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**PERCEIVED RISK FACTORS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION DELIVERY: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this study was to explore the risks associated with staff of University of Education, Winneba who work for University's Distance Education Programme. The study employed sequential explanatory mixed methods approach which used questionnaire and structured interview guide to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 250 respondents from 325 staff of the Distance Education Programme. The study identified security, dietary, transportation and lodging as the key risk factors associated with distance education delivery. It was recommended among others, that the University should institute an insurance policy to cover all staff engaged in the Distance Education delivery.*

**KEYWORDS:** perceived risk factors, distance education delivery, university, education, Winneba

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## **BACKGROUND**

In Ghana, the University of Education, Winneba is one of the tertiary institutions providing teacher education by distance. The University has a special mandate to produce professional educators to spearhead a new national vision of education aimed at redirecting Ghana's effort along the path of rapid economic and social development. Its vision is to become an internationally reputable institution for teacher education and research. In pursuit of its mission and vision, the University started the Distance Education (DE) programme in 1996 with the assistance of the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) now Department for International Development (DFID), to mitigate the limited access to higher education for teachers (Owusu-Mensah, 2007). The aim was to help guard against widening vacancies created by the exodus of teachers at the time and to admit many more students who were being denied university admission. The University enrolled the first batch of 196 students in 1996.

The Institute for Distance and e-Learning (IDeL) runs diploma and post-diploma programmes in Basic Education, Early Childhood Education, Business Management, Accounting and Human Resource Management. It also runs Master of Education programmes in English, Mathematics, Science and Mentorship and a postgraduate diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. These distance programmes are delivered in hybrid mode involving face-to-face tutorials with print modules and online learning support systems.

Like the UK Open University Model (Tait, 2002), learning support system of IDeL (UEW) is decentralized at 40 study centres scattered across the 16 regions of Ghana. The study centre coordinators and administrative assistants act as resident staff members facilitating course modules distributions, tutorials, examinations and students' welfare. Thus, tutors are employed to deliver bi-weekly and monthly face-to-face tutorials, supervise conduct of quizzes, examinations, internships and project works. In such decentralized model, the DE delivery is characterized by frequent travels by the senior members and staff from main university campus to the study centres to administer and monitor examinations, tutorials among others. These travels, most of which cover long distances, always take place both day and night.

### **Statement of the problem**

These frequent travels and monitoring processes are associated with potential risks, which need the attention of the university. These risks concern employees' health and safety. According to Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, all employers are required to carry out a risk assessment at their place of work and to keep a written record of that risk assessment. A risk assessment is therefore a necessary and useful task in tackling potential risks and its attending outcomes. However, since the introduction of the distance education programme, there has not been any assessment of the risk component of the activities of IDeL staff health and safety. The present study explored the potential risk factors associated with working for IDeL as perceived by staff.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Perraton (1988) defines distance education as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. In both the developed and developing countries, distance education has been used to expand access to education for many people who would otherwise not have had the opportunity to benefit from formal education (Perraton, 2004). This expansion has been made possible through such media as print, radio or television. The attractiveness of distance education lies in its ability to replace or supplement the conventional teaching methods (Stewart, 1988). The distance education methodologies have grown recently because of the rising need for continuing learning linked to the unprecedented innovation in communications (Garrison, 2000).

Keegan (1996) noted that the key characteristics of distance education include the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner; the planning and preparation of learning materials and the provision of student support services; the use of technical media-print, audio, video or computer to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course; the provision of two-

way communication; and the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process. In this frame of learning, people are typically taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings, either face-to-face or by electronic means, for both didactic and socialization purposes.

One of the contemporary developments in the distance education is the concept of e-Learning. The e-learning environment has brought dramatic changes in higher education. In this context, the internet is used to address the growing demand for advanced study material and associated resources. In the era of globalization, students from different countries and communities may appear for the same degree or diploma, as distance or geographic location is no more a problem at all. Thus, e-Learning is constructed in a variety of contexts, such as distance learning, online learning, and networked learning and learning to promote educational interactions between students, lecturers and learning communities.

