

## **Perceptions of Technical and Vocational Education and Training Distance Learning students of the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana about their courses of study and face-to-face sessions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study sought the perceptions of Technical and Vocational Education and Training Distance Learning students of the University of Education, Winneba, about the quality of their courses of study, usefulness of study materials and performance of lecturers during face-to-face sessions. The study was guided by three research questions. The sample for the study was 650 respondents. A cross-sectional survey design and a questionnaire were employed for the study. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to organise the data. The study showed that students were satisfied with the quality of their courses of study, study materials and performance of lecturers on the face-to-face sessions. The study, however, revealed that lecturers do not provide prompt feedback on students' assignments and no reading materials are uploaded online for students to access. It is recommended that lecturers provide prompt feedback on students' assignments and study materials should be put online for students to access.

**Key words:** Technical education, vocational education, distance learning, face-to-face sessions, study materials, courses of study.

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is the only university in Ghana charged with the responsibility of producing competent professional teachers for all levels of education in the country. To this end, the University has many comprehensive programmes for equipping students with appropriate knowledge, skills and methodologies needed for effective teaching in the classroom. In order to meet the ever increasing demand for professional teachers to fill vacancies in schools as observed by Perraton, Robinson, & Creed (cited in Sampong, 2009), the University, aside from increasing enrolment numbers for its full time programmes, has introduced Distance Learning (DL) as one other way of allowing many more people who due to employment and family responsibilities cannot pursue a full time programme, also have access to higher education.

The study examined the type of DL run by the Faculties of Technical and Vocational Education of UEW known as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme for qualified graduates from technical and vocational institutions. The programmes run on the TVET DL are also run as full time ones. In the light of this, prospective students for the programmes of the two faculties apart from opting for either full time or distance modes of learning, all have to meet the same entry requirements, do same courses in a given semester, graded by the same criteria and complete their programmes of study in the same number of years. The programmes offered by both full time and TVET DL students are: B.Sc. Automotive Technology Education, B.Sc. Construction Technology Education, B.Sc. Fashion and Textiles Technology Education and B.Sc. Catering and Hospitality Education. The rest are B.Sc. Wood Technology Education, B.Sc. Electrical and Electronics Technology Education and B.Sc. Mechanical Technology Education.

Due to the fact that about 85% of the TVET DL students are employees of the Ghana Education Service (GES) who teach in basic and second cycle schools, face-to-face sessions where students meet with their lecturers for about six weeks of teaching are held during vacations so that teachers do not leave their pupils unattended to. This arrangement also coincides with the end of semester of the University such that the TVET DL students can have access to lecture halls, halls of residence, other facilities and the full attention of lecturers. At the end of each face-to-face session, students are given study materials and take home assignments.

### **1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The TVET DL programme was designed to be same in content and structure to the full time programmes being run by the University. Lecturers are required to give equal attention and commitment to the face-to-face sessions of the programmes as they do for the full time ones. However, since the introduction of the programme, many questions have been raised about the quality of courses of study, usefulness of study materials and commitment of lecturers to the DL programme. This observation is also shared by Badat (2005) who stated that there are serious questions about the integrity of DL programmes and how students perceive their overall quality.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

In the light of the foregoing, the purpose of the study was to find out how TVET DL students of UEW perceive the quality of their courses of study, usefulness of their study materials and the performance of lecturers during face-to-face sessions.

### **1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study sought to find answers to the following three questions:

1. How do TVET DL students perceive the quality of their courses of study?
2. How do TVET DL students perceive the usefulness of their study materials?
3. How do TVET DL students rate the performance of lecturers during the face-to-face sessions?

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Quality education**

Shrestha (2013) has observed that there is confusion over what constitute quality education for both direct and indirect beneficiaries of tertiary education. Shrestha's view is shared by Srikanthan and Daltrymple (2003) who found out in a study on DL that the stakeholders of education are many and for this reason, often have different opinions and meanings of educational quality.

The stakeholders of education in the view of Chua (cited in Shrestha, 2013) include parents who associate quality education with reputation of the educational institution and graduate employability; employers who see quality in the provision of employable skills to students; faculty members who perceive quality as relating to the entire education system from input through to output and students who link quality to process and output. Shrestha found out that: 'Perceived quality is determined by reputation of the programme as credible and trustworthy which is influenced by graduate employability, practical curriculum and competent faculty' (p.52).

Thapliyal (2014) in a study to determine students' perception of quality dimensions in DL found out that course objectives, quality of teaching, learning materials, assessment and evaluation were rated high by students as vital ingredients of a quality DL programme.

