

# **An Exploratory Study of the Exclusive Academic and Counselling Needs Of Distance Learners, In A Pioneer Ghanaian Learning Centre**

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**ABSTRACT:** The research sought to unearth the personal barriers confronting the enhanced studies of distance learners in a fore-running Learning Center in Ghana, West Africa. The phenomenological multiple case study research design was adopted to engage 20 purposively and conveniently sampled participants, in in-depth interviews regarding their idiosyncratic needs. Data were analysed via the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach, to induce themes in line with learners' exclusive personal needs. Individual learners desired consistent professional counselling services and further lamented the ever-increasing cost of computerized study facilities that severely affect their studies. A well-furnished counselling facility, endowed with competent counsellors, and the introduction of counselling awareness at the freshers' orientation were recommended to place distance students on a better learning path. Overall, the research confirmed distance learners' urgent need for professional counselling services even at the freshers' orientation programmes, to promote the studies of distance learners in Ghana.

**Keywords:** counselling needs, distance education, online learning, academic needs

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

It is normal for students to experience stress, anxiety, and mood changes during their academic journey. Frustrations from unreliable internet services, poor time management, low concentration, stress and anxiety as a result of inability to perform certain assignments, and fear of academic failure are usual concerns among distance learners (Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf & Wilens, 2015[1]). The need for competence in technological skills, access to reliable technological gadgets and proper time management are critical factors that necessitate counselling assistance for commendable online studies (Rashid, 2015 [2];Jena, 2018 [3]). A primary source of distress among distance learners additionally, is the usually separate and isolated position of cyber study learners. According to Bolton, Smidt and Li, (2019) [4], the distance learners' inability to promptly connect with colleagues, especially regarding a specific assignment or be able to clarify an urgent academic issue, often attracts severe psychological distress for learners. Indeed, the importance of collaboration and teamwork, both in seeking academic and also other greater social exploits, makes it critical for higher education students especially, to team up with their colleagues for commendable results in certain situations (Isaacs, Scott & Nisly, 2020 [5]). It is common knowledge for instance that individual differences (Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler & Stürmer, 2015) [6 ] and learners' exclusive academic strengths especially, serves as a primary resource for many low-achievers who often times desire their colleagues' unique cognitive styles, learning behaviours and academic resilience (Stoessel et al., 2015) [6 ], to ease the learning experiences of the disadvantaged for better outcomes. The fact that many distance learners in particular, often find themselves trapped in their respective homes or study areas thus, poses a problem for them, when they urgently need to consult their colleagues regarding specific academic issues. By implication, a fundamental source of relief among distance learners lies in their occasional partnerships or collaboration for diverse academic and social needs. This stresses the usefulness of the saying that 'two heads are better than one'. In effect, insight into individual distance learners' academic-related variables, including their counselling needs, will tremendously inform relevant stakeholders regarding useful resources and appropriate support services to promote learners' ultimate academic performance (Zacharis, 2011[7]). The current research thus seeks to unveil the specific individual counselling needs, academic difficulties and frustrations individual distance learners quietly endure while seeking their higher learning degrees. Once outlined, appropriate and strategic professional services will be outlined to benefit distance learners in various facilities worldwide.

## **II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Education is the bedrock of both human and national development. It is a core human activity that meets diverse human and community labour market needs, for holistic development. The relevant knowledge and skills individual students, including distance learners acquire through higher education especially, often defines the future decisions and activities they each undertake, both for their enhanced individual and national advancement (Verhulst & Lambrechts2015[8]; Adams Becker, Cummins, Davis, Freeman, Hall Giesinger &

Ananthanarayanan, 2017 [9]). Higher education specifically provides significant cultural, social and recreational opportunities that propels the enlightenment and overall progress of the individual, with rippling effects on the nation as a whole (Adams Becker et al., 2017 [9]). The aforementioned reports confirm the notion that higher education enriches individuals with new talent and ideas for future leadership roles (Verhulst & Lambrechts, 2015 [8]). The aforementioned therefore endorse the attainment of higher education as a key milestone for many (Leal Filho, Vargas, Salvia, Brandli, Pallant, Klavins, ... & Vaccari, 2019 [10]).

