

## **‘THERE IS ALWAYS THIS FEELING OF OTHERNESS’: EXPLORING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS IN GHANA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In Ghana little is known about the challenges distance education students encounter in the teaching and learning process. This paper presents perspectives of students and staff on challenges. Data was collected from 24 students in two University of Ghana Learning Centres (LC): Accra and Tema between March 2018 and June 2019 through in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation. Amongst students who take classes from the learning centres there is recognition of students' particular challenge in light of their status as distance education students. A relatively poor learning conditions and a lack of interaction are significant barriers for students in accessing the learning centres. Attention is paid to how these manifestations of exclusion impact the academic life of distance education students. A series of recommendations based on the findings are provided to ensure that the learning centres are free from discrimination and exclusion.*

**Keywords:** Distance education, adult learners, educational exclusion, otherness, learning centres

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### **Introduction**

Distance education has been a significant element of social change in most societies in the world. This growth of educational change occurred, however, within a particular demographic, economic, social and political context. This distinctive set of conditions include the need for higher education (improved skills needed to achieve career goals), changes in student community (primarily comprised of adult and other contemporary learners), the need to work at a job or tend to family while completing an academic program, and the need for sustainability, healthy, vibrant and peaceful societies. As one group within a broad category of the education enterprise, distance education students' face numerous challenges in the

teaching and learning process, such as lack of infrastructure, lack of recognition as a ‘proper learner’ within the university, not being listened to or taken seriously and feeling alienated. Enhancing distance education in low and middle income countries is an important global education priority, and Ghana has committed to achieve this goal. The enhancement of distance education in low and middle income countries requires effective management and service delivery in distance education programs. However, this commitment do not always guarantee the provision of inclusive education for all. As Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw (2000) argued, variety of conception and the confusions surrounding the very meaning of the educational concept are the reasons for the slow progress of inclusive education. It is important to note that educational exclusion goes beyond accessibility to schooling, and is often interpreted as the direct and mechanical consequences of socio-economic conditions occurring beyond the educational realm (Sayed, 2003).

Educational exclusion can usefully be characterised in many ways; as example, Tarabini, Jcovkis, & Montes (2018, p. 837) write of “educational exclusion” in terms of not being recognized as a “proper learner” within the school; not being represented, listened to, or taken seriously; being stigmatised, neglected, or even ignored; feeling alienated or completely distant from educational practices and educational knowledge; not having the conditions for a satisfactory school experience for learning and for personal development. Notwithstanding these challenges distance education students encounter, we know little about how these challenges interact to shape the experiences of distance education students in our learning centres (LC). Responding to this knowledge gap is important for two reasons. First in policy terms, it is important to understand how the multiple challenges that distance education students may encounter in the context of accessing the learning centres, and the ways in which the learning centres’ services might be designed to both recognize and respond to these challenges. Second, in conceptual terms, it is important to understand more about ways in which multiple systemic processes intersect to shape the educational lives of distance education students. Education is an essential human right and is the basis for a just society (Echeita & Ainscow, 2011). Understanding these principles is essential in making significant progress in the construction of more inclusive education through distance education in our societies.

While all students in the education enterprise face challenges in terms of access to appropriate or quality services, being a distance education student intensifies these challenges. As a result, gaps in access to essential socio-spatial support remain rampant. To help bridge the gap we conducted the learning centres project. The objectives of the Learning

Centres Project were to understand the quality of the physical and social structures and service needs of distance education students, and to investigate students and staff perspectives on the challenges faced by students in accessing the learning centres. I present in this paper findings on the perspectives of students and staff.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

The theoretical framework this paper uses is the educational exclusion, which is entwined with socio-spatial exclusion and based on Soja' (1980) socio-spatial dialectics. Simply put, Soja argues that social processes and patterns are inseparable from spatial processes and patterns. Thus they feed into each other in such a way that they tend to be both caused and effect of a phenomenon like educational exclusion at the same time. The extent to which distance education students are spatially excluded into learning centres feed into their social exclusion and vice versa. For instance, a student is socially excluded from educational services because the same student is spatially secluded from where the best educational facilities are. The two processes feed into each other dialectically. The structure and institutional arrangements of the distance education system are key drivers of socio-spatial inequalities.

