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# Achieving human potential through community learning centres in Ghana: a capabilities approach to community development

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses Sen's Capabilities Approach (CA), which prioritises access and equality, to critically investigate distance education (DE) programmes in the community learning centres (CLCs) as a programme that sheds light on how to best promote a community's residents' quality of life in Ghana. According to this study, encouraging distance learning in CLCs can have an impact on community development. To investigate how DE in CLCs aids community development, this study used a qualitative case study methodology and conducted in-depth interviews with students and service providers ( $n=25$ ) from the Greater Accra CLCs. Key emerging themes included fostering equity in the community and encouraging access and opportunity for learning through DE. Studies have demonstrated that the more active and knowledgeable individuals are, the greater their independence from families and, consequently, on the resources and services of the community. Additionally, engaged-educated people contribute to the development of their communities through the knowledge, expertise, and experience they have gained. Hence, Sen's capability approach, which seeks to comprehend issues of access and opportunities in the community, makes the connection between studies in CLCs and community development. It is, therefore, imperative to conclude that CLCs are designed to offer learning activities for adults to promote an active lifestyle that contributes to the development of sustainable communities.

## KEYWORDS

Community development; community learning centres; capabilities approach; sustainable communities; adult learning

## Introduction

Although the value of community learning centres (CLCs) to community development is generally acknowledged (Nind 2016, Agyekum 2023, Clancy *et al.* 2023), there are still numerous concerns about the mechanisms for successful policy and practise. It is challenging to establish a single, well-recognised definition of community development since it covers several variables that operate in concert to

enhance people's well-being. It is suggested that CLC promotion in our communities can have a big impact on community growth. In this context, CLCs have developed to satisfy community expectations. The way that CLCs shape and are influenced by local narratives and practises of distance learning, however, is one of the areas that has gotten comparably less attention in the debate on sustainable and community development. Agyekum (2023) acknowledges that distance learning is no longer a desirable choice but rather a need in our societies. He adds that the COVID-19 pandemic, among other reasons, made it even more important to use distance learning as a method of instruction. Theoretically, emphasising DE through CLCs for adults may be positioned in relation to the social and human aspects of community development. Even though work on CLCs and community development is implicitly discussed throughout the literature that is currently available in the fields of education and sustainable communities (McCabe 2014, Vorley and Williams 2015, Watts *et al.* 2022), it has not been explicitly theorised. This is somewhat true when one looks at the literature on community development, where CLC-related concerns are seldom ever connected to current, sustainable discussions about community inclusion and wellbeing (Tay 2021). As a result, little is known about the methods through which institutions establish inclusive education with the help of and in connection with CLCs to influence community development.

Given the foregoing, this paper examines some of the important ways that CLC efforts and distance learning programmes are integrated into discourses and discussions about their role in community development and sustainable local communities to fill in some of these gaps (Lynch *et al.* 2021, Ridzi and Cyrus 2023). Moreover, community well-being has many facets and defies easy description, according to Merriam and Kee (2014) argument. These facets include economic, social, cultural, environmental, and other elements that interact to determine community well-being. In this article, it is argued that encouraging distance learning at community learning centres (CLCs) among the populace may enhance community development by promoting optimal quality of life for community members. To strengthen our stance, we connect Sen's (2002) assertion that the functioning of certain organisational structures, progress follows the increase of human capacities and possibilities to the need to make education readily available at the doorsteps of community members.

Thus, the capabilities approach (CA), which is still understudied in the field of education, provides a framework to outline the enormous prospects provided by CLCs. The CA promotes educational equality via the provision of support services that would allow individuals to reach their potential and participate in valued community work as a framework. As a result, the study's goal was to investigate how learners in the Greater Accra Region CLCs experienced learning support and the services they deemed beneficial to ensure they have meaningful learning experiences. The choice of the Accra CLCs is because they hold over 85% of the University of Ghana CLC students (UG 2023). Even though research on distance education is growing, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to specifically examine the experiences of DE students in the CLC and the promotion of community development in Ghana. This study is different from previous research since it looks at students in the two Greater Accra LCs instead of merely people's opinions on DE curriculum. Essentially, this paper seeks to explore the potential for distance learning

through community learning centres to enhance the capabilities of learners, mainly through the lens of Sen's CA theory. Furthermore, the investigation of this incident within the contexts of community development and CLC significantly enhances the uniqueness of the findings. Thus, the aim of our study was to examine how distance learners understood CLCs; the challenges they experienced negotiating higher education in non-traditional educational environments; and the kind of support services they would need to maintain and develop their abilities, and ultimately serve their communities.

### **Promoting community development through community learning centres**

The capacities approach (CA) is a thought-provoking concept that questions the nature and scope of social justice. It provides a useful framework for social justice to be implemented, monitored, and assessed via people's lived experiences. Amartya Sen (2002) created the CA to change welfare economics. It promotes a person's genuine freedom to do – 'things that they may value doing or being' (Sen 2002, p. 232) – rather than focusing on access to resources like money and communal assets. As asserted by Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur (2016), the CA is a framework for encouraging more educational fairness as it is a human development approach. Furthermore, it offers a framework for supporting procedures that allow people to learn in their communities in the context of CLC's efforts in Ghana. Theoretically, concentrating on community members' learning opportunities may be positioned within the human and social capital elements of community development. The CA states that to improve community wellness and lifestyle quality, human and social capital must be strengthened.

