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Chapter 12
Arrangements for Online Engagements of Distance Learners in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The University of Ghana Distance Education Programme was not spared from the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Management of the Department needed to make a radical move to shift from its hybrid system of delivery to a full-fledged online delivery. In spite of the limited time for this move, a lot of creative planning had to go into this, which led to a virtual training of 340 tutors, through four modules, to prepare them adequately for the task. Aside from assessing the planning and the virtual training aforementioned, this reflective paper also delves into other important issues such as the rolling out of a virtual/online academic and counselling support and architecture for monitoring of all the 228 courses that were moved onto the online space. This paper has implications for both policy and institutions that might be faced with similar circumstances, and it makes suggestions for exploration of other useful tools for delivery and monitoring that would contribute to better online engagements.

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INTRODUCTION

Though the concept and practice of distance learning appear to be a recent emergence that is associated with higher education, it has been in existence for over six decades and pre-dates the independence of Ghana, which took place on March 6, 1957. Before the University of Gold Coast, now the University of Ghana was established in 1948 (University of Ghana, 2020a), higher education could only be accessed via Fourah Bay University in Sierra Leone or by correspondence which was the first generation of distance education known to Ghanaians. Correspondence courses were rather offered by educational institutions in Britain such as Rapid Results College, University Correspondence College and Wosley Hall. Today, we have a combination of both public and private educational institutions, offering distance learning programmes across the globe.

Distance education is a term used to describe a mode of learning mostly between geographically apart individuals who essentially use technological tools such as print, audiotapes, videotapes, radio, television, internet media and all forms of multi-media systems to transmit knowledge, communications amongst and between students and teachers and the management of the education process (Anderson & Rivera-Vargas, 2020, p. 209). It is, however, worth noting that the best distance learning approach is the one that reduces the presence of the physical distance or student isolation in the teaching and learning processes. Thus, the more the interaction or engagement between the learner and the teacher, the better. But, all these must be moderated by some form of technology to reduce the human interface during the interactions.

In the Ghanaian context, distance education has been embraced to the point that Lakai, Ankomah-Asare and Nsowah-Nuamah (2016) recorded that nine tertiary institutions were offering distance education programmes. Out of the nine, four were public institutions while the remaining five were private. One of the highest points in Ghana's efforts at providing learning at a distance occurred around 2013 when myjoyonline (2013) reported that Ghana was ranked number one in Africa by the International Telecoms Union Report, concerning the number of people using or connected to mobile broadband. This was necessitated by the massive strides that had been made with the adoption of mobile technologies as a conduit for distance learning. Consequently, Larry (2016) reported that by the end of 2015, Ghana's mobile voice penetration rate had surged to 128%, a percentage that surpassed projections by telecommunication experts.

From the above, distance education in Ghana has made significant gains in its mission of making quality education more accessible and relevant to meet the learning needs of Ghanaians to enhance their performance and improve the quality of their lives (Government of Ghana, 2002). However, these gains and expected progress have been hard-hit by the Coronavirus or COVID-19 Pandemic, which has been spreading rapidly across the world, since December 2019. As noted by Parker (2020), the virus has affected everyone and has left a strain on education and all other aspects of life. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2020) estimated that over 90% of the global student population has been sent home and has been staying out of school since the pandemic assumed a global crisis status in March 2020. The UN Ghana (2020) estimates the figures of children and youth who are out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic at 1.6 million, globally. By May 6, 2020, UNESCO (2020) estimated that as many as 177 countries had closed schools because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools forms part of concerted efforts by world leaders and institutions to fight the spread of the virus.

Based on the global efforts to curtail the spread of the pandemic, the President of the Republic of Ghana, on 15th March 2020 announced a series of measures to curb the spread of the virus in Ghana

(myjoyonline, 2020). He announced the closure of all schools and an institution of social distancing as well as enhanced personal hygiene protocols. The President, however, directed the ministries of Education and Communication to ensure that they roll out distance and remote learning programmes for all students (Aciafrica, 2020). The President's directives are in line with the proposition by the COL (2020) that there is a need for some form of technology or media to restore communication between teachers and students. It also resonates with Corbera, Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés, and Ruiz-Mallén's (2020) advocacy for the need to learn new ways of operating within the educational landscape.

