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Challenges in managing postgraduate distance education in a Sub-Saharan African higher education institution

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Abstract: Although distance education (DE) is steadily deepening its relevance in the contemporary global higher education landscape, its management is beset with challenges in some developing countries. This study examined the challenges in managing postgraduate DE programs in a public higher education institution in a Sub-Saharan African country. Qualitative data were gathered from course facilitators, managers of the programs, and students, through structured interviews and focus group discussions. It was established that the programs faced challenges related to course material development, internet access, access to the library, Information and Communication Technology, and physical infrastructure, The programs were more print-media supported and face-to-face based than technology-anchored and online-based. For purposes of modernity, cost-effectiveness, and continuous quality improvement, the program managers should develop course manuals and modules and utilise technology-supported virtual teaching and learning instead of the current state of overreliance on face-to-face interactions. For sustainability reasons, the program managers should devise innovative ways of making the programs more practice-oriented to meet the demands of the growing competitive job market.

Keywords: challenges; innovation; postgraduate education; distance education; higher education institutions; sustainability; University of Cape Coast.

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1 Introduction

The path to sustainable socio-economic development is facilitated by several factors, but underlying all the facilitating pathways is continuous learning. The quest for continuous learning deepens the relevance of higher education (HE), which is globally acknowledged as a focal point of skill acquisition, creativity, and innovation that are needed for sustainable socio-economic development (Moore and Benson, 2012; Saurombe, 2015). Investing in HE services, especially at the postgraduate level, aids in generating the requisite knowledge, the diffusion of which helps to build a quality workforce for sustainable development (Agunga, 1997; Santillán and Asmat, 2015: Smith et al., 2006; Zirkle, 2003). However, the demand for HE has become so huge in recent times that the conventional methods of teaching and learning alone are insufficient to satisfy it (Hope and Guiton, 2005: Mensah et al., 2021). The increasing demand for HE has led tertiary education service providers in many parts of the world to introduce Distance Education (DE) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels as an innovative service intervention to increase access to HE (Frensen, 2018; Naidu, 2017). Distance Education, in this context, is defined as the mode of teaching and learning that takes place remotely without the teacher and the learner being in regular face-to-face contact in the classroom environment (Lakai et al., 2016)

Previous studies (Forsyth et al., 2010: Minnaar, 2013; Mensah et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2006) have revealed that despite its laudable rationale, the promise of DE remains largely unfulfilled in many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in developing countries due to a myriad of challenges. If the challenges are not identified and addressed in time, they could graduate into problems that may be difficult to solve, thereby, threatening the sustainability of the programs. While some studies have been done regarding the challenges of DE in both advanced and developing countries, most of such studies in

Sub-Saharan Africa have concentrated on the challenges at the undergraduate levels (Manchishi et al., 2018; Musingafi et al., 2015) with less attention being paid to the postgraduate level. The purpose of this paper was to examine the challenges in implementing DE at the postgraduate level in a Sub-Saharan country. It used the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Ghana as the case study. Further information about CoDE of UCC and the rationale for the study is provided in the section on 'Study Area and Methods'. The study was necessary because insights into the challenges at the postgraduate level could contribute to creating an innovative framework for improving postgraduate DE delivery at CODE, and by extension other similar institutions in developing countries. This would create a sustainable path to the postgraduate DE model, which has been identified as an innovative alternative approach to the conventional models because the DE model ensures more judicious use of physical and human resources (Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Lai-Yeung, 2013; Mensah and Owusu-Mensah, 2002; Naidu, 2017) for sustainable development.

2 Literature review

Both developed and developing countries are adopting DE to meet the increasing demand of students for HE services in the 21st century. Many HEIs are shifting from the purely campus-centred model of delivery to the DE model (Howell et al., 2003; Atkinson, 2016; Mnkeni-Saurombe, 2015). Dhanarajan (1999) examines the direction of DE and finds that many HEIs that provide DE services are heading in the right direction. Dhanarajan (1999) justifies this optimism with the following reasons among others:

> (1) The acceptance of DE as an important pillar of educational provision by many nations; (2) The intensity of the debate within DE circles around issues relating to quality assurance; (3) The number of external reports that view DE as a positive alternative to classroom-based instruction; (4) The confidence with which DE providers are entering the educational global market, which is seen as a reflection of the high level of confidence they have in their systems; and (5) The enthusiasm with which the historically renowned institutions are embracing the DE concept.

However, these factors do not necessarily suggest widespread good practice among them all (Abukari and Ahmed, 2019: Fresen, 2018; Cosmas and Mbwette, 2009; Mbukusa, 2009), as there are challenges.

