the University's study centres up-country did not have libraries and the few which had did not have current books. The public libraries in Uganda were also not well equipped to be useful to the students. The only library the students could make use of the main University library, yet there was no clear policy about library services for the external students'. The students could not borrow books through the post but had to travel to the central campus and this situation was a bother to many of the students.

The library and textbooks issue for distance learners in University of Namibia seemed better than that of Makerere (Owusu-Mensah, 1998). He

observed from his study that library services were available to all registered students free of charge. Students could borrow books and return them on schedule from the main library. The study centres had limited stock of books and external students were encouraged to use. The students were encouraged to contact the University Libraries for any inquiries about library issues. At the study centres, textbooks for references were made available while students were encouraged to buy prescribed textbooks from the University book store and other companies.

At Laurentian University, Owusu-Mensah (1998) observed an efficient library service whereby on-line computer access to the University library was available for distance learners. The public libraries close to the students which had CD-ROM copy of the University's library catalogue provided a quick access to library facilities. Off-campus library services existed for students living 50 kilometres away from Sudbury who found it difficult locating books they needed. When the books were available in the University library, they were sent to the students on request to be used for a period of three weeks. The students had the right to renew the books if they were not on reserve. Postage cost for the return of the books after the loan period was borne by the University.

Additionally, photocopies of articles from magazines and newspapers were made available to students on request at 10 cent per page and students' did not have to return such documents after use. Again, bibliographic search was done for students' if they specified the nature and scope of the work for which they needed information (Owusu-Mensah, 1998).

In another development, Oladokun and Oyewumi's study of some African library services for distance learners revealed that such services in sub-Saharan Africa left much to be desired. They observed a gap between the library services and resources available to traditional students and those for distance learners. They further observed that urban-based distance education students who lived close to the location of their Universities were at great advantage of enjoying library facilities of their institutions than the non-based students. The study indicated that in some cases libraries were non-existent in non-urban areas and students who lived in remote areas could rarely visit the university libraries. The study again revealed that easy access to university libraries in some African countries did not guarantee that distance learners' needs were met. Library facilities and services at the University of Lagos were found to be inadequate in meeting the distance learners' needs. The students were therefore compelled to buy pamphlets prepared by lecturers and tutors.

Kamau (2011) in support of Oladokun and Oyewumi found out in his study that when distance education students in some African Universities were enjoined to use library facilities nearest to them because of lack of access to their university libraries, arrangements to use such libraries were left for the students to undertake on personal basis. In the University of Nairobi, Kamau found out also that the distance education students were allowed reference access in the Kenyatta University without borrowing privileges.

Public and private libraries have been found useful in providing access to library support in open and distance learning, and some distance learning institutions contribute to make such libraries more useful to their students'. In

the Open University of Tanzania, Mmari (2001) found out that the stock of journals and books held by public and private libraries which the University relied upon for its students was limited in scope for their degree programmes. The University therefore sought assistance from traditional donors in the developed countries for University-level materials to augment those already in existence.

Some few African Universities have encouraging library support for their distance learners (Behrens and Grobler 1997). In Behrens and Grobler's (1997) studies, they found out that the University of South Africa operated branch libraries in regional offices apart from the main University library. In addition, the University maintained relationship with municipal libraries. The students accessed the library collections either through personal visits to any of the libraries or had the library materials posted to them. The study also revealed that the institutional libraries of the Universities of South Africa and Botswana could use modern technology to the advantage of their distance learners.

A study conducted by Shale (2013) at the Kota Open University also indicates the type of library support services and facilities available to the University's distance learners. The findings revealed that the University's library system comprised the central library at the headquarters which catered for the teaching and non-teaching staff, counsellors, tutors and research scholars; six regional for forty three study centre libraries which catered for the need of distance learners and resident tutors and counsellors. The regional centre libraries were found to be well equipped with modern electronic and communication equipment such as telephone, fax, e-mail, computers,

television, photocopiers for effective library and information service. Specifically, the regional and study centre libraries provided the following services:

1. reading services
2. reference and information services
3. listening to audio materials
4. viewing of visual materials.

The central library of Kota University also provided the following services:

1. reading services
2. lending services
3. reprographic services
4. viewing and listening to audio-visual materials
5. reference and information services.

Singer (2012) again found out from his studies that the regional and study centre libraries had part-time Liberians who maintained proper record of library services. He also observed that the ten member library committee of Kota University included one director of a regional study centre nominated by the Vice-Chancellor. At the Maharshi Dayanand University, a study conducted by Simpson (2013) also revealed that the university maintained good library facilities at the headquarters and study centres and that the students found the facilities helpful in the preparation of their assignments. In case of necessity the students were allowed to borrow books for two or three days during their personal contact programmes.

Counselling services provided by Open and distance learning institutions take various forms as observed by Owusu-Mensah (1998). In the comparative study, he observed that in UNAM, Makerere and Lawrentian Universities, some form of counselling was provided for the distance learners but differences existed in terms of the importance attached to the various levels of counselling. He observed that UNAM and Makerere did not emphasise pre-admission counselling as in the case of Lawrentia where psychological preparation of potential students was done through the use of a manual called “First Step Kit”. However, post-entry counselling in the three institutions took a similar form with students assigned to lecturers who were expected to help their students with problems they might encounter.

The nature of face-to-face residential sessions and the purposes such sessions serve in distance learning institutions are revealed by various studies. Quaigrain (2001) in their study on face-to-face tutorials at the Open University of Hong Kong observed that attendance was relatively high with 95% of new students and over 70% of continuing students attending 75% or more of the sessions. Quaigrain (2001) further observed from the students reasons for attending tutorials that the students attended face-to face tutorials mainly for academic reasons such as:

1. listening to the tutor explaining the course material
2. receiving guidance on assignments from tutors
3. receiving guidance from tutors on examinations
4. receiving guidance from tutors on study skills
5. exchanging view points with tutors and other students’

To Schlossbery (2011) psychological and social factors were found to be of limited concern to the students as motivating factors for tutorial attendance.

In a study conducted in Atabasca University by Coldeway, MacRury, and Spencer (2013) distance learners were found to be motivated when they had frequent contact with their instructors. In another study on the value of interaction in distance, Burge and Howard (1990) also found out that the utilization of on-site facilitators who developed personal rapport with students and were familiar with equipment and other course materials, increased students satisfaction with courses. The realization of the problem of isolation in distance learning has been emphasized here. There is therefore no doubt that distance learners place premium on interaction whether face-to-face or mediated.

In another development, it has been observed that face-to-face session form an important aspect of Makerere University's support system (Owusu-Mensah, 1998). It was highly centralized at the main University Campus and scheduled three times a year with each session lasting two weeks. Aguti (2011) found out that the centralization of face-to-face support cost Makerere students in terms of food, travel and accommodation and therefore caused absenteeism among students and loss of benefits from such session. He cites the results of one of the summative evaluation of face-to-face sessions as indicating that the sessions:

1. motivated students to work
2. gave them opportunity to interact with one another
3. gave them opportunity to concentrate on their studies and

4. gave them a sense of belonging to the University.

The University of Namibia provided occasional face-to-face tutorials at its study or teaching or administrative centres using local tutors who were trained to provide tutorials. The students could register and pay their fees at such centres. In addition they conducted two residential meetings in a year with each lasting a week, at two main centres. These sessions were institution-initiated but on the contrary Laurentia University operated students-initiated face-to-face sessions and students had to travel to the main campus or use tele-conferencing at designated sites. The sessions here were optional (Owusu-Mensah, 1998).

Financial Support for Distance Learners

According to the case study analysis by Owusu-Mensah (1998) part-time students of Laurentian University in Ontario, Canada, enjoyed financial support from their government to enable them go through their programmes. The Ontario Students Assistance Plan (OSAP) was in place for qualified citizens to apply for financial assistance prior to the beginning of their academic programmes. The OSAP provided financial supplement to students own resources and those of their immediate family where applicable. Again, yearly scholarships were awarded on the basis of academic excellence while bursaries depended on the financial needs of students during winter sessions.

A survey conducted by Mireku-Gyimah (1998) during the pre-implementation stage of distance education for teachers in UEW and UCC, Ghana, revealed that the provision of support services could encourage acceptance and persistence on a distance education programme at the tertiary

level. He did not capture the views of teachers only but also educational administrators, parents and the general public. The study revealed that well equipped district libraries, well stocked study centres, occasional personal contact, face-to-face meetings including residential sessions, access to counselors and tutors, well-equipped regional libraries constitute support service necessary for the distance education programme to have a smooth take-off. He observed that effective use of these support services when provided would depend on proximity and convenience to and affordability by users.

Students Study Groups

According to Paul (2014), students study group meetings help solve the problems of isolation in distance education. Owusu-Mensah (1998) also observed that in Makerere University distance learners were encouraged to form groups and these were operative in areas with large concentration of students. The problems observed was the cost of travel and payment of tutors that was borne by students.

Aguti (2011) found out that sometimes students study group meeting attended by tutors unfortunately degenerated into lectures, defeating its purpose for lack of clear-cut policy by Makerere University. The Association of Laurentian Part- Time Students (ALPS) which encouraged distance learners to contact the ALPS office when they had any concern to express. However there is no information on such groups.

In another study, the results of individual learner tracking at Athabasca University revealed that distance learners benefited significantly

from small learning groups. Such groups were found to provide support and encouragement along with extra feedback on course assignments. Most importantly, the groups were identified as having the ability to foster the feeling that if help was needed, it was readily available (Coldeway, Mac Rury&Spenece, 1980).

Causes of Dropouts

A number of studies have shown that a higher percentage of students participating in an online course tend to dropout compared to students in a face-to-face classroom (Kamau, 2011). Some consider the higher dropout rate in distance learning a failure while others advise careful interpretation of the issue because of unique characteristics and situations that online learners have. Simpson (2013) indicated that uncontrollable factors influence dropout decisions and a high dropout rate is not necessarily indicative of academic non-success. Nonetheless, it is still not easy to explain to corporate executives that dropout rates do not matter (Mmari, 2001), and it is certain that the issue of high dropout rates in online training should be addressed and dealt with.

Several theories and theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain why students drop out. In particular, Tinto's student integration model (2000) and Bame student attrition model (2012) have guided dropout research studies. Tinto (2000) claimed that attrition is a result of interactions between a student and his/her educational environment during the student's stay in a program. He indicated that social integration and academic integration produced stronger student commitment to their institutions and increased students' persistence. However, educators who desire to study the persistence of nontraditional students, who have different characteristics and nature from

traditional students, have found that Tinto's model has limited applicability Bame (2012). Tinto himself indicated that it was necessary to modify his model when used with nontraditional students Tinto (2000).

Bame (2012) developed a conceptual model for non traditional students who drop out that includes academic performance, intent to leave primarily influenced by academic and psychological outcomes, background and defining variables, and environmental variables. They asserted that the main difference between the attrition process of traditional and non traditional students is that non traditional students are more affected by the external environment than traditional students. However, Bame model is unlikely to be applied for distance learners because there is a significant discrepancy between the definitions of distance learners in general and nontraditional students in the Bame model .

Bame (2012), therefore, proposed a longitudinal process model of dropout distance education and made suggestions for testing the model (e.g. developing reliable instruments, conducting both qualitative and quantitative research, etc). Bame's longitudinal model recognizes that social and academic integration of students should be viewed with intervening variables between initial student characteristics, background and persistence, that components change over time, and that students have to make dropout decisions several times during lengthy courses have tested this model in different sets of institutions, courses, and students and emphasized the importance of social and academic integration to student progress indistance learning. Since then, a couple of researchers have committed to comparing those previous models, determining advantages and disadvantages, and finally developing a model

explaining the process of dropping out in a particular population and learning environment.

Taylor et al (1993) reviewed Bame dropout frameworks, and the results indicated that Tinto's model is more comprehensive and robust while Bame model accounts for more variance in persistence.

Kamau (2011) proposed a persistence model to explain factors affecting a learner's decision to drop out of online learning. The model included two prior-to-admission variables and two after-admission variables. The two prior-to admission variables are student characteristics and student skills prior to admission. The two after-admission variables are external factors (e.g., finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, etc.) and internal factors (e.g., academic integration, social integration, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, study habits, advising, absenteeism, etc.). Rovai's framework is established by a thorough review of the most comprehensive previous frameworks (i.e., Tinto's student integration model [1993] and Bean & Metzner's student attrition model [1985]), particularly focusing on nontraditional online learners who have characteristics similar to adult learners in organizations. This model was also tested and expanded by Quaigrain (2001).

Bame (2012) reviewed studies that focused on identifying factors affecting non-traditional and non-degree online program students who drop out and proposed a framework based on Rovai's model for understanding adult dropouts. Based on the review, she indicated that the significance of the four factors from Rovai's model is supported from many studies with a variety of research methods. However, she suggested revision of the structure

of the model and elimination of some of the variables. Specifically, learner skills are in a grey box because these have found little empirical support in previous studies, and their inclusion can be determined only through relevant further investigation. The external factors are moved between prior to and during the courses because these affect student decisions not only during the course but also prior to the course. Adult distance learners may drop out of the course due to increased workload or job change that happens during the course, but some learners may drop out of a course even before they start because of such external reasons.

In addition, external factors and internal factors are likely to interact with each other. For example, when learners have a heavy workload and little time for study, they are more likely to drop out of a course when they cannot get feedback or if it is hard to contact the instructors than when they can easily communicate with them and get more responses. If proper course design and technology are being used, some external problems are likely to be mitigated. So the relationship between internal factors and external factors are expressed as inter-correlation rather than as a one-sided influence. In addition, it appeared that only internal factors would have a direct influence on persistence decision, and others have an indirect affect through internal factors in Rovai's model. However, many studies have reported that some external factors have been major reasons why learners decided to drop out, particularly in relation to adult distance learners. Therefore, a direct line from external factors to dropout/persistence has been added.

Even though numerous studies have tried to identify factors affecting learners' decision to dropout, only a dozen research studies have empirically

explored this issue, and no consensus has been reached for which factors have definite influences on the decision (Paul, 2014).

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to identify meaningful factors affecting learners' decision to drop out of courses and ultimately to shed light on how we can retain students in courses by involving a significant number of research participants and adding meaningful factors. Particularly, this study focused on the three main categories: individual characteristics, external factors, and internal factors. To be more specific, age, gender, educational background, and employment status were chosen as individual characteristics because these four are the most often cited factors in previous studies (Paul, 2014).

External factors consist of family support and organizational support. Most adult learners have many responsibilities for their family as well as for their job, and these two are key factors affecting adult learners' decision to dropout of courses (Paul, 2014). Motivation is one of the most frequently studied variables in relation to dropout (Hodgson, 2013). In particular, relevance and satisfaction are the sub-dimensions of motivation that have frequently been studied (Hodgson, 2013) and are known to be highly correlated with various course-related issues such as instructional design, organization of the online courses, instructors' facilitation, and interaction (Shale, 2013). This study could not include other internal factors such as social integration, academic integration, and technology issues shown in the above framework because the courses investigated in this study were developed before conducting this study, and the researchers did not have access to the

course contents and were not involved with the design and development process.

DE policies and the provision of effective learner support services

The literature was further reviewed to establish how DE policies contributed to the provision of effective learner support services in the DE programme. Koul (2013) and Simpson (2013) noted that programme completion in DE programmes depends on national and institutional policies which clarify staff responsibilities to avoid overlap and role conflict in service delivery. To facilitate this process, Simonson and Bauck (2013) mention seven policy areas in DE. Among these are academic policies which deal with admissions, assessment and students' records; fiscal, geographic and governance policies to deal with tuition, physical distribution of learners and contracts for collaborators; faculty policies to regulate workloads, promotion and compensation, and support in form of staff development and training; student policies to deal with academic advice, access to resources, equipment and software; and technical and philosophical policies that deal with the achievement of vision and mission statements at the institutional level.

Scholars such as Siaciwena (1997, 2000) and Siaciwena & Rubinda (2008) identified institutional factors such as heavy workloads for learners and tutors and non-responsive organisational structures, mainly prevalent in dual-mode institutions, as among the barriers which affected distance learners' progress at the University of Zambia. Siaciwena (2000) advocates tutorial sessions with a small number of students to ensure effective tutor-learner interaction, with detailed comments on assignments and learner-learner interaction during

group discussions. However, because of the over-heavy workload placed on lecturers at the University of Zambia, Siaciwena (1997) observed that the rate at which assignments were marked tended to be slow, which in turn affected the quantity and quality of comments on the assignments.

Another study by Botha (2010), which investigated the role of the individual lecturer in minimizing the obstacles that lower throughputs at UNISA, found that an individual lecturer's (or tutor's) commitment to his/her work also contributed to distance learners' progress and programme completion. Botha (2010) reported on the failure of service delivery, noting that lack of information on assignments, loss of assignments, and institutional barriers, such as learners receiving their learning materials late and phones not being answered were among the obstacles which retarded distance learners' progress and completion. This study showed some correlation on the institutional challenges experienced by distance learners in the DE programme and learners from UNISA. The main issue, according to Botha (2010), is whether DE institutions enable distance learners to integrate their multiple responsibilities with their studies. Abrami & Bernard (2006) caution DE institutions to control attrition in distance education which they viewed as a serious problem, requiring foresight and persistence on the part of DE providers.

As cautioned by Tinto (2000), institutional barriers are a major cause of withdrawal from a distance education programme. My intention in the present study was to find out how such barriers were addressed through learner support services in the DE programme.

To provide effective learner support services, Tau (2006) advocated the development of a learner-centred support strategy that would ensure regular contact between learners and their tutors and between learners and other learners, and maintenance of correct and up-to-date records. As stated by Amey (2002, 2008a, 2008b) Mills, Marchessou, Nonyongo and Tau (2006), DE programmes benefit from a tutor marking system that guarantees timely and constructive feedback and address distance learners' queries in an empathetic, caring, patient, helpful and compassionate manner.

It was not clear whether the same could be said about the contribution of learner support services in the DE programme at the UEW distance education, hence the need to fill this gap.

One factor which may have perpetuated the prevalence of incomplete results, was the lack of clarity in the college management structures for processing DE assessment work, particularly for learners who received tutorial support at Accra, Kumasi and Winneba. Also, the final results of distance learners attending tutorials at senior high schools and colleges of education were processed by Academic Board. This practice tended to frustrate the efforts of distance learners, tutors and the programme coordinators. The intention of this study was to understand the contribution of institutional policy guidelines to distance learners' progress and the reviewed literature further shows that UEW intended to provide support services to distance learners and the Academic Quality Management Policy, indicate the university's intentions to provide academic support, together with learning resources such as laboratories, equipment, decentralised library services, and efficient record keeping. Table 5 describes the intentions of DE.

Table 5: Intentions of the Distance Education

Elements of the DE learner support mainstreaming policy	Intended service provision by the University of Education, Winneba
Academic support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To ensure provision of helpful, timely pedagogical comments on all assignments; 2. To provide flexible access to library resources by aligning acquisition, supply and loan policies with the needs and circumstances of distance learners;
Administrative support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. To provide opportunities for academic advice at regional and other study centres. 4. To ensure access to quality administrative, advisory and instructional support; 5. To provide information on admission criteria, registration, scheduling, and timely processing of grades from pre-enrolment to certification; 6. To provide information through students' handbooks, guidelines, regulations and brochures from study centres.
Guidance and counselling support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. To assist distance learners with personal problems related to their studies.
Infrastructure support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. To create and manage regional study centre facilities in collaboration with external organisations to promote and strengthen the delivery of DE programmes.
Part-time staff support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. To equip part-time tutors, study centre coordinators and other staff with skills in DE to enable them to execute their responsibilities adequately.

Although DE main streaming Policy was intended to provide learner support services in rural centres, it was not accompanied by any guidelines to facilitate its interpretation and implementation (Kamau, 2011). Despite the existence of these policies, UEW did not appear to have developed elaborate

and decentralised learner support services to support its distance learners. In recognition of this shortcoming, Quality Assurance requested:

The Diploma in Basic Education by distance mode requires laboratories, equipped music rooms and computers at designated study centres so as to give students hands-on experience in practical subjects. These resources are available at Colleges of Education, Education Centres and Secondary Schools. Students will also require tutors and library services from Colleges of Education. The purpose of this is to ask heads to make these resources available to support this programme.

In this management hoped to get the assistance of tutors and supervisors by securing release time for them to prepare for tutorials, tests and examinations for the DE programme considering that UEW was not in control of these resources. By getting participants' views about access to learning resources, my intention was to find out the situation on the ground with what the literature says about the availability of and access to learning resources.

Role of technologies in the provision of learner support services

The review of literature in this section assessed the availability and accessibility of technology and how this has influenced distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DE programme. In order to acquire computer literacy skills in the Communication and Study Skills course in the DE programme, distance learners needed access to computer equipment. University of Education, Winneba emphasised the need to make institutional resources available to distance learners for practical work. Kamau (2011) indicates that distance learners had either limited or no access to computer

laboratories and equipment. This reported lack of access to resources in the DE programme seems contrary to Bates' ACTIONS model (Bates, 1992), in which the author argues that at the programme implementation stage, providers should evaluate learners' technological needs in terms of Accessibility, Costs, Teaching appropriateness, Organisational changes required, Novelty and Speed. Given this knowledge gap, I planned to obtain participants' views about the support available to facilitate the acquisition of computer literacy skills by distance learners.

In addition, diversification of technology was evident in other DE programmes in Southern Africa (Aluko, 2009; Beukes, 2009; Fresen and Hendrikz, 2009), where short messaging (SMS) mobile phone technology was used to support distance learners, supplementing print and face-to-face contact. In Uganda, Kajumbula (2006) found that, with mobile phone software, Makerere University was able to give administrative support to distance learners such as on new dates for submitting assignments.

Boitshwarelo (2009), Nleya (2009) and Richardson (2009) identify certain challenges and barriers that will have to be overcome in the application of technology to teaching and learning via DE. Among these are limited telephone connectivity, slow bandwidth, policies which are not supported by implementation guidelines, and a dearth of information and literacy skills in both learners and instructors. Beyond Ghana, and particularly in Africa South of the Sahara, Aderinoye, Ojokheta and Olejede (2007), Leary & Berge (2012), and Nwagu & Ahmed (2009), all identify limited access to ICTs due to poor ICT infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas, limited or no computer ownership, lack of access to the internet, limited knowledge in the

use of technology and lack of social support as among the issues that require attention by governments in partnership with the private sector.

The review of literature in this section is thus relevant to the research question which sought to assess the barriers that influence the provision of effective learner support services and opportunities for improvement. To improve access to ICT technology for teaching and learning in DE, Robinson (2012), Richardson (2012) and Lewis, Friedman & Schoneboom (2010) suggest integrating ICT skills in the school curriculum and tackling the technical, human and cultural challenges involved, including the improvement of ICT infrastructure (Joshi, 2002). To support distance learners effectively, Mabunda (2010) urges DE providers to ensure that staff members are well trained and equipped with adequate knowledge of ICT technologies, with access to suitable and sufficient ICT facilities, and that equipment is well maintained to support teaching and learning in DE. To ensure quicker communication, Wright (2013) and Sikwibele & Mungoo (2009) advise the use of e-mails, so learners in the DE programme can send their assignments expeditiously to their tutors in colleges of education for marking. In this section, it was necessary to understand the challenges confronting distance learners regarding access or otherwise to technology and how this affected their progress and programme completion. The reviewed literature (Butale, 2008; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009; University of Botswana, 1999; Wright, 2013) reflects a need to understand how the available learner support services have facilitated access to technology for distance learners on the DE programme.

Some considerations about the dropouts, one of the major issues in this study was to understand the mechanisms required for the implementation of effective learner support services in the DE programme. In this regard, I found the studies by Robinson (2012) and Welch & Reed (n.d) useful, because they make direct reference to the provision of effective learner support services in DE programmes. I found the criteria for the implementation of effective learner support services by Welch & Reed (n.d), relevant to my research because it has some relevance to the definitions of learner support services by Thorpe (1994) and Simpson (2013) in terms of suggesting useful direction for the formulation and provision of effective learner support services. By describing learner support services as comprising all those activities which go beyond the production and distribution of learning materials, Simpson (2013) stresses the importance of such support during programme delivery. This definition provided a basis for me to seek answers to the main research question which sought to assess the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DE programme. The contestation by Thorpe (1994), echoed by Melton (2002), that learner support services should address a known learner or group of learners underscores the need for learner profiles. In the reviewed literature, Sewart (1993) views learner support services as institution-based, confirming the DE theory by Holmberg (2013) that distance learners require support services to be provided by an institution.

The reviewed literature indicates that the existing knowledge on learner support services is fragmented with different researches concentrating on different aspects of learner support services. The need for implementing learner support services for known distance learners was emphasized in the

reviewed literature (Melton, 2002; Munger, 1995; Thorpe, 1994). Other studies by (Ashby, 2004; Lepphoto & Mohasi, 2009; Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko & Torto, 2009; Tresman, 2001, 2002; Usun, 2004) laid emphasis on challenges experienced by distance learners and their effects on their progress and programme completion. Studies by (Evans and Nation 2014) discuss the effects of organisational unresponsiveness to distance learners' progress while (Mmari, 2011) provide vital information on the need for decentralised learner support services in DE programmes. The other area which has attracted research in the reviewed literature (Robinson, 2012) has to do with the roles of tutors' commitment in enhancing distance learners' progress and programme completion. In this regard (Haughey, 2012; Lessing & Schulze, 2003; Wolcott, 2003) stress the need for empathetic DE policies and institutional guidelines to address the recognition and ownership of DE programmes particularly in dual mode institutions in order to ensure the availability and access of learning resources to distance learners. In my view, these studies lack a holistic approach to the provision of learner support services. For this reason, I took a different approach and included distance learners, and intermediaries such as the providers and policy makers in order to understand the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress from a variety of sources as explained in the research design.

A number of authors expressed the need for effective support in DE (Keegan, 1993; Moore, 1996) in order to break the physical and psychological separation between learners, tutors and other learners. Other authors (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Dearnley, 2003) were categorical that DE institutions which provided guidance and counselling to their learners and sustained two way

communication recorded higher retention and completion rates compared to institutions that did not. Rumble (2013) maintains that academic support through tutorials, peer interaction and quick turnaround times on assignments contributes to distance learners' success. Stressing the need for learner support services, Tait (2003a, 2003b) attributes low pass rates at the University of London and at UNISA to a lack of effective learner support services.

