

# Proximity and choice of College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the University of Cape Coast for further studies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the proximity of study centres to the students of College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast (CoDE/UCC) and whether further studies of distance learners who were teachers and employees could lead to absenteeism in their workplaces.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A sequential explanatory strategy was used. A self-administered questionnaire and unstructured interviews as well as observation guides were employed to collect data from 2,077 students pursuing business and education programmes of CoDE in all study centres across Ghana. Data were analysed with descriptive statistics and pattern matching of content analysis.

**Findings** – The study found that few teachers and other workers pursuing the distance education do absent themselves from the workplace or classroom on Fridays preceding their face-to-face session because they embarked on their journey to the study centres on Friday morning. Some teachers also absented themselves from work on Mondays after face-to-face sessions for a lack of means of transport on Sunday after lessons. The absenteeism of these respondents directly and indirectly affected their employers, students and customers.

**Practical implications** – It was therefore recommended that management of CoDE/UCC should open more study centres in all the regions especially Western, Ashanti, Upper East, Northern and Upper West Regions to reduce number of hours spent by students to their study centres and consider introducing the business programmes at the existing district centres to reduce average distance covered by these students to commute from their places of work to their respective centres in the regional capitals. It was also recommended that online/electronic learning and audio versions (impersonal communication) of the study modules should be introduced so that students would not necessary have to travel to the study centre to participate in lectures/face-to-face sessions.

**Originality/value** – The findings of this study will help managers and administrators of both public and private distance educational providers. In addition to providing basis and areas for establishing study centres for geographical proximity, findings of the study should prove helpful for designing and delivering electronic and audio versions of distance education modules to reduce the level of absenteeism in workplace for the students.

**Keywords** Distance learning, Distance, Proximity, Absenteeism, Hours and study centre location

**Paper type** Research paper

## Background of the study

In the period which has witnessed tremendous growth in enrollment over the previous years, proximity to educational institutions still plays an influential critical role in applicants' choice/desire to further their education to college level (Sander, 2006). Proximity matters to students. Annual Freshman Survey polls conducted by Sanders in 2006 shows that for the third time in four years, 20 per cent of respondents said being close to home was



a significant factor in their college choice. The result was higher than in 1983 when researchers first asked the question as 16 per cent of freshmen considered it very important.

There has been a minimal change in the patterns of proximity over the past 40 years. From 1971 to 2012, for instance, 53 per cent of freshmen attended colleges located within 100 miles from home. In the earlier year, 36 per cent of students went to college from 101 to 500 miles away; in 2012, 32 per cent did. The refusal of student to consistently opt for colleges far from home seems to contradict popular beliefs that globalisation has brought the desire for people to explore the world beyond them. This could be because people are still “provincial beings” (Absher and Crawford, 1996). That is, people like to be close to family, and they want to be in familiar places. Additionally, colleges that shift their recruiting strategies by adopting a hyper-local approach stand to attract students who are more influenced by home for economic or cultural reasons. By leveraging their backyards, colleges may be able to maintain or increase their enrollments while expanding access to students in the immediate vicinity.

Servier (1986) states that research has consistently shown that a college or a university’s location can be a significant factor for potential student’s decision to apply and enrol. convenience and accessibility remain as the main reasons why some students may opt for colleges that are close to their homes or workplaces (Absher and Crawford, 1996; Servier, 1986). Kohn *et al.* (1976) discuss the proximity of a higher education institution to home as an essential factor in student predisposition to attend college. Low-cost, nearby college remains an essential influencer of an applicant’s decision to go to college or university. Hossler and Gallagher (1990) support the assertion that proximity to a college campus indeed influence college attendance rates. Students who live close to university are more likely to attend a college located near home. Chaubey *et al.* (2011) find that vital information regarding the course of studies, financial affordability considerations and the institution’s infrastructure and facilities were the most influential factors when students make a choice of higher institution of learning in Asia. The authors also found that generally age of the student and parental income were not significant in influencing the students’ choice.

