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Perceived Contribution and Challenges of Open and Distance Education for Personal Professional Specialization: The Case of Selected Private Universities in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This research on contribution and challenges of PHEIs[6] for distance learners was the target of the researcher. 130 Open and Distance Education learners from four PHEIs were recruited as respondents via filling Likert type questionnaire of which 116 were found to be proper. In addition, secondary data from college dean reports and 6 FGDs among students have been conducted. Participants were selected using multistage sampling followed by stratified sampling from college to department level. It was found that 89% of distance learners take the presence of open and distance education through PHEI as an opportunity for horizontal and vertical professionalism. Few complain tendency to make business through education as many students purport as if "buying a degree". It is found that distance learners are taking the advantage for availability of choices in department in target for additional degree and/or M.A. However, most learners attributed the challenges of learning through distance in PHEI as they are rooted from the institutions. Collecting learners' satisfaction, feedback as per the need assessment and using e-advising are recommended for enabling learners to communicate actively and be motivated.

Key Terms: Vertical Specialization, Horizontal Accreditation, Multiple Professionalism,

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Education has to be considered in its relation to global economic, social and cultural development. There is now little doubt that major changes are occurring in the world economy, mainly due to the expansion of new information bearing technologies. In what has already become known as knowledge based society, economic advantage will accrue to countries in

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[6] PHEI- Private Higher Educational Institution

which the population acquires competence in processing information into knowledge and applying it in work and everyday life. The importance of knowledge as an essential component of the economy has influenced the increasing interest of governments in human knowledge resource development. The tendency has been evident in developing as well as developed countries, although the circumstances, priorities and challenges are different. In developing countries, human knowledge resource development through initial and continuing education is not only seen as crucial for economic growth and competitiveness, but also has far-reaching social impact, for example in influencing the birth rate, increasing the independence of women, and improving standards of health and the rural environment. The resources available for the development of knowledge are far from evenly distributed. In spite of a considerable quantitative growth in recent years, there are still intolerable inequalities both between and within nations.

In an attempt to define distance education, Burge cited in Obioha & Ndidi, (2011) stated that it is a situation in which the learner uses resources in a flexible way to achieve their goals. The resources here could be print, audio, computer based; used at home, at a study center, in the work place, with or without the guidance of a tutor or mentor. In addition, UNESCO (2002) avowed that term open and distance learning reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The historical evolution of distance learning systems hasn been in four main phases. Open and distance learning systems can usually be described as made up of a range of components such as: the mission or goal of a particular system, programmes and curricula, teaching/learning strategies and techniques, learning material and resources, communication and interaction, support and delivery systems, students, tutors, staff and other experts, management, housing and equipment, and evaluation.

According to Kondapalli (n.d.), quality concept in distance education; purpose of quality improvement programmes at educational institution

- ✓ To ensure continuous improvement of total institutional performance
- ✓ To ensure stakeholders of institutional accountability
- ✓ To evolve mechanisms and procedures for effective and progressive performance
- ✓ Equitable access to benefits of higher education to all
- ✓ Optimization and integration of modern methods of teaching and learning
- ✓ Credibility of evaluation procedures
- ✓ Proper allocation of support and services and
- ✓ Research sharing though networks of collaboration.

Total Quality Management is a recent concept popular among management circles. TQM considers quality primarily as that perceived by the customer of the service or product. In education it means the meeting of the changing demands of students, employers, knowledge producers and society. It's a people driven process. It strives for empowerment and autonomy of the people involved in using the processes of production. It asks people to continuously look for new ways to adapt to the changing environment.

1.2. Components of Total Quality Management (TQM)

The customer is anyone, internal or external, who receives or is affected by the   product, process or services.

- ✓ Continuous improvement is essential to reach the stage of zero defects.
- ✓ Faculty development should ensure diligent updating at par with state-of-the-art
  methodology
- ✓ Teamwork and stakeholder involvement are the key to achieve TQM
- ✓ Monitoring progress with review of objectives is a necessary corollary.

1.3.Challenges faced by the institutions
- ✓ Global competition
- ✓ Technological enhancement
- ✓ Quality enhancement
- ✓ Cost effectiveness
- ✓ New combination of means of production

1.4.The features of the institution at maturity stage
- ✓ High quality teaching
- ✓ High quality research and publication
- ✓ Demand for consultancy
- ✓ Reliance of national and international centers on its expertise and leadership
- ✓ Continuous improvement to win recognition and awards.

1.5.Quality Implementation
- ✓ Implementation of standards
- ✓ Identifying the chasm between standard and actual performance level
- ✓ Reformulating the plans to eliminate the causes of deviation
- ✓ Implementation of the reformulated plans

This is the doing phase of the TQM system, no system can succeed until it is implemented in the right spirit and the right perspective. To make this happen the support of all the playersof this system is required, for it will amount to their attitude change, skill change and knowledge change.

Quality Monitoring and Control

- ✓ Monitoring and evaluating quality system
- ✓ Redesigning and restructuring plans for increasing systems efficiency

The concept of Total Quality Management system, to complete a full circle requires proper monitoring and control. In this phase the processes that do not respond to the changing needs should be overhauled and deviations, it any, Should be ironed out so as to have an effective quality system. Eventually, it can be said that the future of ODE in India is very bright and looking beneath its surface one can find that the strengths are many and the

potential limitless. The onus therefore, now lies upon the institutes to harness and develop it to the best of capabilities.

1.6. Learning Environment

To develop the individual's ability to manage his own learning needs. With the tremendous speed at which latest knowledge is replacing the old one it is impossible for standardize courses to cater to mass individual needs. Open and Distance Education Institutions are to raise more revenue. But quality should not be given up. The large-scale expansion in the number of ODL institutions offering Open and Distance Mode at various levels has been of varying quality during the last century. In the 21st century assuring the quality in higher education has become an integral part of the development of this type of education in India. The need of the hour is to ensure quality of education in the country for the cause of credibility of the entire system of Open and distance Mode. The huge quantitative expansion has taken place at the cost of quality, especially, during the 20th century. The period might be described literally as the" Era of Open and Distance Education" in the history of education in India. Since distance education is 'learner centered', the institutions mainly focus its attention on every strategy and practice that promote quality and excellence in relation to the intuitional performance. Quality Assurance has been defined in the literature of distance education as continuing, active and integrative process for maintaining and enhancing quality. The Quality assurance at the national level and to enhance international competitiveness Distance Education institutions trying to establish their own standards to changing needs of the learners (Kondapalli, n.d.).

