Perceptions of University of Cape Coast Distance Education Learners and Tutors on the Availability and Adequacy of Learner Support Services

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Abstract

The study was conducted to find out the perceptions of learners and tutors of the University of Cape Coast Distance Education Programme on the availability and adequacy of learner support services. The influence of gender, location and study centres patronized was also examined. The sample for the study comprised 269 distance education learners, 27 tutors and 4 coordinators from the three study centres making a total of 300 respondents. The respondents were selected from Cape Coast, Accra and Koforidua study centres. Simple random sampling and purposive sampling procedures were used. The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. Questionnaires were used for data collection. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation were used to present the responses. Findings revealed that most distance learners had low perceived satisfaction with UCC learner support services. There was however difference in the learners' perceived satisfaction with specific learner support services. Specifically, most learners perceived satisfaction with tutorials and learners' handbook was high and low for finance, library, study centre facilities, ICT/computer centres, counselling services, tables and chairs, lecture halls, air conditioners, and others. In light of these findings, it is recommended that the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of UCC improves the facilities and learner support services at the regional study centres while locating new ones to provide easy access for distance learners. Finally, access to the Social Security and National Insurance Trust students' loan scheme should be arranged with the government for the Distance Education students.

Keywords: distance education, learner support services, basic education, tertiary education, University of Cape Coast

Introduction

Tertiary education is post-secondary academic and professional education offered at the Universities, Polytechnics, Specialists' Institutions, Open Universities or any other institutions offering training leading to the award of Diploma and Degree (Anamuah-Mensah Committee, 2002). According to Tucker (1993), 'man' will have either to innovate or perish. That is so far as nothing in this world is static, the needs and aspirations of 'man' keep on changing. Therefore, 'man' must change with the times or be

relegated to the background. This urge to change has been evident in Ghana's education sector. There have been several reforms and innovations to meet the changing needs and aspiration of the nation. This is seen in the number of reforms and initiatives carried out by the various government of the country at different times. This process began as far back as 1899 at the time of Sir Frederick Kudjson, the then Governor of the Gold Coast. One of such innovations and reforms is the distance education concept.

Definition and Characteristics of Distance Learning

Distance education, in contrast to traditional classroom or camps-based education, is characterized by a clear separation in space and time of the majority of teaching and learning activities (Kaye, 1987). Perry and Rumble (1987), in support of the foregoing, assert that in distance education learner and the teacher do not engage in face-to-face but in order for a two-way communication to take place between them, a medium such as print, radio or telephone has to be used. The theoretical basis on which instructional model is based affects not only the way in which information is communicated to the student but also the way in which it is presented. Two opposing views that impact instructional design is symbol-processing and situated cognition (Bredo, 1994). Until recently, the dominant view has

been the traditional information processing approach, based on the concept of a computer performing formal operation on symbols (Seamans, 1990).

The key concept is that the teacher can transmit a fixed body of information to students through an external representation. The teacher presents an abstract idea as a concrete image and then presents the image to the learner through a medium. The learner, in turn, perceives, decodes and stores the image. According to the case study analysis by Owusu-Mensah, part-time students of Lawrencium University in Ontario, Canada, enjoyed financial support from their government to enable them to go through their programmes. The Ontario Student Association 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.

In another development, 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. The survey 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 counsellors and tutors, well-equipped regional libraries constitute support services necessary for the distance education programme to have a smooth take-off. Mireku-Gyimah (1998) observed that effective use of these support services when provided would depend on proximity and convenience to and affordability by users. What then are specific learner support needs of teachers studying by distance at UCC? How do they perceive support services available to them? Do they find them adequate, helpful and convenient?

The area of student support services is central to the success of any distance learning programme. Often overlooked, student service policy issues directly impact prospective and current distance learning students. In particular, institutions need to develop distance learning policies on student advisement, counselling, the library, marketing, material delivery, textbooks, training and proctoring. The SUNY draft report (Feisel, 1998) suggests that campuses work vigorously and cooperatively with the SUNY System Office to provide all related student support services for distance learning students. This recommendation allows campuses some flexibility with all areas-particularly with advisement, counselling, and on-site library usage-yet recognises that a virtual library of digital resources and material, the marketing of courses, delivery of materials and texts and student proctoring at a distance often require collaborative efforts to succeed.