Until the emergence of the marked technological advancement of the twenty-first century, traditional education was considered the most attractive and rewarding means of knowledge and relevant skill acquisition (Stoessel et al., 2015 [6]; Verhulst & Lambrechts, 2015 [8]). A considerable proportion of the general populace for that matter, willingly engaged the laborious and stressful study method for higher qualifications (Kotoua, Ilkan, & Kilic, 2015 [11]), regardless of the many difficulties regarding daily commuting to institutions of learning, arduous literature search from heavy library books and the often troublesome instructor-dominated learning mode (Lim, 2020 [12]). The relief brought to many learners, by the timely emergence of technological advancement, (Isaacs et al., 2020 [5]; Rahmat et al., 2021[13]) through the attractive, easier and fascinating online education (Forson & Vuopala, 2019 [14]) is unfathomable. Considered deeply captivating and relaxing, the eye-opening cyber-related learning mode has brought about immense value and modernity to the entire educational encounter (Forson & Vuopala, 2019 [14]) though not without difficulties. Today, distance learning has become common place, with countless youth, including several employed adult groups, seeking a host of training, via the online education mode (Forson & Vuopala, 2019 [14]). In Ghana presently, both the private and public tertiary education sectors offer distance learning programmes to students, albeit in varying formats. The Universities of Cape Coast and Ghana, Legon, are among the current leading public institutions that also provide distance learning in a variety of fields, including education, nursing, business, and arts (Frimpong-Manso & Owusu-Ansah, 2021 [15]). To date, the ever-increasing applications to various online academic programmes persists, in view of the strong attraction and fascinating means of the new learning mode, especially for twenty-first century learning skills. On the part of the working adult population however, online education offers them easy access to quality education, without losing their various means of employment (Forson, & Vuopala, 2019 [14]; Ofosuhene, 2023 [16]; Dumford & Miller, 2018[17]). The above notwithstanding, a confident possession of employable skills in such difficult times, serves as a great achievement that demands commendation (Ofosuhene, 2023 [16]).

Efforts to meet the ever-increasing cyber-learning demand on the other hand unconsciously creates diverse openings for counterfeit teachers who easily enter to take undue advantage of the situation for financial gains. The ultimate result is the increased stress and anxiety for the constantly increasing number of prospective distance learners. Frimpong-Manso and Owusu-Ansah (2021)[15] thus stressed the significance of offering counselling support, tailored to the unique demands and challenges of distance learners. The authors stress among others, the problem of learner isolation in the mist of confusion and delayed learning as critical to the counselling needs of individual distance learners. While many of these learners hail from dissimilar backgrounds and therefore possess varied individual characteristics, such unique features often severely impact students' ultimate academic attainment, in view of their intrinsic elements and thus reflect exclusive individual learner counselling and academic needs (Isaacs et al., 2020 [5]). Distance learning center administrators consequently need to carefully investigate and outline their learners' individual concerns, to determine their desired appropriate assistive services, in order to make provision for them (Isaacs et al., 2020 [5]). This remains the singular focus of this research.

### **III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The main purpose of the research was to identify the individual academic and counselling needs of Distance Learners in the Central Regional Centre in Ghana.

### **IV. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Many Distance learners are usually confronted with personal educational and counselling needs that often challenge the pursuit of their educational goals. While certain personal needs may lead to little adverse effect, others do culminate in severe setbacks that ultimately affect the academic outcomes of learners, generally. It is equally essential to stress the fact that the severity of a learner's specific need, determines the level of determination and drive he or she expends to meet the concerned need. Learner's educational needs usually consist of availability of direct academic resources such as relevant tools and facilities, consistent presence at lectures, engagement in lecture activities, prompt submission of assignments among many others. Issues related to learner inability to handle excessive academic workload, poor academic performance and overwhelming family demands that necessitate counselling services also comprise learners' counselling needs. Concerns about learners' psychological and emotional states that often determines their readiness for studies and expended efforts in their academics, additionally reflect their counselling needs. It is indisputable that learners'

numerous unmet academic and counselling needs often reflect adverse effects both on their academic and social lives (Pedrelli et al, 2015 [1]; Rashid, 2015 [2]; Jena, 2018 [3]). Since learners' personal needs often drives their expended efforts towards the achievement of personal goals (Bandhu, Mohan, Nittala, Jadhav, Bhadauria & Saxena, 2024 [37]; Max-Neef, 2017 [29]), it becomes necessary for online education providers to gain insight into learners' personal needs, in order to determine practical methods and services to promote the efforts of their learners. This implies that the more ignorant the computerized education providers are, regarding the individual needs of their learners, the more futile their efforts will be, in seeking to assist learners to realize their educational goals. The focus of the current research thus, is to unearth the individual academic and counselling needs confronting distance learners as they pursue their educational goals. Though several studies have highlighted the broad counselling needs of distance learners, little research has focused on the specific academic and counselling needs of individual distance learners, for their academic gain. Findings from the research will instruct distance learning providers regarding the appropriate strategies for the provision of responsive professional counselling, academic services and resources, for enhanced learning purposes. To this end, the researcher proposed the ensuing questions to guide the entire study.

## **V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- 1). What are the personal academic needs of distance learners at the selected research site?
- 2). What personal counselling needs do distance learners express at the selected research site?

