

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS AND PARTICIPATION IN DISTANCE LEARNING: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI BACHELOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMME BY DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract: Rapid changes in the twenty first century with regard to the use of technology and humane approach to issues have driven many people back to schooling. The world has become a global village where happenings in one part of the world influence other far flung areas as well. While distance learning was largely a European and American affair, Africa is now an active player as distance learning becomes widespread. The University of Nairobi has been an active participant in distance learning in Eastern Africa long before other institutions of higher learning got involved. Open, Distance and E-learning (ODEL) campus houses division of educational studies. The school offers Bachelor of Education (Arts) by distance learning. This paper sought to establish characteristics of distance learners and how such characteristics influence their participation in the programme. The target population was 547 Bachelor of education (Arts) students in distance learning program. Data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. A sample size of 231 was obtained and 174 questionnaires were duly filled and returned. Learner characteristics studied were employment status and marital status and their influence on learner participation in distance learning. Results indicate that 126(76.4%) are married and 70% of the married participants strongly agreed that marital status poses a challenge to them as participants in distance learning. On employment status, out of 174 respondents, 136(78.2%) are employed. A total of 67 percent of the employed respondents fell between agree and strongly agree that they are able to balance their job demands and study. Correlation analysis indicate a correlation coefficient of 0.223 below the set 0.05 meaning there is a weak but positive relationship between learner participation in distance learning and learner characteristics. From the findings the study made conclusion that distance learners face challenges of balancing job requirements, family obligations and learning demands. In view of this, it is suggested that University of Nairobi should strengthen learner support through guidance and counseling so that learners facing challenges of participation due to their peculiar characteristics may be assisted. It is also recommended that guidance should be offered from the onset and carried out throughout the programme as the situation demands. As the programme transits to multimedia platform, it is recommended that a dedicated telephone line be established to offer support to learners who may need guidance that are non-academic.

Keywords: learner characteristics, marital status, employment status, learner participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is standard practice in a cognitive domain-based lesson to establish entering behavior of learners. This enables the instructor to know what the students have learnt previously and what need to be reinforced before a new concept is introduced. The concept of entering behavior can be likened to establishing characteristics of distance learners in an Open Distance and E- learning (ODel) programme. This knowledge or information is crucial to a distance learning provider as it provides a platform on which to tailor make learning and instructional materials at the planning level. Since its inception, distance learning has always attracted learners who are older than on campus students. Researchers have established certain characteristics that are common to learners enrolled in distance learning. Enri (2012) indicate that there are demographic and personality similarities among distance learners that may provide the basic description of a typical distance learner. This study sought to establish the relationship between learner characteristics and learner participation in distance learning. This was done with the aim of providing a framework which would assist the learners to fit in the programme and maximize their time and attain personal objectives that led them in the first place to register in the programme. In this study, learner characteristics are personal circumstances that are likely to influence participation in distance learning. Most students in distance learning mode are adults with a distribution of 48.7 per cent being male and 51.3 per cent being female, Ngumi and Mwaniki (2009). Most of them are employed, have families or stable relationships and responsibilities that come with adult life. Going back to school upsets the above equilibrium and hence the need for adjustment. The aspiring students need to structure their life in order to fit back into school environment and at the same time continue with their normal activities and professions. Deverthelyi (1995) quoted in Ngumi (2009) posits that adjustments of individuals into such a system may be affected by situation factors, personality traits, cultural background, gender-role orientation, among others. Most students have no idea what a degree program and specifically distance learning entails until they have enrolled into one. As a result, they blindly enroll into a program and later realize that they are unable to cope financially, workloads, complex subject matter, time constraints and separation from families, Ngumi and Mwaniki (2009). It is with such findings in mind that this study sought to establish the relationship between learner characteristics and participation in distance learning.

The world is a global village in which individuals have to operate and survive in partnership or collaboration with the others. There is increase in demand for knowledge for survival in the job market. Skills that were relevant in yester years may not be applicable in today's systems of operation. This scenario has called for retraining for survival and relevance in the job market. There are individuals who don't have the luxury of full time collage based education. This may be so due to family responsibilities or job demands. Distance learning mode of education therefore becomes the only option for such people. Moreover, the decision to go back to school is not only driven by skills and relevance but as a study by Kimani, Kaara Njagi and Ruinge (2012) indicate such students who opt for distance learning hope for promotions and upward mobility in their profession.

