Perceived Partial Severance: Distance Education and Parent Universities in Ghana

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ABTSRACT

Distance Education has come to stay and it is very significant in the advancement of making education accessible to a broader popular. This distance education stems from a parent university, however, there seem to be a partial disconnection between the distance education and their parent university. The purpose of this study is there to explore the factors that account for the partial severance and the perceptions of distance education students regarding their sense of connection with the parent university. The qualitative research approach was adopted for the study. Consistent with the approach, case study design was used for the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to sample twenty-five (25) participants for the study, twelve (12) lecturers and thirteen (13) students. Interview guide was the research instrument used to collect data for the study. The thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The study revealed that inadequate integration and communication between distance education students and the main campus significantly contribute to their sense of disconnection. Moreso, Distance Education students perceive their connection with the parent university as weak and insufficient due to feelings of isolation and exclusion from campus activities. They face significant communication gaps and lack access to resources and support services equivalent to those available to on-campus students. Based on the key findings, it is recommended that, parent universities who have established distance education should launch regular channels of communication to keep distance learners informed about campus events, resources, and opportunities for engagement. Also, parent universities must prioritize equitable access to resources and support services for distance education students. By creating a more inclusive and supportive environment, there will be a strong connection between parent universities and distance education, ultimately enriching their academic journey and overall satisfaction.

Keywords: Distance Education, Parent Universities, Partial Severance

INTRODUCTION

The origin of distance education dates back to the 19th century with the advent of correspondence courses, which were initially designed to provide educational opportunities to individuals who were unable to attend traditional schools. The earliest known correspondence courses according to Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek (2019), were offered in Europe, with Sir Isaac Pitman, a British educator, pioneering the concept in the 1840s through the teaching of shorthand via mailed lessons and assignments. This mode of education quickly gained popularity and spread to the United States, where institutions such as the University of Chicago established correspondence study programs in the late 19th century (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). These early efforts laid the foundation for modern distance education, which has since evolved with technological advancements to include radio, television, and, most notably, the internet, transforming the way education is accessed and delivered worldwide.

In Ghana, while there is a significant advancement in making education accessible to a broader population through Distance Education, it often appears to be distinct and separated from its parent universities. This separation can manifest in various ways, including differences in resource allocation, access to parent university facilities, and participation in campus activities. As indicated by Arkorful & Abaidoo (2015), distance education students frequently miss out on the comprehensive university experience enjoyed by their on-campus counterparts, which includes academic resources, extracurricular activities, and networking

opportunities. This division undermines the very purpose of distance education, which is to provide equitable educational opportunities irrespective of physical location.

Distance education fundamentally stems from the parent universities, serving as an extension of their educational mission to reach students who cannot attend traditional classes. These programs are designed to mirror the academic rigor and quality of on-campus offerings, ensuring that distance learners receive the same level of education. However, the perceived and actual detachment from the parent university can lead to feelings of isolation among distance education students, negatively impacting their academic performance and overall educational experience (Bolliger & Inan, 2012). This isolation is compounded when distance education students are excluded from participating in university-wide events, accessing facilities, and receiving the same level of support as on-campus students.

Integrating distance education more closely with the parent university is crucial for several reasons. First, it fosters a sense of belonging among distance education students, enhancing their engagement and motivation. When students feel part of the university community, they are more likely to be committed to their studies and achieve better academic outcomes (Tinto, 1997). Providing distance education students with access to university facilities, such as libraries, laboratories, and career services, as well as opportunities to participate in campus events, can significantly bridge the gap between on-campus and distance learners. A closer integration ensures consistency in the quality of education delivered. Parent universities can better monitor and maintain the standards of their distance education programs when these are seen as integral parts of the institution rather than separate entities. This oversight is essential for ensuring that the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment standards are aligned with those of the on-campus programs (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). By treating distance education as a core component of their educational offerings, universities can uphold their academic reputation and ensure all students receive a high-quality education.

