Student Experiences on Distance Education Programs a Case Study of Western Uganda

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Abstract
This paper is a case study of the experiences that distance learners go through when they embark on distance degree or diploma programs. Very little in-depth study had been done on the experiences of these learners who are expected to be highly motivated, independent, active learners, possessing good organizational and time management skills, self disciplined and driven to study without external reminders and can adapt to new learning environments. (Knowles, 3ed 1984) This research undertook a detailed investigation of student perceptions of the Bachelor of Education and Diploma of Education university programs they had enrolled for. The paper concluded that, based on the numerous complaints of neglect by the students, universities need to think of creative ways to help distance learners feel valued, welcome and part of the student body at the universities.

Key words: : Experience, Distance Education, study, private university, students

I. Introduction
According to (Google, 2021) experience refers to an event or occurrence which leaves an impression on someone. The purpose of this study was to establish the events students witnessed during their study period and the impressions it created in their minds about the universities they had enrolled into. Experience is also defined by (Merriam-Webster, 2020) as a process of directly perceiving events or reality and the study sought to establish individual student perceptions which necessitated a case study of limited cases. Experience is a personal thing that is dependent on mood, feelings, perception and background of the subject.

Distance education students refer to adults- male and female who enrol for university degree or diploma programs structured to allow them study away from the university most of the time using print materials either physical or soft copies on the internet or both. (ADEA, 2002). These students may occasionally each semester appear for a week or two at the university for face to face sessions with their lecturers or exams depending on the preset program structure. (Namagero, 2021). The distance education students used in this study were all teachers upgrading from certificate to diploma and degrees mostly driven by the government policy on the basic requirements for teachers at all levels. (The Independent, 2019)

Research done by (Mayanja J, Tibaisingana A, Birevu P.M, 2019) established that many of the distance education programs at Makerere university relied mostly on print materials and face to face sessions to conduct those programs. While (Ouma, 2019) identified the challenges faced by universities in Uganda in managing and delivering support to distance education students while this study looked at personal student encounters, undergone or lived through at the university while on the distance programs. This study was an exposition of distance education practices in western Uganda as perceived by the students who participated in the study.

II. Methods
An in depth case study was undertaken in order to draw out the issues hidden in the minds and hearts of the students. Qualitative research methods were used because experiences are personal, diverse and vary from person to person. A sample size of 132 respondents was selected out of a population of 200 distance education students from two universities using Krejcie and Morgan’s recommendation for determining sample size for research purposes (Robert V.Krejcie and Darryle
W. Morgan, 1970). Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used to collect data. Each student was allocated time to explain the events, occurrences they had undergone and most had grievances they had never been given a platform to air. The two universities were selected on the basis of one being a private university and the other a public university, 66 of the respondents were selected from a public university and the other 66 from a private university as per table 1 below.

III. Findings

Demographics of the Respondents

Table 1: Gender of respondents n=132

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This public university had more male distance students than females on the education programs for in-service teachers, while the private university in this study had more female distance students than their male counterparts.

Table 2: Age Bracket of Respondents n = 132

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males 20 – 30 years</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males 31 - 40 years</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males 41 - 50 years</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males 51 and above</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 20 – 30 years</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 31 - 40 years</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 41 - 50 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 51 and above</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As per table 2 above, there were more distance students in the 41- 50 year age bracket. During the interview most females said their children were now at an age where the mother could pay attention to her personal development. Those in the 51 and above age bracket said they were time bad they wanted to study and attain promotion before retirement age clocked in. Their male counterparts responded that 41-50 years was a suitable time for them because in the age bracket of 20- 40 years they had too many pressures preventing them from concentrating on career advancement.

Table 3: Year of Study n = 132

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In table 3 above, there were fewer students in first year than all previous years, during the interviews the year 1 students said their colleagues had stayed away because of lack of finances because their schools had closed down following the outbreak of COVID 19. The students in year 1 were either from government schools or schools with candidate classes which had reopened.
IV. Experiences

The experiences/ encounters were diverse and they are presented in the order of most prevalent to least prevalent.