## **VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Human needs are vital to their ultimate subsistence and development (Max-Neef, 2017 [30]). The needs of humans comprise a host of interrelated and interactive elements that fundamentally hinge on a wide spectrum of critical life aspects, spanning the entire life course (Max-Neef, 2017 [30]; Goforth, Noltemeyer, Patton, Bush & Bergen, 2014 [31]). Education, marriage, finance, employment, developmental activities and social interactions are among the critical life aspects attracting a host of essential human needs (Owusu-Mensah, Anyan & Denkyi, 2015 [32]; Ofosuhene, 2023 [16]). With its focus on both general physiological and higher order hierarchy of needs, Maslow's Needs theory (1958) [33] firmly anchors this research. The theory among others also alludes to the related nature of human needs, stressing the relevance of achieving basic physiological ones to make way for the achievement of higher order human needs (Maslow, 1958) [33]; Taormina & Gao, 2013 [34]). The motivating role of the human needs gratification process (Osemeke & Adegboyega, 2017 [35]) renders the needs achievement process a critical factor in the entire life advancement process (Owusu-Mensah et al., 2015 [31]; Bervell & Umar, 2020 [36]).

In the current research, the academic needs of distance learners relate to the physical technological resources such as computers, laptops, smart phones and reliable internet service that easily propel their academic efforts. Technological skills like expertise in software management, keyboard efficiency among others that equally enable learners to meaningfully participate in their online education programmes similarly comprise academic needs (Alismail & McGuire, 2015 [22]; Forson & Vuopala, 2019 [14]). Contrarily, learners' counselling needs revolve around their individual psychological and emotional states, that often hinders their positive study attitudes. Such personal counselling needs include poor readiness to study, lack of academic concentration, fear of failure, among others. It is important to stress that both need categories have the potential to either promote or derail the commendable academic attainment of learners. It is thus only when learners achieve their desired goals that they feel gingered up and well-focused on the road to life-long development (Taormina & Gao, 2013 [34]; Osemeke & Adegboyega, 2017 [35]).

## **VII. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **7.1 Importance of the Computerized Education Mode in Ghana**

Life is never static. It is ever-unfolding with diverse transformational phases that often occur with the passage of time. Emergent health issues, increased educational concerns and climatic or weather changes easily attract critical life transformations, most of which eventually turn out to be permanent life aspects. To date, the profound effects of the covid-19 health pandemic for instance, remains deeply engraved in many homes, families, institutions and even work places, leaving a host of educational systems and work-place policies, severely transformed (Lee, Wang, Desouza & Evans, 2021 [18]). Nevertheless, computer-based education is no doubt a typical Twenty-first century educational mode (Johnson, 2020 [19]) that has emerged as a result of diverse societal changes. The remarkable growth and development of online education in recent times, has left no doubts in the minds of many, regarding the general likely future transformations in the education system (Bolton, Smidt & Li, 2019 [4]). The aforementioned reports confirm not only the importance of change, but also the fact that change remains a typical life necessity, though never realized on a silver-platter. Peou (2016) [20] alludes to this fact when he stressed the enduring efforts of the youth to transform their society. Similarly, distance education has presently recorded such profound impact on the phase of modern education, simply as a

result of enduring efforts and commitment by experts among other educationists who sought a technological touch to promote and modernize education in general (Dumford & Miller, 2018 [17]; Rahmat, Syakhrani & Satria, 2021 [13]). The novelty associated with computer-based learning in essence, continues to attract the numbers (Karpov, 2017 [21]). To Karpov (2017) [21], computerized learning is ‘a scientific, innovative and generative learning mode for a knowledge society’ (p, 201). Learners in the twenty-first century thus require basic technological skills, insight into software usage and access to reliable internet service to attain major academic accomplishments (Alismail & McGuire, 2015 [22]). To date, an incredible number of people are attracted to the distance education mode (Alismail & McGuire, 2015 [22]), simply with the advantage of eroded transportation problems, stress from commuting to and from school, avoidance of teacher-related stress and anxiety, to make way for a more relaxing and innovative learning experience in one’s comfortable home setting (Bolton et al., 2019 [4]; Alismail & McGuire, 2015[22]). Sharing the previous authors’ view, Alismail and McGuire, (2015) [22] described computer-based education as the instructional shift that allows students ‘to create and collaborate using the latest technologies’ (p. 150).

