

REDUCING DISTANCE LEARNERS' ATTRITION RATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST: TUTORS'/STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

The goal of distance education in Ghana is to make quality education, especially at the tertiary level, more accessible and relevant to meeting the human resource needs of the country. This is to improve performance as well as the quality of the lives of Ghanaians. This dream can only be realised if students enrolled in the programmes graduate on schedule. Currently, the number of students enrolled in the distance education programme at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) is over 24 000. However, for various reasons, not every student that enrolls in the programme graduates on schedule. This paper examines tutors' and students' perceptions of the attrition rate of distance learners. The survey research method was used to gather data and an analysis was done using frequency count, simple percentages, mean and standard deviation. Factors identified as causes of attrition and measures to reduce the problem were significant, as perceived by tutors and learners. However, this paper concludes that the complexity of the causes of attrition and measures to reduce it, allow for few practical solutions. Most of the significant causes were evolutionary issues that can be resolved as time goes on through improvements in technology, effective course design, better understanding of learner characteristics and appropriate learner support systems. Some recommendations were made as interim measures to help reduce the high attrition rate among distance learners at the University of Cape Coast (UCC).



INTRODUCTION

Distance education, as an alternative to face-to-face instruction, has witnessed steady growth in higher education since its beginning in the mid-1800s. This growth is demonstrated by the fact that, in 1990, nearly 30% of all adult students in the United States were receiving education in some distance format (Roberts, 2006). The influx of adults taking distance education courses has occurred in part because of the proliferating demand for skills by our technological society and the complexity of modern life. Before the distance education programme of the University of Cape Coast in 2001, the university had a total enrolment of 3 584 students on its conventional programmes. In 2010, the distance education programme alone had a total enrolment of about 24 000 students pursuing diploma and degree programmes in basic education, commerce and management studies (Akuamoah-Boateng et al., 2010).

Society demands lifelong learning, and employment and family responsibilities require adults to seek forms of education other than traditional face-to-face instruction (Moxley, 2006). Distance education provides adults with the opportunity for formal education while allowing for flexible scheduling. However, it appears the emergence of distance education at the University of Cape Coast is accompanied by a problem of high attrition rates.

In an attempt to find reasons for some students' non-completion of distance learning programmes and evidence for the high attrition rate, numerous studies have centred on the application of a variety of traditionally based theoretical models on the distance education setting (Tinto, 1982). However, there has not been any empirical study on reducing the attrition rate based on tutors'/students' perspectives at the University of Cape Coast. Therefore, there is a critical need to examine these perceptions. This is necessary to give members of the Faculty of Education and counsellors the opportunity to interact with students who are possible non-completers. It will also help them to make careful placement decisions and enhance review techniques, particularly in the courses, and to further assist students to prolong their academic careers.

Statement of the problem

Higher education has an important role to play in national development, in keeping academic pursuits, and in augmenting knowledge (Benakani, 2009). Distance education students are perceived to have higher attrition rates than conventional students (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999), although there has been much debate over the causes of attrition.

The distance education programme at the University of Cape Coast has provided access to higher education for many people in Ghana. In 2001, before the advent of distance education, the University of Cape Coast had a total enrolment of about 3 584 students in its conventional programmes. The distance education programme alone has increased its enrolment tremendously from 10 543 in 2001 to 54 707 in 2010 (Akuamoah-Boateng et al., 2010).