Musingafi et al. (2015), as well as Berge et al. (2002) described challenges facing distance learners as epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, and social, while Cross (1981) identified three distinct categories of challenges facing DE students namely; situational, institutional and dispositional. According to Cross, situational challenges include job and home responsibilities that reduce the time for studies, institutional challenges include poor logistics and regulatory systems, while dispositional challenges are related to learners attitudes and feelings. Zirnkle (2001) identified specific challenges facing distance learners as program costs, lack of infrastructure, inadequate feedback, and poor teacher contact. Ukpo (2005) found that students who enrolled in DE face challenges related to failure to receive study materials on time and poor learner support systems, including internet and Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) services.

Assessing the challenges of DE at the University of Ghana, Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah (2017) found that the majority of the students felt the registration process at the beginning of the semester was very difficult, while tutorial periods were inadequate. A remarkable perceived challenge of distance learning in some developing countries is scepticism regarding the equivalency of DE mode to the traditional delivery mode (ICDE, 2015: Owusu-Boateng and Essel, 2011), and the value of the certificate. Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah (2017) also observed that the major challenge of DE in Sub-Saharan Africa was the difficulty in getting manuals and modules caused mainly by the unwillingness of the experts to develop the materials due to low remuneration for rendering such services.

Funding is an important issue in running postgraduate distance learning programs. Igbineweka and Enowoghomwenma (2017) investigated internally generated revenue (IGR) suitability and quality assurance in some Nigerian universities and concluded that IGR alone may not be sufficient in financing university education, therefore, the government should provide funds for the universities in addition to allowing the universities to charge reasonable tuition fees. Nage-Sibande and Morolong (2018) undertook a trend analysis of opportunities and challenges of open and distance learning (ODL) provision in dual-mode institutions in Botswana Open University and found that ODL experienced challenges related to stigma, resources, planning, implementation, and monitoring, resulting in slow growth and low impact of the programs.

The view is held that although all DE service providers may have challenges, those in developing countries, have more challenges than their counterparts in the advanced countries. For example, unlike the developed countries which have learning infrastructure that is reliably supported by the internet and information and communication technology (ICT), developing economies such as Sub-Saharan African countries, rely mostly on print media and face-to-face lectures at designated learning centres (Abukari and Ahmed, 2019; Mnyanyi and Mbwette, 2009). This is against the background that modern DE requires constant and reliable access to technology such as computers and the internet among others. In Ghana, internet accessibility is limited to a few areas of the country. Relative constant internet services are available in the cities, but this is hardly the case in rural areas of the country (Owusu-Boateng and Essel, 2011). Meanwhile, many of the DE students are in underserved communities. In some communities where the internet can be accessed, it is not in constant supply and is quite expensive to be afforded by the low-income earners who enrol for the DE programs (Cummings, 2014). The unpleasant experience of unreliable internet access hinders effective DE (Matovu, 2012; Moore and Benson, 2012). The challenges could result in students drop-out and late completion of DE programs as well as deficiencies in the knowledge and skills needed by the students to meet the demands of the job market.

2.1 Study area and method

As mentioned in the introduction section, the research was conducted using the CoDE of UCC, Ghana as a case study. CoDE is one of the five Colleges of UCC. Its core mandate is to provide DE to people who could not or cannot, for one reason or the other, study through the traditional campus-based system. Specifically, CoDE's programs are aimed at assisting individuals in overcoming geographical, economic, social and cultural barriers to education for national development. The vision of CoDE is to become a reference point for the delivery of quality DE in Ghana and beyond. Its mission is to

pursue excellence in the delivery of innovative demand-driven, customer-oriented and cost-effective education. UCC operates dual-mode (regular campus-based and distance) education. The distance education component is run by CoDE. It runs the type of DE whereby everything that is done in the regular campus-based model is replicated except the mode of delivery. With the DE mode, unlike the regular mode, course modules are provided at the beginning of every semester while face-to-face tutorial sessions are organised to facilitate students' studies for every course mounted. However, the assessment of students follows the regular mode where the students take two quizzes and end-of-semester examinations. At the time of this study, the CoDE postgraduate programs (Business and Education) were being run at six study centres across Ghana. The centres were Cape Coast (headquarters), Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, Sunyani, and Tamale.

This study was part of a bigger one that evaluated the postgraduate DE programs introduced in 2015 by CoDE-UCC. It was conducted to obtain evidence-based information to improve the running of the programs. Issues of assessment for the entire study were many, however, this paper was based on the aspect relating to the challenges of the program. This is a key issue because understanding the challenges would allow for evidence-supported recommendations and actions to address them to make the College and its graduates more competitive. The specific objectives for this component as extracted from the main study were to examine challenges faced in running the programs and make recommendations for addressing them to increase the competitiveness and sustainability of the programs

Underpinned by the interpretivist philosophy, the study used the exploratory qualitative design. This is because comprehensive information was needed on the nature of the challenges to inform how they (the challenges) could be addressed, and not so much on the quantitative measurements of the challenges. The qualitative design is recommended for answering research questions that are context-specific and require exploratory investigations (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This approach helped, not only to identify the challenges but also to examine the real stories behind the challenges for better appreciation and understanding for effective solutions.