Moreover, integrating distance education with the parent university can enhance resource sharing and efficiency. Distance education programs often require significant investment in technology and infrastructure. By consolidating resources and providing equal access to all students, universities can optimize their expenditures and improve the overall educational environment. This approach not only benefits distance learners but also enriches the university community as a whole, fostering a more inclusive and collaborative atmosphere (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

From a policy and administrative perspective, ensuring that distance education centers are not separated from their parent universities can lead to better governance and accountability. When distance education is fully integrated into the university's administrative framework, it is easier to implement consistent policies, provide adequate student support services, and maintain a cohesive academic strategy (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). This integration helps in creating a unified educational system that caters to the diverse needs of all students, promoting equity and excellence across the board. While distance education in Ghana provides a vital pathway for expanding access to higher education, it is essential that these programs remain closely connected to their parent universities. This integration enhances the sense of community, ensures consistent educational quality, optimizes resource use, and improves governance. By fostering a more inclusive and unified approach, universities can better serve the needs of all their students, ensuring that distance education fulfills its potential as a powerful tool for educational equity and advancement.

Michael (1991) reviewed literature on distance education theory. In his review, he elaborated on the need for theory in distance education and highlighted some of the theories. Clark (2020) also conducted a review on distance education. In his review, he delved more into distance education in the health care technology online learning. He also elaborated on the advantages and limitations on distance learning and the future trends with respect to healthcare technology. In an attempt to giving a proper definition to distance education, bringing out issues concerning distance education and a proper way to resolve it, a number of studies have been conducted on distance education using different approaches. There seems to be limited study on the partial disconnection between parent universities and distance education. Hence, the purpose of the study is to explore the perceived partial severance between parent universities and Distance Education centres.

Research Objectives

The following objectives guided the study.

1. To explore the factors that account for the partial severance of Distance Education and the parent university.
2. To explore the perceptions of distance education students regarding their sense of connection with the parent university.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

1. What factors account for the partial severance of Distance Education from the parent university?
2. How do distance education students perceive their connection with the parent university?

Significance of the Study

The outcome of the study will help universities who have established Distance Education centres to unite well with their Distance Education centres. It will also send note to other universities who are yet to start Distance Education to come to the realization of the need to attach closely their study centres to the parent university. Also, the findings of the study will add to existing literature.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

The qualitative research approach was adopted for the study. Qualitative research according to (Bryman, 2008) is described as a research strategy that emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. It focuses on meanings through verbal narratives, descriptions and observations rather than numbers. Qualitative approach enable the researcher to describe the meaning of perception, lived experiences, concepts, practices and happenings within a social system (Creswell, 2013). It uses detailed descriptive data, which portray what people say in their words about their experiences and interactions or encounter in natural settings. The researcher employed the qualitative approach because the nature of the study was to generate knowledge by exploring the partial disconnection between distance education and parent universities. However, it enabled the researcher to interact with participants to get first-hand knowledge and an in-depth study of the issue.

Consistent with the research approach, it is necessary to have a research design for the study. Creswell (2014) describes a research design as an inquiry that provides specific guidance for procedures in a study. In other words, a research design provides the researcher with information on established guidelines and strategies involved in studying a phenomenon. This means that the selection of a research design is determined by the nature of the research, the research problem, research questions as well as the target audience of the study. Based on the focus of the study and the participants involved, the case study design was used for the study to generate an in-depth and multi-faceted understanding of the phenomenon. The case study design was selected for this study because it allows for an in-depth and contextual exploration of the partial severance between distance education and parent universities, capturing the complexities and nuances of this relationship through multiple perspectives. Additionally, it provides flexibility in data collection and analysis, enabling the researcher to adapt to emerging themes and gain comprehensive insights into the phenomena. Thus, a case study seeks to examine a current occurrence while concentrating on the dynamics in the case in the context of the real world (Yin, 2018).

Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The population for qualitative studies is always made up of experts, specialists, victims or knowledgeable

people with rich experience and commendable knowledge on the phenomena being studied (Kuranchie, 2021). The population for the study was all distance education students and lecturers in the central region of Ghana.

