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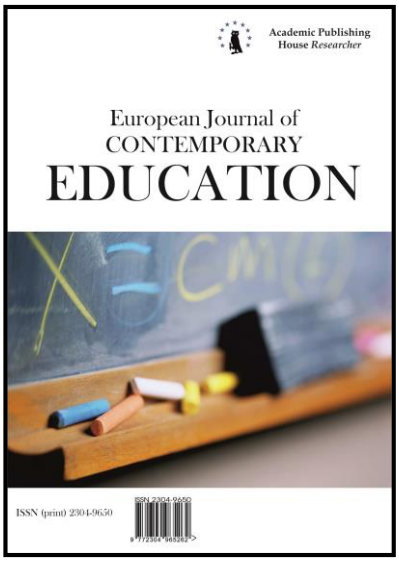

Standardization or Localization: A Study of Online Learning Programmes by Tertiary Institutions in Ghana

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Abstract

Many universities in Ghana have had a desire to ensure equitable access to formal tertiary education for the growing number of the working public who have sought to improve or better their educational status in tertiary institutions. For many of these working public or individuals, it is almost impossible to stay off work to enrol in these tertiary institutions but rather would most likely prefer to improve their educational and knowledge acquisition status in the comfort of their homes and in a relaxed and calm environment. This study is aimed at distinguishing between whether tertiary institutions should be evenly and commonly regulated and the learning process standardized for all individuals or to be specifically adapted for the individual needs of the target market.

Keywords: E-Learning, technologies, tertiary education, distance education, stakeholder perception, standardization, customization, Ghana.

1. Introduction

Highly sought after job positions have become very competitive in this market-driven global world due to the influx of new technological devices and gadgets which aid in communication and interaction and this has given rise to the continuous retraining, upgrading and educating of professionals who are already in the workforce. Many organizations aspire to become the best within their industry and would rather recruit personnel who are top of the range in their educational and professional status. It has therefore become imperative that people become more

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and more current in upgrading or topping up their educational status to be abreast with and meet the job positions they aspire to be in.

These technological changes in equipment and processes have induced many organizations to recruit more qualified and competent personnel into the work environment. Many universities are therefore strategically positioning themselves to cater for this need among the working populace, by providing more market driven upgrades in education for the youth, train new graduate entrants into the work force, and keep on educating and re-training, allowing for the top up of degrees and certificates for those already in the work force for the acquisition of new knowledge and appropriate skills. It is therefore of interest to universities to establish their presence, evenly distribute their programs of study across board for all interested parties or tailor-cut to suit the particular audience who desire to improve their skills and competencies across the nations into cities, towns, villages, and communities.

2. The Research Problem

Ghana's human resource capabilities have been drained by the migration of the youth to greener pastures (Graham, 2013). This has created a huge deficit in the country's human resource development as recent challenges of national development and the increasing global competition between the country's firms and industries is growing stiffer by the day (Ntim, 2014). Technology available has changed work processes in organizations has also contributed to working tasks becoming very competitive and professionally demanding.

It has therefore become imperative and convincingly necessary for individuals and the working public to upgrade their educational status while still keeping their jobs as competition amongst job seekers has become very keen. Mariola (2002) reported that "successful online courses require student and faculty comfort with online instruction and the availability of technical support …". Online and distance learning has become an answer to this growing need in the whole world, and many working students have taken on this advantage to keep their jobs, earn income, fulfil family obligations and at the same time acquire education to better their skills and proficiencies on the job (Morley, 2012). Many universities and tertiary institutions in Ghana have also appreciated this need and some have taken giant leaps to grant solutions to this growing necessity. There is still an educational acquisition cavity that needs to be transformed into a more visible, resource-enhanced form of attaining knowledge that is open to providing lasting learning prospects in distance education to all working Ghanaians to meet the various learning needs for academic, personal, and professional growth (Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015; Senadza, 2012).

The search for more lucrative jobs and higher positions within the workplace has augmented the need for higher learning as well as learning while working (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). This research study was conducted to find solutions to the problems identified by universities in general but with special emphasis to those in Ghana. The research problem here is about how or whether the Ghanaian universities are using their stance and status to deliver the needed service that is expected of them by the working public. Again, the problem of how far and longstanding will online or distance learning verve to help in the nation's human resource development. A related problem to investigate is whether there is a future for online or distance learning studies for Ghanaian universities and whether the program will be standardized for the clientele to be accessed and assessed on a level ground or localized for special and peculiar clients who needed a specialized service.