1.7. Statement of the Problem

Types of learner have paramount relevance for addressing education. Culturally appropriate way of presenting necessary equipment and aiding learners to feel sense of ownership with the university that they are admitted is so critical for learners' autonomy.

As far as the concept of distance is concerned, there are multiple "distances" to be navigated in distance learning programs (Granger cited in Knebel, 2001).

- ✎ **Knowledge.** What do the learners actually know?
- ✎ **Prior skills.** What can they actually do?
- ✎ **Language.** What is the level of their language ability?
- ✎ **Culture.** What is their cultural background?
- ✎ **Context.** What is the context that learners actually inhabit?
- ✎ **Learning patterns and styles.** What are their learning styles?
- ✎ **Learning goals and motivations.** What needs, interests, goals, and motivations the program assumes that learners have as opposed to the actual goals and motivations of learners?(Knebel, 2001)

Failure to take the aforementioned in to account could create gap in the learning process.

According to the Commonwealth of Learning, 2000, in open and distance education there is separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or in both time and place; learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency. This type of learning is distinct from learning through your own effort without the official recognition of a learning institution; the use of mixed-media courseware, including print, radio and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning and telecommunications wherein courseware tends to be pre-tested and validated before use; · two-way communication allows learners and tutors to interact as distinguished from the passive receipt of broadcast signals upon which communication can be synchronous or asynchronous; possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials, learner–learner interaction, library study and laboratory or practice sessions; and use of industrialized processes; that is, in large-scale open and distance learning operations, labor is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who work together in course development teams. However, are all these things provided as a merit for distance learners in Ethiopia especially in Addis Ababa?

Open and distance learning play a significant role in human development by contributing to economic development, and fulfilling cultural as well as societal goals. In particular, nowadays, knowledge and learning are becoming increasingly central to work and everyday life (OECD 1995), the number of distance learning institutions has recently proliferated in different parts of the world to meet the growing demand of lifelong

learning. As evidenced by the increasing number of institutions (public and private providers) and learners, there has been significant amount of resources being invested into the field. Moreover, the globalized economy and the changing technologies play significant parts to influence the way open and distance learning is organized. As OECD (1996: 72) states: "instead of a supply-led and heavily institutionalized system, the new conditions allow for a demand-led client-driven approach, where learners can shop for education from diverse sources and in ways they themselves plan". In order to ensure 'value for money' and 'fitness for purpose', the design as well as organization of effective, flexible and innovative systems are major challenges for administrators of open and distance learning institutions in a world of change.

In Africa, recently, there is much to be gained from enhanced regional collaboration on policy issues, development of delivery systems and sharing of materials. There are now many initiatives to establish networking through national and regional associations in order to strengthen and improve capacities for open and distance learning in the region (UNESCO, 2002).

Research Questions

- ✧ Why are the desires for distance rather than extension and face to face traditional learning in PHEI?
- ✧ What are the personal needs of learners beyond the curriculum?
- ✧ How do distance learners perceive the contribution and education provision of PHEI?

1.8. Significance

This research is important in that it can be reflection for taking meta-cognition and aiding learners' learning how to learn. This study has paramount relevance for distance educators, university administration, tutors/instructors and policy makers for intervention. It can also be used as reference for further research by other researchers on the theme.

2. Objectives
2.1.General Objective

To assess perceived contribution and challenges of PHEIs; Open and Distance Education among Distance Learners for Personal Professional Specialization; the case of selected private universities in Ethiopia in Addis Ababa

2.2.Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to:-

- ✿ Pinpoint contribution of distance education as per the perception of the learners.
- ✿ Identify the challenges learners face in their academic process as self guided responsible learner.
- ✿ Distinguish the sole reason of learners for preferring distance mode of learning.

2.3. Limitation

The span of this study is on contribution and challenges of private higher educational institutions (PHEIs). The locale was bounded to the Addis Ababa and its vicinity.

2.4. Operational Definitions

Contribution: - refers to facilitating condition and supportive learning atmosphere.

Challenges: - refers to any difficulty that the learners encounter in relation to his/her education.

3. Review of Related Literature
3.1.   Gate Clue

In this part of the research different articles on the issue are reviewed. The review of the literatures incorporates research outputs disseminated via journals, books and electronic media. Topic based descriptions, theoretical

and conceptual frameworks are presented. Finally, summary and gaps for the need of this study are presented to explain the concern under study.

3.2. Distance Education

Distance learning programs are generally designed to serve an off campus population. These programs provide access to higher education for students who cannot attend traditional courses due to employment, marital status, family responsibilities, distance, and expenses incurred with traditional education. It also provides a cost effective means to serve large numbers of students in any area. Distance learning is not new in many universities. Correspondence courses comprised the first generation of distance learning, using traditional printed material and communication via post and telephone (Southworth, Flanigan, Knezek, 1981).

On the other hand, the second generation includes audio recordings and radio and television broadcasts (Southworth, et al., 1981). Televised and taped classes for students whose classes were in large lecture halls were offered by many major universities twenty years ago. These lectures were taped and placed in libraries for students to review and thus some students chose not to attend class because of this convenience. Some colleges used television courses where a local station would broadcast the course in the evening and students could tune into it at that time (Hannay & Newvine, 2006). Are these practical among distance education attendants in Ethiopian centers/institutions?

Beyond the merits of ODL, there are challenges that hamper such contributions. The results indicate that the nature of the tutorial services provided by tutors does not follow the fundamental principles of distance education. The tutorial programs were devoted largely to teachers' verbal explanation of descriptive facts which is the typical feature of conventional face-to-face instruction. The late arrival of course modules to the students; the distribution of modules very close to the actual dates of the tutorial sessions; tutors' reliance on the conventional face-to-face mode of instruction; large class size and the heavy workloads imposed upon tutors in some tutorial centers were some of the major constraints that caused the program to be implemented in an unsatisfactory way.

The Commonwealth of Learning, 1999, has noted that the definition of distance education as there is; separation of teacher and learner in time or place or in both time and place; institutional accreditation; that is, learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency. This type of learning is distinct from learning through your own effort without the official recognition of a learning institution; use of mixed-media courseware, including print, radio, and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning, and telecommunications. Courseware tends to be pre-tested and validated before use; two-way communication allows learners and tutors to interact as distinguished from the passive receipt of broadcast signals. Communication can be synchronous or asynchronous; possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials, learner–learner interaction, library study, and laboratory or practice sessions; and use of industrialized processes; that is, in large-scale open and distance learning operations, labor is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who works together in course development teams.