Moreover, it is important to stress that the goal of this study is not to discredit Ghana's efforts at advancing community education. Instead, it is an effort to broaden the definition of initiative to include a focus on helping communities access and give support for learning opportunities, which we believe will open significant doors for empowerment of the citizenry. To build on this body of work, we adopt Martha Nussbaum's conceptualisation of CA, which she describes as intervention modes and strategies for citizenship, social inclusion, and justice domains (Nussbaum 2006). According to Robeyn (2005), CA refers to initiatives 'to better understand people's hope, desires, aspirations, and decisions'. The basic idea is that when human talents and opportunities increase, empowerment naturally follows. The framework's goal is to provide the community with a structure that promotes a variety of what the World Health Organisation (WHO 1999) referred to as 'functional capacity'—the capability to perform correctly in one's culture. In this regard, the CLCs offer instruction which gives students information that is both academically and culturally pertinent, enabling them to be helpful members of their communities first and secondly global citizens.

While the CLC effort has made significant contributions to enhancing community wellness for individuals who would have missed out on normal campus programming, there is debate on the programme's satisfaction and success (Amponsah *et al.* 2021; Agyekum 2020). In an endeavour to enhance the CLC initiatives in Ghana, concerns have been expressed concerning the unofficial or absence of policy guidelines (Ouma

and Nkuyabwatsi 2019; Akuamoah-Boateng et al. 2018). These issues are likened to those raised by Bye *et al.* (2020) that for institutions to compete in the community, they should implement policies that encourage the creation of social capital, or community-led initiatives (see Henfrey *et al.* 2023). This is in line with Brookfield's (2012) question, 'What kind of lifelong learning develops communities in a critical way?' to which the authors suggested the following answers: establishing collective identity, developing agency, and learning to develop community structures and processes. Speaking at a meet-the-press event on COVID-19 and education in Accra in March 2020, the then Minister of Education of Ghana, Dr. Matthew Opoku Prempeh noted that the government, through the National Council for Tertiary Education, had partnered with the Open University, United Kingdom (UK) to support the development of CLC programmes in Ghana. This was done to address the COVID-19 outbreak and the large number of free senior high school students coming from the secondary system. He mentioned that negotiations had progressed and that students may access a gateway through Ghanaian universities, thanks to Open University (Kale-Dery 2020).

Despite these beneficial partnerships, the lack of proper planning and uncoordinated implementation of CLC activities may have detrimental effects on communities (Hurd and Stanton 2022). The CA gives policy initiatives the opportunity to move beyond individualistic conceptualizations and pursue the implementation of a wide variety of potential processes that are shaped by the specific community in which they are being used (see White *et al.* 2016, Hurd and Stanton 2022).

It is worth pointing out that the capabilities perspective also helps us comprehend human empowerment, one of the core aspects of human development. According to Dreze and Sen (2002, p. 6), social possibilities, such as community access to education, are crucial for fostering 'the realm of human agency and freedom, both as an end in itself and as a means of further expanding freedom.' In this sense, Nussbaum's contribution has been to strengthen the CA's focus on the human 'story' to comprehend peoples' freedom and societal functioning.

It is crucial to mention DeJaeghere and Baxter (2014) and Walkington *et al.* (2018) observation that the CA has been widely embraced and used in the fields of education and community development. In this regard, the CLCs' on-going education lays the groundwork for future capability growth as people with good education are noted to function successfully in the information society as noted by Sir Michael Barber. In this sense, education is a fundamental requirement without which most people find it difficult to advance their careers and gain personal power, especially in the technology-driven age and information explosion era. This is consistent with the 'tradition of interdependence' (Brookfield 2012), which maintains that the welfare of the individual and the collective (in this case, the community) cannot be separated.

In essence, the CA aims to provide people the opportunity to live lives they value, empowering them to take charge of their own lives as well as the lives of the community (Deneulin & Shahani 2009). For instance, the goal of CLCs is to increase community access to education (opportunity) and the flexibility to choose from these options. The 'causal importance that they have for well-being' should thus be considered when evaluating institutions and activities, including CLCs (Alkire

2008, p. 33). Also, the CA's application to CLCs in Ghana presents the following issues for consideration: Do CLCs increase the chances of (students') abilities? Does the role of CLCs serve to increase or decrease community members' capacities, functions, and freedoms?

Regarding the goal of the capabilities approach to CLCs, there are two notable points to put across as some researchers have urged for a more complex construction of success in community education. First, it goes beyond the acquisition of information for the development of human capital (see Cunninghame and Pitman 2020). Second, it highlights the university's added responsibility in creating conditions that promote human flourishing in communities without diminishing its function in building human capital. For instance, participation in CLCs may be strategically important in the creation of networks and relationships that offer students support, assistance, and a feeling of community (Bye *et al.* 2020). As a result, non-completers in other areas of life may benefit from the enabling environment that encourages the growth of networks and linkages (Cunninghame and Pitman 2020).

