

# **Attitudes towards Distance Higher Education: Levels, Influencing Factors and Implications**

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## **Abstract**

*Even though distance education is tangibly expanding all over the globe, its practice and experienced challenges are becoming the major concern of educational research. Among commonly faced challenges, poor attitudes towards the essence and effectiveness of distance education are being reported as commonly faced challenges of dual impacts. It was, therefore, aimed in this study at carrying out extensive literature survey so as to find out the level of attitudes of all respective bodies and come up with common influencing factors. It was also aimed to discuss the implication of those set of attitude and influential factors on the future of higher education institutions. As a result, it was found in many studies that distance institutions' instructors, students and owners themselves have poor attitudes towards its essence and effectiveness. Some recent studies, however, revealed that respective stakeholders have already started to have a better feeling about it in some countries due to presence of relevant and flexible curriculum, utilization of adequate expertise and more interactive technological modes of instruction which enhance access of attaining global knowledge from world-class scholars.*

**Key Phrases:** Distance Education, Attitudes towards distance education, Essence of distance education, Distance learning, Higher education, Effectiveness of distance education

## **I. Introduction**

### **1.1. Distance Education: Definition, Pros and Cons**

#### **1.1.1. Definition of Distance Education**

The term *distance education* reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone who is not there in time and place with learners, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure (Keegan, 1980). The US Distance Learning Association defines distance learning as “the delivery of education or training through electronically mediated instruction including satellite, video, audio, audiographic computer, multimedia technology and learning at a distance” (Jennifer & Russell, 2003).

These technologies include: one-way and two-way interactions using audio (audiotape, voice mail, audio conferencing), data ( computer-based training, internet), video (videotapes, video messaging, two-way videos), and combinations of audio, video and data (multimedia

programming, multimedia messaging). In most cases, distance learning is described as a learning model which include all the e-learning, m-learning and the likes (Chute et al., 1999). However, some authors preferred to describe them separately (Russell, 1997).

### **1.1.2 Pros of Distance Education**

Distance education is mostly known as advantageous in that it is more accessible than other modes of education despite of geographical location (Boli & Ramirez, 1986). In this regard, it enables learners to world-class respective knowledge, skills and experience and become globally competent (Keegan, 1980). Similarly, it can significantly reduce the need for student and instructor to be in the same geographical location, and eliminates worries about meeting a class at a certain time (Radford, 1997).

Besides, it is also preferred for being flexible and allowing learners to learn in their own learning style and at their own pace (Basaza, et al, 2012; Keegan, 1980). Especially, distance learning courses that use the Internet offer an unprecedented amount of flexibility. Lectures, class notes, assignments, questions and other class-related materials can be uploaded by the instructor and downloaded by the students around the world at any time. For students who are confined to homes and cannot attend traditional classes, these classes are the most flexible alternative (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999). Online classes also allow for discussion questions to be posted for individual or group responses. Therefore, students who are apprehensive about voicing their opinions in a traditional classroom setting are given an avenue to state their opinions without the pressures of a traditional classroom setting (Bratina & Templeton, 1997).

Moreover, it could potentially decrease parking problems associated with large universities. If more courses were taught over the Internet and students were granted dialup access, essentially this would decrease the entire educational cost and time (Bratina & Templeton, 1997; Shearman, 1997; Sherry & Morse, 1995). Generally, it is removing the traditional notion of the instructor possessing 'supreme power' to more contemporary educational approaches such as team building exercises (Sherry & Morse, 1995).

### **1.1.3 Cons of Distance Education**

A major disadvantages of distance education is the considerable expense associated with installation and maintenance of distance education facilities (Schuttloffel, 1998). Otherwise, the instructional and communication process become less interactive and participatory. In addition, money can be a hindrance for institutions or organizations without money on hand for upgrading to latest technological versions (Shearman, 1997; Sherry & Morse, 1995).

