

Implementation Strategies of the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme

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ABSTRACT--- *In the last few years, educational systems worldwide have experienced a paradigm shift from the traditional synchronous mode to incorporate the asynchronous mode. The main reason for this addition is because a lot of students are either working or having family responsibilities that will not permit them to be full-time students. This study, therefore, explores the implementation strategies that were used to establish the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme. The study is an explorative qualitative design that employs the use of two sets of open-ended interview guides to seek information from respondents who participated in the study. The participants of the study included all past coordinators of the programme as well as the centre organisers. All participants were purposively selected. However, their participation was voluntary. Findings from the study indicated that there was a time span of twelve years from the planning to the implementation of the programme. In spite of the delays, it was revealed that good communication with stakeholders and good structures were employed, making the implementation of the programme a success and also making the future of the programme brighter, as it is now moving into the use of web tools to meet the expectations of the current cohort of prospective university students.*

Keywords--- Implementation strategies, distance education, learning modules, support services, implementation committee.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mokhele (2011) in a study indicates that educational systems around the world need reforms in order to offer more opportunities for students and also meet the expectations of the world as a whole. To support her assertion, she cites Johnson and Donaldson (2007), who contend that the emphasis on standards and accountability has placed extraordinary demands on schools to improve instructional outcomes. To add their voice to the need for curriculum change and implementation, Athavale, Myring, Davis and Truell (2010) use the case of curriculum evolution in business schools and opine that various reasons may account for continuous curriculum evolution. They indicate that, the need to build successful future careers of graduates is seen as the overarching factor amongst the lot. This and other reasons account for countries and institutions changing and improving upon their curricula every now and then so that students who graduate from their institutions would be ready, not only to compete in the job market, but also perform credibly in positions they may be offered.

According to Kwapong (2008), open and distance learning has proved to be a sure way of widening access to education especially for women. She adds that distance education is an educational philosophy that seeks to overcome or remove as many barriers as possible to education. The assertion by Kwapong has come to stay, considering the number of students whom out of their own volition or due to circumstances beyond them opt for distance education rather than the traditional synchronous mode of learning. However, it must be noted that, for universities to incorporate or fully go the distance mode goes with a lot of effort, time and cost. Hence, quality implementation strategies should be put in place for distance programmes to start and run effectively.

Moreso, effective implementation of distance learning programmes leans heavily on the acceptance and use of distance learning technologies, a paradigm shift which some educators and faculty might view as another educational change of value which requires new skills, behaviours, and beliefs or understandings, which might lead to some resistance by both faculty and educators. That notwithstanding, the emerging technologies of distance learning can have a positive effect on the educational system if it is accepted that change is a journey, not a blueprint and that the development of new skills, behaviours, and beliefs is a complex process that must embrace the problems inherent in change (Fullan, 1993). In a similar vein, Keast (1997) establishes that “we can obtain great advantage by viewing the implementation of distance programmes as the *management of innovation*.” The import of what the authorities have indicated is that change is

inevitable, but our ability to accept the change and make good use of the things that come with the change will be to our own benefit or otherwise.

Willis (1993) also identified that distance education programmes can be an effective, integrated efforts of several participants, including students, faculty, facilitators [tutors], support staff and administrators. He continues that when effectively integrated, each party or stakeholder brings a unique capability to the distance education enterprise. Similarly, the absence or under-involvement of a critical participant can dilute or derail the integrated efforts of other contributors. Amponsah (2014) corroborates this by indicating that when individual efforts (synergic effect) of group members are brought together, the maximum best is what accrues for the group that has been assigned a task to perform.