Limitations in the implementation of effective learner support services

While the literature reviewed seemed to agree on the criteria for the provision of learner support services which respond to the known needs of distance learners, there appeared to be a lack of clarity on the implementation processes. Although these limitations or gaps are explained in each section of this chapter, a brief summary is included in this section. I found the reviewed literature both descriptive and prescriptive, with little advice about mechanisms for the implementation of effective learner support services. The prescriptive literature focused on what learner support should be (responsive to the needs of learners), while the descriptive literature described the type of support that could be offered (academic, counselling and administrative support). The prescriptive literature covered the purpose, definition and roles of learner support services in DE, the definitions and theories of DE, and the policy implications for the provision of effective learner support services.

On the other hand, the descriptive literature concentrated on the nature of learner support services and the providers or the intermediaries, without clarifying the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress. Rowntree (2013) indicates that it is necessary to have and apply

information about learner profiles in order to set up support services that are responsive to the needs of learners. However, the literature lacks models or examples in which learner profiles are applied to inform the formulation and implementation of learner support services. Instead, it highlights the challenges that distance learners face and how these could be addressed through support services, without relating these challenges to learner profiles (Badu-Smith 2002; Gatsha, 2007; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009). There is thus a need for further studies to show how aspects of learner profiles such as the previous educational background and geographical location, influence the learning progress and programme completion. Koul (2013) stresses the need to provide decentralised learner support services so that distance learners can interact with tutors and other learners near where they live and work. While Koul's (2013) idea suggests that decentralisation of academic, counselling and administrative support to regional centres may reduce the geographical distance between learners and their tutors from the supporting institution, it is not clear whether this interaction actually reinforces distance learners' progress and programme completion. Paul (2014) also emphasizes the need to make learning resources accessible to distance learners, while Haughey (2012) stresses the need for institutional reorganisation to ensure that human resources, technology and physical facilities, are available to the learners (Aluko, 2009; Beukes, 2009).

In the reviewed literature, there appears to be no guidelines on access to institutional resources by distance learners. This explains why, although learners in the DE programme were expected to interact with tutors, other learners and stakeholders, and to have access to learning resources, the

literature revealed that learners have either limited or no access to learning resources. Lack of clarity in this area suggests a need for future research to inform sharing of resources in DE, considering that its existence is largely premised on the use of available resources (Amey, 2000), such as academic staff from other institutions who are recruited mainly on a part-time basis to provide academic support. The other limitation found in the reviewed literature was a lack of DE policies to guide the provision of learner support services. Although there were indications that DE policies needed to address academic matters such as processing of assignments and record keeping as well as workload and compensation for lecturers, evidence from literature (Simonson & Bauck, 2003), indicated that no such policy guidelines existed in the DE programme.

Authors such as Kamau (2011) and Siaciwena (2011) state that the absence of DE policy guidelines at both national and institutional levels tended to compromise the provision of effective learner support services, where assignments were sometimes marked late due to workload constraints for lecturers. In this regard, Botha (2010) also highlights the need for DE policies to regulate lecturers' commitments to their duties. From the literature review, it is noted that learner support providers or intermediaries should explore the question of access to learning resources and work out guidelines about how these resources could be made available to distance learners. This is critical, particularly in the provision of academic support where learner-tutor interaction is considered as one of the factors that enhances distance learners' progress and programme completion. The review of literature also

stressed the need for DE policies to ensure the provision of effective learner support services.

Summary of Literature Review

This literature review assessed the factors that contribute to the implementation of learner support services in DE as a basis for determining the effectiveness of learner support services for distance learners in the DE programme. The review also covered what different scholars in the DE discipline have said about the provision of effective learner support services in DE programmes in general and for the DE programme in particular. The meanings of learner support services are strongly anchored in the different historical developments and in the theories of DE. From the literature, it emerged that learner support providers or intermediaries need information about learner profiles in order to develop and implement services responsive to the needs of distance learners. The literature identified academic, counselling and administrative support as key components of support services in DE. However, it appears to be the case that learner support services on the DE programme were not based on identified learner needs which was a major weakness in their implementation. Regular learner-tutor interaction is needed to discuss content and learner learner interaction for socialisation in order to reduce the learners' separation and isolation from each other. The other requirement, as noted in the literature, is the provision of administrative support to ensure that distance learners interact with tutors and that they have access to learning resources. In this area, there was a gap in the policy guidelines which represented another major weakness. The present study was

designed to fill out the gaps identified in order to understand the phenomenon of dropout among DE students of UEW.



CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of support service on dropout among Distance Education Students in UEW. This chapter describes the research design and provides a rationale for using a qualitative research approach. The research context and the criteria for selecting the research sample, the methods used for data collection, the ethical considerations involved, and the logistics put in place to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility and dependability are discussed. A justification for choosing content analysis as the most suitable strategy for data analysis and interpretation is provided. The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services of the UEW DE programme?
2. What are distance learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of learner support services in the UEW DE programme in terms of their adequacy, quality and accessibility towards progression, programme completion and dropout?
3. How do tutors and other stakeholders perceive their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?
4. What barriers influence the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?

5. What opportunities exist in the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?

In the next section, I discussed the traditional research approaches and gave a justification for why I found the qualitative interpretative approach the most suitable for this study.

Research Approaches

Three types of approaches are used in educational research, the quantitative or positivist approach, the qualitative or interpretivist approach and the pragmatic or mixed methods approach.

The qualitative-interpretivist approach posits that knowledge and reality are socially constructed and are given meaning and interpretation by people through the sharing of experiences (Beck & Kosnik, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Further, this approach is characterised by the concern for the individual and the subjective human experience, seeing reality as it is experienced by people in real and natural settings. As such, it seeks to interpret reality by drawing on participants' own experiences of the situations in which they live (Creswell, 1998). The interpretivist approach is therefore context-specific, applying techniques and processes for which meanings cannot always be experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency, as is the case in the positivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I chose the interpretivist approach because my research question focused on participants' perceptions about the contribution of learner support

services to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DE programme in University of Education Winneba. My aim as a researcher was to facilitate the construction of knowledge from the participants' perspectives, as they understood the phenomenon under investigation in their natural settings. I needed to interact with the participants and listen carefully to them in order to record and explore their perceptions, attitudes, opinions and experiences with the support services in the DE programme, since they were the primary source of data. It was from this perspective that in the theoretical framework in Chapter Two, I made a case for learner support services which are designed to develop independent learners who would be capable of constructing their own meanings, as contended in the theories of DE and constructivism, discussed in detail in sections. The interpretive approach contends that knowledge can be presented in different ways, other than as a single objective reality as in the case of positivist approach (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

Furthermore, interpretivists believe that reality is subjective and determined by people, rather than by objective and external factors. As such it cannot be measured objectively through the proving of hypotheses and statistical measurements, except with rigour in research methods (Patton, 2002). The interpretivist approach focuses on how people make sense of the world and uses the case study as the most natural mode of reporting their interpretations and the meanings they derive from their life situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was on this assumption that I selected the case study design and used semi-structured interview questions to collect data in both individual and group interviews. I used fewer respondents than would have been the case

had I taken a quantitative approach, which depends on larger samples. In adopting an interpretivist approach, I assumed the role of a human instrument and became part of the learning process. I recorded the what, where, why, when and how of the phenomenon by collecting in-depth data from a small but information-rich sample of participants, which as indicated in the reviewed literature, renders the issue of numbers meaningless (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Trochim, 2006; Voeten, 2006). I did not select the quantitative or the positivist research paradigm because it would not have answered the research question. The quantitative-positivist approach assumes that knowledge is objective and that its judgment is based on the observation of external reality, with the researcher playing the part of an observer (Patton, 2002).

The positivist view defines life in measurable terms, rather than in terms of inner experiences, and uses quantification, experimental designs and statistical measurements to test pre-formulated hypotheses (Cohen et al., 2007; Hall & Hall, 2004; Jones, Vasti & Arminio 2006). Reality is perceived as existing independently of the observer (researcher) who observes social phenomena objectively and proceeds through the application of laws that are deduced from a hypothesis to confirm or refute the truth of a proposition (Creswell, 1998). In the interpretivist approach, however, the researcher interacts with the knower (the participants) in an inseparable manner (Cohen et al., 2007). To generalise findings on social behaviour in the positivist approach, it is necessary to select samples of sufficient size from which inferences about the wider population can be drawn (Patton, 2002).

The positivist and interpretivist research approaches seem to agree that reality exists, but differs in the methodology for investigating this reality. The positivist approach treats reality as objective and external, while the interpretivist approach stresses subjectivity and multiple realities. Mixed methods research is a methodology for conducting research that involves collecting, analysing and integrating quantitative (e.g., experiments, surveys) and qualitative (e.g., focus groups, interviews) research (Creswell, 2007).

The study sought an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions of the influence of support services on progression, programme completion and dropout among distance learners in UEW. As such, it deals with the real experiences of distance learners, tutors and stakeholders in their natural settings, which could only be investigated through an interpretivist approach. The interpretive approach was considered appropriate for this study since it allowed me to explore participants' subjective interpretations of learner support services. The respondents included dropouts, distance learners, who were the recipients, and tutors and other stakeholders who were involved in the provision of support services in the DE programme. My aim was to listen to the participants and interpret their reality, treating it as a subjective concept from their point of view, rather than as one which needed to be measured quantitatively.

Researching a complex phenomenon of this nature, involving multiple players and influences, meant that a simple cause-and-effect approach of the kind commonly used in quantitative research would not adequately have addressed my research question.

The case Study

Cohen et al. (2007) contend that case studies are carried out in organisational and institutional settings, often to explain events in real life contexts, and are defined by participants' roles and functions in a particular situation. As such, there is resonance between case studies and the interpretive approach. By seeking to understand the perceptions of participants, a case study blends description of events with analysis (Cohen et al., 2007), because it focuses on participants' perceptions, views and interpretations of multiple realities so as to arrive at the meanings of the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Walliman, 2005).

A research problem may involve one or more specific case studies, enabling the researcher to conduct analysis of qualitative data in greater depth in order to resolve the problem (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, this method involves interaction between the researcher and the participants in unique locations (Newman, 2006 & Opie, 2004). It is system-bound in terms of space and time situations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; and Stake, 2005), since it investigates the specific experiences of individuals. A case study could involve events, groups of people, academic programmes, schools or communities. In this study, it involved real people in the form of distance learners and the learner support providers who were interacting in real situations. I selected the case study design because I could secure explanations and understanding of why distance learners dropout of the DE programme.

I assumed that by involving different participants, I would be able to gather information for the same case study from different sources, making verification of data possible through the triangulation of data sources and the

research method. In the interpretivist approach, the main strength of a case study is its ability to replicate quantity with quality by separating the significant few instances from the insignificant many. The significance of the data generated, rather than its frequency and statistical inferences, is the hallmark of such a study (Cohen et al., 2007:258; Patton 2002; Trochim, 2006; Voeten, 2006). In this regard, the issue of numbers is not relevant since a case study aims to assemble a picture of a certain behaviour or activity in a particular situation in a unique setting, rather than dealing with numbers of participants to show the representativeness of the sample in the population (Opie, 2004). The case study method was considered appropriate for my study because it allows the participants' perceptions on dropouts and learner support services in the DE programme in order to gain an understanding of their views, not their statistical frequencies.

Role of the Researcher

The first thing I did as the researcher was to embrace the interpretive approach in the naturalist enquiry. I also became aware that before entering the field to collect data, I had to read around the topic under investigation so as to be mentally, physically and intellectually prepared to interact with the participants and assess their experiences and the context within which they were operating. During data collection, I assumed the role of a facilitator to moderate the interview processes, using an objective rather than a subjective lens so as not to contaminate the data collected. My decision to adopt this approach was informed by Cohen et al. (2000), when they argue that a researcher:

1. requires good knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation so as to guide and moderate the interview sessions effectively;
2. requires a clear structure of the interviewing instruments to facilitate a clear focus on ideas through probing, clarifying and confirming; and
3. must be a good listener so as to avoid frightening or intimidating participants during the interview process.

I started by reviewing the literature on the meanings of DE so as to have a firm grasp of the phenomenon I was investigating as discussed in Chapter Two. I then reviewed the literature on qualitative research methodology. This enabled me to design the data collection instruments. I then purposively selected the research sites and participants whom I considered to have the information I needed to answer the research questions. In selecting the DE programme as a case study, I considered the possibility of gaining access to the research site in the limited time available so as to collect appropriate data reasonably, readily and quickly, in the research context and at the convenience of participants.

With regards to the research context, Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) argue that research participants are grounded in their environment in terms of locality and time. As such, the researcher must be sensitive to the contexts, the settings, and the situations in which the participants live or work, since these factors affect their behaviour. In the interpretivist research approach, the context forms the framework and the reference points of participants. From these, 'thick' descriptions and interpretations of their actions and gestures emerge (Patton, 2002). To answer the research questions, I had to anticipate the type of evidence I sought and decide on the research method which would

yield the anticipated results. The study was carried out in University of Education Winneba and involved respondents from some of the study centres where distance learners attended tutorial sessions. The distance learners are scattered all over the study centres I selected. Some taught in geographically remote locations which is far from their study centres, making attendance at tutorial sessions and access to resources such as libraries a big challenge, as explained in the findings in Chapter four. Given this context, the learner support services were offered in the centralised colleges of education and senior high schools at specified times, so that distance learners could access them during weekend and the school holidays when the facilities and other resources were not in use by the full-time students.

Research Design

A research design is determined by its fitness of purpose for the study which is being undertaken (Patton, 2002). It should specify the research problem, the theoretical framework, conceptual framework and the research questions. Through the review of relevant literature, the researcher should specify data collection methods, sampling strategies and the study sample, data analysis, interpretation, the expected product and presentation strategies, including budgets. It should anticipate the information to be obtained, and estimate the time scale for conducting the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hall & Hall, 2004; Silverman, 2000). For this study, this entailed spelling out what I wanted to know and how I could access the relevant information. During the planning stage, I went through various phases of defining the objectives and purpose of the study. This was followed by a convergent phase, in which I sifted through various ideas to select the most plausible concept as

the topic of investigation (Cohen et al., 2000). I then devised a plan to guide me on the following issues:

1. aligning the focus of the enquiry to the research questions;
2. defining boundaries of the investigation within the theoretical framework;
3. selecting the research sample and context, including sampling strategies;
4. developing data collection instruments and strategies for recording and analysing data;
5. deciding measures to be taken to ensure the trustworthiness and dependability of the research findings.

The next step was to link the research questions and the purpose of the study to the identified data sources and data collection methods, as shown in the Table 6.

Table 6: Rationale for the Research Design

Research question	Purpose	Data sources	Data collection methods
What are the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services of the UEW DE programme?	To find distance learners' perceptions about the causes of strengths and weaknesses of learner support services	Distance learners Tutors and decision makers	Focus group interviews. Focus group interviews. Individual interviews with Director and decision makers
What are distance learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of learner support services in the UEW DE programme?	To understand distance learners' perceptions about the learner support services in their studies.	Distance learners Programme and learner support coordinator Director and decision makers	Focus group interviews. Focus group interviews Individual interviews.
How do tutors and stakeholders' perceive their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the UEW DE programme?	To gather views of stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the DE programme.	Tutors. Programme and learner support coordinators. College management.	Focus group interviews. Focus group interviews.

programme?	To gather views from institutional Director about supervision and monitoring of learner' support services in the DE programme.		Individual interviews.
What barriers influence the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme?	To gather the views of distance learners, tutors and decision makers about the implementation mechanisms and how these affect distance learners' progress and completion.	Distance learners. Tutors. Director and decision makers	Focus group interviews. Focus group Interviews. Individual interviews.
What opportunities exist for the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme			

Study Area

I selected students who received support from Accra, Kumasi and Winneba study centres. The criteria used were that the DE syllabus was being implemented on a conventional basis at the study centres for distance learners, to enable them to have access to academic support and other learning resources

Population

The study comprised UEW DE students, my intention was to gain insights into the phenomenon under investigation by recording participants' perceptions, views and opinions about the influence of support services on progression, programme completion and dropouts among UEW DE students

and their perceptions on support services, through an in-depth qualitative case study method based.

Sampling Procedure

I used purposive sampling to hand-pick the participants. In this study, the respondents did not have an equal probability of being picked. As noted by Creswell (1998) and Scaife (2004), in the purposive sampling technique, the researcher subjectively applies her or his own judgment to select the respondents whom he/she considers most appropriate for the study. The choice of the sample depends on what the researcher wants to learn from it, within the available time and resources, and not the sample size (Patton, 2002). For this study, I picked the participants on the basis of their knowledge of learner support services in the DE programme. They were all actively involved in the implementation of learner support services, either as distance learners themselves or as intermediaries, such as part-time tutors, programme coordinators, or policy makers. In using the purposive sampling technique, I kept in mind that the credibility, dependability, meaningfulness and insights generated from the qualitative case study method had more to do with the information richness of the case, the methodological skills and analytical capabilities of the researcher, than with the sample size (Patton, 2002).

Sample size

I purposively selected six (6) final-year distance learners from the 2016/2017 year of the UEW DE programme, who received support from Accra, Kumasi and Winneba study centres. The criteria used were that the DE syllabus was being implemented on a conventional basis at the study centres

for distance learners, to enable them to have access to academic support and other learning resources. I needed to understand the similarities or differences in the provision of learner support services in these institutions. To help me assemble the research sample, I requested the DE coordinators to identify two (2) distance learners (each from the 3 study centres), I also asked the coordinators to identify dropouts from their study centres, 2 each from the 3 study centers and six tutors (2 from each study center). Three coordinators, one from each study centre, were handpicked to give their insights about their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of learner support services. As policy implementers, they were responsible for monitoring the provision of learner support services in those institutions. Participants from UEW included the Director and one quality assurance member of staff, all of whom were involved in the monitoring of learner support. Table 7 shows the distribution of the sample by category and site.

Table 7: Sample Size

Category of participants	Site	Total number
Distance learners (6 who have dropout and 6 still on the programme).	3 study centres	12
Tutors (2 from each centre)	3 study centres	6
Programme coordinators	3 colleges of education	3
DE management (decision makers). Director and one Quality assurance staff	University of Education, Winneba	2
Totals		23

To gain a holistic view of the influence of support services on progression, programme completion and dropout among UEW DE students

and their perception about learner support services, I included both dropouts and those who were still on the UEW DE programme. The other selection criterion was that distance learners and tutors were chosen so as to give their views of learner support services. The criteria for selecting participants are explained in Table 8.

Table 8: Sample selection criteria

Participants	Selection criteria
Distance learners	To give their perceptions about the learner support services to their progress and why some cannot complete the programme.
Tutors	To give their views on the effectiveness of academic, counselling and administrative support provided to distance learners, feedback mechanisms, assistance with study skills, and how these forms of support contributed to distance learners' progress and why some cannot complete the programme.
Decision makers or policy makers (Director and Quality assurance personnel)	To provide answers on monitoring and supervision mechanisms of academic, counselling and administrative support, assessment, and access to learning resources such as libraries, computer and laboratories for practical work, and their contribution to distance learners' progress and why some cannot complete the programme.
Regional Study coordinators	To provide information on their roles and responsibilities in supporting distance learners during tutorial sessions.

Table 8: Continued

Data Collection Instruments

Interviews was the main tools used in the qualitative research. I was interested in discovering peoples' perceptions, interpretations and meanings about multiple realities. In this study, the semi-structured interview method was used to collect primary data from the participants.

The interview method

The semi-structured interview method allows the researcher to probe for meanings, clarify concepts, and obtain rich and in-depth information, which is unlikely to be obtained through other methods (Creswell, 1998; Hall & Hall, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this regard, interviews are not simply tools for collecting data rather, they allow respondents to describe and interpret the external realities of the world in which they live, in the form of facts, events and internal experiences such as feelings and meanings, and by so doing express how they regard a given situation from their own points of view (Silverman, 2000). I was able to collect data by holding conversations with participants to find their views, perceptions, feelings, motivations, claims and concerns about why students dropout and their support services for distance learners in the UEW DE programme. In the process, I compared insights from participants' responses and sought further clarification during the interview process. To do this, I adopted the guidelines suggested by Cohen et al. (2000):

Thematising: This involved clarifying the purpose of the interview by relating the research questions to the theoretical framework and the practical need for the study.

Designing: Involved translating the research questions into interview questions so that the content and format of the questions reflected the information I wanted to get from participants.

Interviewing: I audio-taped the interviews to reduce bias and ensure trustworthiness, dependability and credibility during the transcription, analysis and interpretation of data. I also listened to the audio tapes as I transcribed the data, and conducted a literature review of relevant documents.

Transcribing: Data were transcribed from audio tapes to the written word. To avoid data loss or distortion, I listened to the audio tapes many times.

Analysing: This process entailed analysing and interpreting the data to generate natural units of meaning; these units were then classified, coded, categorised and clustered thematically and orderly, as discussed in the findings in Chapter four.

Verifying: This was done by triangulating the data sources and data collection methods. Participants were also asked to confirm the accuracy of the information collected by reviewing the transcripts.

Reporting: During data analysis and interpretation, quotations from the interviews were used verbatim to ensure that the findings reflected the participants' views.

Data Collection Procedures

I developed semi-structured interview questions which enabled me to collect data and probe deeper to clarify ideas as the interviews unfolded. The interviews were conducted at times convenient to the participants in their own natural environments. To arrange for the interviews, I contacted distance learners, tutors, Coordinators and the Director by telephone or by e-mail. Individual interviews lasted between one and one and half hours, while the focus group interviews lasted between one and two hours.

Before I ventured into the field, I explained the purpose of the study, its ethical issues, and discussed the research instruments with the participants. I also emphasized to the participants their right to privacy before the start of the interviews so they could make informed decisions about whether to

participate. For purposes of identification, the interview sessions were given numbers (1-14) and the participants were identified by pseudonyms; these were later used during data analysis and interpretation, as shown in Chapter four.

Individual interviews

Individual interviews was done with decision makers (Director and the quality assurance personnel), and were conducted at the University of Education, Winneba on separate occasions.

I selected the individual interview method so as to give busy participants, such as decision makers, a voice in this research, allowing them to give their views on the nature and relevance of support services in meeting distance learners' demands. The detailed information I gathered from this category of people would have been difficult to capture using other data collection strategies, such as questionnaires as used in the quantitative research approach. The in-depth information I obtained through the use of semi-structured interview questions is presented in the findings in Chapter four. In addition, such interviews gave respondents the freedom to comment on sensitive issues such as the commitment of tutors to their duties, which they might have found difficult to raise in a group interview.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews with distance learners were conducted on different dates at Accra, Kumasi and Winneba depending on the convenience and availability of participants. My initial plan was to conduct two focus group interviews with these learners. However, during the interviewing

process, it became clear that because of their teaching schedules, it would be difficult to get all of them together at the same time. Instead, I conducted three separate focus group interviews at times which were convenient to most of them. The focus group interviews were done on tutors, dropouts and some of the learners who were still on the programme.

In qualitative research, focus group interviews are essential tool for collecting data. In using focus group interviews, my assumption was that distance learners, tutors, programme coordinators and other stakeholders knew what everyone in their group was doing in the provision of learner support services in the DE programme. I found such interviews appropriate in this study because, as stated by Morgan (1997), Cohen et al., (2000) and Patton (2002), focus group interviews:

1. give group members the opportunity to interact and comment on each others' ideas during discussion, thus allowing for triangulation of ideas at the data collection stage;
2. enable participants to express their attitudes and opinions about the topic by sharing and comparing ideas;
3. are self-contained research instruments, and allow the results obtained to stand on their own;
4. are time-saving and cost-effective compared to other methods, such as individual interviews;
5. allow for group interaction among participants which enhances data quality through checks and balances of each others responses.

I found focus group interviews quicker, more economical, and capable of generating a wider range of ideas than individual interviews. During data

collection, I bore in mind the advice of Patton (2002) that the researcher should guard against certain shortcomings, such as individuals bringing out negative personal opinions during an interview, with the risk of reprisals from other members of the group. To avoid this, I used probes to encourage participation by all group members. This approach was convenient for the participants since they were all responding to the same interview questions.

Pseudonyms were used to notate participants' responses and to protect their right to confidentiality and anonymity. In this study, group interviews facilitated interaction among participants with the information being triangulated through immediate crosschecking of facts and opinions during the discussions. I also gained in-depth information by probing for clarification of ideas during the sessions. I used two tape recorders in case the electronic one ran out of power, in which case I had the back-up of the manual tape. After an interview, I immediately checked the tape recordings to ensure that I had captured all the material on both the electronic and the manual tapes. This strategy paid off because whenever the manual and/or the electronic recorder occasionally failed, I resorted to the other recorder and the field notes to reconcile the collected data. This happened sometimes when the capacity of the electronic recorder was full and needed to be cleared before the next interview.

Challenges of Data Collection

A major challenge during data collection was the failure by participants, particularly distance learners, to adhere to interview schedules, due to their busy work schedules.

I had to schedule and reschedule interview sessions so as to secure a time slot in which the participants would be available to come to the interview venue, but my patience paid off. At other times, I would visit a research site only to find that, although the interview had been confirmed, the participant's diary was full. I had similar experiences with decision makers and learner support coordinators. At other times, respondents did not turn up and my efforts to reschedule did not bear fruit. At the data collection stage however, one of the dropouts was unable to participate in the interview leading to 5 dropouts and 6 who were still on the programme. Considering the high incidence of students who were still on the programme and of data saturation during the data collection stage, this change was not deemed to have contributed negatively to the results of this study. In selecting the distance learners and tutors, I took into consideration the different views about distance learners' access to learning resources and how this influenced their progress and programme completion.

This experience made me aware of the challenges faced by the participants, and also made me appreciate their multiple responsibilities.