The research objectives of this study are formally stated below:

- To ascertain the future and next level of learning opportunities that Ghanaian Tertiary Institutions will attain in the next five years
- To determine which of the strategies; Standardization of Localization will lead to the desired goals of internationalization of online or distance learning.
- To strike a correlation between technology change and business behavior.

3. Literature Review

Online / Distance learning has made a major impact in the world of education (Keegan, 1994). Recent studies show that online learning is an effective and reputable way to earn a college

degree (Littlefield, 2010). Distance / online education has many benefits and advantages as compared to the traditional on-campus learning. In this present day and age, many students and the working class are opting for distance and or online education because of its user-friendliness and convenience (Bullen, 2007). This learning experience provides learners with a less time bound advantage, ease of remoteness and gives learners the flexibility to learn and work in their own time and at their own pace due to personal circumstances, family or work obligations (Cantelon, 1995). Distance education is often less expensive than traditional education. Like this it can open learning opportunities to those who would otherwise not be able to study and facilitates the social inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds (such as economic situation, development regions, disability and so forth (*Steinmann, 2009)*.

With fewer restrictions on capacity limits, online and distance education also benefits the universities as it allows the institutions to expand their offer - and to reach those who usually would not be able to enroll with them (De Wet, 2014). Typical distance learners are regular students as we all know them, but also parents, physically challenged people, and business men who are looking for ways to enhance their skills next to their busy schedule. Allowing any institution across the world to target anyone interested in their subject while reducing additional obstacles to international studies such as visa requirements, travel costs and travel time, makes online and distance education the next step to a truly globalized world of education (*Steinmann, 2009)*.

Adding an international dimension can help prepare students to interact in a global economy (Altbach, 2015). This is particularly important to prepare business students since many businesses have a global presence (Healey, 2008). Furthermore, international online learning communities not only promote interactions outside a student's "home borders" (Higgitt et al., 2008), but also cross border communities that can improve the quality of case discussions (Bonk et al., 2000), who suggest a pedagogical approach often used within business school curricula. Indeed, in their comparative analysis of learning effectiveness via three forms of electronic communication, Yoo, Kanawattanachai, and Citurs (2002) found that the form of electronic communication mattered less than the number of people collaborating on the quality of a case analysis. Thus, they propose that technology will go beyond just reducing geographic distance and provide opportunities to enhance knowledge because of the easier exchange of diverse perspectives. Distance is no longer an issue in distance education, observe Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, and Stevens (2012).

"Today, with the academic learning environment rapidly evolving, an increasing number of institutions have adapted technological advancements on their college or university campuses. Traditional brick and mortar educational institutions are now competing with the convenience and practicality of online degree programs and study. To remain competitive and technologically relevant, the School of Business and Industry has sought to enter into the online degree program market through the implementation of an Online Managerial MBA Program" (Suarez-Brown et al., 2012).

The issue of educational technology has played a major part in improving the learning outcomes of individuals by personalizing the learning experience, even at the elementary level (Bell & Federman, 2013). The immediate responsiveness to computer based programs, and the self-paced private learning environment that educational technology warrants seeks to promote higher levels of motivation among students worldwide. It has also provided greater access to education such as in the case of increased accommodation for students with severe physical disabilities and for students living in remote locations. Of the many indicators in the use of technology on education, the major index of the use of technology in education is distance education or online learning. In online and or distance education the use of technology is of essence the most important element in making distance learning a reality (Nicolson & Uematsu, 2013). Technology is not an appendage, but a requisite element needed to complete the distance learning process.

Technologies like broadband Internet and social media have helped make MOOCs possible and "reduce the friction that is holding together the building blocks" of higher education, said panel moderator Bernd Girod, Senior Associate Dean for Online Learning and Professional Development and the Robert L. and Audrey S. Hancock Professor in the Stanford School of Engineering. Widom, the Fletcher Jones Professor of Computer Science at Stanford and an NAE member is currently teaching her second "Introduction to Databases" MOOC. Although she said

she finds it gratifying to be able to reach tens of thousands of people who can't enroll in her similar Stanford course, she and others question whether the MOOC model in its current form is sustainable (Beckett, 2013).