In addition to being a multidimensional process, educational exclusion is inherently contextual, relational and agent-driven (Tarabini et al., 2018). For example in the UK, educational exclusion is used as a disciplinary measure that school authorities can use to deal with incidents of serious misbehaviour. Here the analysis tends to focus on the individual student with little or no attention to the school or structural organization which may (re)produce educational inequalities (Gazeley, 2010; Daniels and Cole, 2010). The situation is different in France and Spain where the term educational exclusion is used broadly to examine school organisation and its consequences. Scholars following this approach, such as Dubet (2004) and Escudero & Martinez (2012) have emphasized the definition of educational exclusion to include broad processes leading to unequal access to educational contents, experiences and learning that excludes individual's right to a meaningful education. In this way, the space (e.g. a learning centre) with its processes, patterns and practices that produces inequalities is highlighted in the production of educational exclusion.

Recent scholarship has unpacked the ways in which politics, schools and the classroom levels mechanisms may intersect to influence individual's learning experiences. The political mechanism of exclusion is defined in terms of educational politics and policies. According to Dale (1999), the politics relate to ideologies, ontologies, worldviews, and manifest and latent purposes underpinning specific policies. The politics of educational

exclusion are inherent in the construction of ‘normality’ within the education system. Thus the discourse of ‘normality’ in education is multifaceted. It includes the social judgments of educational failure and success, of “good” and “poor” educational system, which forms the underlying policies for legitimising order and unequal structure of education (Escudero & Martinez, 2012). In this sense, ‘normalisation’ becomes most powerful tool in contemporary societies (Foucault, 1979). It promotes homogeneity amongst people and fosters conformity to same model, thereby classifying individuals according to their distance to the ‘normal model’ (Gore, 1995; Tarabini, 2015). On the other hand, the policies relate to the practices that act to promote or hinder individual’s right to education at all levels. For example, in Ghana, there is an inclusive education policy that confirms government pronouncements in the constitution to ensure that every Ghanaian is afforded equitable opportunity in terms of access to quality education (Act 778, Section 5, Ghana Government, 2008, p. 5).

The school mechanism of educational exclusion entails the translation of educational politics and policies that are manifested in the school’s mundane practices (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Also, specific school disciplinary mechanisms, which sometimes put the academic career of some students into jeopardy (Guna, 2018) as well as the recognition of the challenges students have to face (Smyth & Hattam, 2004) are central to understanding educational exclusion.

The classroom experience, most especially in developing countries continue to fail several students by the constant exclusion of students from classroom activities because of poor classroom conditions in most learning centres. The classroom mechanism refers to the interaction between teachers and students, and amongst students, which shape the teaching and learning experience of both teachers and students. Thus the classroom mechanisms are essential in opening up or closing off students’ educational opportunities. So conditions such as blaming, labelling, and lack of attention amongst other factors, are key sources of educational exclusion (Meo & Parker, 2004). As Sayed (2003) sums up, educational exclusion does not affect all students to the same degree and it is not randomly distributed. It mainly affects groups and individuals in terms of social status, location, age, and gender, thereby reproducing patterns of social inequality (Sayed, 2003).

To successfully understand educational exclusion, we need to look inside the school or an educational institution at the interaction amongst politics, school and classroom levels to account for the exclusion of students. In doing so, we must expand our understanding of educational exclusion from the school environment including the classroom to the perceptions or prejudices held by outsiders about the school. Once we come to understand the

interaction amongst these factors and the school as a place, a socio-spatial exclusion framework can be employed to yield a novel insights into the way we understand educational exclusion in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper frames a distinct socio-spatial research agenda that can facilitate empirical analysis of specific learning centres. It focuses on discussion to the way social and spatial analyses can open up such learning centres for interrogation.

### **The Study and its context**

Greater Accra Regional Learning centres, Accra and Tema, are appropriate for this research because of their significant increases in distance education student population and socio-spatial challenges in recent years. Lack of supports and services are significant educational threats in Greater Accra. The region is home to two University of Ghana learning centres, presenting an interesting opportunity for examining adult learners' experiences with the learning centres. For example, the proportion of distance education students in the two learning centres (approximately 80%) is the highest in the University of Ghana. In addition, there are no large or conspicuous "formal" spaces in the learning centres, such as parks, student hub, libraries, amongst others. Characteristics like these suggested opportunities to select settings in which to explore the educational exclusion of such learning spaces. The mode of delivery of the Distance Education Program is a combination of E-Learning and face to face interaction. Tutorials are normally held at weekends, giving students the opportunity to interact with their lecturers, tutors, staff and other students. The objective of the distance program is to create access for qualified students who will otherwise not get admitted into on-campus programs as a result of limited space. Finally, the two learning centres pose interesting questions about making higher education through distance education increasingly accessible to potential adult learners in the country. The two study areas have the largest number of distance education students. Since the early-2000s, demand for higher education has motivated many employees and others to seek distance education opportunities in regional learning centres across the country. Although learning centres are located through the country, many of the students are concentrated in the Greater Accra region. The overall higher education environment is changing with student community primarily comprised of adult and other contemporary learners, for whom distance learning often provides the best path to a post-secondary education. Given the increasing awareness amongst adult learners and the demand for higher education to help adult learners acquire the values, knowledge and skills needed to support sustainable, healthy, vibrant and peaceful societies; there is an ever-increasing need to provide individuals with quality education needed to achieve their career goals. Our analysis of the two learning centres is framed by a broader educational exclusion

concern with impacts and consequences of University of Ghana's distance education program, including physical and infrastructural challenges.

