

**An Investigation of Learners' Satisfaction Level of Distance
Education Teaching Material Preparation, Tutors' Effectiveness
and Student Support and their Predictive Power of Students'
Academic Achievement: The Case of Addis Ababa Center of**

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Abstract

For a country like Ethiopia where higher learning enrollment is very low, distance education offers an ideal opportunity of access for the country in general and for the students in particular since it avoids time and place constraints. In spite of these merits, distance education requires care with regard to the quality of student support, tutoring and material preparation. Higher education institution needs to evaluate the status of the three determining factors time and again to alleviate factors which affect the quality of distance education and students achievement. If the quality of student support, tutoring and material preparation is high, it is assumed that students' achievement would possibly be high. This research is conducted to investigate the satisfaction level of students about the quality of student support, tutoring and material preparation of Saint Mary's Addis Ababa Center of distance division and the prediction power of the three factors on students' achievement. It also tries to see if there is any difference in terms of perception of quality from gender, department and year of study regarding tutors', material preparation and student support effectiveness. The study employs a quantitative method, using questionnaire and document analysis. The findings reveal that students have high satisfaction regarding tutors effectiveness, quality of material preparation and student support. And tutors effectiveness, quality of material preparation and student support predict learners' achievement. There is no a statistically significant difference regarding the three factors when it comes to department, but the study shows a statistically significant difference to year of study. Females appear more satisfied compared to males about tutors' effectiveness, quality of material preparation and student support.

Key words: Learner satisfaction, Distance education teaching material reparation, Tutors' effectiveness, Predictive power of learners' academic achievement

I. Introduction

1.1. Background

Distance learning, according to Moore and Tait (2002, p.7), is defined as “approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.” For a country like ours where higher learning enrollment is very low, it opens an ideal

opportunity of access to students. Living a long way from an institution, students can follow their study without losing their job. Besides, it is highly flexible. As the document of Common Wealth (2004) points out, distance learning “offers flexibility of place and time of study, enabling students to maintain work and family commitments whilst continuing to study.” Its cost effectiveness is the other merit of distance learning. Compared to the traditional learning, the cost per student is affordable and is advantageous to both students and the government. It is also the only method to reach groups who could not be reached otherwise (Ibid, 2004).

Despite the above advantages, distance learning needs extra care in terms of tutoring, material preparation and student support services. The role of tutors is significantly different from the face to face instructors (ibid, 2004). Tutors are not assuming the role of experts; they are helpers. They are not only expected to tutor but to counsel. They do not prepare content in most cases rather they explain materials written by somebody else. They are not in the classroom to lecture except in occasional face to face tutoring but far from it, commenting on individual student’s written work in their office and communicating with their students via post, telephone and if there is the opportunity by e- mail. Pierrakeas, Xenos and Pintelas (2003,p.3) summarizes the role of tutors written by different scholars saying tutors “should promptly solve students’ educational problems, discuss in a friendly way the issues that distract them, instruct them during their studies, but most of all encourage them to continue their studies, understanding their difficulties and supporting them effectively.” (Kasworn, 1983; Naidu, 1994; Race, 1993, Rowntree, 1998; Barnard, Veldhuis, & C.G.M. van Rooij, 2001). Hence, tutoring wants a different set of skills from the conventional learning.

In terms of materials, distance learning requires a complex material design. The material should consider students prior knowledge being designed maintaining their level. It should have attractive format and lots of exercises and examples. Distance students, in most cases, do not have mature reading habits, and they are used to the traditional teach and test method; therefore, it needs care in language use and organization. The language should be clear and simple and the material readable.