The sample for the study was twenty-five (25) lecturers and students of the distance education. While there are no hard and fast rules around how many people you should involve in your research, some researchers estimate between 10 and 50 participants as being sufficient depending on your type of research and research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Other study designs may require you to continue gathering data until you are no longer discovering new information ("saturation") or your data is sufficient to answer your question ("data saturation"). Therefore, sample size for the study was based on data saturation of the participants. Morse (2015) perceives saturation as the point in data collection when no additional insights or issues are identified and data begin to repeat so that further data collection is redundant, signify that an adequate sample size is reached. Data was obtained from a sample of twenty-five (25) participants consisting of twelve (12) lecturers and thirteen (13) students.

The study adopted purposive sampling technique for the selection of participants. Cohen et al. (2007) described purposive sampling technique as deliberately choosing subjects to be included in a study on the basis of their judgement of the typicality or possession of particular characteristics needed. Babbie (2004) advised researchers that in adopting this sampling technique, it is appropriate to select a sample on the basis of knowledge of the population, its elements and the purpose of the study. This is in line with Creswell (2014) assertion that qualitative research purposively selects participants that will resonate with the focus of their research and to understand the problem or issue being studied appropriately as they answer the questions guiding the study. In other words, purposive sampling becomes the process of selecting the participants who qualify or can provide the needed information on the phenomenon. In this regard, purposive sampling technique was used to select lecturers and students who have been in distance education for more than one year.

Data Collection Instruments and Data Analysis

According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), data collection instruments are devices such as tests, questionnaires and interview schedules which researchers use systematically to collect data. Data collection instruments are the devices and mechanisms that are used in gathering data for a study. We were guided by the research objective to carefully select the data collection instrument. The items included in the research instruments related to the study objectives. The research instruments produced data that were accurate and consistent with the purpose of the study as inappropriate instruments can lead to wrong conclusions, which can influence decisions that would be based on the research findings. Interview guide was the research instrument used to collect data for the study.

Data analysis is the act of labelling and breaking down raw data and reconstituting them in patterns, themes, concepts and propositions (Lindolf & Taylor, 2017). Creswell (2018) add that in qualitative studies, data analysis entails organizing and preparing the data (texts such as transcripts or image data such as photographs), reducing the data into themes. To make sense of the bulk of data gathered from the study, the thematic data analysis method was employed to analyse the data gathered. Braun and Clarke (2019) also describe thematic analysis as the process of labelling and breaking raw data and grouping them into concepts, themes and propositions. To answer the research questions set by the researcher, responses was taken from lecturer to answer the research question one whiles responses was taken from distance education students to answer research question two.

Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), ethical difficulties in research arise at every stage of the research process and as such, every researcher needs to anticipate ethical issues that may arise throughout the research process in order to minimize their occurrence. Ethical considerations are pertinent to this study because of the nature of the problem, the methods of data collection and the kind of persons serving as research participants. While carrying out this study, the researcher adhered to ethical procedures suggested by Bryman (2008). Bryman advised that researchers should ensure that participants are protected from any physical or

psychological harm that may arise from research procedures. In line with international best practices in educational research, the researcher adhered to the ethics of research in relation to permission, consent of participants and their responses, no harm to participants, protecting privacy and ensuring confidentiality protection, plagiarism and access and respect of culture of participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is devoted to the presentation of results and their discussion as derived from the analysis of data. The analysis was done in line with the research questions set for this study, and the findings of the research questions followed the order in which the research questions have been presented.

Research Question 1: What factors account for the partial severance of Distance Education from the parent university?

This research question seeks to identify factors that account for the partial disconnection of distance education from their parent universities. Below are the responses from the participants.

Lack of Integration and Communication

Participant 4 said;

"One significant issue is the lack of integration between the distance education program and the main campus. Often, there is minimal communication between the two, leading to a sense of isolation among distance education students."

Participant 7 also said that;

"The communication channels are not robust enough. Distance education students feel detached because they do not receive timely updates and information about university events and resources."

Participant 5 also said that;

"There is absolutely no opportunity available for distance education students to engage with on-campus activities or events, further reinforcing their feeling of being separate from the main student body."

Participant 8 said that;

"The university does not actively promote integration between the main campus and distance education programs. This lack of effort to bridge the gap leaves distance learners feeling neglected."