3.3. Contributions of Distance Education in Higher Education

UNESCO (2002) has shown that Challenges and opportunities, many countries are struggling with limited access to education and training for children and young people, and at the same time have to address the basic needs of an older generation. Low quality and insufficient relevance are other concerns. At the root is often the problem of financing adequate provision, and of outdated structures for education and training. The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the move towards more knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies create new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of education. ICTs open up new horizons for progress and the exchange of creativity and intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless the growing digital divide is actually leading to greater inequalities in development. This is giving rise to paradoxical situations where those who have the greatest need of them ñ disadvantaged groups, rural communities, illiterate populations or even entire countries ñ do not have access to the tools which would enable them to become full-fledged members of the knowledge society. For the student/learner open and distance learning means increased access and flexibility as well as the combination of work

and education. It may also mean a more learner-centred approach, enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interaction. For employers it offers high quality and usually cost effective professional development in the workplace.

It allows upgrading of skills, increased productivity and development of a new learning culture. In addition, it means sharing of costs, of training time, and increased portability of training. For governments the main potential is to increase the capacity and cost effectiveness of education and training systems, to reach target groups with limited access to conventional education and training, to support and enhance the quality and relevance of existing educational structures, to ensure the connection of educational institutions and curricula to the emerging networks and information resources, and to promote innovation and opportunities for lifelong learning.

There are many ways in which Web tools can be used to support teaching and learning (Zhang, Perris, & Yeung, cited in Sahin, & Shelley, 2008; Frederickson, Reed, & Clifford cited in Sahin, & Shelley, 2008). The contributions of distance education to individual learners may include (White cited in Sahin, & Shelley, 2008):

• broadening access to education

• providing new learning environments

• individual development

• knowledge and awareness of learners in context

• the importance of understanding the learner's perspective on distance education

It is clear that online education has the potential to provide students with high-quality learning experiences. If the course content is prepared by considering students' value system, along with their social and cultural context, learning is more likely to occur (Bradshaw & Hinton; Levin & Wadmany; Muilenburg & Berge cited in Sahin, & Shelley, 2008).

According to McGrath cited in Evans & Shortall, 2011, notes that "distance learners have greater freedom to choose what, when, where, and how to learn". The freedom makes and compels the learners to be more responsible in self directed learning (SDL).

UNESCO. (2002) stated that the globalization of distance education provides many opportunities for developing countries for the realization of their education system-wide goals. Two main factors have led to an explosion of interest in distance learning: the growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining; and the technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subjects at a distance.

As Member States and their governments become more aware of the potential of open and distance learning, it is essential for their educational planning that the opportunities offered by new technologies be realistically examined within the framework of national development plans in general and educational policies in particular. Faced with new training demands and new competitive challenges, many institutions need to undertake profound changes in terms of governance, organizational structure and modes of operation. More and more traditional universities are rapidly transforming themselves from single mode to dual mode universities, recognizing the importance of distance education in providing students with the best and most up-to-date educational resources available in addition to the traditional teaching methods that they receive. The increasing number of open universities being established across the world is highly indicative of this trend.

The Commonwealth of Learning, 1999, has described open and distance learning offers a number of advantages to both learners and to providers of opportunities for learning. Problems such as distance and time, which are barriers to conventional learning, are overcome in open and distance learning. The first advantage is overcoming physical distance. Open and distance learning can overcome problems of physical distance for: learners in remote locations who are unable or unwilling to physically attend a campus; and learners and teachers geographically separated in that teachers in urban settings instruct learners in rural settings.

Secondly, solving time or scheduling problems is another merit. Open and distance learning can solve time or scheduling for: client groups unwilling or unable to assemble together frequently; learners engaged in full-time or part-time work, both waged and volunteer; and family and community commitments.

The third contribution of distance education is expanding the limited number of places available. Open and distance learning can expand the limited number of places available for: campus-based institutions few in number; and stringent entrance requirements.

Accommodating low or dispersed enrolments is also another advantage. Open and distance learning can accommodate: low enrolments over a long period of time; and low enrolments in one geographic region but additional enrolments elsewhere.

The fifth advantage is making best use of the limited number of teachers available. Open and distance learning can make the best use of the few teachers available when: there is a lack of trained teaching personnel relative to demand; teachers are geographically concentrated; teachers with certain expertise are in short supply.

Dealing with cultural, religious, and political considerations are all also contributions that made distance education advantageous. Open and distance learning can deal with differences, and consequently: widens women's opportunities to learn; meets the needs of populations affected by violence, war, or displacement; and makes learning possible even when group assemblies are proscribed(The Commonwealth of Learning, 1999).

The CWL also shown that regardless of the size of the program, unit, or institution undertaking development and implementation of an open and distance learning system, the following functions must occur at some level: valuable considerations in relation to each open and distance learning task are presented in the consecutive paragraphs.

In terms of obtaining and managing money and other resources: grant-sustained, cost recovery (self-financing); higher development and start-up costs; and human support relatively expensive component. On the other

hand, developing or acquiring program and courses: considerable development time required for full-scale development and production; buying or leasing courses from other open and distance learning providers may be more effective use of resources; and continuum of approaches, from single author to large teams of specialists.

Distance educating universities use various mechanisms of recruiting and promoting: analyze and assess the needs of your prospective learner populations; make information available at right place and time; provide sufficient accurate information about time, cost, and effort required; provide sufficient accurate information about when, where, and how to get involved; and reassure potential learners about legitimacy and credibility.

Universities focus on teaching/learning resources as physically producing, reproducing, storing, and disseminating materials: course materials requirements may demand print, audio, video, or computer software; dissemination may require post, courier, transport companies, telecommunications, broadcasts, or satellites; physical production and reproduction time consuming; and specialized equipment and personnel required for storage, handling, packaging, dispatch, and inventory.

In enrolling and registering, it is expected that: process varies from simple manual lists to complex electronic systems; fixed or rolling entrance dates; and range of delivery options available.

Delivering program and courses are done through two-way communication required; evaluation and feedback; collaboration with other agencies; library services; and record systems. In providing learner support: personal support such as advice or counseling; academic support such as tutoring, grading, and examining; and face-to-face or mediated support.

