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THE IMPACT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE CASE STUDY: BO DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

It is important to undertake this sort of study because it gives an opportunity for further clarification on issues as those discussed in the topic under review. The study enables us to identify some of the impact of distance education in Sierra Leone.

Furthermore, such a study helps us to identify the impact and usefulness of distance education and its contribution to the reduction of untrained and unqualified primary school teachers in Sierra Leone taking Bo District as a macrocosm.

Finally, since distance education aims at training untrained and unqualified primary school teachers for community development and individual up-grading and personality development, this study seeks to assess the influence of distance education on the teachers, the school (pupils) and the community.

Key Words; Open University, Distance Education, Distance Education Council.

INTRODUCTION

According to Jevons, (1983), Distance Education is not a new phenomenon; it has been practiced since the turn of the century. One of the first forms of distance education was the correspondence courses, which took advantage of the new rural free delivery of mail.

Distance education traced its origin to mid - 19th century Europe and the United States. The pioneers of distance education used the best technology of their day, the postal system as compared to the modern internet system, to open educational opportunities to people who wanted to learn but were not able to attend conventional schools. People who most benefited from such correspondence education included those with physical disabilities, women who were not allowed to enroll in educational institutions open only to men, people who had jobs during normal school hours, and those who lived in remote regions where schools did exist. (Jevous, 1983).

An Englishman, Isaac Pitman is credited as an early pioneer. He began teaching shorthand by correspondence in Bath, England in 1840. Students were instructed to copy short passages of the Bible and return them for grading via the new penny post system.

American University level distance education began in 1874 at Illinois Wesleyan University in which graduate degree could be obtained in Absentia. The Chautauqua move in about 1882 gave the popular push to distance education. The teaching of academic and vocational courses, early correspondence become quite

popular by 1990 and problems of popularity. They National Home Study Council (NHSC) was formed in 1926 in a bid to address these issues. Accreditation of college and university distance programmes to the National University Extension Association in 1915. (Copyright © 2005-2011.californa distance learning project).

During the nineteenth century, in the states several activities in adult education preceded the organization of university extension beyond campuses. In 1873, Anna Ticknor created the society to courage studies at home for the purpose of educational opportunities for women of all classes in the society. This Boston – based, largely volunteer effort provides correspondence instruction to 10,000 members over a 24 years period despite its resolutely low profile (Ticknor, 1891).

A recent American Federation of Teachers (AFT) task force report states that too little is known about the effectiveness of distance learning and that more independent research is needed (Twigg, 1996). At the same time, Clark (1996), in his paper mentioned that media forms are mere vehicles that deliver instructions, but do not influence student achievement. Clark believes that it is not media but variables such as instructional methods that foster distance learning.

In Sub-Sahara Africa (SSA), distance education has been used primarily

"to widen access to basic education and to improve quality in the conventional school system through in-service training of teachers" (Moore & Kearsley, 2005)

Even so, programmes are being created to provide college level and vocational training to a young population that is desperately seeking to find opportunities for work and economic development in what is currently an intellectually and economically starved region. Unlike much of the rest of the World, the demography of Africa – due to Aids, environmental challenges, and a variety of political and historical complications, show that approximately half of the entire of Africa is less than 20 years old and that that population growth continues at an alarming rate. As a result governments are unable to build school systems fast enough to absorb and college – level students. These youths are eager to find education opportunity that well better equip them to compete in the increasingly globalised world, a need that is being addressed by successful distance education programmes throughout the region.

In Sierra Leone, according to (A.M. Alghali et al 2005), a work undertaken on behalf of the commonwealth on education in Sierra Leone with particular reference to open and distance learning and information and communication technology states that distance education has been adopted as a strategy to drastically reduce the large number of untrained and unqualified primary school teachers nationwide. To this end, the Sierra Leone government has instituted a policy on training and embarked on a training strategy to use distance education to prepare primary school teachers and other education – sector personnel. This training strategy is expected to contribute to personnel capacity – building and achievement of the Education for All Goal by 2015, as well as to further enhancing implementation of the 6 – 3 – 3 – 4 system of education. Untrained and unqualified primary school teachers are now being trained up to Teacher's Certificate level at Freetown Teachers College, through distance education. The Ministry of Education also plans to train teachers for the first three years of primary school by distance education, leading to the one – year Teacher's Elementary Certificate.