However, evidence from the Assessment Unit of the Centre for Continuing Education (UCC) indicates that not all students who enrol in the programmes are able to graduate on time, and others do not graduate at all due to several reasons. In 2001, 143 out of 860 basic education students could not graduate. In 2002, 263 out of 2 868 students could not graduate and in 2003 and 2004, 459 out of 3 161 students could not graduate. This trend suggests that there appears to be some problems associated with the completion rates of students in the distance mode of education at the University of Cape Coast. Although not all students are able to graduate on schedule, there has not been any known empirical research conducted on the causes of and measures to reduce attrition rates in the distance education programme at the University of Cape Coast.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the demographic characteristics of distance learners?
- What factors do distance learners perceive as causes of attrition in their programmes?
- How do course tutors view distance learners' high attrition rate?
- What practical measures could be put in place to reduce the attrition rate of distance learners at the University of Cape Coast?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of literature offers an overview of other research studies related to this study as predictors of distance learners' attrition. Distance learning is an excellent method of reaching the adult learner. The competing priorities of work, home and school calls for a higher degree of flexibility in distance learning programmes. The structure of distance learning programmes gives the adult learner the greatest possible control over time, place and pace of study. However, the distance mode of learning is not without problems (Carr, 2000). Most distance programmes are affected by higher attrition rates. Dagger and Wade (2004) argue that, with the growth of distance education over the years, there has been an exceedingly high attrition rate of learners in most distance learning institutions worldwide. Distance learners' attrition and completion rate in any distance learning institution should get continuous attention from researchers and service providers.

The success of such programmes depends largely on extensive research that will provide information that may help in developing better and appropriate student support services to improve the effectiveness and efficacy of programme delivery and success (Thompson, 1999). Huang (2004) concurs when he notes that the issue of attrition in distance learning programmes is important in assessing the relative effectiveness of the cost of distance learning, compared to traditional classroom-based learning. He further argues that attrition should be monitored, as it affects educational planning and the value of investment in distance learning, educational institutions, corporations, and government agencies. Another reason given by Huang (2004) is that research findings on distance learners' attrition will help in determining the approaches to increase access, learning outcomes and the perceived value and credibility of distance learning programmes and qualifications.

Lowe (2005), recognising the complexity of attrition issues in distance learning, claims the problem reflects partly on the inability of distance learning institutions to provide learners with adequate relational and academic support services. He further argues that distance learning institutions have the higher ethical obligation of addressing attrition problems. However, there appears to be no empirical data on distance learners' current attrition rates at the University of Cape Coast.



Characteristics of distance learners

To understand the attrition rate in the context of distance learning, it is essential to understand the characteristics of adult learners. Adults' motivations for learning have been identified by Knowles et al. (1998) as follows:

- The need to know: Adults need to know why they need to learn something before learning it.
- The learner's self-concept: Adults should have a sense of responsibility for their own decisions and for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen and treated by others as being capable of self-direction.
- The role of the learner's experience: Adults come into educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience than the youth. These experiences lead to diverse audiences in any adult group setting.
- Readiness to learn: Adult learners become ready to learn those things they need to know and should be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations.
- Orientation to learning: Adult learners are life-centred in their orientation to learning. They are motivated to devote energy to learning something to the extent that they perceive it will help them perform their tasks or deal with problems they experience in their life situations.
- Motivation: While adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions and higher salaries) the most potential motivations are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life). Motivation may be blocked by an adult's negative self-concept as a student, time constraints and programmes that violate the principles of adult learning (Knowles et al., 1998:55–61).
- According to Garrison (1987), knowledge of distance education learners' background profiles will help to better understand how to design and deliver distance education programmes.

Causes of distance learners' attrition

Research has shown that attrition cannot and should not be attributed to one factor, as the reasons for withdrawal are complex and interrelated (Bernard & Amundsen, 1989; Morgan & Tam, 1999). Barriers to learning and participation can be classified



under three headings as situational, institutional and dispositional (Cross, 1981). Situational barriers include poor learning environment, lack of time due to work or home responsibilities, and geographic location.

