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Higher Distance Education in Ethiopia: Course Materials Development, Delivery and Evaluation Practices

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating higher distance education course material development, delivery and implementation in Ethiopia. The study is made on distance education divisions of Admas, Alpha, and St.Mary's university colleges, and Institute of Distance Education of the Ethiopian Civil Service College. The researcher interviewed ten course material writers and/or tutors, four programme developers, eleven students (in group, i.e., focus group discussion), and analyzed about fourteen course modules. In addition to individual interview and focus group discussion, an observation check-list was also used to collect part of the data required for the study. The qualitative data collected using interview and focus group discussion, and document analysis were all analyzed and interpreted using a qualitative argumentation technique. It was found out that the Ethiopian higher distance education institutions employ what is commonly referred to as the deep-approach to learning in their print mode. It appears that they had to work more on strengthening their academic and counseling services, as well as administrative services at study centers. Finally, the paper recommended that the higher distance education institutions need to keep on producing deep-approach self-instructional materials by way of incorporating such techniques as those indicated in the discussion section of the paper. This could entail the need for establishing strong educational resource center for use of up-to-date and appropriate instructional technologies at their study centers. It was also recommended that emphasis should be given to provide additional academic supports, counseling and administrative supports to learners at the required level by assigning the required professionals.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Distance education is an alternative and not the last resort option to educate oneself (Marilyn, 1994; OU, 2002). Today, unlike in the last few decades, educators have shifted their minds from the debates over the “Advantages and Limitations of Distance Education” to the search of the how of making it effective. Nevertheless, the misconceptions might, in fact, still need some more time to cure until researchers and educators show the wider public that the distance mode can produce competent graduates in almost every field and at all levels of education so long as the medium is supplemented with appropriate instructional technologies (Hooper, 1971; OU, 2002).

According to Amera (2004), for example, issues like demanding intensive and independent works from students-which were seen as limitations of the distance mode of educational delivery over the past decades, are today taken for being consistent with the learner-centered approach. Here, I agree quiet well that modern educators commend active involvement of the learner in constructing knowledge, by keeping teachers’ interaction minimal. Moreover, innovations like adoption of technology, that facilitates two-way communication, and learner-centered approach, and activity method of teaching show that teaching-learning through distance mode is no longer with problems but with much more opportunities and benefits.

Distance teaching-learning has become not just the fashion-of-the day but a necessity. For example, according to Redding (1996) as cited in Marew (2002), there were 835 institutions offering 35,511 courses through distance education in 195 countries. Among countries providing education through distance mode, 92 of them are in Europe, North America, Africa and Asia.

We need distance education for reasons like avoiding barriers of physical separation from both schools and teachers; meeting an educational need that cannot be covered by the traditional curriculum; allowing learners to make personal choices like deciding what to study, where and when, self-pacing and studying based on one’s choice of style,

preference and interest of reading; its appropriateness to teach adults at work as it allows them to relate abstract concepts to concrete experiences at work environment (Amera, 2004).

However, it is no question that the quality of educational provision in our higher education institutions, including the distance mode, needs improvement. One way of bringing improved educational quality is through application of important research findings in the area. In other words, we need to continuously probe into the issue to meet the desired quality. According to Marew (2002), the multidimensional benefits that we could get from distance education can only be truly provided by those who involve in distance education provision more on developing and running relevant, valid and of course significant programmes. The researcher believes this should go farther to the point of following a worthwhile distance education model if not philosophy. This would necessitate investigating distance education programmes that we have in Ethiopia today. Findings of such studies would help in keeping the quality of the programmes.

1.2. Problem Statement

Distance education refers to a variety of educational programmes and activities where learners and teachers are physically separate. Obviously, this fact makes the distance mode challenging on the part of programme organizers, course material developers, counselors, tutors, and especially students. Efforts to overcome these challenges take different forms that can come under the form of using chosen instructional strategies, student support service delivery, salient assessment and evaluation mechanisms, and appropriate educational technologies. Of course, technology itself is a crude term that includes a continuum of human achievements that may range from ancient scriptures on stones then on papyrus and today's electronic forms of data storage, processing and retrieval systems.

No doubt, if we are to fight the sense of loneliness and the consequent negative impact on student, which comes from the mode of delivery itself, we need to remove the obstacles.