Beckett (2013) continues to ascertain how some wonder how the numerous businesses that have sprung up around MOOCs will stay afloat while delivering a free product. Others point out the potential problems with verifying student identity and preventing cheating, especially if course credit is offered. Some worry that the growth of online education could endanger small colleges; others see an opportunity for institutions offering top-tier programs to license course content to others and improve the quality of education on a large scale (Baepler et al., 2014). Regardless, most agree that online education in some format holds enormous promise. There are lots of opportunities ahead and it is an exciting time for higher education, notes (Beckett, 2013).

4. The Study

Data needed for this research was collected through a self-administered survey questionnaire, interviews, and secondary data drawn from a variety of data sources. A random sample of eighty students who are currently enrolled in online distance programs in Ghana and sixty students who have already completed some or the other online program in Ghana completed the survey instrument. In-depth recorded interviews (including questionnaires) with the executives of three different universities who offer the online or distance learning program were conducted. Information from publications, including university brochures and catalogues provided essential secondary data. Information from universities in Ghana websites and reviews from past students and prospective students were used to corroborate the findings.

Published data was sourced from the following centers;

1. Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (ICDE), University of Ghana, Legon;
2. University of Education, Winneba, Ghana;
3. Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Kumasi, Ghana;
4. University of Cape Coast, Ghana;
5. Wisconsin University – Ghana.

The data thus gathered were employed for:

a) Establishing the choice between standardization or localization;

b) Determining consumer requisitions and preferences;

c) Initialising commitment and change in the managerial attitude to standardize pr localize online and or distance learning;

d) Encouraging Ghanaian university decision makers to venture into aggressive advertising and awareness creation for excellent knowledge sharing programmes for customers;

e) Establishing a relationship between change in technology and online and or distance learning.

The following key questions were included in the interviews:

- Do you agree that online / distance learning has impacted knowledge transfer in this present day?
- In your opinion, do you think that online / distance learning should be designed to adapt to the various target market groups in specific countries or they should be uniformly designed for all?
- How would you rate the future of online / distance learning on education?
- Who do you think are the best beneficiaries to online / distance learning?"
- What would you consider as the one most important element that has made online/distance learning easy and possible?

5. Analysis of Data and Findings

There were five Tertiary institutions in Ghana who offered the online or distance learning programme at the time of this research. Students and faculty from different course disciplines including accounting, finance, management, marketing, international business and information systems opted to participate in the survey. Each of these institutions received fifteen survey questionnaires totaling seventy-five questionnaires excluding personal interviews and published data.

Results collected from the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (ICDE), University of Ghana, Legon show that nine out of fifteen respondents agreed that online and or distance learning has helped impact the increasing number of individuals who desire to improve their educational status while twelve of the respondents also believed that technology was the backbone to online / distance learning distribution and that without technology, online learning would never be achievable. In the same way at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) eight respondents agreed to the notion that online/distance learning has impacted the present generation and thirteen also believe that technology is the backbone of distance / online learning. Likewise, at the University of Education, Winneba eight respondents agreed that online/distance learning has impacted the present generation and twelve also believe that technology is the backbone of distance / online learning. Also at the University of Cape Coast, ten of the respondents agreed that online / distance learning has impacted the present generation and thirteen also believe that technology is the backbone of distance / online learning. At Wisconsin University in Ghana seven out of the fifteen respondents agreed that online/distance learning has impacted the present generation while twelve out of the fifteen also believe that technology is the backbone of distance / online learning.

Of the five questions asked in the questionnaire, the second question; "In your opinion, do you think that online / distance learning should be designed to adapt to the various target market groups in specific countries or they should be uniformly designed for all?" The results are summarized, according to institution, as follows:

Table 1. Standardization Vs Localization

	Standardized	Localized
ICDE	10	5
KNUST	9	6
UCEW	11	4
WISC	10	5
UCC	13	2
Total	53	22

ICDE: Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (ICDE), University of Ghana, Legon
KNUST: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Kumasi, Ghana
UCEW: University of Education, Winneba, Ghana
WISC: Wisconsin University Ghana
UCC: University of Cape Coast, Ghana

All five tertiary institutions believed that the distribution process and programs for distance and online education should implement the standardization strategy. The total percentage ratio of the five institutions preference of the standardization over localization strategy is depicted by 66.7: 33.3; 60:40; 73.3:26.7; 66.7: 33.3; 86.7:13.3 = 70.7:29.3. This depicts that about seventy per cent and more of the population sample desire a standardized structure of the online / distance learning programme.