Student support refers to the care and support learners get from their institution in academic and administrative area to overcome learning obstacles. Academically, distance learners require different skills and orientation such as time management, library usage, reading and writing skills, etc. Similarly, they need various supports from the administration which include the choice of suitable study center, timely registration and efficient distribution of quality materials, etc. The above intricacies of distance learning induce the present researcher to evaluate the status of distance learning particularly from tutors, material preparation and support points of view. Hence, this study attempts to evaluate the quality of tutors, teaching material and various supports given to Saint Mary’s University College distance students and examine its impact on their academic achievements.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Due to technology opportunity there is a paradigm shift in the mode of the teaching learning. In developed countries, distance education has a long history, passing four generations. It is now highly networked. In our case its history is short, and it uses dominantly the print media which is somewhat traditional. The public attitude towards distance education is not as reputable as the conventional learning. What adds fuel to the fire was the prohibition of distance education in private and public institutions by the government the year before. This year the ban is lifted for some selected institutions. Even if the restriction is removed, it implies that the sector has problems in the area of quality. Evaluation is conducted to check whether the aspired values are met or not. It appears, then, logical to evaluate the quality of the teaching learning process of Saint Mary's University College distance education systematically to know whether it is up to the expectation of the students. This paper tries to answer the following question basing itself at Saint Mary's University College:

1. What does the material preparation, tutors' effectiveness, and support services look like from learners' satisfaction level?
2. Does the material preparation predict learners' achievement?
4. Does tutors' effectiveness predict learners' academic achievement?
5. Does the student support predict learners' academic achievement?
6. Is there any difference in terms of perception from gender, department and year perspectives regarding tutors', material preparation and student support effectiveness?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study can benefit primarily the students. As stakeholders, they are supposed to assess the teaching learning process. Their feedback will serve as input to take corrective measures. In other words, their voice will be inculcated in the decision making of the University College. It is also likely to benefit tutors pinpointing their strengths and weaknesses. The management of the University College may also get useful insights.

1.4 Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to assess the satisfaction level and predictive ability of material preparation, tutors effectiveness and support services. The specific objectives are to:

- x Assess the satisfaction level of students' satisfaction regarding teaching material, tutors effectiveness and student support
- x Examine the prediction level of the teaching material, tutors effectiveness

- and student support
- x Examine the differences or similarities of perception based on gender, department and year of study

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study is limited to Saint Mary's University College of Addis Ababa center. The University College offers distance education to many students in the distance mode of learning, having more than over to 150 centers. The assessment of the quality of teaching material, tutors and support services at Saint Mary's University College of Addis Ababa center can pinpoint the status and culture of the institutions' quality education in the distance mode. Hence, this paper focuses on the Addis Ababa center, selecting it as a case purposely in such a way that these students are assumed to be in a better position to evaluate the quality of teaching material, tutors and support services due to their exposure to library and other better services compared to remote area students.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to a center of an institution. Adding other centers from regions, it would have been good to compare the nature of services among the different centers of the UC. Besides, it uses only a quantitative method, applying a questionnaire. It would have been good to use mixed method and different instruments to triangulate data. Due to shortage of time, distance barrier and contact problem with distance students of different centers on the part of the researcher particularly, it is limited to Addis Ababa center of Saint Mary's University College, a method and an instrument.

II. Methodology

2.1 Sources of Data

The sources of data for this study were both secondary and primary data. After reviewing different sources regarding distance learning, a structured questionnaire was used to gather data from respondents of Addis Ababa Center students of Saint Mary's UC. Students' cumulative average grade was gathered through the questionnaire to examine its relationships with the inputs of the University College.

2.2 Sampling Method

Applying stratified sampling based on department, year and gender, subjects were selected. A total of 120 samples were chosen from a total of 263 students of Accounting, Management and Marketing departments' proportionally. As to gender, it was difficult to apply proportional sex sample due to male dominance of

students for the given population. So, it was a disproportionate sample which was considered as a sample of study. Out of the distributed questionnaire, 28 were not filled out properly, and they were discarded.

2.3 Instruments of Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was employed to students. The questionnaire had three parts, having 17 items under each part with a total of 51 items (see the Appendix). The first part addressed tutors effectiveness; the second focused on teaching material preparation, and the third concentrated on student support. A Likert scales ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree was applied after piloting with Cronbach method on 30 students. The result of the pilot study was more than the required in such a way that for tutors effectiveness it was .858, and for material preparation it was .8247 and as to student support it showed .789.