This study raises the following leading questions that attempt to assess some of the crucial elements in the distance mode of educational provision.

- To what extent do the instructional strategies in use by Ethiopian higher distance education providers fit the deep approach?
- To what extent are student support services being provided by the Ethiopian higher distance education providers appropriate?
- What kinds of assessment methods do the institutions employ to measure their students?
- How much appropriate are the educational technologies in use?

1.3. Purpose and Specific Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate course materials development, delivery and evaluation practices among higher distance education institutions in Ethiopia.

The specific objectives of the study include:

- providing Ethiopian higher distance education providing institutions with genuine appraisal;
- providing educators and other concerned bodies with evaluative information on the quality of the distance education programmes that are being run by them;
- providing all other distance educating institutes in the country with opportunities of sharing experience in the area;
- providing related review of literature in the area of distance education provision; and,
- initiating other researchers to undertake further research in the area.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on examining distance education provision by Ethiopian higher education institutions. It is mainly conducted on distance education division of Admas University College, Alpha University College, Ethiopian Civil Service College, and St.

Mary's University College. Thus, although the experience can have implications to all such other related institutions in the nation, the findings and conclusions that will be reached at will only be directly applicable to those referred above.

1.5. Definitions of Terms

Deep-approach: An approach to distance education course material development that was meant to involve learners through constant questioning and doing rather than shallow and receptive reading.

Higher distance education institutions: Colleges, university colleges, and universities offering (delivering) courses in distance mode.

A modest distance education: A realistic distance education provision that is in line with the basic requirements of the mode on the one hand and is well-fitted with the available technology on the other hand.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. The Deep Approach

The distance reader is noted to have faced what is called “shallow-learning.” Regarding the concept “shallow-learning”, in his book titled “Planning and Developing Open and Distance Learning”, Melton writes the following:

Where students are studying at a distance, it is all too easy for them to passively accept what is being presented without thinking too deeply about the issues involved. It is, therefore, common in ODL to try to involve students in the process of learning through the provision of activities and projects (Melton, 2002).

In this connection, what is required particularly in college education is what Marton and Salijo (1976) describe as a “deep approach” to learning: an approach where students concentrate more on understanding the overall messages being conveyed and

assumptions on which it is based. According to the above mentioned writers, self-instructing learners commonly adopt a surface approach to learning – tending to concentrate on memorizing facts and detailed information without reflecting on the underlining assumptions and arguments.

If we keep on reading resources on distance education, we would get more and more of same arguments above. The Open University of United Kingdom (UK OU) has made considerable efforts to encourage a deeper approach to learning through the building of activities and projects and courses (Melton, 2002).

However, the writer strongly argues about where and how to use activities. Accordingly, in recommending the use of activities, and projects to encourage deep learning, it is recognized that students often have quite distinct preferences as to how they learn. This is to mean that some might even get activity method frustrating and prefer either reading text, watching TV, or small group discussions and the like. This reminds professional teachers of the idea of learning style. Whereas there are students who get learning by doing more effective, there also exist students who prefer to listen to reading a body of text or important books for their quick mastery of a body of knowledge. Materials can be made activity based. However, it is also recognized that students can develop new learning styles (Bargar and Hoover, 1984; Hyman and Rosoff, 1984; Joyce, 1984) thereby increasing the variety of ways in which they might learn, but where students are expected to develop new ways of learning they need to be given appropriate guidance and support.

2.2. Student Support Service in Distance Education

Despite the “inspiring” title that distance educators address course materials or modules “self-instructional,” a name connoting that the student can effectively communicate with the supposedly available teacher in the text; they need not mean that the distance student should be left without any assistant. In this connection, Alemayehu and Desalegn asserted the following.

Although in designing self-study materials, every attempt is made to respond to the varying needs of different types of students, it is inevitable that students will encounter problems from time to time where they will need individualized help. They need different types of support at different points in time (Alemayehu and Desalegn, 2007).

Of course, distance education students (learners) need supports of all kinds including: academic, counseling, and administrative. Let's see these forms of support one by one in a concise manner.

2.2.1. Forms of academic support.

Academic support could be offered in various forms. For example, in the British Open University (OU), besides sessions on learning skills, additional academic support sessions, and tutorials at distance, there are courses for which they arrange day schools; residential schools. The OU describes the day schools as follows.