## **7.2 The Importance of Counselling to Distance Learners**

Higher education is a great asset desired by many. Yet successful graduation demands tremendous effort, characterized by lots of stress and anxiety. Key among the desired educational efforts is the need for technological know-how that has characterized modern times. Alismail and McGuire, (2015) [22] accordingly assert that twenty-first-century learners must be taught to appreciate flexibility, and resourcefulness and also ‘be linked to current knowledge with authentic experiences to motivate them to create and collaborate using the latest technologies’ (p. 150). The above-mentioned difficulties in higher learning attract professional counselling services that many learners continuously describe as severely beneficial regarding education. The benefits of the service include improved mental health, increased study motivation and enhanced college retention (Imbush, Inongha & Usetu, 2021 [23]; Forson & Vuopala, 2019). Especially as isolated learners, distance learners often experience mental health issues that attract consistent professional counselling services (Rashid, 2015 [2]; Carter & Cook, 2020 [24]). The importance of counselling in decision-making, making informed choices and planning various life aspects in general, cannot also be sidelined in discourses centered on higher education and distance learning. Furthermore, the required competences and skills to proficiently undertake eLearning can be extremely challenging for both old and new distance learners (Jena, 2018 [3]). Forson and Vuopala, (2019) [14] for this reason opine that many distance learners need counselling assistance in view of their lack of relevant skills and readiness for computer-based learning. Similarly, freshers require a meaningful socio-academic orientation and counselling assurance to facilitate their early academic adjustment for better online learning outcomes. It is equally well-acknowledged that all learners are never the same. Students’ individual orientations, unique strengths and capabilities usually integrate with their academic and social efforts to determine their overall academic performance (Nguyen & Zhang, 2011 [25] ; Zacharis, 2011 [7]). The authors refer to the dissimilar cognitive styles, learning behaviors and overall attitudes towards the entire learning process that tend to predict learners’ ultimate attainment, both on the traditional and online instructional modes (Nguyen & Zhang, 2011 [25]; Zacharis, 2011 [7]). Counselling thus comes in handy, to assist students worldwide in meeting their academic and counselling needs for beneficial purposes (Imbush et al., 2021 [23]). For this reason, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and the Allama Iqbal open University in Pakistan find it necessary to offer cohesive learner support services for learners’ academic gain (Rashid, 2015 [2]; Jena, 2018 [3]). To this end, profound insight into distance learners’ personal counselling and academic needs is necessary, to articulate and inform the relevant individual needs and resources for distance learners’ successful graduation (Bolton, Smidt & Li, 2019 [4]). Yet, less research attention continues to be given to the exclusive academic and counselling needs of individual distance learners worldwide. The current research thus enunciates, not only the essence of counselling services to individual distance learners, but also seeks to unearth the specific academic difficulties and frustrations individual distance learners quietly endure during their studies for informative decision-making. Once identified, appropriate and strategic professional services would be outlined for the general benefit of all distance learners worldwide.

## **7.3 The Counselling and Academic Needs of Distance Learners**

Throughout their academic endeavour, distance learners often face several academic and psychological challenges that severely affect their learning outcomes (Rahmat, Syakhrani & Satria, 2021 [13]). Issues related to mental health, relationship with other learners and instructors, adjustment to new academic settings and procedures, poor performance and associated fear of failure, among many other concerns, necessitate professional attention to place the learner on a comfortable academic path (Rahmat et al., 2021 [13]; Pulist, Abrol & Suman, 2020 [26]). Excessive mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression seriously derail students’ academic attainment by causing confusion, forgetfulness, low concentration, fear of examination failure and loss of academic interest, most of which often culminate in academic failure and outright school



dropout (Pulist et al., 2020 [26]; Ocansey & Gyimah, 2015[27]). Moreover, Distance learner complaints regarding feelings of isolation, lack of motivation to study, difficulties with time management and the need for appropriate study habits, skills and attitudes of learners may be considered as counselling needs of distance learners. The prevalence of such experiences sanctions the report by Lister et al., (2023) that distance learners often disclose a higher rate of mental health concerns, with marked gaps in their progression and completion rates, compared to their on-campus counterparts (Lister et al., 2023 [28]).

On the academic front however, learners may for instance complain about lack of appropriate technological gadgets, poor technological skills and inability to frequently participate in class as a result of poor network or lack of data. Academic needs in effect relate directly to the availability of physical study items and resources and specific activities undertaken by learners to achieve their educational outcomes that comprise physical grades, scores from class exercises and assignment. According to Pulist et al., (2020) [26], efficient time-management often impacts favourably on learners' study outcomes since it enables them to appropriately apportion daily available time for their assignments, revision and research. Equally important under the academic needs of distance learners is the persistently high cost of internet-based study materials like laptops, personal computers, data cost, unavailability of reliable internet service outlets and even repair works on faulty gadgets, among many others (Lim, 2020 [12]). Complaints about frustrations in accessing reliable internet connectivity and service, lack of funds to secure considerable data quantum for out-of-classroom studies, among many others also efficiently affect learners' academic outcomes (Dumford & Miller, 2018 [17]). The aforementioned leaves one doubting the credibility of the statement that online education provides easy access to quality education.

Yet, many distance learning institutions continue to remain ignorant about the counselling and academic needs of learners, thereby rendering many of such needs often left unmet and therefore, easily derailing the performance of learners in the long run (Max-Neef, 2017 [30]; Dankyi, 2019 [29]).