The extracts highlight a pervasive sense of isolation experienced by distance education due to inadequate integration and communication with the main campus. Participants consistently emphasize the lack of robust communication channels, which prevents timely updates and opportunities for engagement in campus activities, exacerbating feelings of detachment. Furthermore, the absence of institutional efforts to promote integration reinforces the perception of neglect, indicating a critical need for universities to develop strategies that bridge the gap between distance education and the broader campus community.

Inadequate Support Services

Participant 12 said that;

"Support services like academic advising, counseling, and library access are less accessible to distance education students. This creates a gap in the support they receive compared to on-campus students."

Participant 1 contributed that;

"There is a clear disparity in the availability and quality of support services between on-campus and distance learners. Distance education students often have to rely on less effective alternatives."

Participant 10 added that;

"The limited availability of academic support for distance learners is a significant issue. They often cannot access the same level of guidance and assistance as their on-campus colleagues.

The extracts collectively underscore a significant disparity in the availability and quality of support services for distance education students compared to their on-campus counterparts. Participants highlight that crucial resources, such as academic advising and counseling, are less accessible, leading to a reliance on inadequate alternatives that compromise their educational experience. This lack of comprehensive support not only hinders academic success but also reinforces feelings of isolation and inequity among distance learners, necessitating urgent institutional attention to address these gaps.

Limited Interaction with Faculty

On the issue of limited interaction with faculty, participant 6 said that;

"Distance education students often miss out on the interactive aspects of learning, such as face-to-face discussions and immediate feedback from instructors, which are critical for their academic growth."

Another participant 9 also said that;

"Interactive learning activities are limited for distance education students. The absence of a vibrant, interactive academic environment hampers their learning experience."

The extracts reveal two primary challenges faced by distance education students: limited interaction with faculty and technological barriers. Participants emphasize that the lack of immediate feedback from instructors undermines the interactive learning experience essential for academic development, leading to a diminished educational environment.

Technological Barriers

Participant 1 said that;

"Technological challenges, such as unreliable internet connectivity and inadequate access to digital learning platforms, significantly hinder the learning experience of distance education students, reinforcing their detachment from the parent university."

Participant 8 said that;

"The technology infrastructure for distance education is often not on par with that of the main campus. This disparity creates a barrier for students trying to engage with the same level of resources and support available to on-campus students."

Participants explained that, technological challenges, such as unreliable internet access and subpar digital infrastructure, further isolate distance learners from the resources and support available to their on-campus peers, causing the detachment from the parent university.

Value and Recognition

Participant 6 said that;

"Distance education programs are often perceived as less rigorous or valuable compared to on-campus programs. This perception can make distance learners feel undervalued."

Participant 12 said that;

"There is a stigma attached to distance education. Students feel that their qualifications might not be regarded as highly as those earned through on-campus programs."

Participant 11 said that;

"The lack of recognition and equal treatment in university policies and awards demotivates distance education students, making them feel like second-class citizens within the academic community."

The extracts reveal a troubling stigma associated with distance education, wherein programs are often viewed as less rigorous and valuable than traditional on-campus offerings, leading to feelings of undervaluation among students. Participants express concerns that this perception negatively impacts the recognition of their qualifications, causing anxiety about their academic legitimacy. Furthermore, the lack of equitable treatment in university policies and awards reinforces a sense of being marginalized, ultimately demotivating distance learners and contributing to their feelings of inferiority within the academic community.

Resource Allocation

Participant 3 spoke about the fact that;

"Resources are disproportionately allocated, with the main campus receiving the majority of funding and support, leaving distance education programs underfunded and underserved."

The extract highlights a critical issue of resource disparity, indicating that distance education programs are systematically underfunded compared to their on-campus counterparts. This inequitable allocation of resources not only hinders the effectiveness of distance education but also contributes to feelings of neglect and marginalization among distance learners.

Administrative and Policy Gaps

Participant 8 said that;

"There is a lack of clear policies and guidelines tailored specifically for distance education, leading to inconsistencies in program delivery and support."