## **Methods**

### *Study Design*

This exploratory study is one of the first attempts to explore the experiences and perceptions of exclusion faced by distance education students in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The qualitative descriptive study was carried out in the two learning centres and data was collected between March 2018 and June 2019. A single stage purposive sampling strategy (Polit and Beck, 2008) was used to select participants from different years of study in the learning centres. For consistency and to add rigour to the study, all interviews were conducted by the same interviewer (who was also one of the program coordinators). Invitation was sent to selected students. Participants who responded and agreed to participate were subsequently contacted by the program coordinator to further explain the project and to seek their permission to participate. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer obtained verbal consent from each participant. All interviews were conducted using an open-ended interview guide.

### *Interview Guide*

The interview guide was designed to explore students' perspective on the challenges distance education students encountered in accessing learning centres' facilities and services. Interviews lasted between 60 – 90 minutes, and transcribed verbatim. Following each interview, field notes and observations were taken by the interviewer regarding his impression about the interview. These notes were later discussed with other researchers. This process helped in contextual insight beyond that provided by the text of the transcripts. For example, by creating connections between what the interviewee said to existing practices, or to similarities in challenges in other interviews.

### *Participants*

In total, 24 students, 6 supporting staff and 3 assistant lecturers/tutors volunteered to participate in the study. In addition, two focus group discussions were held with student participants: one for each of the learning centres. Six participated in the Tema focus group discussion while seven were in the Accra focus group discussion. Participants were recruited from the two learning centres and represented different levels of study. The inclusion criterion was that the student was a registered student in the learning centres. Students as well as staff engaged in providing services to students at the learning centres volunteered their

time and were not compensated. They were later sent a thank you correspondence by the investigator as an appreciation for their time.

### *Analyses*

In the analysis stage, the investigator and two research assistants independently reviewed the transcripts of the completed interviews and discussions and generated preliminary themes and sub-themes. The team then met face-to-face to discuss similarities and differences. During the analyses, the researchers' 'positionality' no doubt influenced the emerging themes and sub-themes. Collectively the researchers work directly with students in the distance education program with different levels of experience in distance education research. All researchers had prior experience in qualitative research.

### **Results**

Distance education students are affected by poor policy interventions in the provision of better conditions in the learning centres. There is no developmental agenda regarding the provision of services in the centres. Exclusion of distance education students can be linked to many of the physical, social, political and infrastructural factors. Physical and infrastructural challenges are the major threats to distance education inclusion.

*We have been running this program for several years now, and there is no policy direction as to where we want to reach. Look at the conditions here. It tells you there is no proper planning regarding this program (A tutor)*

*I think there is no proper monitoring and evaluation of the distance program. I don't know if we have any policy on the development of the distance program. What have we been monitoring and what recommendations have we made so far? The state of the conditions here tells you that there is no clear guidelines and directions (A supporting staff).*

Supporting staff at the centres play critical roles in facilitating distance programs at the learning centres. They are key actors in supporting distance education students in the centres, who claim that they are demotivated regarding the extent of managing the distance education programs.

*So I think if we were on main university campus, we would not be experiencing this type of treatment that we are experiencing now. Like we feel that we are nothing. We're nobody here and you know, we worth nothing (A student).*

A shared emotion in the focus group was to be a poor student in a poor learning centre was fundamentally different experience from that of the regular (internal) students in the universities. The degree of disappointment, stress and failed expectations that participants felt as distance education students was viewed as unique to their distance education status – other

– status. A poor state of the learning centres and how to make it work for them was a recurring frustration.

*It has been labelled and stigmatised as a poor learning centre among the other centres due to its poor facilities and services. These facilities can't be provided to regular students on main campus – like something would happen, you know. And one of the reasons that I'm really sort of stuck to it is that it's like fifteen minutes away from my house. The conditions here actually affects teaching and learning (A student).*

The stock of facilities and services familiar to them in the main universities were not available to them. Their conditions were precarious existence of....where and how to find basic facilities and services, a classroom with power sockets, ceiling fans, access to library services, and even where to hangout after one class and wait for the next class, including relations with peers and tutors – such tasks, cited by participants, exemplified “not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master” (Schuetz 1944, p. 506).