Per the directives of the President of Ghana, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Communications rolled out distance learning programmes across all levels of education. As a result, efforts were made by various educational institutions to leverage different technologies and learning management systems to engage students for teaching and learning purposes. The Distance Education Department of the University of Ghana, which had been using the hybrid system, hitherto the advent of the pandemic, had no option than to roll out a full-fledged online distance learning programme in its true sense of the word and practice, by the middle of April 2020. This was, indeed, a very sharp learning curve that had to happen overnight. In this reflective paper, the authors conceptualize the processes involved in the somewhat radical shift from a blended learning (BL) mode to a full-fledged online mode of distance education. The intention of this paper is not to proffer a boilerplate for other institutions but the authors believe the strategies and processes followed can be beneficial to other institutions which might be faced with similar circumstances that called for a swift shift in their operations.

BACKGROUND TO ONLINE ENGAGEMENT IN GHANAIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The establishment of the Department of Distance Education of the University of Ghana dates back to the late 1950s when the University of Ghana had Learning Centres, which were called Workers' Colleges, established in all the then-ten regions of Ghana, under the Institute of Adult Education, now School of Continuing and Distance Education (SCDE). In 1973, the Correspondence Unit was started to produce learning materials for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level in English, Economics, General Science, Mathematics among others (University of Ghana, 2020b).

The actual attention to provide distance education in its true sense at the University of Ghana happened when the University launched its programme on 23 November 2007 with 1,127 applicants, of which 907 enrolled (Amponsah, 2010). The programme started with five courses, namely: Sociology, Economics, Linguistics, Psychology, and Geography and Resource Development (University of Ghana, 2020b). The two main objects behind the establishment of the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme were: first, to broaden access to qualified applicants who, otherwise, would not have been admitted into the University due to inadequate space on the main campus. The second object was to offer an option for individuals whose work and family obligations could preclude them from being regular or resident students on the University campus.

The objectives and mission of the University of Ghana's Department of Distance Education are to:

- widen access to the University of Ghana's academic programmes through technology-mediated learning;
- mount marketable academic programmes that will be attractive to [their] clientele;

- harness the potential of cutting-edge educational technology that will reduce the space between the lecturer and the distance learner; and
- provide students' support systems that will maintain a high retention rate among distance learners of the University (University of Ghana, 2020a).

Despite the novel objective to leverage on technology to widen access to education and adopt cutting-edge technologies, the first six years (2007 to 2013) of the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme witnessed the practice of being predominantly print-based, which was supplemented with regular face-to-face tutorial meetings at the regional study centres. This practice resonates with Taylor's (2001) first generation of distance education that is characterized by correspondence which relies mainly on print technology.

Major efforts at incorporating technology into the University of Ghana distance education programme gathered steam around 2010. However, it was not, until March 2012, that the University Council approved the University's Information and Communication Policy. Two years later, the Business and Executive Committee of the University sanctioned the Policies and Procedures on Technology-Mediated Courses and Programme in E-Learning (ICT Deployment Committee Report, 2014). With the tone set for the incorporation of technology in distance learning, Awiah (2015) asserts that ICT facilities were installed in eight out of the eleven learning centres of the University. This led to the eventual launching of the Sakai Learning Management System, which the ICT Deployment Committee Report (2014) advised should be deployed to run a bimodal or hybrid delivery of content to students. What this meant to do was to blend the traditional teaching modules that had been in existence since the programme's inception in 2007 with the Sakai Learning Management System (University of Ghana, 2020b). With this in place, the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme has been delivering quality distance education to all its eleven learning centres, namely: Accra, Bolgatanga, Cape Coast, Koforidua, Kumasi, Ho/Tsito, Sunyani, Takoradi, Tamale, Tema, and Wa, since 2014.

Inarguably, strides have been made in the University of Ghana distance education programme in terms of the shift from traditional forms of delivery to the incorporation of technology. It is obvious the second, third and fourth generations of distance education established by Taylor (2001) had been integrated into the programme. Thus, the introduction of multi-media models, video teleconferencing and flexible learning by multimedia and internet access respectively has been worthwhile. However, Taylor's (2001) fifth generation, characterized by intelligent, flexible learning model, which leverages on the interactive nature of the internet, marked by intuitive computer-mediated communication, using automated response systems had not been attained by the University.

