

## **Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Programme of Study at the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast: Curriculum Implication**

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**Abstract:** The study examined factors influencing students' choice of programme of study at the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast. The study adopted the pragmatist's approach from the positivist perspective. Specifically, the study used descriptive research design. Simple random sampling techniques were used to draw a sample of 2324 students at all levels from the 63 study centers (those offering education programmes) across all regions of Ghana. Data collection instruments were self-administered questionnaire. Survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically, frequencies and percentages. The study discovered that students' personal interest for a particular programme, ambition or aspiration in life and credibility of the institutional certificate influence their choice of selection of a programme of study at UCC-CoDE. It was recommended that management of the College of Distance Education and all institutions running distance learning programmes should tailor curriculum of academic programmes to meet the interest and aspirations of applicants.

**Keywords:** Distance Education, Curriculum Implementation, Facilitation

### **1. Introduction**

Distance education basically provides opportunity for students who for one reason or the other could not develop their academic careers and desired professional growth through conventional classroom. The choice of programmes in higher institutions in general and specifically in distance education is an important issue of consideration, yet it remains a dilemma for most institutions in general and students in particular (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008; Ming, 2010). The University of Cape Coast (UCC) established in 1962 is one of the public institutions, with the core mandate to turn out highly skilled professional graduate teachers (University of Cape Coast Act 1971) (Act 390) and subsequently, the University of Cape Coast Law, 1992 of PNDC Law 278) to meet the manpower needs of the Ghana Education Service (GES), Commerce and Industry (Magalhaes & Veiga, 2013; Stoer & Magalhaes, 2004; IMHE, 2006; Altbach, 2011).

The UCC runs two systems: campus based mode and distance learning mode. Thus, the UCC operates on a dual mode system (which means, UCC offers its regular programmes on campus-base and also makes available a proportion of its programmes through distance learning). The College of Distance Education (CoDE) is the distance learning wing of the UCC. The CoDE was established in 2001 with the primary aim, to augment the university's mandate to cater particularly for qualified applicants who for one reason or the other could not gain admission through the conventional mode. The distance form of learning at CoDE is not open learning, there are admission criteria attached to it. Students who wish to enroll on the distance education programme must meet the university's admission requirements.

The first programme to be run by CoDE was a three year Diploma in Basic Education (Ankoma-Sey & Dawson-Brew, 2009). This was followed by the Post Diploma in Basic Education. In order to broaden the market avenues for graduates, in the 2010/11 academic year, the Diploma in Psychology and Foundations of Education (DPF) and later Bachelor in Psychology and Foundations of Education (BPF) and Diploma in Mathematics and Science Education (DMSE) programmes were added. Currently, the CoDE runs five programmes at the undergraduate level. According to Akyina, Oduro-Okyireh and Osei-Owusu (2014) governments of Ghana over the years had laid emphasis through educational reforms on the need to have programmes in schools that will train the youth to occupy positions in the society. A study conducted on factors considered in choosing a programme of study by Clutter (2010) on parents' critical role in their children's career choices and aspirations affirms that there has been a progression to the post-modernist view that vocational interest and aspirations on constantly changing life roles.

At the UCC, placement of students in CoDE programmes is generally based on the student's choice with particular reference to their background knowledge in the area of choice. However, in selecting what programme of study to pursue in higher education, aside from background knowledge, applicants also take into account other factors such as: interest and future aspirations. Information from the Students' Support Services Unit of CoDE revealed that, quite often students apply for change of programme of study at the beginning of the semester or sometimes mid-way of their programme. There seems to be a problem since by implication, there are number of factors that come into play when individuals are making decisions on what programme of study to pursue in higher education.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Every year, the CoDE admits students into its diploma and bachelor degree programmes. Most of these students who are admitted faced problems of having to decide on the choice of programme to pursue which is critical decision they have to make due to its career implications. Recently, there has been a gradual shift of students' preference of programmes of study since the introduction of the Psychology and Foundations of Education and Mathematics and Science Education programmes, which is increasingly becoming crucial for management of CoDE to understand empirically, the context-specific variables that strongly influence students' choice of programmes of study at the CoDE. This will provide management with empirical information as feedback for developing effective management strategies for attracting and retaining students on the distance education programme. Given this trend, the researchers were interested in identifying the undergirding factors responsible for the shift.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Theoretical Perspective**

The theories of 'reasoned action' and 'planned behaviour' propounded by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Ajzen (1988), respectively were adopted. The theory of reasoned action holds that the decision to engage in a particular behaviour results from a rational process which is goal-oriented and follows a logical sequence (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The planned behaviour has it that the engagement in behaviour is determined by one's perception of how easy or difficult it is to engage in the behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1988). In the view of Zimbardo and Leippe (1991), individuals make decisions based on two main issues namely: attitudes towards the relevant behaviour and subjective norms. Attitudes are based on beliefs regarding how easy or difficult it is to perform the behaviour and its likely outcomes, while the subjective norms have to do with the reaction of others (Gyimah, 2006). Thus, for a student to make a choice of the programme to study at CoDE, UCC, he/she would consider his/her interest, ability and aspirations in relation to existing institutional norms and/or practices. Additionally, Bandura's self-efficacy theory was used. This theory holds that a student's choice of a programme is largely dependent on their belief that they will be successful on that programme.