### **2.2 Study/learning materials**

DL students unlike their full time counterparts are more prone to feeling separated from each other and their tutors by distance (Keegan, 1996). In this regard, study materials for DL students should attempt to fill the 'distance gap' by being written in such a way that when students are reading the content, they would feel as if they were seeing, hearing and interacting with their tutors to the extent that each succeeding paragraph answers a potential question or questions. Peat and Helland (cited in Essel, Owusu-Boateng & Saah n.d.) emphasised that the tutor and teaching methodologies should be embedded in the study material for DL students while Moore and Tait (2002) stressed that DL learning materials should be user friendly and easy to understand.

DL learning materials come in many forms. Gujjar and Malik (2007) classified distance learning materials as printed materials such as textbooks specially written or published, and secondly, audio-visual materials like television and radio broadcast and various audio visual aids such as slides and tape recorders. Gujjar and Malik again intimated that DL study materials should among other things be sequenced for independent study, written in self instructional style, have self assessment activities and learning outcomes.

Online learning is one other facility for providing students with appropriate learning outcomes provided the course material posted is prepared in a user friendly manner and consistent with the aspirations of students (Bradshaw & Hinton, 2004; Levin & Wadmany, 2006; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

### **2.3 Effective teaching**

Muroski (2008) posited that the most important strategy for effective teaching is the connection that a teacher makes with his students the absence of which would create an un-conductive

environment for teaching and learning. This view is shared by a number of researchers who found out in their studies that meaningful teaching and learning takes place in an enabling environment where; teachers respect the views of students, students feel free to ask questions and actively take part in all activities that leads to the acquisition of knowledge (Lubawy, 2003; Ralph, 2003; Gurney, 2007).

A teacher's knowledge of the subject matter is highly associated with effective teaching. Johnson and Johnson (2010) found out in their studies about students' perception of effective teaching in DL that 'students expect and appreciate that their instructors are knowledgeable in the field of study in which they teach' (p.2). Smittle (2003) and Okoronkwo, Onyia-Pat, Agbo, Okpala and Ndu (2013) also agreed that knowledge of subject matter is vital so far as effective teaching was concerned. Closely related to a teacher's knowledge of the subject matter is the teacher's ability to communicate that knowledge to students otherwise the knowledge remains bottled up. Johnson and Johnson (2010) and Okoronkwo et al. (2013) emphasised that the ability to communicate well is a compelling quality that a teacher who wants to be effective in the classroom must have. One other strategy that a number of researchers have alluded to as one hallmark of effective teaching is prompt information feedback. These researchers maintain that students must be given prompt information feedback on all assignments given them by their teachers because such feedbacks first and foremost give students a sense of achievement which motivates them and secondly, enable students who made mistakes to correct them in good time to avoid the trouble of having to unlearn them later ( Alam, Waqar, Zaman, Shehzadi & Mehmood 2012; Johnson & Johnson 2010).

Studies by Delaney, Johnson, Johnson and Trestian (n.d.) and Okoronkwo et al. (2013) on students' perception of effective teaching revealed that students highly rated the use of varied strategies in presenting lessons. This may be due to the fact that the use of varied methods enables the teacher to present the content in different ways to cater for the learning abilities of almost all the students and to also eliminate boredom which is associated with doing something in only one way.

### **3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design used for the study was cross-sectional descriptive survey. Survey in the views of Osuala (1993) is appropriate for conducting research into an on-going process. The choice of survey method was again informed by the views of Davis, Stokes-Hurby, Rover and Donovan (2002) who indicated that results obtained from survey research can be generalized to be that of the population's.

### **3.2 POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

The population for the study was 2,490 subjects comprising all students pursuing the TVET DL programmes. Purposeful and stratified random sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 650 respondents. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that only continuing students formed the sample. This was necessary because only continuing students who have been on the DL programme for at least a year could provide meaningful information about the content of courses, lecturers' performances during the face-to-face sessions and usefulness of the study materials. Stratified random sampling technique was also used to ensure that the sample included subjects from all the programmes of study.

### 3.3 INSTRUMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

The instrument used for the study was a self-completion closed-ended Likert type scale questionnaire which according to Best and Khan (1996) is the most suitable instrument for measuring views and impressions. In line with this, a 30 close-ended Likert type scale item questionnaire was used. A four-point Likert scale was used for the questionnaire in preference to the conventional five-point scale because when an odd number response scale is used, there is the tendency for individuals to select responses such as 'not sure' or 'undecided' usually in the middle of the scale to avoid making a real choice (Casley & Kumar, 1988). The responses for the four-point scale were; *strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3) and strongly agree (4)*.

