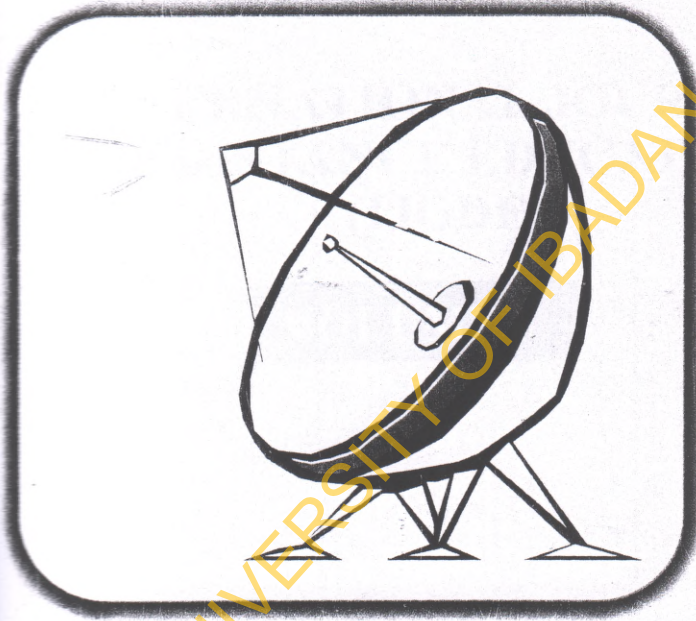


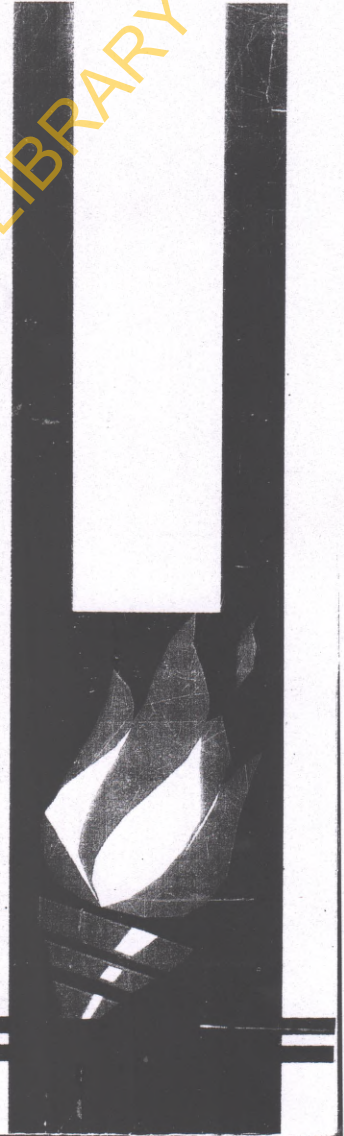
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PERSONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS INDICATORS EXPERIENCED BY PRE-PRIMARY TEACHER TRAINEES UNDERGOING DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES

By

M.N.ODINKO

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Abstract

The study sought to explain the level of stress among pre-school teachers undergoing Open Distance Learning programmes at Universities of Ibadan, Lagos, Abia State University, and National Teachers Institute from different locations (Enugu, Akure, Ibadan, Lagos) using eight personal and environmental variables: gender, age; marital status; status at work; employment type; locus of control; and attitude towards distance education. Survey research type was used. Four valid and reliable instruments and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were used to collect data on the relevant variables from 360 pre-school teachers undergoing distance learning programme in the universities. Data analysis involved using content analysis on the views of the respondents and stepwise multiple regression to examine the relationship between the stress level among distance education students and the eight independent variables. The results showed that the prevailing stressors as identified by ODL students (pre-school) include those of finance, ICT, emotional and course delivery channels. It also showed that the personal and environmental variables, when taken together, would effectively predict stress level among distance education students ($R_{Adjusted} = 0.6852$; significant at 0.01 level); and that marital status is the most potent contributor to the prediction ($T_{ratio} = 3.682$; significant at 0.05 level). There is therefore need for ODL organizers to endeavour to evaluate antecedent conditions before embarking on new programmes. Thus, university authorities should organise attitude corrective workshops as part of the orientation activities for new students of distance education programme.