The Division of Extra-Mural Studies (DEMS) in Fourah Bay College at the University of Sierra Leone is implementing, in co-operation with the University of Ghana (Legon), a Common Wealth youth programme diploma course in distance education. DEMS also offers distance education as an elective course for the Master of Arts Degree in education.

The institute of Public Administration and Management of the University of Sierra Leone also offers a distance education module for one semester as part of the Master of Arts for the Master of Arts in Education.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through familiarization visits of Freetown Teachers College

(FTC) and a distance education center in Pujehun under the supervision of the Freetown Teacher College. Some efforts were made to interview educational personnel and Non-Governmental Organization supporting DE programme in Sierra Leone.

These responses were meant to cross check those from the students and lecturers. A checklist of information to be obtained combined with forms to be filled out to provide basic information on the impact of distance education in Sierra Leone and Bo district in particular.

Various methods such as formal and informal discussions, interviews and personnel observations with the use of structured questionnaires were used to collect primary data. 55 questionnaires were administered to students in distance education programme, 8 administered to lecturers and 2 administered to the coordinator or administration of the distance education programme.

Data Analysis

With the completion of the data collection, frequencies for all questions in the recording schedule were made. This was used to determine the weight of a response influencing the coding. The questionnaires used were pre-coded before they were administered. Numerical codes were assigned to possible answers.

The statistical programming for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to compute for their raw scores as well as used in calculating the frequency and percentage volumes which seek answers to the research questions. The frequency table gave a clear and precise description of the data obtained.

However, for open-ended questions, coding was done by putting the answers into distinctive groups and codes assigned to each group. The data gathered was entered into a spread sheet from which tallies were made.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Why People Prefer the Distance Learning Programmes to Campus Based.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	it allow one study whilst working	26	47.3	47.3	47.3
	it is cost effective	8	14.5	14.5	61.8
	it is convenient in relation to the duration.	3	5.5	5.5	67.3
	it allow one study whilst working and also convenient in relation to time	18	32.7	32.7	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

The above table revealed not a surprising thing that 47.3 % of the respondents prefer the distance education program to that of full time campus based learning programs. 32.7% of the respondents however prefer distance education programs because it is convenient for them in relation to time. 14.5% of the respondents prefer the distance education program because of the cost, while 5.5% of the respondents prefer it because of the duration.

From the analysis above, it is clearly evident that all the respondents selected for this study reveal that they prefer the distance education program to the regular programme for various reasons such as it is convenience in relation to time, cost effective, and the fact that it allows students to work while studying.

Table 2: Do Respondents Believe Graduates of Distance Education Programme are of the Same Academic Quality with Graduates of the Base/ Conventional Learning Programme?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	49	89.1	89.1	89.1
	No	6	10.9	10.9	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

Out of the 55 respondents, 89.1% strongly believe that graduates of the distance education programmes are of the same academic quality to graduates of campus base programmes. 10.9% of the respondents rather believe otherwise-that is, they don`t believe they are of the same academic quality. In effect, majority- 89.1% of the respondents view that they consider such graduate as having the same quality with graduates of regular learning programme.

Table 3 : The Characteristics of a Successful Distance Education Programme

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Have improve teaching methodology	15	27.3	27.3	27.3
	They are abreast with current / emerging issues	15	27.3	27.3	54.5
	They are masters of their various fields of studies	3	5.5	5.5	60.0
	Have Improve teaching Methodology and has Kept me abreast with current/emerging issues	13	23.6	23.6	83.6
	All of the above	9	16.4	16.4	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

27.3% of the respondents believe that graduates from the distance education programmes have improved teaching methodology just like any graduate from the full time campus base programmes. The above data also reveals that 27.3% of the respondents stated that graduates from the distance education programme are abreast with current / emerging issues upon graduating. 23.6% of the respondents believe that graduates from the distance education programme have both improved teaching Methodology and are abreast with current/emerging issues. And 5.5 % of the respondents are masters in their various fields of study.