The assessment and the examining, crediting, and granting credentials: range of credit options available; exam taking and credit evaluation requirements; and involvement of professional associations and external agencies. In addition, evaluating and revising processes, procedures, program, and courses should consider learner performance; learner satisfaction; meeting goals and objectives; and resistance to change.

Above all, for the execution of distance education, training and developing staff deem: orientation and adjustment to new technologies and approaches; and awareness of advantages and limitations of open and distance learning operations.

The benefits and drawbacks of distance education have been researched by various individuals. Wheatley & Greer (1995) saw the primary benefit of distance education as saving travel time, given that students do not have to travel to and from a home campus. With Web based courses, the instructor also does not have to travel and can work from home.

Another benefit is that students can work on the class according to their own schedules. It was found that teaching costs may be reduced in two ways: first, because different campuses can utilize the same instructor as a resource for a tele-course, and second, with some Web based courses an instructor can handle a larger number of students, ultimately reducing the overhead costs of faculty (Wheatley & Greer, 1995, p. 243). Further, in fields where information is constantly changing, the use of distance learning allows professionals the ability to remain current without having to travel long distances to do so (Bisciglia & Monk Turner, 2002). There are also some drawbacks to this type of education. Baker (1986) suggested that students may have problems comprehending course information that is technical, quantitative or scientifically oriented. Also, course expectations are often not clear, and because of the physical separation between the instructor and student, problems may be difficult to resolve. Unlike the traditional classroom, distance education does not allow instructors to modify lecture plans on the basis of moment to moment feedback from learners, which may affect how a student experiences the distance learning environment (Cropley & Kahl, 1983, p. 33). It is also possible that the limited interaction between students and instructors impacts the overall learning experience. However, it is difficult to measure what a student learns in a classroom from the interaction and discussions that occur.

When comparing the attitudes of instructors and students towards distance learning, it was found that instructors had conflicting attitudes about distance education. While they were willing to teach a distance learning class, they rated the courses as equal or lower in quality than traditional

courses taught on campus (Inman, Kerwin, & Mayes, 1999). The students, on the other hand, were highly satisfied with these instructors and the distance courses taught. The students were not concerned about the interaction with the instructor. Drennan, Kennedy, and Pisarski (2005) found that student satisfaction is influenced by positive perceptions toward technology and an autonomous learning mode.

Consequently, students may react differently to the online learning environment, depending on their skill levels and attitudes. Clark (1993) found that those instructors who favored distance learning were those that were more familiar with the educational technology. Passig & Levin (2000) found that when using multimedia approaches, the student not only studies the subject matter but also learns how to deal with the synthetically programmed environment. It has been found that with the interactivity available in many distance learning approaches today, students are able to be actively engaged in the learning process. Much of the research previously conducted favors distance education. However, in much of this research, only distance learning students were sampled. To achieve a more realistic picture of how students perceive distance education, it is important to question students who have participated in both traditional and distance education. This research will address this issue by comparing student perceptions of course quality in both distance and traditional courses (Hannay & Newvine, 2006).

Despite the challenges and limitations of distance education such as; the learner is usually isolated; the motivational factors arising from the contact and competition with other students are absent; the student also lacks the immediate support of a teacher who is present and able to motivate and, if necessary, give attention to actual needs and difficulties that crop up during study; distant students and their teachers often have little in common in terms of background and day-to-day experiences and therefore, it takes longer for student-teacher rapport to develop.; without face-to-face contact distant students may feel ill at ease with their teacher as an "individual" and uncomfortable with their learning situation; the chief advantages of distance education programs is that students can learn at their convenience thus accommodating work and personal life and that it can be accessed by those who do not live near or who cannot attend traditional training centers and

universities. This is tempered, however, by some of the costs and personal motivation needed to complete programs (Billings 1997).

Above all Willis (1993) has identified and has shown that three models to deliver a distance education program, each based on the needs of the learner, and the cultural and resource environment.

3.4. Self Directed Learning

In designing, developing, and delivering distance education courses, students' needs and perceptions should be central. A course failing to meet student expectations and needs may lead to low levels of student involvement and low intrinsic motivation (Hall cited in Sahin, & Shelley, 2008). Indeed, without investigating what satisfies learners in quality distance education courses, it is difficult to meet their needs and improve their learning.

Cowan cited in Evans, Shortall, 2011, notes the importance of autonomy, emphasizing how students can concentrate on aspects of courses that are interesting and skip those sections that are not. Students can also progress at a pace they choose. However, Broady （1995） noted that there are difficulties in developing learner autonomy in isolated ODL situations, and that theory in particular is daunting when tackled alone, as is analyzing one's own teaching. Despite Broady's concerns, there is every reason to believe that modern ODL can encourage learner autonomy. The new technologies are a key influence in this, as they allow learners to carry out sophisticated worldwide online searches for learning material; in addition, the ease of communication by email allows for learners to consult quickly if they are having confidence problems.

Cowan （1995） feels that communication in the ODL environment is a poor second to the classroom when it comes to communication. Bolton and Unwin, 1996, p.40, agree, saying that ODL students "cannot benefit from learning directly from others through discussion". Aldred says ODL learners often report "feelings of insecurity, lack of self-belief, and difficulty in assessing their own progress". At the same time, there are indications that this problem is not as widespread as suggested. Rangecroft et al., 1999,

found that opportunity for contact with other students was something students did not value as highly as the academics.

Lyall and McNamara, 2000, p.10, in an investigation of Australian students, noted that ODL students "accepted isolation as a part of this choice, and had devised strategies to overcome this", that "[i]solation from the university due to geographical distance and issues of time had made these students independent learners", and that "lack of support from other students and teachers did not seem to be a great concern for interviewees, although they all felt that on campus students "had it easy" (Lyall & McNamara, 2000, p.113. Probably the greatest sense of isolation is in academic terms: ODL students simply do not have access to the range of publications that an OC student can find on campus, although this situation is now improved by the ability of university libraries to make core readings available online, and to provide borrowing facilities for ODL students.

The ODL involves completing with specified period of time that is initially communicated at the beginning as schedule. In the assessment of performance, ODL students receive assignment questions at the beginning of each 4-month module, and are expected to submit their assignments at the end of each module. ODL students cannot negotiate assignment questions for some modules whereas, however they can choose from a list of pre-set questions that usually involve classroom research.

Tutorial is so vital for distance education learners. ODL students are assigned a personal tutor. The tutor monitors their progress at least once a month, and comments on draft essays when students want this.