Despite the strides made and the introduction of the Sakai Learning Management System to ensure a hybrid system was deployed, the orientation of both instructors and students was still not fully tuned to the new system. For the majority of instructors, the Sakai Learning platform was simply a space to upload study materials while students only downloaded for their consumption. There was a one-time online interim assessment, which was confronted with several challenges. The end of semester examinations were not conducted online. Rather, it was conducted at the learning centres in-person.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated requirement for observation of social distancing protocols, that resulted in the closure of schools in Ghana and many other countries, there was no way the University could sustain the blended form of delivery. Though Koomson (2020) argued that Ghana, positioned in the Global South, has not achieved online parity to swiftly move online as witnessed in developed countries. Marshall and Moore (2020) tout the achievements of Ethiopia and India

in their swift resort to moving their schools online in the face of COVID-19. In launching the Global COVID-19 Education Coalition, the Director-General of UNESCO (UNESCO, 2020, p. 2) said, 'this effort is an opportunity to rethink education, scale-up distance learning and make education systems more resilient, open and innovative." Thus, some radical efforts needed to be put in place to sustain engagements between faculty and students and among the two parties in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the foregoing, the managers of the University of Ghana Distance Education Programme had to swiftly work to move all courses from a hybrid to a full-fledged online mode. The sections that follow delve into the approaches that were adopted to roll out a hundred per cent distance learning programme without any face-to-face component and the lessons that emerged.

LEARNER-ENGAGEMENTS, ARRANGEMENTS AND EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Prior to the introduction of the Free Senior High School Policy by the current government in 2017, the average distance education enrolments into four Ghanaian public universities (University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Education, Winneba, and University of Ghana) were 52,005 (± 14, 198) students annually; thus, 22% increase (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 44). The imperatives of the new basic education reforms for Ghanaian tertiary institutions are worthy of note. Perhaps, technology integration could be part of the solution as succinctly articulated by the 2007 Education Reform, chaired by Professor Jophus-Anamuah Mensah. Accounts on innovative modes of educational delivery that help learners to actively engage with content (Parker, 2020; Corbera, et al., 2020; Taylor, 2001; Awiah, 2015), and learner-centred engagements (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) provide context for our experience sharing on arrangements for full online instructions: the case of the University of Ghana's Distance Education Programme.

Planning Phase for Online Engagement During the COVID-19 Lockdown

Our planning activities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to education was premised on two important strategic goals of the Department of Distance Education: (a) to harness the potential of cutting-edge educational technology that will reduce the space between the lecturer and the distance learner, and (b) to provide students' support systems that will maintain high retention rate among distance learners of the University. Leadership is critical in strategic visioning and management of information technology in higher education, a position shared by Drabier (2003). Rising costs, accountability demands, and productivity pressures have contributed to the demand for strategic leadership in Information Technology resources in institutions, Drabier observed.

In the case of the University of Ghana's Distance Programme, the Dean of the School of Continuing and Distance Education and the Head of the Department of Distance Education led faculty and staff to envision and implement protocols in the wake of the COVID-19 disruption to the educational activities, globally. Consequently, our experience-sharing account aptly used technological platforms to continue the engagement, and delivery of quality education to 8,014 registered students on the Distance Education Programme. The planning phase of the online engagement involved the identification of training, monitoring, supports, counselling, and assessment strategies.

The planning considerations for moving teaching and learning to full-fledged online delivery for the Distance Education Programme were based on learning curves from its hybrid mode. Since 2014, the Department had implemented its online tutorials, using the Sakai-LMS with over 90% of courses migrated onto the platform. Thus, our distance education students and some tutors had some experiences of online learning but there was the need to train and upscale our newly recruited tutors' andragogic experiences of online learning. Indeed, skills for full-fledged online learning in the twenty-first century required advanced planning and accounting for diverse learning styles (Smith, 2008).

Engaging the online learner using the social constructivists' theory was an important consideration in our online tutor-training module. Evidence suggests that learners' appreciation of content is best influenced by their knowledge acquired from their personal and social context (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000). However, Conrad & Donaldson (2004) were quick to add that time was an important factor in guiding learners in the learning environment, based on the desired outcome of the constructivism model. Conrad and Donaldson recommended that engaged learning practices should focus on providing interactivity and avoid solely the instructor-centred methodology. As such, the department considered multimedia skills as an important engagement tool for a full-fledged online teaching strategy at the planning phase. We were also informed by the low technology environment observed for many Ghanaian public universities (Yidana, 2007).

