

A Practical Framework for Evaluating Distance Learning Programs in Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

Distance learning is not a new phenomenon. Technology has ensured that learning takes place anywhere at any time by freeing learners from the constraints of space and/or time respectively. Despite of this benefit, there is apprehension among some scholars that distance education compromises the quality of learning. Substantial research has been conducted comparing the academic performance of the conventional face-to-face and distance learners leading to the 'no significant difference phenomena'. However, a number of researchers have questioned this claim and branded it as inconclusive in that it does not show whether the two modes are equally good or bad. These researchers suggest a shift from comparative studies to evaluation of specific distance education program. The argument for this assertion is that evaluation as a discipline assigns a value or worth of a phenomenon based on certain criteria. This criteria may be in terms of fulfillment of outcomes, appropriateness of results (relevance and effectiveness), justification for resources used (efficiency), extent of the change that is attributed to the intervention (impact) and extent of the results lasting beyond the life of the intervention (sustainability). This paper seeks to synthesis program evaluation and distance education literature to recommend a framework for conducting evaluations of distance learning programs. This is because evaluation elements that are used to determine the worth and value of distance learning programs cannot be quite the same terms as the conventional face-to-face teaching that academicians are most familiar with.

Keywords: Distance education • Distance learning • Program evaluation

Introduction

Over the last decade, the debate is no longer on whether distance learning is a viable learning option but on whether the quality of distance learning is comparable to conventional learning. There has been a belief among scholars that conventional learning (face to face) is the real education. The conviction is premised on the fact learning takes place when an expert (in this case a teacher/tutor or lecturer) dispenses knowledge to a learner when they are at the same place at the same time. This, after all, is the basis on which schools, colleges and universities have been built. This feeling is even in countries where distance education has evolved over time making distance education to act as subordinate level of education. Amutabi noted that in Kenya, open and distance learning is looked down upon and 'few universities have embraced the model of open and distance learning and even in those institutions where this is used, it is taken as a second or third class form of instruction'. This paper defines distance learning as a form of teaching and learning experience offered to learners who are not in the same place at the same time with their tutors. This type of learning eliminates the need for gathering in one place dedicated to learning referred to as a

classroom or a lecture theatre. Distance learning has its strengths and limitations. A few are enumerated.

Strengths of distance learning

Flexibility: Distance learning fits learning to one's way of life. A learner does not need to be in the same place and time with the teacher. Learners are able to control their time and place of learning thereby leading to effective learning. **Self-paced learning:** learners are of different abilities. There are those who are slow learners while other grasps concepts pretty fast. Distance learning takes care of individual learning differences according to their level of understanding. A slow learner can go back and forth to areas they may have difficulty while a fast learner can complete a course way below the prescribed time and offer the opportunity to skim through the next course materials. **Various formats of course material:** Advancement in ICT allows the course tutor to convert the course content into multiple multi-media forms.

Accessibility: In a face to face teaching, a learner cannot re-attend a class if s/he misses. Content is delivered in a set place and time following a schedule called a time table. In a distance learning set-up, a student needs not to worry about attending class because the

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materials are available. Interactivity: Distance learning offers increased interactions among the teachers (tutors) and students better than a conventional face-to-face environment. This is because shy and quiet students who may feel threatened asking questions in a face to face interaction would now be free to open up through the various multi-media forms available for instance discussion forums and chats. This ensures that individual student's needs are addressed. Cost-effective: distance learning allows for massification of education which increases access. Unlike a conventional face to face set up where the ratio of lecturers to students is 1:30, in a distance learning set-up, the ratio is upto 1:800. This means that institutions with challenges of infrastructure both human and physical can still educate a large number of masses.