Lastly, the CA emphasises the necessity to investigate structural socioeconomic and political hurdles that hinder individuals from making use of a variety of advantages and opportunities in their communities as the expansion of these liberties is crucial for society's development. Although CLC promotion of innovations might be extremely expensive, they can have a significant positive influence on the community. It is in this light that the CA is considered crucial in directing CLC programmes which aim to offer and encourage development for many people. We conclude that such efforts align with Sen's observation that human growth necessitates the development of human capacities.

### **University of Ghana Community Learning Centres (UGCLCs)**

The landscapes, populations, and physical features of the University of Ghana's community learning centres are diverse, but several contextual similarities link the centres as places to support inclusive education and community development. According to Kwapong (2008), the foundation of open and remote learning is the safest approach to increase the number of women in communities who have access to education. We add that the CLCs have opened doors for all potential students who could have been prevented from receiving formal education owing to a variety of external and internal circumstances.

There are eleven CLCs in the country (UG 2023) with about 12,500 students registered (UG 2023). Thus, the selection of UGCLCs represents analytical representation by deliberate sampling. Before 2014, all courses run at the CLCs were taught in-person. From 2014 the hybrid model, that combined online learning (via the Sakai LMS) during the weekdays and in-person tutorials on the weekends to enable students to engage with classmates and instructors. The courses were moved to a totally online format for lessons and different exam modalities due to the lockdowns caused by COVID-19 in March 2020 (Amponsah 2021). After COVID-19, the customary blended mode has been kept in place. Five diploma programmes, four first-degree programmes, and four certificate programmes are offered by the CLC course (UG 2023).

A Ph.D.-holding senior faculty members oversee the CLCs. They are supported by administrators, organisers, IT officers and other staff. Among other amenities that support teaching and learning, many learning centres contain state-of-the-art computer labs, video conference rooms, and smart classrooms. Admissions into the CLCs are done through direct admission for applicants with the necessary university qualifications or through the Mature Access Entrance Programme for applicants 25 years of age and older. Applicants in the latter category without prior academic qualifications are taken through courses in English Language, Mathematics, and Logic. Once they pass an entrance exam in these subjects, they are admitted into the DE programme and assigned to the CLCs based on their preference. According to Belete *et al.* (2022), CLCs are appropriate for literacy and basic skills, continuing education, and vocational skills, liberal, popular, and community education, as well as citizenship skills which are all linked to lifelong learning.

The purpose of this study is not to demonstrate how well the CLCs fit the capabilities approach. Sen (1999, p. 295) argue that the true essence of the CA is to help individuals 'lead more worthwhile and more free lives'. Thus, this study has a goal to leverage CA's discoveries regarding the ways that CLCs enhance the evolution of human capacities. The CA holds that any restriction of educational rights, whether due to finances or geographic location, amounts to the loss of capacities. The literature on community development provides precedence for conceptualising CLCs as a function of opportunities and freedoms, maybe even in promoting equality in education. Although CLCs have a great deal of potential for good, other scholars have observed that the overwhelming emphasis on equality and inclusivity associated with CLCs obscures the structural inequality that CA seeks to address and reframes it as a matter of people's lives (Taylor 2012; Terzi 2014). That is, merely having a place for studying at the community level does not advance equality. Modern facilities should be made available to meet the demands of students, as the CA aims to encourage.

Like any other well-meaning institutions, the UGCLCs seek to contribute to the human development of members in the communities. Hence, it has the objectives and mission to widen access to education in the communities through technology-mediated and traditional forms of learning. For instance, it was discovered through a survey of 210 CLC students that the students' needs for professional development, self-development, and better-paying jobs were being met due to the education made possible at the CLCs (Amponsah *et al.* 2018). Despite the substantial advancements CLCs have seen, Simpson (2015) stated that the graduation rate of students in CLCs is lower than that of students in mainstream institutions. Based on this, Paniagua and Simpson (2018) criticised the trend as concerning and demanded that action be taken strategically to reverse the trend. Sarmah and Das (2010) advocated for the development of a supportive learning environment among students, faculty, and administrators to reduce the obstacles faced by distance learners in this context. The CLCs have several challenges, such as a lack of resources to address the unique problems that face CLCs and meet learners' service demands (Kirkup 2014, Berry and Hughes 2020, Lee 2020). While there are many difficulties in providing services and support for teaching and learning to students using all types of learning environments, supporting CLCs will promote inclusive education in our communities.

## Methodology

This study followed Rashid *et al.* (2019)'s description of the qualitative case study method. The purpose of qualitative research, according to Creswell (2013), is to investigate a topic and come to a thorough knowledge of a specific phenomenon. Also, the qualitative approach to research enables the discovery of insider [participants'] viewpoints. It is in this light that we employed the approach to gauge whether the UGDE programme is enhancing their human potentials of the study participants. Purposive sampling, according to Merriam (2009), is based on what chosen participants already know about the subject of the research. The fundamentals of purposive sampling, according to Van Wyk and Toale (2015), are consistent with qualitative research, which is more concerned with thorough and in-depth analysis than with statistical correctness. As a result, the purposive sample ( $n=25$ ) for this study included 15 students, six supporting staff members and four managers from the two CLCs where this study was conducted. Purposive sampling was done with recourse to diversity in gender, discipline (programme), and student population. Through their CLCs, students were enlisted as participants. Being a registered student with the CLCs was one of the requirements for inclusion. The participants in this research were drawn from the University of Ghana's two Greater Accra CLCs (Accra and Tema), which enrol almost 85% of DE students (UG 2023).