The questionnaire items were scrutinised for validity by colleague lecturers of UEW. Suggestions and comments made by colleagues were considered, the questionnaire revised accordingly and pilot tested among 15 past students of the DL programme. The reliability co-efficient of the instrument (Cronbach's alpha) was determined to be 0.78 and deemed adequate. A total of 650 questionnaires were administered randomly by class captains to their class members and 500 returned. The returned questionnaire represented an overall response of 76.9%.

### 4.0 DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed by computing the mean ratings for each statement in the questionnaire. Each computed mean was then compared with the theoretical mean rating (assuming a normal distribution of responses) of 2.50. Statements which had their computed means above 2.50 indicated that respondents agreed with them while statements with computed means below 2.50 showed that respondents disagreed with them.

### 4.1 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are discussed according to the research questions.

**Research Question 1:** *How do TVET DL students perceive the quality of their courses of study?*

As shown in Table 1, seven questionnaire items were used to seek the views of respondents on their perceptions about the quality of courses taught on the TVET DL programme.

Table 1: *Respondents' views about the quality of courses taught on TVET DL programme*

S/N	Statement	SD(1)	D(2)	A(3)	SA(4)	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Decision
1.	Course objectives and outlines are given to students to guide them in their private readings.	26	308	624	380	2.770	Agree
2.	Contents of courses are challenging.	11	72	801	740	3.255	Agree
3.	Contents of courses are consistent with the curriculum of the Ghana Education Service.	15	122	795	628	3.144	Agree

4.	Contents of courses include practical work for the acquisition of appropriate practical skills	110	206	480	488	2.594	Agree
5.	Contents of courses cover all topics students expect to find.	19	158	792	520	3.026	Agree
6.	Contents of courses are arranged in a clear, logical and systematic manner.	30	254	648	400	2.816	Agree
7.	Contents of courses can equip students with adequate knowledge in their areas of specialisation.	13	144	756	604	3.181	Agree

**Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree**

The mean ratings for all the statements were above the theoretical mean of 2.5. The statement that 'contents of courses are challenging' had the highest mean rating of 3.255. This was closely followed by mean ratings of 3.181 and 3.144 for the statements that 'contents of courses can provide students with adequate knowledge in their areas of specialisation' and 'contents of courses are consistent with the curriculum of the GES' respectively.

The finding that courses of study challenge students strongly suggest that students learn new subject matter on the programme which will position them well enough to teach confidently in schools. Respondents' indication that contents of courses can equip them with adequate knowledge in their areas of specialisation further goes to suggest that the courses are comprehensive and up-to-date. The result that contents of courses are consistent with the curriculum of the GES is refreshing since according to Kerre (2000) some educational systems produce students with certain skills and knowledge which they cannot apply in their work places. This result therefore means that products of the programme can apply their knowledge in the teaching industry in Ghana.

The results in Table 1 also give indication that respondents are satisfied with the contents of their courses and how the content is arranged. In the first place, respondents agreed with a mean rating of 3.026 that 'contents of courses covered all topics they expected to find' and secondly, 'contents are arranged in a clear, logical and systematic manner' ( $\bar{x} = 2.816$ ).

Respondents' expression of satisfaction that contents of courses cover all topics they expect to find on the programme gives them inner satisfaction that their expectations for enrolling on the programme would be met. The finding that contents of courses are arranged in a clear, logical and systematic manner suggests that the topics are arranged to be consistent with the popular teaching maxims 'from simple to complex' and 'known to unknown.' With this approach, simple and known content is taught first to help build confidence in learners and provide them with subordinate knowledge and skills before advancing to higher knowledge and skills.



Respondents agreed with a mean rating of 2.770 that they are provided with course objectives and outlines for their courses of study. The statement that contents of courses include practical work for the acquisition of practical skills had the least approval rating of 2.594.

The result that course objectives and outlines are given to students to guide them in their studies, fall in line with the finding of Thapliyal (2014) that DL students of Panjab University considered course objectives for their courses of study as being vital because the objectives enable them to focus on what to study. The study showed with a mean rating of 2.594 that course contents include practical work for the acquisition of practical skills. This finding is, however, not good enough because the mean rating is just a little above the theoretical mean 2.50. The implication of this finding is that students do not do any meaningful practical work on the programme and would therefore not acquire the needed practical skills which in the view of Okoro (2006) are the hallmarks of technical and vocational education and prerequisites for national development. Secondly, when the students graduate as teachers, they would not be able to impart appropriate practical skills to their students since one cannot give out what one does not have.