## VIII. RESEARCH METHOD(S)

The research adopted a phenomenological multiple case study research design, in agreement with the individualized focus of the study. The focus of the research, to unearth the personal academic and counselling needs of individual distance learners, justified the use of the specified research design, to intricately explore participants' accounts for the desired research aim. Since case studies are notably exceptional in thoroughly exploring and revealing details about real life phenomenon (Starman, 2013 [38]) and phenomenological studies are efficiently endowed to reveal the personal thoughts and views of social actors, in line with their real life experiences (Gammelgaard, 2017[41]), the chosen research design seems best for use in this particular case. Day, Mcloughlin, Aslam, Engel, Wales, Rawal, Batley, Kingdon, Nicolai, and Rose (2014) [39] further support the fact that case studies intensely explore and describe in detail, little or less known phenomenon. In concurrence, Yazan (2015) [40] adds that case studies are 'suitable for studies where meanings, interpretations, managerial dilemmas and storytelling play a predominant role' (p. 911). By implication, the subjective focus of the current research integrates meaningfully with the interpretive phenomenological multiple case study design, to resonate participants' exclusive counselling and academic needs. A sample of 20 participants were thus purposefully selected from the main Central Region Distance Education Center in Ghana, to respond to in-depth interview items, based on the subjective research focus. The adopted interview guide among others, allowed researchers to establish deep rapport and subsequently, closely interact with participants for in-depth data-collection.

### 8.1 Characteristics of research participants

The twenty distance learners engaged in the research comprised twelve females and eight males, purposively and conveniently sampled from the selected research site. All twenty participants were Ghanaians between the age range of 31 – 50 years. Twelve out of the twenty were married and another ten of the participants were teachers in both First and Second cycle institutions. All twenty participants were selected from the Education Department of the institution. In view of their higher education statuses, all participants were interviewed in English Language, being the approved medium of instruction at the higher education level in Ghana.

### 8.2 Research instrument

A self-designed interview guide was used to mobilise in-depth data regarding the personal counselling and academic needs of distance learners in this research. The research focus on participants' personal counselling and academic needs attracted the use of in-depth interviews that also embraced the interpretive focus of the research framework in this case. Interpretivism reflects in-depth personal understandings of context-specific and subjective insights from research participants' view point (Nathan, Newman & Lancaster, 2019 [42]). The intimacy and relaxed conversational nature of in-depth interviews, rendered them most effective for

gathering significant unfolding opinions, experiences, values and various other aspects of the population' (Showkat & Parveen, 2017 [43]). Similarly, the flexible use of interviews, especially in relation to diverse physical settings, equally sanctioned the use of in-depth interviews in reaching detailed participants' private data, much more than any other research instrument (Nathan, Newman & Lancaster, 2019 [42]). By this means the researcher was assured of reaching a profound understanding of the 'socially situated world' of participants, hence the use of in-depth interviews (Nathan, Newman & Lancaster, 2019[42]). The adopted interview guide thus centered on the two thematic areas of identifying learners' individual academic and personal counselling needs in seeking their various higher degrees.

### **8.3 Data collection procedures**

Two in-depth interview sessions were held with each research participant for comprehensive and holistic data-collection purposes. Each session was scheduled by the participant for their convenience. The sessions were each also held within their familiar institutional settings. Each interview session spanned between 30-45 minutes and were each audio-recorded with permission from the research participants, to facilitate data analysis.

Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, ethical clearance and research permission were sought from appropriate gate keepers. Telephone discussions were also held with relevant stakeholders to prepare the grounds for efficient data collection within the selected research site. Two university graduates with orientations in Guidance and Counselling, and Educational Psychology were trained as Research Assistants to facilitate the data-gathering sessions. Their training centred conducting credible in-depth interviews, asking probing questions, ethical considerations in research among a few others. The RA training covered 4 working days in all. Data-collection for the actual research however covered 4 weeks. At the end of each day, the completed interview sessions were transcribed, verbatim for future analysis purposes. The entire fieldwork spanned four weeks.

### **8.4 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are critical in every research encounter (Ciuk & Latusek, 2018[44]). Especially in qualitative inquiries where human participants are often involved, it is important for both the researcher and participants to carefully uphold ethical standards, in order to build methodological and ethical rigour in the research. This makes research ethics a vital ingredient for participant protection, while also ensuring high data-collection standards (Ciuk & Latusek, 2018[44]). To this end, ethical clearance was first sought from the Institutional Review Board, and subsequently from appropriate institutional gate-keepers. The sampled distance learners were likewise offered ethical assistance such as confidentiality assurance, protection from harm, thorough briefing about the research purpose and aims, as well as the opportunity to quit the research, should they at any point in time so desire. Participants equally had the opportunity to ask any burning questions on their minds and received meaningful feedback to each question. The in-depth interviews were equally scheduled at the convenience of each research participant and were also held at the usual study centres of the sampled participants. Permission was also sought from each participant to audio record the sessions to ease future verbatim transcription and meaning-making.