Makoe, 2012, noted that studying through printed media will remain one of the main medium of instruction in most developing countries. The pre-produced self-contained study materials are developed with an explicit understanding that they facilitate access to learning. Holmberg argues that the study material that is developed with good didactic conversation in it should be written in a personal style; easily accessible; offer explicit advice and suggestions and invite exchange of views. Traditionally, students go through prepackaged and submit assignments and the lecturer provides feedback though tutorial letters and marked assignments. In recent times,

different technologies have been used to enhance student-content interaction through automated testing, simulations and computer assisted instruction. These methods of independent study are meant to maximize student-content interaction.

In distance education, Holmberg believed that course material should be developed in such a way that the conversation is internalized and the "student will be more motivated and more successful than if the course studies has an impersonal textbook character" The idea is to facilitate access to conversation which is meant to support motivation. To ensure that students do not feel left out, study materials and assignments should be designed in such a way that students are encouraged to analyze, summarize and draw conclusions on the content of the study material. He believes that self-check exercises as well as frequent submission of assignments and extensive feedback increase motivation.

Students study at their own pace using a detailed syllabus and contact faculty using one or a combination of technologies. Students are provided course materials and access to a faculty member who provides guidance, answers questions, and evaluates their work. There is wide variation in the amount of student-initiated communication with the instructor. When email and/or computer conferencing is available, interactive discussions can occur.

There are four main categories of media used to bridge the distance between instructor and student: audio, video, electronic communication, and print (Chitanda cited in Knebel, 2001).

3.5. Theoretical Framework

Interaction, according to Anderson is the core of the educational experience. Without interaction, teaching becomes simply "passing on content as if it were dogmatic truth" p 29. The nature of distance education compels providers to use mediated forms of this interaction to support their students. This enables students to communicate with their lectures and talk with each other in an effort to understand the course content. Interaction, according to Anderson, occurs when objects, events and people mutually influence one another. Through interaction, people become involved in a

community of practice which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. Vygotsky argues that social interactions are methodologies that turn experience into knowledge, with language as a medium for negotiation of teaching and learning. Therefore, students' development is determined by social interaction through problem-solving under the guidance of a teacher or in collaboration with capable peers Vygotsky.

To understand how cell phones can be used for pedagogic purposes, it is important to look at interaction on the efficacy of distance learning. The main focus of the learning process should be based on a particular theory or theories that help to explain the functioning of people and institutions. Each theory of learning leads to an adoption of specific teaching and learning process. It is this regard that theories of distance education will be looked at in terms of supporting distance students. Keegan classified theories of distance education into three groups: theories of independence and autonomy, theories of industrialization of teaching, and theories of interaction and communication. This study will focus on those theorists that dealt specifically with the role of communication or interaction in supporting distance students.

The character of good distance education, according to Holmberg, "resembles that of a guided conversations aiming at learning and that presence of the typical traits of such conversation facilitates learning." He argues that the study material that is developed with good didactic conversation in it should be written in a personal style; easily accessible; offer explicit advice and suggestions and invite exchange of views. The idea is to establish a personal relationship with the students and course developer and "find ways to noncontiguous cater for something functioning in the way that dialogue does" p17. Central to student support is a mediated conversation between the students and the teacher through Bridging the Distance: The Pedagogy of Mobile Learning in Supporting Distance Learners integrated and structured dialogue in the study material and in other interventions aimed at formative development of a student. Interaction between the tutor and the student was done through student sending a completed assignment to the teacher who marks it and sends it back with comments and feedback. This system assumes that students have the ability to work through the study material independently. However,

studies have shown that students seem to value contact with other people even when they study at a distance.

Holmberg argues that the conversation concept can be successfully translated for use by the media available to distance students. Although the simulated conversation brought about by the presentation of the study material, the real or two-way conversation could be done through the written, personal and telephone interaction between the students and the tutors and others belonging to the supporting organization. Keegan defined distance education as a system characterized by 1) the separation of instructor and student during most of the instructional process, 2) the influence of an educational organization, 3) provision of student assessment, 4) use of educational media to deliver course content, and 5) two-way communication between instructor and student.

However, the question is "how long do distance educators execute these in Ethiopian context?" Moore defines this distance in terms of the responsiveness of an educational program to the student rather than in terms of the physical separation of the instructor and the student. He argues that distance education, not only a geographic separation between the teachers and the learners, is a pedagogic concept. This separation affects the patterns of teacher and student behavior. In this separation there is a "psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstandings" between instructors and students who are physically separated p22. It is in this space, that Moore describes as transactional distance, where the structure of the educational program and the quality of the interaction between the teacher and the student determines academic performance. In his theory of transactional distance, Moore, argued for the relationship between dialogue (the interaction that occurs when one gives instruction and the others respond), structure (teaching strategies and evaluation methods) and learner autonomy (the ability of the student to take responsibility of his or her learning). Transactional distance tends to be lessened in courses with high levels of dialogue and little predetermined structure because students receive ongoing guidance from instructors. But where there is a high structure and low dialogue, the responsibility of learning is on the students. Moore believed that interaction should be both unidirectional and bi-directional in distance education. It should serve a

variety of purposes including encouraging interaction between student and content; student and student; and student and lecturer. "Deep and meaningful formal learning is supported as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-tutor; student-student; student-content) is at a high level".

Anderson and Garrison took Moore's types of interaction a step further by including the teacher-teacher, teacher-content and content-content interaction. They argued that teaching and learning is not only about students, it also includes other forms interaction that takes place in distance education. This model presents a shift from focusing on the student to 68 Distance Education looking at the entire distance education system. While Moore looked at interaction from a students' point of view, Anderson focused on the educational phenomenon of interaction from the multiple-perspectives. In developing this framework, Anderson was seeking to clarify the costs between independent-oriented and interactive-oriented learning strategies and activities. "He stressed the importance of cost and sustainability as well as pedagogical value in choosing appropriate mixes of interaction". From Anderson model, it is clear that there are many types of actors (both human and inanimate) and a variety of interactions Most of the interaction that takes place in the distance education environment is often mediated by technologies. In introducing the fourth type of interaction, learner-interface interaction, Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena argue that student should have the skills and the necessary competencies that will give confidence in operating the mechanisms of the delivery system before they can successfully interact with content, the lecturer and other students. "What is known lies in the interaction between individuals and artifacts, such as computers and other technological devices".