In summary, the respondents view that distance education graduates are well equipped as they employ improved teaching methodology and are aware of current and emerging issues which make them masters of their various disciplines.

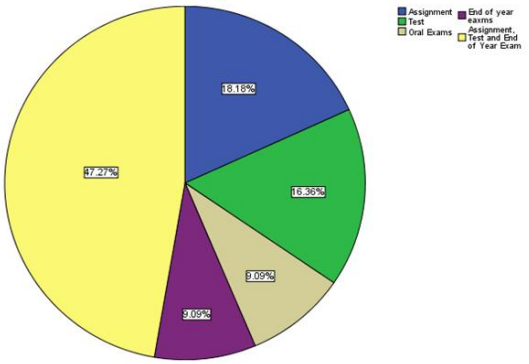

Figure 1: Mode (s) of Assessment Used to Access Students in the Distance Education Programmes by Lecturers.

The above data reveals that 47.27 % of the lecturers in the distance education programmes use Assignment, Test and end of year/Semester exams as a mode of evaluating their students. It is also worth noting that it is the same method use by lecturers in the normal campus education. 18.18 % uses the test as a mode of assessing their students during the distance education period. The data also reveals that 16.36 % of the lecturers use only the test method as a mode of assessing their students during the distance education period.9.9% of the lecturers use the oral method of assessing their students.

From the analysis also, it is interesting to know that the distance education system uses the same mode of assessment – assignment, test and end of semester or year exam as indicated by majority of the respondents- 47.27%. This however is contradicted by a few respondents who indicated that some lecturers either only use one of test method, oral test, or exam.