Limitations of distance learning

Distance learning is not without limitations. Some of the limitations are: It requires learners who are highly disciplined, self-directed and self-motivating. This is because in most instances, the learner is alone without direct, continuous and immediate supervision of a tutor. Quality of interaction- a major issue of concern in distance learning is the quality of interaction between the tutor and the learner. Palloff and Pratt noted that "technology does not teach students; effective teachers do". This is premised on the fact that technology delivers what is uploaded; therefore the quality of what the learner is interacting with should be paramount. If the design of distance learning materials is not done well, then the outcomes (quality of graduates) will be compromised. Moore suggested, teachers of distance learning programs should ensure that the following types of interactions exists: Learner-content interaction: the interaction of the learners and the course content; Learner-tutor/instructor interaction: this interaction allows the learners to communicate to and receive feedback from the tutors and vice versa regarding the teaching-learning experience; and Learner-learner interaction: this is interaction between learners to create an active learning community. Loss of social relationships due to lack of face to face interaction and the sense of community that is usually present on traditional courses. Ocker and Yaverbaum suggested that proximity and eye contact are important factors in education, but these physical indicators are limited in the distance learning environment. It has also been noted that, in distance learning environments teachers are unable to observe the emotions of students and thus cannot detect any anxiety in the students which limits the instructor's ability to respond to the student needs. Lack of immediate feedback: there is a seemingly lack of continuous and immediate feedback or contact with the teacher in distance learning. Keegan believes that the separation of student and teacher removes a vital "link" of communication between these two parties. This missing interactivity can be mitigated through synchronous and asynchronous technological tools which enable the student to receive prompt feedback. Social Isolation - distance learners miss the social, physical and emotional connection that comes with attending class together with a social group referred to as classmates. This may cause a feeling of fear, isolation, loneliness and separation.

It is because of these limitations that the quality of distance education is questioned. This then begs the question, how can quality be assured in distance learning. It is only through evaluating that a distance learning program can prove its efficacy, assesses its performance and improve on its efficiency and effectiveness.

The Concept of Quality

Higher education institutions that offer distance education programs share a need to determine quality. But what is quality; Harvey & Green postulates that quality is interpreted as fitness for purpose and value for money. Quality as fitness for purpose emphasizes the establishment of national and institutional structures for evaluating quality. The Commission for Higher Education (CUE) is a national structure to ensure that the university education in Kenya fits the purpose. This can be deduced from the Mission of the Commission which is to regulate and assure quality university education by setting standards and monitoring compliance to achieve global competitiveness. Individual universities are expected to create institutional structures to ensure quality. Majority of universities have directorates of quality assurance. The view of value for money associates quality with expense and economic exchange. Drummond posits that customers are willing to pay for better quality and what pleases the customer most is quality. Accountability is thus central in this definition. In Kenya, the government looks for a good return on investment in higher education by using the Ministry of Education and other funding agencies to audit performance of the institutions. This is meant to assure that money allocated to the universities is properly and effectively used. These two aspects of quality seeks to discern whether a program lives to its mandate in an effective and efficient manner. This is the focus of evaluation.

Evaluation of Distance Learning Programs

Evaluations provide important information that can prevent programs or courses from floundering or failing to meet the needs and goals of students. There are a number of definitions available and at times, the disciplinary basis of the evaluator can influence the way evaluation is defined. There are evaluators who will approach the definition of evaluation from the goal or objective oriented perspective as in the work of Ralph Tyler. Tyler perceives evaluation as the process of finding out the extent to which the goals and objectives of a program are being or have been achieved. A multiple perspective definition can be gleaned from Emeke. In this writing, evaluation is perceived as the scientific, systematic and objective assessment of a distance learning program. The program may be ongoing or being implemented or completed which in this case, evaluation entails the results of the program. Evaluation aims at determining the relevance of the program, fulfillment of program objectives, development of efficiency and effectiveness, impact and sustainability. In this paper, evaluation is defined as a systematic and objective application of scientific methods to assess the planning, design, implementation, outcomes and impacts of an on-going or completed distance education with the aim of determining its relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. In this context, the program is the distance education programs.

There are various types of evaluation. This paper will be guided by Scriven model which has two types of evaluations: formative and summative evaluation. According to Scriven, evaluators role is to provide professional judgement on the worth or value of a program by deciding which is good and which is bad. Formative evaluation forms the program during the process of implementation. This serves to

improve to ensure that the program lives up to its mandate. In a distance learning institution, formative evaluation is the internal quality control mechanism that an institution will put in place during the implementation of a distance learning program. Formative evaluation is conducted by internal experts who are familiar with the design and development of the program. An example of internal staff would be the staff in the directorate of distance learning or distance learning campus. Summative evaluation reveals how well the final product of a program fits in the real world. It provides information to audience outside the design and development team. Such audiences could be the Ministry of Education, CUE, funding agencies, employers and other stakeholders.

Discussion and Conclusion

Issues of quality are raised more in a distance learning environment than in a traditional environment. Evaluation of distance learning programs is therefore not a matter of choice but a process that should be embedded in the design, development and implementation of the programs. To create an evaluation strategy, institutions must begin by defining what 'success' of distance learning programs are. Is it increased enrolment, high retention rates, learner performance in examinations, increased employability of graduates, positive attitude and higher satisfaction among stakeholders.

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