The successful implementation of learner-interface interaction, according to Hillman et al. requires the student "to operate from a paradigm that includes understanding not only the procedures of working with the interface, but also the reasons why these procedures obtain results". It is therefore important that students understand why they are using cell phones in an educational environment in order to interact successfully with content, lecturers and peers.

The use of technology is an essential component of supporting two-way communication in the education transaction. The mediating role of information and communication technologies such as cell phones places the student at the centre of learning. Garrison's concept of learner control is based on the students' "ability to influence and direct a course of events" within a distance education environment. He believes that a two way communication can only be sustained if students are also in control of the educational transaction. In this context, according Garrison, a student assumes responsibility for constructing meaning is an interactive environment. Mobile learning, by nature tends to ascribe to the student-centered approach which aims to develop in each student a sense of responsibility for his or her own learning by focusing on individual student's experiences, perspectives, background, interests, capabilities and needs. Garrison's concepts of dialogue, structure and control are central to his two-way communication framework.

These selected theorists were concerned with explaining the functioning of the concept of interaction in enhancing and supporting learning in distance education. This shows that the potential to use cell phones in facilitating interaction is enormous and can be used in a variety of ways. Cell phones can be used as a tool to provide both synchronous and asynchronous support to learning. Cell phone social networks can be used to facilitate the process of real-time communications between individuals and groups. These devices can also be used by the teacher to stimulate discussion amongst students by sending a question via SMS. The idea is to find an accessible and available technological tool that can be used to support distance education learners.

Theoretical framework	Main characteristics	Pedagogical focus
Guided didactic conversation[55].	Conversation character of the written pre-produced course package Real and simulated conversation	Study material should be written in a personal style; easily accessible; offer explicit advice, suggestions and invite exchange of views. Mediated conversation facilitates the development of learning relationships between the lecturer and the student
Transactional distance [56;57;58].	Dialogue – two-way communication; interaction Structure - teaching strategies and evaluation methods Learner autonomy Learner-interface interaction	Learner – lecturer :The lecturer provides an organised curriculum to ensure that the student masters the content Learner – learner: Students form peer support groups Learner-content : Student reads a book, views or listens to DVDs and CDs and interacts with inanimate learning resources. Learner-interface: interaction between the student and the technologies used to deliver the instruction
Two-way communication [59].	Dialogue, Learner Control Two-way communication	The course is designed and developed using networks of diverse mobile applications to support two-way communication. Students are empowered to control process of learning
Equivalency Theorem [60].	Interaction from the multiple-perspectives including teacher-teacher, teacher-content and content-content interaction. Costs of interaction	Focus is on the entire distance education system that includes interaction within the content and among teachers, course developers, instructional designers, administrators etc.

Table 1. Pedagogical focus of theories of interaction

3.6.   Conceptual Framework
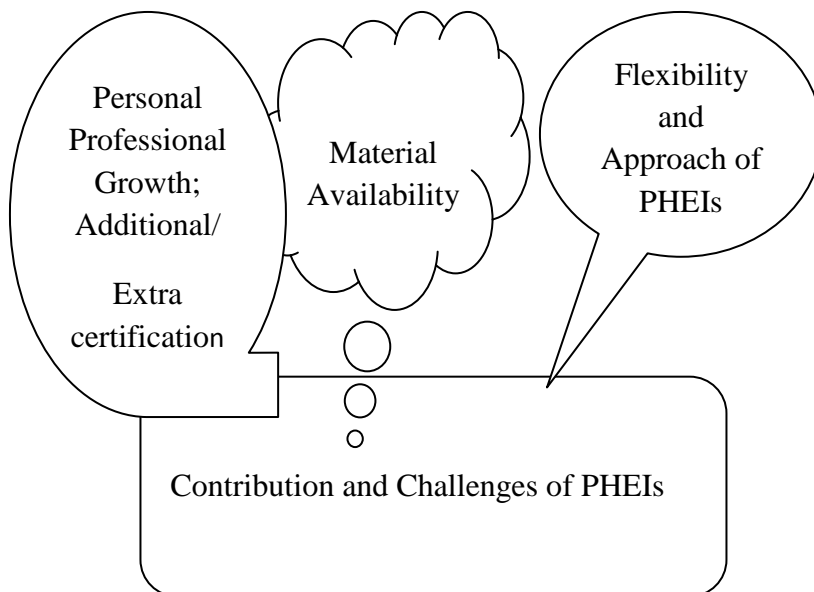
What are the positive and negative influences of the selected independent variables on PHEIs?

3.7.   Summary and Allegation of the Literature

In the review of literatures from various articles it is noticed that distance education is best alternative for face to face direct learning and it is being used as equally important. However, this does not mean that it is fully error free. Negative attitude among learners, employers, educators and the larger community is the major obstacle for contend to deliver quality distance education with embedded much responsibility of self direct learning by learners.

Perception of the contributions and challenges affect other learning activities and communications. How do distance learners perceive the education form and their institution where they are attending their learning process? There are gaps in looking at the psychological factors that affect ongoing learners. Are there close guidance of the academia to support psychological strength of learners? How do the personal goals of attending distance education influence the learning process and communication with the institution?

4. Research Methods

In this part of the research, locale, population, sample, and sampling are presented. In addition, the data gathering instruments in line with construction/preparation, validation, administration, coding and analysis techniques are shown.

4.1. Locale and Population

 The population of this study refers to distance learners in Addis Ababa locale.

4.2.   Sample and Sampling

For this study 130 respondents were recruited by using multistage sampling followed by stratified sampling from college to department level.

4.3.Data Gathering Tools
4.3.1.Construction

Likert type questionnaire with 24 items were constructed in line with the theme of the research. Interview guide questions and FGD leading concepts were prepared by the researcher with special assistance of co-examiners.

4.3.2.Administration

The Likert type questionnaire was administered in a face to face manner. The glorious moments were tutorial programs and exam days that were alarmingly used. In addition, the center coordinators played great role for recruiting participants across departments. Meanwhile, the interviews and FGD sessions were also arranged in the tutorial session breaks.

4.3.3.Validation and Reliability

The repeatability, trustworthiness and tendency to be generalized of the finding and usability of the instruments are attested differently. The reliability of the tool from the pilot study was found to be 0.79. This shows that the instrument is trustable to administer. In addition, the content validity was cross-checked by educational psychology colleagues in line with the objective of the study. The FGD and interview guide questions were prepared based on the objectives and contents for dealing.