### **8.5 Data Analysis**

Gathered data in this research were analysed using the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA). The IPA is an overriding and recent qualitative research tool with a descriptive focus (Tuffour, 2017 [45]; Alase, 2017[46]) that highlights the strengths of the approach in explaining poorly understood aspects of personal experiences (Alase, 2017 [46]). Phenomenology specifically aims at exploring the personal experiences of people, 'to reveal what lies 'hidden' in them' (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015 [47]). Lately, Phenomenology has assumed the higher qualitative research methodology and philosophical stance in the humanities, human sciences and arts due to their immense usefulness in analysing qualitative research data (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015 [47]). The need to deeply explore and reveal participants' exclusive needs in this research, attracted the use of the IPA for data-analysis.

## **IX. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Based on adopted research methods in the study, the following academic and counselling needs of distance learners were unearthed. The emergent needs have been categorized according to the named research requirements for easy reading and comprehension.

### **9.1 Exclusive Academic Needs of Distance Learners**

As already established, the personal academic needs of distance learners in this research centred on the physically concrete learner requirements that often propel the educational efforts of learners. The primary identified ones in this needs category are recorded as follows.

### **9.1.1 Need for group study mates and collaboration for studies**

At her interview, a participant for example reported that:

*'I can study on my own but I need a study group interaction to motivate me to do more.'*

Asked why she mentioned this need, the participant explained that:-

*'having good study company makes learning easier, more meaningful, consistent and also more interesting. A learner mate often brings a special flavour, spice and new interpretation to whatever we learn ... as the saying goes, two heads are better than one and so partnering with study group members is a great asset to me as distance learner.'*

In response to further probing, another participant opined that:

*'... frankly, I sometimes don't feel like learning but my mates always have a way of pulling me to join them for discussions and this often makes me use my time profitably.'*

Another participant in agreement with the initial one opined that *'in fact, studying alone is not easy. Sometimes you find that your mind moves off your study materials to irrelevant things but a study mate's presence can easily bring your thoughts back to your studies.'*

### **9.1.2 Need for competence and confidence in using appropriate technological skills**

*'Oh as for that one, I must confess it is always a struggle for me. I just don't have it easy using the computer .. and even the internet for studies and so some training in this area will do me a lot of good.'*

*'You know, some of us are the BBC people so it's not easy at all. ... Because of that, me I always depend on a friend to type and use his laptop for my assignments. ... BBC means 'before the birth of computers, please'*

### **9.1.3 Need for specific useful physical learning facilities**

#### **9.1.3.1 Need for a baby-sitting room**

One participant for instance observed that: *'... the absence of a baby-sitting room here makes studies difficult and stressful because I always have to look for a hide out to feed my baby well and also take a brief rest before classes resume. This makes it difficult for me to use my breaktime well and so when classes starts after break, my baby keeps crying and that disturbs me a lot..'*

In a similar vein, another participant responded:- *'.. for me, I attend monthly face-to-face classes with a helper but under the tree where they sit is so uncomfortable that the baby sometimes cries. I just can't bear it when my baby cries in class. It simply takes my concentration away and makes me so helpless in class ...'*

Similarly, a participant acknowledged the fact that:- *'... a good breaktime can be such a useful medicine to my body and soul. I need a comfortable rest at break ... Once relieved, learning becomes easier and more enjoyable because my baby also feels comfortable ...'*

From another participant the comments were straight-forward:- *'hmmm, this nursing-mother role is like one woman for a thousand jobs combined ooh. The baby's needs are usually thousand and one and adding mine, as a mother usually becomes unbearable. Yet mothers need concentration to study in such difficult situations. How is that possible?'*

#### **9.1.3.2 Need for an Information and Technology Center (ITC) at our Distance Learning Center**

A participant also had this to say when asked for what she needed:-

*'... I live in a compound house where the tenants often make so much noise at home. I usually get so disturbed and cannot study at home. Also the internet service at the place is so terrible. I often hot spot my phone but the network is so slow ... I will be happy if an ICT center is created close-by so that I can just come here during weekends to study and complete my assignments.'*

Similarly, another participant commented that:-

*'It will be good to have an ICT center here so that we can just come and do all our assignments and even study here. Many of us do not have the funds to buy laptops for use because they are very expensive these days so such a facility will be of great use to us.'*

#### **9.1.3.3 Need for more personal technological gadgets (laptops, smartphones and tablets)**

A participant simply said: *'I currently don't have a laptop and so have lots of assignments to catch up on. I sent my old one for repairs ... but the charge was so high I've not been able to go for it. Hmm, since my phone is a yam, It's been very difficult ... don't know what to do ... may be, I'll have to quit the programme'*

Another participant responded in the following words: *'... I just can't afford the ever-increasing data cost. It's so expensive for me. See, I've spent all my pocket money on data today and still I haven't even gone half way through my assignment. ....'*

A third participant was more open and frank about her needs. She said:- *'I really envy those who have personal smart phones and laptops .... It makes it easy for them to study at their own convenience. Some of us don't have it and it hurts ... it's just unfair!'*

## **9.2 Exclusive Counselling Needs of Distance Learners**

The following exclusive counselling needs were recorded by participants in the research.