A survey by Mensah & Owusu-Mensah (2002) revealed that all the institutions have certain basic facilities like computers, libraries, and resource centres but because of the large number of students using them these facilities are overstretched and so are not enough to support students' learning. Even though these facilities are not adequate we believe that they provide an initial valuable resource for distance education at the tertiary level. They are potential preparatory grounds for the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching and learning.

Distance Education in Ghana

Distance Education (DE) as an educational initiative allows a person to learn without necessarily coming into direct contact with

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instructors. The economic and political mismanagement of educational policies and practices in Ghana in the 60s, 70s, and 80s led to the brain drain and dearth of qualified Ghanaian teachers in the classrooms, as well as the collapse of the entire educational system and management. The concept of distance education was conceived to meet one of the challenges of the reforms of the tertiary education system as far back as 1986 and the university provision of distance education began during this era. According to Ossei-Anto (2003), "the Ministry of Education did not offer nor set any guidelines for the articulation of distance education mechanism in the education sector" (p. 132). The universities took advantage of this open gap to claim they were using DE as a means to affording learners the opportunity to work and study whilst at home releasing pressure on residential accommodation; allowing adults to divert into other academic areas of interest; creating an off-campus channel; increasing access; sharing cost; opening up the field for upgrading and updating; meeting family or job or social or educational commitment simultaneously.

The Open Distance Learning-(ODL) initiatives has now increased access to teacher training, resulting in qualified teachers and higher admission rates at UEW and UCC. The development of distance education units in the Universities has also resulted in computer literacy among University staff and production of good quality distance education course materials. Despite these modest achievements, there are serious issues and challenges facing higher education in Ghana especially, with the implementation of learner support services of DE. In conventional education institutions, a number of facilities necessary to ensure the comfort of students and facilitate their learning exist despite their inadequacy probably because of the increasing number of students.

When students engage in distance learning, some of these instructional facilities like library, internet and counselling services are denied them. To ensure that distance learners go through their studies successfully, Rowtree (1992) emphasizes the need for student support services without which most students are liable to delay their completion of a programme or drop out all-together. This paper dwells on the basics of Open Distance and Flexible Education (ODFE) as practiced by some selected institutions (universities) worldwide and zooms in to examine how DE is currently perceived and operated in Ghana, particularly, the University of Cape Coast.

For the past ten years, the universities in Ghana have had the unpleasant duty of turning away a large number of qualified applicants every year because of their inability

to admit them. This situation has been attributed to limited and deteriorating facilities, coupled with these limited facilities is the rising cost of providing quality education at the secondary and tertiary levels. The Government of Ghana is finding it increasingly difficult to fund tertiary education all alone. The above reasons have compelled the Government of Ghana has adopted distance education as a viable complement to the conventional face-to-face education. This step is inspired by the vision of the Government of Ghana that all Ghanaians should have access to all forms of education and training regardless of where they live.

Tucker (1993) stated that despite the difficulties encountered in the earlier attempts with Distance Education in Ghana, there was still a strong conviction on the part of the Government of Ghana that Distance Education is a viable complement to conventional education especially at the tertiary level. This conviction was partly due to the fact that universities were not able to admit even half of qualified applicants due to limited facilities. Consequently, between 1991 and 1994, the Government of Ghana through the Ministry of Education (MOE) sponsored a number of surveys to assess the distance education needs of Ghana. Two important international organisations which were involved in these surveys are the Commonwealth of Learning

(COL) and the United Nation Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (Tucker, 1993).