4.4. Data Coding and Analysis Mechanism

Though 130 questionnaires were distributed, 116 were given back to the researcher. Then the responses were encoded to excel making them to be in raw data. Then after coding the quantitative data were further analyzed using SPSS 20 for descriptive and inferential.

From the interview and FGD data were collected through note taking and in fact the analyses were being made even at the time of data collection. These qualitative data were helpful for triangulation.

5. Analysis, Findings And Discussion

This fourth part of the research displays the analysis, the finding/ results and discussion. Quantitative data collected through the questionnaires are analyzed through SPSS 20 in descriptive (%age, tabular illustration, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics. Qualitative data are described through narration across the points of discussion.

5.1. Background of Participants

Table 2: *Background of the Respondents*

SR	Construct	Categories	Frequency	%age	Remark
1	Sex	Male	85	73.28%	
		Female	31	26.72%	
		Total	116	100%	
2	Age	18-29 years	19	16.38%	
		30-40 years	42	36.21%	
		40-55 years	54	46.55%	
		Above 56 years	1	0.86%	
		Total	116	100%	
3	Previous educational level	Certificate	-	-	none
		Diploma	96	82.76%	
		Degree	17	14.66%	
		Masters and above	3	2.59%	
		Total	116	100%	
4	Current level admitted	Diploma	-	-	none
		Degree and above	116	100%	
		Total	116	100%	
5	Department	Accounting	33	28.45%	
		Management	32	27.59%	
		Economics	25	21.55%	
		Sociology	13	11.2%	
		Agriculture	5	4.31%	
		Other departments	8	6.9%	
		Total	116	100%	
6	Working condition	Employed	109	93.97%	
		Self Employed	5	4.31%	
		Unemployed	2	1.72%	
		Total	116	100%	

5.2. Reasons for Learning in PHEIs

Table 3: Reasons for learning

SR	Reasons for Learning	Mean	St. Deviation	Remark
1	I learn to upgrade in my profession	3.81	1.03	
2	Learning in distance education helps me to more job opportunity	2.66	1.21	
3	Distance education helps to get additional skill	3.55	0.88	
4	I learn in distance education to get knowledge	3.26	0.70	
5	Distance education is opportunity for learners in terms of access	3.82	0.97	
6	I prefer distance education because I work and learn at a time	4.16	0.85	
7	Self Directed Motivated Learning	3.56	0.76	

5.2.1. Professional Upgrading/Vertical Specialization

Do distance learners learn for their professional upgrading and growth? Do they learn to specialize more as from diploma to bachelor degree, or from bachelor degree to masters?

Table 4: Learn to upgrade in one's profession

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Strongly Disagree	1	0.9%
Disagree	21	18.1%
Not Sure	5	4.3%
Agree	61	52.6%
Strongly Agree	28	24.1%
Total	116	100%

As it is depicted on top, 76.7% of the respondents are that they learn in distance education for their professional upgrading (M= 3.81; SD= 1.03). On the other hand, 23.3% had marked disagreement and they explained that they have other more reasons.

Table 5: Learning in distance education helps to more job opportunity

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Disagree	89	76.7%
Agree	5	4.3%
Strongly Agree	22	19%
Total	116	100%

As it is shown there on top, 76.6% (80) of the respondent are not learning for new job opportunity. However, 23.3% (27) of them show agreement in that they tend to broaden job opportunity in their career. In the interview and FGD there was tendency to triangulate job opportunity related justification.

Respondents in the qualitative study were justifying that most of them are already employed so they want to upgrade in a given arena. This is similar with the background of the information as 93.97% were employed (109); 4.31% were self employed (5); and 1.72% were unemployed (2).

5.2.2. Horizontal Multiple Professionalism

The respondents have shown the under presented response to one of the reasons why they are attending distance education.

Table 6: Distance education is opportunity for learners in terms of access

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Strongly Disagree	3	2.6%
Disagree	8	6.9%
Not Sure	25	21.6%
Agree	51	44%
Strongly Agree	29	25%
Total	116	100%

Access to distance education is also raised as respondents prefer it over other means. 67% (80) of the participants responded that distance education is an opportunity to learn as it is accessible in terms of place and time (M = 3.82; S.D = 0.97). The rest 33% have other reasons for prioritizing this program.

Table 7: Respondents preference to distance education because of work and learn at a time

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Disagree	2	1.7%
Not Sure	28	24.1%
Agree	36	31%
Strongly Agree	50	43.1%
Total	116	100%

74.1% (86) of the respondents have shown that they attend distance education for the reason that they can work and learn. Distance learners have high inclination due to the flexible nature of the program (M = 4.16; S.D = 0.85).

Table 8: Self Directed Motivated Learning

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Disagree	6	5.2%
Not Sure	52	44.8%
Agree	45	38.8%
Strongly Agree	13	11.2%
Total	116	100%

In distance education programs, self directed learning is so critical while learner autonomy is expected by the student. As it is shown on the table, 50% (58) of participants in this study have shown that they do course works through self initiation (M = 3.56; S.D = 0.76).

5.2.3. Training for Skill and Knowledge

Table 9: Distance education helps to get additional skill

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Disagree	15	12.9%
Not Sure	37	31.9%
Agree	49	42.2%
Strongly Agree	15	12.9%
Total	116	100%

Table 10: Learn in distance education to get knowledge

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Disagree	15	12.9%
Not Sure	58	50%
Agree	41	35.3%
Strongly Agree	2	1.7%
Total	116	100%

As to the reflection of respondents 37% (43) of them said that they learn to get knowledge in addition to other reasons. Whereas, half of the respondents marked that they are not sure of knowledge acquisition. Meanwhile, 12.9 % (15) of them disagree on this construct.