One primary approach of drawing educational institution closer to potential applicants is the introduction of distance and open learning avenues which serve as the conduit for adult learners who are employed, have families, and/or other responsibilities to update knowledge and skills related to their job by saving travel costs and allowing a flexible schedule (Keegan, 1996). Moore and Kearsley (2005) indicated that most distance education students are adults between the ages of 25 and 50, and 56 per cent of all degree-granting higher education institutions offered distance courses during the 2000–2001 academic year. Distance learning (DL) has become an accepted method of delivering educational content in institutions of higher education. Allen and Seaman (2007) observe that improving students’ access to higher education has been cited as a primary reason for offering DL courses and programmes. DL involves a student-centred approach in which the instructor takes the role of the facilitator and students to engage in peer learning (Maor, 2007).

Study centre proximity plays an essential role in promoting distance education in Ghana. The levels of study centre usage, distribution, facilities, study centre conditions and physical activity amongst different distance students continue to play a significant role in students’ performance and selection of academic programmes. Upon realising the importance and the influence of proximity and location of the educational institution on students’ choice process, the University of Cape Coast (UCC) introduced the distance education programme by establishing the Centre for Continuing Education in 1998. With the hope to make its programmes more accessible and closer to applicants and students, the College of Distance Education (hitherto called Centre for Continuing Education) of UCC (CoDE/UCC) has opened 48 study centres in all the ten regions of Ghana as at January 2014, hosting Diploma and Degree programmes in business and education. With an initial

intake of 750 basic school practising teachers to pursue a three-year Diploma in Education in the 2000/2001 academic year, the enrollment has increased to 16,840 in the 2013/2014 academic year for both Diploma and Degree programmes in business and education (CoDE/UCC, 2018).

Registration of students and distribution of course modules of CoDE's students are done in the first week (beginning) of each semester. Face-to-face tutorials were organised every two weeks (bi-weekly) tentatively for the two groups of students in all the study centres across Ghana. Each of these two groups attends six weeks of face-to-face tutoring, two weeks of students' assessment test (quizzes) and four weeks of the end of semester examination. Students commute from their various places of work or residence within the various districts of the country to the closest study centres hosting programmes of students' choice. Thus, each student must travel to his/her study centre for 13 weekends to be able to complete the academic semester of the college successfully. Due to the fact that most of the students on CoDE's programmes have been teachers and employees of organisations, the college now organises face-to-face sessions and examinations on Saturdays and Sundays which, hitherto, was organised from Fridays to Sundays. This was done to avoid employee/teacher absenteeism in the workplace/classroom since these students would not be at the post on weekends.

### **Problem statement**

Previous studies have investigated the issue of absenteeism, the benefits of distance education, qualification status of individuals enrolled in distance education programmes, among others (Acquaye, 2013; Gyansah *et al.*, 2014). Researchers, however, appeared to be quiet on how the absence of the various workers from their workplace to pursue these programmes can affect their employers and clients/customers. Considering that the need for the programme is premised not just on education but to help the total development of mankind and the nation as well as the world, it is necessary that we consider the effects of the distance education on individuals, businesses, customers, etc. This study, therefore, sought out to investigate further studies and absenteeism by finding out whether CoDE's distance programmes contribute to teacher/worker absenteeism in the classroom and other workplaces.

Additionally, although study centres and educational facilities are available in urban, suburban and rural communities across the country for CoDE's distance education programme, the distribution of these centres are not uniform. Disparities in the distribution of study centres exist across the country that is characterised explicitly by populations and other relevant factors. Thus, the need to determine the average distance and hours spent by students to commute to these various study centres has become necessary. Thus, this study hoped to bridge the knowledge gap and to find solutions to these problems if they existed.