1. Experiences at the university

These were divided into different departments in which the students had encountered those situations.

**Administration and academic registrar’s department**

- 98% of the 132 respondents were not happy with the lack of prior information on the semester examination registration requirements. In the interviews conducted, students said they reported at the universities on the designated dates for registration only to be sent back to bring more documents they had not been told to carry in the communication inviting them for registration. This created anxiety among the students who were already anxious about preparing adequately for the exams.

**Harassment/ mistreatment by administration during registration.** Over 90% of both female and male respondents felt they had ever been mistreated by university administrators. When asked specifically 50% said they had been shouted at by the staff at the registration desks, 30% said they had been ignored even after they had made efforts to greet the staff at the desk, 20% said the staff were uncultured. Some respondents said that after paying for university t-shirts, the t-shirts department staff would hand out t-shirts without asking for student size and were unwilling to change even when requested.

- No welcome meeting for students. All the 132 respondents had never been invited for an induction meeting or welcome function as is the case for full time students. This resulted in their not knowing which office is responsible for what activity. They ended up roaming around campus each face to face session looking for assistance. They felt neglected and ignored by the universities.

- No university ID given to distance learners until almost the end of the course. The respondents were not pleased that they had not been given identity cards. The 32 third year degree program respondents and 25 second year diploma respondents at the time of the interviews were in their first semester of their last year of study but had never received university identity cards.

- All 66 males and 66 females from both the private and public universities felt that registration a day or a week before exams created unnecessary stress for them and diverted their attention. They did not appreciate being forced into other activities besides revising for exams bearing in mind that they had very little time to prepare for exams- the two weeks of face to face sessions.

- The students requested for representation on the university student leadership in order to communicate their views. This sentiment was in line with (Ouma, 2019) who had also observed that students lacked representation in the university. The students felt excluded from campus activities because they were not asked like full time students to elect their representatives to the university councils/ boards. This view was held by 90% of the female respondents and 55% of the male respondents.

- Lack of well defined channels of communication between the administration and students. All the 132 respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the manner in which vital information reached them. The respondents felt that they were ignored as students because information about when they were expected to report for face to face
sessions and other activities was not given through well established channels of communication but heard as rumours from fellow students. In the public university the respondents were not happy that they lacked simple things like a notice board for distance education students.

High tuition fees and charging fees for late registration. Both the private and public universities had policies of charging late registration fees. Students from both universities felt this was a hindrance to many other students who wanted to enrol but had difficulty in raising all the money in the short time allocated. Students felt it was not fair to charge them fees for late registration after they had struggled to look for the money to pay the fees.

V. Teaching department

- Lack of study materials or inadequate materials. The private university had a module section which was in charge of distributing study materials to students. However these materials were inadequate to cover all the students. There was also the issue of the long distance they had to travel to the university to collect modules two or three times each semester which had financial implications. The public university did not give any modules to the students. They depended solely on the lectures during face to face sessions.

- Shallow content given and no reference books for some subjects. Students in both the public and private university complained about the depth of content they were given in some core subjects. They complained that in some difficult course units they were only given introductions and the rest of the material was not handled. Coupled with this was the lack of reference books in those same course units where the lecturers gave introductions and brief summaries and no detailed explanations for the students.

- Time tables issues and communication with lecturers. Students from the private university received time tables before reporting for face to face sessions earlier than their lecturers. It showed a lack of coordination between the administration and lecturers. The respondents said they sometimes would ask lecturers about the information they had received only to be told that the lecturers had not received any official communication from the university even on simple issues as the date for resumption of face to face lectures. The case was different in the public university where the students reported for face to face sessions but had no timetables and information on who was handling the course units for that session.

- Long course duration. Students from both universities felt the 3 years allocated to the degree course was too long bearing in mind that they were adult learners. They requested to have the course reduced to 2 years for the degree program like other universities had done for the Bachelor of Education degree.