The University's Ethics Committee for the Humanities approved an ethical clearance certificate with the code ECH/037/19-20 for this study as a component of a wider project by the School of Continuing and Distance Education that investigated the educational needs of adult learners in Ghana. The researchers created interview guides with 11–12 semi-structured questions for each participant group (Appendices 1 and 2). Between August and November 2020, the two investigators interviewed three stakeholder groups for 30–40 min on the average. The English Language was used for all the interviews. To enhance the flow of questions and facilitate easy interpretation, the first set of questions was examined and improved. Interviews with eight students and three service providers/managers were conducted in person, over the phone with five students and six service providers/managers, and through Zoom with one student and two service providers/managers. The three interviewing methods were chosen for the research participants' convenience. The semi-structured interview questions were used to ensure consistency. The interviewers took field notes after each interview on their observations of the interviews, which the researchers then discussed. Through extra understanding beyond what was given by the language of the transcripts, this technique helped to contextualise the findings. This was extremely helpful in making links between the interviewees' statements and current policies and practices, or to parallels in obstacles to existing CLC support seen in other interviews, or even the interviewer's perceptions of how the interviews were conducted. To allow the participants to dive further into the topics under examination, the key research questions that drove the interview focused mostly on 'what' and 'how' inquiries. These questions also gave the researchers the chance to delve deeper into the responses provided by the study participants.

All participants were informed of the study's goal by the researchers prior to the start of data collection. It was emphasised that the researchers would not divulge

their names or any other form of information that identifies them to maintain research ethics. Data were gathered, transcribed verbatim, reviewed, assessed, and then subjected to thematic analysis. The multi-perspective study points out significant upstream aspects connected with the growth of CLCs in Ghana and reveals difficulties that go beyond the conventional socioeconomic drivers. The data analysis included several stages. The first stage involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify initial themes that emerged from the perspectives of the participants. Next, the themes and sub-themes identified that had similar interpretations were coded into conceptual categories, reducing the overall number of themes. Major themes that emerged were interpreted through the lens of Sen's CA (2002). A senior researcher in the College of Education of the University of Ghana, who is an expert in qualitative research was given access to the original recorded versions of the interviews and transcripts after the data analysis process was complete to validate the reliability and authenticity of the content in relation to respondents' answers to the questions that emerged from the analysed data. Additionally, we performed member checking to verify our data.

## Findings

The study's objectives, which were developed in accordance with Sen's (2002) capability theory, are reflected in the findings in this section. These objectives pertain to the participants' experiences of learning environments, such as community development and learning opportunities, challenges encountered in CLCs, and strategies for maintaining LC quality.

### *Promoting opportunities in the CLCs*

#### *Equity in the community*

To bring education to everyone's door, the capabilities approach (CA) is emphasised as a framework for fostering better community equity. The CLC plan addresses potential conflicts that may develop when people strive to realise their aspirations are conflicting with other duties, broadening the variety of choices, and promoting wellness. It does this by embracing equitable opportunity to education at all levels. In learning communities, accessibility to educational courses encourages vital community learning processes that lead to 'the accumulation of social capital' by those communities. In attempts to broaden access to education through CLCs, a lack of fairness in learning has been noted. Being depicted as essential to human growth is equity. As a result, the CA encourages fairness by expanding choices and freedoms to support CLCs and enhance wellbeing (see White *et al.* 2016). Participants talked on the various possibilities that CLCs provide to various community members:

I'm working, yet I'm able to pursue my dream. The reason is it [CLC] will give most people the opportunity to engage in learning to better themselves (Fourth year female student).

I think for me it has been a learning curve that I am harnessing so far as in the CLC compared to the regular style of pedagogy. It's exciting so far (Second year male student).

Adult participants in CLC courses may enjoy the opportunity they provide for both their socioeconomic and non-economic advantages. Community education can have both economic and non-economic value. For instance, the CLC offers a chance for future financial gain, such as money from a job and a shift in a person's social position. Participants expressed that they would advise other prospective members to learn through the CLCs. A participant suggested:

I will recommend [CLCs] repeatedly because University of Ghana CLCs have brought hope to the hopeless. I'm working, yet I'm able to pursue my dream (Second year female student).

CLCs give people the chance to follow their aspirations who would not have been able to attend a traditional university. Participants view the existence of CLC's option as a chance to realise their social, economic, and educational objectives, enabling them to remove the obstacle to inclusive education. One of the service providers echoed what was said above:

*Students have what they need if they commit to learning, they have the library here and IT resources, and they can access materials from other libraries at the university campus. I think they are getting most of what they want compared to other communities and other institutions (Service Provider #3).*

### **Getting support and maintaining community ties**

One participant stated that their goals while choosing the CLCs were 'becoming financially stable and having own living space in the community [as opposed to] moving to a university campus], which can be called permanent'. Another participant shared how her decision to attend the CLC was impacted by her desire to preserve her cultural and religious identity in the community. Some participants also indicated that having family nearby preserves their cultural identity, allows them to depend on others in an emergency, and even helps with basic daily tasks like babysitting. When asked to provide further details about their needs to be close to family and friends, A participant voiced out:

When you're close, sometimes they prefer [family and friends] to view it as a community member helping to ensure your well-being. So, when I must rush to class, the people I know help me with my kids (Third year female student).