#### **3.2 Factors Influencing Choice of Programme**

##### **3.2.1 Individual/Personal Factors**

Students' low interest, their low content knowledge and negative self-concept of ability as well as a perceived lack of the subject's relevance for their anticipated careers and their self-perception are recognised as possible causes affecting their decision to enroll and stay on a programme (Fullarton & Ainley, 2000; Merzyn, 2011). In advancing knowledge on the individual and personal factors that determine students' choice of programme, Worthington and Higgs (2004) observed in their study that students select the major programme that matches their personality and personal interest. This was supported by Mihyeon (2009) when he said students will choose a major which will fit their personality type.

##### **3.2.2 Family and Peer Influence**

The choice of programme and for that matter career of the students is being influenced by some factors from the social environment, mainly parents, friends and peers who play an active role in choosing the right education (Pafili & Mylonakis, 2011; Geiger & Ogilby, 2000).

##### **3.2.3 Institutional Factors**

There are certain attributes of tertiary institutions which could influence students' choice for higher education institution and by extension the course they choose to offer. These attributes include but not limited to location of the institutions or the study centre, the programs offered, the reputation of the institutions, the facilities available at institutions or study centre, the cost of education, the job opportunities (Proboyo & Soedarsono, 2015; Beneke & Human, 2010; Baharun, 2002).

### 3.2.4 Curriculum Factors

Students' abilities to understand the concepts in a particular subject area could have a great impact on their decision regarding which programme they will enroll on and commit their efforts in learning that programme (Mustapha & Long, 2010; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004). In other words, if a person's ability does not match up with the programme, he or she would naturally go for an alternative programme that would fit his/her understanding level. In this case the content of the curriculum matters (Hagel & Shaw, 2010) such as market-driven factors (e.g. availability of job; job prospects, flexibility and opportunities). In any given endeavour, people take decisions based on critical analysis with regard to the benefits to be derived from such decision. In the same vein, students select programme based on what will be derived from it after completion of the programme. In a study to find out what influenced choice of MBA programme, Bell, Connell, MacPherson, and Rupp (2010), discovered that the demand for the MBA programme is strong, and most respondents believe the degree would help them in their current career path and progression. Epstein et al. (2013) revealed that students chose programmes primarily because of external factors such as promotion, salary increase, and better employment. In summary, the review has shown that studies are unlimited with regards to issues relating to factors that account for students' choice of a programme of study in institutions of higher learning. Suffice it to say that students personal factors, peer and family influence, curriculum, institutional factors and market-driven factors were the major issues raised in the literature relating to factors that influence students' choice of a programme in a tertiary school.

## 4. Research Methods

Cross sectional descriptive survey design was used for the study. This design allowed the researcher to involve greater number of students to be sampled for the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The target population was all students offering education programmes in the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast across the ten administrative regions of Ghana. The total number of students' population was 38,739. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted in the selection of the student samples. On the first stage, purposive sampling technique was used to select nine (9) regions. This is because, the study pilot testing of the instrument was done in the tenth region (thus central region), hence it was not involved during the sampling process for the main study. On the second stage, simple random sampling method, specifically, table of random numbers was used to select 2324 number of students from the 60 centers spread across the nine selected regions (this excludes 3 regions that were used for the pilot study). The study sample size was an accurate measure of that which serves the purpose of representativeness of the population (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

The instrument used was a self-developed questionnaire. The instrument was a 47-item questionnaire on a dichotomous response level (i.e. Yes and No). The instrument was also divided into six sections with each sub-section measuring a hypothetical construct. The first section had nine (9) items which measured students' personal factors that influence their choice of a programme at UCC-CoDE. The second section also measured family and peer influence with nine items. The third sub-section had nine items measuring institutional factors. The fourth sub-section had eight (8) items that were crafted purposely to measure curriculum factors. Finally, the fifth and sixth sub-sections had six (6) items on both measuring market driven and mass media factors respectively. In order to validate the instrument; a

pilot-test was conducted using three (3) study centers in the Central Region. The pilot test was necessary because it enhanced the content validity and reliability of the instrument, and also to improve questions, format and scales after careful analysis of the items based on the comments passed by respondents concerning the weaknesses, clarity and ambiguity on all aspects of the questionnaire (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In all the Cronbach Alpha index of the whole instrument was .63 (Quansah, 2017). After, the refinement of the instrument, the administration of the instrument was done in four weeks. The administration was done by the researchers themselves. Formal permission was sought from relevant authorities prior to the data collection exercise. Respondents were also given the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity as well as the right to opt out of the study if they wished. The data to answer the research question were analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically, frequency and percentages.