Aggoret. al (1994) therefore recommended some systematic strategies to the National Distance Education Secretariat (NDES) to be adopted in the design and delivery of distance education courses by Ghanaian Universities. The recommendations include the following:

- The universities should examine and carefully select suitable course materials produced by other tertiary institutions for use, with modifications in initiating their first programmes (p.3). To this Willis (1993) also states that the fastest way to eliminate uneasiness in a distance-delivered class is to contact local sites or individual students prior to the start of class and get to know them as individuals, not just students.
- The universities through NDES should adopt a team approach in the planning and production of core course materials.
- Course writers and instructional staff should be paid adequate remuneration and courses shall belong to academic departments.
- The universities should plan to use a wide range of media to maximize student access and to meet their learning needs and situations. Radio, audio and video recordings can be used to supplement and enhance print materials and other instructional methods.
- The NDES must establish effective instructional and student support services by using existing physical and human resources of the university and Institute of Adult Education centres (p. 13).

In order not to work in isolation and to bring all parties on board, the department handling distance education should strategise and ensure that they work within the broader university system and that everything they do is in line with existing institutional systems and personnel. As Wolcott (1997) rightly indicates that faculty members can help to align distance education with the overall university mission through the acceptance of a greater range of scholarly activities (eg, the development and use of non-traditional delivery systems). Other works by the faculty can help the university to define various copyright and intellectual property issues and to protect junior faculty, perhaps relieving them of distance education responsibilities.

One of the most effective ways of preparing for a new distance education initiative is training the faculty. Olcott(1995) opines that the training can begin with general information about distance education, including the overall educational process, instructional models, appropriate technology, relevant research, and specific publications. In addition, the initial training could also include showcases of faculty examples and experience, workshops, forums, and newsletters. It was later established that online mini-courses which could provide an introduction to the online environment, its features, and activities could also be resorted to as a way of training faculty and reading them for a change to the distance mode of teaching and learning (Cini and Vilic, 1999).

With facilitators or tutors, Willis (1993) intimates that they should be used for effective delivery and course content, to enhance the use of instructional materials and to ensure that course goals and objectives are met. He continues by indicating that support staff are the silent heroes of successful distance education programmes. The conclusion is that the support staff functions as the glue that keeps distance education enterprises together since it serves a single organization coordinating the numerous support activities required for effective distance education.

Lastly, “effective distance education administrators are more idea people. They are consensus builders, decision-makers, and facilitators. They maintain control of technical managers, ensuring that technological resources are effectively deployed to further the institution’s academic mission. At the same time, they lead and inspire faculty and staff in overcoming obstacles that arise” (Willis, 1993). This is in agreement with what Jones and Lewis (1991) suggested earlier that in addition to change on an individual level, change must be collective in that it must occur simultaneously on the level of organizational structure and function.

In summary, effective distance education requires the integrated interest, participation, and enthusiasm of faculty, students, facilitators (tutors), support staff, and administrators. The informed involvement of these related participants will help meet the challenges that may arise in the implementation of the programme. It is for this reason that Aggoret. al. (1992) recommended that the NDES and distance education centres will require core staff for programme development

and delivery and that there must be opportunities for staff training and development at all levels. They further state that orientation and training workshops should be organized on a regular basis.

Development of University of Ghana Bachelor's Degree Programme

In tracing the phases the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme (UGDEP) has gone through to reach where it is now, Adda (2004) states that various efforts have been made by the Government of Ghana, the universities and international agencies like the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to integrate distance education into the nation's tertiary education system. It is established that the Academic Board of the University of Ghana gave the first serious consideration to the issue of introducing distance education into the university system in 1986 as a direct result of the lack of both academic and residential facilities in all the three public universities in Ghana at that time. Moreso, the university could not sustain the Oxbridge model where students were housed and fed three square meals a day and as well as multiple roles played by student combining work, family and household chores.

In order to pave a way for students who could not get access to study through the main stream of the university and also bring workers and those whose engagements prevented them from being full-time university students, the University of Ghana employed a number of strategies in a bid to implement its distance education programme. At the inception stage of the programme, an implementation team was formed in 1995 and the focus of the committee was on three thematic areas: material development, student support services and course writers' training. Around 2007, the focus was extended to include module development. At this stage, seminars were organized for deans of various faculties and periodic workshops were also organized for course writers to equip them with knowledge and skills in developing quality modules.