Guba (1981) emphasises the need for meticulous attention to the validity and reliability of qualitative research, explaining that in qualitative research, validity refers to trustworthiness while reliability relates to consistency in terms of instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and presentation of results. Guided by these, systematic steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Students, course facilitators and key staff (management) involved in running the CoDE postgraduate DE programs were identified and used as respondents. These were the Provost and Registrar of CoDE, Coordinator of Quality Assurance, Coordinators of Education and Business Departments, Coordinator of Exanimation, Acting Head of Finance, Coordinator of ICT, Coordinator of Graduate Studies, Coordinator of Guidance and Counselling, as well as the Regional Co-ordinators of the Distance Learning Program.

Semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussion (FGD) guides were designed to collect data from the identified respondents. Informed and guided by the literature review, the items in the instruments covered issues on challenges relating to the accreditation of the programs, financing, mode of delivery (online and face-to-face teaching), internet and ICT, manuals and modules, and physical facilities/infrastructure. Data were collected in May and June 2019 by the researchers and trained research assistants.

At the beginning of each interview or discussion, the purpose of the study was explained to the participant(s) who was/were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality of the data they would provide. A verbal consent was obtained from the participants before the interviews or discussions commenced. All the respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and that at any point in the course of the interview or discussion any participant could opt out if he or she so wished. Sixteen CoDE Management staff were involved in the data collection as respondents. Data were also collected from 18-course facilitators (three were randomly picked from each of the six study centres). Six focus group discussions were held with students. Three of these were held with female students and three with male students. Three were held with Business students and three with Education Students. At least a course representative was part of each focus group, comprising 12 participants. Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect data from the management staff and course facilitators, while FGD guides were used for the students. In all, a total of 106 participants were involved as respondents.

Having gathered data from the 106 participants enumerated above, data saturation was attained as no new data were emerging from additional interviews or discussions. Data saturation is the conceptual yardstick for estimating and assessing qualitative sample sizes (Brown, 2010). Broadly, saturation is described as the point in data collection and analysis when new data produces little or no new information to address the research question. Guest et al. (2017) observe that data saturation provides empirically-based guidance for approximating how many qualitative interviews and/or discussions might be needed for a given study, thus playing a role analogous to power calculations in quantitative research designs.

The qualitative responses from the field were transcribed verbatim and analysed manually. Content analysis was applied guided by codes, themes and sub-themes. In this wise, a variety of techniques were used to make meaning from the contents of the transcripts by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of the data. This consisted of carefully reading the transcripts several times and slowly sorting respondents' diverse answers into a coherent framework that made sense and meaning. Initial coding was done to group the text into themes, noting when respondents seemed to be saying the same thing or when one person described a unique experience. Axial coding was used to group the texts into various categories under the subthemes by coming up with a series of headings that seemed to capture and cover the range of responses. After each transcript was coded the analysts discussed the emergent themes and compared the code applications. All coding discrepancies were resolved through discussions to reach a consensus before proceeding to the next stage. Saturation of analysis was reached when no new codes and themes were emerging any longer.

Finally, the data were organised and synthesised under broad themes guided by the objective of the study. This iterative procedure helped to build the confidence that essential details were not overlooked. Presentation of findings was accomplished by providing triangulated evidence from the respondents and supported with the theoretical and empirical literature. The results and discussion are presented using thick narrative descriptions and most significant stories. Although a qualitative study, the results are supported with simple frequencies, percentages, and graphs, where needful.

3 Results and discussions

The results and discussions are presented in line with the major challenges identified. These relate to accreditation of programs, development of manuals and modules, finance, logistics, physical facilities, ICT services, face-to-face sessions, support from other departments, workload and teaching environment.

3.1 Accreditation of programs and value of certificates

One important issue about running academic programs is the accreditation status of the institution running the programs, and the programs being run. Institutional accreditation is important because it gives confidence and assurance to the stakeholders of the institution that the institution meets the acceptable standards of education. Having a degree in a program that is nationally accredited and universally recognised, not only speaks to the quality of the education, but it also means that credits taken are transferable to other accredited programs in other accredited institutions. Institutional and program accreditation also suggests that the degree or certificate will be recognised by employers.