As their name suggests, day schools provide an extended period of teaching, and usually involve all students on a particular course, in one or more region attending at one centre. Here the tutor could be requested either to give formal lecture or exposition to all the students, that could be followed by related group work. Two or more colleagues might give linked presentations on a relevant theme, or share workshops or laboratory sessions. These kinds of possibility require liaison and teamwork (the Open University, 2002).

The OU residential schools are meant for courses that specifically require these for up to a week during summer. This is when the profile of the course itself requires so. The tutors would here be following the approach they use with conventional students but may require orientations.

The OU session on learning skills include such skills as ranging from reading academic material to revision and examination skills. The three types of support discussed above are all face-to-face tuitions and are better done by team approach.

The OU also arranges additional academic support sessions. The OU describes this sort of support as follows:

From time to time, you may find an individual student or a group of students, who for a variety of reasons need particular kinds of tutorial help. Perhaps a student has been ill and has fallen behind with the course, or you may have a student who cannot attend tutorials. It might be that some students are having difficulty with a particular session of the course or certain key concepts on which the course is based (the Open University, 2002).

The OU also arranges what are called tutorials at distance. These are in case of certain courses that for part- and sometimes all-of their tuition require the telephone or computers for the part.

The correspondence tuition is still another form of academic support that distance students most commonly are required to get. It's a form of support to students to learn through written feedback on their course work assignments. This too follows its own principles of providing. It's the main form of one-to-one teaching in the OU. It involves helping students with both the course content and the development of their study and learning skills. It's not just marking; it's a teaching as well, and hence the name-correspondence tuition.

2.2.2. Counseling support.

Distance learners need ideas from others by sharing their difficulties they come across while they are reading. It is a support or counseling from a helping professional teacher-in his/her role as a social worker. Here, counseling is academic support tutors help learners on how to achieve to their maximum level. The support usually creates conducive psychological environment.

Some of the personal skills that a distance education tutor requires in this connection include: patience, empathy, warmth and genuineness, being respectful, being creative, being adaptable, being culturally sensitive, recognizing who the learner is as a person and

as a learner; being realistic, and being organized and accountable. According to the OU (2002), what a tutor need to bear in mind about face-to-face tutorial in distance learning is learners expect different things:

- Help and support in doing assignments,
- Teaching, guidance, and explanation on core issues of the course; and
- Social support.

2.2.3. Administrative support.

Distance learners need to be provided with sufficient directions regarding the rules, regulation and schedules of the teaching institution, college, or university. The programme coordinators need to provide strong follow up of circulation of assignments. Moreover, studying the subject and preparing for examination needs strict direction by the institutions, program organizers and/or the tutors ahead of time. The programme organizers need to accurately and timely distribute course materials, register students, and other administrative works.

2.3. Assessment in Distance Education

In relation to course material preparation for college education, Walker (1994) noted that assessment in using the LC Approach should be in relation to outcomes made explicit to students, staff and employers; be based on a range of strategies through which a student can demonstrate what he/she knows or understands or can do; be based on a range of evidences appropriate to activity; include review and reflection, and lead to the identification of future goals and targets; facilitate the formative recording of achievement; should be supported by appropriate quality assurance; and should enable students gain credits for their attainments.

On the other hand, the formal contexts through which the modular approach can enhance learners' capability are: the extent to which students use tests to improve the quality of future assignments; the extent to which the assignment is not focusing narrowly on one aspect of performance (say, for example, simple recall of facts); the extent to which

assignments are fair and relevant; and the presence or absence of an assessment framework to ensure the coherence and progress in students' learning (Leask, 1994). He further noted that students identify the assessments in modules that are in the middle of program (formative), for they keep them in track timely by clearly showing their progress too. In the modular approach, learners like feedbacks that are placed close to activities and questions for different reasons. For example, they are said to create opportunities for learners to investigate and thus consolidate their knowledge. Some of the common assessment strategies in the LCA are given by Leask (1994) as: production of resource packs; essay (usually on problematic education issues); teaching experience plans and evaluation; laboratory manual completion; staff and peer assessment of seminar work; display (using it or visual aids); presentation of a sequence dance or gym; formal examination (with a variety of types of questions); short tests; analysis of case studies; group displays; test with viva; seminar notes; logs or diaries; seen questions; investigations practical assessment; oral presentations.