## 5. Results

Table 1: Individual/Personal Factor on Choice of Programmes

Statement	No	Yes	Total
Interest in the programme.	742(32%)	1682(68%)	2324(100%)
To satisfy my ambition/aspiration.	1081(47%)	1243(54%)	2324(100%)
Ability to pursue the programme.	1179(51%)	1145(49%)	2324(100%)
Based on my professional background.	1311(56%)	1013(44%)	2324(100%)
To be a role model.	1406(61%)	918(39%)	2324(100%)
Proximity to study centre.	1570(68%)	754(32%)	2324(100%)
Availability of learning resources.	1667(72%)	657(28%)	2324(100%)
Affordability of the programme.	1714(74%)	610(26%)	2324(100%)
Funding/Sponsorship.	1856(80%)	468(20%)	2324(100%)

Source: Field data, (2018)

Results in Table 1 show that among the individual or personal items influencing choice of programme, majority of the students (68.1 %) indicated that they selected their programmes based on interest. Followed by those who did so based on ambition/aspiration' represented (53.5%). Suffice it to say that "Interest in the programme" and "Desire to satisfy ambition/aspiration" highly influenced students' choice of programmes.

Table 2: Family and Peer Items that Influence Choice of academic Programme

Statement	No	Yes	Total
Colleagues at workplace/home.	1324(57%)	1000(43%)	2324(100%)
Sibling(s).	1719(74%)	605(26%)	2324(100%)
Father.	1779(77%)	545(23%)	2324(100%)
Mother.	1708(74%)	616(26%)	2324(100%)
Husband.	60 (50%)	31 (26%)	2324(100%)
Wife.	1956(84%)	368(16%)	2324(100%)
Friend(s).	1589(68%)	735(32%)	2324(100%)
Parents.	1811(78%)	513(22%)	2324(100%)
Other family members.	1793(77%)	531(23%)	2324(100%)

Source: Field data, (2018)

Results from Table 2, indicates that majority of the respondents ticked “No” for as a response to the demand whether people around them such as; parents (N=1811, 78%), siblings (N= 1719, 74%), other family (N= 1793, 77%) members and friends (N=1589, 68%).

Table 3: Institutional Factor and choice of programme

Statement	No	Yes	Total
Proximity to study center	1449(62%)	875(38%)	2324(100%)
Recognition/credibility of the Institutional certificate	1022(44%)	1302(56%)	2324(100%)
Quality of instructors	1357(58%)	967(42%)	2324(100%)
Availability of instructional materials	1573(67%)	751(33%)	2324(100%)
Quality of instructional materials	1683(72%)	641(28%)	2324(100%)
Access to instructional materials	1754(76%)	570(24%)	2324(100%)
High completion rate	1744(75%)	580(25%)	2324(100%)
Availability of student support services (e.g., counseling)	1832(79%)	492(21%)	2324(100%)
Flexibility for students to transfer, transit, and pay fees in parts.	1417(61%)	907(39%)	2324(100%)

Source: Field data, (2018)

Results from Table 3 revealed that respondents (students) are of the belief that recognition/credibility of institutional certificate influenced their choice of academic programmes offered by CoDE. This shown by majority (N= 1302, 56%) of the respondents who opted for “Yes” when provided with a questionnaire to respond to some items.

Table 4: Curriculum factors and Choice of Programme

Statement	No	Yes	Total
Adequacy of information on the nature of the programme.	1330(57%)	994(43%)	2324(100%)
Flexibility of the programme.	1572(68%)	752(32%)	2324(100%)
Level of Pass rate.	1717(74%)	607(26%)	2324(100%)
Size of the module.	1669(72%)	655(28%)	2324(100%)
Availability of the programme at the nearest study center.	1418(61%)	906(39%)	2324(100%)
Facilitation by Tutors.	1487(64%)	837(36%)	2324(100%)
Distribution of learning materials.	1462(63%)	862(37%)	2324(100%)
Tutor attitude.	1479(64%)	845(36%)	2324(100%)

Source: Field data, (2018)

Table 4 shows responses on how curriculum influenced the respondents' choice of programme at the UCC-CoDE. As observed from Table 4, more than fifty percent of the respondents indicated that none of the items provided on this sub-scale of the questionnaire actually influence their choice of programme at CoDE before they enrolled.