The inception stage led to the developmental stage when the Implementation Committee was tasked to see to the growth and development of the programme. The first Coordinator of the programme stated that it was at this stage of the implementation process that a Coordinator and other experts were appointed to operationalize the implementation plan and to turn the concept into reality. It is worth noting that from the onset of the programme, it was decided by the Implementation Committee that the module was going to be the main material to be used. For this reason, it was very important to develop quality modules which called for the training of those who would be in charge of developing these materials. To ensure this was done successfully, series of training workshops were held for the material developers in Ghana while others were sent abroad in a bid to obtain quality training in material development.

Additionally, the issue of funding cannot be left out in a case where a programme needs to be implemented. In this regard, some budgetary allocations were made by the Ministry of Education to cater for workshops organized by the Implementation Committee. While TALIF provided support for the printing of course materials, the Canadian government also provided one million Canadian dollars for the purchase of computers and finally UNESCO also gave some support to the committee in its bid to implement the distance education programme.

Support services are central to the provision of distance education in order to enhance learners' abilities to adapt to the asynchronous mood of learning. It is also important for the smooth implementation of the programme, hence, the following support services were either provided or earmarked by the Implementation Committee to be provided to students who enrolled in the programme;

- Study Centres with coordinators, administrators and competent tutors.
- Academic Advising and Personal Counselling.
- Well-resourced Study Centres.
- Course materials delivered at the Study Centres. An example is the module provided for students.
- Students can assess library information in the University once registered with a valid university identity card.
- Assignment being mailed (post), faxed or submitted personally at the study centre.

In addition to these support services, there are residential sessions where learners from all over the country congregate at University of Ghana for one month for revision and examinations. This takes place at the end of every semester in January and July (for the first and second semesters respectively). The examinations are held under the supervision of the University Examinations Superintending Committee and Academic Affairs Directorate of the University (Last Coordinator, 2010).

Prior to the start of the programme, advertisements were placed in the Daily Graphic and the Ghanaian Times for prospective students to apply. The programme was launched on November 23, 2007 with an initial intake of 1127 applicants. However, 907 of the applicants duly registered and were matriculated. The programme was started with five Bachelor of Arts courses namely; Sociology, Economics, Linguistics, Psychology, Geography and Resource Development (The University of Ghana Distance Education Programme Brochure, undated). Subsequently, three additional programmes Information Studies, Social Work and History were added. In the 2009/10 academic year, 1097

learners were admitted into the programme and another 2508 learners were admitted for the 2010/11 academic year in addition to 748 mature students (University of Ghana Basic Statistics, 2007).

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

In view of the phases that the UGDEP has undergone and how it has survived the delays between when the idea was conceived and when the programme actually started, this study seeks to establish the strategies that were adopted in the implementation of the programme.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A constructivist-interpretivist perspective formed the grounds this paper. The chosen perspective of this study leans on the qualitative design, hence this research made use of an exploratory qualitative design. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) believes that with the anti-positivist or constructivist paradigm, meaning is constructed and (over time) constantly re-constructed through experience resulting in many differing interpretations. In the same vein, this research sought to get into the inner world of the coordinators and organisers of the UGDEP in order to be abreast of all events that led to its eventual establishment. The participants were all the past and last Coordinator of the programme, as well as Centre Organisers. The participants were purposively selected since they are the ones who have been around since the planning and implementation stages of the programme.

The study made use of two sets of unstructured interview guides which solicited information from coordinators and centre organizers of the distance education programme respectively. The interview guide was made up of ten open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were used because it allowed for generation of in-depth information and also the researcher was able to ask follow up questions to strengthen the information already gathered. The open-ended interview guide also helped respondents to freely express themselves without any restrictions and the interviewer was also able to promptly record responses given and ask respondents for clarification where things were not clear. The interviews were audio recorded verbatim, transcribed and analysed by using the constant comparison data analysis process adopted from Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the extent to which a study can be replicated in another context in qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). The participants of the study were sufficiently engaged as a way of ensuring the credibility of the study. Enough contextual information about the fieldwork site and participants were provided in the study to ensure transferability. In terms of dependability and conformity of this study, the research methods used were vividly explained as well as the objective for the research, projection of limitations.