The Risk Management Standard (2002) defines risk as the combination of the probability of an event and its consequences. For every undertaking, there is the potential for events and consequences that constitute opportunities for benefit or threats to success. Risk assessment identifies the controls or improvements that need to be put in place to avoid or reduce the downside events and their associated consequences. Accordingly, employees could be protected from injury and ill health through the implementation of control measures.

Although, there are no set rules on how to carry out a risk assessment, the Health and Safety Executive recommends five steps:

- Identify potential hazards associated with work activities
- Identify who could be at risk from those hazards
- Implement control measures
- Record the findings of your assessment
- Review the risk assessment on a regular basis

Risk identification requires an intimate knowledge of the organization operations, the legal, social, political and cultural environment as well as strategies and operational objectives, critical threats and opportunities related to the achievement of set objectives. This ensures risk profiling which gives a significance rating to each risk and provides a tool for prioritizing risk treatment efforts. Studies that investigate risks associated with the organization of distance and e-learning programmes have tended to focus on the risks associated with the electronic component to the neglect of that of the traditional distance education. According to Barik and Karforma (2012), e-learning has such threats as confidentiality and integrity violation, denial of Service, illegitimate use, malicious program, repudiation, masquerade, information leakages in traffic analysis and brute-force attack. Barik and Karforma (2012) opined that, because of above threats, certain risks may occur during transaction of textual and non-textual messages among different participants of e-Learning system.

All risks of e-Learning are not to be restricted to the technical system but may embrace the entire methods of teaching, examination, evaluation and grading. In terms of teaching methodologies, common risks in delivering lecture, sending notes and assignments, accepting and marking answer

sheets, preparing and distributing mark sheets. There is a risk in the standardization of examination questions and list of questions which possibly restrict the academic freedom of individual teachers. Risk related to examination is directly associated with cheating, “apo” syndrome or non-repudiation of assessments. It is necessary for all tutors to be aware of risk, their attending consequences and control measures to adopt. While risk factors in e-learning exist substantially in literature, risk associated with decentralized DE delivery like those UK and UEW are yet to be properly identified for risk control policies to be enacted for employees. The present study is focused on filling this research gap.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was based on explanatory sequential mixed methods research approach. This means that both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Equal priority was given to both forms of data. Integration of the data from the two approaches occurred when the data was being interpreted. This approach was adopted because of its ability to substantiate and validate research findings.

### Sample Size

Since the study is focused on the risks in DE delivery at UEW, the targeted population of the study included all students, administrators/coordinators, lecturers/tutors and drivers of IDeL, UEW. To obtain a representative sample, the sample size determination table was used to calculate the required minimum sample size using 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. The distribution of the sample size is shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1: Distribution of Respondents in the Study**

Sampling Unit	Population	Sample size
Drivers	20	15
Monitors	40	32
Lecturers/invigilators	265	203
Total	325	250

Simple random sampling technique was then employed to select each sampling units for the study. The use of this sampling technique was justified by its ability to offer equal chance for each of the sampling units. Thus, it ensured that the sample selected is unbiased and generalizable to IDeL staff and associates.

### Data Collection

To ensure that the data was obtained from the field, a self-administered questionnaire and structured interview guide were used. A questionnaire was based on the research objectives outlined in the study. It included both closed and open-ended items. To ensure the required data was obtained, four separate but parallel items were designed for each category of respondents (drivers, monitors and invigilators). The main goal of an in-depth interview was to solicit for extensive and detailed information that can be used to explain the risk factors associated with the UEW distance education delivery. The interviews were done through face-to-face approach. The interview guide included series of questions, probes and follow-up questions on key themes

relating to risks. The interviewees included a coordinator, a monitoring team member and a tutor/investigatior from each centre. These categories were purposively selected because of their in-depth knowledge regarding risk associated with travels, monitoring and administration of the DE at various centres.