**Research Question 2:** *How do TVET DL students perceive the usefulness of their study materials?*

Ten questionnaire items were used to seek the views of respondents on the usefulness of their study materials as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Respondents' perceptions about the usefulness of study materials*

S/N	Statement	SD(1)	D(2)	A(3)	SA(4)	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Decision
1.	Study materials are given out in good time for private reading.	64	314	528	360	2.600	Agree
2.	The study materials are hard copies only.	19	110	711	604	3.126	Agree
3..	Some study materials are posted online for students to read or download.	175	258	327	120	1.986	Disagree
4	Study materials cover all topics in course outlines.	26	132	756	604	3.066	Agree
5.	The language used to write the materials is clear, appropriate and self explanatory.	12	76	699	864	3.308	Agree
6.	The quality of the study materials is acceptable.	38	208	786	312	2.788	Agree
7.	The study materials are enjoyable to read.	17	154	930	340	2.947	Agree
8.	The study materials have self-assessment activities for students to test their understanding of content read.	23	208	741	468	2.933	Agree

9.	Titles of reference books are given for additional reading.	33	108	774	604	3.063	Agree
10	Students have access to reference books to read.	93	342	501	264	2.414	Disagree

**Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree**

As shown in Table 2, respondents agreed with eight items regarding the usefulness of study materials and disagreed with two. The statement that the language used to write the study material is clear, appropriate and self explanatory had the highest approval mean rating of 3.308. This was followed by a mean of 3.126 for the statement that the study materials for the programme are in hard copy forms only. Respondents also agreed that reference books are given for additional reading, contents of study materials cover all topics in course outlines and the study materials are enjoyable to read.

The results also revealed that the study materials have self assessment activities to test understanding of topics read, are of good quality and are given out to students in good time for private reading. The results, however, indicated that no study materials are posted online for students to read and reference books given by lecturers for additional reading are not accessible ( $\bar{x}$  = 1.986 and 2.414 respectively).

The essence of any form of communication is to be understood and the findings that the study materials are written in clear, appropriate and self explanatory language is good for DL students who are expected to read and understand a lot of content on their own. This finding falls in line with the view of Moore and Tait (2002) who stated that DL learning materials should be user friendly and easy to understand. Students' contentment that the contents of their study materials would equip them with adequate knowledge suggests that the study materials are good and comprehensive. Additionally, the findings that the contents of the study materials cover all topics in course outlines and are enjoyable to be read truly makes the study materials appropriate for distance learners who study alone. The inclusion of self assessment activities collaborates the suggestions of Gujjar and Malik (2007) who stressed that DL study materials should be written for independent study and have self assessment activities.

**Research Question 3:** *How do TVET DL students rate the performance of lecturers during the face-to-face sessions?*

With regards to issues relating to students' perceptions about the quality of face-to-face sessions with lecturers as shown in Table 3, the study revealed with a mean rating of 2.869 that lecturers reported regularly and promptly for face-to-face sessions. Respondents, however, disagreed that lecturers looked tired or complained of tiredness during the face-to-face sessions.



Table 3: Respondents' views on performance of lecturers on face-to-face sessions

S/N	Statement	SD(1)	D(2)	A(3)	SA(4)	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Decision
1.	Lecturers report regularly and punctually for face-to-face sessions.	38	238	600	524	2.869	Agree
2.	Lecturers communicate with confidence and enthusiasm.	37	248	609	476	2.836	Agree
3.	Lecturers support presentations with teaching and learning resources where necessary.	40	242	657	404	2.792	Agree
4.	Lecturers give enough assignments to students.	3	14	642	980	3.495	Agree
5.	Lecturers give prompt feedback on students' assignments.	119	380	351	256	2.257	Disagree
6.	Lecturers encourage students to take active part in face-to-face sessions.	10	54	756	780	3.306	Agree
7.	Lecturers demonstrate sound knowledge of courses they teach.	21	78	798	676	3.178	Agree
8.	Lecturers are tolerant of students' contributions and critiques.	10	66	828	652	3.228	Agree
9.	Lecturers complain of tiredness when teaching.	152	374	264	256	2.130	Disagree
10.	Lecturers look tired when teaching.	123	354	357	256	2.257	Disagree
11.	Lecturers show genuine concern for students' wellbeing on the programme.	31	106	774	588	3.065	Agree
12.	Lecturers respect individual differences among students.	15	68	792	644	3.205	Agree
13.	All things considered, the face-to-face sessions are very useful.	17	66	654	716	3.251	Agree

**Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree**

Results of the study confirmed that lecturers demonstrated sound knowledge of courses they taught and also communicated with confidence and enthusiasm. The results further indicated that lecturers supported lessons with appropriate teaching and learning resources, encouraged students' participation in lessons and were tolerant of students' contributions and critiques.