Preparation for field work

To enhance the trustworthiness, credibility and dependability of the findings in a qualitative case study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Scaife (2004) advise researchers to explain their data-gathering procedures, including the constraints they encounter during the data collection process. The field work for this study was carried out between September 2016 and January

2017. In preparation for the interviews, I sent out letters to the institutional managers, asking for permission to conduct field work in their institutions

Research ethics

One of the most challenging responsibilities for a researcher involves safeguarding participants' ethical requirements, avoiding putting them at risk or disempowering them through deception, misinformation or betrayal (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Merriam 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002). It is unethical for researchers to expose participants to pain, stress or embarrassment by concealing the true purpose or conditions of the research (Graziano & Raulin, 2004; Walliman, 2005). To obtain ethical clearance from the University of Cape Coast, I first of all asked permission from my department through the Office of Institutional Review Board (IRB). A further consideration was ensuring the protection of the respondents' right to privacy.

Voluntary participation and informed consent

In order to protect participants' rights to freedom and self-determination, Cohen et al. (2000) and Patton (2002) emphasise the need for researchers to secure their cooperation and consent by explaining to them the importance of the information being solicited, including the benefits and risks involved so that they can make competent and informed decisions about participation. In this study, I ensured the anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of the respondents by disclosing to them the purpose of the research and explaining that their participation would be voluntary. They could give their informed consent but were also free to withdraw if they chose to do so. I also asked their permission to record their responses on tape to

facilitate correct transcription (Silverman, 2000), since it would have been difficult for me to recollect conversations or note down all the words correctly during the interview sessions.

Anonymity and confidentiality

I avoided the risk of false information by transcribing the interviews verbatim, thus enhancing the dependability and the credibility of the findings. I used pseudonyms to protect participants' identities and confidentiality, assuring them that the information they gave during interviews would not be revealed or traced back to them. Their anonymity in the data analysis and presentation was protected using group designations, such as 'distance learners', 'tutors', 'managers' and 'decision makers', and 'learner support coordinators'. In qualitative research, data analysis is an interpretive and progressive process which commences at the data collection stage and continues through to data analysis and drawing conclusions from the main findings (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell, 2003; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Glesen, 2006; Patton, 2002; Saldana, 2009). It is also a result of reflexive and reactive interactions between the researcher and the interpretations of social encounters which emerge from the interviews. In order to draw meaning and understanding from participants' views and perceptions, I developed codes which enabled me to group the data into patterns and clusters of related concepts. From these patterns and clusters of the data, I was able to generate the themes which emerged from the coding process.

Data Analysis

The field data collected were analysed to answer the main research question which sought to understand the influence of support service on dropout among UEW distance learners and the perception they hold about support services in the DE programme. In qualitative research, data analysis is a cyclic process which involves data collection, analysis and interpretation (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Saldana, 2009). It entails coding and recoding of data, then classifying, prioritising and integrating the data corpus in order to develop categories from emerging themes. The themes guide data analysis by exposing the social reality underlying the findings. Coding is also an interactive process which requires the identification of a word, phrase or sentence to represent a concept or area of interest in the data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Hall & Hall, 2004; Saldana, 2009). Since I was analysing large chunks of written data, the content analysis method was the most appropriate, because it gave me an opportunity to compare and contrast data from different sources and identify links or interconnectedness between the categories and emergent themes. In this study, coding was done using the ATLAS.ti computer software.

Coding procedures

According to reviewed literature (Cohen, et al., 2007), my study fell in the category of language-based interview transcripts. After reading and re-reading the transcripts, data patterns began to emerge around words and short phrases (such as assignments, assessment, academic support, incomplete, loss of scripts, record keeping, tutorial support, barriers, feedback, library,

laboratories and policy) which were mentioned frequently in relation to some of the factors that contributed to dropouts and ineffective learner support services in the DE programme. Because I was investigating the perceptions, views and opinions of the participants, I found the ATLAS.ti coding method to be the most appropriate. It gave me the chance to explore the findings in the light of participants' interpretation of learner support services in the DE programme. The ATLAS.ti software enhanced the findings both by giving participants a voice and by keeping track of what was participant inspired and not researcher-generated. During the coding process, I selected words and short phrases from the interview transcripts which appeared to interconnect participants' responses across the 14 interviews. The codes produced patterns and overlaps of related content clusters which enabled me to compare and contrast similarities and differences of data and determine a structure for organising the findings into a written report as presented in Chapter four. This method also enabled me to triangulate my data by comparing and corroborating information from different sources so as to gain a better perspective and enrich the findings of the case study.

Data were analysed through the computer-assisted qualitative data programme (CAQDAS) using the ATLAS.ti platform. Each primary document was given an Interview Number (1-14). Through the ATLAS.ti software, all 14 tape-recorded interviews were transcribed into MS Word documents, saved as rich text format (rtf) documents, and then imported into the ATLAS.ti software where they were converted into hermeneutic units of 14 Primary Documents. The ATLAS.ti software was beneficial in that data for each

interview were grouped separately, which made it easy to go back and forth to the participants' views.

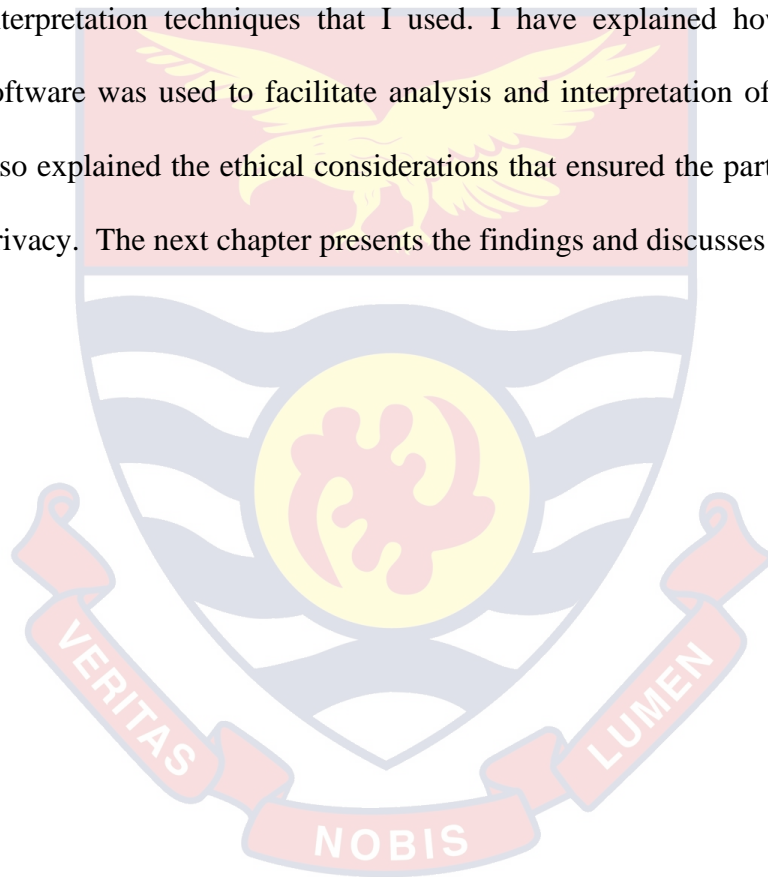
Trustworthiness, credibility and dependability

In the qualitative research approach, researchers are required to demonstrate the worthiness and genuineness of their research findings through critical investigations, in order to avoid arriving at quick conclusions through anecdotes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2000). Unlike in quantitative research, where truth is refined through careful sampling, instrumentation and statistical treatment of data, trustworthiness in qualitative research is enhanced to include the honesty, richness, scope and in-depth knowledge of the participants, as well as through the data collection methods (Patton, 2002). To enhance credibility and dependability, which are important factors in improving trustworthiness, I collected data from a wide spectrum of participants which included distance learners, who were the recipients of the learner support services, intermediaries such as part time tutors and programme coordinators, as well as policy makers. I used different data collection methods which as articulated by Lincoln & Guba (1985), allowed for triangulation of methods and gave participants the opportunity to interact and comment on each other's views, thus allowing for contextual triangulation and validation of data at the data collection stage. I avoided influencing and manipulating participants' perceptions by transcribing data and using quotations verbatim during data analysis and interpretation, as presented in Chapter four. To improve credibility and dependability, the transcribed scripts and analysed texts were

given to the participants so they could check and confirm that the texts and findings reflected their views and inputs.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the research design, and explained why I chose a case study method. I have also explained the criteria used for sample selection, my data collection methods, and the data analysis and interpretation techniques that I used. I have explained how the ATLAS.ti software was used to facilitate analysis and interpretation of the data. I have also explained the ethical considerations that ensured the participants' right to privacy. The next chapter presents the findings and discusses them.



CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

In Chapter Three, I presented the research design for this study.

After checking the consistency and accuracy of the transcripts against the audio recordings, I coded, recoded and categorised the data into a set of related themes, grouping similar ideas from different interviewees into thematic categories and sub-categories. Through this, I developed a structure for the findings which is presented in this chapter. As explained in Chapter one, this research set out to gain insight into the influence of support services on progression, programme completion and dropouts among UEW distance learners and the perception students hold about support services provided for learners. The findings presented in this Chapter are organised thematically according to the research questions.

Findings of the Study

Research Question One: What are the strength and weakness of learner support services of the UEW DE programme that impact dropout

I needed to find out what influenced the respondents for enrolling and their expectations from UEW DE programme. To this end, data were grouped into two sub-categories. The first sub-category deals with the benefits(strength) learners expected from UEW DE programme, while the second addressed the challenges (weakness) relating to the learner support services, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Distance learners’ motivation for enrolling in the DE programme
Theme: Distance learners’ motivation for enrolling in the DE programme

Meaning unit	Codes	Sub-category	Category
It had taken Certificate ‘A’ holders too long before they had an opportunity for upgrading	Expectations	Benefits from in-service upgrading	Addressing learner needs
In-service upgrading was meant to improve academic and professional qualifications	Qualifications		
Learners wanted to upgrade their knowledge and gain more confidence when teaching their subjects	Confidence		
Their motivation to study was driven by personal factors such as promotion and salary increase	Promotion Salary		
Learners had multiple responsibilities of family, work and their part-time studies, which competed for their time	Workload Family		

The need to understand distance learners’ motivation for joining the DE programme was based on the assumption that support services would be

designed with a clear understanding of learners' needs, expectations and characteristics, as stated by one of the tutors, referred to as Tutor 1, who said:

We should try to understand their background. What type of students do we have in class? You will find that we have , old people, with sugar diabetes and high blood pressure, everything...So we have to sort of guide them to show them the importance of being able to go to school on a programme because sooner or later these students find that...this is too much! So many things at a go!they complain I am going to drop...they say, 'now I want to quit', so emotionally, we have to prepare them

This claim of desolation was supported by the distance learners, whose ages at the time of data collection ranged between 30 and 50 years. The youngest in this study was 30 years old at enrolment in the UEW DE programme, while the oldest learner was 50 years old at the time of data collection.

Based on this background information, the age range of distance learners in the study was determined to be between 30 and 50 years as explained in Chapter Three. Some of the mature learners joined the distance education programme specifically because of their age, as stated by May, 49 years old and one of the continuing students:

“ I really wanted to take this one referring to the DE programme because of my old age”

For learners like May, the DE programme was convenient because she could learn even at a mature age. The findings further revealed that background knowledge about learners and their characteristics was necessary

to design effective support services, as noted by one of the learner support providers referred to as Tutor 2 who explained:

It didn't matter where you were, you had to enrol on the programme, and be thrown to a nearby study center as long as you qualify for tutorials. This is one reason that made some uncomfortable, and for some of them the geography of Ghana, a good number of places are away from towns and the roads are not good, maybe you are the only teacher studying in that school, you don't have anybody that you can work with or that you can refer to. There was no preparation done they got letters coming from colleges, that you have been admitted to study for a four year and three year diploma in Basic Education by distance mode. No preparation, no induction, nothing.

These findings reveal distance learners' fears about DE delivery mode, which were not explained to them before enrolment. During the period of study, their fears appear to have been made more complicated by the fact that they did not receive any information about the programme prior to enrolment.

Benefits (strengths) DE Students Expected from the DE Programme

Expected benefits from the DE programme include: High salary, Recognition, Motivation, Higher Qualification, Promotion, Diploma Holder. Participants highlighted further qualifications and professional development as among the factors that motivated distance learners to enrol in the DE programme. Explaining the reasons for enrolling in the DE programme, Tati, a 42-year-old teacher and one of the dropouts, said:

“ I just wanted to become a diploma holder, but I had some problems and difficulties at my work place. I wanted to improve myself and have more knowledge to teach others but I could not.”

While securing a diploma qualification in order to become more effective in the teaching subjects, another learner, a 43-year and one of the continuing students referred to as DD, felt that it had taken him too long before he had the opportunity to upgrade his qualifications. DD who said:

It had taken a long time since leaving school to have a course to upgrade myself... in Maths and Science...the DE programme by distance mode was the right programme for me as I would study by myself. I wanted to upgrade and make myself familiar with the subjects so that I can have more confidence when I am teaching maths... Also, the Syllabus changed and we were getting to renew content and as such there was need for teachers to understand the new content.

In addition to improving content in academic subjects, distance learners appreciated self-study and the study skills they acquired which they applied in their work of managing their schools, as stated by DD.

I have been taught how to write assignments and references in a correct manner. We should not plagiarize but come up with our own original work, we covered topics such as addressing meetings which we are doing at schools, writing reports, writing circulars, filing and even the use of the computers ,it was of great benefit to some of us because we were taught how to take notes and used this skill in their studies and reading and now I am quite used to it.

These findings confirm that distance learners wanted to increase knowledge in their teaching subjects and enhance study skills which they could use in their daily work in primary schools. Others wanted to upgrade their qualifications so as to offer effective leadership and act as role models in their work, as stated by M.Y. a 37-year-old teacher and one of the dropouts:

“ I wanted to upgrade myself so that I can produce quality work to my subordinates. As a certificate ‘ A’ teacher I wanted to be effective and role model but I could not “

These responses reveal Certificate ‘ A’ holders’ desire to improve their skills so as to be able to function more effectively. Gaining respect was a further motivation. BB, a 47-year-old teacher, and one of the dropouts, wanted to upgrade her qualifications to gain respect and recognition of her staff. BB said:

I just wanted to upgrade myself... The young people come to schools with degrees and diplomas and as a Certificate ‘ A’ holder, you feel as if they challenge you to see if you know what you are doing, I am class teacher. You feel as if they undermine you.

From these responses, it is evident that some mature distance learners wanted to upgrade their qualifications to gain confidence, reducing the fear of competition from younger and more qualified teachers, who often resented working under the supervision of academically less qualified teachers in primary schools. Other learners wanted to secure promotion to teach higher classes in the primary school hierarchy, with an accompanying salary

increment, as stated by Pee, a 39-year-old teacher and one of the continuing students. Pee said:

I needed an increase of salary, and also to be recognised at work, I realised that teachers with the diploma programme, are recognised even during meetings, and if they have an idea, everyone will listen to them, as compared to the certificate 'A' teachers, They are allocated upper standards, so I also wanted to teach standard six and standard seven when I complete.

Views about lack of respect and recognition for Cert.'A' holders in primary schools were echoed by May, in one of the primary schools:

Yes, it could be so. But myself, I am lucky because I have been promoted to senior supretendent, that is why I am at a place where my voice can be heard. But for those people without a portfolio, there still is some sort of discrimination, between the diploma and the primary teaching course, something like that.

Although this study was about school dynamics in terms of how teachers socialise with each other, the perceived lack of respect and recognition suggests a need for further research. This would establish whether Cert. 'A' teachers gained respect and recognition after qualifying from the DE programme. From the present research, I drew the conclusion that Cert.'A' holders appreciate the benefits and opportunities offered by the DE programme to further their qualifications, enabling some of them to advance in their careers, as expressed by Pee who said:

“ I have been promoted recently to senior superintendent ...and also I use the timetable schedule to manage my time, I know when to attend to the class, for study, remediation, and when to attend to other activities”.

From these answers, it is clear that distance learners appreciated the opportunity to study because it enabled them to acquire further qualifications, which in turn made them eligible for promotion. They also benefited from the knowledge and skills they gained from the DE programme, improving their academic performance in their various subject combinations and their professional skills. These skills could also be applied to other activities in their places of work, such as organising school meetings and writing minutes, which often presented challenges before joining the DE programme.

Despite these motivating factors, distance learners often did not appear too eager to study via the DE mode, partly because of lack of information about it prior to enrolment. Instead, they preferred to study through the conventional mode, as stated by Tutor 2:

The reason why they were not too eager to enrol is ...because of those people who would go to the colleges of education full time for the pre-service programme. They would wonder why ...they were being subjected to in-service... it sounded like they were resenting...distance education. But ...the support they were given during the course of their studies paid off...I believe this intervention increased their motivation to keep on going.

These comments were echoed by TT a coordinator, who said that distance learners seemed to be overwhelmed by their multiple responsibilities and part-time studies. For this reason, they preferred the conventional mode, in which they could just concentrate on their studies. TT said:

If they had a choice they would not enrol with distance education because they say... it takes a long time...it's coupled with a lot of things that they are doing at school and they don't have time to pay much attention to it because they are full-time teachers at school. So if they had a choice, they would choose to go to full-time University of education for three or four years.

Despite these opinions, the findings confirmed that the DE has the flexibility and capacity to provide educational opportunities to distance learners, even as they continue with their employment and take care of their families. The findings further indicated that distance learners were able to acquire further qualifications through in-service training, without confining themselves to conventional institutions. Other motivating factors for upgrading are reflected in Cert. 'A' holders' opinions about the DE as a mode of delivery. Though not one of the research questions, this suggests scope for further studies to find out peoples' awareness and acceptance of the DE delivery mode.

Challenges (weakness) Encountered by Learners

In this section, data were analysed to determine what challenges (weakness) were experienced by distance learners and whether learner support services influence them to overcome these challenges. Their views on duration of study, prerequisites for the course before enrolment, assignment due dates,

effects of changing family circumstances, job transfers, and the constraints they faced during their studies were all examined. Some of the challenges faced by UEW learners related to the location of residence, family, noise, neighbor, workload, study- leave, study group.

When asked to give their views on information they received to prepare them for the DE programme at registration, at orientation and during the programme itself, distance learners appeared content with the assistance they received from their tutors and coordinators. For example May said:

“ We were given a word of encouragement that we are old enough to know what is happening, that we should learn to work very hard... that we should always...submit our assignments on time”

The appreciation of distance learners for the information and encouragement they received from their tutors during orientation was confirmed by SS a teacher and one of the continuing DEstudents.

There was a lot of encouragement and support from the lecturers, even the subjects, We used to call them and make appointments with them and they used to come and discuss and they really used to help us. And we would even get help from our headteachers who allowed... us some weekdays off when we were preparing for tests and examinations

However, despite the information and encouragement given during registration and orientation, distance learners did face various challenges in the course of their studies as reported by Eva, a teacher who had dropped out of the DE programme:

You try to study at home but the kids are there also, running up and down. You tell them to keep quiet... the kids will be quiet for some time, then from there they are jumping all over the house. You tell them to go to their room, they run there, then after five minutes they are back. ... it was difficult

Noisy environments, taking care of young children and old people, poor time management, power cuts and institutional chores emerged as some of the factors which interfered with distance learners' progress and programme completion. In particular, lack of a quiet place to study at home, due to living with young children and in noisy neighbourhoods, was singled out as a major problem, as reported by May who said:

At home with the neighbours there...the radios, making loud noise...if you talk to them in a nice way...they listen. Sometimes I am trying to sit in the room... to study and my children...are calling Mama! So, I lock myself in the room and they knock: open! Open! We want to come...

These findings confirm that learners had problems studying at home because of family responsibilities and living in noisy neighbourhoods. Many faced challenges of isolation, working and living in remote areas and with heavy workloads from combining part-time studies with various responsibilities in the school. Lack of books for reference and lack of electricity were also found to make inroads on their progress, as reported by DD who said:

I was teaching in a remote area...There was no telephone network to enable me to contact anyone. After 2 O'clock, I...try to do the assignments but stop at night due to lack of electricity. Public transportation was a problem. When working on assignments, I would sometimes stop because I would...not find information...because there were no books...The workload was...a problem because you are teaching and administering the school...this left you with no time to do your studies...sometimes, I was too tired to continue with my studies so I stopped going for tutorials.

From these comments, it is clear that heavy workloads, physical exhaustion, lack of time, inability to contact other learners because of poor telephone networks, poor public transport, particularly for those living and working in remote areas with no electricity to study at night, and lack of resources such as libraries were major challenges that hindered distance learners' studies. A further challenge, as claimed Tutor 2, relates to institutional barriers, with some distance learners saying they were denied study leave to prepare for tests and examinations. Tutor2 said:

There should be study leave policy where ...teachers who are enrolled on the DE programme by distance mode will have personal right to be given two weeks to study for tutorials during the holidays but the regional education officers are not allowing the teachers to go, That is where we had a problem.

These findings stress the need to remove such institutional barriers because unresponsive organisational structures contributed to

some distance learners missing tutorial sessions and some dropout of the programme.

In summary, intrinsic factors, such as self-actualisation, and extrinsic factors, such as getting a higher salary after further qualifications, influenced distance learners to enrol in the DE programme. The findings further showed that distance learners experienced various challenges which interfered with their programme of study. These challenges, coupled with distance learners' motivation to join the DE programme, needed to be investigated to determine whether learner support services enabled them to meet their expectations. Background information about distance learners was needed to facilitate the provision of effective learner support services as discussed in the next section

Research Question Two: What are distance learners perception of the Effectiveness of Learner Support Services in UEW DE programme in terms of their adequacy, quality and accessibility towards progression, programme completion and dropout?

In this section, data were analysed to assess participants' views on the effectiveness of learner support services in responding to distance learners' needs and expectations. Data were analysed under the theme of issues relating to the rationale for providing learner support services. This theme generated three categories of data. The first category, responding to learner needs, was analysed under four sub-categories, while the second and third categories generated their own sub-categories.

Table10: Need for learner support services
Theme: Rationale for learner support services in the DE programme

Meaning unit	Codes	Sub-category	Category
Tutorial strategies did not acknowledge learners' previous experiences	Tutorial methods	Tutor accessibility	Responding to academic needs
Tutors were assumed to be knowledgeable in the subject matter			
Participating in tutorials assisted learners to judge their learning progress and programme completion	Tutorials		
Distance learners' physical locations inhibited participation in self-help study groups	Study group		
Poor telephone network inhibited learner-learner contact, particularly in remote areas, from contacting tutors and other learners	Telephone network		
Tutors were expected to attend scheduled tutorials	Attendance	Learner-tutor interaction	
Assist learners to interpret the content in the learning materials.	Difficult concepts		
Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials interfered with distance learners' progress	Absenteeism		
Frequent changes of tutors and coordinators meant that learners dealt with more than one tutor per module	Workload		
Heavy workload inhibited distance learners' progress to complete their studies	Research projects		

Table 10 (Cotinued)

Irregular supervision of research projects interfered with programme completion	Supervision	
Marking and commenting on assignments and providing timely and constructive feedback	Assignments	Facilitating two-way communication
Short turnaround times for assignments was not maintained	Completion	
Loss of assignment scripts resulted in unnecessary rewriting of assessment work and incomplete results	Assessment	
Feedback was not timely and constructive	Incompletion	
	Feedback	
Clear, correct, and up-to date records on assignments were not kept	Loss of scripts	
	Record keeping	
Limited access to required learning resources (human, libraries, computer laboratories and equipment)	Tutors, Library Laboratories Labs Computers	Access to learning resources

Table 10 (Continued)

Supporting institutions were not involved in the provision of counselling support			
Learners lacked appropriate study skills and time-management skills			
Learners needed advice on how to complete their programme of study			
Juggling multiple responsibilities was a major challenge	Counselling	Addressing nonacademic needs	Responding to non academic needs
Increased workload due to multiple commitments, caring for family members and their studies	Husband Family		
Learners received support from family, children, friends, spouses and employers	Friend Child		
Limited public transport and poor telephone network inhibited peer interaction for learners living and working in remote areas	Remote areas Telephone		
Lack of commitment and accountability by part-time tutor	Accountability Policy	Learner support monitoring mechanisms	

Table 10 (Continued)

Learners not provided with correct and up-to-date information about the DE programme	Tutorials
Institutional processes and procedures for learner support services were clarified	Supervisor
Learners' progress was monitored throughout, module by module	Assignments
Turnaround deadlines for assignments and other assessment work were not enforced	Feedback
Record-keeping processes and procedures were not enforced to enhance learning progress	Record keeping
Lack of clear guidelines about access to learning resources	Resources

In this it was assumed that learner support services would prepare distance learners for the diploma content - which was targeted at Post Secondary level - by developing them towards independence and autonomy in line with the theories of DE, as discussed in Chapter Two. To find out whether learner support services helped distance learners to progress successfully in their studies, I analysed the data in three categories: academic, non academic

and administrative support. The first category, on responding to academic needs, was further analyzed under four sub-categories, as shown.

Responding to Academic Needs

Response to academic needs as a category was explored through the following four sub-categories: tutor accessibility, learner-tutor interaction, access to resources and facilitation of two-way communication.

In the sub-category of tutor accessibility I discussed learners' views about the availability and accessibility of tutors to distance learners as part of academic support, in response to their academic needs.

The issue of access to tutors revolved around the following: tutorial method, telephone, study group membership and networking. The findings discussed under the sub-category of access to tutors indicate that distance learners needed access, both to tutors and to other learners throughout the learning process. In this context, it was also important to record the views of the tutors, as intermediaries between learners and the course content. When asked to comment on the purpose of such services in the DE programme, one of the learner support coordinators remarked:

The main purpose of tutorials is to help distance learners to understand the module and to put it into practice. It is not easy to separate it from assessment because assessment really is supposed to help learners to understand the module, that is how much they have learnt and in a way it serves as a motivator to assess how much they have understood the module.

Other participants associated academic support with making learning resources such as books available in physical structures such as libraries, where they could find a quiet place to study. For example Tash said:

Learner support... should be a support that makes learners go through the programme. But you find that at times they don't have enough support... like if you take the languages group... prescribed books are not even there in the libraries; they are just depending entirely on tutors to go through the programme... so this learner support service should see to it that learners do get such books or such material.