INTRODUCTION

Open Distance Learning programme is not like the conventional educational programme where teachers and students meet at a regular basis in a classroom setting, situated in an environment demanding that everyone must be available at a given time, have face-to-face contact sessions, and receive instructions through one medium. Rather, Open Distance Learning on the other hand refers to educational programme policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning (Glen, 2005). It also reflects the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure (UNESCO, 2002).

The Nigerian Open Distance learning programme is expected to have two essential characteristic features which are that it should be "open" and secondly, learning should be at a "distance". With respect to it being "open", it means that it should focus on removing barriers that could hinder access to learning, increase flexibility of learning provision, as well as choice over what, when, where, at what pace and how the learning programme could take place. Secondly, the connotation with respect to distance, means the teaching and learning process in which students are separated from their teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communications technologies (Dhanarajan, 2001). Ogonor and Olubor (2008) are of the view that distance education aims at increasing access to education to those who have difficulty in accessing it within the mainstream such as the poor, illiterate, women, the marginalized and those living in remote areas. The advantage of this is that working adults who could not afford to have university education because of work pressure to do so and in turn use the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired during the course of study to improve on their duties in their work context. Further, it offers them this opportunity without the candidate being taken away from their duty posts.

Case studies carried out in some countries (Brazil, Burkina Faso, Nigeria) on behalf of UNESCO (2008) have shown that there is paucity of teachers and unless we can get more teachers, and better teachers, we will not reach the target of making quality education available for all by 2015. Conventional approaches to teacher education have not met all the

demands of the profession and this has led to an interest in open and distance learning alternatives with the hope that candidates can take part in this without stress. Teacher education is expected to inculcate in the teacher trainees some positive behaviours which would enable them to develop the potential of their pupils; to serve as role models; and encourage self confidence and creativity. At the same time, many educators often hope that student teachers will develop appropriate, and where necessary changed, attitudes to their job. In order to meet these hopes, teacher education is likely to include four elements: improving the general educational background of the trainee teachers; increasing their knowledge and understanding of the subjects they are to teach; pedagogy and understanding of children and learning; and the development of practical skills and competences (Perraton, Creed, and Robinson (2008)

Many teachers in Nigerian primary schools begin work without teaching qualifications so they may get initial training while they are working by enrolling in distance learning programmes. But the ever changing nature of the educational system is creating increased demands for primary teachers to improve on their skills to enable them meet up with such demands. Therefore, those teachers who do not possess the required qualification which the work demands would need programmes of professional development to help them in their new job. Thus, many of them enroll in in-service programmes to help prepare them for the variety of different needs they are faced with in their places of work.

Nigerian Distance Learning Education programmes have played a significant role in the training of teachers. The type of training they offered includes initial training for formal teaching qualification and in-service training which the beneficiaries use for their formal upgrading, and training in particular subject area. This method of training provision in a developing country like ours has helped in the expansion and quality improvement needed in making it possible for intending teachers as well as practicing teachers in Nigerian schools who do not have the professional qualification needed for the effective teaching and learning in our education system to do so. A lot of untrained practicing pre-school teachers who could not afford training in the conventional universities were absorbed.

The use of new technologies in the training programmes for students, thus, make it a common need for the providers as well as the Ministry of

Education to upgrade teachers' knowledge and competence in ICT. The emergence of new forms of distance learning based on new information and communication technologies; in particular those supported by the Internet and using the World Wide Web (WWW), has significant pedagogical, economic and organizational implications. This is an indication that those enrolled in this programme will have to go through the stress of ICT skill acquisition, procurement of a set of computer (which most times are not economically viable considering the meager pay received by those teachers

Teaching methodology in Open Distance learning centres is quite different from the conventional teacher-learner face to face contact as well as the traditional talk and chalk method of communication. Open Distance learning outfits have culminate in new patterns of instructional delivery modes which thus generated new learning needs and new patterns of information access and application. These appear to have some effects on learners who are enrolled in these programmes. This could amount to stressful conditions on the students.