Questions were asked on whether there were challenges regarding accreditation of the postgraduate programs being run by CoDE. The questions on this issue were on only accreditation of the distance postgraduate programs because for institutional accreditation, it was already clear the University (UCC) was accredited. CoDE Management reported that "the College depended on the regular UCC programs for accreditation and so once the regular Master of Business and Master of Education programs run by UCC were accredited, then the distance postgraduate programs were also accredited and vice versa". This is because, it would be superfluous and cost-ineffective to go through another program accreditation process if the same programs being run in the regular mode by the same University which are borrowed and run in the DE mode were already accredited. A crosscheck on the institutional level accreditation of the programs with the Directorate of Academic Affairs of UCC indicated that the postgraduate programs being run were accredited.

Responding to challenges about how the CoDE's certificates were valued compared to the regular ones, the Provost of the College had this to say:

> Our (distance education) certificates are equally valued. We have not done any study on this, but it should be at par with the regular ones.

The course facilitators provided similar responses to the same question on equivalence or parity of certificate between the regular and distance postgraduate programs. About 78% of the course facilitators indicated that there was no difference between the distance and regular postgraduate students in terms of recognition and value of the certificate. The major reason given by most facilitators for their 'no difference' view was that there was no indication on any of the two certificates to show any difference. However, about 22% of the course facilitators indicated that given the inadequacy of support services for the distance postgraduate students, coupled with the limited contact hours for the DE students, the conventional face-to-face programs could have an advantage over the distance programs in terms of content. In the FGDs with students, the participants reported that a section of the Ghanaian population had the perception that the regular campus-based programs were more credible than the distance learning programs. However, the participants themselves were unanimous in their view that the distance

postgraduate programs were as good as their conventional counterparts. The quote below was from an FGD discussant, but the observation had support from virtually all the other discussants or participants.

> The perception regarding the existence of a difference between the certificate of the regular and distance learning programs is a figment of some people's imagination. There is no difference in the value of the certificates or the quality of students. It is the same thing we all learn and the same certificate we are all awarded. There is no difference in value between the two as perceived or claimed by some Ghanaians.

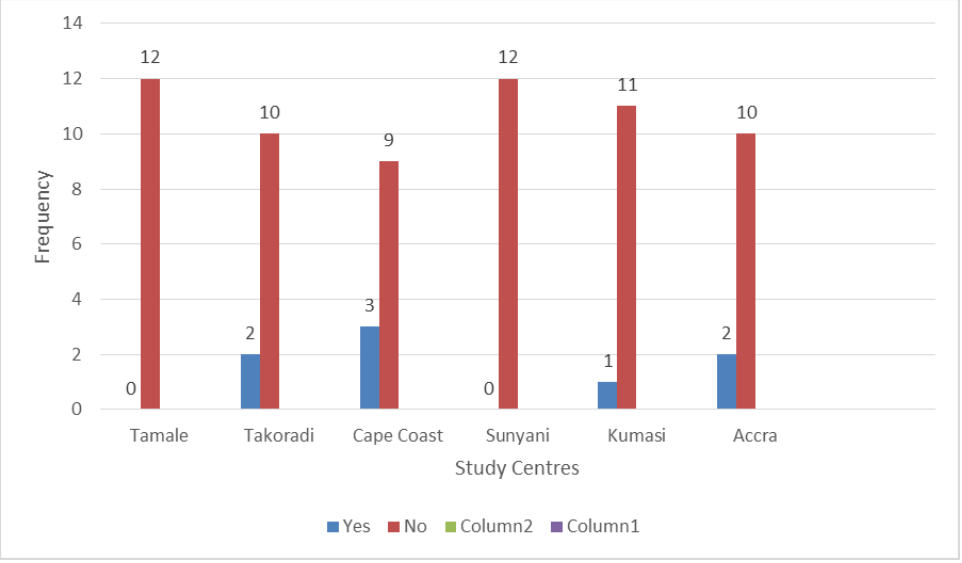
Despite the relatively mixed responses, it can be argued that the evidence largely suggests that there was confidence in the certificate of DE programs. This is contrary to the perceived challenge in terms of scepticism regarding the equivalency of DE mode to the traditional delivery mode (ICDE, 2015; Owusu-Boateng and Essel, 2011). Interestingly, anecdotes in Ghana suggest that many distance education students are admitted with lower grades compared to the regular students so their performance is also lower compared to the regular students. The responses about the value of the certificates, as typically represented by the above evidential narratives, suggest that the recognition of and confidence in the certificates were based on perception and personal conviction, therefore, they need to be empirically verified from other stakeholders such as the alumni, employers and the general public through further research.

3.2 Challenges with respect to manuals and modules

Manuals are important in running DE programs as they are a form of a handbook designed to provide basic information for the students. A module is an organised collection of content (what is to be studied), that is systematically presented. With modules, course tutors or facilitators can provide a structured path through the content items to foster understanding of concepts intended to be taught or learnt. Course facilitators can allow students to explore the content of the modules systematically and at their own pace. Designing high-quality modules that describe the knowledge and skills students will have on graduating, is one way of providing explicit evidence of quality and standards of education.