These comments were echoed by another tutor (tutor 1) who described support services as exposing students to learning resources as follows:

Learner support services can also include things like libraries, where they can read, at their places or study groups, especially in the education centres, where we have access to some books...But here at the college, the support system that we provide is tutorials... so it helps them to understand what to do during their study....they are supported in several forms.

In the sub-category of access to tutors, distance learners appeared satisfied with tutorial techniques which encouraged discussion of content during tutorials. Commenting on access to tutors and facilitation of tutorials, Wen observed:

Some were very good in discussions. Like Mr X (giving the actual name of the tutor) in education, he facilitated discussions in class. He would also really try and take us chapter by chapter and summarise it with us

and make us answer questions from the summary. That really helped us a lot, because you could just take the summary to your group discussions and start asking each other questions for revision.

These comments reveal some of the strengths of learner support services, with distance learners considering tutorial support which encouraged discussion of content among them as helpful to their studies as proposed in the reviewed literature. Some participants, though, noted that some tutors used techniques, such as reading the modules in class, which did not encourage active participation. This was seen as one of the weaknesses in the provision of tutorial support. Such an approach did not demonstrate tutors' empathy with learners or address the criteria for effective learner support, as described in Chapter one. Indeed, some learners were discouraged from attending such tutorials. For example, here is what some participants said:

Some would just read through the module and we discuss Others would ask you to read a passage from the module and ask you to explain. Sometimes you stayed home when you knew that a tutor would just read the module. You would just... study in home rather than go to the classroom to see somebody reading the module...because you are better off reading the module ...quietly and trying to understand it yourself.

Poor tutorial techniques were also confirmed by learner support providers from UEW. For example, Tebo said:

We have to be sure that the teaching is what we expect...you will get into the classroom ... and the tutor

will be ...reading from the ...module and we say...is this tutor prepared? It was not right.... you can't read the whole module to the students word by word, line by line... you discuss... But I don't blame the tutors...we don't sit with the tutors ... to discuss the expectations...

From these findings, I concluded that one of the weaknesses of learner support services was the use of facilitation techniques which did not encourage active participation of the learners or help them to become independent and autonomous thinkers, who are capable of constructing meaning from content either individually or through group discussions, as proposed in the theories of DE. Some tutors read the module in class, indicating that they were not adequately prepared to facilitate tutorial sessions. This suggests that distance learners' previous teaching and learning backgrounds and experiences were not taken into account. Commenting on tutorial facilitation methods used by some of the tutors, distance learners said that such tutors were not committed to their work, as confirmed by Joe, a dropout who said:

Some of the lecturers... were not committed. It's like they were just passing time, they want to get money... In some cases, someone will come to the classrooms, and ask, 'where do we start'? ...you end up being demoralised and wonder, what is the expectation...you don't have that much time at home, you have social problems to attend to... marking... and so a lot of problems...but some lecturers would expect everything from us.

Although some learners encountered unhelpful tutorial techniques, others agreed that not all tutors read the modules during tutorial sessions for example BB said:

“ Our tutors did not use the modules only, because modules do not have detailed information. So sometimes they borrowed us novels, and even helped us to find books in book stores”

Thus, learners perceived tutors who used tutorial methods which involved them in discussion of content as helpful. However, the findings also suggest that distance learners did not always read the module in preparation for tutorial, which tended to slow the pace of discussions, as noted by tutors 2 who remarked:

They don't read the module. Or sometimes they say they read but do not understand... so much so that a lot of time is wasted trying to explain things one by one then you have to come up with extra time outside the hours that have not been allocated in order to help them

These views could explain why some tutors included reading the modules during tutorials sessions, not as evasions of their own responsibilities, but as part of stimulating and facilitating discussion. However, learners cited lack of appropriate study skills as among the challenges they experienced and which contributed to their inability to read modules in preparation for tutorial sessions, as stated by one of the dropouts (Participant 2).

It was very difficult for us because we had spent many years without being at school, so it was difficult for us to get into the habit of reading and preparing for our

work, at the same time to carry out some reading...We had to learn a new style of living, how to read, how to prepare for lessons, how to mark pupils' books and it was difficult for me so I decided to stop the programme.

These views emphasise the need for support services to help distance learners to acquire appropriate study skills considering that some may have left school a long time ago. Some of the learners in this study had graduated from training college for over twenty years before they joined the DE programme, and needed assistance with updating their study skills. To facilitate group discussion of learning materials during tutorial sessions, some of the tutors suggested involving the learners in group presentations. For example, Pee said:

With me the issue of not reading the module was a challenge. I decided ... to divide them in groups... to deal with various topics overnight... and in the morning they have to present... I found out that it was very helpful because.. when you present and you are a group of five...there will be participation by every individual. I found that very helpful... instead of teaching. It worked for me because...it forced them to read... because when it was them doing it, they tend to understand than in the past when I used to make summary of notes.

These findings reflect a need to train tutors in order to equip them with appropriate facilitation skills in DE. The question also arose whether it was better for distance learners to study the learning materials individually or in self-help study groups, which would reduce isolation and help prepare them for tutorial sessions. The findings showed that some distance learners did

create and participate in self help study groups in order to reduce isolation. For example TT said:

“ I benefited a lot from my study group...when we discussed... members of my study group helped me a lot, particularly when it comes to mathematics.”

Similar comments on the usefulness of self-help study groups were made by TK as follows:

“ It was useful because some students know better than others, so they helped us a lot! Like myself, I am old, this one... They went to school later and maybe have more insights in the new curriculum.”

However, although learners participated in self-help study groups, they had to contend with constraints during the group sessions. Physical distances also prevented many from taking part in such study groups. Wen drew attention to this challenge by saying that:

Sometimes after tutorial sessions, we would go back to the classrooms...and start discussing ...But outside tutorials sessions it was difficult because you find that you come from different areas, and so we did not organise self-help study groups outside tutorials session periods ,there were some advantages and disadvantages, because you find that some learners were a bit too slow... and that would really delay you.

These views were shared by two dropouts (Participant 2, Participant 3) who said:

We couldn't have time to meet and discuss. The only time we discussed assignments was here in the college. We formed study groups but...we couldn't meet ...because the students were far from each other...physical distances,I become frustrated and stopped the programme. When you phone them, someone would say...I've got a problem...funeral, wedding.

These responses indicate that, although distance learners intended to join in self-help study groups, social problems and physical distance often prevented them from meeting with their colleagues. This suggests that when they formulated learner support services for the DE programme, learner support providers did not take into consideration the physical distances that separate learners from each other, as well as their social commitments, as suggested in the reviewed literature. Participants also stated that working and living in remote areas made it difficult for some of them to form and participate in self-help study groups. In this regard May said:

You suffer a lot, particularly if you are studying alone in a place where there are no students and no libraries. For example, teachers who are in the remote areas where there are no other students or libraries suffered a lot when it came to completing their assignments. Most of them used to complete their assignments at college when they came for tutorial sessions.

While appreciating the benefits of such groups, including the encouragement to study, some learners found it more beneficial to study on their own, as reported by May, who was one of the continuing students:

When I was alone, I kept postponing my work. That is laziness of some kind. However, the advantage of being alone is that I am able to absorb the information and develop meaning of content on my own, rather than depending on other peoples' ideas when we are in a group.

The fact that some distance learners manage to study on their own, without joining in self-help study groups, supports the constructivist views that learners are capable of constructing meaning from knowledge by interpreting their experiences, with or without the presence of a mentor, coach, tutor or facilitator. My findings established that many distance learners are unable to form and sustain self-help study groups due to poor communication networks and social problems. However, those who live in areas with good telephone networks are able to contact their tutors and other learners by telephone. For example, TT said:

“Students kept in touch with tutors through the telephone numbers in the supervision of research and portfolios”

In conclusion, analysing the category of tutor accessibility revealed that learners benefited from tutors who used tutorial techniques which encouraged them to engage in the discussion of content. A tutor reading modules during the tutorial session was interpreted as a weakness in academic

support, since it did not encourage learners to participate actively in constructing meanings from the content. Self-help study was also made difficult for many students by their physical distance from the residential sessions.

Facilitating Learner-tutor Interaction

In addition to assessing learners' access to tutors, I needed to establish distance learners' perceptions about their interaction during tutorials. In this section, data were analysed to discover how learner-tutor interaction enabled tutors to clarify content and programme structure for distance learners during the provision of academic support. For example, difficult concept, absenteeism, tutorials, Workload, Supervision, Research project and attendance.

Data in this section were analysed to determine whether interaction between learners and tutors creates an opportunity for tutors to clarify content and explain difficult concepts in the learning materials. Commenting on the effectiveness of learner-tutor interaction, Participant 3, a dropout remarked:

“Our tutors explained content we did not understand...teachers who taught us would come with their own knowledge of the subject and elaborate difficult concepts... They did not use only the knowledge in the module”

While the findings suggest that learners benefit from explanation of content by tutors, failure by tutors to attend scheduled tutorials disrupted learner-tutor interaction and prevented two-way communication between learners and the tutors, as reported by one of the dropouts(Participant 3)

Sometimes the lecturers...would not come...and if some had some commitment... they would ...exchange the lessons... That is why we would come to the classroom and find that the lecturer did not come...then we would be told to join classes where there was a tutor.

Similar sentiments were shared by another dropout (Participant 3)

They would just come in some days and at other days they won't be there. We attended tutorials but we had no teacher...We would be running to other classes to get information and find those classes at different stages of the module. These were some of the problems that frustrated me and I stopped the programme.

These comments suggest that tutor absenteeism and frequent changes of tutors during tutorials were major barriers in the delivery of effective academic support in the DE programme. Such lapses interfered with the continuity of tutorial support, as reported by May, one of the learners:

Students whose tutors kept changing...did not get their assignments back, let alone feedback on them. When tutors change there is no follow up since the outgoing tutor has not handed over to the incoming tutor. This may have partly contributed to poor performance, failure and dropout on the programme.

The frequent change of tutors also led to inconsistency in explaining content in a logical sequence. For example Wen said:

Nobody, even the coordinator, came to tell you why there was no tutor. The coordinator just said, go and get into the other classes...And they were not able to replace him so we had to run from one class to the other, from

one teacher to the other teacher, and you do not know the sequence of the module discussion in that class.

These findings suggest lack of commitment and accountability on the part of the tutors and limited monitoring and supervision of tutorial support.

To maintain continuity of tutorial support, Wen recommended a consistent learner-tutor interaction, in which one tutor handled one tutorial group until a particular course/level was completed. She said:

I think there should be continuity of the teacher. The teacher really should be there when the course starts. And there should be people to monitor that those teachers are there from day one to the last day. It would really help a lot.

A further problem, was the frequent change of programme coordinators indicating that the academic support did not conform to management structures suggested in the theory of distance education based on empathy (Holmberg, 2003). These changes appeared to disrupt the continuity of programme activities, as stated by one of the dropouts (Participant 2):

“ Even changes of the coordinators was a big problem. Today it is this one, the other day it is that one, then the other session a different person is there. So there is no continuation in what the other person did.”

From these findings, I concluded that tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials and frequent change of tutors and part-time coordinators were major weaknesses because they disrupted learner-tutor interaction and interfered with the provision of effective academic support. Asked about the

measures taken against tutors who failed to attend tutorials, one of the tutors (tutor 2) made the following observations:

“ Nobody is bothered...Mr. X (referring to the programme coordinator) would run around finding replacements for tutors who were absent. Otherwise...I am not obliged! I don't expect anybody to take any action! I come when I feel like!”

Similar views were given by tutor (tutor 4)

“That is the case. Nobody can take any action against you. It's just something that you are volunteering to do looking at the money given us.”

“In support, Tutor3 said Yes! And nobody can say why.”

These remarks echo distance learners' claims that some lecturers were not committed to conducting tutorials on the DE programme. They also confirm the absence of administrative structures for supervising and monitoring tutor participation in the learner support services in the programme. However, there were notable exceptions to tutor absenteeism, as one BB explained:

During the course of my studies, I was lucky because we did not encounter the changing of tutors time and again or even with the computer...Even with the project, I did not have any problem because my English teacher is the one who was helping me with the project and he was also a tutor.

Thus, even in the same college, some tutors were consistent in giving tutorial support, while others were reported to absent themselves from scheduled tutorials. These views confirmed the need to examine the role of decision makers in monitoring academic support and assess the responsibilities of stakeholders in providing support in the DE programme. It was also made clear that learner-tutor interaction was necessary, given distance learners' perceptions about their readiness for the diploma course. Asked to comment on the courses in the DE programme that they found challenging, distance learners identified maths, science and practical subjects such as music and home economics as among the subjects that they found difficult. Some participants traced difficulties with maths and science back to Training College backgrounds as TK said:

“ My educational background is Primary Upper after JHS, Secondary and training college, my maths and science knowledge was limited. I prayed in my first year!... I didn't know what to do because for maths, to add $(a+b+y)$ was difficult for me.”

Other learners said that the Maths content in their Training College course differ from the type of content they found in the DE programme. DD who said:

When I was doing maths in secondary school and at training College, I was not doing this modern maths, because I didn't do Form Five. That is why I had a very big problem in maths... It is too difficult. Like today we are still struggling with first-year modules. After eight years. This is not right.

DD concerns about lack of prerequisite knowledge for the diploma course confirms the need for learner profiles as a basis for effective learner support services. Distance learners claims about difficult content in maths were confirmed by tutor1:

“ They have problems that are scattered all over in mathematics...to the extent that...maybe...there are some students...who are still supplementing module one... Whether it is the test or an assignment or the exam, there are students who are still in module one.”

Some learners, however, found other subjects, such as music, difficult, simply because they did not like the subject. For example BB said:

“ I had a serious problem, because I don't like music. I thought I was going to go straight to English . I would have preferred to specialise in English straight away.”

Other learners said that they found all the subjects in the diploma curriculum difficult. Gati for instance said:

I had problems because most of the subjects were tough like communication and study skills, especially the computers, because we just finished the course without being shown how to use the computers because there were no computers on the course at the college.

Some of the participants attributed these difficulties to distance learners' work environment which limited the development and use of the language of instruction (English), Tati said:

Maybe the problem is the programme itself... the teacher has been teaching in lower primary for many years! Language wise! If you teach lower primary for a long time you are bound ... to be speaking the local language, or their mother tongue... almost throughout your life... definitely when it comes to the college here, it's... like you have a very serious elephant in front of you.

In the same vein, Tutor 2 said:

“ What he is saying is they cannot express themselves!! So we have a problem in assignments, their...mistakes! It is terrible!.”

These responses suggest a gap between what was known about distance learners' previous educational backgrounds and the DE entry requirements. If information was made available about learner characteristics, it could have been used to specify the needs to be addressed, define the appropriate study skills, motivation and expectations from the new programme, and indicate the best learning approaches to be taken. Despite finding the content in some subjects difficult, learners said the diploma content was useful because it gave them an opportunity to upgrade their knowledge across all subjects, as stated by Dan one of the learners:

The first modules had information that the teachers did not have at the Training Collge level. Teachers have problems covering the syllabus. Most primary school teachers of our age do not understand content. We need to elevate our content in teaching subjects up to SHS Level. ...so as to help pupils. We do not understand content, we primary teachers of yesterday... Take the objectives of primary 5 or 6 maths. Teachers will teach it

without adding or subtracting because they do not have content.

Some learners found it difficult to study due to heavy workloads.

Given this conflict, some concentrated more on their employment work than their studies as Wen said:

“ The class I was teaching was too demanding. More so than with one of the schools, we were really competing, and so... the pressure. We really had a lot of pressure. We really put more effort to see that we get position one...when the final results come out”

Another learner May said she had made slow progress in her studies, ending up with incomplete results, because her employment responsibilities left her only limited time to concentrate on her studies. May said:

“ The problem I had is that our school did not perform well last year. Our bosses!.. We committed ourselves with lots and lots of strategies so that we improve the performance... I have to help the teachers...and see to it that things are done.”

Other learners said they were unable to concentrate on their studies because they were taking care of their old parents. TK said:

‘ I am having a mother who is very old. A blind one... she is staying with my sister. And when we close, we all come and help with staying with our mom...It is really hectic to see myself...every tutorial session, leaving my mother behind!’

Joe said:

“ My results for the research project and the teaching assignment portfolio are incomplete because of social problems, not because of the lecturer who supervised me.”

Thus, workload constraints and social responsibilities such as taking care of old parents may leave distance learners little time to concentrate on their studies. Despite these constraints, some learners devised mechanisms for coping with their part-time studies and the increased workload, as recalled by Pee, one of the learners:

I didn't have any problems because I had a plan. ... My second and last born were at college completing their studies. So we planned our studies at home together. They studied together from 7.00 to 10.00 am. I studied from 2.a.m when the family, including grandchildren, was asleep. At six o'clock, I woke up and prepared myself to go to work. If I had problems I used to call my tutors and they would help me with content any time. They would arrange for a venue and help me.

Other learners like DD devised time management skills which allowed him to combine various responsibilities with his part-time studies .DD said:

I planned to study with my friend, but she fell out of our discussion due to other commitments. She could not finished her studies because she did not allocate time for her family, work and studies...Tell your family about your problem...There is need for a life plan that should be discussed with the family

These data indicate that some distance learners did manage their time in a manner that enabled them to combine their part-time studies with their other responsibilities.

Interaction between learners and tutors was vital to facilitating the supervision of research projects. One of the reasons why distance learners dropped out was their inability to complete research projects and written assignments in modules. This was confirmed by one of the officers at the UEW, whose office was responsible for processing final-year results in the DE programme. The officer, Bet said:

“ Actually the research projects for the distance learners have been a concern and teaching assignment portfolios... these students are not completing ...the programme because... they are unable to complete their research projects and portfolios.”

When asked to comment on why they were unable to complete their studies, some of the learners gave lack of time as one reason they were unable to do their written assignments and finalise their compulsory research projects and teaching assignment portfolios. In this regard, May said:

I had no time to carry out research for my project. It was not due to lack of support from the college. Even the lecturer, he used to call me... and with the portfolio...it is a little bit difficult because you know I don't have much time, although I don't have a class.

Time management emerged as a major constraint for another distance learner, Dan, who said:

I did my own work except studies. I did not allocate time to my studies. That was why I fell behind with my work. For example, I still owe assignments in maths and science module I postponed my assignments and suffered, these are some of the reason why I stopped the programme.

Although tutors made attempts to help learners with the supervision of research projects, some learners did not turn up for supervision, as explained by tutor1:

With research we try to make some schedules of when we can meet, but in most cases they don't turn up...because of commitments at their workplaces... or because of the distance between the student and the supervisor... they don't honour the scheduled meetings

Distance learners' claims about being unable to complete their studies due to work commitments and lack of time were shared by programme coordinators. For example coordinator 1 said:

Their main problem was... time! Looking at the programme vis-à-vis their own business, which is teaching. You would find that we expect them to read on their own but... they would be teaching so they didn't have the time to concentrate on the programme. The other problem was the workload... They were supposed to be given time to study and at times, it was not possible because they had to do their work ... knocking off on Friday and being expected to write the following day...

*they would come to write tests and exams not prepared...
due to their workload at their work station.*

Evidence from the findings indicates that in addition to lack of time and heavy workloads, distance learners lacked the study skills appropriate to carrying out the research projects, as noted by some of the tutors who also supervised research projects. For example Tutor2 said:

It is difficult to supervise research projects...the problem is sometimes access to the library, and even how to use the library. Critiquing and analysing documents is a major problem for them, It takes a long time for the student to complete the project. They don't understand. They keep asking... what do you mean by this? It is very time consuming. They don't have any knowledge on research.

These data appear to question the notion that the DE is a flexible mode of study, in which distance learners can combine their work and family responsibilities with part-time studies. This view was confirmed by Pee a learner, who felt that distance learners needed more time with tutors in order to be equipped with research skills. Pee said:

Staff should be able to visit us ...just once, to see how well we are doing with our research and teaching assignment portfolio, to help us... because we sometimes struggle...especially with the research project because it was our first time to carry out a research. We didn't know what to do.

Other participants claimed that distance learners might be unable to carry out their research projects because they were not given adequate research skills by their supervisors, as agreed by one of the tutors.(tutor 3):

“ They may have the idea but because they are not practically doing it... I know here and there, we have lecturers presenting in different conferences, but ...we are not directly involved, we just read for class, we don't read to research! “

The physical distance between learners and their tutors took a significant toll on the supervision and completion of research projects. For example, tutor 2:

The problem really could be the kind of learner support because supervising a project and somebody is in far away and I'm supervising... in Accra for me to be able to supervise, that...student has to be travelling up and down. And how many of them...have the resources? For them to do the project they have to come to the study centre when the schools have closed... The learner support system is failing them, because we are not providing them with the guidance that we should be providing... If they would come to the study centre just for two weeks to work on the projects...the tutors are there, and then they use the library, they are helped here...then it would do.

Some supervisors felt that the lack of continuous supervision of research projects may have contributed to some learners submitting completed but unsupervised research projects. This raised concerns about how a learner

could carry out and submit a research project without supervision, as recalled by tutor 3 one of the tutors:

I received a complete project which we had never discussed, which I never passed. I called the student and up to date she has never come. I think she knew why I was calling her, and when I went through, I could see that this was not her work and it was very difficult for me to put wrong or right because I could suspect that this was not the student's piece of work. She has not shown up to date.

To reduce the distance between learners and tutors in the supervision of research projects, one tutor(tutor1) suggested more learner-tutor interaction through frequent meetings at the study centres. Tutor1 said:

Like here in Kumasi if we organise with places like one of the JHS Schools, rather than coming to a central place...then you can make arrangements with the students to ...come the day before, in the morning, others can come in the afternoon, you do the work then they go back, not at a longer interval but may be shorter intervals.

From these comments and from the reviewed literature in Chapter two, I concluded that learner-tutor interaction in the DE programme should be devolved to the education centres. This would bring the support services closer to where learners lived and worked, offering a possible strategy for improving completion rates. The justification for decentralising learner support services was summed up by Dan, one of the learners:

“I know some of the students who deserted because of distances from the college... Why don't these people do their tutorials somewhere near...education centres?”

In summary, the findings established that it was necessary to build learner-tutor interaction into the provision of academic support. Tutors could then help learners to interpret content through using appropriate study skills. Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, frequent changes of tutors, and the use of tutorial techniques that did not encourage learner participation further discouraged some learners from joining in tutorial sessions. Lack of appropriate research skills was one of the factors that contributed to distance learners' failure to complete their research projects on schedule.

Academic support was not available in between the tutorial sessions, particularly for learners who lived and worked in remote areas and who could not contact their tutors or other learners because of poor public transport or limited telephone network. The introduction of decentralised learner support services at or near education centres could ensure more learner tutor and learner-learner interaction, thus obviating long intervals of waiting between the tutorial sessions and contribute to the provision of effective learner support services.

Facilitating Two-way Communication

The sub-category of facilitating two-way communication, in the category of responding to academic needs was analysed to find out whether marked assignments facilitated two-way communication between learners and tutors, short turnaround times, and the provision of timely and constructive

feedback. This assessed participants' views on the effectiveness of feedback to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DE programme. For example loss of scripts, assignment, assesment, feedback, record keeping and Incomplete result.

The results in this section show that, while some learners benefited from the feedback provided by tutors, others had not. Some of the learners, particularly those who have not completed the DE programme, seemed satisfied, suggesting that constructive feedback does indeed facilitate two way communication between learners and tutors. In this regard May said:

“After doing the assignments, tutors would mark them and show us where we went wrong Tutors' feedback was constructive because we discussed in class with them and they corrected our mistakes.”

Pee who said:

“After they have marked the assignments our tutors gave us constructive feedback so that you cannot go wrong in the next assignment.”

Some dropout said they never received their assignments back from tutors, which reduced any two-way communication through written assignments. Tati put it this way:

The teacher would be coming in class, giving us marked scripts and then from there yours is not even there and then she would tell you, maybe it is mixed with scripts of another class, you run to that class, nothing! And from there you realise that in the computer also, your mark is not appearing.

Wen's views illustrate distance learners' frustrations in their attempts to get feedback from tutors. Another learner (May) said that tutor absenteeism had resulted in some students not receiving their marked assignments during the tutorial session. With regard to this May said:

“Tutors would collect our work for marking but when we reported back during tutorial session, they were not there. Some had gone to mark national examinations. As such we did not have feedback.”

Other learners said that, although they received their marked assignments back from tutors, it was difficult to understand the ticks in the marked scripts because the tutors had not provided comments, as Dan claimed:

In some subjects, they gave me my scripts with many ticks, but...I did not understand what the ticks meant. They were meaningless. There were no comments on my marked assignments and tests. I don't know the meaning of ticking

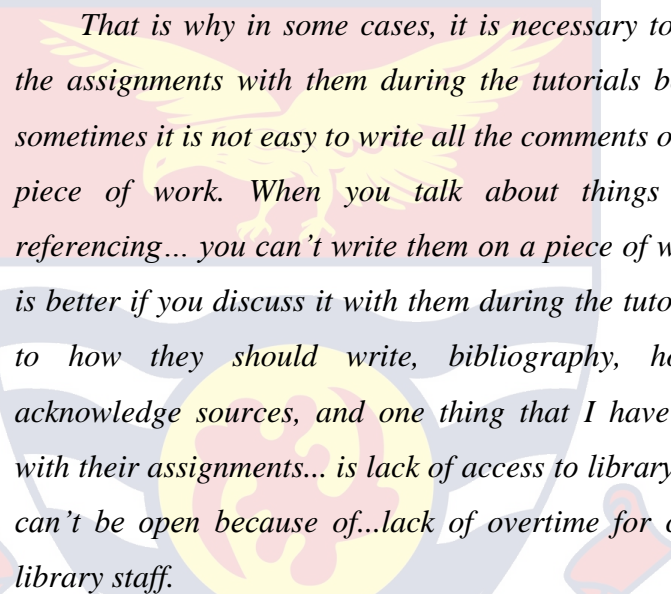
These criticisms were confirmed by Coordinator 1, who said:

“Marked scripts rarely have constructive comments from tutors... People just make ticks...We went to our study centre to find explanation on tutors' comments... and feedback on... marked assignments ...there were very, very few comments.”