All of this creates new challenges that could manifest in form of stress for teacher education and continuing professional development: the need to find ways of using existing resources differently, of expanding access to learning opportunities at affordable cost, of using technologies appropriately to enrich teaching and support practice, of stimulating and supporting teachers' active learning and continuing professional development.

Stress is associated with pressure on an individual which makes the individual to experience tension or mental strain. When under stress condition, an individual's cognitive function is disturbed. Stress at work could be bad for business and for employees. It could undermine employees' performance, increases accident-prone behaviour, and leads to absenteeism, discontent and ill health among staff. Indeed, the economic implications of work-related stress for businesses are enormous. Stress can lead to impairment of performance, perception, learning and judgment. Stress conditions are thus not conducive for effective learning. Moreso, when the learners are adults involved in Distance Education Programme as well full-time employment in order to cater for some personal and environmental needs. The adult learners in Distance Education programme are likely to be associated with high stress level considering that most of

them are employees in public and private sectors who seem not to be satisfied with their salary earnings. To this end, some research studies in Nigeria have examined stress related problems of employees (Joe, 1985; Ogugua, 1987; Okebukola and Jegede, 1992; Salami, 1994).

However, these studies, despite their scope and perhaps depth, only used a univariate approach to relate employee stress to job productivity as well as one or a combination of the following personal and environmental variables; gender, age, employment type, locus of control, socio-economic background, study habits, status a work, marital status and attitude towards distance education programme. Neither did any of the studies provide empirical evidence of any relationship between attitudinal factors and stress level of employees involved in Distance Education Programme in spite of the significant linkage between attitudinal factors and educational achievements (Okpala, 1985). The available literature also indicate that previous researches had not attained a reasonable degree of success in identifying chronological order and strength of interactions between mediating variables and stress level, especially when many of these variable as are taken together.

This background emphasizes the need to bring into focus research which examines what pre-school teachers undergoing ODL programme feel are about stress as well as some attitudinal factors as part of personal and environmental variables that could influence stress level among distance education students. The present study was therefore designed to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the prevalent stress indicators identified by the pre-school teachers undergoing distance learning education programme?
2. To what extent would personal and environmental variable", when taken together, predict stress level among these students?
3. What is the relative contribution of the variables to the prediction?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted survey research type. Subjects were 360 pre-primary teachers enrolled in distance education (269 female and 91 males) selected from the various distance education centres attached to four different Universities, (Ibadan, Unilag Abia State University, and NTI selected from the various study centres (Uturu, Akure (NTI), Ibadan(NTI), and Enugu (NTI). The selection was by stratified random sampling with probability proportional to the size of student population enrolled for

degree program and working in varied type of employment (self employed, private sector, and public sector) and years of working experiences. Their ages ranged from 24 years to 56 years (mean age=49.2 years; SD 4.3).

(b) Instrumentation

Four instruments were used to collect data for the present study: Self Reported Stress Questionnaires (SRSQ); Study Habit Inventory (SHI); Rotter Internal-External Control Scale (RIES) and Inventory of Student Attitude Towards Distance Education (IATDE).

(i) Self Reported Stress Questionnaire (SRSQ). It consists of two parts: A and B. Section A Solicits information on personal and environmental variables such as gender, age, marital status, status at work and employment type. Section B consists of 17 items on symptoms of stress placed besides a five-point likert scale in which the respondents are required to indicate the extent to which they experience such symptoms. The instrument was adapted from Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) Self-reported stress questionnaire. It was pretested for the purpose of this study using 230 distance education students of university of Nigeria Nsukka. The pretest results showed no ambiguities in the instrument and produced internal consistency reliability /construct validity estimate of 0.89 and 0.91 respectively.

(ii) Study Habit Inventory (SHI). The SHI is a self-report, 45 item-five point scale study inventory developed by Bakare (1977). It had test retest reliability and construct validity estimate of 0.96 (Abe, 1995). For the purpose of this study, the SHI was also pretested using 230 distance education students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The pretest results showed no ambiguities in the instrument and produced an internal consistency/construct validity estimate of 0.91 and 0.86 respectively.