Institutional barriers include the following:

- Costs and problems with institutional procedures
- Course scheduling
- Course availability and tutorial assistance

Dispositional barriers include the following:

- Lack of a clear goal
- Stress of multiple roles
- Time management
- Learning style differences
- Psychological reasons
- Social and economic factors

Students' chances of successfully completing distance learning programmes also depend on specific student characteristics that have been identified as indicators for potential success. These indicators include the following (Keegan, 1986):

- Being a self-starter
- Having self-discipline
- Being knowledgeable of the technology requirement of specific formats
- Being able to meet other students in a virtual environment

Factors such as age, marital status, educational level and gender, which are particular to an individual context, have been identified as determinants of attrition among distance learners (Morgan & Tam, 1999). Other factors that have been investigated as determinants of attrition include the number of courses and sources of financial aid (Parker, 1999). Another important variable for students' progress is the impact of the part-time status of most adult learners in distance education. Generally speaking, part-time students have higher attrition rates than full-time students. As students are the ones who study, their entry qualifications will certainly affect their study outcomes. Research results have shown that the background characteristics

of students are significant factors affecting their completion rates in studies (Rovai, 2003).

Phythia and Clement (1980) report job and domestic pressure, and course content being too hard or long as the three main reasons for dropouts from third year-level Mathematics courses at open university. Rekkedal (1983) reported a number of reasons for learners dropping out of the NKL school in Norway, such as a lack of time, job commitments, changed career plans, economic reasons, illness, unsatisfactory living or study conditions, and personal reasons.

Ozok and Brett (2011) stress that dropping out is a phenomenon caused by learners' characteristics (educational background, personality, motivation and aptitude among others) and life circumstances (occupation, relationship with family and peer group, and health among others).

Research conducted by Thompson (1997) showed that the majority of students reported that work, family, and study commitments were the main reasons for their withdrawal. Some other researchers reported psychological reasons for dropping out, such as feelings of inadequacy, distress, and examination anxiety (Fan & Chan, 1997). Difficult course content and learning environments have also been identified as important reasons for attrition (Chyung, et al., 1998). It is clear from the literature that many issues account for the causes of high attrition rates.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey design, using a simple random sampling technique through a computer lottery method. A sample of 360 students was selected from a population of 1 985 final-year education students who have not been able to graduate. These students were contacted through their cellphone numbers and were asked to meet at their various study centres to respond to the questionnaire. A 100 basic education course tutors were randomly selected out of the course tutor population of 1 300 in the ten regions of Ghana.

Data was gathered at all the regional study centres located at Ashanti, Brong Ahafo, Central, Eastern, Upper West, Northern, Upper East and Volta Regions of Ghana. Each of the ten regions had a Regional Resident Tutor, coordinators and course tutors. The study centre coordinators were briefed about the essence of the study and they were given the instruments to administer to the students at

the centres. Final-year students were selected because they have been in the programme long enough to have experienced some of the causes of attrition in the programme. Two sets of questionnaires, one for the course tutors and one for students, were designed to elicit relevant information for the study. In total, 75 (75%) course tutors and 285 (79%) students returned copies of the questionnaire. The gathered data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in accordance with the research questions. The investigators concentrated on the distance learners who actually dropped out of their programmes and those who have problems with some of their courses.

Presentation of results and discussion of research findings

Demographic characteristics of students

The demographic characteristics of students were sought in order to determine whether they had any influence on attrition. The information obtained is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of students

Variables	Subscales	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	185	64.9
	Female	100	35.1
Age	Below 18	-	-
	18–22	-	-
	23–27	135	47.4
	Above 27	150	52.6
Programme of study	Psychology of Education	140	49.1
	Post Diploma in Education	85	29.8
	Diploma in Education	60	21.1
Employment status	Employed	265	93
	Unemployed	20	7
Marital status	Married	85	29.8
	Single	200	70.2
	Divorced/separated		
	Widow/widower		

Table 1 represents the demographic characteristics of the respondents of the study. In terms of gender distribution, 185 (64.9%) were male, while 100 (35.1%) were female. This implies that males exceed females in terms of pursuing distance education programmes at the University. Also, it can be seen that the majority, 150 (52.6%), of the respondents were above the age of 27, while 135 (47.4%) were between the ages of 23 and 27. Furthermore, it can be observed that the majority, 265 (93%), were employed, while 20 (7%) were unemployed. In terms of marital status, 85 (29.8%) were married, while 200 (70.2%) were single. This seems to suggest that, although the distance education programme is for all groups of people, most of the enrolled students are not married. The implications of this are discussed later in the paper.