As to validity, the study made use of the construct of Meachean (1982) and other local studies to identify the content and then the tool was shown to experts. Incorporating their comments, the instrument was distributed.

2.4 Method of Analysis

The data were analyzed quantitatively using mean, standard deviation, correlation, F-test, ANOVA and multiple regressions. In other words, the study applied both descriptive and inferential statistics.

III. Analysis of Results

In this chapter, analyses and interpretations of the findings regarding the comparison across departments and the prediction powers of course material, tutors effectiveness and students support are discussed.

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

The following Table shows the descriptive statistics of the study. In all the three factors, students expressed their satisfaction with slight differences regarding tutors' effectiveness, quality of material preparation and student support services. When we compare the means, females were more satisfied compared to males. And quality of teaching material got the highest mean which indicate that learners are highly satisfied by the quality of the teaching material compared to tutors' effectiveness and student support.

Table 3.1: Descriptive Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tutors	Male	72	75.60	22.141
	Female	20	80.30	23.315
	Total	92	76.62	22.356
Course materials	Male	72	75.99	21.858
	Female	20	84.85	20.197
	Total	92	77.91	21.713
Student support	Male	72	75.21	22.778
	Female	20	82.00	21.701
	Total	92	76.68	22.607

4.2 Student Support, Course Material Preparation, Tutors' Effectiveness as Predictors of CGPA

As Table 3.2 shows, when students achievement was regressed on student support, course material preparation, and tutors' effectiveness, the results of the multiple regression analysis indicated that the three independent variables, in combination, are significant predictors of students achievement ($F=29.852$, $P < .05$). As a result, we reject the null hypothesis which states that student support, course material preparation, and tutors' effectiveness are not significant predictors of students' achievement. The result further revealed that about 50% of the variation in students cumulative CGPA is explained by the combined variation in student support, course material preparation and tutors' effectiveness.

The results also made clear that when quality of course material preparation was excluded from the equation, student support and tutors' effectiveness were found to be significant predictors of students' achievement which accounted for about 50% of the variation in students' performance. This result also indicated that the presence or absence of course material preparation in the equation did not add or reduce any significant prediction power to the other two variables and, thus, automatically eliminated.

Finally, when the student's achievement was regressed on tutor's effectiveness, controlling for the effect of student support, course material preparation, the results depicted that tutors effectiveness was found to be a statistically significant predictor of student's achievement ($E = .519$, $P < .05$); and accounted for 52% of the variation in student's achievement as indicated in Table 4.2. Thus, tutors effectiveness is a strong predictor of student's academic achievement of all the three variables.

Table 3.2: Student Support, Course Material Preparation, Tutors' Effectiveness as Predictors of CGPA

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sign	F	E
		B	Std. Error	Beta				
1	(Constant)	1.656	.121		13.671	.000	29.852	50.4
	Tutors	.010	.006	.519	1.771	.080		
	Course materials	-.001	.006	-.059	-.207	.836		
	Student support	.005	.006	.255	.859	.392		

Dependent Variable: CGPA

3.3 Mean Comparison by Sex

The Table below shows means comparison by sex. The comparison of the mean values of female and male's perception of the impact of tutors support service on their academic achievement indicated a statistically significant variation between the two groups ($F=.690$, $P< .05$). So, it can be concluded that females seem more satisfied regarding the impact of tutors support on their academic achievement. This finding holds true perhaps as it goes with the view that females are naturally inclined to seek help to solve problems they face.

Similarly, the comparison of mean values of male and female's perception of course material preparation ($F=2.656$, $P< .05$) and students' support services ($F=1.419$, $P< .05$) were found to have significant differences.