Adults who needed to continue their education while taking care of their families on the weekends, especially those with children, found this assistance to be crucial. It is clear from the findings that a variety of individuals were engaged in community-based learning and that groups were maintained by the support of their families and peers.

### **Challenges in the CLCs**

The capabilities approach is focused on the individual's freedom to realise their talents and engage in valued functioning, as well as the structural and personal variables that might help or impede them. Participants spoke on the numerous support services they get, such as counselling, IT help, library support, and online

support. However, the mere fact that these support services are offered does not guarantee equitable access to them. Participants felt that the CLCs' poor services and support programmes prevented them from fulfilling their potential as individuals and from enriching their individuality. Feelings of despair and dissatisfaction resulted from such situations. Below are explanations of the numerous support and services themes that have come out of this study.

### ***Economic condition***

Policies and initiatives should support social equality, socioeconomic advancement, and individual well-being, according to the capabilities approach. According to the findings of this study, most financial aid schemes accessible to regular on-campus students at state institutions do not accept full fee-paying members of CLCs in Ghana. These viewpoints, which were expressed by both service providers and students, highlight how critical it is to provide alternative financial support systems and educational opportunities that will allow CLC students to pursue and complete their education in their local communities:

Sometimes I go out soliciting for funds to help needy community learners. I have been able to get individual organisations because the Students' Financial Aid Office doesn't offer CLC students any financial help. CLC students are fee-paying students, so I try other organisations and so far, there have been some help. The GETFUND [*Ghana Education Trust Fund*] does help and so far, we have several students getting funding from them. (Service Provider #4).

A student also commented:

We are unsure where we can get access to financial resources. It is very difficult for us to get such information on funding (Third year male student).

Initiatives may occasionally concentrate primarily on certain ways to increase community development capability. For instance, focusing more broadly on better subjective well-being and human development rather than having a clear understanding of what the desired 'end' truly is (i.e., students quitting their studies for lack of cash), to achieve higher success. This is what another Service Provider said:

Aside from the academic support, we sometimes also offer counselling services and then we also introduce them to institutions that can offer them support in terms of finance (Service Provider #1).

### ***Conflicting responsibilities***

Many of the participants interviewed reflected that seeking support from their programme coordinators and other staff in the CLCs is one strategy for overcoming the difficulties of participating in CLC programmes. The social wellbeing provided by managers of CLCs – include the concerns, affection, encouragement and caring CLC students need to realise their potential throughout the programme. CLC programmes can be a bit different with most adults having conflicting roles. Given the daunting nature of juggling several activities, pursuing programmes in the CLCs may result in changes in family, job, and social life. The conflicting responsibilities

of school, career, and family are that. Some CLC students might not have the familial support they require, which makes it difficult for them to fully enjoy their CLCs. For instance, a student bemoaned:

It is too stressful and exhausting in the sense that the institutions do not put much effort or consideration into the needs of students in this programme. The tutorial sessions and many assignments put us under pressure, too much pressure on us. (Third year female student).

Considering the results of the interviews, it is evident that CLC students are enrolled in courses that are out of alignment with their career goals since there are fewer courses available at the learning centres than there are on the conventional main campus. One of the participants used the following terms to describe how the few available programmes affected his career plan:

I had very negative experience on my programme in the learning centre, but I attributed it to the characteristics of the CLC in which I am pursuing this programme. The programmes are limited, and after my second year, I realised that I wanted to continue my career in the food sciences, I realised that I did not want to study in the CLCs because they could not offer me the programme of my choice (Third year male student).

These extracts support the idea that CLCs may be enhanced by paying attention to adult learners' preferred methods of learning in addition to pedagogical concerns and practical difficulties. Such access and opportunity difficulties obstruct CLC students' ability to develop their skills, which will impede their attempts to support the development of the community.

### ***Challenges with the CLC delivery system***

The ability of CLCs to effectively manage their learning requirements rests heavily on how well they can use the learning management system (LMS) and other information sources that have been approved by the university. This is one of the topics that came out of the participants' perceptions about how to use and comprehend the LMS. Participants talked about how challenging it was for students to grasp and use the sophisticated learning management system (LMS), particularly for new students. One service provider said:

The system is a bit complicated. Even for me, it is really complicated as someone who has been using the system for a couple of years (Service Provider #1).

Another service provider explained:

*Mmm, earlier on, when we started the blended learning approach, the students were not conversant with the state of the art or the SAKAI Learning Management Platform, so it led to several challenges with several students re-sitting [referring to re-take of assessments] (Service Provider #2).*

Student interviews pointed towards the difficulty in accessing the LMS as well as their support needs. The extraordinary efforts needed in the context of accessing online materials and other engagements were recognised:

Complicated sometimes, especially with Sakai online system since network connectivity is a major challenge for me in terms of actively participating in online tutorials, quizzes, assignments, and forums (Second year female student).