*Before we came here, nobody tells that classes are organised in this kind of classroom. They never tell you. They advertise for students, but they never tell the truth. We would come with the joy of attending a university, but later realize that we never enjoy a university life. I'm feeling really bad. Very experienced people are here: Nurses, Police, and Administrators. They never feel ok here (A student).*

*We don't have a library here, no study room. It's like wasting the whole day at the centre. When you need to borrow books, you will have to travel to the main campus, Accra to borrow books from the library (A student).*

It was abundantly clear to our participants that their status as ‘other’ – distance education students in the university introduced distinctive patterns of educational disadvantage – exclusion. To be a distance education student was to confront challenges and inherit a debilitating set of penalties. Although complaints about the learning centres’ poor facilities were mentioned frequently, more pressing was the lack of appropriate staff offices, especially in Tema. We asked about the conditions of office space for the supporting staff in the learning centre, one staff described it as:

*Horrible... Here the office pushes you down and it has influence on your work ability. I can't even bring visitors to my office. I think working here affects my daily life, you know. Because when they know that you work here, you're poor. That everybody, whoever works here is not enjoying life. We're are in the midst of other industrial workers and service providers. The noise and smoke levels are high from the restaurants and pubs during the day (A staff).*

A form of local effect we observed is the negative endorsement by the staff of their learning centres resulting from the centre’s labelling by others. The shrunken opportunities available to the staff from their disadvantaged positions as members within the university are carried to

the offices where they work. Here they are compounded by another penalty, the seemingly injurious local conditions of living among concentration of poor neighbours and other industrial activities around the centre's office.

A number of participants spoke of not being recognized as professionals at the centre where classes are held, *"it is a constant struggle,"* one supporting staff said. An assistant lecturer recalled that in the school where classes are held every weekend, he was constantly being mistaken for a cleaner of the school and was continually asked, *"Can you please open the washroom for us?"* The combination of the stress of trying to make ends meet and the frustration of not being able to work up to one's potential negatively impact supporting staff and lecturers' self-esteem. *"If you're teaching and the light goes off,"* said a tutor who had been teaching at the centre for 3 years, *"that is horrible, you travel miles away to come and teach and no light. You have to reschedule the class."* Thus, not having the necessary resources to handle the program resulted in huge frustration.

## **Discussion**

This study examines distance education students' views on the challenges students accessing the learning centres encounter in regards to the physical and social structures of the learning centres. There are two caveats regarding this overall picture. First, there are differences in the educational exclusion between the two study centres. Basically, students from the Tema LC may experience more discrimination in terms of access to educational resources than their counterparts from the Accra LC. Students and staff from the Accra LC relatively enjoy better services, in large part as a result of its high proportion of students as well as being located in the capital city of Ghana. However, after careful observation and confessions from the staff and students, it clearly shows that the two learning centres tend to experience similar levels of educational exclusion. Second, given the size and the manner of recruitment, there can be no certainty that the focus groups represent the student experience across the two learning centres or even within the same learning centres. The idea was to recruit participants from different levels of study but this proved very difficult. In fact, students attend classes according to levels of study, and to be able to recruit different levels meant students would have to wait for longer periods of time. With this difficulty, the focus group occurred immediately after the class. Therefore, only third year students and second year students from Tema LC and Accra LC were recruited respectively for the focus group discussions. Nevertheless, the focus groups yielded a rich qualitative data set that illuminates the complex and multiscalar experiences of distance education students' exclusion.

Participants' understanding of educational exclusion drew on a complex mix of policies, learning centres' conditions and classrooms frames of reference that reflect experiences in the educational realm. For example, all students and staff interviewed drew on politics and policy mechanisms to describe the lack of policy direction regarding the distance education program. At the same time, participants drew on the school and the classroom mechanisms to make sense of educational exclusion in the learning centres. The results highlight that amongst staff who work with distance education students, there is recognition of the particular challenges faced by distance education students in light of their student status – as distance students. The findings bear relevance to practice, policy and research literature.

Conceptually, the results point to the multifaceted factors of politics, the school and classroom mechanisms in the experience of exclusion in the education system. As Tarabini et al. (2018, p. 849) note, educational exclusion goes beyond social exclusion to include specific educational politics and policies, dynamic and practices, as well as lack of recognition of students' feelings, experiences and voices. In the results, we found evidence of a variety of situations where forms of discrimination/ exclusion were overlaid to impact participants lives at the learning centres. For example, many students and staff faced significant stigma due to the poor conditions at their centres of learning. This was compounded by their status as distance education students, and the assumption that distance students are 'other' held major implication for educational inclusion and reducing educational inequality in communities.

