Chapter 13
Distance Learning in Kenyan Universities: The Relationship between Learners’ Characteristics and Academic Performance

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ABSTRACT
Anchored on the premises that Distance Learning (DL) is fundamentally learner centered (LC), and that universities facilitate DL programs through various forms of media and technologies, this study investigated the contribution of learner characteristics to academic performance among distance learners. Adopting the triangulation design validating quantitative data model, the predictive power of the following variables was examined: age, gender, entry qualification, region of residence, employment status, marital status, academic self-concept, and study strategies. Findings show that learner characteristics were positively related to academic performance. The overall regression model was significant (F (8,162) =2.633, p<.05). While the multiple correlation coefficient was .339, the study found that approximately 11.5% of the variance of academic performance was associated with learner characteristics (r²=.115). Specifically, employment status and study strategies were statistically significant predictors of CGPA [(t=3.16, p<.05) and (t=2.23, p<.05) respectively]. Study recommended that universities should profile distance learner characteristics and align student needs with all the instructional processes of DL.

INTRODUCTION
In its simplest form, distance learning (DL) is conceptualized as a planned teaching and learning environment where teachers and learners are in different places for all or most of the time. Scholarship in this field (as a discipline) unanimously agreed that DL is characterized by teacher-learner-learner separation in distance and, or, time, the use of different forms of communication technologies and the influence of...
a special institutional organization (Keegan, 1996). Educators and facilitators of DL programs further employ different techniques of teaching to manage and administer the programs that they provide (Gibson, 1998; Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Within most university education settings, DL is currently hailed as an instructional model that continues to support efforts to enhance access to higher education and training across the globe. Over the years, the conventional institutions have accepted DL as an alternative and innovative method of reinforcing the traditional ways of organizing university education (UNESCO, 2008). Indeed, this process is what has led to the emergence of dual mode universities, as well as the mega-single mode institutions, such as the Open University of Britain and Athabasca University in the 1960s (Keegan, 1996). Recent literature has further documented that the contribution of DL is immensely seen in nations and governments that have, over time, been struggling with limited resources amidst increasing demand for university education among their citizenry. John Daniel, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, observed that most developing countries could realize their education system-wide goals through DL (UNESCO, 2008). He further associated the explosive interest in DL programs to the following two factors:

1. “Technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more programs at a distance, and
2. The growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining” (p.4),

To date, these are, in part, the milestones that are experienced and echoed in all the universities (and states) that continue to invest and mainstream DL within the existing instructional processes.

Whilst using the above review as a preliminary note of DL, the authors of this chapter delved further into student learning experiences with an interest towards their academic performance. This attention was inspired and guided by three main propositions. First and most important being that - academic performance is a globally accepted criterion of judging the quality of student learning in all education systems, including university programs (Commonwealth of Learning [COL], 2004). Secondly, scholars have affirmed that the continuity and future of DL as a preferred mode of delivering university programs remains tied to the level of student learning outcomes (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Ojokheti, 2010; Okoh, 2010). Lastly, recent attention towards successful learning has reiterated that persistent unimpressive academic performance of distance learners, in addition to drop out, is capable of making DL programs quite unproductive. In fact, the latest research evidence has further recorded (and warned) that if the desired objectives of DL (including student achievement and better productivity) are not guaranteed, two things may happen. One is that workforce development and the labor market may be unwilling to recruit graduates who attain low academic results in most of the current DL programs. Secondly, and most importantly, employers may decline to support their staff to further education by DL (Animassaun, Ige, Adelua & Oladejo, 2010).

Hence, and in keeping to the fact that “academic performance is a product of several variables” (Okoh, 2010, p.102), this chapter highlighted findings of a study which examined the extent to which selected learner characteristics determined academic performance in a case DL program. The authors did not intend to impose any particular policy or model, but rather, shed some light regarding learner characteristics and academic performance.

The rest of this chapter is presented under the following sub topics:
Effects of Software on Gifted Students Achievement and Activities in Elementary Education: Cross-Cultural Investigation

Redefining the Classroom: Integration of Open and Classroom Learning in Higher Education