The providers claimed that the university has implemented measures, such as hiring IT officers in each CLC, to help and teach students in using and navigating the LMS with a minimum of difficulty. These are steps to provide people the chance to grow their capacities and participate in worthwhile functioning.

### **Communication barriers**

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the staff's mismatched referrals and poor information quality because of the inefficient information transfer between the office and students. The knowledge necessary for a student's full growth was noted to be spread, making it challenging for new students to obtain. Sometimes, to obtain information about certain services, students must go from their numerous villages to the main office at UG.

Support services, ehmm, at times students are trying to reach other centres and they tell them the phones are off, so obviously you wouldn't be able to get what they want so students try to get in touch with whatever number they can reach. Students have challenges with getting the right information. Sometimes they call and they may not be able to get help immediately. In a nutshell, communication is a major barrier (Service Provider #3).

In Berge's (2013) description of CLC communication hurdles, CLC programme design, development, delivery, or implementation are all included. Students must obtain knowledge, communicate ideas, and quickly feel and comprehend to teach and learn. Participants were questioned about their perceptions of communication between the community and the university, faculty, and staff to further emphasise this. According to one student, her experience was not encouraging. *'It's horrible, extremely poor,' said a male fourth year student.*

### **Limitation of ICT, practical labs for nursing students, and library spaces in the community**

The lack of services like ICT labs, practical laboratories, and libraries is one of the CLC barriers to human development that we discovered, and which the programme attempts to overcome. The CA method also considers the factors in education that have an impact on learning, especially how effectively distant learners may participate in academic activities. The availability of these resources in the CLCs to facilitate learning drew varying responses. One of the services providers stated the following:

For libraries, I think there is adequate, or somehow moderate number of books where students can access but they maximize the use of the library when it is getting to exams. In normal times, they don't use it [*patronize the library facility in the community centres*] until when it is close to exam before they use the library (Service Provider #2).

While others have praised the infrastructure support for the CLCs, many participants reported that support services—such as ICT, practical labs, and

libraries—necessary for the learners’ optimal growth and development are not always present in some of the learning communities and are scattered throughout different communities and the main campus, making it difficult to access them:

For now, the facilities support theory but getting to the end we will be doing more practical and clearly the facilities are not there to support practical learning sessions (Second year female student).

Participants felt that the communities’ lack of ICT and library services is hindering the development of human agency and freedom:

We are left out in terms of basic resources like Internet access, a sound teaching-learning environment, lecturer/tutor feedback on Sakai, especially, timely circulation of information, etc. (Third year female student).

### Maintaining quality in the CLCs

A first central element of the CLC quality strategy depends on the capability and motivation of the instructors, quality infrastructure and materials, quality of teaching, and instructor training, among other things. This is an attempt at capabilities approach analytic that emphasises the quality maintaining process of CLCs to obtain quality learning outcomes. To encourage certain learning outcomes in the form of capabilities, CLC environments must be of a certain calibre. Here, two service providers compared their current quality assurance to the parallels they drew with it:

The university of Ghana is supposed to facelift most of their CLCs because if the centres are facelifted facilities will be at par with what we have at Legon campus [University of Ghana campus] and it will help. I conducted research in CLC A [Centre’s name withheld] and one of the shortcomings was that we did not have a lot of qualified tutors and because of that they [students] always wanted to move to Accra. This is because Accra is where you can get all the qualified tutors and resources. (Service Provider #6).

We have a monitoring system.... a monitoring....an internal monitoring mechanism which is very rigorous and that also err comes under my unit and it has erred an architecture which runs up to the day and you can understand how rigorous it is (Service Provider #5).

Such statements from the service providers emphasise the CLCs’ strategies for ensuring quality in their delivery. As demonstrated by Daniel (2012) and Hoosen and Butcher (2012) there is a struggle with the delivery of instruction everywhere but always somewhere, with a muddled image problem of poor excellence and substandard. We next asked students what variables they thought affected the CLC programme’s quality, and two of them shared the following opinions:

Unavailability of lecturers [only Tutors instruct on the programme], centre not resourced and lack of effective online engagements. Many things are lacking (Second year male student).

My learning centre is not conducive, the community lacks the necessary facilities to achieve effective learning (Fourth year male student).

There are undeniably significant issues that, if nothing is done to improve the situation, will continue to negatively impact students' and communities' capacity improvement. According to the statistics on the CLCs (UG 2023), the Accra CLC has more resources than the others, which makes it a preferred location at the cost of the other CLCs. It is vital to note that the student's claim that they are exclusively taught by tutors is true, but that this is standard for distance learning. Perhaps the issue is the calibre of the instructors more than a need that university lecturers instruct DE students at the CLCs.