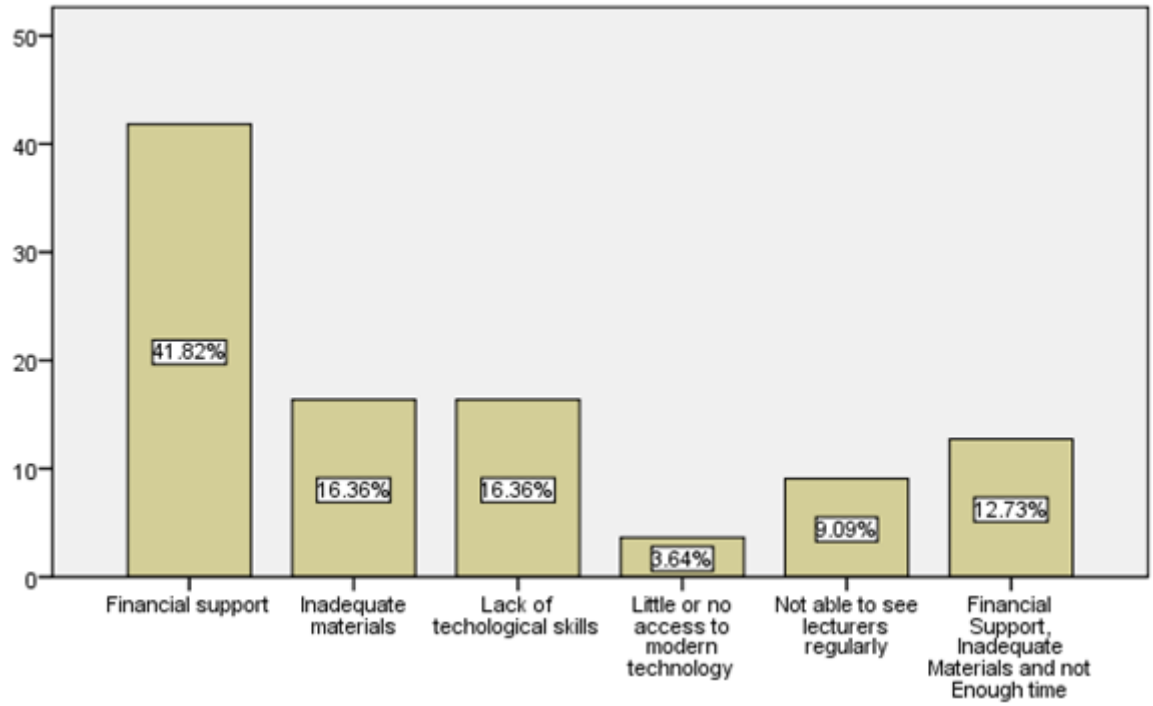

Figure 2: The Challenges/Constrains Faced in Distance Education

The above figure reveals that 41.82 % of the respondents in the distance education programmes are faced with financial problem during the course of the distance education programme.

16.36 % of the respondents also face inadequate materials constrain. 16.36 % of the respondents lack technological skills as a constrain during the course of the programme. The figure also reveals that 12.73 % of the respondents lack financial support, inadequate materials and time not being enough for the course as a constrain.

The study also reveals that like other students of regular campuses, students of distance education courses faced many challenges such as lack of financial support, lack of technological support, inadequate material, lack of access to modern technology, inadequate time to engage in academic activities, and the failure of lecturers to attend classes regularly.

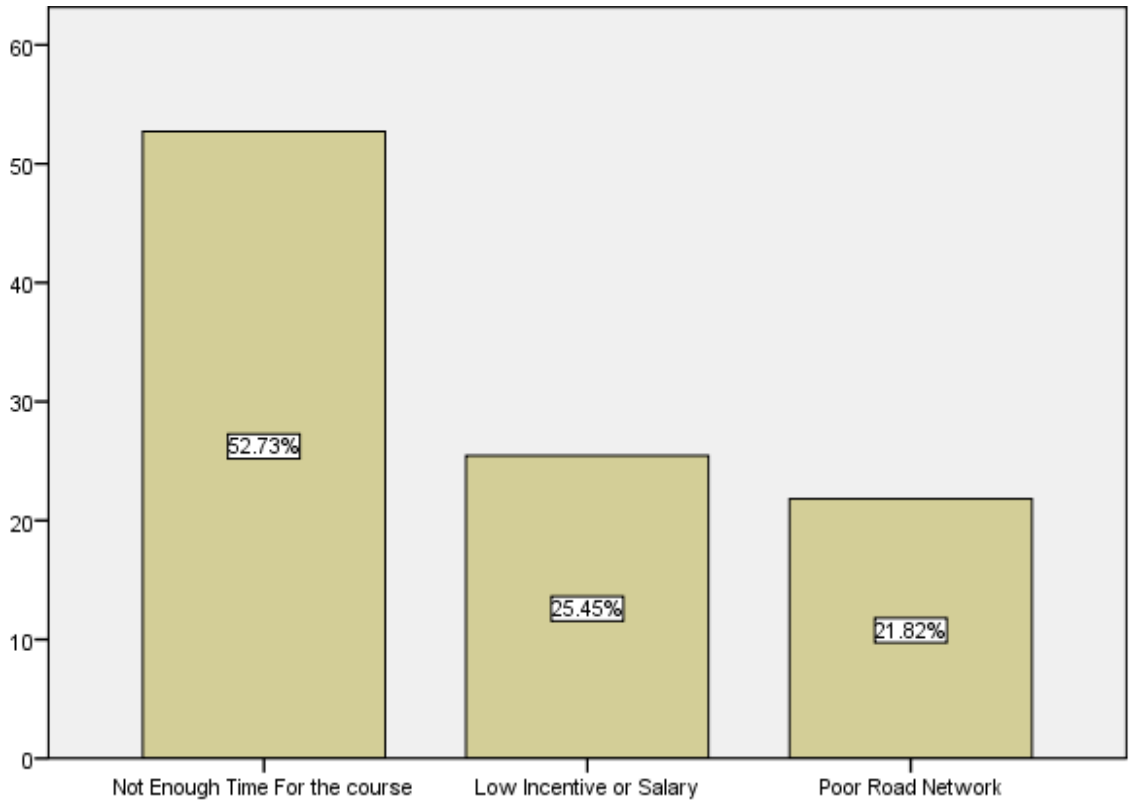

Figure 3: Other Constrains Faced by Stakeholders in the Distance Education Programme.