### **9.2.1 Need for Time management skills**

Imminent in the research were participants' expressed concerns in the following words.

A research participant remarked that: *'My responsibilities at home and work are so many that I find it difficult combining them with my academics. I need help to enable me balance them all to optimize my academic performance.'*

Further probing of the point made, provided other responses like:- *'my work as a wife, teacher and mother keeps me busy, 24/7 so any help to enable me add my academic responsibilities will be appreciated ... in fact, this is my biggest challenge so far ... once I sort it out, I will be fine.'*

In another development, a participant noted thus:- *'In fact, my biggest problem is how to manage my time, ... I seem to run around everyday, trying to sort out one or two personal tasks before going online for my class, but I often find myself running late.... even last week, I only managed to join about 25 minutes after the class had started...'*

### **9.2.2 Need for suitable academic programme choice and counselling assistance**

Some research participants further registered some complaints about their registered programmes.

One of them said:- *'I've made such a terrible mistake that makes me sometimes feel like just quitting the entire course. I think I shouldn't have chosen this programme in the first place'*

Unable to hide his regrets any longer, a participant responded, while throwing his hands in the air uncontrollably at his interview. He simply remarked:-

*'I would have chosen a different programme of study if I had pre-entry counselling service. It seems a bit too late now and I so much regret the situation I currently find myself in'*

Sharing similar concerns, another participant had the following words to say:-

*'I sometimes get so confused with my academic work. I wish I could talk things over with a professional in my centre. It simply feels like you're stuck and there's just no way out for you'*

In another development, a participant also commented thus:-

*'I frankly thought it was going to be the usual classroom issues because it is B. Ed. I didn't know these were the topics under this course. I'm just not comfortable with the topics and thus find it difficult studying them.'*

In another development, another participant agreed that:-

*'I have been through a number of orientation programmes but none addresses my personal academic needs. It's so frustrating'*

### **9.2.3. Poor preparedness for the distance learning mode and need for academic resilience**

On the of her distance education programme, a participant said the following:-

*'I thought I was prepared for the course but the frustrations here are just too many. The class periods are so frequent and I'm beginning to feel like quitting it for now... I wonder how come I put myself in such a tight corner. ... I just feel like I'm drowning.'*

*'At sometimes, I simply feel like am stressing myself with this engagement.... I tend to think about doing something like business to make more money, rather than schooling, which is not working for me.'*

From a different participant:-

*'... my low mood times are becoming extremely many. I could really do with some motivators ...'*

*'Especially at exams time, the stress is usually high, making me feel like quitting and moving out of home to a completely different place all together'*

## **X. DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Based on the applied useful research methods and theoretical framework that anchored the study, the following personal academic and counselling distance learner needs emerged from the research.

In the first place, the need for collaboration and teamwork emerged as the most relevant of all the highlighted personal academic and counselling learner needs in the research. Not only was this attributable to the immense importance participants assigned to creating partnerships in their studies for enhanced academic outcomes, but also to meet their basic social and human needs (Salas et al., 2018 [48]; Pociask, Gross & Shih, 2017[49]). Salas et al. (2018) [48] assert that as social beings, it is essential for humans to establish efficient rapport with peers for personal need gratification and individual development. Teamwork for that matter does not only facilitate the achievement of greater academic exploits but also promotes the social aspects of human life, including finance, employment, health, education, development activities, family life and marriage just to mention a few (Salas et al., 2018 [48]). By this same means, both the Swedish government and also Croatian health science undergraduates recorded remarkable life progress (Puljak, Čiviljak, Haramina, Mališa, Čavić, Klinec, ... & Ivanišević, 2020 [51]; Giota, Lace & Emanuelsson, 2023 [52]). This makes it absolutely indisputable for all to avoid teaming with colleagues for diverse human accomplishments (Salas et al., 2018 [48]; Max-Neef, 2017 [30]; Goforth et al., 2014 [31]). Accordingly, Salas et al., (2018) alluded to the broader human desire for life advancement by aptly describing collaborative efforts as *'the collective is often stronger than the individual'* (p. 593 [48]). In likewise vein, important life gems such as *'two heads are better than one'*,