Demographic characteristics of tutors

The demographic characteristics of course tutors were sought in order to determine the characteristics of tutors responding to the attrition rate. The gathered information is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic profile of tutors

Variables	Subscales	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	52	69.3
	Female	23	30.7
Age	Below 30	4	5.3
	31–35	14	18.6
	36–40	20	26.7
	41–45	24	32
	46–50	8	10.7
	Above 50	5	6.7
Academic qualification	First degree	40	53.3
	Master's degree	18	24
	PhD	2	2.7
	Others	15	20
Teaching experience	1–5 years	34	45.3
	6–10 years	12	16
	11–15 years	15	20
	16–20 years	8	10.7
	Above 20 years	6	8

Table 2 represents the demographic characteristics of the tutors of the distance education programme used for the study. In terms of gender distribution, it can be observed from Table 2 that, out of the 75 tutors used for the study, 52 (69.3%) were male, while 23 (30.7%) were female. This implies that most of the tutors teaching in the distance education programme are male. Also, it could be seen that the majority, 24 (32%), of the respondents was between the ages of 41 and 45, while 20 (26.7%) were between 36 and 40. However, the table also indicates that only four respondents (5.3%) were below the age of 30.

It could further be observed from Table 2 that 40 (53.3%) of the respondents were first-degree holders in various fields of study, 18 (24%) had master's degrees and two (2.7%) hold PhDs. Also, 15 (20%) indicated that they had other forms of academic qualification such as diplomas in education and other professional qualifications. In terms of teaching experience, it could be observed that the majority, 34 (45.3%), of the tutors has taught for 1 to 5 years, followed by 15 (20%) who have taught for 11 to 15 years. However, there were 6 (8%) who had over 20 years of teaching experience. This is an indication that all tutors for the distance education programme have some level of teaching experience. This means that their professional competency levels are very high and they are well grounded in the pedagogical aspects of the teaching profession.

Causes of distance learners' attrition

The study sought to determine the causes of distance learners' attrition. A total of 19 items in the instrument sampled students' views on the causes of attrition. The information obtained is shown in Table 3. Mean ranges: Agree (A) – 3; Undecided (U) – 2; and Disagree (D) – 3. Mean of means = 2.53; Mean of standard deviation = 0.76.

Table 3: Students' views on causes of distance learners' attrition

No.	Statement	A	U	D	M	SD
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
1	Academic achievement before entry predicts attrition.	175(61.4)	55(19.3)	55(19.3)	2.62	.80
2	Whether the initial course is the first preference of students also has a significant impact on course attrition.	170(59.6)	80(28.1)	35(12.3)	2.47	.70

No.	Statement	A N (%)	U N (%)	D N (%)	M	SD
3	Student aspirations in undertaking particular courses and the degree of 'fit' between such aspirations and the courses' outcomes influence attrition rate.	220(77.2)	55(19.3)	10(3.5)	2.74	.51
4	The quality of teaching and the teaching staff influence attrition rate.	195(68.4)	45(15.8)	45(15.8)	2.83	.75
5	The economic position of the students themselves has also been linked to their risk of leaving study.	180(63.2)	30(10.5)	75(26.3)	2.77	.87
6	Distance education may cause a sense of isolation that weakens motivation, which is an important reason for student attrition.	110(38.6)	40(14)	135(47.4)	1.91	.92
7	A social environment where the student experiences security, takes responsibility and is inspired, produces positive learning effects and also reduces student attrition.	160(56.1)	65(22.8)	60(21.1)	2.35	.81
8	The student's ability to cooperate in a learning community is crucially important for the decision to drop out or complete studies.	185(64.9)	65(22.8)	35(12.3)	2.88	.70
9	The student's previous education, study experience and motivation are all important factors influencing attrition.	185(64.9)	50(17.5)	50(17.5)	2.47	.78