Participant 2 said that;

"Administrative support for distance education students is often lacking. The bureaucratic hurdles they face can be demoralizing and contribute to their sense of detachment."

Participant 4 said that;

"Institutional policies tend to favor on-campus students. Distance learners often feel that their needs and concerns are not adequately addressed in university decision-making processes."

The extracts reveal significant shortcomings in the institutional support for distance education students, primarily due to the absence of clear policies specifically designed for their needs. Participants highlight how bureaucratic obstacles and inadequate administrative support can be demoralizing, exacerbating feelings of detachment from the university community. Moreover, the perception that institutional policies favor on-campus students further alienates distance learners, leading them to feel marginalized and their concerns overlooked in university decision-making processes.

The data reveals that, the detachment of Distance Education from the parent university is attributed to several critical factors, including inadequate integration and communication, limited access to resources, and insufficient interaction with faculty. Many distance education students report feeling isolated due to a lack of

regular updates and engagement activities, contributing to a sense of exclusion (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Additionally, the disparity in access to academic and support services (Guri-Rosenblit, 2018) further exacerbates this detachment, as distance education students often lack the same level of guidance and resources available to their on-campus counterparts. Technological barriers, such as unreliable internet connectivity and outdated digital infrastructure, also play a significant role in hindering the learning experience of distance students, reinforcing their sense of separation from the university community (Xiao, 2018).

Research Question 2: How do Distance Education students perceive their connection with the parent university?

This research question seeks to answer explore hoe distance education students perceive their connection with the parent university.

Sense of Isolation

Participant 9 said that;

"I often feel isolated from the main campus. It seems like we're not really part of the university community because we don't get to participate in most of the events and activities happening there."

Another participant (P1) also said that;

"There is a significant disconnect. We rarely get updates about what's happening on the main campus, and it makes us feel like outsiders."

Participant 4 said that;

"We are not included in many of the university's major events. This exclusion makes it hard to feel connected to the parent university."

The extracts underscore a pervasive sense of isolation experienced by distance education students, who feel disconnected from the main campus community due to their exclusion from events and activities. Participants express frustration over the lack of communication and updates regarding campus happenings, reinforcing their perception of being outsiders within the university. This exclusion not only diminishes their sense of belonging but also highlights the need for more inclusive practices that integrate distance learners into the broader university environment.

Limited Access to Resources

Participant 6 said that,

"The library and other academic resources available to on-campus students are not as accessible to us. This limitation makes us feel detached from the main university."

Another participant (P5) also said

"We struggle to get the same level of support and resources as those on campus, which makes us feel like second-class students."

Participant 7 commented that;

"Our access to academic resources is quite restricted compared to on-campus students. It's as if we are attending a different institution altogether."

The extracts highlight a significant disparity in access to academic resources between distance education students and their on-campus counterparts, contributing to a sense of detachment from the main university.

Participants express frustration over the limited availability of essential support services, leading them to feel undervalued and treated as "second-class" students. This lack of equitable access to resources not only hampers their academic success but also reinforces feelings of isolation, making them perceive their educational experience as fundamentally different from that of on-campus students.

Neglect and Inequality

Participant 4 said that;

"It feels like we are an afterthought in the university's plans. Our needs are not prioritized, which makes us feel neglected."

Participant 11 said that;

"There is a sense of inequality in how distance education students are treated. We don't receive the same level of attention or support as on-campus students."

Participant 12 said that;

"We often feel overlooked by the administration. The support and opportunities available to on-campus students are not extended to us. The university seems to focus more on on-campus students, leaving us to feel like we don't matter as much."

The extracts reveal a profound sense of neglect felt by distance education students, who perceive themselves as an afterthought in the university's planning and support efforts. Participants emphasize a palpable sense of inequality in treatment, noting that they do not receive the same level of attention or resources as on-campus students, which exacerbates feelings of being overlooked by administration. This lack of prioritization reinforces the notion that distance learners are undervalued within the academic community, contributing to their sense of disconnection and diminished importance within the university structure.