The other drawback of distance education is that it is relatively difficult to follow up, monitor and supersize how learners are doing instructional activities, assignments, examinations and

projects (Keegan, 1980). For such reasons, there are usually complains being raised about whether all the respective learners' scores, and grades represent their real performance and achievement (Schuttloffel, 1998).

## **1.2. The Problem**

In this regard, it is being raised in recent studies that these disadvantageous features of it might lead to the development of poor or negative attitudes towards its essence and effectiveness. It is also being raised that internal and personal beliefs, motives, needs and misconceptions lead to wide range of attitudes towards both the essence and effectiveness of distance education. For the same reasons, different sets of controversial findings are being reported regarding whether the essence, effectiveness and acceptance of distance of distance education is declining or inclining in terms of quality. Therefore, it was aimed in this review study to re-examine and discuss the attitudes of respective stakeholders towards the essence and effectiveness of distance education, and influencing factors. It was also attempted to discuss and infer the implication of different range of attitudes and casual factors on the future of our country's higher education institutions.

## **II. Discussion**

### **2.1 Attitudes towards Distance Education**

Even though there is a serious shortage of research works conducted in our context, most studies conducted abroad revealed that different range of attitudes towards distance education. In this regard, such ranges of attitudes are usually being seen from two points of view, either from its essence or effectiveness. In this discussion, attitudes towards distance education were also seen from these two points of view.

#### **2.1.1 With Respect to the Essence of Distance Education**

In this respect, many respective studies found that majority of participant have good attitudes towards distance education (Inman, et al, 1999; Jennifer & Russell, 2003; Nasser and *Abouchalid* 2012; Wilson, 2001). As per the findings of these studies, distance education is essential for being flexible (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999), more accessible (Boli & Ramirez, 1986), learners-friendly (in terms of learning and studying style) (Basaza, et al, 20120; Keegan, 1980), feasible (Inman, et al, 1999; Jennifer & Russell, 2003), enhancing independent learning (Bratina & Templeton, 1997) and so on. Moreover, some studies found that distance e-learning and m-learning are even more preferable and interactive that the face-to-face program (Czerniak, at al,1999). A study carried out in Saudi, for example found that about 62% of female and 52% male higher education students are highly interested in mobile mode of distance education. In addition, a study conducted on school teachers and directors revealed that about 68% of the teachers and 63% of the directors have positive attitudes about distance teachers education program (Nasser and *Abouchalid*, 2012).

However, it should be noted that there is a significant difference between having positive attitudes towards distance education and preferring distance education. Some recent studies found that participants have positive attitude towards the essence of distance education not for themselves, but for others (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999). For these group of participants, distance learning should be our last choice that we can consider if we couldn't join a face-to- face program for any reason.

Conversely, it was also found in other studies that school directors and employers, having poor attitude about the essence of distance education, prefer their employees and school teachers to attend distance education (Bratina & Templeton, 1997; Nasser & *Abouch ed i d*, 2012). It looks like that those employers' and school directors' concern is only about having employees and teachers in their schools or companies. Based on their findings, Nasser and Abouch ed id (2012: 5) described this situation as " . . . *directors were concerned with four main issues: funding, training, feasibility, and loss of time. . . . not so much concerned with the value or worth of distance education, but showed concern for distance learning processes.*"

Besides, working on the distance students themselves, Basaza and his colleagues found that majority of distance students in Uganda are happy for joining distance education program, but not having desired attitude towards its essence. The authors found that majority of these learners are employed or involved in farming and fishing. As a result they joined distance education programs in order to obtain qualification and/or promotion, and they enroll in distance education with the attitude that distance education is easy (Basaza et al, 2012). It was also revealed by similar studies that faculty members themselves have no positive attitude towards the essence of distance education. However, having not convinced by its essence, they still found more interested in handling distance courses than face-to-face courses (Wilson, 2001).

Hence, it is easily understandable from these two ranges of thought that attitude towards the essence of distance education is usually found very much influenced by our internal drives.