Upon the recommendations from these surveys, the Universities agreed to start Distance Education Programmes. The four universities, University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and University College of Education started the programme. University of Ghana opted to offer four courses through its Distance Education programme. These are Sociology, English, Religious and Political Science at the Bachelor Degree Level. For University of Cape Coast, the courses selected were Bachelor of Education in Primary Education and Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE); at the University of Science and Technology, two programmes were proposed for the programme. These were BSc. (Building Technology) and BSc. (Building Science). However, funding of the Distance Education Programme was a problem for the universities.

Of these four Universities only University College of Education, Winneba (UCEW) now University of Education, Winneba (UEW) was able to take off in 1996 as a result of assistance from the then British Overseas Development Administration (ODA), now

Department for International Development (DFID). UCEW took off by admitting a first batch of 196 students to pursue Post-Diploma Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Degree in four subject areas namely; English Education, Life Skill Education, Mathematics Education and Science Education. UEW therefore became the Pioneer in University-level Distance Education in Ghana. University of Cape Coast (UCC) and University of Ghana (UG) took off in 2001/2002 academic year with Diploma Programmes in Basic Education and Youth in Development Work respectively (Tucker, 1993).

Student drop-out has been identified by the researcher as a characteristic problem of distance learning institutions. It is on record that 31% drop-out in enrolment occurred in University of Education, Winneba first batch of B.Ed students. The first batch of diploma students also has their enrolment reduced from 1384 to 1094 between July 2002 and December 2002 (UCWE, 2002). The researcher wonders why the distance education unit of UEW is recording student drop-outs between the period of registration/matriculation and completion. This may be partially due to unavailability of learner support services like learning materials, tutorials, counselling, library facilities, and ICT centres. It is necessary to explore why DE students do not receive adequate learner support services. Since the development of effective learner support services would make distance education programme achieve its objectives. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the perceptions of students and tutors on the UCC Distance Education Programme about the learner support services available to students.

Researchers like Akrofi (2009) and Musa (2002) have researched into prospects and problems of Distance Education in UEW and Department of Social Sciences Education, UCC respectively but they did not touch on real learner support services problems facing distance learners. Student drop-out has been identified by the researcher as a characteristic problem of distance learning institutions. This may be partially due to unavailability of learner support services like learning materials, tutorials, counselling, library facilities, and ICT centres. The development of effective learner support services would make distance education programme achieve its objectives.

As Gay (1987) rightly points out, using whole population in research is not feasible. Thus, this research is delimited to Central, Greater Accra and Eastern Region study centres of the College of Distance Education of University of Cape Coast. The study seeks to investigate perceptions of learners and tutors on learner support services challenges and

suggest appropriate measures to improve them. This study focuses on learner support services provided to the UCC undergraduate Distance Education learners because they were not enjoying the needed support services as compared to their counterparts in conventional educational institutions. Again, the study is delimited to the learners pursuing educational programmes only.

Purpose of the Study
This study, therefore, sought to investigate the perceptions of learners and tutors on the UCC distance education programme concerning the availability and adequacy of learner support services to learners. Based this purpose, the study sought answers to the following questions:
1. What learner support services are available to UCC distance education students?
2. How do UCC distance education students perceive the adequacy of available learner support services?
3. What improvements in the area of learner support should be made for students learning by distance?

Method
Design
In this study, the design used was descriptive research design. Descriptive design made room for the concepts and issues to be well assessed by the researcher. The study made use of quantitative method (questionnaires). The target population for the study was all distance education students of Koforidua, Greater Accra and Cape Coast study centres who had registered for educational programmes for both Diploma and Degree in Basic Education and Business Studies who had spent at least a year on the distance education programme, academic staff of the distance education and the regional study centre coordinators of the UCC Distance Education Programme. The target group which the researcher was interested in gaining information and drawing conclusions is known as the population. Pollitt and Hungler (as cited in Amedahe, 2002) have explained that population is the entire aggregation of cases that meet a designated set of criteria. Therefore, the population is the entire data from which a sample will be drawn. If the population is not well selected the work will not have efficacy. The population should have a bearing on the objectives that the study intended to be achieved.