Communication Gaps

Participant 10 said that;

"Communication from the university is often delayed or incomplete. This lack of timely information makes it hard to stay connected and informed. We don't receive the same level of communication as on-campus students. Important updates and information often don't reach us in time."

Participant 3 said that;

"There is a significant communication gap between us and the main campus. This gap contributes to our feeling of being detached from the university. The communication channels for distance learners are not as effective. We miss out on a lot of information, which makes us feel disconnected."

The extracts highlight a critical issue regarding the ineffective communication channels available to distance education students, which significantly contributes to their feelings of disconnection from the university. Participants express frustration over the delays and incompleteness of information, indicating that they often miss important updates that are readily accessible to on-campus students. This communication gap not only hampers their ability to stay informed but also exacerbates their sense of isolation, reinforcing the perception that distance learners are marginalized within the broader university community.

Technological and Infrastructure Challenges

Participant 13 said that;

"Technological issues, like poor internet connectivity, make it difficult to fully participate in online classes and connect with the university."

Also, participant 8 said that;

"We face significant infrastructure challenges that on-campus students don't. These challenges make it hard to feel integrated into the university community."

Participant 10 said that;

"The digital divide is a real problem. Our limited access to reliable technology hinders our educational experience and connection to the university."

Participant 2 said that;

"Inconsistent access to technology and learning platforms makes it difficult for us to stay engaged and feel part of the university."

The extracts collectively underscore the substantial technological challenges faced by distance education students, which hinder their ability to fully engage with their coursework and the university community. Participants highlight issues such as poor internet connectivity and inadequate access to reliable technology, creating barriers that prevent effective participation in online classes. This "digital divide" not only compromises their educational experience but also reinforces feelings of isolation, as inconsistent access to necessary resources further alienates distance learners from the broader university environment, emphasizing the need for improved infrastructure and support.

Distance education students often perceive their connection with the parent university as tenuous and inadequate, primarily due to a lack of integration and communication, insufficient access to resources, and limited interaction with faculty and peers. Many students feel isolated because they do not participate in university events and activities, receive delayed communication, and lack immediate feedback from instructors (Ama K.; Dr. A. Mensah). This perception is supported by Stone and O'Shea (2019), who found that distance learners frequently experience a sense of disconnection due to minimal engagement with the campus community and inadequate support services. Similarly, Guri-Rosenblit (2018) emphasizes that the disparity in resource allocation and technological infrastructure exacerbates this detachment, making distance learners feel like second-class students. Conversely, the findings challenge the assertion by Shea et al. (2015) that advancements in online learning platforms have sufficiently bridged the gap between distance and on-campus education, indicating that significant challenges remain in fostering a cohesive university experience for all students.

KEY FINDINGS

The study reveals that,

1. Inadequate integration and communication between distance education students and the main campus significantly contribute to their sense of disconnection. Limited access to essential academic resources and support services further exacerbates this disconnection, making distance education students feel marginalized. Moreso, technological barriers, such as unreliable internet connectivity and outdated digital infrastructure, hinder effective participation and engagement, reinforcing their isolation from the university community.
2. Distance Education students perceive their connection with the parent university as weak and insufficient due to feelings of isolation and exclusion from campus activities. They face significant communication gaps and lack access to resources and support services equivalent to those available to on-campus students. Additionally, limited interaction with faculty exacerbates their sense of detachment from the university community.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it is however concluded that, there is a partial severance between distance Education and their parent university. This is primarily due to inadequate communication, limited access to resources, and insufficient interaction with faculty and peers. This disconnection not only hinders their academic experience but also affects their overall sense of belonging within the university community.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the key findings, it is recommended that,

1. Parent universities who have established distance education should launch regular channels of communication to keep distance learners informed about campus events, resources, and opportunities for engagement. Also, promoting participation in university-wide activities through digital platforms can help bridge the gap between distance education and on-campus experiences.
2. Parent universities must prioritize equitable access to resources and support services for distance education students. This includes expanding online library services, providing robust academic advising, and ensuring access to mental health resources tailored to the needs of distance education students. By creating a more inclusive and supportive environment, there will be a strong connection between parent universities and distance education, ultimately enriching their academic journey and overall satisfaction.

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