Not common as some of the above methods sound in the Ethiopian higher education culture, others are really convincing and have been frequented too. For example, essay or composition in language classes and group presentation and formal examinations are common assessment strategies. What we learn from the above lists of strategies other than the need for variety is that activities or questions that are well built on cases or situation analysis based on visits promote learning through investigations that are to be done by learners.

If learners are to probe deeply into the issues involved in their study, instructional materials need activities and projects to engage learners in the process of learning. Projects tend to be much more open-ended than activities with students being given considerable freedom to determine their own goals and the means of achieving them. However, even in projects where students are given a considerable freedom to determine the nature of their assignments, the process can be carefully structured. In this way, for example, students are expected to develop their thinking in stages-obtaining feedback even on their initial outline plans.

2.4. Distance Education Technologies

We have already pin-pointed that the print medium itself is a technology: a time free technology of course. Yet, the distance education obtained its recent name distance education than correspondence education with the coming in to being of much more advanced means of communication-ranging from telephone, audio-cassette, video-phone, fax, and video-conference that can assist the print medium. E-Learning, which is electronic learning, had its more sophisticated form with the coming of the Internet-simply taken to be a network of computers. Yet, e-learning has existed in the form of educational Compact Discs (CD's).

This has also been made possible for students by just sitting on their PC's. Given the creativity of the self-instructional developer/teacher; the modern electronic media that allow asynchronous classroom organization and group work for distance students can be made possible.

The important point here is to note factors that should be considered in our choice of technology for our distance education institutions. For example, getting an e-tutor might be a case. E-tutoring would require one to be committed to the job and preferably to have sufficient training and the required backing from the institution like training on production of educational resources, and instructional and web-designing. The other approach is to conduct it in a team of a course material developer, and instructional designer, a web-designer, a server administrator, etc.

3. Methodological Considerations

3.1 Methodology

This qualitative study is mainly conducted on distance education institutions of Admas University College, Alpha University College, Ethiopian Civil Service College, and St. Mary's University College. Attempt was made to examine the instructional strategies that these higher distance education institutions are currently employing; their student support services, modes of assessment, and types of educational technology.

Thus, focus was made to investigate the case from three perspectives: students (i.e. as important determinants of a program), tutors (i.e. instructors who participated in module development process and tutoring), the programme developers and/or coordinators, and the materials themselves (i.e. the modules under close examination of the researcher).

3.2. Sampling

The modular materials of disciplines under investigation were chosen on accessible sampling technique. Accordingly, two materials were selected from each of the higher distance education providing institutions. The materials chosen on accessibility basis are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Sample of Course Materials Selected for the Study

No.	Course title	Institution
1.	English	Admas University College
	Law of Persons	
	Family Law	
	Law of Succession	
	Penal Law	
	Law of Civil Procedure	
	Introduction to Information Technology	
	Basic Application and Mathematics	
2	Administrative Law	Alpha University College
	Working Capital Management	
3	Law of Evidence	St. Mary's University College
	Public International Law	
4	Statistics for Management	Ethiopian Civil Service College
	Strategic Planning and Management	

Furthermore, a sample of ten course material developers/ tutors, a group of eleven students for focus group discussion, and four programme organizers-one from each of the four institutions were taken for the study.

3.3. Data Gathering

The following techniques (tools) were used to collect the required data for the study.

3.3.1. Interviews

Three separate interview schedules were prepared and utilized to gather data from material developers and/or tutors, trainees and programme coordinators (for details see Appendix A, B and C).

3.3.2. The observation checklist

The checklist on Appendix D is just used for checking whether or not the deep approach strategies have been sufficiently employed in the course materials. This checklist mainly observes whether or not the devices of the deep approach are found within the stipulated range, and the match of the devices with the already stipulated instructional objectives. The other related criterion is the relevance of devices with the actual demand of the students upon graduation.

3.4. Method of Data Analysis

The study has employed a qualitative description for an in-depth analysis. This qualitative description was used to analyze data, such as the researcher notes from focus group discussions with trainees, and data from the open-ended interviews with trainers.