## Discussion and conclusion

Like many other CLCs, the University of Ghana DE programme, run through the CLCs, has frequently been cited as a method for community education and as a chance to advance inclusive education (Perraton 2008, Fidalgo 2012, Fidalgo *et al.* 2020). These claims have been supported by this study, which found that Ghanaians are open to learning at CLCs. This is in line with other studies that have looked at the potential of CLCs as options for higher educational institutions to keep and grow their student population in the communities (Allen and Seaman 2017, Nakamura 2017, Fidalgo *et al.* 2020). The CA's application to CLCs serves to emphasise how crucial it is to gain a broad understanding of what members of specific community's value as being crucial to how they want to realise their capabilities as opportunities for enhancing knowledge, skills, and well-being (see White *et al.* 2016). The CLCs' emphasis on inclusive education may be compared with the potential for quality problems to go unnoticed when using accessibility strategies to address quality concerns. The inclusion of community education in the capabilities approach, as argued by Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur (2016), enables the migration away from the constraints imposed by the binary thinking of CLC as either inclusive or exclusive and instead calls for a comprehensive review of these programmes and an evaluation of how the programmes contribute both positively and negatively to individual development, families, and communities. As structures, support, and services are not categorically classified as being completely inclusive but rather are continually assessed and updated for new methods to build capacities in the communities, CA provides for a constant examination of practises inside CLCs. Having equitable access to education in one's community is crucial for the development of both the individual and the collective.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the function of quality assurance in CLC courses (Darajat 2018; Singh and Mishra 2016). Addressing the problems with quality assurance that research participants identified might help people trust CLCs that could otherwise appear to be a 'black box' (Drachslor 2018). Since stakeholders are frequently concerned about how much the CLC is worth in supporting inclusion, quality assurance is an important issue that must be addressed in communities (Quan-baffour and Arko-achemfuor 2018). Indeed, if people believed the programmes' quality and relevance to their wellbeing, they would participate in CLC learning (Jivet *et al.* 2020).

The CLC authorities are aware of the learners' financial difficulties and have established a strategy to assist CLC pupils by cooperating with local financial institutions. The endeavour is concentrated on removing the obstacles that LCs encounter

while assisting persons who access their services. The CLC attends to the conversion of endowments into valued capabilities, such as educational and socioeconomic capacities, by addressing the financial conditions of learners. From a CA standpoint, CLC students' inability to receive financial help might be seen as causes of 'unfreedom' that deny them the chance to grow their skills and engage in valuable functioning. This conclusion is reinforced by other studies (for instance, Castleman and Meyer 2019; Rasciute *et al.* 2020) whose studies show that the inherent advantages of learning diminish with greater stress from a lack of support and services. The interviewees revealed that several financial institutions and service providers are collaborating to integrate CLC programmes with unique financial arrangements to suit the demands of the students. These initiatives are commendable and will help eliminate obstacles that prevent those with financial difficulties from participating while also fostering learning in the community. Regarding the funding need, it is acknowledged that everyone has the right to fundamental human rights, regardless of their age, gender, or community of origin. The goal of this project is to translate endowments into valuable capabilities, in this case, educational competencies (DeJaeghere and Baxter 2014).

To comprehend the social capital component of CLCs, and relying on Sens' capabilities approach, the findings highlighted the fact that CLC students are entrenched inside a home in addition to being CLC students and members of their community. The familial and employment endowments that CLC students bring to the table must thus be taken into consideration to understand the social capital issue. Given the competing roles of the various interests, participation in CLC programmes may result in changes to relationships within families and the workplace (see Singh and Mishra 2016). It can be challenging for CLC students to finish their programmes because they have conflicting responsibilities in their studies, families, and jobs, and they may not receive the support they require from these groups. The CA emphasises the need of considering how family and employment endowments influence and limit the options and decisions made by CLC students. The resources and assets that support educational opportunities and achievement but do not in and of themselves constitute opportunities are referred to as family and workplace endowments in this context. To classify these endowments as human, social, financial, and physical assets, Chambers and Conway (1992) drew on Sen's work to construct the idea of livelihood capabilities. Finding personal guidance and support from the programme coordinators and other staff members, according to several participants in the interviews, is one way to deal with the challenges of managing the CLC programme. This serves as an example of how counselling support services assist in transforming capacities into functioning that furthers the objective of human development. In this regard, CLC activities should stimulate and boost students' emotional capacities by comprehending their worries and giving them the love, support, and care they require to develop their potential.

Our findings suggest that knowledge and communication are substantial access hurdles for CLC students, which is consistent with prior research on CLC students who have communication barriers when attempting to receive support services (Agyekum 2020). Access to support services, teaching, and learning all depend on effective communication between students and service providers (Baker *et al.* 2020).

The CA offers a framework for supporting procedures that provide students the freedom to engage in activities they value in the context of CLC courses. This might involve having access to educational programmes as well as other types of services and support that can help students succeed, such information and communication.

There was enough evidence that many students in this study found it challenging to use the learning management systems (LMS) after enrolling in the CLC curriculum. Lack of knowledge, technical difficulties, and failed login attempts are frequently cited by students as barriers to efficient LMS use. Service providers shared that the University, in addition to the University of Ghana Computing Services (UGCS) on the main campus, has delegated IT workers to each of the CLCs to assist students with problems and solve concerns relating to the LMS to. The CA acknowledges the genuine possibilities that the individual has for making decisions that may or may not come to pass. Using the SAKAI Learning Management System as an example, knowing how to use it is a personal endowment, but having the chance to use it in a way that is appreciated is a capability. As a result, growing capacities are aided by the development of valued talents using additional resources in a positive learning environment. For CLC students, issues with online training and guidance, inadequate technology, a lack of understanding of new technology, accessing the Internet with difficulty, and difficulty analysing the opinions of lecturers and tutors continue to be major obstacles (Isman and Altinay 2005, Lerra 2015, Kara *et al.* 2019). This study calls for a reduction in these educational obstacles in order increase access to CLC programming and to offer the students more meaningful learning experiences.