Coordinator 3 added that:

'And these are ...work-shopped people on how to do comments...It is a big setback because tutors do not give learners comments on assignments and tests.'

While acknowledging the lack of comments on marked scripts, one of the tutors claimed that it was easier to give comments in class than to write them on assignment scripts. Tutor2 put it this way:



That is why in some cases, it is necessary to cover the assignments with them during the tutorials because sometimes it is not easy to write all the comments on each piece of work. When you talk about things like...referencing... you can't write them on a piece of work. It is better if you discuss it with them during the tutorial as to how they should write, bibliography, how to acknowledge sources, and one thing that I have found with their assignments... is lack of access to library...they can't be open because of...lack of overtime for college library staff.

These comments suggest that individual distance learners did not receive the kind of support in their written assignments which they could use to judge and correct their mistakes when doing their next assignment which contradicts the role of assignments in DE. At the individual level, two-way communication between students and tutors was not sustained, and the lack of constructive comments from tutors may have contributed to some learners dropping out of their studies as Pee said:

Some people have not graduated because of the tutors. They handed their projects to the tutor and the tutor did not mark. I know of a case of a student who

handed the project to a tutor and the tutor did not mark the project or portfolio, and he just switches off his cell phone so that he cannot be contacted..

When asked to comment on how they ensured that distance learners received timely feedback on marked assignments, research projects and teaching assignment portfolios, tutors from one of the study centres said there were structures for the processing of assignments, from submission to the time the learners were given feedback, May said:

For timely feedback...lecturers are doing their best because if the assignments are sent to the colleges on time they...are sorted according to subjects, from subjects according to particular lecturer, and that particular lecturer will come and collect their assignments and mark, and after marking we normally don't send the assignments back to the students, they wait until they come...the first day that they go to class for that particular subject, they get their feedback..

These findings confirm that procedures and processes for the administration of assignments in colleges were enforced by the part-time coordinators to ensure short turnaround times and timely feedback to distance learners. The importance of assignments and feedback in facilitating two-way communication between learners and tutors and in the provision of remedial work was emphasised by one of the tutors (tutor 1) as follows:

When they come, you find that the tutors have already marked their assignments, and they have already identified some of the problems which the learners have, such that those problems help tutors to prepare ... to summarise the information. And also, the tutors, they are

doing a lot of... photocopying... they are giving handouts, so if this learner support service...could find a way to support the learners...if really we could follow them and find a way of knowing what they are doing, and give them even encouragement support, it would really help!

These comments were echoed by tutor 3 who said:

“We are given their assignments, mark them and then return them to the office, and discuss the corrections during the tutorials. When we return assignments we try to guide them as to how they should have performed... and how they could have done the solutions correctly.”

Apart from delays caused by lack of timely marking or return of assignments with constructive feedback from tutors, social problems and religious convictions may also prevent some distance learners from writing scheduled examinations, as explained by the programme coordinator (coordinator 1) :

Some would come in, and there is a death and or a funeral and they are supposed to be writing exams and because it's only that time they would come in and also religious issues where you find ...an SDA student...so she could not come to write an examination because it was on Saturday against her religious beliefs.

The findings further indicate that policy statements, such as programme rules and regulations also contributed to delays in programme completion. `A student who fails a module resit that module's assessment component within a period of two years. This regulation encouraged some

learners to carry forward failed modules from Level 100 to Level 400, thus increasing their workload due to that some of them get frustrated and dropout of the programme. Tati said:

We were told that you can take failed modules afterwards... I decided not to write the failed ones until I had finished. I would suggest... for those who have not finished, they are given a chance to write subjects that they are still owing... so that ... when we go for second year everyone has finished first year modules, instead of carrying them to second year because it becomes a heavy load of work. You are not going to the second year with a fresh mind. That is what creates this problem of dropout from the programme.

The weaknesses of learner support services thus include delayed feedback on assignments. With this goes problems of time management, workload constraints and lack of appropriate research skills, all contributing to distance learners' inability to meet deadlines for research projects, interfering with two-way communication and delaying programme completion and some dropping out of the programme. A further factor which needed to be analysed in the category of facilitating two-way communication was that of record keeping.

Keeping Correct and up-to-date Records

Effective management of DE should include the maintenance of correct and up-to-date records of assignments and other assessment work. In this study, data on record keeping was analysed to assess whether providers of learner support services developed and implemented procedures and processes

for receiving and recording assignments, dispatching them for marking, and returning them to distance learners, and whether they communicated these administrative procedures to learners and tutors. The comments from the participants, however, indicated that there was a weakness in record-keeping mechanisms, which were not clear and which were perceived as among the factors that delayed distance learners' progress and programme completion and some dropping out of the programme, as stated by one of the dropouts. Tati explained the problem as follows :

“There was a problem of management and record keeping. Sometimes the secretary would receive and record assignments, but if they were out of the office, they told us to throw them through the window.”

Asking learners to throw assignments into the office through the window, instead of physically receiving and recording them, clearly indicated poor record keeping with a possibility of loss of assignments. It also suggested that the college may not have put together correct and up-to-date records, either of learners who had submitted their assignments or those who had not. The following highlight the issue as stated by May:

Sometimes we submitted assignments on arrival at college and went back home. Next time we came to college we were told it has been misplaced. You had to...re-write the same assignments... Management and administration of assignments was poor due to poor record keeping. Sometimes we would be asked, “to whom did you give the assignments?” after we had been told to throw them through the window of the office.

The careless nature of administering assignments was expressed by another dropout, (joe) who said:

“ The copies of assignments were just lost there in the office. So keeping of the records, it is like they are not kept in the right order”

Poor record keeping was confirmed by the programme coordinator 2 who remarked that:

There were times when the students will come to hand in their assignments and ... the secretary is not there, and for a student who comes all the way from far away and doesn't find somebody it was problematic...the coordinator thought that...they can throw in the assignment through the window ...because they thought they were solving a problem.

These comments suggest a lack of efficient procedures for the administration of assignments at the offices. Poor record keeping in the processing of assignments seems to have contributed to failure for some learners who might otherwise have been passed, as judged from the following excerpts, Pee said:

“ Sometimes they write even subjects that we have passed as fail and repeat... If you do not have a copy of the marked assignment, you are going to fail. “

On occasion learners were compelled to rewrite assignments that the college had requested, but which could not be traced due to mismanagement of assignments, Dan explained that:

The assignments for year three... we were told to bring them to college immediately we received them back from tutors. Some of us took our marked scripts immediately, only to find that as the years went by, we were told that our marked assignments and the marks cannot be traced... The only thing you could do is just to write again so that you can get your certificate (very bitterly). Some of us came from very far away like me. This was very painful for us because you had to go very far to write exams when you knew you had already written, but they lost your marks.

Although the programme coordinators seemed to understand their managerial roles, there were challenges in the administration of assignments at the college. For example Coordinator 2 said:

The role of coordinator is to maintain order...to take care of their wellbeing... their documentation ...but there were challenges from the coordination, because...students would hand in assignments and the assignment would not be captured...coupled with the computer breaking down...to ensure that the documentation is there

It is clear that there was negligence in record keeping and a lack of accountability on the part of those in charge of the learner support services. When asked to comment on record-keeping at the college, the programme coordinator confirmed there had been negligence, but attributed it to the high turnover of programme coordinators and the lack of proper hand-over routines, particularly during the early years of the programme. In this regard coordinator 2 said:

I would say, yes, there was negligence, because if you look at the programme in the college, it went through... four coordinators who because of work or whatever decided to resign. ...there was no formal handovers. The documentation...was a bit scanty, such that you would find that a student would have done some work and the work is not recorded

This lack of institutional policy guidelines to regulate the coordination of DE activities at the stakeholder institutions could be the reason why programme coordinators were not directly involved in record keeping. Coordinator 1 explain this as follows:

“ It may be poor record keeping but I would attribute it to ... the secretary who was not accountable...who knows how the computer programme operates...and because of that...the coordinators did not know anything about...where you entered information and it translated this way or that way”

However, record keeping seemed to be better organised at Winneba study centre, as stated by two of the tutors:

“ Even the projects cannot get lost...because you know whether they have completed. What we are doing here for projects, we take the list to their supervisors...the record is there”

Clearly, poor record keeping emerged as one of the factors which added to distance learners' workloads and slowed their progress and programme completion. It also increased workload for tutors who had to set and mark additional assessment work that had been written all over again. A

number of participants noted that some of the poor record keeping was due to lack of training in DE skills. For example tutor 1 said:

There hasn't been a programme for training or orientation for programme coordinators. We need something to help these people...to keep records, attendance registers... and marks. If you do not know how to operate Excel you have problems ...with computation of marks, for presentation to Examination Boards... Programme coordinators just rely on their own experiences...We need to identify activities, that coordinators do and...provide proper skills by developing an appropriate training programme for them. The coordinators should be made to do the certificate for distance education practitioners, because when you go through the course, you are able to understand what the learners go through....it makes you more empathetic to their needs. It really helps you to appreciate what you mean by distance learner.

Collaborating with other organisations in the community could lead to the provision of effective learner support services as suggested by one of the learner support providers (JJ) who said:

“ Community involvement ... will help with resource provision . Teachers have access to the computers.. So liaison with industry...can be formalised and monitored...where there are no resources”

This participant also suggested the provision of decentralised learner support services using people who had been trained in DE skills, so as to improve service delivery. In this regard JJ said:

Training of education officers at the national level (regions and schools) and part time coordinators at colleges ...for empowerment and capacity building in DE ...because we need people that we can call on...unlike currently... If the coordinator goes away, the programme is left in the lurch. This training is necessary because... there is a need for the development of/and mentoring at the school level. These views were shared by part-time staff in the DE programme who had received training in DE skills and found these useful, as noted by one tutor.

In a similar vein TT said:

“ The orientation was...OK. I even use some of the skills when teaching my conventional students.. how to write instructional materials.... And the way I mark the scripts for distance learners is different from the way I mark for conventional students.”

In summary, the findings showed that poor record keeping contributed to delayed progress and programme completion in the DE programme. Participants also suggested that some colleges, did not have the procedures needed to record assignments from submission and marking through to when they were returned to the learners. The loss of assignments, resulting in the affected learners being asked to rewrite their work, highlighted record keeping as one of the factors delaying distance learners' completion and some dropping out of the DE programme. In the next section, I discuss the sub-category of access to resources to find out how it contributed to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

Facilitating Access to Learning Resources

In this section, data were analysed under the sub-category of access to learning resources in order to assess participants' views on distance learners' access to the available learning resources. Since the diploma syllabus had components which required distance learners to gain practical skills, it was important to know whether they had access during their studies to relevant learning resources such as libraries, computers, laboratories and equipment. In some of the stakeholder institutions, it appeared that access depended on individual lecturers, since guidelines on such access were lacking. To determine the contribution of access to learning resources, data were analysed on these issues, Laboratory, Computers, Library and Tutors.

In this section, participants gave different views on access to learning resources. When asked to comment on the availability of computers, laboratories and the library, one learner (Dan) remarked:

“ We used laboratories and were even taken to the music room. It depended on the tutor's initiative. My tutor took us to computer laboratories. Access to computer labs depended on tutors. “

These views confirm that access to learning resources depended on the individual lecturer's initiative, and was not guaranteed for learners, either individually or in groups. It was difficult for learners to gain practical computer literacy skills since there was only limited access to computer equipment and only a few tutors with computer expertise of their own. The following illustrate this points, Pee said:

“ I have never used the practical part of the computer, but just theory”

Someone will take us there for two hours. You will move from one person to another. Most of us didn't know how to use a computer, so you stand there...with one person trying to show you, do this... do that... for around twenty minutes... another person.... It didn't help us at all! there was only one lecturer who was able to teach all the whole classes! ...Which means that some of the lecturers who were teaching that module did not know...how to write....things using the computer but teaching

That tutors could take part in tutorials for which they did not have the required competencies suggests lack of a proper vetting mechanism to ensure they had the required knowledge and skills to teach specialised subject areas such as computer skills. The revelation that some tutors had limited computer literacy and could not assist distance learners in gaining such skills could explain why the learners felt they were not given adequate support in this area. The data revealed that lack of access to computers was compounded by the limited number of computers in the stakeholder institutions relative to the number of learners, as noted by one of the programme coordinators. (Coordinator 2) said:

Most of our learners see the computer for the first time when they come to the colleges of education...The computers will be down the whole of two weeks, so those who are tutoring computers, they don't have access to the computers. Furthermore...we are dealing with over a hundred and something students at a time and we have only 20, 25 computers or so, and out of these...only five are working... You...distribute students around a

computer and only one is clicking. That is where they get the most difficulties...when it comes to practical things

When asked to elaborate on how they managed a computer skills course without doing the practical component, Wen, a learner remarked:

We did the theoretical part. We studied the parts by numbering them! This is a mouse...the hardware!...the types of computers, CPU (central processing unit), this one is a screen...this one is the font that can create the size of the letter, reduce it. This was too theoretical. Now, we were left with the practical part, where we would buy the computers for ourselves and practise it more at home with our little ones to help us.

Wen's response suggests that students were not helped to acquire computer literacy skills beyond naming the various parts of the computer. Nor were they able to access and use a computer during tutorial sessions, which limited their opportunities for practice. The following excerpts illustrate the learners' challenges. May said:

"You don't have computers at school, some of us, we don't know how to use a computer, so to get information becomes a problem. Or you can go...to the internet café ... when I get there, I can't request... information because ... sometimes we are afraid to ask"

The need to access computers as learning resources was emphasised by one of the learners:

Dan said:

" Practical work needs accessibility to computers. If lessons on practical subjects are given there should not

be a problem. Learners should be given access to computers.”

Apart from restricted access to computer resources, distance learners had only limited access to libraries and laboratories for other practical subjects such as science. For example May said:

When we were doing module one, they said laboratories were for college students. We were not taken to the computer laboratories. We were allowed access to libraries during the working days, but they were closed during weekends. In science, we haven't gone to the laboratory since we started the course until we finished, from module one to six

Wen also said:

“With science laboratories, some tried. But this depended on individual lecturers.”

Such restrictions on access to library and science laboratories seemed to indicate that some of the stakeholders had not committed adequate resources for distance learners. However, the situation was seen differently at the stakeholder institutions, as noted by one of the programme coordinators.

(Coordinator1) said :

We are using the duplicating machine, the computers, the printing, the art are using their own things, music are using their own melodic ...even the home economics. As we have said, these computers were meant for the conventional, and they were made to understand that it is not for them ... the only problem is lack of facilities, resources in general, just like for the

conventional. We don't have enough materials. Not that we are being barred from using them. Even the library, when our distance people are here... it is open at night

These views contrasted with those held by participants in the college of education, as stated by the programme coordinator(Coordinator 2) said :

With communication and study skills, it is the module vis-à-vis the resources, because the component on computers is really out...any component which requires them to use special equipment ...Well, in some cases the facilities were there but the numbers were large. We had 95 per cohort and putting them in a classroom where there are two stoves or so many computers...would not be practical. If all science lecturers decided that they didn't want to be part of the programme... who would be accountable for the material?

Commenting on lack of access to reference materials, (tutor 3) said:

The problem of modules is very acute, because...they don't know which books to read. Even if you can provide the guidelines that this subject will need, the following textbooks, the fact that most of them are in the rural or remote areas, it is not easy for them to come back to town to buy or borrow textbooks. So they normally rely on the modules which are just a guide

Lack of access to learning resources raises certain questions regarding the effectiveness of learner support services in helping distance learners to

cover topics which require access to laboratories, as articulated by learner support coordinators. (Coordinator 3):

...how are they doing...science...It is a practical subject...in chemistry, if you say that when I mix hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide, I get sodium chloride...they should see...the two liquids mixing and becoming something that rests at the bottom of the tube. When you distil...it becomes ordinary salt... You can make them to taste, so that they can see clearly that it is salt. Can you just talk! talk! talk! when they are not seeing?

Again, these findings suggest a lack of institutional guidelines to support distance learners' access to learning resources. They also raise certain issues for future research into the contribution of the DE programme to improving the standard of education in practical subjects, when distance learners seem to have been given only limited access to learning resources. Although this study was not about equivalency between the pre-service and the in-service programmes, the participants raised concerns about what appeared to be different approaches in the provision of resources between the pre-service and the in-service programmes, as noted by one programme coordinator. (Coordinator 2):

With the conventional students... the college buys them materials to do the practical work. But with these ones, they are not supported with any materials. They have to buy it for themselves. And at times also ...they are being downgraded because of the materials that they bought. If...they could be supported in one way or the other, by just giving them the materials that they give to

the conventional students, because we are saying, it is the same thing except for the delivery mode.

A further limitation was lack of access to tutors for supervision of research projects outside the tutorial sessions. The participants raised concerns about the originality of practical work when performed without adequate supervision by the programme coordinator. (Coordinator 1) said:

Take home economics ...they have to go in the lab and do the cookery, but on this programme... since the time is limited they are expected to go and do this at home... Who sees that they are really doing it? Like they are expected to come up with...dresses for children. They have to go in the laboratory and do that... Who is there really seeing that they are doing it or they are buying it?

These findings reflect the need for regular contact between learners and their tutors, particularly in the supervision of practical work. But in the sub-category of access to learning resources, the data indicated that distance learners had limited access to resources such as computers, which they required to complete their studies successfully. This implies that there was a gap in the guidelines for facilitating such learners' access to learning resources.

To understand the institutional standpoint on this problem, it was necessary to get stakeholders' views about the availability and accessibility of institutional resources for DE activities. Asked to comment on how they ensured that distance learners had access to learning resources, Mod one of the college managers said:

“ Speaking from where I am sitting now (management position) I haven’t come across a situation where I have been told that we cannot allow distance learners access to things that are allowed to conventional students. They were assisted with whatever equipment, whatever facilities were there.”

These views were shared by a decision maker. (Clement) who said that:

“ Everything that we provide to the conventional students, must be provided to the DE students. When it comes to the computers, we do not have a computer lab...even for the conventional students... computers are not enough... but they have access. “

Although the institutional managers indicated that distance learners had access to institutional resources, their views were contradicted by the students themselves. For example DD said:

“ We were told...the computers were for conventional students who are training at this college ...not for the distance mode students”

Another learner (May) commented on distance learners’ limited access to laboratories for science subjects as follows:

“We didn’t go to the laboratories...although they said the laboratories were there. I don’t know why things were like that.”

Other participants noted that the restricted access to learning resources could have been caused by a lack of resources in some of the institutions, particularly in the colleges of education. Pee put it this way:

The laboratories and consumables at colleges of education is almost zero. For instance, at the college, you find a room ... with test tubes in a box...how are they doing the practicals? At the secondary colleges, there are enough laboratories...specifically for chemistry, physics, biology, home economics... art ... and music room

Although these comments suggest that resources are available in the SHS than the colleges, lack of clear guidelines limited distance learners' access to these resources. However, other participants insisted that there were no guidelines to facilitate access to learning resources. For example Wen said:

When the programme was introduced, the understanding was that we were going to share resources (the conventional programme and the DE programme) but there was a little bit of a problem, because along with this came a little package for the tutors paid on an hourly basis. So this was saying, if you want to be paid on an hourly basis, apply... and you will be paid. It could mean that those who aren't enrolling for that extra pay did not need to be there for the tutorials

It thus appears that access to human resources was constrained by lack of procedures. Another factor which emerged from the findings was that stakeholders did not seem to have explored the possibilities of engaging other service providers, so as to give distance learners access to facilities such as libraries and laboratories for practical subjects, outside the colleges of education, as explained by (JJ) one of the learner support providers who said:

Not many Junior Secondary schools had libraries, but there were libraries in some of the Junior Secondary

schools, and these teachers never used them...because they needed somebody to go to the senior High schools and say,...these people are feeding your schools with form ones, they are trying to upgrade themselves... can they be allowed to use these resources? At the SHS, there are enough laboratories...specifically for chemistry, physics, biology, home economics...art ... and music room.

Coordinators also experienced difficulty in accessing resources such as the telephone and office space to facilitate communication, supervision and monitoring of programme activities, as confirmed by one of the programme coordinators. (Coordinator2) who said:

“ Getting a telephone was a problem they had to walk from here to the Library...make a telephone call or receive a fax. But other colleges have them.”

This suggests that stakeholder institutions had not readjusted their institutional resources and infrastructure to accommodate the needs of the DE programme. These data show that there was no coordinated effort among DE institutions to ensure that distance learners used the learning resources, as confirmed by a programme coordinator.(Coordinator 1) who said:

“ Facilities like libraries are not accessible...the schools don't have computers... in the city or in large villages... where there is a library or... secondary school teachers... tutor them at a fee... that's how they... help themselves ... Those in...remote areas... don't have access. “

From my findings, it could be concluded that lack of access to learning resources was limited by stakeholders' failure to coordinate the use of

available resources at different institutions. This in turn reduced distance learners' access to the information they needed to complete their assignments, especially given the lack of library facilities near where they lived and worked and that made some of them to drop out of the programme.

Addressing Non-academic Needs

This section addressed the sub-category of non-academic needs in the category of the provision of counselling support. Data were analysed to assess the nature of the counselling given to distance learners to help them cope with their multiple responsibilities of combining the demands of employment, workload, and family commitments, as well as resolving personal problems. In this case, the category that addressed non-academic needs was analysed as Counselling, Telephone, Friends/neighbours, Remote Area, Husband, Children and Family

When asked to comment on the problems they encountered in the course of their studies, May said:

“ When you are trying to study, the noise by the neighbours, ... the workload in school, those were the barriers. And the social problems, others sometimes during the month end, the head is not working properly. “

Distance learners encountered both academic and non-academic problems, as stated by (JJ) one of the learner support providers.

We listened to their grievances. Some are social problems, some are problems of learning itself, and then you would advise him/her accordingly... If it's a social problem we even go to the extent of meeting the family. If it's a married person we would ... request the husband to

support the learner. Sometimes ...the school head would refuse with the days of study leave...we would ...talk to the school head ...after our intervention ..learners will ... be ...motivated to come to us when they have problems.

These views were shared by one of the learner support providers (JJ) who said:

The counselling support that we provide, we look at the results, when ... they come out, especially during tutorials and ask them, why didn't you submit your assignments... portfolio and the research project? What problems are you facing? What type of support are you getting from your school administration? Because at times they will be saying, it is because of the school administration...

These findings confirmed that distance learners encountered academic problems such as workload and time constraints and social problems which interfered with their studies. These problems needed to be addressed through effective counselling support services. However, learner support providers maintained that they encountered constraints when they tried to contact students at their work stations, as maintained by(TT) one of the coordinators who said:

To communicate with those in remote areas,...we will call and call and call before you will get them .That is how we followed up some of those who were in these areas. Some would climb the sand hill to make or receive telephone calls.

Communicating with distance learners, particularly those based in remote areas, could be complicated by lack of telephone network, as noted by coordinator 2

We used to report about ...a teacher ...in the sand dunes in... remote areas... we would ... talk through and say at a particular time, I will be up on the sand dune, then we would phone from the office, and then she would relate her problems to us.

However, the findings showed that distance learners found family members, such as spouses and children, as well as friends, employers and peers to be useful as sources of emotional support, (May) explain that such support enhanced their motivation to persist:

In my case...my family was extremely helpful. That is how I passed ...because when I went to the class... I could... remember what the child had taught me... and then I would get everything right. Friends... would help with homework. The SHs teachers would really help in some subject areas. Even in other primary schools, some teachers were really helpful.

Another learner (Dan) stated that the help given by a family member who was SHS teacher was very useful:

“ I was ... helped by my son who is a teacher at a secondary school teaching Science and Maths, even with English grammar, literature, everything...there was academic and emotional support from family members.”

Employer support was also found to be useful in the administration of assignments. For example DD said:

“ The employer would allow us some time to hand in assignments because those ones, you cannot hand them after hours. “

These learners had academic support from their children and friends, and administrative support from their employers. However, students did not always receive counselling support from the collaborating institutions as admitted by the programme coordinator (Coordinator3) who said:

The academic and assessment is OK. But the counselling support ...is lacking because ...who is supposed to counsel? During those two weeks ...we would be running around to get them tutored and assessed... We tried to do it but...the structures are missing. The regular students...are using the guidance and counselling department in the Dean's office, but for the distance learners, they are not available because it... is optional... If the Dean chooses to ...take leave when schools close ... distance learners will be the responsibility of the coordinator.

These data reinforced the need to improve the provision of counselling support by involving the relevant departments in the stakeholder institutions, Coordinator 1:

Manpower for learner support, especially for...the counselling part of it...the education centres could also be used to provide support ... in the field or any other form of support which they can get when they are no longer in the colleges. For future cohorts... the Dean of

Students and the Counsellor...should deal with those problems... because I'll be doing the administrative part and at the same time if a student needs counselling I have to be there, and I am not qualified in counselling ... For you to be able to counsel you need to have that close association with the students.

To improve counselling support, some participants suggested identifying the counsellors who would be available to assist distance learners

(Participant 2) who said:

“ I just wish we had at least one counsellor per college or per region, because we have people trained in counselling ...in the colleges...it would benefit ...if we could engage them as part-time counsellors whenever the students need that kind of counselling.”

In summary, the findings analysed in the sub-category of non-academic support show that distance learners received emotional support from their families, children and friends, but only limited counselling from the DE institutions. From this I drew the conclusion that such institutions did not demonstrate empathy towards distance learners.

Monitoring and Supervision of Learner Support Implementation

The sub-category of monitoring mechanism in the category of the provision of administrative support services was discussed. In this sub-category, data were analysed to find participants' views on the contribution of learner support monitoring mechanisms to distance learners' progress and programme completion as follows, Assignment, Tutorials, Feedback, Record Keeping, Resource, Policy, Supervisor and Accountability.