5.3. Respondents' View towards Contribution and Education Provision of PHEI

Table 11: Descriptive

SR	Issue	Mean	Std. Devia
1	In distance education, materials encourage me to learn	3.95	0.83
2	The modules are pleasing to read independently	3.92	0.92
3	I feel responsible for activities given in the courses	3.76	0.74
4	I want to learn more than what is written in the learning module	2.49	0.61
5	Other resources such as audio-video aids are equally helpful as the printed modules does	3.87	0.87
6	Graduates of distance education are equally competent with regular and extension students who learnt in face to face manner	4.25	0.76
7	The previous knowledge and my work experience helps me to good at learning independently in distance education	3.87	0.68
8	I prefer distance education because I am free	4.33	0.71
9	I feel that distance education is mainly for those who missed the opportunity and aging people	3.46	0.86
10	For quality distance education more is expected from learners	2.84	0.86
11	Private higher educational institutions do not care for learners quality education	3.00	0.77

12	The current way of distance education way should be modified	3.66	0.91
13	Private higher educational institutions work for money/profit	4.28	.78
14	Distance education is inferior in quality as compared to face to face interaction with instructors	3.78	0.74
15	I trust the university for fairness in evaluation	2.68	0.9
16	There is too much pressure on the learner in distance education	4.1	0.77
17	Universities are making business out of distance education	3.66	0.8

Respondents have explained exclusive preference for PHEIs in terms of access, flexibility, transparency and relative freedom.

Respondents disclosed that PHEIs give ample focus as they do for face-to-face/regular and extension programs. In communication and material provision, St. Mary's University and Alpha University were rated by respondents better. St. Mary's University's SMS messages for learner in tutorial and exam schedules were exemplified.

In the FGD session, one of the respondents has put the under mentioned response.

The modules of few PHEIs [names omitted] are so important. They are like books since they are written in the level of the students. I have friends learning in public university distance programs and they borrow modules from us to read.

Respondent from C2PHEI

5.4.   Discussion

The result in SDL (M=3.56; SD=0.76) depicted that 50% of the respondents stated that they are making self directed learning with self motivation. Whereas, 44.8% of the respondents have responded as they are not sure. This finding is similar with Evans & Shortall, 2011. As distance learners have greater freedom to choose what, when, where, and how to learn and since learners have freedom more responsibility is embedded.

According to Sahin, & Shelley, 2008, understanding students' perceptions regarding distance education is the first step for developing and implementing a successful online learning environment. The finding on the reasons that learners attend distance education is found to show similar justification as learners attend distance education for professional upgrading (M=3.81, SD=1.03); to get additional skills (M=3.55, SD=0.88); to get additional knowledge (M=3.26, SD=0.7); due to opportunity for learners in terms of access (3.82, SD=0.97); and better option for learning while working (M=4.16, SD=0.85). However, the disagreement on getting more job opportunity (M=2.66, SD=1.21) seems very unusual finding different from various literatures. Indeed, the triangulation of the finding has shown that the respondents are already employed. Therefore, they prioritize job security rather than job opportunity.

Mulatu Dea Lerra(2014) had stated as distance education is becoming the option of academically poor and weak candidates. Unlike Mulatu's finding, in this study most respondents were competent even with previous Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts qualification.

Respondents suggested that poor communication and orientation of students who join the distance education program, poor quality of the program in terms of students, tutors and materials, lack of time and libraries at the study centers, insufficient module supply, wrong location of study centers, heavy workloads of tutors'', lack of policy and proper organizational structure, and lack of information in distance education program   in   general need great attention to augment the level of performance of students in DL.

Though data are not collected from instructors, the attitude and perception of other people around and employers' acceptance influence the attitude of the learner. This finding differs from Inman, Kerwin, & Mayes cited in Hannay & Newvine, 2006, that stated when comparing the attitudes of instructors and students towards distance learning, it was found that instructors had conflicting attitudes about distance education. While they were willing to teach a distance learning class, they rated the courses as equal as or lower in quality than traditional courses taught on campus.

In terms of resource availability and resource use, distance learners in this study responded that they use printed material i.e. module. This is one fourth of what Knebel, 2001, explained as there are four main categories of media used to overpass the distance between instructor and student: audio, video, electronic communication, and print.

The finding the benefits of distance education are similar with most researchers' finding in general and Wheatley & Greer (1995) specifically as saw the primary benefit of distance education as saving travel time, given that students do not have to travel to and from a home campus.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation
6.1.Conclusion

As far as student study groups are concerned, mainly because of a lack of access to instructors and the problems associated with remoteness from the centre, students have organized themselves into strong study groups. The study groups meet mostly on weekends and evenings to review previous work and discuss difficult assignments. Ongoing research has shown that groups are mainly found in areas where there is a concentration of students, not necessarily at the extramural centers. Nonetheless, such gatherings tend to lead that the students submit uniform answers for assignments.

In the interview, few distance learners have uttered that they have personal tutors. They added that the mere reason is to get assistance especially for those computational courses.

Why are the desires for distance rather than extension and face to face traditional learning in PHEI?

In this study the respondents have shown that distance education is desirable for the reason that they are working at the same time they have family responsibilities. In addition, time freedom to schedule activities with personal desire is leading reasons. Prior educational and work experiences are also signifying that they trust themselves to learn in autonomy as per self direct learning. The very presence of the program is another contributing factor for preferring distance education. Above all, location matters are other significant factors. When the work and residential area are far-away, neither regular nor extension classes are preferred over distance education. PHEIs are also preferable for the very reason that they are student centered, better accountable and their schedules are relatively flexible.

What are the personal needs of learners beyond the curriculum?

Students study at their own pace using a detailed syllabus and/or module. Students are provided course materials, but they have no direct access to university member who provides guidance, answers questions, and evaluates their work. There is wide variation in the amount of student-initiated communication with the instructor. Yet, there is no high habit to use email and/or computer conferencing available for interactive discussions.

How do distance learners perceive the contribution and education provision of PHEI?

Respondents have explained various relevance of PHEI in terms of access, flexibility and relative freedom.

6.2.Recommendations

As per the research finding the following actions are forwarded for stakeholders and concerned individuals as recommendation.

(1) PHEIs should make difference through enabling learners to be self motivated and offer study skills as well as time management training so as to help their SDL.

(2) Responsibility should be shared with students to enable them feel sense of institutional belongingness.

(3) Skilled and qualified center facilitators should be recruited to maximize client/learner satisfaction in addition to academic competency enhancement.

(4) Course materials should be distributed to the learners in time to make them start reading and doing activities as soon as possible.

(5) Based on their location assigning focal learners to get feedback and comments from students for further assistance.

(6) Audio-video materials and internet should be planned to be used following technological advancement. The medium of communication should be available and should bidirectional.

6.3. Limitation of the study

This study on perceived contribution and challenges of PHEIs is done merely from the response of distance learners. Therefore the conclusion is not attributable to the side of workers in the respective institutions because data are not gathered from workers and instructors in the universities. The findings cannot be generalized to primary and secondary distance education as the respondents are all from tertiary distance education.

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