In the case of postgraduate DE, modules are particularly important because they help the students to learn on their own and prepare questions on what beats their understanding in a given subject for discussion with the course facilitators during the face-to-face interactions. In the CoDE model of DE, the literature showed that course modules were supposed to be provided for the students at the beginning of every semester. Therefore, the respondents were asked if manuals and modules were available for the programs. The rationale was not only to find out about availability but also to explore further to identify the strengths and limitations of the manuals so that recommendations could be made for their improvement, if necessary. The results from the students in the various study centres suggest that manuals and modules were not available for the programs. In the Cape Coast Centre, nine out of 12 students indicated that there were no modules while in Kumasi 11 out of 12 students gave the same response (Figure 1). In Tamale and Sunyani all the students indicated that there were no modules while in Takoradi and Accra, 10 out of 12 students each said modules were not available to the students. In total, 64 out of 72 (89%) of the students indicated that modules were not available for the distance postgraduate programs.

Figure 1 Students responses concerning availability of modules (see online version for colours)



Source: Field Data (2019)

It emerged from the Management's responses that manuals and modules were not available for the postgraduate programs being run by CoDE except the postgraduate diploma/certificate in education. The following quote lends credence to these results.

> We don't have the manuals at the moment. We don't have the modules either. We ask the facilitators to give learning materials to the students and also refer them to appropriate sources, including websites to enable them to do further reading. The facilitators meet to discuss what they are supposed to teach so they can have uniform material to present to the students. (A Postgraduate Distance Learning Program Co-Ordinator, CoDE)

Ninety-four percent of the Course Facilitators indicated that manuals and modules were not available, with Management adding that manuals and modules were yet to be developed for the CoDE postgraduate programs. Interestingly, few students mistook the handouts and other photocopied materials given to them by the course facilitators for manuals and modules and, therefore, reported that manuals and modules were available.

On the issue of why the manual and modules were not available, a key Management staff indicated that module development for CoDE was associated with challenges such as excessive charges, plagiarism, and errors. The course facilitators, on the other hand, identified challenges in developing modules as low pecuniary motivation and lack of time since facilitators and other lecturers were overwhelmed with teaching, research and publication of papers for promotion. In line with this evidence, while Shabani and Okebukola (2001) asserted that it was not easy to recruit people with experience and professional qualifications in SSA for the development of innovative modules for DE programs, Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah's (2017) found that low fee paid to experts for module writing was a disincentive. Instructively, many experts concur that ideally, a DE program should include teaching materials developed by specialists for use by course facilitators/instructors and students, adding that there should be a manual that provides, in concise form, essential information about the program for effective DE delivery.

3.3 Challenges with regard to finance

The role of finance in running postgraduate programs can neither be overemphasised nor underemphasised. Proper allocation and use of funds lead not only to improvement in operational efficiency but also to the smooth running of the programs (Ferguson and Ladd, 1996). Most activities and operations of the postgraduate' programs are financed through fees paid by the students. On finance, the Finance section of CoDE reported that collection of fees from the postgraduate distance learning students was a challenge, adding that about 40% of the postgraduate students were owing various amounts of fees at the time of data collection. In terms of programs, about 30% of the Education students were owing, while about 50% of the Business students were owing fees. In terms of level, 31% of the first-year postgraduate students were owing fees while 49% of the second year students were owing fees.

The high rate of non-payment of fees or default in payment was reported to be affecting the operations of CoDE. A Senior Member at the Finance Section of CoDE reported that there were always huge fee arrears that affected budgetary provision for some earmarked activities to the extent that sometimes CoDE was compelled to disinvest to pre-finance certain activities. Additionally, due to default in fee payment, CoDE was often compelled to procure some logistics on credit. These pieces of evidence supported Igbineweka and Anukaenyi (2016), Igbineweka and Enowoghomwenma's (2017) as well as Ada et al.'s (2019) report that providing postgraduate DE, in particular, and DE in general, involves expensive services that require adequate financial provision and that difficulty in accessing funds thwart the smooth running of the programs.

Questions on payment of fees were posed to the students. The rationale was to ascertain challenges concerning financial issues from the students' perspective. According to the students, the fees were high, while the mode of payment was unfriendly as there were limited outlets for payment. The students reported that these difficulties often led to course registration challenges. It emerged from the FGDs with students, that some students were unable to register at the time they wanted to register, although they had paid their fees. CODE Management explained that such anomalies were due to technical challenges which were easily resolved when they were brought to the attention of the College. The evidence corroborated Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah's (2017) finding. Assessing the challenges of distance education at the University of Ghana, Badu-Nyarko and Amponsah (2017) found that the majority of the students felt that the registration process at the beginning of the semester was very difficult due mainly to technical problems associated with such activities.