(iii) Rotter Internal External Control Scale (RIES): The Rotter I-E scale consists of 23 pairs of statements, using a forced choice format and a six filler questions. Each pair contains one internal statement and one external statement; and subjects are to make dichotomous choice between the two alternatives. The instrument was pretested twice, for the purpose of this study, using 193 distance education students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The pretest results showed no ambiguities in the instrument and produced a test-retest (two weeks interval) reliability estimate of 0.81.

(iv) **Inventory of Student Attitude towards Distance Education (IATDE)**

The IATDE is a twenty item questionnaire in which the items are placed beside a four-point scale for the respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement or otherwise to each of the items. The 20 items were selected from an initial pool of 30 items on the basis of comments and suggestions of 4 lecturers in educational evaluation. A trial testing of the 30 items using 230 distance education students of University Nigeria, Nsukka showed no ambiguities in the instrument and produced estimate of construct validity and internal consistency reliability of 0.89 and 0.091 respectively.

(v) **Focus Group Discussion**

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a group discussion of approximately 6 - 12 persons guided by a facilitator, during which group members talk freely and spontaneously about a certain topic. A FGD is a qualitative method. Its purpose is to obtain in-depth information on concepts, perceptions and ideas of a group. A FGD aims to be more than a question-answer interaction. The idea is that group members discuss the topic among themselves, with guidance from the facilitator. Implementation of FGDs is an *interactive* process. Provided the groups have been well chosen, in terms of composition and number (see below), FGDs can be a powerful research tool which provides valuable spontaneous information in a short period of time and at relatively low cost.

In each location used, participants informed two days in advance, and the general purpose and procedures of the FGD were explained, in order to obtain their **consent to join**. Since we are outsiders in these schools, we had to rely on the facilitators and the admission officers as our key informants for the selection of participants in FGDs. To them we explained thoroughly the purpose and the process of the FGD. In our explanations we emphasised that we want a group of people practicing pre-school teachers (males and females) who are undergoing the programme. When the list was given, we then randomly selected participants ensuring that males and females as well as those working in public and private sectors were represented.

Physical arrangements during the discussion involved arranging the chairs in a circle; making sure that there were no disturbances; as well as adequate lighting existed, etc. We also ensured that we held the FGD in a neutral setting (snack joints/eatery) which

encouraged participants to freely express their views. Prior to the visits, **discussion guide was prepared (written). This involved structuring the series of open-ended questions used.** A tape-recorder was also used for recording. During each discussion, the researcher and the three assistants worked in pairs. One of the researchers served as 'the facilitator' or 'moderator' for the focus group discussion the other performed the duties as 'recorder'.

(C) Data Collection and Analysis

The instruments were administered directly to the subjects by the investigator and three trained research assistants. Data analysis involved using content analysis for the FGD, and stepwise multiple regression procedure to examine the relationship between stress level (dependent variable) and gender, age, marital status, status at work, employment type, locus of control, study habit, and attitude towards distance education programme (independent variables).

RESULTS

Content analysis of the Focus Group Discussions (FGD) held with the pre-school teachers undergoing ODL education programme.

The nature of the data generated gave rise to the use of different methods of data analysis. These include the SPSS and transcription methods. The SPSS was used for data generated with the structured instruments (Self Reported Stress Questionnaires (SRSQ); Study Habit Inventory (SHI); Rotter Internal-External Control Scale (RIES) and Inventory of Student Attitude towards Distance Education (IATDE). These produced quantitative results whereas the **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** recorded with an audio tape recorder were transcribed and the information generated from the transcription produced the qualitative results. The results provide information on the research question one, concerning what the respondent felt were prevalent stress indicators with respect to the programme they are undergoing.

The structure used for the transcription was based on the key issues raised by pre-school teachers in training on what they understood by ODL as well as what they felt are sources of stress encountered as they undergo this programme of study.

The Respondents views on Open Distance Learning

With respect to what they think ODL means, their views include: I think it means;

“School without walls”;

“Thought Open /Distance Learning is just like the normal school”;
“Have some weeks contact with our teachers”;
“Where people are given admission without writing entrance exams”
“Programme conducted during holiday periods for workers” among others.

The indicators identified include: technology and interaction; learning materials used; unavailability of print materials; issues that border on test and examination methods; learner support provision and financial stress. Technologies and interaction

“Limited our level of socialization' and interaction with our lecturers, our fellow students, and even knowing the school where we are studying”.
“one can even finish university without knowing the classmates”.
“I do not even know my teachers”.
“Gives me opportunity to stay with my family while studying” among others.