No.	Statement	A N (%)	U N (%)	D N (%)	M	SD
10	Distance education students who have their own families are somewhat more likely to drop out.	115(40.4)	40(14)	130(45.6)	1.95	.93
11	Motivation and support from family and friends are factors that increase the likelihood that a student will complete the course.	235(82.5)	30(10.5)	20(7)	2.75	.57
12	Communication, especially with the teacher, is an important ingredient in supported distance education.	220(77.2)	35(12.3)	30(10.5)	2.67	.66
13	There are great deficiencies in the communication between teacher and student, which should have a greater emphasis on the role of the teacher as a facilitator of dialogue and active participation.	165(57.9)	30(10.5)	90(31.6)	2.96	.91
14	Other reasons for dropping out are simultaneous work and studies or parallel studies.	205(71.9)	45(15.8)	35(12.3)	2.60	.70
15	Conflict between studies and other commitments in the family, social or working life is one of the important reasons for attrition.	215(75.4)	15(5.3)	55(19.3)	2.56	.80
16	Psychological factors, such as feelings of inadequacy, distress, lack of confidence and examination anxiety, cause students to drop out.	200(70.2)	45(15.8)	40(14)	2.56	.73
17	Lengthy and difficult course content causes attrition.	205(71.9)	35(12.3)	45(15.8)	2.86	.75

No.	Statement	A N (%)	U N (%)	D N (%)	M	SD
18	A loss of interest leads to students dropping out.	170(59.6)	65(22.8)	50(17.5)	2.72	.77
19	Course content not being relevant to students' present careers may also contribute to attrition.	45(15.8)	40(14)	200(70.2)	1.46	.75

The results presented in Table 3 shows a mean of means and mean of standard deviations as $M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.76$. According to the scale used for the analysis, these figures indicate that the students generally agreed that the 19 factors listed were possible causes of distance education students' attrition. It means that a lot needs to be done if the administrators of the distance education programme want to reduce the level of attrition. This is because the nature of the given responses indicate that a lot of factors determine whether a distance learner drops out or completes a programme. The standard deviation ($SD = 0.76$) shows a relatively high consensus on the mean of means value ($M = 2.53$). This means that the reasons why distance learners drop out of their programmes over a certain period of time are many, as attested by the students themselves. Interestingly, the students seem to consider motivation and support from family and friends as factors that increases the likelihood of students completing their programmes.

Tutors' views on causes of distance learners' attrition

The tutors' opinions on the causes of distance learners' attrition were also sought. The reason is that the tutors might have interacted with the friends of the dropouts or the dropouts themselves. Table 4 shows information gathered from the tutors. Mean ranges: Agree (A) – 3; Undecided (U) – 2; and Disagree (D) – 1. Mean of means = 2.60; Mean of standard deviation = 0.76.

Table 4: Tutors' views on causes of distance learners' attrition

No.	Statement	A N (%)	U N (%)	D N (%)	M	SD
1	Academic achievement before entry predicts attrition.	47(62.7)	15(20)	13(17.3)	2.95	.78
2	Whether the initial course is the first preference of students also has a significant impact on course attrition.	44(58.7)	21(28)	10(13.3)	2.45	.72
3	Student aspirations in undertaking particular courses and the degree of 'fit' between such aspirations and the courses' outcomes influence attrition rate.	57(76)	15(20)	3(4)	2.72	.53
4	The quality of teaching and the teaching staff influence attrition rate.	51(68)	14(18.7)	10(13.3)	2.55	.72
5	The economic position of the students themselves has also been linked to their risk of leaving study.	47(62.7)	9(12)	19(25.3)	2.37	.87
6	Distance education may cause a sense of isolation that weakens motivation, which is an important reason for student attrition.	30(40)	11(14.7)	34(45.3)	1.94	.93
7	A social environment where the student experiences security, takes responsibility and is inspired, produces positive learning effects and also reduces student attrition.	40(53.3)	19(25.3)	16(21.3)	2.82	.81
8	The student's ability to cooperate in a learning community is crucially important for the decision to drop out or complete studies.	46(61.3)	19(25.3)	10(13.3)	2.88	.72