3.4 Challenges concerning information, communication and technology (ICT), particularly internet services

There is a consensus in the literature that the use of ICT enhances the quality of teaching and learning processes in distance education (Butter et al., 2017; Cho and Yu, 2015; Zaki Ewiss et al., 2019). Also, Mc Gorry (2002) and Rana and Rana (2019) make it clear that the internet in particular and ICT in general can act as motivating tools for the students as students of today are increasingly getting fascinated with technology. Educators could take advantage of this excitement and enthusiasm about the internet and ICT to improve the quality of DE as they provide other learning options that are not readily available in the conventional classroom environment.

Apart from the Cape Coast centre (Table 1) where most (11 out of 12) of the students reported that the use of ICT was high, in the remaining five centres low use of ICT was reported. In the Cape Cost centre, the students argued that since there was an ICT facility (computer laboratory) at the Centre and other Facultties in the University it implied ICT services were available to the students for use. The facility was not available at the other five study centres. However, some of the students indicated that sometimes some pieces of information were given to (them) students through their mobile phones (WhatsApp, text messages and emails) but there were no zoom or virtual lessons for them so ICT usage was low.

Table 1 Students' views on ICT services at the study centres

	Views on the level of Use ICT services			
Study Centre	*High*	*Low*	*Undecided*	*Total*
Tamale	2	8	2	12
Takoradi	3	8	1	12
Cape Coast	11	0	1	12
Sunyani	2	9	1	12
Kumasi	4	6	2	12
Accra	5	7	0	12
Total	*27*	*38*	*7*	*72*
(Percent)	*37*	*53*	*10*	*100*

The students reported that even services relating to the issuance of transcripts, attestation of certificate, and proficiency in English were done manually. The course facilitators supported by CoDE Management were of the view that it should be possible for requests or applications for transcripts, attestation, and proficiency in English to be made or done online. Payments for such services could also be made online. Further to this, the students reported that they often had challenges with their examinations and quizzes results, which often took a long time for the College to correct.

> Many of us experience and complain about incomplete results. CoDE does not act fast on such reports, which is worrying. For a student to progress to the next level, his or her results must be complete and ready on time so that even if they have to re-sit or re-write a paper, they can do that in time. It takes too long a time to correct such anomalies. Sometimes students who are far from the headquarters have to travel several times to the headquarters to complain before it is done. CoDE should be more proactive regarding this issue (FGD with Business Students, Takoradi Study Centre).

The students indicated that the solution to the incomplete results problem was for CoDE to have its own Management Information System (MIS) section, rather than depending on the University-wide MIS system. A Management staff pointed out that CoDE had the MIS already, but it was not as effective as expected, therefore. there was a need for improvement in its effectiveness. The students further reported that course registration by CoDE postgraduate students was sometimes truncated or disrupted because of

regular/sandwich students' registration, which should not be the case, given the current level of advancement in ICT in the world. The students were of the view that with an effective ICT system, similar activities could be carried out concurrently to suit different constituents, irrespective of the mode of study (whether distance, sandwich or the regular campus-based mode).

The students and facilitators reported that internet access was a challenge. A female course facilitator at the Takoradi study centre had this to say about internet access;

> For me almost all that I need for teaching is available but there are frequent power outages and internet challenges.

A male course facilitator at the Sunyani study centre reported that:

> Sometimes, during face to face sessions, I want students to go online to explore certain things but due to unreliable internet access, we are unable to do that.

The students, mostly those in Takoradi, Accra, Kumasi and Cape Coast Centres, expressed the need to improve ICT services and consider introducing the online teaching platform for innovative instructional delivery. They observed that the use of online platforms would make course facilitators reach learners remotely and limit absenteeism and lateness on the part of both students and lecturers, and reduce the cost of transport to the designated centres and the associated inconveniences. CoDE Management acknowledged the challenges with ICT, particularly the internet access and indicated that they (Management) were working on all those, including the online instructional delivery. Management, however, noted that online services also had their challenges, including the rural students being disadvantaged due to irregular power supply and unreliable internet access. These results were congruent with Mnyanyi and Mbwette's (2009) observation that unlike the DE institutions in developed countries which have learning infrastructure that is reliably supported by the internet and ICT, their counterparts in developing countries relied mostly on print media and face-to-face lectures at designated learning centres.

3.5 Challenges in regard to logistics and physical facilities

The point has already been made that CoDE operates the type of DE where almost everything done at the regular mode is replicated. Face-to-face tutorial sessions are organised periodically to facilitate students' studies for every course mounted. This implies that there is a physical infrastructure aspect that needs to be maintained for effective face-to-face teaching and learning sessions, as well as quizzes and examinations.