4. Data Analysis and Presentation

4.1. The first question raised to all the three groups of respondents, and on which the document analysis went runs as follows:

“Do you think that the text books/modules are inviting and make learners read critically and without getting lost now and then? How? Please explain giving example? If your answer is no, what do you suggest? ”

Despite the complaints of some student respondents on certain modules, nearly all tutors and programme developers favour the modules. They stress on the detailed make up of the modules and the rigorous procedures with which the course development process passed. Some writers for some of the institutes, however, refrain from passing through all that. For example, whereas some of the institutions have a course team including authors, three different editors, internal and external reviewers with student evaluators; others heavily depend on the personal effort of the author by only providing a type setting assistance. Another technical issue that can be raised here is that the payment the institutions allocate for the course developing team. It is hard to deny the fact that the amount we invest on each course material can affect the quality. This creates an obvious irregularity. However, further research might be needed before reaching at a conclusion.

Much of the teaching through distance mode happens in course material development. This is possible by designing the course contents in such a way that learners can do most, if not all, their learning from the materials alone. The materials must carryout all the functions a teacher would carryout in the conventional situation: guiding, motivating, asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising every learner's progress, giving appropriate remedial or enrichment help and so on. To get such instructional materials is not an easy task. It requires educators to do their best.

The course materials and accompanying worksheets have been checked against the following ten distinct elements of self-instructional materials.

- Course introduction;
- Learning objectives;
- Advance organizers/Unit introductions/;
- Content presentation;
- Activities;
- Examples and visual;
- Summaries;
- Self-check questions (SCQs);

- Language style;
- Other points.

The researcher has learnt from the study that the sample higher distance education providing institutions are well on progress in developing “deep-approach” course modules. The researcher has, for the most part, not only noted the presence of the above listed elements but also have found the objectives well set and serving as a guide to the other curricula elements. The selection of content; activities; self-check or assessment questions; tutor-marked assignments, and final examinations all made the course, module and or unit objectives their bases.

The eight sample modules can be taken as clear indication of the fact that the higher distance education institutions are running a distance learning program that is inline with what modern approaches in the field suggest and in fact what the objective reality of our country permits. To be specific, the materials reviewed generally address the crucial elements of a quality of Distance Education material. For example, in all the course materials, we find introductions for courses and for units. These introductions and, in fact, unit sections in some of the course materials have objectives. The introductions at each level attempt to point out the forthcoming points to students. Contents except in rare cases are presented in detail and well-sequenced manner. For example, the pattern in the “English” course consistently develops across the units: Unit introduction, Reading, Vocabulary, Note making and Summary, Grammar, Speaking, writing, Summary and Self-Check Questions (SCQs). This is a very good style as learners can easily get used to the pattern quickly after working through the first two units.

The contents in the materials match with the already set objectives. Most of the course materials are rich in activities. For example, the “Law of Persons, Family Law and Law of Succession ” course materials have activities along with “In-text questions”. In most of the course materials, the writers have shown to use varied presentation of lessons using diagrams and pictures. Except in few cases, course materials have included unit summaries and Self Check Questions (SCQs). For example, the SCQs on p.18 of “ Civil Procedure law ” is really interesting as it both encourage learners and examine their

progress with their study. The language is also clear in most of these materials. To this end, the course “English” can also be more self-sufficient by addressing, listening skill. Thus, it will be good to support the learning texts by media in the future.

In modern instructional theories the provision of content from simple to complex is highly favored. The idea of advance organizer stresses on the need for the writer’s intentions, in an explicit statement, which indicate to the learner what comes next. Most course materials have unit introductions. And most of the introductions have the following qualities.

- Provide general idea about what will be encountered in the major topics to be treated.
- Provide students with an overview of relevant previous lessons and an outline of key ideas on the present lesson.
- Indicate how the topics are partitioned and interrelated and the relevance of each topic to the unit or course.
- Constitute a framework for the unit.
- Present at higher level of generality and inclusiveness.

Content is the vehicle through which the objectives are achieved. In most of the courses, contents have been presented. The content of the materials generally:

- Match with contents specified in the curriculum;
- Partitioned to appropriate and balanced chapters/units and sections" based on the weeks in the semester;
- Have an introduction, body and conclusion;
- Progressively increase the degree of difficulty;
- Well-structured, logically sequenced and very clear;
- Give interesting and appropriate titles to each;
- Balance between depth, breadth and coverage;
- Match with the specified objectives;

- Concise;
- Readable with moderate density of information;
- Present it progressively, in small and easy to master steps;
- Systematic flow and sequential organization of material.