Sample
The sample size of students conformed to the estimates provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), which indicates that a population size of 900 should have a sample size of 269 and consequently a sample size of 269 for a population of 900, which is the sample should

be about 30% of the population. An unequal number of 134 and 135 students were drawn from the second and third-year groups respectively. However, the first-year students were excluded from the study since they were new in the system. The selection was done separately, one for the male students and the other for the female students. The ratio of male to female students in the programme was 3:1. In selecting the tutors, purposive sampling technique was used. Out of a total tutor population of 70 for the three centres, 27 were purposively sampled for the study, representing approximately 39% of the entire tutor population. The rationale for this purposive sampling selection was to acquire relevant information from those personalities who, by virtue of the key positions (such as heads of department and form masters) they held in the distance education programme with rich teaching experience. The total sample size for the students was 269.

Data Collection Instrument, Procedure and Analysis

Three separate types of questionnaires were designed, one for the students, the second one for the tutors and the third one for the regional study centre coordinators. The questionnaires were made up of five major sections. Section (A) consisted of items dealing with the demographic data of students. Section (B) consisted of items designed to measure the

respondents' view on the learner support services available to UCC distance education students. Section (C) of the instrument was designed to find out perceptions of DE students on UCC learner support services. Section (D) of the instrument contains items designed for distance education regional study tutors and Section (E) contains items designed for distance education regional study centre coordinators to find out what improvements in terms of learner support should be made for students learning by distance.

The SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 21) was used to determine a Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient for the study. The responses were edited and scored. Using the SPSS software package, a Cronbach's Alpha reliability statistics for the three parts of the questionnaires stood as .721 for students, .728 for tutors and .786 for the study centre coordinators respectively. The statistical results indicated that the instruments were valid and reliable. The Cronbach alpha was used for the Likert-type scale items because it has been judged to be appropriate for survey research in which items are not scored as wrong or right (McMillan & Schumacher, 1977). The researchers personally delivered the questionnaires to respondents. To maximize response level, a follow-up was made to re-emphasize the importance of the study. A meeting was held with selected

tutors and study centre coordinators to explain how the distance learners' questionnaire would be administered. The lists of selected samples of students for each study centre were given to the study centre coordinators and tutors to assist in getting the students assembled. The students' questionnaire was administered by the researcher himself at the three study centres where the student had converged for a residential face-to-face session in April 2015.

In each centre, the lists of sampled students were used to invite the student respondents. Twenty minutes of a day's tutorial session was used at each centre for students to complete the questionnaires. The researcher briefed the students on how to fill the questionnaires after being introduced by the centre coordinators. The data collected from the field was sorted, coded, and entered into SPSS. Percentages, frequencies, means and standard deviation were used for the analysis and interpretations. Analysis of the responses was done in order of the research questions. Responses from the various categories of respondents were discussed systematically in line with the research questions.

Results and Discussion

This section deals with the discussion of the data from the field to address the research questions that were formulated to guide the study. The four-point Likert scale questionnaire that was administered was using mean of means and standard deviations. From the analysis, a mean value between 4.5–5.0 showed that the respondent strongly agreed to the statement, a mean value between 4.4–3.5 showed that the respondents agreed with the statement, a mean value between 3.4–3.0 showed that the respondents uncertain with the statement, between 2.9–2.5 showed that respondents disagreed with the statement and a mean value between 2.4–1.5 and below showed that the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. A standard deviation below 1.0 showed that the responses from the respondents were homogeneous and heterogeneous when it was above.

Research Question One: What learner support services are available to UCC Distance Education Students?