Ethical Considerations

Before embarking on this study, clearance was sought from the university authorities, while the participants were informed in writing concerning the objectives of the study, the time and meeting place, as well as what is expected of them during the interview. The participants were assured of strict confidentiality of information that they give and their right to opt out of the interview without any repercussions since their participation was purely voluntary. Participants were also made aware that the interviews will be tape recorded and the data will be kept for a period of six months after the study and will be destroyed afterwards.

4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Any good idea conceived and not put into action forever remains an idea and nobody apart from the one who conceived the idea without birthing it will ever be privy to the unborn idea. For this reason, ideas have to move from the drawing board to the implementation stage. It is in this light that the implementation committee of the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme came out with strategies to bring about this programme. During the interviews with the coordinators of the programme, the following themes which encapsulates the strategies unfolded.

Personal contacts

A major component of the implementation process was having personal contacts with major stakeholder in order to gain their support for the programme. Thus the major Academic Departments were consulted over a period of time. This was contained in a statement by the “First coordinator” of the distance education programme (1995-1999) thus:

Personal contact, first of all we had a forum for heads of departments. After that we moved or I moved from department to department to talk to individual lecturers

As well the Second Coordinator of the distance education programme (1999-2002) further remarked:

The major strategy was to train people from the faculty, a small core group to fully understand the distance education concept.

Another strategy was the establishment of an “Implementation Committee” to coordinate the development of the programme for an effective take off.

The implementation process started when the Implementation Committee was established and it was made up of the Dean of the Business School, Faculty of Art and Faculty of Social Studies, all in addition to the Director of the Institute of Adult Education being the core member in the committee. I think the coordinator and Director of Academic Affairs were also part of the implementation committee (Last coordinator of the distance education programme, 2007-2011).

The views of the coordinators on the implementation strategies indicate that personal contacts, collaboration with faculty and the establishment of the Implementation Committee were mainly used. The collaborative effort made by those who handled the programme from the onset ties in with Willis’ (1993) assertion that distance education programmes can be an effective, integrated efforts of several participants, including students, faculty, facilitators [tutors], support staff and administrators is required. Also, the belief by Amponsah (2014) that when individual efforts (synergic effect) of group members are brought together, the maximum best is what accrues for the group that has been assigned a task to perform.

Stages in the Implementation Process

Reflections of the coordinators indicated that the programme went through three interdependent stages before it was fully implemented. They named the stages as initial, developmental and current stages. The processes reflected on by the coordinators is in line with the theoretical basis for this study in which Rogers (1962) gives the indication that for implementation to be effective, certain processes have to be passed. This he called the diffusion of innovation theory.

The Initial Stage:

Indication from the programme coordinators is that at the inception of the programme in 1995 a team was formed and the focus of the team was on three thematic areas, namely, material development, student support services and course writers’ training. The focus was later (around 2007) extended to module development. At this stage, seminars were organized for Deans of various Faculties. Periodic workshops were also organized for course writers to equip them with knowledge and skills in developing quality modules.

The Developmental Stage:

The inception stage led to the developmental stage. It was at this stage that the Implementation Committee had the task of seeing to the growth and development of the programme. Funding for the programme was sought from external organizations and advertisements were placed in the Daily Graphic and the Ghanaian Times. The second coordinator of the programme had this to say about the developmental stage:

One important strategy was that support staff including data entry clerks, artists/ graphic designers, organizers and other programme support officers were added to strengthen the capacity of staff.

Third Coordinator of the distance education programme added that:

Funding was sought from external organizations such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Department for International Development (DFID), Ministry of Education and the Commonwealth of Learning. The distance education programme was advertised using leaflets, notice boards and other means.