The conclusion was that tutorial attendance was not adequately monitored as admitted by one of the programme coordinator (Coordinator 3) who said:

“ Personally we take it that these are adults who do not need to be followed up...the idea of tutorials is to augment what they have been reading and if they understand so... we have not had any monitoring mechanisms to ensure that they really do attend. “

From these comments, it could be concluded that there was a weakness in some of the study centres, in tracking distance learners’ tutorial attendance, ensuring that they took part in discussions of content with their tutors, receiving feedback on marked assignments and writing scheduled tests and examinations. However, monitoring academic support and tracking learners’ attendance at tutorials appeared to be different at some study Centre as noted by one of the tutors. (tutor 3) who said:

“Here we are given a list...of students, so that we follow them up on a regular basis and we guide them, looking at what they are supposed to learn.”

As explained in Chapter one, tutorial and assessment functions were located at colleges of education and senior high schools so that distance learners could have access to tutors and other facilities which were overseen by the college principals and headteachers. However, the participants indicated that the involvement of senior management in the supervision and monitoring of tutorial, feedback and record-keeping functions to ensure accountability by service providers was different in some study centres. When

asked to comment on how tutorial and assessment functions were monitored , the programme coordinator said (coordinator 1) :

“ We only followed ...up... those who owed projects... portfolios... because we want them to finish up. It’s them that should take the initiative to ensure that they learn ”

Programme ownership and accountability thus appeared to be different from some study centres, as expressed by one of the tutors and the programme coordinator:

“ When the programme started, we were told that this is...our baby...the attitude that we have is that this is our programme and therefore we should make it a success ”

Asked to comment on the support tutors had from college management in integrating the DE programme with other college activities, one of the tutors (tutor3) remarked:

“ Even when you seek assistance we don’t see them...Who is responsible? Even if the work is not done, I cannot accuse him or her the way I would do if they refused to do work for my pre-service students. “

In the same vein, (tutor 1) said: *Management really support us*

There appeared to be no monitoring procedures for receiving, recording and dispatch of assignments, both for marking and returning to learners. If such procedures existed, they did not appear to have been communicated to tutors and learners. Commenting on the processes for setting and moderating examinations, converting marks and maintaining correct records, one of the programme coordinators (coordinator2) remarked:

There are so many challenges...people don't take it seriously ... because...the test when it comes...the day it is to be administered ..it has a mistake...you have to...correct a mistake ...this ...moderation process is supposed to make sure that mistakes are taken care of before the paper gets to students...When it comes to assessment, we need to do a lot of work.

Other factors which constrained the supervision and monitoring of DE functions were related to the fact that programme coordinators were limited in ensuring that tutors did their work as required, as stated by the DE programme coordinators (coordinator 1) who said:

If there is a tutor within the colleges who is marking and they are not delivering, because the coordinator has no authority over that person, they are colleagues; they are at the same level... they go to the Deputy Principal ... who has the authority, or even the Principal.

In summary, the findings in the sub-category of monitoring mechanism in the category of administration of learner support services established that there was inadequate supervision and monitoring of learner support functions in stakeholder institutions. It was also noted that the involvement of senior management in these functions differed from one institution to another. Also support services were not accessible to students. Participants suggested collaboration with the community and non-governmental organisations to facilitate the sharing of resources with distance learners in the DE programme.

Research Question Three: How do tutors and other stakeholders perceive their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support service in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?

To assess stakeholder involvement in the provision of learner support services in the DE programme, I analysed the data in three sub-categories under the main category that dealt with stakeholder roles and responsibilities, as indicated in Table 11.

Table 11: Stakeholder participation

Theme: Stakeholders' participation in the provision of learner support services

Meaning units	Codes	Sub-categories	Category
Ensuring supervision and monitoring of learner support services in stakeholder institutions.	Academic support Counselling support Administrative support	Roles and responsibilities	Stakeholder involvement
Supervision of learner-tutor and learner-learner contact during tutorial sessions. Facilitating access to learning resources.	Supervision Resources		
Stakeholder collaboration and cooperation to enhance provision of effective learner support services.	Programme ownership Communication		
Implementation of policy guidelines.	Policy		

Table 11 – (Continued)

Learner-tutor interaction inhibited by tutor absenteeism and delayed feedback.	Absenteeism Feedback	Implementation constraints
DE not perceived as core activity of stakeholder institutions.	Recognition	
Ownership of DE activities in stakeholder institutions not adequate.	Barriers	
Lack of clear policy guidelines on resource sharing in stakeholder institutions. Lack of clear guidelines to facilitate supervision of part-time staff.	Resources Study centres	
Limited contact and interaction between learners, tutors and DE institutions due to physical distances.		
Limited information about transferred teachers for follow-up.	Transfer	
Shortage of staff to provide learner support in between the residential sessions.	Payments	
Payment structures which did not remunerate functions other than tutorials and assessment.		
Policy guidelines that facilitate integration and mainstreaming of the DE programme as a core activity of stakeholder institutions.	Recognition	Opportunities for improvement

Table 11 – (Continued)

Change payment structures as an incentive to improve service delivery

Improve on record keeping by providing dedicated staff to focus on DE activities. Tutorials

Sustained continuity of service delivery through reducing changes of tutors and coordinators.

Improved supervision of tutorials and feedback mechanisms. Supervision

Encourage learners to pass failed modules before progressing to the next level modules

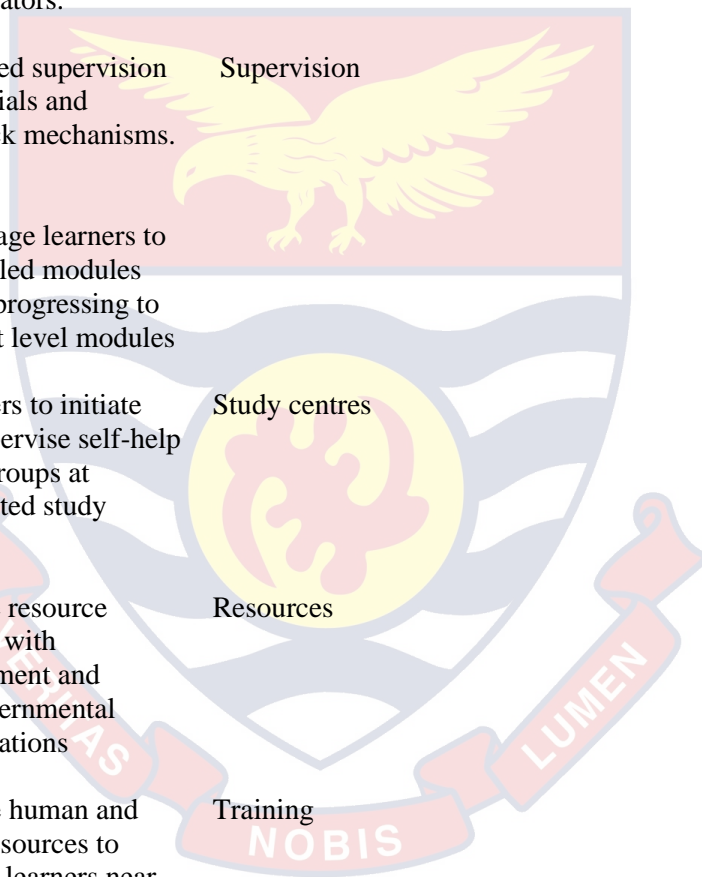
Providers to initiate and supervise self-help study groups at designated study centres. Study centres

Initiate resource sharing with government and nongovernmental organizations. Resources

Provide human and other resources to support learners near where they live and work. Training

Provide staff training in DE skills. Communication

Provide access to technology to interact with tutors through emails.



In this section, data were analysed under the category of stakeholder involvement in the implementation of learner support services in order to answer the research questions which sought to assess the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and the barriers encountered during the implementation of learner support services, the first sub-category addressed the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders while the second sub-category dealt with the constraints on implementation. These were analysed as Roles and responsibilities and Implementation constraints.

As explained in Chapter one, the DE programme was a joint venture, in which different stakeholder institutions were responsible for the development, implementation and management of all the activities of the programme. This section examines how the stakeholders administered and managed learner support services in order to ensure their effectiveness and why students dropout of the programme. In the sub-category of roles and responsibilities, data were analysed as communication, programme ownership supervision, resource, counselling, academic support and administrative support.

In this section, I investigated the existing management processes and procedures in stakeholder institutions to determine whether they facilitated the coordination and supervision of different functions of learner support services, such as conducting tutorials, administering assignments, and keeping records.

Asked to comment on how learner support services were conducted Mod, one of the managers remarked :

“ We run a diploma programme using two modes... The students...who come through the distance mode...are not any different except they only come for tutorials. In terms

of support for them, it is really the same support that I give...the conventional ones.”

The institutional manager at one of the study centres perceived the DE programme as part of other college activities that dealt with the pre-service programme. These views were shared by Pat, one of the managers, whose college hosts distance learners for tutorial sessions. Pat said:

“Distance learners are coming to an institution that is running, and... whatever is available in the areas that they have to undertake, they have to access and in my view, it is exactly what was happening. If something was not there...for the conventional students, there was no way distance learners could access them. “

These responses suggest that all the services at stakeholder institutions that were required for the DE programme were available to distance learners. Commenting on the management of support activities, one of the institutional managers Mod, stated that the supervision of learner support services was one of his responsibilities. His brief included ensuring that tutors were available to conduct tutorials. Mod said that:

Anyone who commits himself/herself as a tutor...becomes my responsibility. And once you enlist to be a tutor, I will demand that if you do not attend your sessions, I be informed...by the coordinator...Things come to this office when they are really bad. I have not been informed of people not attending tutorials, or not supervising projects.

Thus, while the supervision of learner support is carried out by the programme coordinator, the college manager is ultimately responsible for these activities. Commenting on procedures to ensure that learner support services were provided as scheduled, Mod one of the managers remarked:

There is a specific officer assigned to ensure that this programme is implemented ...the coordinator...who ensures that the timetables are adhered to and...the tutors take...groups in terms of...delivery and assessment and availability of the necessary facilities. Those are the people who are involved in the processes. I participate in...ensuring that the environment is ready for their involvement...

It appeared that the manager was not directly involved in the management and supervision of learner support services at the college. This could explain why there were no procedures for administering tutorial support and processing assignments. This view was shared by one of the tutors (tutor 1) who said :

I have been in this programme ever since it started. I don't remember Mr X... being part of this...even when the exams are written Mr X is supposed to be up on his feet to ensure that things are going right. I have always seen the coordinator's role to be very difficult because...you are carrying this whole thing...he was supposed to be covered by the administration.

Participants' comments about stakeholder involvement in the study centre suggest that there was less involvement in the supervision of learner support activities, that is why student dropout of the programme and

completion rate is low. Mod one of the managers commented on the actions taken against tutors who did not attend scheduled tutorials:

“ I don't know if there are any procedures relating to that...I am just hosting people who come from elsewhere to deliver. Some of them happen to be lecturers in this institution but given the diversity of the personnel, it has never been possible to us to know... how we ... treat them when they are in the programme ”

This appeared contrary to what management is expected from management in stakeholder institutions to supervise tutors, and all other part time staff, as well as manage and supervise all DE learner support activities. However, according to Vicent one of the managers, their supervisory roles were limited by the fact that part-time staff were not under the authority of institutional managers. He said that:

Some tutors come from secondary schools...the private sector... from their own employing agencies... to deliver tutorials and assignment processes. You are likely to find problems when you attempt to deal with that individual...it is necessary that we work with necessary laid-down conditions for that particular programme. But that has been absent.

This suggests that stakeholder institutions do not have guidelines enabling them to supervise learner support activities in their institutions. This could further explain distance learners' reactions to the frustrations they experienced because of the frequent changes of tutors and the lack of feedback on their assessment work, which were analysed in this chapter. The findings also showed that stakeholder institutions did not understand their roles and

responsibilities, which included facilitating learner-tutor and peer interaction, helping to reduce feelings of isolation emanating from physical separation between learners, tutors, other learners and the DE institution, as discussed in the definitions of DE in Chapter two. Commenting on the need to reduce distance learners' isolation, coordinator 1 remarked:

Distance learning is a very isolating mode of delivery and therefore tutorials are meant to interrupt the isolation because it gives learners opportunity to interact with their peers and their tutors, and the institution, because when they come for tutorials that is when they are able to address issues related to tutorials and assessment.

Providing counselling support is a further responsibility of stakeholder institutions. However, the data indicated that stakeholder institutions did not encourage the responsible departments to ensure that distance learners received non-academic counselling to help them deal with their personal and emotional problems. Because of logistical constraints, the support services at stakeholder institutions did not include counselling, as noted by coordinator 3.

“Colleges were supposed to extend all the services to distance learners, but practically speaking...if Counselling Department is not participating, then there is no way counselling can be available to distance learners.. .coordinators...provide counselling...on academic regulations...it's been a voluntary thing”

Coordinator 3 also said that the reason why distance learners were unable to receive counselling in colleges was because DE activities were not recognised as part of the college activities:

“ The mainstreaming is still a big problem... recognition...where ownership is concerned...when it comes to personal counselling ...the counselling centre is not open to distance learners...when the counsellors are not participating in distance education.”

This suggests that, the integration of DE activities in the management of stakeholder institutions so as to ensure infrastructural adjustments in these institutions, was not implemented. Such adjustments could have addressed traditional power structures in order to integrate DE activities with other institutional activities. This was confirmed by the findings which revealed that the DE activities were not viewed as part of the core business of the stakeholder institutions and that participation by institutional staff was optional and voluntary.

The other factor in the sub-category of stakeholder roles and responsibilities was concerned with the decentralising of learner support services and assessing the type of support needed by distance learners in the regions where they lived and worked, both before and after the tutorial sessions. Asked to comment on their roles in support services in the DE programme, coordinator from one of the study centres, said that one of their responsibilities was to keep in contact with distance learners in between tutorial sessions and to encourage them to attend scheduled tutorials. He explained that:

“ If somebody doesn't come ... we follow them up to... check why they didn't turn up... we have records...we follow them up by telephone and request them to go and meet their coordinator at the college and discuss.”

These comments highlight the limitations in the provision of administrative support manifested in the form of poor service delivery, including poor record keeping, which contributed to students dropout, incomplete results and slowed down distance learners' progress and programme completion. To remedy this, participants advocated for efficient administrative support, starting from admission and continuing through registration, tutorial delivery, assessment and records management, and addressing distance learners' complaints. The way such problems were handled could make the difference between a student persisting with an academic programme or withdrawing from it. Such a system was not implemented in the DE programme. A further limitation was associated with ownership of the programmes by the institutional managers as noted by one of the learner support coordinators. (Coordinator1) who said that:

“ Support depends on the ownership of the programme from the college management. Where there is support of the college principal, learners access most of the services, and are assisted.”

My findings revealed the gap between what was expected from the service providers and the reality on the ground.

Research Question Four: What barriers influence the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme towards progression, programme completion and dropout?

Implementation constraints looks at the hindrances that were encountered during the implementation of learner support services. The aim was to gain an understanding of the research question, What were the barriers

to the implementation of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme. This question addressed the sub-category barriers related to implementation constraints, absenteeism, resource, study centre, feedback, payment, transfer and recognition.

The constraints related to monitoring of feedback, absenteeism and lack of access to resources. In this section, the findings indicate that lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms contributed to tutor absenteeism, frequent changes of tutors, loss of assignment scripts and poor record keeping, which also inhibited the provision of timely feedback, leading to incomplete results, dropouts and delays in programme completion. Apart from management constraints, lack of planning of the DE curriculum to determine distance learners' content workload, coupled with their other responsibilities, could reduce learners' motivation to persist on the programme, as noted by (Mod) one of the institutional managers who said:

You needed to recognise that you are enrolling mature entrants...people who already...are employed ...who have...gone through some processes of learning, in the same area. So when...they designed the curriculum...they regarded them as new.... So we overcrowded the academic programme and that alone meant that the environment was very stressful, they are teaching...marking. Instead of developing interest in the learning, they developed some kind of disinterest.

Further factors that emerged from the interviews were the lack of empathetic management structures and of commitment by part-time tutors to the support services, as confirmed by one of the learner support coordinators, (coordinator 3) who explained that:

Until this DE is given recognition as the conventional programme, the activities will be compromised because of lack of management structures in the colleges.... if in DE the administrators were calling tutor if they are not attending tutorials, things would improve... because...sometimes somebody just wants to make money..., from the part-time programme

Similar views were expressed by distance learners who reported that part-time staff was not committed to their work, which was reflected in tutor absenteeism, frequent changes of tutors, and lack of feedback due to the loss of scripts. There was also a lack of commitment in the supervision of research projects, as noted by Mod, one of the institutional managers, who said that:

“There has been very little commitment from the tutors... to the extent that ...the amount of input from the tutors...particularly when you look at the projects and...the portfolios sometimes they were questionable...there wasn't sufficient supervision provided by the tutor.”

Another institutional manager (Pat) attributed absenteeism and lack of commitment to the fact that participation in the DE activities by the staff in the stakeholder institutions was voluntary:

“I can't insist they participate in the tutorials...Some lecturers do not want to do this tutoring, and there is not much you can do as long as they have not entered into an agreement to do so, because there is extra pay for it.”

Another factor which could explain participants' views on the lack of commitment by some of the tutors was the failure to monitor the DE programme activities as stated by coordinator 1 :

“ The problem is lack of monitoring and evaluation, coordination inclusive ... one of the students ...gave me a letter... for the research project when she had not even gone for second year in the programme... So the coordination, the monitoring... especially, the colleges, nobody cares.”

These limitations suggested there was a gap in the monitoring of DE support provision which needed to be filled. It also emerged that there was only a limited follow-up of distance learners who were scattered in schools all over Ghana. Failure to share information about transferred teachers who were also distance learners further inhibited the provision of effective support services in the DE programme, as stated by May one of the participants:

“ We don't work like a system because it's a partnership. You find that a teacher is registered in Attraco...then without notice he or she will be transfer to a place far away from the college where you are registered. It disrupts the student's studies and some drop out because of that.”

These views were shared by coordinator 2, said that:

Those people are suffering. When the students go to tutorials they are with their tutors, when they are out there in their schools they are on their own ... see students...when you are visiting a school for something else... there is no personnel that is...supporting DE

learners, especially at the area where...there is no communication.

Other factors which may have contributed to poor monitoring of DE learner support activities include a lack of proper briefing about the roles and responsibilities of institutional managers. Mod referred to this lack of briefing about roles and responsibilities as follows:

The other challenge that has been of concern is that...when the spill-over was done...there wasn't any proper and systematic way of doing it. It was only an expectation that college management had to be involved, which is another mistake...and the programme itself had personnel appointed and paid for overseeing it. It was only...when there were problems that ...institutions started to step in...which was unfair because it wasn't done properly.

These views were echoed by another participant, (DD) who indicated that the stakeholders were not adequately informed or prepared for their roles and responsibilities in carrying out the DE learner support activities. In this regard DD said that:

Lack of knowledge about the distance mode, DE, is in itself a barrier. We don't know what it is, we don't know the difference between the lecturer who teaches students every day for three years and the one who teaches DE students only for a number of hours during tutorial session, and the rest of the time the students are on their own. We didn't do a pilot for the DE whereas for the conventional diploma we did a pilot, evaluated, and then implemented it full scale.

These comments suggest that some of the stakeholders did not have knowledge and skills in DE. As a result, it was difficult for them to implement effective learner support services, as confirmed by Coordinator 2, who said:

“ The other barrier is the changeover of the directors. At times one director will have a vision towards the whole programme and the coming in one will have a different vision. So the turnover of the directors...really hinders the progress of the programme.”

Staff from one centre (tutor 2) said that because of the lack of consistent supervision and monitoring of research projects, it was difficult to determine whether some of the learners had carried out the research projects on their own, or if they had asked other people to assist them. Tutor 2 had this to say on the matter said:

“ Because of lack of support...some students end up plagiarising. They will ask someone to do the work for them. And at the end of graduation a student is empty...because all the work is either done by her child in the house or she would rather prefer to pay money to somebody...they are not confident. “

Doubts about the originality of research projects were shared by another participant, (participant 1) who said:

“ They don't fear to pay money”

Asked to elaborate on how they could prove that such plagiarism was taking place in the writing of research projects, (TT) one of the coordinators explained:

The student herself will say... these things, I did 1, 2, 3 myself. After all, I got the certificate at the end of the

day. The other students will tell us, student so and so has been hiring so and so to do the work for her. And the school heads themselves would say, your student is just as good as not enrolling in the programme and such student...would have passed...and graduated.

Uncertainty about the originality of the research projects, arising from a lack of continuity in the supervision between the tutorial sessions and the monitoring of learner support by the stakeholders, could also raise questions as to whether distance learners acquired appropriate research skills from the DE programme. These doubts were shared by one of the tutors,(tutor 1) who warned that:

“ It is difficult to prove that somebody had cheated. But you can see that this person... the way it has been written... and the kind of student that you know... you don't expect that kind of work from them, but how do you prove that? “

Thus the limited supervision of research projects and other practical subjects emerged clearly as a weakness in the provision of effective learner support services. One of the tutors confirmed that the lapse after learners met their tutors for the supervision of research projects could be one of the factors which contributed to cheating. In reference to this tutor 3 said:

“ May be the strategies that are put in place do not really discourage cheating. This issue of a lapse...with no contact... then we have people after a long time...they can actually cheat because they are given more room to cheat.”

In summary, despite the existence which mandated the stakeholders to create a network of study centres, contact with distance learners in between the tutorial sessions was limited since support services were not available near where they lived and worked.

Payment as an Incentive for Services Delivery

The last factor which was analysed in the sub-category of implementation constraints dealt with payments for part-time activities. Part-time tutor/markers and programme coordinators in the DE programme were financially compensated as an incentive. However, the payment structure constrained the provision of other services, such as counselling support and logistical support in stakeholder institutions, which were not allowed for in the payment structure as stated by a programme coordinator.(coordinator 1) said that:

“Guidance and counselling department in the Dean’s office...was not available because the distance at...the college is optional...they attach distance with financial gain. If I’m there as a Dean, what am I benefiting?...as a coordinator ...as a tutor you are getting something.”

The ability of other members of staff in stakeholder institutions to provide services such as counselling support was also constrained by the payment structure, as explained by (Mod) one of the institutional managers:

Other members of the hosting institution started feeling agitated by the fact that those who delivered the programme were paid for the services, but those who supported the programme were not paid, although they were expected to participate in the same way, and that

created some kind of dissatisfaction...because they didn't deliver the most efficient service. In a sense, that affected the delivery of support...on the programme.

These views were shared by (Coordinator 1) one of the learner support coordinators when commenting on attempts to access non-academic services, such as photocopying or cleaning:

“Sometimes it was so difficult that if you asked even a cleaner to clean the classroom they would say... no! no! these are distance learners!! Lecturers are paid...sometimes you could not photocopy for distance learners since people would ask, why are lecturers paid and I am not paid? “

The data further revealed that the payment structure remunerated different activities, such as tutorials and assessment, but did not facilitate effective service delivery, as noted by (Mod) one of the institutional managers:

The nature of the payment also contributed...a lot of problems for the programme. You would... pay for every single...activity that the tutors undertake. You are not looking at the desired outcome...because in the process you may find that those pieces are done by different people. That is making the coordination of this programme very difficult.

The stakeholders needed to reinforce accountability in service delivery, by demanding evidence of task completion before responding to a claim for payment, as stated by the learner support coordinator, (coordinator 2) who said:

“ At my centre they have designed a form asking the tutors to fill after teaching and that form is attached to the payment claim form.”

Delayed payments discouraged members of staff in stakeholder institutions from participating in the DE programme, as stated by(tutor 2) who said:

“ Payments are not timely. They are not made on time, and as a result you find that some tutors have dropped out, because they are dissatisfied with the service...”

These views were shared by another tutor, who said:

“ The major barriers...this financial issue... That is a support service on its own... that is our timely feed-back ,we want four weeks...for that money”

However, another institutional manager (Pat) suggested that instead of paying for part-time activities, it would be better to strengthen those institutional resources which are also available for use by distance learners:

You get paid for tutoring, invigilation and setting, marking exams...which teacher gets...paid for setting tests? I would suggest that...the conventional programme facilities be improved because the DE students will also benefit ...because they utilise these resources, such as equipping computer labs, and science laboratories.

In this sub-category, while payments for part-time activities were viewed as an incentive for institutional staff to participate in the DE programmes, the payment structures and delays in payments discouraged some of the staff from offering their services. The management and coordination of

payments for part-time activities thus emerged as another of the weaknesses of learner support services in the DE programme.

In concluding the analysis of the sub-category implementation constraints, the evidence revealed various factors that hindered the implementation of effective learner support services, some of which made students drop out of the programme are summarised here. There was a lack of clarity among stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities in the management of the support services, including access to learning resources. Also, participants attributed poor service delivery, such as tutor absenteeism, to limited monitoring by the stakeholder institutions. This in turn was attributed to some students dropping out of the programme, lack of ownership and recognition of the DE programme as part of the activities of the institutions. Payment for part-time tutoring was meant to be an incentive, but did not apply in all cases, and staff who were not covered in the payment structure were reluctant to serve on the DE programme.

Research Question Five: What Opportunities exists in the implementation of effective learner support services in UEW DE programme towards progression ,programme completion and dropout

The last research question related to participants' views on improvements that could be implemented in order to provide effective learner support services in UEW DE programme so that students' will stay on the programme till completion. To answer this question, data were analysed which dealt with opportunities for improvement, as indicated as communication, tutorials, training, recognition, supervision, study centres,resource.

As indicated in Chapter one, the main issue that inspired me to carry out this study was to discover why some students will enroll on UEW DE programme and dropout despite the provision of learner support services in the DE programme. This puzzle motivated me to explore the contribution of support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion. In this chapter, one issue appeared repeatedly in the findings, namely the need for sustained interaction between learners and tutors, their peers, and the DE institution, together with access to learning resources so as to reduce the physical and psychological distance between learners and support providers. In the sub-category about opportunities for improvement, participants suggested helping distance learners to complete their studies by decentralising support services, so as to reach learners near where they lived and worked, as confirmed by one of the tutors, who said:

We need more support from...our senior management...and from education officers...at education office. We have to make full use of them...because education office are manned by people who have Masters Degrees, and some have doctorates (Ph.Ds). They have retired...we could use them...for project supervision so that we minimise the travelling from faraway places. Let's utilise them, ...to supervise, so that learners can complete their projects.