Table 5: Market Driven Factor and Choice of programmes

Statement	No	Yes	Total
Employment	1293(56%)	1031(44%)	2324(100%)
Job security	1701(73%)	623(27%)	2324(100%)
Job satisfaction	1720(74%)	604(26%)	2324(100%)
Job/Career promotion	1633(70%)	691(30%)	2324(100%)
Improvement in social status	1461(63%)	863(37%)	2324(100%)
Institutional requirement	1606(69%)	718(31%)	2324(100%)

Source: Field data, (2018)

Table 5 shows that majority of the respondents responded "No" to all the items forming market driven factor. In effect, respondents are of the view that employment issues, job security, job satisfaction, improvement in social status and institutional requirement do not matter when they are making a choice for an academic programme at UCC-CoDE.

Table 6: Mass Media and Choice of Programmes

Statement	No	Yes	Total
Internet (e.g., UCC Website)	1212(52%)	1112(48%)	2324(100%)
Radio announcement	1859(80%)	467(20%)	2324(100%)
Television advert	1908(82%)	416(18%)	2324(100%)
Newspapers advert	1889(81%)	435(19%)	2324(100%)
Flyers	2048(88%)	276(12%)	2324(100%)
UCC Brochure	1702(73%)	622(27%)	2324(100%)

Source: Field data, (2018)

Table 6 reveals that more than 50% of the students responded “No” to the entire items, meaning that radio announcements, circulation of flyers information printed in UCC brochure, television and newspaper adverts did not influence them when they were choosing a programme of study at UCC-CoDE.

## 6. Discussion

Results from the field data appear to suggest that overall, students’ personal interest for a particular programme, ambition or aspiration in life and credibility of the institutional certificate influence their choice of selection of a programme of study at UCC-CoDE. This is to say that, a students tend to think through and admit what programme he/she admires, the kind of profession he/she desire to be part of should he/she complete reading the programme and the recognition/credibility of the certificate that would be awarded to him/her by the institution to tell which programme he/she opt for to read. The finding corroborates with several research findings in the literature. For example, Worthington and Higgs (2004) in an empirical study found that students select the major programme that matches their personality and personal interest. Also, Mihyeon (2009) who found out those students choose a major that fits their personal career aspirations. This suggests that when students are interested in the programme and are sure of getting job opportunities, they will naturally enroll on such programme. Beggs et al. (2008) also opined that, if students found out that a programme has no job prospects, they could opt out even after enrolment on the programme, because there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Kaur and Leen (2007) discovered that student’s choice of a programme was significantly influenced by the reputation of the university or faculty members. In this case it is sound to think that, the reputation of an institution includes the recognition/credibility of the certificate that the institution award to students. Furthermore, The findings support the theories posited by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Ajzen (1988). In their theories of ‘reasoned action’ and ‘planned behaviour’, the decision to engage in a particular behaviour was found to have resulted from a rational process which is goal-oriented and follows a logical sequence (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Again, the findings highlight Bandura’s self-efficacy theory which holds that a student’s choice of a programme is largely dependent on their belief that they will be successful on that programme. Clearly, the findings as shown by this current study have implication for policy in UCC-CoDE and other distance education institutions in the country.

## 7. Implication to Practitioners of Distance Learning

On a much wider scale, the findings have implications for all practitioners of distance learning programmes. In mounting any programme of study, it must be necessary to seriously consider applicants interest and aspiration/ambition for future job opportunities. This can probably be achieved through empirical survey means for applicants (prospective students) to tell what their interest are and what they yearn to become (ambitions). Moreover, it behooves University of Cape Coast-CoDE and other institutions of higher learning that run Distance Education programmes to uphold institutional integrity and credibility among the good people of Ghana in order to maintain the positive image of the institutional certificate to both job seekers and employers.

## 8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that management should:

1. Tailor curriculum of academic programmes to meet the aspirations of applicants.
2. Curriculum developed should take into consideration learner's level of understanding and interest through consistent monitoring of the requirements of the job markets.
3. Monitor the activities of the UCC-CoDE in areas such as attitude of teaching and non-teaching staff toward students, supervision of quizzes and exams, scoring of scripts for both exams and quizzes. When these issues are well handled the integrity of the institution would be well kept.
4. Make readily available adequate information on the curriculum of programmes to applicants and students prior to their enrolment.

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