Research question one sought to find out from the respondents the learner support service available to UCC Distance Education Students. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Learner Support Services Available to UCC Distance Education Students

Statement	M	SD
Provision of print materials for monthly face-to-face	3.12	1.831
ICT centre for learners	1.15	0.758
Adequate computers for students use	1.15	0.758
Adequate number of library books	1.74	1.432
Adequate counselling services at the centre	1.83	1.334
Adequate provision of students' handbook	2.65	1.423
Adequate provision of modules	2.17	1.434
Provision of library facilities and reading area at the centre	2.71	1.530
Study centres have internet facility	1.49	1.171
Adequate tutorial sessions (face-to-face meetings)	2.96	1.846
Adequate feedbacks and contact with tutors/lecturers	4.39	0.490
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	**2.43**	**0.769**

Note: M is Mean and SD is Standard Deviation

Table 1 shows the responses of students on learner support services available to UCC Distance Education Students. The results indicated that majority of the students on UCC Distance Education Programme are not provided with the listed learner support services. and their responses did not differ much from each other (M=2.43; SD=0.77). The responses provided by the respondents are in concordance to that of researchers who have made comprehensive studies on the learner support services for distance education students. Notable among them are Boettcher and Cartwright (as cited in Abate, n.d.) who assert that the learner support services should include access to library materials and facilities, delivery of course materials and counselling. Again, a survey conducted by Mireku-Gyimah (1998) revealed that well-equipped district libraries, well-stocked study centres, occasional personal contact/face-to-face meetings including residential sessions, access to counsellors and tutors, well-equipped regional libraries constitute support services necessary for the distance education programme to have a smooth take-off.

Additionally, Oaks (1996) conducted extensive research on learner support services for distance education students and held the view that success in attracting and retaining students depends on excellent student support services such as provision of library books and other reading materials. This also confirms the findings of Quaigrain (2001) and Owusu Mensah (1998), who maintained that adequate face-to-face tutorial session is an example of learner support

services provided for distance education student. Similarly, Aguti (1995) found that face-to-face sessions motivate students to learn, allow them to concentrate on their work, give students the opportunity to interact with their friends and a sense of belonging to the University. Studies by Owusu-Mensah (1998), Bampo (2008), and Owusu-Boateng, Essel and Mensah (2001) support this assertion that there should be the provision of adequate learner support services for distance education students. Moreover, the finding is in line with Keegan (1986) who believes that the separation of student and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital "link" of communication between these two parties. This link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be "reintegrated". He then hypothesized that students who did not receive adequate reintegration measures such as electronic or telephone communication could be less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life.

Research Question Two: How do UCC Distance Education Students perceive the adequacy of available learner support services?

Research question two sought to find out from the respondents on their perception of the available learner support services. The results on this research question are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Perception of Students on UCC Learner Support Services

Statement	M	SD
Tutorials help me obtain clarification in my studies	4.21	0.784
Tutorials enable me to have helpful interaction with tutors	4.28	0.451
Tutorials help me get in touch with my colleague students and feel connected	3.80	1.210
Distance I travel to regional study centre is not be a barrier to my tutorial attendance	3.48	1.340
I get motivated by the counselling support offered me	2.86	1.678
It is important spending time reading the student handbook for guidance to my studies	3.57	1.572
Library facilities at regional study centre serve my needs adequately	1.88	1.276
I have easy access to University libraries	1.64	1.096
Public libraries in my area help in my studies	1.64	1.146
I easily get relevant reference	1.50	1.171
It is easy getting in touch with colleague students in my local area for academic/social support	3.79	1.309
I get in touch with colleague students only at tutorial/residential	3.51	1.239

sessions		
It is convenient travelling to and from the regional study centre	3.35	1.582
Coordinators and tutors at the study centre are supportive	3.09	1.518
Self-assessment questions in course units are sufficient	2.86	1.678
Assignments per course book are adequate	3.73	1.384
Comments on tutor- marked assignments are helpful to me	2.23	1.406
Tutor-marked assignments are returned without undue delay	1.88	1.455
Lapse between submission of assignment and return of such assignments with comments from tutors is commendable	1.84	1.379
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	**2.83**	**0.54**