No.	Statement	A N (%)	U N (%)	D N (%)	M	SD
9	The student's previous education, study experience and motivation are all important factors influencing attrition.	47(62.7)	14(18.7)	14(18.7)	2.74	.79
10	Distance education students who have their own families are somewhat more likely to drop out.	32(42.7)	12(16)	31(41.3)	2.91	.92
11	Motivation and support from family and friends are factors that increase the likelihood that a student will complete the course.	61(81.3)	10(13.3)	4(5.3)	2.76	.54
12	Communication, especially with the teacher, is an important ingredient in supported distance education.	57(76)	11(14.7)	7(9.3)	2.67	.64
13	There are great deficiencies in the communication between teacher and student, which should have a greater emphasis on the role of the teacher as a facilitator of dialogue and active participation.	45(60)	9(12)	21(28)	2.82	.89
14	Other reasons for dropping out are simultaneous work and studies or parallel studies.	55(73.3)	12(16)	8(10.7)	2.63	.67
15	Conflict between studies and other commitments in the family, social or working life is one of the important reasons for attrition.	57(76)	5(6.7)	13(17.3)	2.59	.77



No.	Statement	A N (%)	U N (%)	D N (%)	M	SD
16	Psychological factors, such as feelings of inadequacy, distress, lack of confidence and examination anxiety, cause students to drop out.	50(66.7)	13(17.3)	12(16)	2.51	.76
17	Lengthy and difficult course content causes attrition.	53(70.7)	10(13.3)	12(16)	2.55	.76
18	A loss of interest leads to students dropping out.	44(58.7)	17(22.7)	14(18.7)	2.62	.79
19	Course content not being relevant to students' present careers may also contribute to attrition.	12(16)	11(14)	52(69.3)	1.97	.76

An analysis of tutors' views on the causes of attrition shows the mean of means and mean of standard deviations as $M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.76$. According to the scale used for the analysis, these figures indicate that the tutors generally agree that the 19 listed factors are possible causes of distance learners' attrition rate. It means that some practical measures should be put in place as interim measures to address the problem of attrition. A standard deviation ($SD = 0.76$) shows a relatively high consensus about the mean of means value ($M = 2.60$). This means that the general reasons why distance learners' drop out of their programmes over a certain period of time are varied, as attested by the students themselves. Surprisingly, the students and tutors both indicated a lack of motivation from family and friends as the most common reason for dropping out.

Measures to reduce the attrition rate

The tutors' and students' views on measures to reduce the attrition rate of distance learners were elicited. Tables 5 and 6 respectively depict students' and tutors' views. Mean ranges – students: Effective (E) – 3; Not Sure (NS) – 2; and Ineffective (IE) – 3. Mean of means = 2.48. Mean of standard deviation = 0.74. Mean ranges – tutors: Effective (E) – 3; Not Sure (NS) – 2; and Ineffective (IE) – 3. Mean of means = 2.46; Mean of standard deviation = 0.75.

Table 5: Students' views on measures to reduce attrition rate of distance learners

No.	Statement	E	NS	IE	M	SD
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
1	Providing guidance in time management through their core faculty and part-time academic counsellors	200(70.2)	30(10.5)	55(19.3)	2.51	.80
2	Providing intense pre-entry counselling	225(78.9)	35(12.3)	25(8.8)	2.70	.62
3	Monitoring the counselling sessions and evaluating assignments with tutor comments	225(78.9)	30(10.5)	30(10.5)	2.68	.65
4	Providing more concrete guidance in writing assignments	205(71.9)	35(12.3)	45(15.8)	2.56	.75
5	Introducing different types of assignments besides short answer and long answer types	160(56.1)	50(17.5)	75(26.3)	2.30	.86
6	Sending evaluated assignments to the students in time	190(66.7)	50(17.5)	45(15.8)	2.51	.75
7	Contact between the core faculty and the students may be increased using various communication technologies	205(71.9)	45(15.8)	35(12.3)	2.60	.70
8	Introducing more hands-on experience for skills development	175(61.4)	55(19.3)	55(19.3)	2.42	.79
9	Making teaching and learning material available to students on time	250(87.7)	10(3.5)	25(8.8)	2.80	.59
10	Extending the duration of the courses to provide students with more time to complete them	170(59.6)	25(8.8)	90(31.6)	1.72	.91