Lastly, the CLC programme eventually loses credibility as continual dissatisfaction grows. The difficulties in obtaining support services are the greatest barriers to individual student performance, as this study has demonstrated. The study's findings showed that service providers see structural support constraints as one of the most common problems. As a result, concerns with access and opportunity limit CLCs' ability to support community development – community-led efforts that advance sustainable goals (Henfrey *et al.* 2023). The promotion of CLCs appears to have significant benefits for both people and communities. The CLC graduates have much to contribute to their communities through a variety of avenues, including ongoing employment, volunteer work, and civic engagement. By encouraging independence and reducing a demand on community support services, ongoing education fosters community development (Lynch *et al.* 2021). This link can be strengthened if policymakers and educators pay conscious attention to improving CLC chances. Importantly, the use of the CA might present chances to think critically about how CLC activities could support community development.

It is our hope that understanding CLCs' potential for learning and community development is necessary to apply inclusive education towards social justice, as advocated by the CA. We have theorised the lessons that can be drawn from the data in this study, which is crucial for further research on the possibilities and challenges that CLCs provide. Rather than blindly accepting assumptions about the potential social and educational benefits of CLCs and the infrastructure that is supposed to support them, we hope that more research—possibly one longitudinal and another that covers all eleven CLCs—on the operations of these organisations would promote reconsideration.

## Study implications and limitations

The results of this study have significance for both Ghanaian community development and the global learning community. CLCs in Ghana do not get the full amount of attention they need. However, they give individuals who would not have otherwise been able to attend colleges options. Furthermore, having access to education in one's community opens new possibilities and encourages an active, involved lifestyle, all of which contribute to the formation of stronger communities. Though there has been a lot of research on the possibilities of CLC, as far as we are aware, no one has examined the CLC programme from the perspective of the capabilities approach. The use of the CA as a development and implementation framework for CLC programmes can assist international CLC institutions in identifying the structural problems and educational inequalities that exist in our societies and that may limit people's freedom and opportunities to realise their potential.

There should be a note of the study's limitations. The findings from this qualitative study are based on a selective sample of service providers and CLC students from two of the eleven CLCs which were involved in the study. Because of this, it is unclear to what degree the opinions of the participants reflect those of all service providers and CLC students. The results can, however, serve as a starting point for future quantitative research that concentrate on service providers' opinions on the provision of support and services in the CLC programme and practise patterns. This is because of the study's size and the variety of students and service providers represented among its participants. Furthermore, because this study was conducted in the Greater Accra Region, it is possible that structural and support services in other communities work differently, necessitating cross-regional comparison and maybe a national study. Despite these drawbacks, the study's findings point to a hitherto ignored source of inequity in the initiatives being taken to expand the support services for distant learning in our universities and colleges.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix 1: Managers' interview guide

### *Demographic Questions*

1. What is your position in the CLC?
2. What kind of work/service do you provide?
3. How long have you been doing this kind of work?

### *Open Ended Questions for Managers/Staff across the Department of Distance Education*

1. In what context do you have contact with CLC learners? (Learning Centres, Department Office, etc)
2. In your experience, what would be the most significant barriers for CLC learners in accessing services and support for their learning needs?
3. In your capacity, what do you perceive would be of most help to these learners in meeting their educational needs?
4. Can you tell me about what supports are already in place for learners in the CLCs?
5. Overall, how do these learners seem to you? (struggling/coping)
6. In your work are these learners, or equally involved in the University's programmes and to what extent do you understand their involvement to be linked to their being CLC learners?
7. Are you aware of any support programmes offered through your office for CLCs?
8. Do CLCs complain about challenges to your office directly and if so, how?
9. What are the strategies to maintaining quality in the CLCs?
10. Any outreach strategies, challenges for expanding the frontiers of CLCs?

## Appendix 2: Students' interview guide

### *Demographic Questions*

1. What is your level of study?
2. What is your programme of study?
3. What is your current employment status? Full-time, Part-time, Unemployed, etc.

### *Open Ended Questions for Learners in the University of Ghana Learning Centres*

1. How does your experience of CLC programmes compared with regular face to face questions?
2. Do you think your learning outcomes could be achieved through CLCs?
3. How do you feel about the communication between yourself and instructors?
4. What do you think are the important factors influencing the quality of CLCs?
5. How do you view the support and services provided from the CLC? Do you receive any other support, such as advice about the programmes, technical support?
6. Would you say that the support and services at your centre meet your learning needs and well-being?
7. How do CLCs promote community well-being?
8. If you have a complaint, are there support staff you can address to or help solve your problem?
9. In which areas do you think CLC learner are left out?
10. What factors would motivate you to choose CLC programmes rather than regular on-campus programmes?
11. How does the amount of workload in the CLC compared to regular face to face instruction?
12. How would you rate the overall quality of CLC programme? Very good, good, moderate, poor? Why?
13. Would you recommend CLCs to your friends/anyone?