### **2.1 .2 With Respect to the Effectiveness of Distance Education**

The proportion of participants (distance learners, instructors, distance education institution owners, employers, employees. . .) having positive attitude towards the essence of distance education found very low in case of effectiveness. The society in general, employers in particular, were found to have very poor attitude towards distance education as a whole. In this regard, it is better to look at how the distance graduates participants of Czerniak and his colleagues" study (1999) describe the situation.

*" . . .it's entirely disappointing. Almost all of the employers and company owners were not willing to consider us. They are not patient enough to let us considered on posted vacancies and examine our competencies. They think we all are incompetent because they already*

*convinced themselves distance education entirely not effective. As a result, they usually preferred to kick us out of the competition for false reasons, they don't want to tell us we are not considered because we attended distance education program."*

Similarly, a study carried by Wilson revealed that faculty members of Kentucky state-supported institutes of higher education found to be unsure of the instructional efficiency of Distance learning, unconvinced about personal involvement, underprepared, under supported and unrewarded for their work (Wilson, 2001). Data showed instructors had conflicting attitudes about distance education. They were willing to teach a distance learning class again, but they rated the quality of the courses as equal or lower quality than other classes taught on campus. Their students, on the other hand, were highly satisfied with these instructors and the courses. In addition, about 50% of Lebanese school teachers who prefer to attend distance education rather than face-to-face education program were found to fail to feel its literal effectiveness. The authors described those teachers feeling as: "*A teacher in a rural school, for instance, reported that she did not benefit from the training sessions she received since they were chaotic, disorganized, and incongruent with her training needs*".

On their further inquiry, Nasser and Abouchedid (2000) found that teacher-trainer at the Center Educational Research and Development (A Governmental Center for Educational Research and Training) shared this view. One of the teacher-trainer used the expression "*...there is much chaos in the training and many schools in North Lebanon started to question the worth of the training sessions they received*" to describe the situation. Some recent studies conducted in our country were also found to agree with such findings (Czerniak, et al,1999; Dereje, 2010).

On the other hand, some recent studies revealed that significant shift of attitude has been observed about the effectiveness of distance education. These studies were carried out on post graduate second and third (PHD) degree students who have been attending a post graduate distance program which incorporate more interactive medias like video conference, world wide web and so on (Belwal, et al, 2010; Czerniak, et al, 1999). For these participants, integrated distance and open education is more preferable for enabling them earn more knowledge world-class professors, being more flexible and interactive and allowing them to learn at their own pace and in their own style. This new approach of distance and open education was found to convince and change attitude of not only rural peoples who have less access, but also university lecturers and graduate assistance who intended to proceed their further study.

## **2.2 Influencing Factors**

About eight factors affecting learning at distance have been identified yet by factor analysis. These are content, environment, finance, readiness, time, employment, family support and internal expectation (Dereje, 2010; Jegede & Kirkwood, 1994). Further inquiries on the influencing extent of these factors have also revealed that some of these factors are more influential to individuals who are not distance learners than those distance learners (Tam, 1999;

Tobin, et al, 1994). In this regard, a comparison of pre-semester and post-semester showed five factors found to be significantly different at the end of the class than at the beginning. Students concerns related to content, finance and readiness were higher at the beginning of the class than at the end, while concerns related to time and employment increased towards the end of the class (Jegade & Kirkwood, 1994).

More specifically, attitudes towards distance learning in the instructional process is more influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantage of distance education, for himself, as a student and an employer whose employees are also distant learning students (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999). In this regard, almost all distance learners participant of respective studies were found to emphasize that acceptance of distance qualification does really matter. In this they do mean that their attitude is highly being affected by negative attitudes of employers and company owners (Tobin, et al, 1994). According to these participant, poor consideration and respect provided by the society in general, employers in particular let them to develop negative attitude about distance education.