Monitoring and evaluation functions are sub-sets of planning as a managerial function. In the view of Brooks (2003), evaluation of new technology or methodology against best practices provides a framework for reengineering. Hence, our online tutorials were supervised to ensure that students' learning outcomes were achieved. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DE programme was monitored during face-to-face tutorial sessions; and this useful part served as a quality assurance standard for the distance programme. The final planning phase to manage instructional activities during the lockdown considered student and staff support services. Social distancing regulations meant that face-to-face services delivery was curtailed. Our planning had to apply creative means to meet academic support services involving attesting letters, recommendation, and general enquiries. Mental health and career guidance services for our distance learners were also considered on an LMS.

Online Training for Distance Tutors

Historically, technology-based training gained prominence in the 1970s under a label called Computer-based Training (CBT) that was designed to deliver performance-based instructions, that reduced skill gaps (Woodall, 2000). As part of efforts to complete the academic year, the department organised 15 hours of virtual training for tutors with 340 attendees from the 11 learning centres nationwide. In line with Woodall's thinking, these efforts helped in bridging our tutors' skill gaps on full-fledged online instruction and further helped to continue the delivery of the online lesson on the University' Sakai LMS and other social media platforms in line with Management's teaching protocols for the COVID-19 locked-down. It is worth emphasising that long-term preparatory works to digitise the University of Ghana's Distance Programme must be lauded. Fortunately, 95% of the distance education courses were populated on the Sakai-LMS by course examiners from the various departments across the University. However, the vast majority of our newly appointed tutors were also receiving first time lessons on the University's LMS. For effective engagement with learners, the DE tutors received CBT (Zoom) on four modules namely:

- theory and practice of online tutoring and learning,

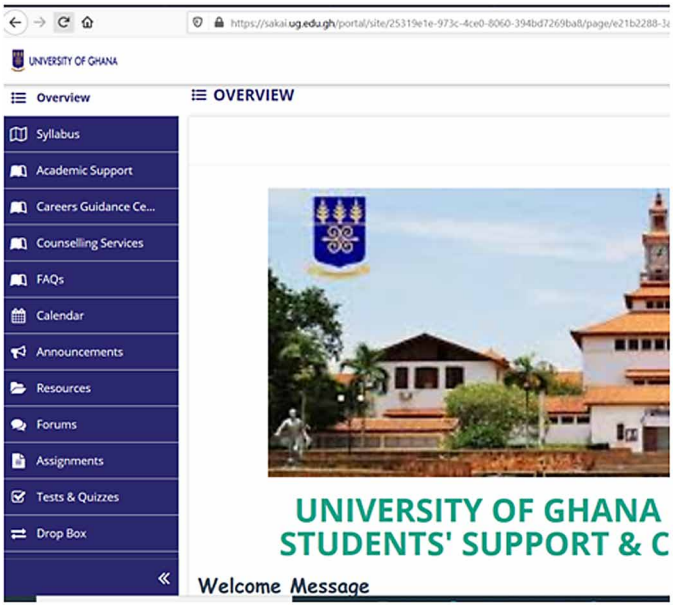
- use of UG-Sakai LMS and other online resources,
- assessment in online learning, and
- learner and tutor support in web-based instruction.

Module 1 explored the principles and philosophy of web-based education, the dichotomies and similarities between web-based learning and traditional classroom learning, designing web-based courses for different learning styles (auditory, visual, etc.), the application of andragogic approaches to delivering content, and the creation of interactivity for the online learners, based on the social-constructivist approaches.

Continuous professional development practices guided the authors' decision to provide requisite skills for developing online content. Hence, we designed Module 2 to help tutors deliver online content using the Sakai-LMS and other open-source applications, based on subject-specific demands. These included instructional design, leveraging online learning technologies to enhance teaching and learning, design and implementation of effective tutorials using multimedia principles, and evaluation of online teaching.