### Data Analysis and Discussion of Result

This study involved descriptive analysis of quantitative data juxtaposed with qualitative data. The quantitative data was presented using frequency/percentage distribution tables while the qualitative data were presented after repeated coding, finding of common patterns and categorization into themes. The result of background information of respondents is displayed in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Background Information of Respondents**

<b>Respondents' Attributes</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	225	90.0
Female	25	10.0
<b>Age (Years)</b>		
25-35	33	13.2
36-45	121	48.4
46-55	78	31.2
56 and above	18	7.2
<b>Department</b>		
Finance	33	13.2
Administration	52	20.8
Transport	15	6.0
Lecturers	150	60.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>

In terms of sex distribution of the respondents, Table 3.1 indicates that, 90% (225) of the respondents were males while the remaining 10% (25) were females. This indicates that most of the respondents involved in the study were males. The proportion reflects the gender distribution of population of staff who take part in the distance education delivery in the university. Furthermore, as indicated in Table 3.1, 48.4% of the respondents were within the age group 36-45 while 31.2% were within the age group 46-55. In addition, 13.2% of the respondents were within 25-35 years with as few as 7.2% having their ages at 56 and above. The age distribution of the respondents shows that majority of the staff involved in the distance education delivery are youth who have the tendency to provide service to the university for many years.

In terms of departments, information elicited revealed that majority of the respondents (60%) were lecturers/tutors of IDeL, followed by administrators (20.8%) and finance staff (13.2%). Only 6% of the respondents were drivers who are responsible for transport services. Compared to the population of the staff involved in the distance education delivery, the sample distributions clearly show that the major stakeholders of the IDeL have been well represented in this study.

To determine the forms of risk associated with the DE delivery by UEW, the questionnaire responses were categorized into those associated with accident, security, lodging and dietary risk. The result of analysis shows respondents (99.2%) perceive transportation and security as high risk factors. However, transportation risk (67.2%) was perceived as the highest risk factor compared to security (64.0%). According to the respondents, the underlying reason for rating transportation risk highest in the distance education delivery was because of the frequent to and from travels to the 40 study centres for administration and monitoring of quizzes/ examinations as well as the distribution of study modules/materials and other financial transactions. This perception was buttressed by one of the respondents who narrated that:

*“Transport risk is the major risk in IDeL work because we travel from Winneba to various centre across the country at least every two weeks. This makes us very liable to accidents since the more you travel, the more you are risk of getting to accident” (Monitoring team member, 20 January 2019).*

Linked to transportation risk was the perceived security risk. Aside insecurity in transporting question papers, respondents narrated that the likely breakdown of cars or vans transporting monitors to study centres adds to the risk component. One respondent echoed that:

*“Insecurity is also a risk factor in the IDEL work, when our car breakdown on the road people try to rob us because they think we have money and other valuable items on us. Sometimes students who are aggrieved also try to attack us” (monitoring team member, 20 January 2019)*

Lodging or accommodation risk also emerged as the third major risk factor in IDeL job accounting 87.2% of respondents’ perceived risk. Their reason was that due to late arrival at study centres for monitoring, available hotels or rest places are often not very hygienic. This possesses serious threat to their health and exposes staff to armed robbers who might mistake staff as businessmen carrying sums of money or valuable things.

Even though quite a significant health concern, dietary risk was perceived as the least form of risk (50%) in the IDeL. The respondents mentioned that getting good and quality food to eat at the centres has been very difficult. According to respondents, they are not comfortable with some of the food that are available in some part of the county, especially when they travel to some parts of the country.