Table 4.3: Mean Comparison by Sex

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Tutors effectiveness	Between Groups	346.165	1	346.165	.690	.408
	Within Groups	45133.51	90	501.484		
	Total	45479.68	91			
		5				
Course materials	Between Groups	1229.768	1	1229.768	2.656	.107
	Within Groups	41673.53	90	463.039		
	Total	42903.30	91			
		6				
		4				
Student support	Between Groups	721.984	1	721.984	1.419	.237
	Within Groups	45785.87	90	508.732		
	Total	46507.85	91			
		5				
		9				

3.4 Mean Comparisons by Year of Study

When the mean values of students perceptions of tutors effectiveness, course material preparation and student support services were compared by year of study, the results showed significant variation with (F=1.961, P<.05) for tutors effectiveness (F=1.338, P<.05) for course material preparation and (F=1.018, P<.05) for student support service. Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that first year students seem to get easily satisfied with what is provided to them while senior students are more demanding since their quality parameters get refined as they stay more in the UC.

Table 34: Mean Comparisons by Year of Study

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Tutors	Between Groups	2057.05	2	1028.527	1.961	.148
	Within Groups	36716.7	70	524.525		
	Total	38773.7	72			
		81				
Course material	Between Groups	1355.10	2	677.554	1.338	.269
	Within Groups	35443.8	70	506.341		
	Total	36798.9	72			
		59				
Student support	Between Groups	1106.89	2	553.447	1.018	.367
	Within Groups	38052.9	70	543.613		
	Total	39159.8	72			
		36				

4.5 Mean Comparison by Department

Table 5 indicates test of significance for mean difference between participants by departments for tutor's effectiveness, ($F=1.018$, $p=.148$), quality of course material preparation ($F=1.338$, $p=.269$) and student support service ($F=1.018$, $p=.367$). The findings were not found statistically significant. Thus, we accept the null hypothesis that claims for the equivalence of the means between the groups. Consequently, we can conclude that students from the participating do not vary in their perception of tutor's effectiveness, quality of course material preparation and

student support service as a result of differences in their department.

Table 3.5: Mean Comparison by Department

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Tutors					
Between Groups	2057.054	2	1028.527	1.961	.148
Within Groups	36716.727	70	524.525		
Total	38773.781	72			
Course material					
Between Groups	1355.108	2	677.554	1.338	.269
Within Groups	35443.851	70	506.341		
Total	36798.959	72			
Student support					
Between Groups	1106.894	2	553.447	1.018	.367
Within Groups	38052.942	70	543.613		
Total	39159.836	72			

IV. Conclusions and Implications

4.1 Conclusions

The following conclusions are made based on the findings.

- x Students have expressed their satisfaction regarding tutors effectiveness, quality of material preparation and student support. They rated the services as very good.
- x Course material, tutors' effectiveness, student supports predict learners' achievement, accounting for 50 % of the variation in students' achievement. Tutors' effectiveness

- is
 found to be the strongest predictors of all the three variables.
- x Compared to male students' females are more satisfied regarding tutors and quality material preparation.
 - x First year students seem easily satisfied in comparison to senior students. x Department difference does not have an impact on the perception of tutors effectiveness, students support and quality of material preparation.

5.2 Implications

The following implications can be drawn from the findings.

- x Even if learners rated tutors effectiveness, quality of material preparation and student services as very good, there is still a need to upgrade the quality of the above factors.
- x Tutors effectiveness, quality of material preparation and student services have predicted learners achievement. Therefore, the institution should give due regard to material preparation, tutors effectiveness and student support. While employing tutors, there is a need to screen them based on their content, written and oral competencies instead of relying merely on work experience and university or college CGPA. On top of these, they should have material preparation experience.
- x The institution should prepare different study skills guidelines and make them easily accessible to students at region levels.
- x There is a need to conduct qualitative study to identify the causes for females' greater satisfaction so as to narrow the gap between the two sexes.
- x Senior students appear to demand much from tutors, level of material preparation and student support. Thus, care should be taken while assigning tutors and preparing materials in such a way that experienced tutors should be assigned to them and the institution should ensure the quality of distance materials.
- x CODL should conduct periodic and regular studies of its distance education students to know what their needs are and what problems they confront in their teaching learning process. The study can be approached, for example, by gender, age, location, study program, applying mixed type of research to gather adequate data regarding even about personal and professional circumstances which can contribute considerably to the understanding of students' problem. This will contribute to the design, development and provision of effective distance education that will be tailored to students' specific needs and expectations.

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