Module 3 (Assessment in online learning) equipped tutors with the rights and responsibilities of test-takers, writing test items for diverse learning domains, roles of validity and reliability in test items construction drawing on Bloom's Taxonomy and table of specification, and identification of various test administration tools on the Sakai-LMS (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Screenshot of online training module 3
Source: https://sakai.ug.edu.gh/portal/site/67634cf9-18bb-4649-a18d-c9a1c5823d9b/tool/



Learner-support is a crucial ingredient in online learning environments, as it helps to prevent student resistance. Instructional technologists fully appreciate sources of resistance with learner-centred approaches. Weimer (2002) identifies increased workload and varied skill levels for students to cope

with online learning as sources of resistance. Hence, our Module 4 guided tutors to appreciate varied supports for both tutors and students in an online learning context, managing feedbacks, and provision of guidance services to students across the 11 learning centres. Recognising the role of guidance and counselling services for the minimisation of resistance in learner-centred teaching strategies, our next section discusses virtual support services to the students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Virtual Students' Support and Counselling Services

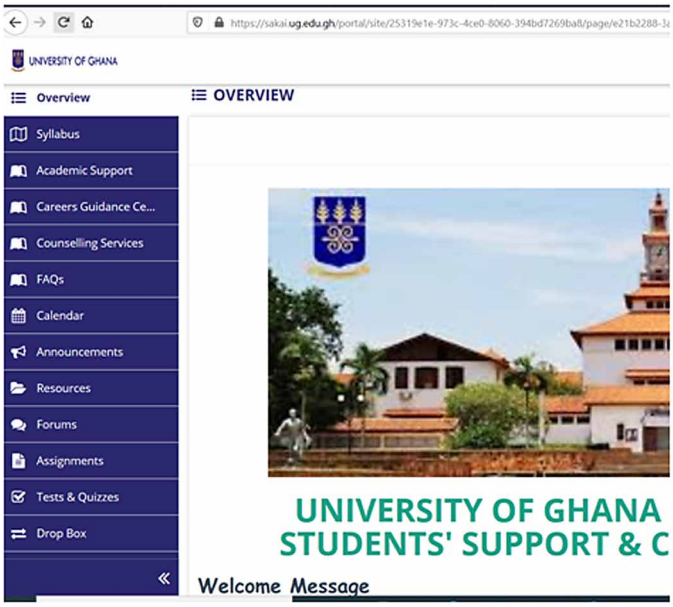
Professional counsellors' roles have been extended to accommodate innovative disruptions of the 21st century. To become an academic conscious of learning environments, Dahir's (2008) lists change agent, leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and data analytics decision-making as required competencies for academic counsellors. Therefore, the chapter was determined to create memorable learning experiences for the DE students, as part of our virtual engagement portfolio during the COVID-19. Academic support services were provided on the Sakai-LMS (Figure 2), thereby reducing the person-to-person contacts. Similarly, career guidance and counselling services (learning and emotional challenges, career decisions, developmental and mental issues) were provided on LMS. Students reached out to the resident counsellors, using Google Forms (as intake forms). We elicited personal details and presented complaints from counselees. Counsellors also reached out to the counselees through phone calls and Zoom meetings. Successfully, 8,014 students' data was uploaded onto the University's Sakai-LMS (https://sakai.ug.edu.gh/portal) platform and was accessible to counsellors who could send bulk emails to all students. Besides, the Careers and Counselling Centre was accessible to students through phone calls only. The added value the department shared with students was the synchronous and asynchronous support services available to students. Refreshingly, with a mean age of 23 ($\pm$ 5.05), 29 distance education students accessed various online counselling services between April and July. 2020. Five main counselling issues emerged - career guidance, mental health, anxiety, and stress, which could have impacted negatively on learners' online engagement experiences, whilst observing social distance protocols. Finally, live career guidance sessions were organised on Zoom for students on career choices, job search, portfolio design and presentations, interviewing for entry-level jobs, communication skills, and resume writing.

Online Monitoring Model

The practice of virtual monitoring of academic work is not new. Lera-López, Faulin, Juan and Cavaller (2010) monitored students' activity and performance in an online higher education environment and found a significant relationship. Akhtar, Warburton and Xu (2017) on the other hand succeeded in predicting students' participation against their success through a similar system. Having had records of successful courseware development on Sakai, the department decided to explore ways of integrating a virtual monitoring system into the teaching and learning activities that went fully online due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Before transitioning into a full-fledged online mode, the department practised an in-person monitoring system, which required that face-to-face teaching and learning or tutorials at the various Regional Learning Centres be supervised. The face-to-face teaching and learning or tutorial monitoring system comprised all senior members of the department across the country. Their role as quality assurance officers did not limit them to only report on class activities, commentaries and queries from tutors and students on particular courses. Their presence also helped in ensuring that the interest of students

Figure 2. Students' academic support and counselling services portal
Source: https://sakai.ug.edu.gh/portal/site/67634cf9-18bb-4649-a18d-c9a1c5823d9b/tool/