An analysis was done to determine the nature of the responses given in terms of the measures that can be put in place to reduce distance learners' attrition rate. In the case of the students, a mean of means and mean of standard deviations were computed as $M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.74$. According to the scale used for the analysis, these figures indicate that the students generally agree that the 10 listed factors are possible means of reducing distance education students' attrition rate. A standard deviation of $SD = 0.76$ shows a relatively high consensus on the mean of means value ($M = 2.48 \approx 2.50$). The most remarkable measure to which students (250 (87.7%)) responded was making teaching/learning material available on time.

Tutors' views

Table 6 presents tutors' views on the measures to reduce the attrition rate in distance learning. Mean ranges are: Effective (E) = 3; Not Sure (NS) = 2; and Ineffective (IE) = 3. Mean of means = 2.48; Mean of standard deviation = 0.74.

Table 6: Tutors' views of measures to reduce distance learners' attrition rate

No.	Statement	E	NS	IE	M	SD
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
1	Providing guidance in time management through their core faculty and part-time academic counsellors	52(69.3)	9(12)	14(18.7)	2.51	.79
2	Providing intense pre-entry counselling	60(80)	9(12)	6(8)	2.72	.61
3	Monitoring the counselling sessions and evaluating assignments with tutor comments	58(77.3)	8(10.7)	9(12)	2.65	.69
4	Providing more concrete guidance in writing assignments	52(69.3)	11(14.7)	12(16)	2.53	.76
5	Introducing different types of assignments besides short answer and long answer types	41(54.7)	13(17.3)	21(28)	2.27	.88
6	Sending evaluated assignments to the students in time	49(65.3)	14(18.7)	12(16)	2.49	.76

No.	Statement	E	NS	IE	M	SD
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
7	Contact between the core faculty and the students may be increased using various communication technologies	53(70.7)	13(17.3)	9(12)	2.59	.70
8	Introducing more hands-on experience for skills development	45(60)	16(21.3)	14(18.7)	2.41	.79
9	Making teaching and learning material available to students on time	65(86.7)	3(4)	7(9.3)	2.77	.61
10	Extending the duration of the courses to provide students with more time to complete them	22(29.3)	7(9.3)	90(61.3)	1.68	.90

An analysis was done to determine the nature of the responses given in terms of what measures can actually be put in place to reduce distance learners' attrition rate. In the case of the tutors, a mean of means and mean of standard deviations were computed as $M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.75$. According to the scale used for the analysis, these figures indicate that the tutors generally agree that the 10 listed factors are possible measures of reducing distance education students' attrition rate. A standard deviation ($SD = 0.75$) shows a relatively high consensus on the mean of means value ($M = 2.46 \approx 2.50$). The highest rated measure given by the tutors, 65 (86.7%), was the provision of teaching/learning material on time.

Discussion of findings

The study has revealed that most of the students pursuing distance learning are male. One wonders why women are still lagging behind men, even when distance education has been made accessible in Ghana. It is not clear whether the socio-cultural practices that discourages in career development in African women are still dominant in communities. The smaller number of females also reflects in the number of course tutors in distance learning. This finding is contrary to findings made by Adrah (2000) in the then College of Education, Winneba, where female students were found to be more than males.



With regard to marital status, it has been found that the majority of the students are single. This fact may help the students concentrate on their books, as they will have no marital demands. It could also imply that the institution might need to monitor this trend. Monitoring this issue will enable the institution to understand the characteristics of such students, their profile and how to better support them in their studies, especially in view of technological trends in the age group.