Faculty respondents were asked how they would rate the future of online / distance learning. Responses were content analysed and the findings are summarized in table 2. It is evident that that the optimism thumbed. In fact, no one responded in highly pessimistic terms.

Table 2. Optimism about the future of online programs

	Highly optimistic	Optimistic	Status quo expected	Pessimistic
ICDE	2	9	2	2
KNUST	3	11	0	1

UCEW	2	10	2	1
WISC	4	9	1	1
UCC	1	9	2	3
Total	11	48	7	8

ICDE: Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (ICDE), University of Ghana, Legon
KNUST: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Kumasi, Ghana
UCEW: University of Education, Winneba, Ghana
WISC: Wisconsin University Ghana
UCC: University of Cape Coast, Ghana

We did a demographic analysis of the ideal targets for e-learning. In aggregate, as expected, working adults were the primary interest groups in the online programs. Out of the 65 people who answered this question, 52 were working adults. The results are summarized in table 3.

Table 3. Target groups for e-learning

	Young working adults	Older working adults	Any tertiary education aspirant	Anybody and everybody
ICDE	4	8	2	1
KNUST	5	7	2	1
UCEW	3	9	3	0
WISC	3	10	1	1
UCC	2	11	2	0
Total	**17**	**35**	**10**	**3**

ICDE: Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (ICDE), University of Ghana, Legon
KNUST: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Kumasi, Ghana
UCEW: University of Education, Winneba, Ghana
WISC: Wisconsin University Ghana
UCC: University of Cape Coast, Ghana

We also observed a significant positive relation between comfort with the use of technology and the optimism in the e-learning effectiveness. Respondents who were passionate about technology in general also rated high about the utility of online education. The following correlation matrix, given in table 4, highlights this.

Table 4. Technology friendliness Vs perceived e-learning effectiveness

Description	**ICDE**	**KNUST**	**UCEW**	**WISC**	**UCC**
Optimistic about online education	9	8	8	7	10
Comfort with the use of technology	12	13	12	10	13

ICDE: Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (ICDE), University of Ghana, Legon
KNUST: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Kumasi, Ghana
UCEW: University of Education, Winneba, Ghana
WISC: Wisconsin University Ghana
UCC: University of Cape Coast, Ghana

The Pearson correlation coefficient derived from the above table is r =0.716, and the regression coefficient, adjusted R^2=0.51. In each of the institution from where the data came, this shows a strong positive relation between technology and online learning. In summary, this means

that optimistic views about technology is a significant factor in determining the learner comfort to use technology for education. Making students feel good about the promises of technology is, thus, an important key in facilitating their good use of e-learning technologies.

6. Conclusion

In accordance with the results, it could be inferred the stakeholders preferred standardization strategy over localization. This can be interpreted to mean that students would prefer a common platform for communication, promotion, and distribution of the course program. This also means their preference for being graded on a common scale. Over seventy per cent of the respondents from the sample population preferred a standardized program that every individual around the world would be able to access the same program without restrictions and changes. It was also ascertained that online learning in Ghana has a very great future as about eighty per cent of the respondents believed in the prospects of e-learning technologies for tertiary intuitions to take advantage of.

A significant positive correlation between an individual's mastery over technology and his or her optimism about e-learning effectiveness implies that an important way to make e-learning widely accepted is by means of offering training in the use of technologies. Learners are more likely to appreciate e-learning if they know how to use e-learning technologies. Thus, in addition to developing quality content, attention should also be given to training the learners in the use of technologies.

Finally, standardization Vs localization is also a political issue (Beyer, 2002): before concluding this paper, we must admit that not every stakeholder class has been interviewed for the study and the findings might be inadequate to that extent. It is not the students or their teachers that make decisions about educational policy, even though their voices are important. Enriching this study with views of the political class and that of the bureaucracy will make its findings more valid.

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