Further analysis of these major factors resulted into some perceived consequences. The distribution of these consequences based on the extent of agreement by respondents is shown in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3: Consequences of forms of Risk associated with IDeL**

Types of Risk	SD	D	NS	A	SD
<b>1. Security Risk</b>					
Disclosure of phone number	0	35	22	122	71
Enmity with student	0	5	48	93	104
Arm Robbery attacks	0	0	13	34	203
Tutors Hostile	2	27	41	157	23
Student attacks Tutors	0	38	13	123	76
<b>2. Dietary Risk</b>					
Sickness from food	8	10	45	66	121
Eat poisonous food	23	18	84	78	47
Poor nutritional food	0	20	26	146	58
<b>3. Transportation Risk</b>					
Death because of accident	0	2	8	32	208
Incapacitated because of accident	66	16	0	16	152
Deformation due to accident	2	8	0	34	206
Travelling at night pose psychological risk	0	0	1	141	108
<b>4. Lodging Risk</b>					
Hotel Risk	9	9	14	108	110

On security risk, the attending consequences indicated by respondents include disclosure of phone number distribution, enmity with students, army robbery, tutors' hostility and students' attacks.

From Table 3.3, cumulatively 77.2% (193) of the respondents perceived that disclosure of their phone number to students could threaten their security and 79.6% (199) agreed that this could lead to attacks by students. Also, 78.8% (197) perceived that the monitoring and invigilation breed enmity with students while 94.8% claimed that they are often exposed to arm robbery during travels and at hotels. In sharing her experience, one respondent recounted that:

*"We were once robbed when we were travelling at night after a quiz. The road was blocked and all our valuable and money was taken away"* (A driver, 20 January 2019)

Aside arm robbery, 72% of respondents indicated that some tutors are often hostile to monitors and invigilators who attempt to ensure UEW examination rule/ regulations are applied to the latter. One respondent during interviews pointed out that:

*"The students sometimes attack us when they feel we are putting up strict measures during exams. Also, when some of them have problems with their books or items they attack us verbally and sometimes use threatening words on us"* (A coordinator, 20 January 2019).

On dietary risks, 74.8%, 76.5%, or 82.4% admitted having experienced ill health attributable to eating unwholesome, contaminated or imbalanced food during travels or at study centres. One respondent recalled that:

*“It was very difficult for me to eat because I was not comfortable with some of the food I bought. For instance, last time I bought food from a food joint and I had stomach upset for about three days”* (A monitoring team member, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2019)

On transportation risk, death, deformity and incapacitation were perceived consequences which might arise from accidents. As shown in Table 3.3, 83.2 % (203), 60.8% (152) or 82.7 % (206) perceived likelihood of car accident leading to lose of life, incapacitated or deformity of body. A substantial proportion (108) of the respondents lamented that traveling at night possesses even psychological problems as highlighted by one respondent below:

*“Travelling at night is very scary because sometimes when the car breaks down, getting mechanics to fix the car becomes a problem. Sometimes, arm robbers also operate at night so aside the stress and discomfort in night journeys are, it is also exposes us to accidents and robbery cases”* (A monitoring team member, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2019).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Risk assessment ensures that risk factors are mapped to the business area affected so that primary control procedures and risk control investment might be increased, decreased or reapportioned towards accomplishment of organizational goals. This study generally concludes that, there are many risk factors associated with the DE delivery. Major risk factors affecting staff, majority of whom are youthful, include transportation, security, lodging and dietary risk. To address these risk factors, the following are recommended.

- Individual insurance scheme: Though cars used for the travels are insured, IDeL needs to come out with an insurance policy to cover individual staff engaged in the DE delivery. This insurance policy should cover arm robbery attacks, severe sickness and diseases.
- It emanated from the study that monitoring team members often arrive at study centres before they book hotels. This generates stresses and difficulties to monitoring team members. It is recommended that centre coordinators should be mandated to secure proper accommodation for the monitoring team members prior to their arrival.
- Abolishing Pre-financing: Given that most of the people claimed that they are to pre-finance their trip before reimbursement, it is recommended that 60-80% of the claims should be paid to monitors to enable them pay for bills. This will reduce the stress and hardship associated with pre-financing.
- Proper compensation assessment and payment plan: It is also recommended that proper compensation plan should be instituted IDeL to be fairly disbursed to staff who encounter any of the risks in the discharging their duties.

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