Distance education organisations or institutions operate on the ‘open system’ principle and thus the UGDEP did the same. It does not operate in a vacuum and saw the need to interdepend on other sectors and organisations for its survival. It is in this light that at the developmental stage, support staff were brought on board and funding sought to enhance the smooth implementation of the programme.

The Current Stage:

The final stage, termed the current stage stretches from 2007 up to the year 2014, which marks the eighth year since the programme was lunched. Until the end of 2011, there was a national Coordinator who managed the programme and its operations with the Director of the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education and the members of the old Implementation Committee serving as advisors to the Coordinator and other staff working on the programme. Later in 2011 a Deputy Director in charge of Distance Education was appointed to oversee the operations of the programme.

On this subject, the first Coordinator of the programme noted; *Although I don’t have any official role to play, from time to time I am invited to participate in training tutors and to edit course materials.*

In line with the above, Wolcott (1997) and Olcott(1995) are of the view that faculty should be severally consulted and communicated to as a way of ensuring effective implementation of distance learning programme. Their view comes into play at this point considering what the first coordinator reflected on that he still does some work for the department.

In most recent times, the administration of the distance education programme has changed, so the Deputy Director has been replaced with a Head of Department in charge of distance education. The Head assists a Dean who is also works under a Provost of the College of Education, under which the UGDEP operates.

Material Development

The value of (quality) course materials in a distance education cannot be overemphasized. Aggor et al (1992) advises that the universities should examine and carefully select suitable course materials produced by other tertiary institutions for use, with modifications in initiating their first programmes. Due to the premium placed on quality course materials in the distance learning enterprise, this research investigated the materials provided for students and the last coordinator of the programme had this to say in relation to material development:

Course writers were trained through workshops for seven days initially and three days as refresher programmes. We also had Professor Ansere who was in charge of the training. He was a professor in correspondence education from the University of Botswana who came to help in training our course writers.

Evidently, training was provided to equip material developers and writers to produce quality materials both in terms of content and design. Some of the students on the programme might have been out of school for a long time so any study material that had abstract or difficult concepts could easily scare the students off. Likewise, if the design was not user friendly.

Role of the Organizers

As indicated earlier in this research, the organizers play very instrumental roles in the implementation process. They are at the operating core of the programme at the Regional Study Centres. Among their roles are helping in the recruitment of tutors, liaising between tutors, learners and administration and ensuring that the various centres are well prepared for tutorials to be held. In reiterating the roles of their roles, an organizer is quoted in this research that:

As an organizer, I liaise between tutors, students and the administration. In fact this forms the core of the work. We also make sure that the module is ready, the place is swept and have materials. We also monitor tutors' attendance (Koforidua Organizer).

Aside what has just been noted, one Organizer reflected on how he had to take on additional roles in addition to the main roles as an Organizer. He indicated:

I designed what you call the module covers and the colours before one was chosen. Apart from modules, I am deeply involved in the organization of tutorials. For Accra centre, I am involved in recruiting of tutors, preparation of tutorial time table for the academic year, semester and the weekly tutorial as well, I make sure that logistics are in place when the learners come for tutorials (Legon Organizer).

This organizer was made to add on additional tasks by virtue of his proximity to the national centre for the entire UGDEP. He was the organizer for Legon where everything was being coordinated and implemented hence he had to do a bit of administrative work for the programme could start on time.

The Organizers in this study are actually performing multiple tasks, which range from ensuring that rooms for interaction sessions are cleaned and are ready for the day's work. They also ensure that materials are available for facilitators to use. It is also the duty of the organisers to ensure facilitators are present and also serve a liaison duty between students, facilitators and the administrators of the programme.

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Personal contacts

Fullan (1993) postulates that the emerging technologies of distance learning can have a positive effect on the educational system if it is recognized that change is a journey, not a blueprint and that the development of new skills, behaviours, and beliefs is a complex process that must embrace the problems inherent in change. The question that arises is how will people accept change if it is not properly communicated to them. The whole idea of incorporating distance education to the existing synchronous model sent shivers to the spine of some faculty, with the anticipation that they would be overtaken or may lose their jobs (Badu-Nyarko, 2000). That notwithstanding, those entrusted to translate the UGDEP from an idea into reality did very well in informing all concerned via the Implementation Committee.