These findings confirm participants' views that some distance learners were abandoning the programme and not completing their studies because only limited academic support was provided outside the tutorial sessions. This was especially so in the supervision of research projects, which was hampered by the long distances between the learners and supervisors of their

research work. To improve the situation, one of the participants recommended that the programme be transferred to a government institution whose main responsibility would be to run DE programmes. Participant 1 who said:

“ You already have existing distance education institutions. Take Colleges of Education for instance, they are running distance education courses. This could be one of those courses that they run ...all the logistics would be there so they can use whatever support structures that are already in existence.”

These comments indicate that there was a clear need for more direct interaction between learners, tutors and other learners in study centres, such as the education centres, where distance learners could meet and discuss content with their tutors and with other learners. To improve the supervision of research projects, a participant (Pee) suggested increasing access to the required resources and using technology to facilitate communication between learners and their research project supervisors:

They should have...access to e-mail...access to technology...ICT resources, technologically because distance education requires a lot of technological resources. We need more supervisors and we need technology for them to be able to be sending their research projects to their teachers ... through e-mails so that there is constant follow-up, not to be meeting a teacher after three, four months when there is nothing that has been going on in supervision

The same participant suggested giving distance learners greater access to libraries:

To me, it is lack of resources ...they need staff to supervise students, they need access to libraries...They need transport to travel up and down... some of them in real, real remote areas... human resources.

For the stakeholders, the implication of these findings was that they needed to explore the available human resources and technology to implement decentralised support services at study centres which are both flexible and accessible to distance learners. The participants acknowledged the potential of the DE programme in upgrading Certificate 'A' holders, but would like to see more consistency, for example by making some of the activities, such as the coordination of support services in stakeholder institutions into full-time jobs, as maintained by DD, one of the participants, who said:

We need focus... this ...DE can help to upgrade teachers...let's have the programme which is focused. It has all the facilities, teachers are there! Not just bringing someone...as part time...when we are here... she can coordinate all these activities but from there, it just... stops...even if it is a distance programme, let it have its own staff, who can actually facilitate this thing... If there is staff, the number of years can be reduced, from four years.

These views were shared by another participant(Pee) who proposed that, to improve and coordinate the management and supervision of learner support services in stakeholder institutions, the role of the part-time DE coordinator could be converted to a full-time position at the level of a head of department. (Pee) said:

We are recommending that the Ministry of Education recognise the DE office as a full-time establishment with its own staff, secretaries, telephones... If this programme can be recognised...some of the problems we are experiencing in learner support can be reduced or ...eliminated. This office can be pegged ...at the level of a Head of Department so that the coordinator can be presenting his/her own results just like any other head of department. But now DE exists just as an after thought in colleges.

Another participant (DD) called for staff who could match the criteria for effective learner support services as explained in Chapter 1:

“There is a lot of work load for them, that is why they don’t attend to, and address everything that we need. There is a work load problem. So better they face one area, because of this workload. “

In addition to training service providers, the findings also stressed the need for stakeholders to provide physical resources in the form of an enabling environment. May suggested that:

“ It should be...a conducive common room with facilities... a special computer, with functions that will allow for the analysis of results, and specific programmes, telephone, fax, photocopying facilities... and tea, so that coordinators do not waste time roaming about looking for food.”

In concluding analysis of the findings under the sub-category of opportunities for improvement, I isolated a number of factors that could facilitate the provision of effective learner support services. Staff who are

engaged in such services should be trained and committed to the DE programme, and should be employed full-time in coordinating these activities.

Distance learners should have access to the required learning resources and technology to ensure regular communication between them and their tutors, particularly in the supervision of research projects. Decentralised support services should be introduced at study centres, such as education centres and senior high schools, coupled with the training of learner support providers in DE skills.

Discussion of the Findings

This study explored participants' perceptions, views and opinions on the influence of support services on dropouts among UEW distance education students' and perception they held about learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DE programme. The discussion of the findings is guided by three themes, satisfaction, accessibility and responsiveness, and DE policy gaps, in the implementation of learner support services. The theme of satisfaction emerged from distance learners' perceptions of the usefulness of learner support services in meeting their expectations, while the theme of accessibility and responsiveness derived from participants' views on the strengths and weaknesses of support services in meeting distance learners' needs. The theme of DE policy gaps emerged from perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and intermediaries in implementing learner support services. These themes are further related to the criteria for the provision of effective learner support services which were explained in Chapter one.

Satisfaction with Learner Support Services

The findings examined participants' views about distance learners' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with learner support services in the UEW DE programme. The data found that distance learners were motivated to enrol in the UEW DE programme to increase their knowledge and skills in their subject areas, to gain higher qualifications, and to improve their morale and confidence in the teaching profession. They saw that obtaining further qualifications as a ladder would elevate them to teach higher classes, such as Upper Primary and Junior High Schools which will help them improve their social status and gain recognition and respect from their colleagues. They would also get a chance for promotion and a higher salary upon graduation. They also appreciated the opportunity to acquire study skills which they could apply in leadership roles, such as school head or departmental heads. Those who were already in positions of leadership appreciated the chance to improve their academic and professional qualifications, not least because these would help to protect them from the insecurity of competition from younger and more qualified teachers who worked under them in primary schools.

The findings showed that distance learners saw the major role of learner support services as assisting them in carrying out their studies successfully. Interacting regularly with tutors and other institutional resources was perceived as necessary, especially since they were studying in lonely environments where they were isolated from their tutors, from each other and from the stakeholder institutions. It also emerged that distance learners appreciated tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction, in which tutors explained and clarified difficult concepts, discussing content and helping them

to arrive at meanings in their subject areas. Learners also appreciated timely feedback and constructive comments on assignments since these helped them maintain two-way communication with their tutors. This feedback enabled them both to study individually and to conduct discussions in self-help study groups. Learners who received timely and constructive feedback were empowered to judge their own learning progress and avoid similar mistakes when doing their next assignments. Those who had access to learning resources, such as libraries, computer and science laboratories, gained skills in science and other practical subjects. To cope with personal problems, distance learners resorted to and obtained support from their family, children, friends and their employers.

While in theory distance learners appreciated the provision of learner support services, in practice they experienced frustration in gaining access to such services. Analysis of learner profiles showed that they were a heterogeneous group in terms of their diversity in age, academic backgrounds, work experience and geographical location. The findings indicated that these factors were not taken into consideration in the planning stage resulting to the implementation of unresponsive learner support services. This claim is reflected in learners' views about difficult content in subjects such as maths and science which did not appear to be planned for in the provision of academic support. The identified needs of known distance learners in terms of their demographic profiles, previous educational backgrounds, geographical locations and learning styles, were not addressed. It was clear that the learner support providers did not have information about learner expectations and needs. From this, it could be concluded that distance learners' needs for

academic counselling and administrative support were not known and therefore not met. Lack of access to tutors due to frequent absenteeism and change of tutors during scheduled tutorials resulted in learners not receiving explanations of difficult content or feedback on their assignments regularly. Tutor absenteeism and frequent change of tutors during tutorial sessions were frustrating experiences for distance learners, interfering with the logical flow of content since there was no proper handover of tutorial groups from one tutor to another. Learners who did not receive feedback on assignments due to losses and poor record keeping were forced to rewrite the lost assignments, which increased their workload. Thus, tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, failure to provide timely and constructive feedback and comments on assessment work, and loss of scripts due to poor record keeping, were among the factors that contributed to some students dropout, incomplete results and delayed programme completion for distance learners. Effective supervision of research projects was also hindered by lack of access to tutors and other learners outside the tutorial sessions, a factor that inhibited learners with incomplete results from completing their compulsory research projects. Giving feedback on assignments and other practical activities, such as research projects, is part of the tutorial function in DE. Distance learners were dissatisfied with the use of non participatory tutorial techniques such as reading the modules out in class, because this approach did not take account of their characteristics as adults and their work experiences. Students were unable to judge their own progress because of the lack of constructive comments and the failure to explain the marks awarded. Poor record keeping also contributed to mistakes in the final results, which retarded the progress of

the affected learners. The findings indicated that there was negligence in the management, supervision and monitoring of the academic support services in some stakeholder institutions, where there appeared to be no procedures for the administration of assignments.

Studying through the DE mode is an individual activity for which distance learners need to find convenient places to study, such as the library. In this study, the findings established that these learners had trouble finding quiet places to study, either at their places of work or at home. In some instances, lack of support from uncooperative spouses interfered with their progress. Those working in remote rural areas with no libraries for reference and no electricity found it difficult to do their assignments and/or study at night after work because of fatigue, a factor which emerged as one of the causes of dropout and incomplete results. During the tutorial sessions, distance learners at the UEW had access to the library during the weekends, while learners attending tutorials at the other study centre did not have access to library. This experience was frustrating for distance learners who could not use the library. This rigidity in the control of resources was not in line with the philosophy of DE, in which flexible learning requires institutions to relax their scheduling to suit the circumstances and contexts of distance learners. The findings further showed that limited supervision and monitoring of tutorial support by senior management in some of the stakeholder institutions contributed to the weaknesses in the learner support services in the DE programme. It could be inferred from this that poor management in these institutions added to delayed feedback, loss of assignment scripts and poor

record keeping, leading to dropout and delays in completion for distance learners.

Being teachers, parents, spouses and students meant that distance learners carried multiple responsibilities and heavy workloads, which competed for their time and could interfere with their progress. This raises the issue of the need for employers to support distance learners by allocating them study leave. The physical distances between students and their tutors and other learners, as well as lack of public transport and of telephone networks, made frequent contact outside tutorial sessions difficult. These challenges were among the factors that led distance learners to believe that the nature of academic, counselling and administrative support provided hindered rather than helped their progress and programme completion in the DE programme.

Accessibility and Responsiveness

The theme of accessibility and responsiveness stems from participants' perceptions about the accessibility and appropriateness of learner support services in facilitating distance learners' successful completion of the DE programme. As discussed in the section, the main strength of learner support services was the provision of academic support in the form of learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction, enabling distance learners to benefit from discussion of content with their tutors and other learners. The provision of two-way communication through feedback and comments on assignments and the supervision of research projects to enable learners to judge their own progress emerged as further strengths of learner support services. Participants also indicated that support providers or intermediaries were expected to

maintain order through proper documentation, keeping correct records and ensuring that distance learners had access to learning resources. Yet another strength was in facilitating distance learners' access to resources such as libraries, computers and science laboratories, particularly necessary for the acquisition of skills in practical subjects. Despite these strengths, the findings identified weaknesses which interfered with the accessibility and responsiveness of learner support services and hindered progress and programme completion.

Lack of access to tutors during scheduled tutorials and in between the tutorial sessions did not facilitate discussion of content of this chapter, emerged as indicators that the existing academic support was not responsive to the needs of distance learners. The fact that some tutors did not involve these learners in active discussions, but instead read the module during tutorial sessions, further deterred learners from attending tutorial sessions. Tutors who were not competent in computer literacy and research skills were perceived as incapable of helping learners to acquire such skills. The support services also failed to address the physical distances between learners, tutors and other learners or to provide decentralised support at regional centres. Lack of a network of support close to where the learners lived and worked hindered learner-tutor and learner-learner contact, particularly for those in remote areas characterised by poor public transport and poor telephone networks. Although there was evidence that distance learners needed counselling on non-academic problems, such support was inadequate in the DE programme.

Lack of guidelines to facilitate access to services at stakeholder institutions raises concerns about the execution of stakeholder roles,

responsibilities and their commitment to the monitoring and supervision of support services. That distance learners had limited access to learning resources such as libraries, computer and science laboratories and reference materials, emerged as one of the factors that contributed to dropouts and delays in programme completion. This raises the issue of commitment to the provision of effective learner support services at institutions where access to libraries, computer and science laboratories was limited, although the facilities were available in the college. In contrast, one of the study centres access was constrained by lack of resources. In this context, participants suggested that stakeholders liaise with other institutions for the shared use of resources so as to complement government initiatives in providing learning resources. Partnerships could be forged with the community and other institutions to facilitate shared use of resources.

Barriers to the provision of learner support services constrained and slowed distance learners' progress, dropout and programme completion. The major roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved the management, supervision and monitoring of academic, counselling and administrative support services in order, as one participant put it, to maintain order to take care of their wellbeing. This would ensure that tutors will attend scheduled tutorial sessions and provide timely feedback on assessment work. But, the stakeholders encountered various challenges and barriers to the creation of support services that would be responsive to the needs of distance learners. There were no measures to address tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, although this caused frequent changes of tutors. This was coupled with the loss of assignment scripts due to poor record keeping and delayed feedback on

assessment work. Stakeholder institutions had not developed measures to ensure continuity of care and follow-up when there were changes of tutors. Due to lack of contractual agreements, institutional managers found it difficult to discipline part-time staff for failing to attend scheduled tutorials or for delaying feedback on assignments. This omission in the planning of the DE programme was addressed by Haughey (2012) and Wolcott (2003) who advise stakeholder institutions to make contractual agreements with part-time staff in order to clarify their roles. Holmberg (2003) stresses the need for the institution to mediate between learners and part-time staff so as to ensure relevant and responsive academic support. The findings showed that at the time of this study, no such processes and procedures were in place in the stakeholder institutions relating to the UEW DE programme. The other barrier to responsive learner support services resulted from perceptions that participation in UEW DE activities by members of staff in the stakeholder institutions was voluntary and optional.

Although academic and counselling support emerged as vital for enhancing distance learners' progress and completion, their needs were not understood or considered to be part of the core business of these institutions. Failure to recognise the DE programme stemmed from a lack of shared goals and rules among academic and administrative staff. Among staff in stakeholder institutions at present there is no common understanding of the needs of distance learners, which explains why tutors find it difficult to access services such as photocopying of learning materials for such learners.

To improve the provision of such services, the participants offered a number of suggestions for consideration by stakeholders. The findings

suggested that there was need to establish support structures and resources at study centres near where learners live and work in order to strengthen learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction. Part-time staff in stakeholder institutions and at regional study centres should be trained in DE skills so that they understand the circumstances of distance learners and be empowered to support them. Participants also called for organised and supervised self-help study groups at designated study centres, such as the education centres and secondary schools, where distance learners could interact with tutors and other learners in between the tutorial sessions, particularly in the supervision of research projects and facilitate access to learning resources. From the literature (Simonson and Bauck 2003) support the need to improve communication between learners and their tutors through the use of various technologies such as e-mail and mobile telephones to enhance interaction, particularly in the supervision of research projects. This suggestion has implications for stakeholders to make technology available for use in enhancing interaction between learners and their tutors.

Perceptions about strengths and weaknesses of learner support services

The findings indicated that the main purpose and strength of learner support services was to assist distance learners to go successfully through the programme of study. A major weakness which emerged was that the learner support services did not address the diversity of distance learners who were a heterogeneous group in terms of age, educational background, and work experience, as discussed in Chapter one and Chapter three . Some learners had been out of school for more than 20 years which indicated that they needed

assistance in study skills, particularly in conducting research and using a computer. Although the data show that learners still in school benefited from contacts with tutors and other learners, for other students, limited contact with tutors and other learners, together with lack of access to learning resources, were major weaknesses which slowed down their learning and contributed to their dropout and incomplete results.

Delayed feedback was another weakness. Holmberg (1985), Melton (2002), Robinson (1989) and Welch & Reed (n.d) recommend that feedback, which is a measure of quality in DE, should be given between 14 and 21 days from the date of submission of assignments. Learner support services were also offered in a haphazard manner in stakeholder institutions due to lack of policy guidelines and management structures for regulating tutorial support and feedback mechanisms.

Perceptions about stakeholder roles and responsibilities

Learner support services were not perceived by the providers as the core business of stakeholder institutions. Lack of mainstreaming of the DE programme as part of the activities of stakeholder institutions explains the lack of commitment in the provision of academic support by tutors who failed to attend scheduled tutorials or provide feedback on assignments. Loss of assignments contributed to delays in programme completion and dropout of some learners. This shows a failure by the stakeholder institutions to facilitate effective management, supervision and monitoring of their learner support services. There was limited learner-tutor and learner-learner contact and limited or non-existent access to learning resources outside the scheduled

tutorials. There was also no decentralised learner support services designed to reduce physical distances between learners, tutors and the staff in the stakeholder institutions. The absence of policy and related implementation guidelines to facilitate the provision of academic support limited institutional managers in their efforts to supervise and monitor tutorial activities, such that part-time tutors were not called upon to sign contractual agreements defining their roles and responsibilities. This deficiency in policy provision emerged as one of the constraints that hindered the introduction of effective academic, counselling and administrative support. Although the part-time staff who had received orientation in DE skills said they had benefited from the training, the stakeholders who had not acquired DE skills admitted they were not adequately prepared for their roles in the management and supervision of learner support services.

Barriers inhibiting implementation and opportunities for improvement

Limited supervision of research projects emerged as one of the major barriers that slowed distance learners' progress and programme completion. Restricted contact between learners and their tutors, working in remote areas with little or no public transport or network connectivity, together with institutional barriers such as being denied permission to attend tutorial sessions emerged as some of the major barriers that hindered contact between learners and their tutors. The findings revealed that there is a need for more organised and sustained interaction between learners and their tutors at designated study centres in order to monitor learners' progress regularly. As advised by Melton (2002), Rashid (2009) and Rennie and Mason (2007), there

is need for the existence of decentralised learner support services near to where distance learners live and work so that learners can access them individually or in groups. This can be made possible by sharing resources with other institutions such as community secondary schools and education centres near where distance learners live. Communications technology (ICT), such as e-mail, should be introduced to facilitate regular communication between distance learners and their tutors in the supervision of research projects. Participants also thought that qualified retired people could be used to help distance learners in their research projects, but would first require orientation in DE skills to empower them to offer effective support in the DE programme.

Need for Empathetic Learner Support Services

The findings further indicated that learner support providers needed to understand the particular circumstances of distance learners so that as one participant noted, they could be: more empathetic to their needs. In this regard, I needed to understand the implication of theories of DE and the constructivist theories in the provision of learner support services in the DE programme.

The theory of distance education based on empathy by Holmberg (2003), urges supporting institutions to enhance empathy by mediating and facilitating frequent communication between learners and those who provide support services. This theory indicates that DE institutions should ensure learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction, and timely feedback through short turnaround times. The data in this chapter showed that distance learners were satisfied with tutorial sessions when tutors did not change too frequently and when constructive feedback was given on assessment work. It also emerged

that distance learners needed timely feedback in order to judge their own progress. However, the findings also revealed that poor management and supervision of learner-tutor interaction contributed to tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials and delayed feedback on assessment work, thus delaying the learners' programme completion and making some dropping out of the programme. The limited access to learning resources also suggested that stakeholder institutions did not empathise with the circumstances of distance learners.

There was a clear need for learner support providers to give distance learners study skills which would enable them to learn at anytime, anywhere. But, creating independent learners was hampered by the limited learner-tutor interaction, which took place only during school vacations and was almost absent in between the tutorial sessions. This suggested that learner support services did not facilitate interaction or frequent communication between learners and service providers. The findings further stressed the need for support providers to be trained in appropriate DE skills so that they could offer effective academic, counselling and administrative support. I found that participants were satisfied with tutorial techniques which encouraged discussion of content with the tutor as a facilitator. Stakeholders have a responsibility to select and implement the most empathetic and appropriate academic support approach, one which would enable learners to construct knowledge relating to their own experiences and their environments.

Implications of Findings for Distance Learners' Progress

In this section, I present the main findings and their implications for effective learner support in the DE programme.

A major weakness of learner support services in the UEW DE programme was that they were not based on a scientifically established needs assessment of a known individual or group of learners. This contradicts views from the reviewed literature where Melton (2002), Simpson (2002) and (Thorpe, (1994), assert that learner support services should address the known challenges of distance learners. My findings revealed that distance learners' profiles in terms of their academic strengths and deficiencies and study habits were not known and could therefore not be adequately addressed, which presented a major shortcoming in the provision of learner support services in this programme.

Distance learners said that they were influenced to join the UEW DE programme to elevate their academic and professional qualifications to the diploma and degree level so that they could teach their subjects with confidence. To succeed in their studies, they expected assistance from their tutors throughout the learning process in the form of feedback on mastery of content. Melton (2002) and Simpson (2002) views were supported in the reviewed literature which emphasise the need for tutors to explain and clarify content so as to enable learners to cope with their studies. Although there was evidence that those distance learners who interacted with their tutors benefited from learner support services, those whose tutors were absent expressed dissatisfaction because they were denied the opportunity for feedback. Lack of timely and constructive comments on assignments, failure of communication,

particularly in relation to the supervision of research projects, and lack of access to learning resources, all had a negative impact on distance learners' progress and programme completion.

Data analysed showed that the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders were not clear. This claim is supported by what appears from the findings to be a prevailing lack of commitment and accountability by tutors in giving tutorial support, demonstrated through frequent tutor absenteeism, lack of feedback and loss of assignments. Stakeholder involvement was further weakened by the lack of relevant DE policies, institutional guidelines and structures which could facilitate the implementation of efficient learner support services and ensure students' access to the required resources was discussed.

To strengthen the monitoring and supervision of support services, policy makers could take advice from the reviewed literature (Haughey, 2012; Simonson & Bauck, 2003; Snowball & Sayish, 2007; Wolcott, 2003) which stress the need to re-engineer institutional operations, changing the mindsets of staff and entering into contractual agreements with tutors so as to determine their commitment to the learner support services. Deficiencies in such provision were further demonstrated by the claims that stakeholders initiated learner support services with no induction or training in DE skills to prepare them for their new roles, which weakened their ability as managers and supervisors.

Summary

The implication of the findings of current study show a need to implement flexible learner support services that are accessible to distance learners, irrespective of their geographical location. Such services would address known learner needs, provide assistance from tutors throughout the learning process and show institutional commitment in the provision of clear guidelines and structures to facilitate effective learner support services. The next chapter presents the summary of the whole study, conclusions, recommendations and emerging issues for further research.



CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was motivated by my desire to understand why, despite the provision of learner support services, some students' dropout of the DE programme, had low pass rates and high rates of incomplete results in the UEW DE programme. To resolve this academic puzzle, I needed to find out participants' perceptions about the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion

Also there was a need to understand how the learner support intermediaries (tutors, coordinators, policy makers) perceived and performed their roles and responsibilities in the provision of effective learner support services in the UEW DE programme. The variety of data sources and different data collection methods, such as individual and group interviews, and the review of relevant documents, gave me a basis on which to triangulate data sources and research methods, thus enhancing the trustworthiness, credibility and dependability of the findings. Data analysis was carried out using content analysis. Data were coded in ATLAS ti using the software so as to improve dependability of the findings, as explained in Chapter three. The ATLAS ti coding technique was chosen because I wanted to give the sources a voice, by selecting words and short phrases from actual interviews, as advised by Saldana (2009). This coding technique enabled me to extract actual quotations which were used verbatim during data analysis and interpretation, as presented in Chapter four.

Summary of the Study

1. In this study, the respondents' views and opinions showed that distance learners in the UEW DE programme experienced many learning challenges in the form of academic, demands of employment, and taking care of their dependants, all of which competed with their time to study. These indications, which were supported by the theory of autonomy and independence in the reviewed literature indicate that challenges such as heavy workloads made it difficult for distance learners to juggle their part-time studies with their other responsibilities.

2. The findings further showed that the role of learner support services in UEW DE was to facilitate learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction by bringing learners and tutors together. In this scenario which support the theory of interaction and communication, tutors could help learners to understand difficult course content by defining, explaining, clarifying and exploring the learning materials, both individually and in group tutorials, as well as by giving timely and constructive feedback on assessment work. The findings showed that UEW gave minimal tutor-learner interaction or no learning support in the form of the provision of relevant study skills and counselling for distance learners' progress and programme completion

3. The participants indicated that there was a policy gap in the provision of learner support services in the UEW DE programme. The findings suggested that, although academic, counselling and administrative support were provided in the UEW DE programme, which support the theory of industrialization their implementation was poorly managed in the stakeholder institution. The conclusion that there was poor management and lack of monitoring and

supervision structures was confirmed by participants' views on tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, frequent changes of tutors and the loss of scripts submitted for marking. These constraints delayed feedback in assessing distance learners' activities and subsequently, contributed to dropout and incomplete results and delays in programme completion.

4. The findings suggest apathy from distance learners which is a result of poor learner support management, and a lack of empathy on the part of stakeholders contrary to the theory of distance education based on empathy by Holmberg (2003) which urges support providers to empathise with distance learners by maintaining contact and interaction through regular communication, and timely and constructive feedback within short turnaround times. These were some of the factors leading to dropout, delays and incomplete results in the UEW DE programme.

Conclusions

This study sought to build on existing research into the need for learner support services, both in University of Education, Winneba and in the region as a whole. Although the findings are not generalisable, they could serve as lessons for institutions which want to incorporate learner support services in their DE programmes. One of the main lessons that emerged was that learner support services should be a component part of DE programme and not an add-on. This idea was supported by the participants' views that living and working in areas with poor public transport and poor telephone connectivity made it difficult for the affected learners to access support services. Such

learners were not catered for in the design, development and implementation of support services in the DE programme.

The study demonstrated that conducting a needs assessment to identify the needs of learners was a pre-requisite for the design and implementation of efficient support services. This required learner support providers to assemble learner profiles and develop appropriate services that would be responsive to known learner needs, study habits and geographical locations (Shale 2013; Simpson 2013; Thorpe, 1994;). Lack of information about learner characteristics meant that the support services were not responsive to their needs in the DE programme. This view was reinforced by distance learners' claims that they found some of the content in their syllabus difficult, attributing this to the level of their previous educational backgrounds.

Results from a needs assessment survey could have identified the strengths and weaknesses of distance learners and identified areas where they could have earned credits and reduced the content load and programme duration, bearing in mind that all of them had a previous teacher training course and wide teaching experience prior to enrolment on the DE programme. Information about their geographical distribution could have been used in designing and developing decentralised learner support services, ensuring frequent contact between learners and their tutors and other learners, and bringing learning resources closer to where distance learners lived and worked. This study showed that having knowledge about distance learners' needs and expectations was a stepping stone towards the design and development of effective learner support services.