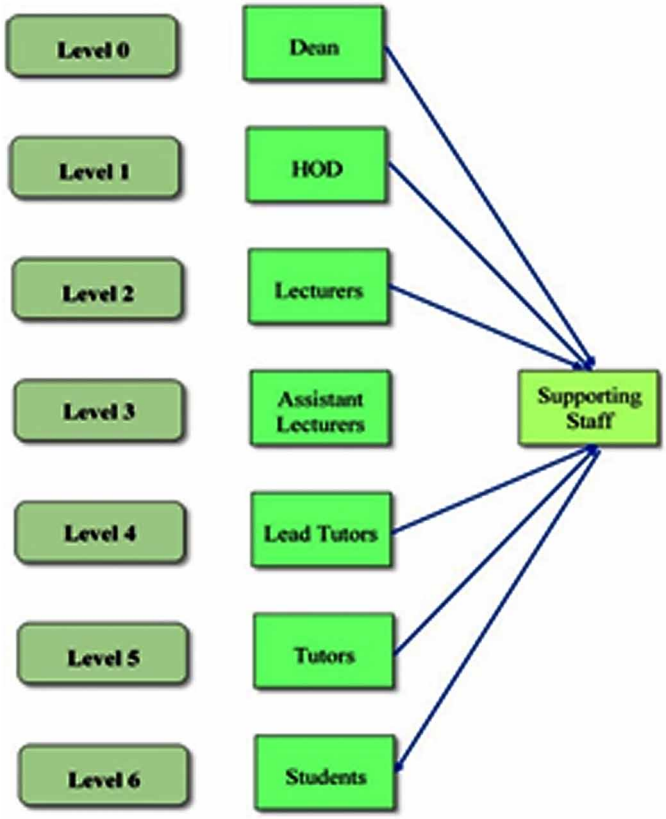
was protected. For instance, they helped with course advising or processes involved in resolving some student-related problems.

Upon the decision that migrating academic work into a full-fledged online mode without sacrificing the University's academic standards and that of quality assurance principles, a virtual monitoring system (VMS) of the DE programme was put in place. The decision by the department to put in place a virtual monitoring system was in line with standard practices in the virtual delivery of education across the globe. Bates and Sangra (2011) have underscored the need to leverage on technology to include quality assurance strategies in the design of virtual or online distance education programmes. Our framework of online tutorial monitoring has been captioned in Figure 3 under the leadership of the Dean and the Head of Department, Level 1.

The COVID-19 pandemic could provide opportunities for failure in the deployment of virtual learning due to the ad-hoc measures needed to complete the semester. Several virtual spaces to support students have not succeeded due to the lack of preparations (McPherson and Nunes, 2004a). The eight-level virtual monitoring model and implementation plan approved by the department as shown in Figure 3 largely a scalar chain (vertical hierarchy) of actors in the monitoring chain. The arrows show where support could be drawn from, and in this case, the superiors also contributed support services through professional and academic support.

The side support mainly made up of a team of six administrative and technical assistants, which mounted surveillance and helped staff and students with administrative issues only. For instance, students were assisted with their login details and in some cases directed to the appropriate site for the department's virtual counselling services. The staff were also supported in getting themselves linked up to courses, missing course materials and other emerging issues. Generally, their roles also included re-hashing of announcements for scheduled classes or meetings.

Figure 3. Virtual learning monitoring model



Tait (2018) espoused that leaders for Open and Distance Education needed to be technology-minded and advanced in terms of strategic partnerships among networks; these qualities are embodied in the model. The model pivots around technology and networks of people led by the Dean. The Dean (Level 0) was the Chief monitor and ultimate officer, answerable to the Provost of the College of Education and the College Academic Board. However, at Level 0, the Dean had oversight responsibility for all activities that took place on all the course sites. The HOD at Level 1 and the Dean, both conducted programme and periodic checks on all the course sites at regular intervals on the various scheduled video-enabled classes. They made arrangements for training sessions and peer support to tutors and students who needed some collegial support of that sort.