Kenya has witnessed rapid expansion in the institutions of higher learning in the recent past. This has come about as a result of growing demand for higher education. The increased demand has led to the growth of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions which act as a stop gap to fill demands that traditional educational institutions are not able to fill. According to Nyerere, Gravenir and Mse (2012), distance learning is increasingly becoming popular because of its flexibility and learner friendly approach. In this mode of education, learners fit their program of learning at appropriate time that suits their needs hence the popularity. As more and more institutions adopt Open and Distance Learning, there is need to ensure that the main stakeholders who are the learners participate in learning and get quality education that would enable them to be relevant in the market. Distance learning is a mode of education that depends on a medium for delivery. The medium chosen should be designed in such a way that it meets requirements of a distance learning mode of education. There are several media that are being used in the delivery of distance learning as pointed out by Melton (2002) and Potashnic and Casper (1998). These include text books, study guides, modules, work books, study units and web-based platforms among others. This study however focused on study units used in distance learning program at the University of Nairobi. Specifically, learner characteristics were studied in terms employment status and marital status and the influence these characteristics have on learner participation in distance learning at the University of Nairobi.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study targeted 547 Bachelor of Arts students in the department of educational studies, University of Nairobi. A sample size of 231 was obtained using Cooper and Emory (1995) sampling procedure for social sciences. Questionnaires were administered on students. Mixed method approach was used which involved qualitative and quantitative analysis of

data. Frequencies and percentages were obtained from likert scale responses that required respondents to indicate in a scale of 1 to 5 whether they agreed, strongly agreed, disagreed, strongly agreed or were undecided with the statements provided. Correlation analysis was done to obtain the strength of the relationship between learner characteristic and participation in distance learning.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Learner characteristics and participation in distance learning

Respondents were required to respond to a yes or no to the questions posed. Farther respondent were to indicate the extent to which they agreed with various statements regarding their participation in distance learning. The frequency of responses were then captured in a five point likerts scale (5= strongly agree, 4= agree, 3= undecided, 2= disagree and 1= strongly disagree) and the general level of acceptance was determined by calculating the frequencies and percentages for the various statements as per the responses and tabulated in respective order of means further a composite table of 2*2 where the responses of each question of the independent variable were cross analyzed with the variables of the dependent variable.

MARITAL STATUS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION DISTANCE LEARNING

The respondents were classified into four groups: married, single, widowed and others. They were expected to respond to a yes or no with regard to their marital status.

Results show that most distance learners are married since out of 174 respondents, 126 (72.4%) are married. Single respondents accounted for a 26.4% which had a frequency of 46 while others accounted for 0.6%.

MARITAL STATUS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN ASSIGNMENTS

An assessment was done on learner participation in assignments (Dependent variable) and the extent to which marital status influences their participation in distance learning. In the first category 0-25 consisting of respondents who made least references to study units while doing assignments, 1 of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that marital status influences his or her participation in assignment. 2 disagreed, none were undecided, 3 agreed and 2 strongly agreed. In the second category of 26-50 consisting of respondents who made moderate reference to study units while doing assignments, 3 strongly disagreed that marital status influence their participation in assignments, 2 disagreed, 2 were undecided, 7 agree while 6 strongly agreed. In the third category ranging from 51-75 consisting of respondents who made above average reference to study units while doing assignments, 8 strongly disagreed with the notion that marital status influence their participation in distance learning, 7 disagreed, 1 were undecided, 35 agreed and 10 strongly agreed, in the fourth category ranging from 76-100 consisting of respondents who made extensive reference to study units while doing assignments, 3 of the respondents strongly disagreed, 5 disagreed, 4 were undecided, 15 agreed and 10 strongly agreed. It can thus be concluded that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that marital status hinder their participation in assignments. Most of them disagreed and strongly disagreed 88(70%) with the majority agreeing that they refer to the study units for the purposes of assignments being in the range of 51-100. This means that even though family obligations may be a challenge in distance learning, study units remains a reference point for learners when it comes to participation in assignments.