Nevertheless, if we open, certain courses from not few of the institutions, we see a series of text. This presentation needs breaks by inserting activities and/or in text questions. Doing this will make the course more appropriate for distance learners. This is due to a common practice to include activities or at least a question within three pages of a self-instructional material.

As any distance material is expected to be self-instructional material, it should be written in a conversational style. The language used in the course materials should be very simple and clear. These are good characteristics of distance education materials. There should be a dialogue between the student and the material in the absence of the teacher. Although this is used in stating unit objectives in most of the courses, it is not kept in presenting the content throughout the material in certain courses.

Activities - what students do in order to learn the content of the material - should provide students with opportunities for practical application based on the understanding of the content. Activities also should provide learners' with an opportunity to learn and encourage them to relate what they are learning in real life situation. They should encourage students to reflect on the issues that they are learning. Therefore, materials for distance education should encompass many activities that help learners apply what they have learned. According to literature in the area, ideally activities should appear regularly in two to three pages interval.

In general, most of the activities in the modules:

- are realistic about the time it will take to do the activity; with clear purpose ;
- contain clear instructions;
- include background information that may be relevant to the activity

- encourage students to become actively involved,
- are integrated with the core content
- help students to apply their newly developed knowledge to new situations.
- are relevant for the learner and course objectives;

Most of the course materials fulfill these requirements although some of the activities are Self Check type questions. However, certain activities in certain courses are not accompanied with feedback or comments that help students so as to enable them to check whether their responses are correct or not. In addition, some of the activities lack a clear step-by-step instruction advising students what to do.

In-text-questions of certain course can be promoted to the level of activities by building them on cases and relating them to the day- to- day activities in their work environment.

Distance learners can not really grasp new ideas unless they are given ample and practical examples. Thus, in distance education materials, adequate real life examples and illustrations should be presented. This, indeed, is instrumental to help students to relate contents with real life and, practical experiences. Also, problems related with the subject should be incorporated in the materials. In most law courses, for example, articles from different relevant provisions and Codes are used widely as examples. This helps to understand the articles and relate the content of their learning with the practical problems which they would face in their job.

The more the examples are in language courses, the more learners understand the pattern of the grammar. Even when there are examples in courses like English, they should not be limited to 1-3 in number. The real life examples and illustrations provided in the courses *Law of Succession* and *Mathematics* help students to relate the content with the relevant real life and, practical experiences and problems related with the subject.

In the course '*Law of Family*' in addition to the provision of real life examples, students are asked to give their own examples. This is a good experience as it helps students to use their own experience to relate it with what they have learnt. It also helps them to observe the relevance of the content to their job.

Most of the course materials of the colleges are aided by various visuals. For example, the courses *Introduction to Information Technology and Basic Application* and *Mathematics* are full of visuals. Pictures (like on PP.63&87 English Course materials), diagrams (like on PP. 88 & 89 of the same materials), PP.42 of *Penal Law* course material and *Law of Succession* pages 48 and 51 are very essential to facilitate students understanding of the material. Otherwise, the student can't see the relevance and importance of learning the course. In short, the visuals in the materials are:

- clear and simple to understand;
- well-positioned;
- not too decorative;
- simple in structure;
- uses helpful leadings;
- used when it is found a better way to present an information;
- used to substantiate a point in a text (not to repeat what has been already stated).

Unit summary at the end of each unit can help students to capture the major points of the units once more again and check as well as measure their progress before they proceed to the subsequent units. Nearly, all the course materials have summaries for the above stated purpose.

In most materials, there are self-assessment questions at intervals of discussions. For example, in the course *Law of Family* self-assessment questions are presented throughout the material. This helps students to practice what they learnt and check their progress. It provides students the opportunity to practice what they have learnt in a real life situation and to help them express their ideas and thereby develop their writing skills. Some additional detailed questions such as choice, true and false, matching would have better been included at the end of each unit to help the students to assess if they have understood the detail points of the material and thereby to check and monitor their progress.

