Students Perceptions on Distance Education in Ethiopian Higher Education:
Exploring the Experience of Haramaya University

Yilfashewa Seyoum, Haramaya University, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

The study explores students' perceptions in open and distance education at Haramaya University. A total of 120 students (90 male and 30 female) represent the study sample. Data were collected from the audience through a questionnaire which consisted of open ended items with a reliability of α equal to 0.96. The collected data were analyzed using t-test, ANOVA (One-way &Two-way) and the Pearson Product Moment Correlation(r). The results disclosed a considerable proportion of students' have the perceptions that the quality of distance education system in general and the distance teacher training program in particular ranges from moderate to poor. Female learners' demonstrate lower perceptions of the quality of the program while their male counterpart demonstrates high quality perceptions. There is a positive correlation between academic score and perceptions score. Married learners show a lower level of academic achievement compared to those who are unmarried. The natural science students have better academic performance and higher perceptions scores than social science and language students. And, high achievers show significant higher perceptions than the low and average achievers. In addition, diploma students demonstrate higher perceptions scores than the BA/BSC or certificate students with regards to the ODL system of education.

Keywords: *Distance Learning (DL), Ethiopia, Haramaya University, Higher Education, Open & Distance Learning (ODL), Open Learning (OL), Perception*

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is emerging as a vigorous educational alternative in nearly every corner of the world. Many developed and developing nations now use it as a potent tool for the development of human resources. McIsaac (1990) indicates that the move towards maturity in distance education is reflected not only in the proliferation of research in the field, but much more significantly, in the changes in quantity and quality of distance education programs themselves. With the developments of high technology and globalization, social, cultural, educational aspects of life become different and get better in terms of time, space and communi-

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cation. Distance Education provides fast, easy education opportunities for everyone without concentrating time, distance, and space limitations. Today there are huge tendencies from students for participating in distance education to live the sense of self-development, achievement and responsibility (İŞMAN et al., 2004).

Research in the area of distance education specified that the commencement of distance education in Ethiopia goes back to 1967 when the Ministry of Education collaborated with Addis Ababa University (AAU) to establish a Correspondence Study Unit under the Extension Division of AAU (Teshome & Thomas, 2001). Unfortunately, it had neither the necessary infrastructure nor the expertise in designing, developing and implementing its educational program in an effective and efficient manner. However, following the implementation of the New Education and Training Policy, the Ministry of Education developed *Education Sector Development Programs* to bring change in the education system of the country. One of the programs designed was open and distance education. Education Sector Development Program II has clearly put it the indispensability of distance education:

Distance education will be used as a tool for teacher training in primary and secondary education, especially to reach the under qualified primary school teachers. ...It will serve as information source for the public at large. Therefore, widening the coverage and improving the quality of the programs will be given due emphasis. Moreover, all REBs will be assisted to strengthen and organize Distance Education Units to implement and evaluate distance education programs closely. (MOE, 2002)

It is to be recalled that in collaboration with universities and colleges in the country, a scheme called "17,000 projects" had been undertaken through which about 21,400 elementary school teachers were upgraded their qualification to diploma level (MOE, 2002). A few years ago, IICBA / UNESCO, together with Ethiopian and other Universities in abroad, has been offering advanced certificate in school management, a post-graduate diploma in distance education and MA degrees in distance education as well as in the teaching of subject area methodology at the level of post graduate education. Subsequently, about 24 CPI (Critical Practitioner Inquiry) candidates from six National Universities had been following M.Ed program. The program was initiated by IICBA / UNESCO and aimed at making teacher educators analyze what is happening in their classrooms, and to examine the official policies that lead them to improve their practices. Today, a considerable number of private and government institutions in Ethiopia have been delivering their training through open and distance mode of education.

It is a well known fact that good practices and successful implementation of distance education can take place when there are a positive inclinations and accurate perceptions of stakeholders on the program. A study under the area of Distance Education (DE) in Ethiopia concluded that the program besides suffering from lack of good leadership "passing through a period of doldrums which seems to be the result of long neglect, under-financing, under-staffing and a lack of attentiveness to the program" (Stone, 1988). A review of distance education program, points out that although distance education learners enjoy the opportunity of studying courses through distance learning having the material to hand for a long period of time and tutorial classes with instructors, they were not satisfied with the nature of the contents covered, the quality of the self- instructional materials, the inadequacy of the supplementary materials, the tutorial classes, the function of study center as well as the nature of assignments and examination of distance education courses (Wallelign, 2003).

Similarly, a summary on another study of DE concluded that despite its promises and obvious advantages; there are problems that need to be resolved. These problems include the quality of instruction, hidden costs, misuse of technology, and the attitudes of instructors, students, and administrators (Bates, 1995). Each