MARITAL STATUS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT TESTS

An assessment was done on CAT (Dependent variable) and the extent to which marital status influence respondents participation in distance learning. In the first category of 0-25 consisting of respondents who made least reference to study units while preparing for CATs, none of the respondents strongly disagree with the notion that marital status influence their participation in distance learning, 1 disagreed, none were undecided, 5 agreed and none strongly agreed. In the second category of 26-50 consisting of respondents who made moderate reference to study units while preparing for CATs, 7 strongly disagreed with the view that marital status influence their participation in distance learning, 10 disagreed, none were undecided, 6 agreed while none strongly agreed. In the third category ranging from 51-75 consisting of respondents who made above average reference to study units while preparing for CATs, 28 strongly disagreed with the notion that marital status hinder their participation in distance learning, 15 disagreed, 4 were undecided, 8 agreed and 5 strongly agreed. In the fourth category ranging from 76-100 consisting of respondents who made extensive reference to

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and LearningVol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (1-7), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

study units while preparing for CATs, 15 of the respondents strongly disagreed with the view that marital status hinder their participation in distance learning, 10 disagreed, 10 were undecided, none agreed and 2 strongly agreed. It can thus be concluded that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that marital status hinder respondents participation in CATs, as most of them disagreed and strongly disagreed 86(68%) with the majority agreeing that they refer to the study units for the purposes of CATs with the range being 51-100.

MARITAL STATUS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN EXAMINATIONS

An assessment was done on examinations (Dependent variable) and the extent to which marital status does not hinder respondent's participation in distance learning. In the first category of 0-25 consisting of respondents who made least reference to study units while preparing for examinations, none of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that marital status hinders their participation in examinations, 1 disagreed, none were undecided, 5 agreed and none strongly agreed. In the second category of 26-50 consisting of respondents who made moderate reference to study units while preparing for examinations, 7 strongly disagreed with the view that marital status hinders their participation in distance learning, 10 disagreed, none were undecided, 6 agreed while none strongly agreed. In the third category ranging from 51-75 consisting of respondents who made above average reference to study units, 28 strongly disagreed with the statement that marital status hinders their participation in distance learning, 15 disagreed, 4 were undecided, 8 agreed and 5 strongly agreed. In the fourth category ranging from 76-100 consisting of respondents who mostly make reference to study units while preparing for examinations, 15 of the respondents strongly disagreed that marital status hinders their participation in distance learning, 10 disagreed, 10 were undecided, none agreed and 2 strongly agreed. It can thus be concluded that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that marital obligations does hinder their participation in examinations, as most of them disagreed and strongly disagreed 86(68%) with the statement posed.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN DISTANCE LEARNING

In this section, respondents were requested to either select yes or no with regard to their employment status. Those who responded with a "Yes" had the highest proportion of 136 (78.2%) which represented a frequency of 136 while "No" had a frequency of 37 which was 21.3%. This means that most distance learners are in employment.

JOB DEMANDS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN ASSIGNMENTS

Respondents were asked the extent to which they are able to balance job demands (independent variable) and their participation in distance learning and the following results were obtained; in the first category of 0-25 consisting of respondents who made least reference to study units while doing assignments, 2 of the respondents strongly disagreed with the view that they are able to balance job demands with their participation in distance learning, none disagreed, 2 were undecided, 10 agreed and 7 strongly agreed. In the second category of 26-50 consisting of respondents who made moderate reference to study units while doing assignments, none strongly disagreed, 9 disagreed, none were undecided, 20 agreed while 11 strongly agreed. In the third category ranging from 51-75 consisting of respondents who made above average reference to study units while doing assignments, 3 strongly disagreed that they are able to balance job demands with their participation in distance learning, 10 disagreed, 3 were undecided, 20 agreed and 9 strongly agreed. In the fourth category ranging from 76-100 consisting of respondents who made extensive reference to study units while doing assignments, 3 of the respondents strongly disagreed, 3 disagreed, none were undecided, 8 agreed and 3 strongly agreed. It can thus be concluded that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that they are able to balance job demands with the studies in distance learning, as most of them agreed and strongly agreed 88(65%) with the majority agreeing that they refer to the study units for the purposes of assignments with the range being 51-100. Even though 59 percent of the respondents indicated that they are able to balance job demands with participation in distance learning, a significant number 67 (38%) felt that they are not able to balance their studies with job demands.

JOB DEMANDS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT TESTS

An assessment was done on CATs (Dependent variable) and the extent to which a respondent is able to balance job demands with the studies in distance learning. In the first category of 0-25 consisting of respondents who made the least reference to study units while preparing for CATs, none of the respondents strongly disagreed with the view that he or she is able to balance job demands and participation in distance learning, 3 disagreed, none were undecided, 7 agreed and none strongly agreed. In the second category of 26-50 consisting of respondents who made moderate reference to study

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units while preparing for CATs, 4 strongly disagreed, 4 disagreed, 3 were undecided, 20 agreed while 9 strongly agreed. In the third category ranging from 51-75 consisting of respondents who made above average reference to study units while preparing for CATs, 3 strongly disagreed with the notion that they are able to balance job demands with their preparation for CATs, 8 disagreed, 0 were undecided, 20 agreed and 9 strongly agreed. In the fourth category ranging from 76-100 consisting of respondents who made extensive reference to study units while preparing for CATs, 4 of the respondents strongly disagreed, 3 disagreed, none undecided, 25 agreed and 1 strongly agreed. It can thus be concluded that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that they are able to balance job demands with the studies in distance learning, as most of them agreed and strongly agreed 91(67%) with the majority agreeing that they refer to the study units for the purposes of CATs.

JOB DEMANDS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN EXAMINATIONS

An assessment was done on examinations (Dependent variable) and the extent to which a respondent is able to balance job demands with the studies in distance learning. In the first category of 0-25 consisting of respondents who made least reference to study units while preparing for examinations, 1 respondent strongly disagreed that he/she is able to balance job demands and preparation for examinations, 3 disagreed, none were undecided, 7 agreed and none strongly agreed. In the second category of 26-50 consisting of respondents who made moderate reference to study units while preparing for examinations, 4 strongly disagreed with the view that they are able to balance job demands with preparation for examinations, 4 disagreed, 3 were undecided, 20 agreed while 9 strongly agreed. In the third category ranging from 51-75 consisting of respondents who made above average reference to study units while preparing for examinations, 3 strongly disagreed with the statement that they are able to balance job demands with preparation for examinations, 9 disagreed, 0 were undecided, 20 agreed and 9 strongly agreed. In the fourth category ranging from 76-100 consisting of respondents who made the most reference to study units while preparing for examinations, 4 of the respondents strongly disagreed that they are able to balance job demands with preparation for examinations, 3 disagreed, 0 were undecided, 25 agreed and 1 strongly agreed. It can thus be concluded that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that they are able to balance job demands with preparation for examinations as most of them agreed and strongly agreed 91(67%) with the statement posed.

A chi-square test was done to determine the association between learner characteristics and learner participation in distance learning. The expected count less than 5 is >20% at 42.9%, meaning that the Chi square assumption of this question of the independent variable is violated and thus need for an alternative action. The Pearson Chi square had a value of 124.904^a, the degrees of freedom were 18 and the P-Value was 0.000<0.05 meaning that the model was significant. It therefore means that learner characteristics have influence on learner participation in distance learning. The observed frequencies were different from the expected ones suggesting that learner characteristics do have influence on their participation in distance learning.

Hypothesis which stated that there is no relationship between learner characteristics and participation in distance learning was tested. This hypothesis was tested by analysis of the mean variances (ANOVA) between the learner participation and the learner characteristics, where learner participation was the dependent variable and learner characteristics was the moderating variable.

The results show that the influence of learner characteristics on learner participation was significant as $F = 4.929$, $p < 0.05$ at 0.000, meaning that H_0 : learner characteristics have no influence on participation in distance learning is rejected. The sum of squares between groups was 8.397 and the degree of freedom was 6 with a mean square of 1.4. Similarly the sum of squares within groups was 38.899 and the degrees of freedom was 137 with a mean square of 0.284. This means that learner characteristics influence their participation in distance learning..

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This study sought to establish the relationship between learner characteristics and learner participation in distance learning. The aim was to provide suggestions on how best learners in the programme can be assisted to fully participate in learning in order to achieve their dreams. The results obtained show that students enrolled in bachelor of education programme at the University of Nairobi ODeI campus are mostly adults who are engaged in some form of employment or the other. Majority of the students also married and therefore shoulder other responsibilities other than being students as findings in this study explain further.

MARITAL STATUS OF RESPONDENTS

The respondents were classified into four groups, of these married took the highest percentage of 72.4% which was a frequency of 126 respondents, single respondents accounted for a 26.4% which was a frequency of 46 respondents, others accounted for 0.6% which was a 1 frequency while widowed had .6%. This means that most distance learners are married.

MARITAL STATUS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Result show that married marital status hinder learner participation in assignments. Out of 72.4% married respondents, 70% fell in the category of disagree and strongly disagree with the statement that marital status does not interfere with their participation in assignment. With regard to CATs and examinations, 68% felt that marital status interferes with their participation in the program. These results show that marital status influences learner participation in assignments, CATs and examinations even though respondents still find study units important as they make reference to them in the scale of 51 to 100 percent.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN DISTANCE LEARNING

The results indicate that out of 174 respondents who participated in the study, 78.2% are employed. Out of these 65% strongly agreed and agreed that they are able to balance job demands with their participation in assignments. A total of 67% respondents fell in the category of agree and strongly agree that they are able to balance job demands with their participation in CATs and examinations. This shows that while marital status poses challenge to respondents, they are able to manage job demands alongside their studies.

4. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Various studies have confirmed the notion that there are certain characteristics that are peculiar to distance learners. The assertion that majority of distance learners are older than regular on-campus students, are in steady employment and are in marital relationships have been confirmed in this study. This study also confirms that learner characteristics influence their participation in distance learning. Responsibilities such as employment and family obligations in one way or another interfere with the study schedule of distance learners. A study by Ngumi and Mwaniki (2009), Mboroki (2007), Sharma (2005) confirm characteristics of distance learners. According to Ngumi and Mwaniki (2009), going back to school affects family equilibrium and requires an individual to do a lot of adjustments. In this study respondents indicated that family obligations normally interfere with their participation in distance learning.

It is worth noting that in an African setting, there is still a firm belief in gender roles. There are traditional gender responsibilities that a male or female is expected to perform irrespective of level of education, area of residence or expanded responsibility of being a student for example. One would imagine that with the changing dynamics of current world order, households would become more flexible with regard to gender roles. Facts on the ground however show that very little has changed in regard to this scenario. It is also important to note that the rigidity may not directly come from the affected parties. The concept of Ubuntu still plays a key role in determining how households are run and managed in many parts of Africa. It is as if one is answerable to the community on how his household is managed. This probably explains results in this study that points to a good number of learners who struggle to balance their study with marital status. In view of the foregoing, learner support is crucial in enabling adult distance learners to fulfill their desires of acquiring higher education. Learner support services are strategies that are designed to enable learners fit in a distance or blended programme, Bowa (2008). Support services when offered appropriately not only enables the learner to fit in the programme but goes a long way in minimizing the challenges that additional responsibilities that come with adult life. Learner support services given in distance learning normally include but not limited to guidance and counseling, administrative support tuition support, financial support among others.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has confirmed previous researches that most distance learners are adults with responsibilities and most of them are on employment. Majority of the learners at the University of Nairobi are able to balance job demands with their studies but a number find marital status a challenge. As much as they make references to study units for assignments, continuous assessment tests and examinations balancing family obligations and study is a challenge to the students. The

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university should strengthen guidance and counseling so that such students can fully participate in the program and realize their dreams. Apart from general administrative and academic guidance, there should be need-based guidance and counseling for learners in active employment and those who are married. This would go a long way in minimizing drop outs and or stress experienced by adult learners. Moreover the call center should have a dedicated line that learners in distress can call when they need support with regard to issues to do with job-academic and marital- academic assistance.

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