We appreciate; there are assignments for each course. The work sheets of the materials require students to fill their personal data. This helps to identify the student and handle the assignment properly. Moreover, it helps the college to get personal information of the student regularly. The work sheets have clear step-by-step instructions that make clear for the students to understand what is expected of them before writing their answers to the questions. Moreover, the weight (marks) to be given for each question is indicated. This helps students to understand the relative emphasis given to each question and to allocate the efforts and the time to be invested on each question. Work sheets of most of the materials include variety of objective and subjective questions. This helps to cover the detail points treated in the course as well as to assess high level learning and develop the students writing skills (writing their ideas by their own words).

The teaching materials are generally well formatted with adequate space to help students to write their remarks and notes. Providing space in distance material helps to make the material attractive and increase its readability. This is one of the good qualities of distance education materials.

The titles in the materials are numbered systematically to keep the flow of the presentation. Most of them used not more than 3 digit numbers. This helps not to confuse students and make the flow of the presentation very clear. However, certain course modules use up to five digit numbers which may make the numbering system very complex. Instead, it is possible to use limited (1-2) digit numbering to identify titles. In addition to this, it is possible to differentiate the level (sequence) of the titles using variety font sizes and font faces.

All the course materials indicated the reference materials that are helpful to indicate the sources used in developing the materials to be used and to indicate students the material to be used as additional reading materials.

4.2. The second question raised to all the three groups of respondents runs as follows:

“What do the student support offices do in their respective higher distance education to distance students?”

4.2.1. Regarding the academic support most respondents appreciate the modules. The academic support they discuss in the second place is the tutorial. Most respondents stated that the time allotted for tutorials are not enough. In some of the institutions, there are instances where tutorials are scarce, cancelled due to the few number of students registered for the course at the center. In some other instances second (last) tutorial sessions have been noted to be cancelled and students were just made to sit for final exams. Still, in some other instances tutorials were made only once per semester. Still, other respondents have noted that tutorials at study and regional centers out of Addis Ababa are mainly held for common courses. Reasons could be absence or shortage of tutors for certain advanced courses. A related problem raised is that certain practices appear to demonstrate instances where tutors who are not professionals in the particular area of study are assigned. Some tutor respondents also complain that students come to tutorials without reading and inviting them to lecture and participate little. Others strongly oppose this view and say it all depends on how the tutor attempts to handle the problem.

Despite the above deficiencies, however, tutorials are highly regarded and respondents call for increased tutorial sessions and hours for each course. According to some of these respondents, the academic type learner supports from the tutors come in two major forms: face-to-face tuitions and script comments. The face-to-face tuitions are those supports from tutors in the form of both didactic and/or facilitative type classroom lessons. The script comments are those written comments that the tutors provide on subjective type assignment questions. These, in fact, have been found by student respondents most useful. However, in some of the colleges, assignments were found to be objective type questions that provides little guarantee both to the individual students' effort, and the tutor commenting on the answer-sheets.

The other type of support respondents raise is that they all facilitate conditions in which students hire the tutors themselves in groups.

4.2.2. Regarding the counseling service, in not few of the institutions, orientations are provided to students. The institutions provide “student information handbook” wherein most important information are found.

Still, some believe that they have practiced orienting learners when semesters begin. They, in fact, believe that the practice needs further strength.

Nevertheless, most respondents including programme organizers believe that they worked little except the rare practices they encountered with certain individual students haphazardly. Of course, as tutors are teachers and social workers themselves, students obviously can get some support. The problem here is that they have little time to spend with individual students for caring. Consequently, the researcher had little belief that additional academic supports to individual and group based academic and counseling supports were practiced.

4.2.3. Administrative support to distance student includes registering students, collecting payments and issuing slips and receipts, distribution of assignments and recording files, etc. Especially, student respondents in some of the institutions had big complaints in that the study centers attempt to run the business of distributing materials in disorganized manner using unqualified professionals-sometimes even 10th graders, and yet the programme is college education. Overall, the improvement in administrative support like developing an effective means of information communication using appropriate media, student respondents also demanded consistent academic calendar to be in place.

4.3. The third question raised to all the three groups of respondents, and on which the document analyses runs was, “*On the modes of assessment that the distance education providers follow?*” Accordingly the respondents confirmed, a 30% continuous assessment and a 70% end of course exam as the trend of assessment. The 30% assignment itself in some of the institutions as has already been discussed earlier, are limited to objective type questions. This would affect the type of script comment and hence the degree of support that learners get from the tutors. In some other institutions, the trend is the assignments focusing on broader and subjective type questions would

invite the learner to focus on advanced levels of knowledge. Some tutors in such institutions contribute a great deal to the learner support provision.