The above figure reveals very important details in the research as illustrated above. That is 52.73 % of the stakeholders are having problem with the time allocated for the distance education programs. For them, the time allocated for the course is not enough. 25.45 % are face with low incentive during the distance education program, while 21.82 % of the respondents states poor road network.

The study also capture the following – inadequate time allocation, low incentive/salary, poor road network as other challenges stakeholders in the distance education sector face. These challenges hamper their effectiveness and efficiency in their works.

. Figure 4 reveals that 54.55 % of the respondents are admitted into the distance education just after taking the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE). 25.45 % of the students gain admission into the program with their teaching experience, while 20.00% of the respondents actually gain admission using other means which they did not state.

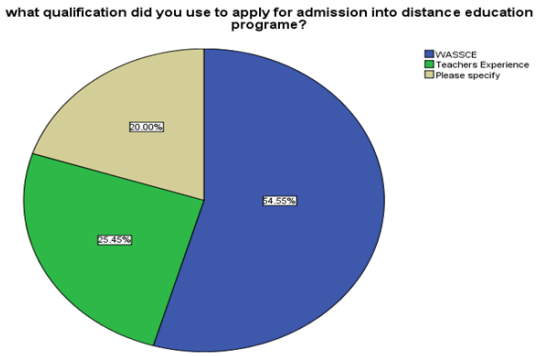

Figure 4: The Admission Policy into Distance Education Programmes in Sierra Leone.

In relation to the requirement for enrollment into distance education programmes, the research reveals that candidates must have taken WASSCE or must have acquired some teaching experience. Notwithstanding, some candidates as indicated by the respondents can gain admission on other grounds which they did not specify. From all indications, it is clearly evident that admission into distance education programmes almost follow the

same procedure as with the regular college system even though there is some amount of flexibility in the distance education policy.

Table 4:Academic Awards in the Distance Education of Sierra Leone.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	T.C	30	54.5	54.5	54.5
	H.T.C (P)	15	27.3	27.3	81.8
	H.T.C (S)	10	18.2	18.2	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

The above table reveals that 54.5 % of the students who enroll into the distance education programme end up graduating with Teachers Certificate (T.C). 27.3% of the students graduate with Higher Teachers Certificate Primary H.T.C (P). 18.2 % of the respondents also graduate with Higher Teachers Certificate Secondary H.T.C (S). From the analysis presented above, it is clear that degree programmes are not offered at distance education courses. Only certificate courses such as TC, HTC (P), and HTC(S) are offered. Moreover, the study also reveals that more than half of those who are offered admission for distance education programmes enter for Teachers Certificate (TC). Only a handful enrolls for the Higher Teachers Certificate programmes.

Figure 5 reveals that 96.36 % of the Lecturers use the modules as a means of instruction during the distance education program, while 1.82 % of the lecturers use the videos as a mode of instruction which is very small. Also, 1.82% of the respondents mentioned that lecturers use computers. The figure also reveals that none of the lecturers use the modern means of instruction.

In relation to the means of instruction, the study also reveals that the medium of instruction largely depend on the use of manuals- designed handouts, while only a few lecturers use videos and computers as means of instruction. In effect, lectures largely depend on reading and talking instead of visualization of concepts, objects etc. This implies that learning becomes more abstract than concrete.

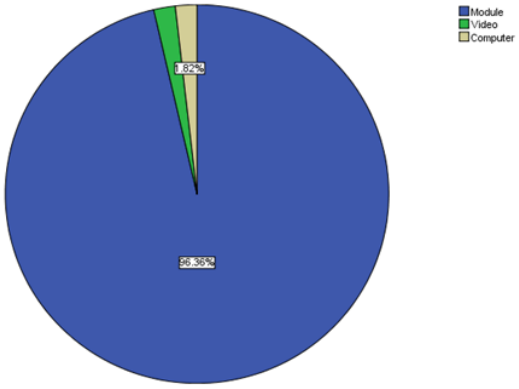

Figure 5: The Modes of Instruction of Distance Education in Teacher Education.