In policy terms, one of the major themes emerging from the analysis concerns the way in which distance education students and staff might encounter particular challenges in accessing facilities and services due to multiple forms of exclusion. As Kane (2006) found the lack of teaching and learning support has an evident impact on the experience of students, and staff, as they feel abandoned and distance from the educational system. For example, geographical isolation has been identified as one of the challenges for distance education students (see Meacham & Evans, 1989). The lack of library system reported by the students makes borrowing library books problematic, leading to the denial that they belong to a scholarly community. In the absence of these educational supports, it becomes clear that these students are at risk of dropping out unless they develop study survival skills as rapidly as possible (Wood, 1996).

The problem we are addressing therefore is how to describe a progressive and convincing distance education mode of education for this day and age. We need a way to do this, one that resists the tendencies of regular university education that appears to be the best

and only means, and champion the course of distance education to enable people and societies realize alternative futures. This paper addresses the challenges identified here holistically. It does this mindful of the fact that distance education mode of education varies considerably between countries and educational jurisdictions even within countries, as in the case of Ghana. This paper is not intended to smooth such differences out, but its focus is to determine whether there is a possibility to share across jurisdiction a notion of what it means to be a distance education student that would hold true regardless of educational jurisdiction. While distance education is already a fact of life for most universities, providing higher education to students who would have otherwise missed out on university education, it is crucial to understand the intrinsic problems. Thus, overcoming the barriers will be critical to successful implementation of distance program on a larger scale in the future. Here, we agree with Marrs (1995, p. 21) when he says, “without this support, distance education is at risk of becoming a peripheral activity, without commitment from or significant to the institution.” Support for distance students should be a priority when planning distance programs. Planners from Washington State University (WSU) believe that “success in attracting, serving, and retaining students will hinge more on excellent student services than on any technology issue” (Oaks, 1996).

### **Conclusion**

This article has explored the educational exclusion of distance education students in University of Ghana’s two learning centres in the Greater Accra Region. The high proportion of distance education students with lack of socio-spatial services raise the prospect of substantial distance education effects in student experience. The objective has been to extend existing work on educational exclusion by documenting the meaning of distance education in students’ life. Such an approach deepens understanding and thereby the capacity for effective policy interventions, supporting learning centres’ initiatives that better facilitate distance education students’ inclusion and a sense of citizenship.

The experiences and perceptions shared by participants clearly point to a reality of elusive and differential education generated in part by a lack of policy direction, including monitoring, evaluation and appropriate interventions. Far more frequent than positive assessments by participants was evidence of the burden of a double jeopardy: They were distance education students, and they study in a relatively poorer university learning centres. Understanding of distance education students’ experience requires attention to the range of mechanisms that affect them, although this has seldom been attempted at the local and national levels.

The results of this study suggest that subjective experiences of inequality in education carry serious consequences. It is imperative to understand these experiences so that measures may be taken to address the issues. By understanding the factors that affect distance learners' experiences of discrimination and exclusion, policy makers may be able to better design and implement the distance mode of education in the country. If planners and managers of distance programs take steps to remedy the situation, they may be able to improve the conditions in the learning centres, increase enrolment and retain students, and ensure completion of programs. As learning centres become increasingly diverse and complex, issues of exclusion are likely to be even more important in the years to come.

Interestingly, the study's focus group discussions suggest that, the learning centres, despite their poor facilities and services, can sometimes launch distance education students' lives rather than restrain them. Why were these positive results in assessing poorly resourced learning centres? It is clear that distance education students depend heavily on supporting staff and tutors, and relatively easy supports from the personnel at the learning centres was energizing.

Finally, support for supporting staff and lecturers is required. Quite frequently, these individuals are isolated, marginalized, and have little support. Universities need to create strategies, practices, and policies to ensure that no employee or staff is marginalized and have opportunities to fully utilize their knowledge and skills in the learning centres. Our observation across other learning centres in the country reveal significant variations as well as general trends; in this study where generalizations highlight students' exclusion, further study of inclusion education is advised.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Biographical information**

Dr. Boadi Agyekum is a social geographer, specializing in health research addressing: immigration, migration, sense of place, sense of community belonging, religion, quality of life and therapeutic landscapes. He currently is a Lecturer at the School of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana and doubles as the Head of University of Ghana Tema Learning Centre. Recent research has focused on Distance Education Programs in Ghana, and Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) and Implications for Adult Education in Ghana.

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