'no man is an island' and more especially, the typical African life philosophy dubbed 'Ubuntu', meaning, 'I am because we are', equally sanction the value of collaboration in life. The same interestingly implies that 'we are each other's keeper', hence the value of Africans' communal living mode, as the best way of instilling immense love, care and the spirit of togetherness in their children (Chowdhury, Abd Wahab, Saad, Roy, Hamidi & Ahmad, 2021 [50]). To crown it all, the interesting metaphor regarding collaboration for exclusive needs emerged with participants' call for teamwork to meet their individual exclusive academic needs in this research. In effect, while the research sought to promote both the exclusivity or individuality of distance learners and also the computerized learning mode, it equally effortlessly highlights the inherent potent general goal of diverse individual human endeavours for the common goal of overall life advancement. The aforementioned underscores the complexity of life in its entirety, and the relevance of constantly changing phases of life, as necessary for constant life advancement. Two life features thus emerge from the above discourses, first that unity among humans generates greater impactful efforts and secondly, that life without change or transformation is mundane and simply impossible.

Secondly in this research, time emerged as an invaluable life resource that necessitates careful management for greater benefits. It is noteworthy that the call by participants for sharper management skills to accommodate the many new academic duties clearly affirms the important saying that, 'time and tide waits for no man' and therefore making it essential for humans to endeavour to 'make hay while the sun shines' for them. Indeed, since wasted time is forever lost and poor time management often attracts dire consequences (Riazi, Nawi & Yaziz, 2020 [53]), the emphasized counselling need regarding time management is worth stressing in this research. Indisputably, participants' recorded frustrations and pain regarding their wrongfully chosen academic programmes, align with the need for efficient time management and decision-making. Griffin, (2021) [54] for instance agrees by asserting that time management is a paramount skill for efficient company managers, given their key responsibilities of planning, organizing, leading and controlling employee efforts. The aforementioned stresses the value of lost life assets as a result of poor time management. Most important are the poor health states and disturbing helplessness feelings expressed by research participants as a result of their lack of efficient time-management skills. It is thus important for learners to be certain they possess the reliable skills before enrolling in any such encounter. Feelings of regret often associated with lost time come with lots of pain and other crippling effects, making it important for careful time management as a critical learner needs. This makes it understandable that participants further urgently called for early counselling intervention and also for proper orientation, before their programme selection at the inception stage of their distance education programmes (Poalses et al., 2018 [55]; Amuaful, 2020 [56]). The finding further reflects the preventive and remediating roles of the counselling experience, in so far as it addresses perturbing experiences such as confusion, anxiety, fear of failure and frustration, many of which culminate in poor mental health conditions among learners. The disastrous nature of poor mental health that culminates from experiences such as anxiety, stress and frustration (Ocansey & Gyimah 2015[27]; Nazilah, 2021 [57]) are worth-noting in this instance (Pulist et al., 2020[26]; Rahmat et al., 2021 [13]). Amuaful, (2020) [56] on the other hand highlights significant academic counselling roles like sharpening reading and note-taking skills, positive study habits, deeper academic concentration and self-reinforcement. Especially in respect of their usually isolated positions, counselling features prominently in augmenting students' academic efforts (Nazilah, 2021 [57]).

## XI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research speaks volumes about the exclusive distance learner needs and experiences at the investigated research site. Key lessons learnt include the important dichotomy of human individuality that easily emerges through both collaboration and exclusive needs, and more especially, the need for social relations among humans at specific times to promote greater achievement. It is worth noting that though humans are similar in many respects, they are also different in many ways. Yet since we need each other, we must realise that *together we stand, divided we fall*. Summarily, life is never static, hence accepting emergent change with prior-planning for future transformations to attain the remarkable life advancement desired by all is deeply important.

## XII. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the aforementioned findings, the researcher recommends the following:-

- Provide a well-endowed counselling centre at all distance learning centres for use by learners once they visit the centre.
- Assign competent and professional counsellors to learners in various departments and year groups for the provision of appropriate student support services.
- Schedule a weekly on-line and physical counselling periods for learners, and frequently advertise the schedules to learners.
- Create an online platform for motivational and uplifting messages for use by learners

- Ensure consistent stock-taking of the centre's facilities and maintain a robust maintenance culture at the distance learning centre.
- Create counselling service awareness at the freshers' orientation to attract new clients to patronize the service.

### **XIII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The encountered challenges during data collection reflected some key limitations for the study. First, the delayed research permission received from institutional gate-keepers, and the inconsistent schedules of face-to-face schedules adopted at the research site culminated in the imbalanced gender composition of the sample. This resulted in accessing lesser male views on the research focus, as opposed to the original plan to maintain a gender balance and therefore access a well-balanced set of views on the research focus. However, the credible and detailed findings generated from the research cannot in anyway be compromised, despite the obvious research limitations.

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