On the topic of tutors' qualifications, it was revealed that the majority of the tutors were first-degree holders. This qualification is on the lower level, since the requirement for lecturers at the University of Cape Coast is at least a second degree.

With regard to the causes of a higher attrition rate in distance learning, students and tutors agree on the 19-point factor list above as possible causes of distance education. These factors fall in line with the existing literature (Nash 2004; Perraton, 1992; Keegan, 1988; Brookfield, 1987). The respondents' highest-rated factor for preventing attrition (motivation from family and friends) confirms what Brookfield (1987) noted: that adults need a comfortable and supportive environment to ensure success in learning.

With regard to how the attrition rate can be reduced, tutors and students have rated providing teaching and learning material on time, intense and monitored pre-entry counselling, and evaluating assignments with tutor comments as the most significant to reduce attrition. Again, sending evaluated assignments to students on time was also seen as a crucial measure to reduce attrition. These measures confirm literature in this area, which includes pre-course orientation (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). While Minich (1996) contends that frequent contact with students is critical in reducing attrition, Nash (2004:2) reminds us that "interactions can be time-consuming and difficult for the faculty to sustain".

It has also emerged from the study that the reasons for female distance education students leaving the programme are significantly different from the reasons for male students dropping out.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The problem of attrition in distance learning programmes has been argued by several researchers, without any consistent conclusions about the magnitude of the problem or a clear understanding of what can be done to solve the problem. In examining tutors' and distance learners' perception of the attrition rate of distance learners, this paper focused on the distinctive characteristics of adult learners, predictors of attrition and measures to reduce the problem. While the findings of this study offer a constellation of causes of attrition among UCC distance learners and some measures to reduce the problem, little can readily be done to ameliorate the situation.

The complexity of the causes of attrition and measures to reduce it allows for few practical or readily applied solutions. In some instances, some causes may be evolutionary issues that may, in time, be resolved through improvements in technology, more effective course design, a better understanding of adult learner characteristics, good facilitation skills and effective learner support systems.

One area where something can be done to reduce the attrition rate of distance learners is early faculty contact, where intense pre-entry counselling sessions are given through orientation in relational, academic and other retention strategies. A greater level of persistence may be achieved if learners are supported to anticipate, recognise and recover from the cognitive burden they may experience as beginners.

The issue of distance learners' attrition needs further research. However, it is believed that early faculty contact and thorough orientation will help reduce the high rate of attrition as perceived by both tutors and students. This contact can improve retention and enhance the learning outcomes of UCC distance learners. Attrition cannot be attributed to one cause, but must be considered as from the result of a combination of factors. This study has identified important predictors of attrition in distance learning and has identified others that did not show significant effects. The findings may prove to be of value to UCC distance learning providers, future researchers and institutions providing distance learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following interim measures are recommended to reduce the high attrition rate of UCC distance learners:

- Efforts must be made by the Centre for Continuing Education to make it a norm to employ tutors who have at least a second degree. Such tutors will be able to teach and encourage students to get involved with the programme.
- Again, there is a need to provide teaching and learning material on time and intensify pre-entry counselling for tutors and students. This will help tutors and students to establish a foundation for the teaching and learning environment.
- The centre should create a course website to promote online chats. This will encourage frequent interaction between the students and the centre, so that issues can be discussed promptly to prevent frustration, which may eventually lead to attrition.
- The centre should also develop group projects and assignments that encourage students to develop relationships with other members in and outside their study centre, so that they can explore their knowledge base together. This group project may help students overcome physical separation, feelings of isolation, lack of support and feeling disconnected, thus reducing attrition levels.
- Furthermore, the centre should provide online access to a variety of services, including assessments, educational counselling, registration, technical support, study skills assistance, career counselling, library services, students' rights and responsibilities and governance.
- Finally, there should be an open forum in all the centres where students' concerns could be addressed.

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