Levels 2 and 3 are also Lecturers and Assistant lecturers, numbering 30. The lecturers were not left out from the model as Dillon and Walsh (1992) described as the neglected resource in Distance Education. All the lecturers who also doubled as examiners for various courses in their fields monitored virtual teaching and learning activities among the tutors and students (Levels 4 to 6). They (Levels 2 and 3) were the liaisons between all the higher and lower ranks on the VMS. They also ran individual, smaller and large group pieces of training together with day to day technical support. The Level 2 officials submitted 3 extensive reports to the Dean (Level 0) through the HOD (Level 1). The various tools utilised by both students and staff were analysed and discussed for the performance evaluation and improvement. It was found that the Announcement, Chat, Forum and Email tools were the most utilized. Again, the

zoom application appears to be user-friendly to students and tutors. Though it was evident that Sakai was zero-rated, students preferred to spend more on data bundle in order to use video applications such as zoom and Big Blue Button (BBB). This development appears to suggest that the corporation did not want to depart from the practices and legacies of the face-to-face learning environment.

Tutors are not just intermediaries between students and the institution. McPherson and Nunes (2004b) reiterate the importance of tutors in virtual learning. Levels 4 and 5 are Lead Tutors and Tutors respectively who were made up of 351 contract staff. The least qualification for this position was a Master's degree. Prior to the commencement of the virtual learning, they handled tutorial sessions at the various Regional Learning Centres. The tutors were then clustered from the national database according to courses they handled during the face-to-face mode. This clustering was followed up by a series of qualifying virtual training courses before they were appointed and migrated onto the virtual space. Lead tutor roles were created as a coordinating role. A Lead tutor's role was that of a liaison between other tutors and the lecturers and if the need was, the students. Their level of monitoring also included the compilation of academic challenges that arose during the session. In consultation with the lecturers, they also had the power to arrange for back-up plans from among the list of tutors if a tutor had technological challenges with a particular tutorial session. They assisted in compiling and filing returns of weekly activities and sessions done outside the Sakai LMS. The tutor monitoring role was very simple. They served as watchdogs who did not only engage students for their tutorials but also checked to find out if all materials were duly uploaded on the course sites. They were responsible for monitoring discipline and class attendance of students.

Students at Level 6 played an important and integral part of the model. More so, they were adult learners who understood their self-directed learning environment and could contribute to creating it (Knowles, Holton III & Swanson, 2014). Since they were the clientele in this virtual enterprise, their monitoring duties emanated from their feedback on how the system fared. Avenues for feedback from students included a Course site reporting system, email, telephone services and the mail or letter system. Complaints that came from students were analysed and resolved for them. Student complains largely had to do with students who missed, or could not submit their assignments. The unique part of Level 6 was that, though the model followed a scalar chain of authority, in some cases the bureaucracy was broken down. Students did not always have to go through tutors to get their issues resolved.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, the focus of this conceptual paper is to document lessons learnt from the online engagements of Distance Education learners at the University of Ghana following the interruption of academic work by the COVID-19 global pandemic. The interruption led to the University management's decision to fully migrate teaching and learning activities online. Sakai remained the official LMS for the online engagements which covered 228 courses sites, a training platform for tutors and Student and Staff-Support Services for UGDE students. Among other things, the support services included Academic, Career and Counselling and Informational services which were all deployed online. Online assessment strategies were also deployed to help assess students continuously. The paper traces the trajectory from the preparation stage to how quality was assured through an online monitoring model of vertical chain headed by the Dean of the School of Continuing and Distance Education and assisted by the Head, Department of

Distance Education. Students (primary monitors) also played a validation role on the monitoring model to confirm whether, or not, instructions took place and the resource folders adequately populated.

This paper has implications on a number of issues. The implications are not limited to policy direction and quality assurance in online distance education delivery, especially for Ghana, but also, institutions planning to deploy online learning during and beyond a pandemic. Implications on tutor management and training for sustainable Online Distance Education are also important. Finally, the virtual monitoring model also provides clear roles of leadership to manage online engagements, prevent leadership crises and create room for follow-ups on student progress, in order to reduce attrition rates of Distance Education students.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Assessment: The process of checking the performance of students.

Counselling: Guiding individuals to help address issues that bother them.

Educational Technology: Information and communications tools or gadgets that are used for the purpose of teaching and learning.

Evaluation: The process of finding out the impact or outcome of an activity at the end of it.

Monitoring: The process of checking the progress of an activity as it is going, in order to address or provide remedies for any anomalies.

Quality Assurance: The act of ensuring that set standards are met.

Support: Enabling measures for helping an individual.

Training: Equipping individuals with required knowledge, skills and capabilities.

Tutors: Facilitators of teaching and learning engagements.

Virtual: Interactions that are done online.