Table 5: Recommendations to Improve on the Quality of Distance Education in Sierra Leone.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Provide Accommodation for students	10	18.2	18.2	18.2
	Employ Qualified Lecturers on full time bases	23	41.8	41.8	60.0
	Provide Enough Teaching and Learning Materials	22	40.0	40.0	100.0

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Provide Accommodation for students	10	18.2	18.2	18.2
	Employ Qualified Lecturers on full time bases	23	41.8	41.8	60.0
	Provide Enough Teaching and Learning Materials	22	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 reveals that 40.0% of the respondents want to be provided enough time and learning materials. 41.8 % of the students want to the people concerned to employ qualified lecturers on full time bases. The remaining 18.2 % recommended that the authorities provide accommodation for students during the course of the programmes.

From this analysis, it is clear that the respondents recommended that the authorities concern should provide adequate teaching and learning materials, provide accommodation for students, employ trained and qualified lecturers on full time basis so that their numerous challenges would be solved and hence be able to perform in their various disciplines.

SUMMARY CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Summary

This section presents the summary of the findings of the study. It was observed from the study that 55 students, 8 lecturers and 2 coordinators participated in the survey from whom information were collected. Out of the participants, the study revealed that 47.3% preferred distance education programme because it allow one to study whilst working. 14.5% prefer it because it is cost effective. 5.5% prefer it because it is convenient in relation to the time duration and 32.7% prefer it because it allows one to study whilst working and also convenient in relation to time.

The study also revealed that 89.1% of the respondents strongly believe that graduates of the distance education programme are of the same quality to graduates of the campus based programme . 10.9% do not believe they are of the same academic quality.

In terms of the characteristics of a successful distance education programme, 27.3% of the respondents believe that graduates from the distance education programme have improved teaching methodology just like any graduate from full time base learning. 27.3% of the respondents stated that graduates from distance education programme are abreast with emerging issues. 23.6% 0f the respondents believe that graduates from distance education programme have both improved teaching methodology and are abreast with current issues. 5.5% stated that they masters in their various fields of study.

In terms of the mode (s) of assessment 47.27% of the lecturers used assignments, test and end of year/semester exams as a mode of evaluating students. 18.18% used the test as a mode of assessing their students during the distance education programme. Only 16.36% of the lecturers used test in assessing their students and 9.9% used oral method in assessing students.

The study further revealed that the highest number (41.82%) of the respondents in the distance education programme have faced with financial problem. 16.36% faced with inadequate material constrain. 16.36% lack technological skills and 12.73% lack financial support, inadequate and lack of enough time.

In terms of other constrains faced by stakeholders in the distance education programme,

52.73% of the stakeholders stated that time is not enough to go through the course successfully. 25.45% are faced with low incentive, whilst 21.825 stated poor road network.

The study also revealed that 54.55% of the respondents are admitted in to the distance education just after taking the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination. 25.45% gained admission based on their teaching experiences, whilst 20.00% of the respondents gained admission using other means which they did not state.

In terms of academic awards the study revealed that 54.5% of the students graduate with the Teachers Certificate (T.C). 27.3% graduate with Higher Teachers Certificate Primary HTC (P) and 18.2% with Higher Teachers Certificate Secondary HTC(S).

The study further revealed that 96.36% of the lecturers used the modules as a means of instruction in the distance education programme, whilst 3.64% of the lecturers use modern technology such as videos and computers.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, distance education has contributed immensely in capacitating teachers or individuals with relevant skills and attitudes that have led to the development of education through improved teaching methodology, thus creating a positive impact in the pupils in various schools across the country.

It has also created the platform for teacher education, increasing opportunities for teachers to upgrade themselves for proper service delivery.

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