Questions were asked on challenges concerning physical facilities and logistics for the postgraduate programs. The students reported the lack of air conditioners and/or functioning fans in the classrooms as well as frequent electric power outages, adding that these situations often led to unbearable heat in the classrooms, making both course facilitators and students feel uncomfortable during face-to-face sessions. Additionally, the students and some facilitators reported dirty washrooms at the study centres as well as markers and projectors not being provided on time for use, thereby, delaying the start of face-to-face lectures.

3.6 Challenges with respect to the attendance of periodic lectures (face-to-face sessions)

As mentioned earlier, physical contact teaching and learning (face-to-face tutorials) is an important component of the dual-mode delivery system operated by CoDE postgraduate distance learning. Questions were asked on this component with special reference to challenges relating to attendance of lectures and preference for the mode of delivery. Of the course facilitators, 5 out of 18 (about 28%) of them reported that some of the students were not regular, while 9 out of 18 (50%) of them reported that some of the students were not punctual. A Program Co-ordinator concurred with the facilitators that, many of the students did not attend face-to-face interactions regularly and/or punctually. According to the Co-ordinator, some of the students argued that they were adult learners with several other responsibilities, therefore, they could not attend lectures all the time.

Responding to a question on how the College was dealing with such a challenge, a CoDE Management member indicated that the College had no strict policy on the attendance of lectures or face-to-face. Some facilitators (37%) suggested that face-to-face should be made compulsory so that the students would attach importance to it.

Twenty-two percent (4 out of 18) of the Course Facilitators also reported that some students had simply not positioned themselves as postgraduate students because at their level they still wanted notes to be dictated for/to them during face-to-face- sessions, instead of taking their notes and doing extra reading for a broader understanding of issues discussed during face-to-face sessions. According to the facilitators;

> "many students do not read ahead of the face-to-face sessions, and this makes recapitulation of the previous lesson and continuation of the new lessons difficult."

Interestingly, from the FGDs with the students, it emerged that although most of the facilitators were regular and punctual, a few were not. The students also reported that most of the facilitators knew their stuff and taught well but there were a few who did not teach well, adding that CoDE should investigate and replace non-performing facilitators.

3.7 Challenges regarding support from other departments and UCC management

Another challenge reported by some course facilitators and CoDE Management staff was inadequate support from some of the Colleges, Faculties, and Departments of the University, as well as UCC Management. According to the facilitators (3 out of 18), and one out of 16 Management staff:

> "some lecturers of the conventional or regular UCC programs do not support CoDE programs because they think CoDE will collapse their Colleges, Faculties or Departments."

CoDE Management (2 out of 16) were also of the view that some of the Regional Co-ordinators were slow to act, especially when it came to vigorous marketing of the programs and liaising with CoDE Management. The Regional Co-ordinators explained that they were more in charge of the distance undergraduate programs than the postgraduate ones. Therefore, until their responsibilities were extended to include the postgraduate programs, they could not take an active part in overseeing the postgraduate programs.

While most (14 out of 16) Management staff of CODE reported adequate support from UCC Management, 2 out of 16 reported otherwise. According to the two, UCC Management seemed to be suspicious of CoDE not doing the right things. The quote below typifies such responses.

> "UCC Management often interfere with CoDE affairs and are sceptical about CoDE, which suggests a lack of trust in CoDE Management." (A CoDE Management Staff)

Some of the facilitators (2 out of 18) and a member of CoDE Management (1 out of 16) were of the view that UCC Management was not doing enough to advance the course of the College in general, and the running of the postgraduate programs in particular. Specifically, it was reported by some of the facilitators that, UCC Management was not showing much interest in the activities of CoDE. They observed that UCC management did not visit the study centres to familiarise themselves with what was happening so that they could take experience-informed decisions about the running of the programs. These respondents (participants) added that it was only examinations that UCC Management was interested in monitoring. According to one of the respondents.

> "……UCC Management should be more interested in what CoDE is doing. They should be integrated and immersed in the CoDE system. Active involvement of UCC Management in CoDE activities would help a lot in transforming the College because major decisions about the College are taken by the University management. They should go to the various study centres, sit in the face-to-face facilitation sessions and know what is actually going on." (A male Course facilitator)

The evidence is similar to Mensah and Owusu-Mensah's (2002) finding that the level of commitment on the part of the personnel of the various institutions towards their institution's distance education program was very low as the DE program was often marginalised at management meetings. Mensah and Owusu-Mensah, therefore, called for the active involvement of all the different levels of personnel in the institutions in DE programs, beginning from the top management.