Respondents also agreed that lecturers showed genuine concern for students' wellbeing on the programme, respected individual differences of students and gave enough assignments to students. The results, however, showed that no prompt feedback was given to students on their assignments ( $\bar{x} = 2.257$ ). With regards to the last item in Table 3, respondents agreed with a mean rating of 3.251, that all things considered, the TVET DL programme is of good quality.

The findings that lecturers were punctual and regular for face-to-face sessions is good news for the integrity of the programme since critics of it argue that lecturers do not attend the sessions as expected of them. Other related findings that lecturers do not complain of tiredness nor look tired when teaching go to further dispel the views of critics that lecturers are unable to give off their best as a result of tiredness carried over from the full time session of the University. The agreement by respondents that lecturers demonstrated sound knowledge of courses they taught and did so with confidence and enthusiasm strongly suggest that students were content with the face-to-face sessions with their lecturers. This finding lends support to that of Johnson and Johnson (2010) who found out in a study about perceptions of effective teaching that students expect their teachers to be knowledgeable in the courses they teach so as to pass on same to them. In a similar vein, Okoronko et al. (2013) noted that knowledgeable teachers must be able to confidently communicate their knowledge to their students otherwise the knowledge remains bottled up and is of no use to anybody.

The findings that lecturers supported their lessons with appropriate teaching and learning resources fall in line with the advocacy of Amoakohene (2014) who has noted that for lessons to be well understood by students, teachers must as much as possible support their lessons with appropriate teaching and learning resources so as to appeal to at least more than one sense of the student.

The involvement of students by lecturers in the face-to-face sessions as shown in Table 3 and lecturers' tolerance of students' contributions and critiques are good pedagogical practices which help build confidence in students and make them proud to be co-contributors to the success of lessons. Again, the results from the study that lecturers expressed genuine concern for the wellbeing of students and respected their individual differences all fall in line with the views of Lubawy (2003), Ralph (2003) and Gurney (2007) who saw such attributes as necessary pre-conditions for a conducive teaching and learning environment in which students freely express themselves and ask questions for answers.

The statement with the highest mean rating ( $\bar{x} = 3.495$ ) of the study was that 'lecturers give enough assignments to students'. This result is good because assignments among other things 'compel' students to do a lot of reading on their own which is good for DL students. In spite of the fact that assignments are given to students, the study, however, revealed that no prompt feedback is given to students on their assignments. This finding is worrying and inconsistent with the views of Alam et al. (2012) and Johnson and Johnson (2010) who emphasized that prompt feedback on assignments is important to students because it serves as motivation for them, makes them know of how they are progressing on their studies and enable those who made mistakes to correct them in good time to avoid their repetition. This notwithstanding, the findings showed with a mean of 3.251 that the face-to-face sessions are very useful.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The study sought to find out the perceptions of TVET DL students of UEW about the quality of their courses of study, usefulness of study materials and performance of lecturers during face-to-face sessions with them. The results of the study showed that the courses run on the TVET DL programme challenge students and meet their expectations. The study materials for the programme were found to be good in quality and content. The findings also proved that there were no online study materials for additional reading by students. The perceptions of some people that lecturers do not give off their best on the programme could not be substantiated by the study. Instead, the findings indicated that lecturers were punctual for face-to-face sessions, worked hard and showed mastery over their subjects of specialization. The study brought to the fore that lecturers gave enough assignments to students but did not provide them with prompt feedback.

## 6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that students should be made to do more practical work so as to acquire relevant practical skills for industry and the classroom. The internet has become a useful tool for mass, fast and friendly communication and so the Faculties of Technical and Vocational Education of UEW should make good use of the internet and upload relevant materials and assignments online for students to read and interact with their lecturers and colleagues. Prompt information feedback is very important in teaching and learning because it makes students know how they are progressing in their studies. In the light of this, lecturers should always provide prompt feedback on students' assignments.

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