Note. M is Mean and SD is Standard Deviation

Results from Table 2 shows the responses of distance education students on the perception of learner support services. The results indicated that a greater percentage of the students do not have positive perception about the UCC learner support services and their responses did not differ much from each other (M=2.83; SD=0.54). This finding is in line with the findings of Quaigrain (2001) who in his study on face-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 the sessions. Based on this research, Quaigrain found out that some of the reasons given by the students for participating actively in face-to-face tutorials included: providing opportunities for them to listen to the tutor for the explanation of course materials, receiving guidance on assignments and examinations from tutors, receiving guidance from tutors on study skills and exchanging

viewpoints with tutors and other students. In a similar study conducted in Athabasca University. Coldeway, MacRury and Spenser (2003) pointed out that distance learners were found to be motivated when they had frequent interaction with their tutors. Confirming this. Bampo (2008) pointed out in a study carried out at the University of Cape Coast on student support services that all the respondents placed high premium on face-to-face tutorial sessions as it creates opportunity for student-student and also student-tutor interaction and as such serves as a means of getting feedback from students.

Research Question Three: What improvements in the area of learner support should be made for students learning by distance?
Research question three sought to find out from the respondents the improvements that should be made in the area of learner support for students learning by distance. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Improvements in the area of Learner Support for Distance Students

Statement	M	SD
Building more lecture halls	4.39	0.49
Provision of air conditioners in the lecture halls	4.17	0.85
Improvement in the ICT centre	3.11	1.83
Provision of better tables and chairs	2.95	1.84
Provision of counselling units	2.69	1.53
Relocation of study centres	2.65	1.45
Provision of internet facilities	2.17	1.43
Good communication between administration and students	1.83	1.34
Expanding the population	1.75	1.44
Provision of ICT/computer resource centres	1.49	1.17
Provision of libraries	1.15	0.76
Distribution of study materials on time	1.15	0.76

Note. M is Mean and SD is Standard Deviation

Table 3 shows the views of students, tutors and centre coordinators of distance education on improvements that should be done in the area of learner support for students learning by distance in the University of Cape Coast. From Table 3, the first item that was outlined by the respondents was building of more lecture hall which has a mean value of 4.39 and a standard deviation of 0.49. This implies that majority of the respondents listed building of more lecture halls and their responses did not differ from each other concerning the statement. It can be deduced from this view that there is overcrowding in some of the lecture halls of the centres of University of Cape Coast Distance Education. This creates inconveniencies for students, tutors and centre coordinators alike. The second area of improvement mentioned on the subject of student support service for distance education was provision of air conditioners in the lecture halls with a mean value of 4.17 and a standard deviation of 0.85. The mean and the standard deviation values give the implication that majority of the respondents outlined the provision of air-conditioners in the lecture halls and their responses did not differ from each other concerning the statement. It can be emphatically derived from the responses that students, tutors and coordinators in distance education experience a lot of heat in their lecture halls, especially sunny mornings and afternoons when lectures are in progress.

The third item has to do with improvements in ICT centre which had a mean value of 3.11 with a standard deviation value of 1.83. On the fourth item from the responses, it

concerns the provision of better tables and chairs with a mean value of 2.95 and a standard deviation of 1.84. Following the fifth item listed by the respondents was on the provision of counselling unit in the various centres with a mean value of 2.69 and a standard deviation value of 1.53. The sixth item was relocation of study centres with a mean value of 2.65 and a standard deviation of 1.45. The seventh and the eighth items were the provision of internet facilities and good communication between administration and students with a mean value 2.17 and 1.83 with standard deviations 1.43 and 1.34 respectively. In addition, respondents did not leave out the provision of ICT/computer resource centres which has become an integral instrument in twenty-first-century education.