As a result, especially unemployed distance learners were found to always worry about their future career opportunity. On the other hand, as most of distance learners addressed, the reasons of such distance qualification ignorance were found to be internal quality-related problems of instructional system of the distance education institution themselves (Basaza, et al, 2012). This implies that, problems related with the way how the distance instruction is being carried out is becoming the most deep-rooted influential factor of attitude towards distance education. In turn, such internal beliefs are usually found affected by organizational and social environment, management and support services (Czerniak, et al, 1999). In this regard, some studies have reported that individuals who are more field independent (that is, less influenced by the surrounding environment, including the social environment) are better suited to distance learning than people who are less field independent (Czerniak, et al, 1999; Russell, 1999).

Chute and his colleagues (1992) examined the connection between tutor contact and course completion rates for students enrolled in distance training courses. The treatment group received weekly phone calls from the training staff while the comparison group received only minimal feedback. Results did not show a statistically significant difference between the two groups in course completion rates. As a result, he found that students receiving frequent calls completed their coursework at significantly faster rates when exposed to regular telephone cues from their tutors.

### **III. Conclusion**

As per the findings of many related studies, the essence of distance education is unquestionable. Majority of participants were found to have very positive attitude towards the essence of distance education, even though it should be noted that some of them were found to have positive attitude

for wrong reasons (Basaza, et al, 2012; Nasser & *Abouch ed id*, 2000). However, the case is different for the effectiveness of distance education. In this regard, not only employers and distance learners, but also distance education institutions owners and instructors themselves were found to have undesired feeling about the effectiveness of distance education (Wilson, 2001).

The reasons for such negative attitude were found to be factors like content, environment, finance, readiness, time, employment, family support and internal expectation (Dereje, 2010; Jegede & Kirkwood, 1994). From these factors, individuals internal beliefs as a distance learner, graduate, rater, employer and part of the existing society was found to be the most influential factor in accordance with career and employment opportunity (Basaza, et al, 2012; Biner, at al, 1994; Russell, 2001). Further casual effect analysis revealed that this has something to do with internal instructional, structural, technology utilization and commitment of the distance education institutions, especially in terms of quality and effectiveness (Belwal, et al, 2010; Czerniak, et al, 1999; Wenzel, 1998). This in turn implies that internal institutional problems like irrelevancy of curriculum, inadequate expertise and instructional modes and relatively poor commitment were found to be the roots of other influential factors resulting negative attitude towards the effectiveness and quality of distance education (Basaza, et al,2012; ; Nasser & *Abouch edid*, 2000; Wilson, 2001).

In fact, findings of few recent institutional studies and impact assessments seem to support this situation. Studies carried out on post graduate distance students of AVU and UNISA, for example, amplifies that distance education program could even be more preferable than the face-to-face program if appropriately handled (Belwal, et al, 2010; Sherry & Morse, 1995). According to these studies, those distantly enrolled post graduate students had a chance of joining a face-to-face study program in local universities. However, they felt more beneficial in earning global knowledge, world-class skill and experience from internationally known professors, studying in their own learning style and at their own pace (Belwal, et al, 2010; BUSE, 2012; Wilson, 2001). Generally, it was found convincing that internal quality and effectiveness related problems lead to the entire development of negative attitude towards distance education in one or other ways. It was also found acceptable that appropriate utilization of human resource and existing information technology, and institutional commitment can not only bring the desired attitude change, but also enable higher distance education institution more competent than those face-to-face education higher institution. This does have dual implication on the existing both distance and non distance higher education institutions found in developing countries like Ethiopia. These institutions need to take a breath for while and think re-examining their curriculum, expertise, resources, utilization information communication technologies and attitude of their teaching staff so as to become globally competent. Otherwise, the interest of their clients and incoming

students will probably be shifted to be enrolled in those globally popular higher learning distance and open institutions at a very reasonable cost leaving those local distance and non-distance higher education institution demand less.

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