Learning material

Print media remains the practical choice. To this most of the respondents are of the view that it is inexpensive and reliable medium for studying purposes. Though some are of the view that some of the texts are difficult to understand. Those from the rural location appear to be marginalized. For instance, most of them did report that they hardly get connected to either radio station where the lectures were delivered nor having access to internet facilities. Most of them emphasized that the cost of accessing internet facilities from those who offer the services is also enamors because their servers are always slow and one spends hours of one's precious time and of course money. Respondents also reiterated that:

“only text books are provided”.
“Although we have computer unit, but I do know how to use it”.
“we do not even have where we can get reading materials”.
“No constant power supply”.

Learner Support

Responses generated include:

“There are not enough people to help when we needed counseling or advice with respect to courses to take, how to register, among others”.
“Our teachers are not readily available for consultation”, among others.

Views on stress

A primary cause of stress identified by the respondents in study is the ICT based (inability to perform computer operations, non-availability of computer in some localities as well as internet facilities, too expensive to assess mails and materials because of slow nature of networks; emotion-related, ranging from outright employee refusal to give them permission during exams and lecture periods, conflict to more subtle issues, such as people feeling unappreciated or that they have been treated unfairly. Financial Stress was also identified. Here is an excerpt on what they feel about this:

“Use of internet, procurement of materials (electronic - computer set, internet facilities, radio set, generating set to ensure that electricity supply is available to enable them listen to broadcast of the lectures, among others require money, considering the amount we r paid, we find it difficult to cope financially”.

Respondents' Views on Testing and Evaluation include:

“Assignments and lectures posted on-line are difficult to access”

“Computer Based Testing (CBT) where candidates have to respond to test items by imputing their responses and getting feedback almost immediately is seen as a means of ‘wanting many students to fail’”;

“it will reduce intimidation by lecturers”;

“aids quick release of results so that we may know the course we passed or are to repeat”.

Quantitative Results

Table 1 shows that the use of eight independent variables (gender, age, marital status, status at work, employment type, locus of control, study habit and attitude toward distance education programme) to predict stress level among distance education students yielded a coefficient of multiple regression (R) of 0.6102. (adjusted) and a multiple correlation square (R^2) of 0.3721 (adjusted). The Table also shows that analysis of variable of the multiple regression data yielded an F-ratio of 7.89 (significant at the 0.01 level).

Table 1: Regression Analysis on Sample Data, Standard Error of Estimate/Analysis of Variance

Source of variation	df.	Ss	Ms	F-ratio
Due to regression	8	81686.134	205.813	5.1*
Due to residual	351	3535.412	40.211	
Total	259	5221.546		
		Multiple R (adjusted)	= 0.6852	
		Multiple R ² (adjusted)	= 0.4695	

* Significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 2: Testing the significance of regression weights

Variable No	Variable	Std. Reg. wt ()	SEb	Df	T-ratio	P-level
1	Gender	1.68	2.31	1,351	0.942	N.S
2	Age	-5.19	2.30	2,350	-3.361	0.05*
3	Marital status	6.72	1.84	2,349	3.682	0.05*
4	Status at work	4.80	1.62	4,348	3.134	0.05*
5	Employment type	1.03	1.09	5,347	0.514	N.S
6	Locus of control	0.63	0.96	6,346	0.811	N.S
7	Study habit	1.20	1.24	7,345	0.783	N.S
8	Attitude towards distance education	-4.03	2.11	8,344	-2.956	0.05*

Table 2 shows for each independent variable the standardized regression weight

(\hat{a}), the standard error of estimate (SEb), the degree of freedom (df), the T-ratio, and the level at which the T-ratio is significant. As indicated in the table, the T-ratio associated with only variables 2 (age), 3 (marital status), 4 (Status at work) and 8 (attitude towards distance education programme) are significant at the 0.05 level.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study level that the eight independent variables, when taken together, seem to be effective in predicting the stress level of distance education students. The observed F-ratio is significant at the 0.01 level an indication that the effectiveness of a combination of the independent variables in predicting stress level of the distance education students could not have occurred by chance. The magnitude of the relationship between the stress level of the students and a combination of the independent variables is reflected in the values of coefficient of multiple correlation (0.6852) and multiple R square (0.4695) as shown in Table I. It may thus be said that about 46.95% of the total variance in stress level of the distance education students is accounted for by a linear combination of the eight independent variables.