Keast (1997) suggested that when implementing a programme, monitoring and support must follow. He explained that during this stage, efforts during planning and initiation become translated into sustainable programme improvement. One cannot but agree with Keast that for every programme to succeed continuous monitoring or supervisory strategies must be put in place so as to see the pros and cons in order to put in corrective or remedial measures should the need arise so that the success of the programme will be ensured. To a very large extent, the setting up of the Implementing Committee right from the initial stages and the inclusion of the support staff at the developmental stages account for monitoring and support as suggested by Keast.

Stages in the Development Process

At the inception stages of the programme, an implementation team was formed in 1995 which focused on course writers' training, material development and student support services. Seminars were organized for Deans of various faculties. Periodic workshops and training were organised for course writers to equip them with knowledge and skills in the writing of modules.

After the inception followed the developmental stage where a Coordinator was appointed to operationalise the implementation plan and other experts were also added to the implementation team to help bring the concept into reality. To programme implementation management, the indication is that implementing programmes cannot happen overnight since it takes time and patience. Again, it needs proper planning and strategies as indicated in this research to be able to successfully implement quality programmes (Amponsah, 2010).

The fact that the whole idea of distance learning started way back in 1995 and could only see the light of day in 2007 gives an indication that things were not smooth. However, one can also argue that at the end of the day, it still came into existence which also means that the challenges that came along the way were defeated through the systems and structures put in place. Thus, the programme has moved from strength to strength and is now fully incorporating the use of the internet instead of the physical modules that it started with in the year 2007.

Material Development

The quality of modules developed for the programme is corroborated by a recommendation by Aggor et al (1992) that the universities should examine and carefully select suitable course materials produced by other tertiary institutions for use, with modifications in initiating their first programmes. At the onset of the programme, it was agreed that the modules given to students was going to be their 'lecturers' and that apart from attending the arranged interactions on campus or other regional centres or being present at the end of semester revision sessions, students have no one to resort to officially.

As a matter of principle, the modules were made to a standard that contained quality content and was also user friendly so as not to scare the students from enrolling on the programme. As a matter of fact, some students on the programme occasionally reported that students in the main stream were borrowing their books to study. This gives an indication of the quality of the modules prepared for the students.

Role of the Organisers

Willis (1993) gives a vivid description of the role(s) people in the forefront of distance education, such as Organizers in this study, should play. In reality it can be concluded that the organisers did not only play the role of organisers, as their job title indicates, they played very important roles in ensuring this programme became a success. The above issues raised fits into Rogers (1962) theory of diffusion of innovations, particularly the third stage where decisions are made as to whether to reject or accept the idea before it can be implemented or discarded. In this research, it could be deduced that proper structures were set up and procedures were followed to a large extent, considering the fact that past coordinators who do not have any official business with the Department running the programme still volunteered to help when called upon and also for an Organizer to go the extra mile of doing some administrative duties alongside his core duties as an Organizer for a centre.

6. CONCLUSION

In relation to the objective of the study, it could be concluded that in the development of the UGDEP, proper identification and inclusion of all structures with a strong implementation committee in place were essential. In a bid to have a smooth implementation there ought to be involvement and deliberations with faculty, training of course writers, training for tutors recruited for the programme, as well as training of all stakeholders. The gap between the inception of the programme and when it actually came to light (a period of twelve years), indicates that things were not smooth at all perhaps with strong resistance from Faculty and University Administrators as to how the new programme will correspond to the on-campus programme including its quality and delivery. However, the determination, experience and tenacity of those entrusted with the task of establishing the programme paid off and eventually lunched.

The programme successfully went through all the three phases of initial, developmental and current stages and it is developing rapidly. The current administrators of the programme are moving it from textbook to web platforms - an indication that the UGDEP has come to stay and will continue to be a force to reckon with in the near and distant future.

7. REFERENCES

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