3.8 Challenges relating to workload and teaching environment

Faculty workload refers to all faculty activities that contribute to the accomplishment of the mission, goals and objective of the institution – teaching; research, and outreach/extension activities. With this conceptualisation of workload, teaching the students is only one aspect of a postgraduate faculty member's job as members also need to spend time on other activities such as research and outreach activities.

Seventy-three percent of the course facilitators complained that their workloads were too heavy as many of them also taught in the regular campus-based programs or did other kinds of work in addition to teaching the postgraduate distance students on part-time basis. The facilitators also complained about not being allowed to set their questions for examination. As indicated earlier, assessment of students' performance is supposed to follow the regular mode where the students take two quizzes and end-of-semester examinations. In the case of the regular mode, lecturers set their own questions, but the DE facilitators were usually not allowed to set their questions. Additionally, the course facilitators and some students indicated that the block teaching was good but daunting. That is, it was too loaded and so the topics were too compressed to make for effective

teaching and learning. Facilitators and students, therefore, suggested that the teaching periods should be increased. Some students reported that some aspects of the courses were too theoretical and needed to be beefed up with practical lessons. In this connection, a suggestion was made by the students for arrangements by CoDE for professionals and practitioners to interact with the students so that the theories taught by the facilitators could be translated into practice. The following quotes further illustrate these points:

> Given the content of what the students are supposed to learn, the duration or periods for the face-to-face should be reviewed. Allowance should be made for more practical sessions by arranging for practitioners and professionals to interact with the students. The theory is too much (FGD with Business students).

> The teaching environment should be improved and course facilitators should be allowed to set end-of-semester questions for the courses they teach. The examination questions could be moderated (Male Course Facilitator).

The facilitators were almost unanimous in their report of inadequate motivation for them to deliver and, therefore, expressed concern about the need for CoDE and UCC to motivate them to work, adding that it should be noted that most of the facilitators had taken extra burden as they taught the distance postgraduate students in addition to their normal or regular work.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

The paper set out to examine the challenges in managing postgraduate distance education in a sub-Sahara African public Higher Education Institution, namely the CODE of UCC. The results showed that generally, the CoDE postgraduate programs were progressing quite steadily. The rationale for introducing the programs was laudable and the programs being run were accredited. However, several challenges needed to be addressed. Manuals and modules had not been developed for the programs, while course outlines were not readily available to the students. The teaching and learning environment for the face-to-face sessions was mostly not conducive in terms of ventilation in the classrooms and the availability of clean washrooms in some study centres. Some course facilitators and students were not regular, punctual, or both regarding attendance of face-to-face interactions. The programs faced financing challenges due to the high default rate of fee payment by the students. The outlets available to the students for fee payment were limited, while students faced registration challenges. ICT services, particularly the provision of internet access to the postgraduate students and course facilitators were poor, hence, the overreliance on the face-to-face mode of delivery instead of relying more on the online delivery mode, which is a more modern and innovative mode of distance education delivery. The courses, particularly the Business related ones, were more theoretical than practical.

The following recommendations are made for improving the CoDE postgraduate programs. The teaching and learning environment should be improved to make it more conducive. Ventilation in the classrooms should be improved and logistics made readily available for effective teaching and learning. Internet services should be improved for the facilitators and students to pave way for innovative teaching and learning approaches. CoDE should engage experts to develop manuals and modules for the postgraduate

programs. In developing the modules, theory should be blended with practice to allow for holistic masters' program delivery.

CoDE should devise more innovative strategies to collect fees to raise more money to finance the running of the postgraduate DE programs. This could be done by reducing the high numbers of fee defaulters. In this regard, more payment outlets or platforms could be made available to students for payment of fees to allow for flexibility and also to encourage students to pay the fees. Additionally, CODE could develop policies to regulate the attendance of face-to-face sessions by both students and course facilitators. The policy should stress punctuality and regularity on the part of both students and facilitators. Offenders should be punished to serve as a deterrent to others.

With the present state of low ICT (internet) service provision by the University or the College, it appears the face-to-face mode of delivery is better. However, the University should improve ICT services towards virtual or online teaching and learning in order to keep pace with modernity and to save cost. The Business programs and courses could be made more practical than theoretical by bringing on board practitioners and captains of industry to complement the lecturers' (academics) efforts.

5 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

Although the relevant categories of respondents were involved, the study was more qualitative than quantitative. It involved relatively few respondents, particularly students. Additionally, one issue that came up was the value of the distance learning certificate relative to the regular campus-based ones. Though CoDE Management, course facilitators and students gave their views on the issue, which suggested that there were virtually no major differences in the value of the certificates, there is the need for a further study to confirm from other sources such as the employers and the public. It is, therefore, suggested that further research be conducted on people's perception of equivalence or parity between distance and regular postgraduate graduates of CoDE as well as other universities in Ghana that are running the dual (distance and regular) models.

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