As for the extent to which each of the eight independent variables contributed to the prediction, the value of the T-ratio associated with the respective variables, as shown in Table 2, indicate that variable 2 (age), 3 (marital status) 4 (status at work), and 8 (attitude towards distance education) each contributed significantly to the prediction of stress level among distance education students. The values of the standardized regression weights associated with these variables (See tables 2) indicates that variable 3 (marital status) is the most potent contributor to the prediction, followed by variable 2 (age), variable 4 (status at work) and variable 8 (attitude towards distance education) in that order.

The study results on the significant contributors to the prediction are such that married students are associated with higher stress level than their colleagues who are bachelors and spinsters; while older distance education students experience more stress than younger ones. These results corroborate the views of Okebukola and Jegede (1992) and Salami (1994) on determinants of stress and stress analysis among school workers in Nigeria. Such a pattern of results are also not surprising considering that the economic and social demands of the typical Nigerian home on parents are much more than these parents can afford. More so, when it is likely that these married students registered for distance education programme to increase their chances of improving the quality of living among their family members. It would thus seem that the unmarried distance education students is under less pressure to respond to economic and social demands from home.

The link between age and stress level is also explicable considering that the older students are likely to be married (with its associated economic and social responsibilities), They are also likely to be not as physical and mentally fit as their younger counterparts to withstand the additional demands of a distance education degree programme.

The results are also such that distance education students who are senior employees experience less stress than their counterparts who are junior workers; while the more positive a student's attitude is towards distance education programme, the less the stress level of the student. These results lend support to the view that stress level on an individual could depend on the individual's social status (Coleman, 1979) as well as attitude towards associated stimulus/ task (Efunniyi, 1986; Okpala, 1996). The results are also explicable considering that workers at the senior management cadre (unlike the junior workers who only receive and act on instruction) have

more access to adjusting their work-setting responsibilities to suit the demands of a self-sponsored training programme that are combined with the responsibilities. It is thus likely that distance education students who are senior employees would experience less stress than their colleagues who are junior workers.

In addition, the issues of attitude and emotions of programme participants towards a programme could lead to conflict and resistance to tasks associated with the programme (Okpala, 1985). This, in-turn, could lead to increased stress among the programme participants. In this regard, the result that stress level among students of distance education programme is inversely related to their positive attitudinal dispositions towards the program could be explained.

The study findings also show that gender, employment type, locus of control and study habit made no significant contribution to the prediction of stress level among distance education students. This, perhaps, is an indication that in the presence of other more potent factors, the respective contributions of the four variables would be low and not significant.

Conclusion/recommendation

The results reported in this study underscore the need for ODL organizers to endeavour to evaluate antecedent conditions before embarking on new programmes. This will help them to ascertain if discrepancies exist between their intended objectives and the actual implementation/outcome. They should also seek for Government intervention with respect to power supply. Course materials should be well designed to facilitate access to information. Access to information with respect to readability level of the course materials considering the nature of the students admitted.

The results also reveal the need for the of ODL education research unit (if any) to use the eight personal and environmental variables (gender, age, marital status, status at work, employment type, locus of control, study habit and attitude towards distance education) as a predictor set in studying stress level among distance education students. The organizers of distance education programme should ensure that employers of distance education students are aware of the students' involvement in the programme since this could help to minimize the students work-setting responsibilities. Perhaps, it may be suggested that the criteria for admission into the programme be made to favour spinsters and bachelors as well as those applicants who are too old to be admitted into the mainstream universities (e.g. those above 50 years).

The findings also provide a basis for suggesting that university authorities should organise attitude corrective workshops as part of the orientation activities for new students of distance education programme, and repeat such workshops annually as the students advance in the programme. It is hoped that fostering student's positive attitude towards distance education programme (during the workshops) would reduce the stress level among the students.

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