Isolation of learners from tutors and other learners, poor reading culture, multiple responsibilities and lack of access to learning resources, were among the factors that slowed distance learners' progress and delayed programme completion. The study has shown that learner support services are expected to help distance learners overcome these learning challenges, assist them in coping with difficult content and with personal problems, and give them access to learning resources through the provision of effective academic, counselling and administrative support. These claims were supported by participants' views that learners who completed their studies appeared to receive regular feedback on assignments from their tutors, while those who dropout and those with incomplete results blamed lack of feedback on assignment, tutor absenteeism, loss of assignments and wrong conversion of marks. These conclusions indicate the need to develop criteria for the recruitment of tutors and to regulate the provision of academic and counselling support to ensure that learners interact with their tutors. Proper planning was required to guarantee fitness to purpose of learner support services through the involvement of the different stakeholders, and by so doing, ensure their recognition and ownership (Wolcott, 2003). Implementation guidelines in the form of monitoring and supervision mechanisms should have been developed. While resources were known to exist in stakeholder institutions, there was no guarantee that they would be available to support distance learners.

These observations were supported in the findings which showed that in stakeholder institutions, access to resources such as computers and science laboratories depended on whether or not staff from the relevant departments were participating in the UEW DE programme. Guidelines indicating how

such resources would be accessed needed to be negotiated and developed. Payment, though meant to be an incentive, could also be a barrier and needed to be aligned with the tasks to be carried out by part-time staff.

The study stressed the need for training of staff in UEW DE skills. The fact that tutors, institutional managers and policy makers have expertise in their own areas of specialisation does not mean they understand the DE operations. Capacity building for service providers was essential to prepare and empower them to give effective learner support and empathise with the circumstances of distance learners. Another call was for the diversification of media in learner support in order to improve the frequency of learner-tutor and learner-learner contact, which support the theory of interaction and communication. Although Bates (1992) warns service providers to consider factors such as the cost of technology, the findings indicated that the use of e-mail and mobile phone technology could have improved communication between learners and their tutors, particularly in the supervision of research projects in between the residential sessions.

Recommendations

The study focused on the influence of support services on dropouts among DE students' at University of Education Winneba. It investigated participants' perceptions about the contribution of such services to distance learners' progress and programme completion. Specifically, it set out to discover why, despite the provision of learner support services, the UEW DE programme continued to register low pass rates, dropouts and high incompleteness rates. To this end, it established a number of strengths and

weaknesses that were discussed in detail in Chapter four. In this section, the issues which emerged as recommendations are discussed briefly.

The findings presented in Chapter four indicated that learner support providers should base learner support services on identified and known learner characteristics, needs and expectations, in order to address real and anticipated learning challenges. These views were reinforced in the reviewed literature (Robinson, 1995; Welch & Reed, 2010) where it was observed that learner support services should fit the purpose for which they are intended. The need for learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction and socialisation in self-help study groups to reduce isolation and loneliness for distance learners cannot be over emphasised. All the participants agreed that academic support could be improved by frequent contact between learners and their tutors and two-way communication through timely and constructive feedback, thus enabling learners to measure their progress regularly, rather than having to wait for one month between tutorial sessions.

The findings suggested that staggering learner support services after one month was not effective since it left distance learners separated both from their tutors and from other learners for too long before the next tutorial session. All the participants agreed that to facilitate more regular interaction, support services should be devolved to designated study centres such as the existing education centres and secondary schools. Retired but qualified people could be employed, particularly for the supervision of research projects which seemed to be a major factor contributing to dropout and incomplete results. Participants believed that this form of support could reduce delays in programme completion.

Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, lack of timely and constructive feedback, poor record-keeping and lack of access to learning resources all suggested a failure by the stakeholder institutions to provide adequate guidelines, planning and preparation which are discussed in Chapter four. The fact that college tutors were employed in Colleges of Education and Senior High Schools teachers did not necessarily mean they would be available to give tutorials in the DE programme. In this regard, one of the recommendations from the findings was for the integration of the DE learner support activities into the institutional core business. This would ensure acceptance, recognition and ownership of the DE programme, offering distance learners access to learning resources and other vital services, including counselling support.

A further recommendation was to intensify learner-tutor interaction through the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), in addition to face-to-face tutorial sessions and occasional school visits made by regional learner support officers from the University of Education, Winneba. E-mail technology could be used to link learners and their tutors, and to intensify the supervision of research projects. The literature reviewed in Chapter two, (Aluko, 2009; Beukes, 2009; Fresen & Hendrikz, 2009; Kajumbula, 2006) found mobile phones useful for supporting distance learners in other institutions. Policy makers should therefore explore the possibilities of ensuring that distance learners have access to and use such technology to improve communication between them and their tutors as indicated in the findings in Chapter four.

A discussion with study center Coordinators, did not bind anyone in the provision of learner support services in the DE programme. The commitment of part-time tutors should have been ensured through contractual agreements signed between the tutors and stakeholder institutions. The participants were in agreement that such policy guidelines could have spelt out payment structures which could be aligned with the completion of specific work, such as tutorials, marking assignments and entering marks into the relevant mark sheets before the payments could be made. A further recommendation was for the training of all service providers in instructional and leadership skills in the field of DE. Indeed, the stakeholders admitted that they lacked knowledge in DE and appeared to be groping in the dark as they went about implementing support services in the DE programme.

Emerging Issues for Future Research

This study has raised issues which suggest further research into how learner support services could be improved in the future. A few of the issues that call for such investigation are discussed in this section.

1. One of the areas for future research could be the relationship between distance learners' profiles, expectations and learning difficulties in DE programmes and the formulation of effective learner support services. There is a need to determine how demographic factors such as age, previous educational backgrounds, learning styles and geographical location affect distance learners' progress and completion of DE programmes.
2. Another area of future research could be the factors that affect retention in UEW DE programme. Participants in this study mentioned time constraints

and heavy workloads as two of the factors that contributed to dropout and incomplete results. The literature review in Chapter 2 stressed that one of the advantages of DE was its flexibility in enabling people to earn qualifications as they continued with employment and taking care of their families (Farrell, 2003). There is thus a need to explore further how distance learners manage to combine their multiple responsibilities with their part-time studies.

3. A further possible area for future research could be collaboration strategies to facilitate sharing of resources in stakeholder institutions. As established in the reviewed literature, DE programmes depend to a large extent on available resources, such as tutors and physical facilities in form of classrooms and laboratories for practical work. Such an investigation could come up with strategies to inform stakeholder collaboration for the benefit of distance learners.

4. The effectiveness in the classroom of graduates from DE programmes emerged as another area for future research. This could consider issues such as gaining respect and recognition after graduation, which was seen as one of the factors which motivated distance learners to enrol in the DE programme.

5. There is a need to carry out research to explore the relationship between difficult content in the learning materials and the language of instruction as these affected distance learners' programme completion.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Demographic Data

Please write or tick (✓) the appropriate response to each item as the question/statement may indicate.

1. Sex Male [] Female []

2. Regional study centre Patronized

Accra []

Kumasi []

Winneba []

3. Name of region (where working).....

4. Level of school (where teaching)

KG [] Primary [] J.S.S. []

Others (specify).....

5. Location of school/ office

Rural – based []

Urban – based []

6. How far is your school/ office from the regional study centre?

Less than 20km []

20-49km []

50-79km []

80km and above []

7. Teaching experience

Less than 5 years []

5- 10 years []

Above 10 years []

Appendix B:

Interview Schedule I: Distance learners and dropouts

1. How did you know about the DE programme by distance mode before enrolment?
2. What motivated you to enrol in the DE programme?
3. What assistance were you given to prepare you for distance learning at the following stages of your studies?
 - a) admission
 - b) registration and orientation
 - c) during the course of your studies.
4. How effective are the study skills provided in meeting your learning needs? If not, why?
5. What challenges did you face when learning on your own? Briefly describe some of the advantages and disadvantages.
6. How has studying part-time and your teaching responsibilities affected your personal life? What changes has studying part-time brought to your personal life?
7. What assistance did you get from your family, employer and friends in the course of your studies?
8. What subjects, if any, do you find most challenging on the DE programme? Why? What remedies would you suggest?
9. How do the following factors affect your learning progress?
 - a) time allocation to your studies and pacing your work
 - b) availability and accessibility to tutors outside residential sessions
 - c) finding a quiet place to study.

10. How accessible are the following resources and facilities to you to enhance your studies? a) computers

b) laboratories

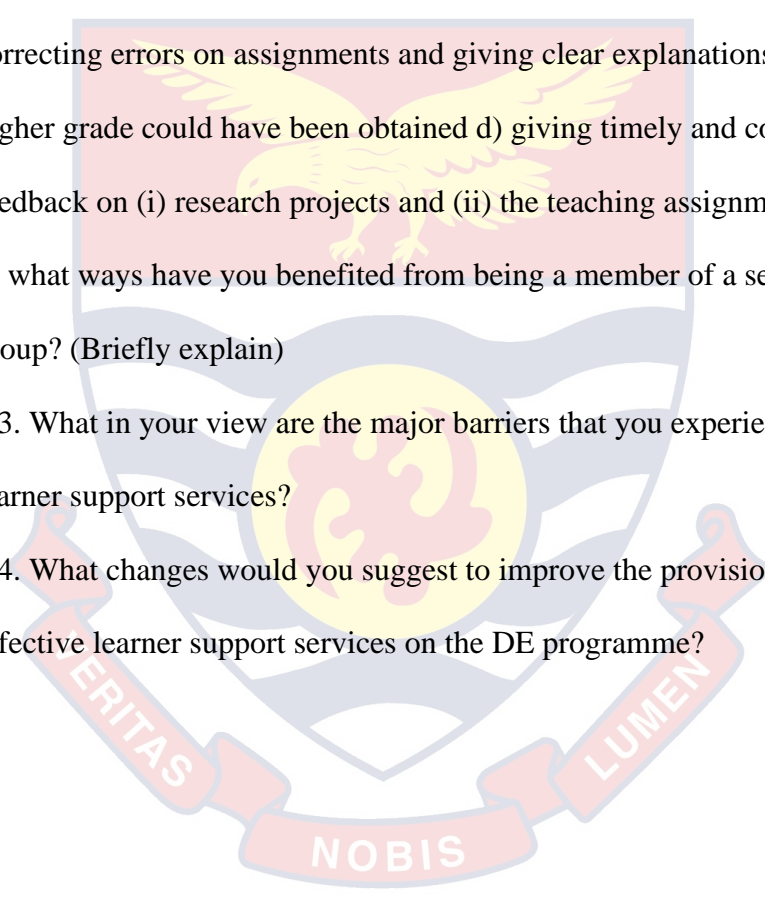
c) libraries

11. How helpful are your tutors in the following aspects of your studies? a) clarifying difficult content by providing additional explanation over and above what is in the study materials b) facilitating discussions during tutorials c) correcting errors on assignments and giving clear explanations on how a higher grade could have been obtained d) giving timely and constructive feedback on (i) research projects and (ii) the teaching assignment portfolio. 12.

In what ways have you benefited from being a member of a self help study group? (Briefly explain)

13. What in your view are the major barriers that you experience in accessing learner support services?

14. What changes would you suggest to improve the provision of more effective learner support services on the DE programme?



Appendix C:

Interview Schedule II: Coordinators and course tutors

1. What is your understanding of learner support services? (Briefly)
2. What do you think learner support services are addressing on the DE programme?
3. How effective is the orientation you get in distance education skills in preparing you for tutoring and marking assessment work for distance learners?
4. What are the most common learning challenges that distance learners present during the learning process? How do you assist them to find solutions to these challenges?
5. What preparations do you make for tutorials before meeting distance learners?
6. What subject areas do learners have most difficulties in? Why? How do you assist them?
7. How do you ensure that distance learners get timely feedback in the following aspects of their assessment work?
 - a. marked assignments
 - b. research projects
 - c. teaching assignment.
8. What arrangements are in place to ensure that distance learners have access to the following resources?
 - a. computers,
 - b. laboratories and
 - c. libraries

9. What form of support do you get from college management in the following aspects of your work?

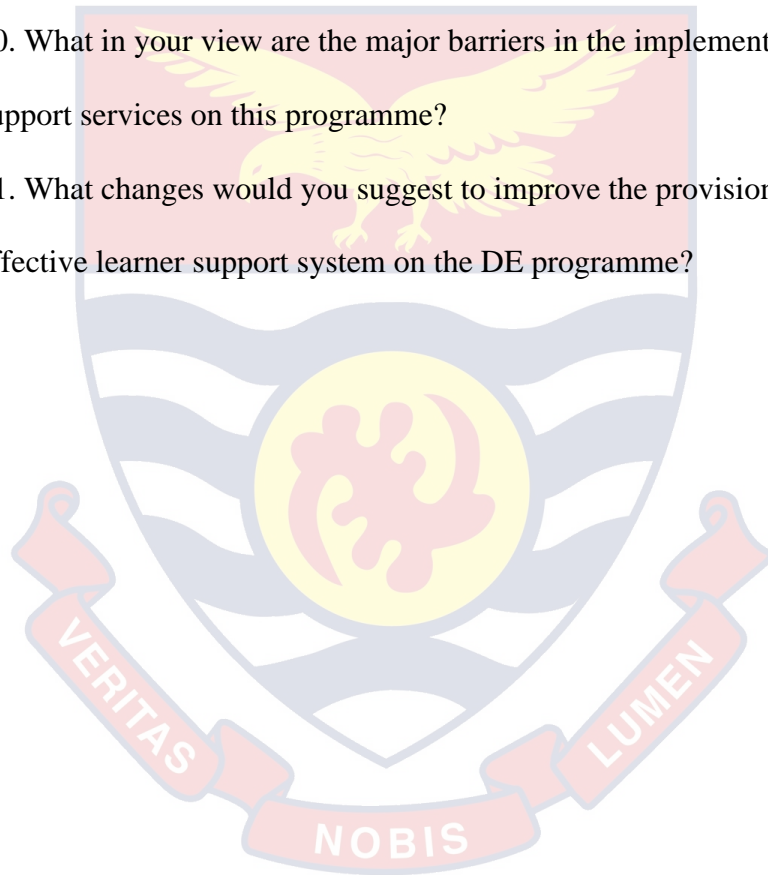
a. integration of tutorials, setting and marking distance learners' assessment work with other college activities

b. timely processing of results through college assessment structures

c. accessing human, physical, and material resources for distance learning activities.

10. What in your view are the major barriers in the implementation of learner support services on this programme?

11. What changes would you suggest to improve the provision of a more effective learner support system on the DE programme?



Appendix: D

Interview Schedule III: Decision makers

1. How do distance learners know about the DE programme? Briefly explain how this programme is advertised before enrolment?
2. How is distance learners' readiness determined to ensure that they meet the admission requirements for enrolment on the programme?
3. What information do distance learners get at the following stages of their studies?
 - a) admission
 - b) registration and orientation
 - c) in the course of their studies
4. What processes and procedures are in place to ensure that distance learners get their study materials on time?
5. What is the purpose of
 - (i) academic support such as tutorials and assessment
 - (ii) administrative and
 - iii) counselling support on this programme? How do you ensure that learner support services achieve the purpose for which they were set up?
6. What monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure that distance learners attend scheduled tutorials? What steps are taken to assist those who fail to attend tutorials?
7. What orientation/training is given to part-time tutors and programme coordinators to enable them to carry out their duties effectively?
8. What processes and procedures are in place to ensure that the following roles and responsibilities are carried out effectively on the DE programme?

- a. tutor attendance to tutorials
 - b. timely marking of assessment work
 - c. timely provision of feedback in form of constructive comments on assessment work?
 - d. correct conversion and entry of marks into the mark sheets
 - e. processing of results through various regulatory academic boards
9. How does the learning support contribute to distance learners' retention and timely completion of the DE programme?
10. What arrangements/policies are in place to ensure that the following resources are accessed by distance learners?
- a) computers,
 - b) laboratories and consumables for practical subjects
 - c) libraries
 - d) photocopying facilities and stationery
 - e) office space and equipment
 - f) meals and hostel facilities.
11. What do you see as the major barriers in the provision of learner support on the DE programme?
12. What changes would you suggest to improve the provision of a more effective learner support system on the DE programme?

Appendix E

Letter Introduction



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION STUDIES
INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND ADMINISTRATION

Tel.No.: 03302-91478
Tel. No. : 03321-30571
Fax No. : 03321-30588
E-mail : iepa@ucc.edu.gh

University Post Office
Cape Coast
Ghana

Our Ref: EP/153.1/V.2

21st June, 2016

The Chairman
Institutional Review Board
University of Cape Coast
Cape Coast

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

The bearer of this letter, Mrs. Judith Bampo, is a Ph.D. student of the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) of the University of Cape Coast. She is to submit her research proposal to your Board for ethical clearance. Her thesis topic is, "**The Influence of Support Services on Progression, Programme Completion and Dropout among Distance Education Students: The Case of students of University of Education, Winneba in the Central Region of Ghana**".


We would be grateful for your assistance.

Thank you.

Dr. (Mrs.) Rosemary Seiwah Bosu
DIRECTOR

Appendix F

Permission to Carryout Research



UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA **CENTRE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION**
iede **INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EXTENSION**

P. O. Box 25, Winneba, Ghana. Tel: 0202041099 Fax: 03323 20954 E-mail: cdehead@gmail.com

10TH March, 2016

The Director
UCCIRB Office
University of Cape Coast
Cape Coast

Dear Sir/Madam,

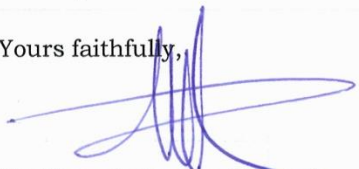
PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH

This is to inform you officially that Ms. Judith Bampo, your student with index number ED/QLR/14/0010 has been granted permission to carry out research on the topic ***“Drop out among distance education students; a case study of the University of Education, Winneba Students”*** in the Centre for Distance Education (CDE) of the Institute for Educational Development and Extension (IEDE) of the University of Education, Winneba.

As part of the research work, she would be given permission to visit all the 33 Study Centres of the Institute to interact with our students and solicit the needed information for a successful research work. We would grant her all the necessary support in order to accomplish this collaborative research work.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully,



Dr. Francis Owusu-Mensah
Head, CDE

Website: www.uew.edu.gh

Appendix G

Application Form for Ethical Clearance

FORM A

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (UCCIRB)

Application Form for Ethical Clearance of New Proposal

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

(Please type in your responses on this page)

Title of Proposal:.....

Principal Investigator: (Name, Qualification (Specialty), Department, Postal Address, Telephone, Fax number, email address)

Co-Principal Investigator(s): (Name, Qualification (Specialty), Department, Postal Address, Telephone, Fax number, email address)

UCC STC NUMBER (Proposal number to be provided by the UCCIRB Office):.....

STC Approval Date (If Applicable):.....

For Students: Attach approval letter from Head of Department and Supervisor

Collaborating Institutions (Attach letter of Approval)

Source(s) of Funding:.....

Type of Research: (Biomedical/Social/Behavioural etc)

B. FORMAT FOR PRESENTING PROPOSAL

DETAILS OF PROPOSAL: This should be the format of the full proposal

Executive summary (Not more than 250 words)

Introduction/Rationale

Justification

Aim(s) or Objective(s) of study

Methodology

Expected Outcome/Results

References

Work Plan

Budget

Informed Consent Form (Attached)

C. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ETHICAL REVIEW AND CLEARANCE

1. Ten (10) Copies of Full Proposals (hard copies) and 1 Soft Copy (sent by mail to the address: irb@ucc.edu.gh). The proposal is submitted to the IRB Office after it has been reviewed at the Faculty/School/Organisational level.
2. CVs of all Principal Investigator and Co-Principal Investigators with a cover letter signed by the Principal Investigator (An abridged version of the CV is preferred) - use the attached format
3. Informed Consent Form for Potential Research Participants (subjects) (download UCC-IRB website) or obtained from the UCCIRB Office
4. Attach (10)copies of all Supporting Documents including Questionnaire, Interview Guide etc to the UCCIRB Office

D. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Paper size should be A4

Margins 2.5 × 2.5 × 2.5 × 2.5cm

Font and Font size: Any of these is acceptable (Times New Roman 12 pt, Arial 11 pt, Calibri 12pt)

NB: The Proposal and the Informed Consent Form must be paged **separately**.

E. CHECKLIST

Complete the attached checklist

Appendix H
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title: **THE INFLUENCE OF SUPPORT SERVICES ON PROGRESSION, PROGRAMME COMPLETION AND DROPOUT AMONG DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS: THE CASE OF STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF GHANA.**

Principal Investigator: [Name] Dr Albert Dare

Address: [Name of institution/company and complete address] UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST COLLEGE OF EDUCATION STUDIES
INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND ADMINISTRATION

General Information about Research the University of Education, Winneba has produced self instructional materials for its distance education students and in addition, provided some learner support services yet personal interaction with some of the students suggested that these facilities are not sufficient for effective learning culminating to the dropping out of some of the students from the programme

This study seeks to explore the problems that are responsible for students discontinuation of the distance education programme at the University of Education Winneba.

In addition, the study will find out the type of perception students on UEW distance education programme hold about the learner support services available to them in terms of meeting their learning needs.

The study is a sequential mixed methods case study. It will be undertaken in three phases. The first phase will be a cross-sectional sample survey of continuing distance learning students enrolled in various programmes offered by UEW. The second phase will involve interview of a purposive sample of participants surveyed whose answers to open-ended questionnaire items suggest that they have rich information likely to lead to dropping out of their programmes of study. This phase will also include document analysis, sticky notes and collaborative inquiry. The third phase will involve focus group discussion with and face-to-face interview of a convenience sample of persons who have voluntarily withdrawn from the distance learning programmes of UEW.

(NB: Avoid the use of technical language or jargons) Procedures

To find answers to some of these questions, we invite you to take part in this research project. If you accept, you will be required to:

(the following applies only to focus group discussions) take part in a discussion with 7-8 other persons with similar experiences. This discussion will be moderated by [name of moderator] or myself.

(the following applies only to in-depth interviews) participate in an interview with [name of interviewer] or myself.

(the following applies only to questionnaire surveys) fill out a survey which will be provided by [name of distributor of blank surveys] and collected by [name of collector of completed surveys].

[Explain the reasons why a particular person is being selected to take part in the study] (e.g. You are being invited to take part in this discussion because we feel that your experience as a social-worker can contribute much to this discussion).

[Explain the type of questions that the participants are likely to be asked in the FGD or interviews or in the survey]

(The following applies only to focus group discussions) During this discussion, however, we do not wish you to tell us your personal experiences, but give us your opinion on the questions that we will pose to the group based on your personal experiences and your experience within your community. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions or take part in any part of the discussion, you may say so and keep quiet. The discussion will take place in [location of the FGD], and no one else but the people who take part in the discussion and the moderator or myself will be present during this discussion. The entire discussion will be tape-recorded, but **no-one will be identified by name on the tape**. Additionally, the tape will be kept [explain how the tape will be stored]. The information recorded is considered confidential, and no one else except [name of person(s) with access to the tapes] will have access to the tapes.

(The following applies only to interviews) If you do not wish to answer any of the questions posed during the interview, you may say so and the interviewer will move on to the next question. The interview will take place in [location of the interview], and no one else but the interviewer will be present. The information recorded is considered confidential, and no one else except [name of person(s) with access to the information] will have access to the information documented during your interview.

(The following applies only to surveys) If you do not wish to answer any of the questions included in the survey, you may skip them and move on to the next question. [Describe how the survey will be distributed and collected]. The information recorded is considered confidential, and no one else except [name of person(s) with access to the information] will have access to your survey. The expected duration of the [discussion, interview or survey] is about [length of discussion, interview, or survey] (e.g. 40-75 minutes).

Possible Risks and Discomforts

(Description of any reasonable foreseeable risks or discomfort to the participant. Include physical, social and psychological risk if anticipated.)

Possible Benefits

(Specific language about benefits to individuals and/or society that can be reasonably expected.)

Alternatives to Participation

(Disclosure of appropriate alternatives or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to the subject). (This does not apply to all studies and usually used for intervention studies)

Confidentiality

(A statement describing the extent, if any, to which confidentiality of records identifying the subjects will be maintained. For example, "We will protect information about you to the best of our ability. You will not be named in any reports Some staff of [list all groups that may access the research records] may sometimes look at your research records").

Compensation

{If there are any compensation packages either in cash or kind available for participants it must be clearly spelt out in terms of the actual amount to be given or gift to be given, conditions for receiving the package and when it will be made). Usually compensation should be given at the end of the study

Additional Cost

(Any additional cost to the participant that may result from participation in the research should be stated)

This does not apply to all studies

Staying in the Research

(If the research method is to be used with another method, list conditions of use and any exceptions to the exclusive use requirements)

(This does not apply to all studies)

Voluntary Participation and Right to Leave the Research

(A statement that the research is voluntary and participant can withdraw without penalty)

Termination of Participation by the Researcher

(Any anticipated circumstances under which the participant's participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the participant's consent must be specified)

(This does not apply to all studies)

Notification of Significant New Findings

(A statement that significant new findings developed during the course of the research that may relate to the participant's willingness to continue participation will be provided to the participant) (This does not apply to all studies)

Contacts for Additional Information

(Give an explanation of whom to contact for answers to pertinent questions about the research and whom to contact in case of research-related injury. Give names and mobile numbers that are accessible to the participant)

Your rights as a Participant

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of Cape Coast (UCCIRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you can contact the Administrator at the IRB Office between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:30 p.m. through the phones lines 0332133172 and 0244207814 or email address: irb@ucc.edu.gh.

VOLUNTEER AGREEMENT

The above document describing the benefits, risks and procedures for the research title (name of research) has been read and explained to me. I have been given an opportunity to have any questions about the research answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate as a volunteer.

Date

Name and signature or mark of volunteer

If volunteers cannot read the form themselves, a witness must sign here:

I was present while the benefits, risks and procedures were read to the volunteer. All questions were answered and the volunteer has agreed to take part in the research.

Date

Name and signature of witness

I certify that the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research have been explained to the above individual.

Date

Name Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent