ABSTRACT

THEME: FORMAL EDUCATION
SUB-THEME: QUALITY ISSUES

Title: In Pursuit of Quality: UNISWA Lecturer's Perception on the Academic Performance of Conventional and Distance Education Students

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UNISWA students doing the B.A. degree in Humanities, which is offered in both the conventional and the distance education mode, proceed to become high school teachers in the country. As the quality of education that these prospective teachers receive will have a bearing on the quality of education that the high school students will receive, questions regarding the quality of education given using the DE mode have become common. This study was conducted to investigate the views of the lecturers in the Faculty of Humanities as regards their perceptions on the academic performance of the DE students vis-a-vis the ones in the conventional system.

Questionnaires were designed and sent to all the lecturers in all Departments in the Faculty of Humanities to solicit their views on this. Over 90% of the staff responded to the survey and the results were analyzed using frequency tables. The major finding of the study was that the IDE students' performance in assignments, tests and the final examination was perceived to be below that of the conventional students by 59%, 64% and 68% of the respondents, respectively. The study recommends that further research needs to be conducted to determine if the perceptions of the lecturers are indicative of the situation on the ground. Such a study would compare the scores of the two groups of students on their assignments, tests and examinations to determine if indeed the scores of the students in the conventional system are significantly better than those of the students in the DE system.

In Pursuit of Quality: UNISWA Lecturer's Perceptions on the Academic Performance of Conventional and Distance Education Students.

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INTRODUCTION

The major challenge facing many African Countries is the high social demand for formal university education, in the face of dwindling resources to expand (let alone maintain) the required physical infrastructure and human resources. Success in expanding access to education, and the democratization of primary and secondary education, to achieve Education For All (EFA) by 2015, has led to a serious bottleneck between high school and tertiary education. The African Governments have found it difficult to continue funding higher education at the same levels as they used to, and as a result, to meet the high social demand they have had to look at other affordable alternatives to offering university education.

Distance education (DE) is considered one of the alternatives of dealing with the dilemma, as it is said to require less physical facilities, is economic, and more industrialized in that it can cover many students, hence it is often hailed as the answer to the African governments' problems. The University of Swaziland (UNISWA) created in 1994, the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) which was charged with offering the university full-time programmes and courses using DE delivery methods, and using the same facilities and staff used on the full-time programme (CF2F) to reach wider audiences.

As this concept of running a distance education programme alongside one that is running on a full-time basis is new, a debate has arisen concerning the quality of education given to the students taught by the two methods and the quality of output from the DE programme. In an attempt to measure the quality of education given to the students in the CF2F and in IDE, this study collected and analyzed the perceptions of the teaching staff members in the Faculty of Humanities (FOH) at UNISWA. The study investigated their perceptions as regards the academic performance of these two groups of students in their class work, assignments, tests and final examinations.

The objectives of the research are:

- To find out the teaching staff members' perceptions as regards to the quality of the course modules produced and used by the IDE.

- To investigate the perceptions of the teaching staff of the FOH with regards to the academic performance of the students taught on CF2F and the students taught by DE mode in their assignments, tests and in the final examinations.

- To establish the reasons why students in the IDE do better or worse than the full time ones in their academic work.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research studies that have been done to compare the performance of DE and CF2F learners have not agreed on which mode is better. Some, such as Bernard et al (2004), Zhao et al (2005) have found no significant differences between the two modes, while others, like

Hughes et al (2007) found that DE students performed better than CF2F ones. Still others, such as Gunawardena & McIsaac (2004) found that CF2F students performed better. The question of which mode produces better academic performance is still not fully answered. This study is an attempt to contribute to this gap, and it collected information from the UNISWA lecturers who taught the students as to their perceptions of which students performed better between the two.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design – The study design was descriptive and used both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The target population for this study was all the lecturers in the Faculty of Humanities who offered and taught courses in IDE in the academic year 2005.

Data Collection - A questionnaire designed by the researcher was used to collect information from the Lecturers who taught the two groups of students to find out their assessment of the academic performance of the two groups. The researcher pre-tested the questionnaire first on the staff in the faculty of commerce, who also taught courses in IDE as well as in the Faculty of Commerce full time programme. Based on the findings of this pre test, the questionnaire was revised accordingly before it was used to collect the data from the staff members in the FOH.

Data Analysis – the data obtained from the questionnaires that were filled in by the FOH Lecturers was analysed manually by the researcher. The data analysis was guided by the research questions. The matrix tables to summarize the information, frequency tabulation, and percentages were computed to provide answers to the research questions.

RESULTS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

There were twenty two (22) staff members (out of a possible 24) in the FOH who filled in the Questionnaire. Twelve of these were males and ten were females and all of them taught one or more IDE courses. Sixty eight percent of the staff members had also prepared a module and thirty two percent had not. Out of these 22 staff members, only one of them had taught for less than three years in IDE, and hence most of the respondents were familiar with the IDE mode and the student's work.

The FOH lecturers were asked how they found the quality of the course modules that were used by the IDE students and the reasons for their answers. The staff members responded as follows:

Ten lecturers said the course modules were well written because the authors had excellent background and training on the subjects that they covered, the modules provided sufficient details and students had little difficulty in understanding the material, and because the data in the modules came from first rate intellectual research and from a number of sources.

Ten lecturers said that the quality of the modules were average. The reason for this, according to the lecturers, were that it was not conceivable that one text could cover details about all concepts in a course and that as a result the subject coverage of each module was incomplete. Some other reasons given were that some of the course modules were poorly structured and organized and were mostly theoretical and not interactive enough.

Two lecturers mentioned that the course modules were below standard. Their reasons for saying this was because the coverage of the course content was not complete and students needed more materials to do well on each course. Another weakness pointed out was that the course modules did not have enough self-assessment questions and also lacked practical activities.

The second set of questions tried to find out from the staff members how the IDE students performed on written assignments when compared to the CF2F ones, and the reason for their response. Their responses are as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Comparison of performance on assignments and reasons

		How do you find performance of IDE students vs. Fulltime students in assignments				Total
		Above Fulltime	Same as Fulltime	Below Fulltime	Much below Fulltime	
Why do you say so	Above average because IDE students participate actively and are keen to learn and take their work seriously. They are further motivated and have more time.	1	1			2
	The results for tests & examinations are similar so IDE and F2F students have similar performance.		2			2
	Perform poorly because they don't get enough contact - too few F2F hours. They don't get proper teaching and attention.			1		1
	Perform poorly because they do not read their materials, and thus the quality of their answers is poor.			5	1	6
	Perform poorly because the IDE students are too young to handle independent study.		1			1
	Other		4	5	1	10
Total		1	8	11	2	22

The results are that one (5%) of the lecturers indicated that the IDE students performance was above that of the CF2F ones, and eight (36%) indicated that the performance of the two groups was the same. Fifty nine percent of the respondents (N= 13) indicated that it was below to much below that of full time. The reasons given for the IDE students performing as well as the CF2F ones were that: IDE students were keen to learn, were highly motivated, and they took their work seriously. The reasons given by those who claimed IDE students performed poorly were that: IDE students had very few face-to-face contact hours, they did not read their materials and thus the quality of their answers were poor, that the students were too young to handle independent study, and because they did not get proper teaching and attention from their lecturers.

The third set of questions tried to find out from the staff members how the IDE students performed when compared with the full time ones on tests and why they said so. Their responses are as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Comparison of performance on tests and reasons

		How do you find performance of IDE students vs. Fulltime students in tests				Total
		Same as Fulltime	Below Fulltime	Much below Fulltime	Other	
Why do you say so	Above average because IDE students participate actively and are keen to learn and take their work seriously. They are further motivated and have more time.	1				1
	The results for tests & examinations are similar so IDE and F2F students have similar performance.	2				2
	IDE grades lower because IDE students are less committed to their studies. They are passive & rarely participate in class.		1			1
	Perform poorly because they don't get enough contact - too few F2F hours. They don't get proper teaching and attention.		3			3
	Perform poorly because they do not read their materials, and thus the quality of their answers is poor.	2	1	3		6
	Other	2	6		1	9
Total		7	11	3	1	22

As seen on the table, no one said IDE students performed better than full time ones on tests. Seven said the performance was the same, and 64% (n = 14) indicated the IDE performance as below and much below that of full time. Most of those who said the IDE performance was below and much below that of full time mentioned that this was the case as the IDE students do not read their materials, they do not get enough contact as there were too few face to face hours or sessions, they do not get proper teaching and attention, and hence the quality of their answers was poor.

The fourth set of questions tried to find out from staff how IDE students performed vis a vis the full-time ones on the final examination. Their responses are as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Comparison of performance on the final examination

		How do you find performance of IDE students vs. Fulltime students in final examination				Total
		Same as Fulltime	Below Fulltime	Much below Fulltime	Other	
Why do you say so	Above average because IDE students participate actively and are keen to learn and take their work seriously. They are further motivated and have more time.	2				2
	The results for tests & examinations are similar so IDE and F2F students have similar performance.	2				2

Perform poorly because they don't get enough contact - too few F2F hours. They don't get proper teaching and attention.		3			3
Perform poorly because they do not read their materials, and thus the quality of their answers is poor.		5	1		6
Other	2	6		1	9
Total	6	14	1	1	22

A large number of respondents, 68% (N = 15) indicated that the IDE students performed below and much below the full time ones. No one said they performed above fulltime, and 27% (N =6) said that their performance was the same as that of full time students. The reasons for this poor performance were similar to those given for performance in tests above as they evolved around not reading their materials and not enough face to face contact and attention.

The final question asked the staff what should be done to improve IDE at UNISWA. Their responses were as shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: What needs to be done to improve IDE

What do you think could be done to improve the D.E. learning at the University of Swaziland?

	Frequency	Percent
All the part-time Lecturers should be taught how to do it right.	2	9.1
Students to be taught to read their modules & other materials and be up to date.	1	4.5
Classes are too big and should be reduced.	5	22.7
The number of F2F contact hours need to be increased for each module.	2	9.1
Have IDE dedicated staff to reduce stress, burnout, fatigue and pressure on full-time staff who are overloaded.	6	27.3
Make modules more detailed and improve their content, presentation and teaching aids.	2	9.1
Sponsor subject/department workshops to review/evaluate & update modules.	3	13.6
Improve the remuneration for IDE Lecturers.	1	4.5
Total	22	100.0

The three popular recommendations, as seen from the table above were:

1. Have IDE dedicated teaching staff to reduce stress, burnout, fatigue and pressure on the overloaded full-time staff was said by 27.3% (N = 6) of the lecturers. Perhaps that is why many 36.4 (N= 8) said the performance would be better if the IDE was an open university.
2. Reduce the size of IDE classes as they are too big (22.7%, N=5).
3. Sponsor and promote subject/departmental workshops to review/evaluate and update modules (13.6%, N=3).

Interestingly, improving the remuneration for the IDE part-time lecturers was not seen by the respondents as necessary to improve distance learning at the University of Swaziland, as this was chosen by one respondent only.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed that the Lecturers who teach the IDE BA Humanities students believe that the FT students, the ones that belong to their faculty, perform better than the IDE students on class work, assignments, tests and the final examination. This however is not in accord with the findings of the analysis of the exact marks obtained by these students that was done by Sukati et al (2010). It would appear that the lecturer's perceptions, as found in this study, are not quite correct. Perhaps these false perceptions are a result of the Lectures knowledge that the IDE students come in with poorer grades and are taught face to face only for a few hours in each course. The staff therefore need to change and accept that the DE mode is a very good teaching system and that it enables these poorer students (on entry) to catch up with those in the CF2F program. They need to further accept that on graduation, in year 4, the IDE students are at the same level as their full-time ones. To further improve IDE and the DE offer at UNISWA, the staff members pointed out the dire need for IDE to have its own teaching staff to reduce stress, burnout, fatigue and pressure on the CF2F staff who are overloaded, and also for IDE classes to be reduced as they were too big.

LITERATURE CITED

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