Finally, it is obvious from the result that provision of libraries and the distribution of study materials on time were outlined by the respondents as far as learner support services for distance students are concerned. This gives reason to the fact an improvement in the areas mentioned by the respondents would serve as very good factors to improve students' academic achievements in distance learning at the University of Cape Coast. Researchers who have conducted extensive studies on the subject under discussion laid emphasis on the provision of learner support

services for distance students, its importance and the adverse effects. Notable among them is Wright (1991), who categorically stated that support services are the "requisite students' services essential to ensure successful learning at a distance" (p. 59). Rowntree (1999) also maintained that where distance learners are denied such support services, they are likely to delay the completion of their programmes or drop out altogether. This is supported by Keegan (1996) who argues that the most important characteristic of distance education is the provision of adequate student support systems at study centres.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 1999) for higher education also identifies material-based learning which implies that all learning materials should be made available to distance learners on time. These range from printed, audio or audio-visual material and experiment equipment. In addition, Wood (1996) indicated that adequate study materials must be provided, distance learners. Study materials must take into account the significant proportion of students who enrol with little or no experience of distance study. These students are at risk of dropping out unless they develop study survival skills as rapidly as possible. Another scholar, Adentwi (2002), in his research, found out that student support services are provided by UEW for its distance learners. These

include regional study centres fully equipped with library books, audio and video communication facilities and computers to provide access to information for distance learners. Such centres are also supposed to be used to provide face-to-face contact programmes which permit some measure of feedback between course instructors and students. Counselling services are also provided for students. Tutor-counsellors are assigned the role of general guidance to students on effective self-study skills.

On the issue of the causes of students drop-out from the UCC distance education programme, the tutors are of the view that the following two factors could contribute to the drop-out rate: attraction to regular programme and financial problems associated with travelling to the study centres. This implies that some of the drop-out students were more interested in the regular straight 4-year degree programmes than the 3-year diploma by distance. Again, the regular campus programme offers students the opportunities for subject specialisation as against general programmes offered by distance. Moreover, students were attracted to regular programme due to opportunities for interaction with tutors and colleagues were more certain and solved problem of working on assignments in isolation. Besides, in the programme access to library facilities and services is

much easier and makes working on assignments easy than distance programme.

The financial problems are due to lack of early arrangements for distance learners to access the SSNIT loan scheme to support their education. The problem of traveling costs and long distances of traveling to study centres confirm Joshi's (1999) findings that high travelling cost and long-distance to regional study centres among others pose problems to distance learners in Zimbabwe's College of Distance Education. In addition, Kember's (1989) finding that financial cost for traveling to any tutorials and residential schools among others could contribute to drop-out in distance education is confirmed.

Conclusion
The following conclusions can be drawn from the study. A lot of Distance Education students do not enjoy adequate financial, library, internet and study centre support. There are significant differences found among the proportions of students of the three study centres – Cape Coast, Greater Accra and Koforidua in terms of their perceived satisfaction with their learner support services indicate discrimination in the provision of such support at these study centres. The major challenges distance students face is travelling long distance to study centres, expensive tuition fees, and inadequate supply

of modules and not receiving them on time, inadequate internet and library facilities at the Regional study centres to supplement the course materials available and high cost of accommodation during residential face-to-face sessions. These challenges are a result of fewer study centres at the various Regions in Ghana, inadequate facilities and unavailable loan facilities to cushion the distance students.

Based on the research findings and the conclusions arrived at, the following recommendations are made towards the improvement of the available learner support services for UCC distance learners.

1. The College of Distance Education (CoDE) set up well-stocked libraries and internet facilities at study centres and that students be taught how to access the internet.
2. The number of regional study centres need to be increased to avert students traveling long distances to attend tutorials and their location should ensure that distance education students have easy access to learner support services.
3. The government to grant the distance students the opportunity to access the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) loan scheme just like UCC conventional students.
4. Course materials be delivered to the students on time to enhance smooth academic work.
5. Provision of counselling unit at the various study centres across the country.
6. There should be ICT centre at all regional study centres to improve —teaching and learning at distance.
7. Vehicles be provided in each regional study centre to carry distance students at a subsidized cost.
8. Hostel facilities be provided at the various regional study centres.
9. Students Representative Council (SRC) is instituted at the various study centres across the country.
10. Tutors need to be motivated by increasing their allowance and also appointment letter should be given to them for them to give off their maximum best in lesson delivery.

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