The end of course examinations counting 70% of the marks cover the whole course and varieties of questions include: True/False items, multiple choice items, matching items, completion type items, and open-ended subjective questions, such as work out or write out. Of course, because the subjective type questions remain limited in final examinations for feasibility of marking reasons. Therefore, writing subjective type questions for the most part of the 30% assignment in two or three continuous assessments depending on the modular breakdown of the course sounds sensible.

With regard to the appropriateness of the continuous assessment, students in some of the institutions have pointed out those assignments questions of earlier batch students are used again without any change. Up until very recently, some of the institutions didn't mark the assignments. These were mal practices noted. Both of the aforementioned practices do negatively affect the quality of education that the institutions provide.

5. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Major Findings of the Study

This part of the paper tries to jot down major findings of the study. Strategies for deepening the approach of learning employed by the distance education course materials included: focusing on coining appropriate general course objectives, and specific unit level objectives; incorporation of techniques like brainstorming and/or in-the-middle text questions, activities with helpful comments and/or feedbacks; brief summaries in the form of diagrams, charts, etc.; self-checks, and self-assessment questions that are followed by answer keys. Perhaps, relating the activity questions with the actual work situation of learners upon graduation is mentioned as a major technique of fighting surface learning by the distance students. The careful placement of the answer-keys with notes in the course introduction and/or guide that remind learners not to abuse the answer-keys has been employed as a major technique. The inclusion of cases,

illustrations and examples are also found to be an important technique. The logical organization of the course (i.e., the breakdown of the materials into modules, or modules into units, etc.) is found to have helped in building concepts upon previously studied concepts-scaffolding.

The academic supports by the institutions are mainly based on formal tutorials that were found to be not only insufficient but also totally missing in cases of certain advanced sources. Also, additional academic supports when provided take same form. Counseling services to students were also found to be minimal. The administrative support provisions especially at the study centers were found to require further strengthening. Improved service provision in module distribution and keeping record of students' grades were also some of the challenges the study found.

Uniformity of assignments and examinations as well as marking, which were found to be one of the biggest challenges of the system, were found to have been further aggravated by the growing number of students. Problems include leniency-versus stinginess of markers; repeating assignments and/or examination questions.

The use of technology by the institutions though limited, passed the print mode and in rare cases audio materials for part of language courses. The effort towards the use of advanced technologies need be focused on.

Conclusion

In recent times, the demand for distance education programmes has increased at an alarming rate in Ethiopia. However, the multidimensional benefits of distance education cannot be achieved haphazardly. This paper had attempted to explore the current trends in course material development, delivery and evaluation of distance education in Ethiopian higher institutions. It was made on distance education divisions of Admas, Alpha, and St. Mary's University Colleges, and Ethiopian Civil Service College. The institutions have well-done self-instructional modules that demonstrate considerable efforts towards reducing shallow learning. The relative recency of the distance mode of educational provision in Ethiopia, the overall bias that institutions in the country have towards the

particular mode of educational provision, and the limited involvement in up-to-date educational technologies were found to have limited the volume of student support that the institutions should provide. Despite this, comforter conclusion over the programmes of the institutions, the institutions have a lot to learn from their practices and other institutions. The encouraging continuous assessment and course examination practices need attention at their preparation, administration and post administration phases. The researcher hopes that those responsible bodies would examine their programmes and make the necessary amendments. Among other things, they need to consider enhancing the capacities of educational resource centers, and studying centers that provide academic, semi-academic and administrative support services to learners.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings, the study recommended the following

- Higher distance education institutions should keep on producing course materials that allow deep-learning by way of fulfilling the techniques suggested in the discussion section of this paper;
- They should all strengthen their academic support services (i.e. tutorial-face-to-face and correspondence tuition), and by establishing effective educational resource centers both at headquarters and at study center;
- They need to provide counseling support services as the very mode of educational provision requires, to enhance effectiveness of the programmes;
- They need to strengthen their administrative support services to students at study centers like by assigning professionals.
- They also need to provide attention to the assessment and evaluation practices to enhance efficacy of the learning process.

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