- High payments not commensurate with services given. 99% of the respondents from both public and private universities felt that they had limited/ little time with lecturers. They complained that sometimes they were not fully attended to while on face-to face sessions. They felt that the services the university offered distance learners in terms of teacher support were not equal to the high tuition fees they were charged each semester.

- Unfriendly lecturers yet students were mature and needed to be treated as colleagues not children. There was no cordial relationship between some lecturers and students. In both the public and private universities students reported that some lecturers were aloof and did not show interest in the students. As shown in the demographics in table 2 above, all the students in the study were adults probably in the same age range as their lecturers. Being upgrading teachers, they were able to identify that their lecturers were not treating the students as expected of a lecturer/teacher.
VI. Welfare and accommodation

- Accommodation during face to face sessions. Students from both the public and private university had to look for their own accommodation off campus each face to face session. Students went from lodge to lodge looking for the most inexpensive place to stay. This also added to their stress especially since face to face sessions lasted for only two weeks. Among those students were breastfeeding mothers who looked for lodges as close as possible to the university. Even in the public university where the university had accommodation still these students were denied accommodation on campus and were told to look for their own accommodation off campus.

- Hospital facility was not open to distance students. 100% of the respondents had never got access to the health facility of the universities. Students responded that the university clinic remained closed throughout the face to face seasons. They felt that their health was not catered for and yet they paid functional fees just like the regular students.

VII. Personal experiences

The respondents being social being had had many other occurrences in their lives as a result of being distance education learners. These included:

- Lack of support from employers. 60% of the female and 30% of the male respondents lived in fear of losing their jobs. They also acknowledged that they worked under harsh employers who frustrated them sometimes by refusing to give you time off work to pursue academic goals. They faced resistance from bosses especially when they were to report for face to face sessions during school time. They also faced constant discouragement from colleagues at work who were not happy to see them trying to advance academically.

- Loans to finance education. 90% of the respondents in both public and private universities had taken a loan to pay for their education. Inadequate finances to facilitate studies and personal activities lead some to end up taking numerous loans. This was especially true in the case of single parent families and one income homesteads that shouldered the burden of looking after their families’ with limited financial provision.

- Lack of social life because juggling school, work and family. All 66 female respondents had the challenge of lack of time for personal activities. They said that they had dropped out of their clubs and other social events because they no longer had time to participate in those events. Failure to strike a balance between work and studies was a constant fear they lived with throughout the course. They had limited time to conduct personal revision because of work place demands that left them tired with hardly any extra time for any other engagements.

VIII. Recommendations

The recommendations made by the distance learners included:

- Streamlining the registration process and explaining the requirements in advance to students to avoid wastage of time and money travelling back and forth to collect relevant documents.

- Register students as soon as they report and not wait for examination time.

- Give modules/ reading materials in time, provide soft copies of reading materials and let the modules be precise and understandable for the students.

- Give students access to the lecturers even after the face to face sessions for consultation.

- Give students with financial constraints opportunity to study and sit for exams before clearing all tuition fees. This is because most earn little salary but can pay in instalments over a longer time period after the course. Their certificates and graduation can be withheld until when full payments are made months or years later.
● Introduce a loan scheme for distance learners like the one for normal programs.
● Remove charges for late registration.
● Conduct orientation for new students.
● Staff and lecturers at the university were requested to be friendly.
● Give accommodation to those who need it within the university at a reasonable fee.
● Introduce a systematic way of passing on information to students including timely feedback of course work marks.
● Hold beginning of session meetings with students each time they report for face to face sessions to bring them up to speed with the university expectations from them.

**Conclusion**

Distance education students in both public and private universities had similar experiences. The difference was in the magnitude of neglect of distance learners in the public university in spite of the exorbitant fees they charged each semester. Owing to their position in society that is - practicing teachers, deputy head teachers and head teachers, they could not organise protest because of their teachers’ code of conduct.

Universities should address distance learners’ concerns to enable them complete their courses successfully. Another study could be done to establish the positive experiences in the Bachelor of Education and Diploma in Education distance education programs.

**References**