### **Objectives of the study**

The general objective the study was to determine the proximity of study centres to CoDE-UCC students and how their further studies as distance students (teachers/employees) can lead to teacher/employee absenteeism. The specific objectives of the study, however, were to:

- (1) identify the various types of employment/employers of CoDE's students and the primary means of transport used by these students to commute from their places of work/home to their study centres;
- (2) determine the level of teacher and employee absenteeism among CoDE's students and proximity of these students to their study centres;

- (3) ascertain CoDE students' perception of the effect of their absence from the workplaces on their employers and students/customers; and
- (4) recommend how CoDE can improve upon the proximity of its study centres to its students and reduce teacher absenteeism among its students.

### Theoretical and conceptual discussions on proximity and students' choice or enrolment

A three-stage model designed by Kohn *et al.* (1976) on factors influencing the choice of an educational institution (see Figure 1) suggests that the first stage in the choice process concerns the option of commuting to campus from home or living on campus. This choice is determined by the distance from home to college, family income, and other variables.

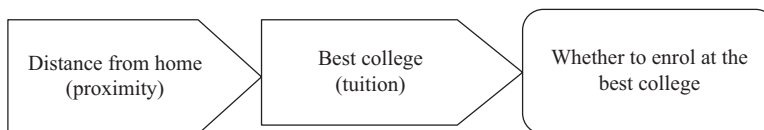
The second stage concerns the choice of the "best" college available, given the residency decision made at the first stage. Choosing the "best" college is affected by the following variables: tuition, board and room charges, average student ability, field breadth, per student revenues, family income ability and distance from the college. The third stage is the choice of whether to enrol in this "best" college or not at all. The variables affecting this stage are determined by parental education, sex of student, family income and the attractiveness of the "best" college alternatives. Kohn *et al.*'s (1976) perspective on the selection process is unique because it is the first study to focus on a three-stage approach to the process and is often referred to in more recent reports of research.

### Proximity, absenteeism and students' choice of an educational institution

In South Africa, a convenience variable such as geographic location was considered the second most important factor to have influenced the selection of universities (Beneke and Human, 2010). Additionally, Raposo and Alves (2007) and Dawes and Brown (2002) pointed out that proximity to home is one of the strongest influences in the selection of a university in Portugal and the UK. Furthermore, Paulsen (1990) indicated that the closer the institution is to their home, the higher the university was ranked by students and noted that the location of the university and the geography of its surroundings were some of the characteristics that were important for students at various universities in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These institutional characteristics suggest that a university nearby is one of the important stimulators of students' decision to further their education.

Raposo and Alves (2007) conducted a study on how distance from the family home to the university campuses affected absenteeism. The distance was grouped into three categories such as 0–25, 26–200 and 200–9,999 kilometres. In sum, 200 kilometres was arbitrarily chosen as the distance which allows students to go home on weekends.

Gyansah *et al.* (2014) conducted a study on teacher absenteeism in primary and JHS in Abesim District in Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana, and the majority of their respondents (84 per cent) indicated that sandwich/distance education was the leading cause of teacher absenteeism in schools that had their teachers pursuing further studies. Thus, a relationship was established between further studies and teacher absenteeism. Different levels/rates of absenteeism have been recorded for different communities and regions in Ghana. For



Source: Kohn *et al.* (1976)

**Figure 1.**  
Three-stage model of  
students' choice  
process

instance, the NNED (2013) found about 90 per cent of teachers in the Talensi and Nabdam districts of the Upper East Region of Ghana absented themselves from school without permission in the 2012 and 2013 academic year.

NNED (2013) provides a distribution of the absenteeism among the teachers studied that about 296 trained teachers topped in absenteeism by recording 2,366 full days' absence. Additionally, 195 pupil teachers were absent for 1,803 days within the period under review. Finally, 54 National Service Teachers also missed 576 working days without permission, 132 National Youth Employment Programme teachers and 7 community-based teachers missed 2,096 full days without permission. Besides, there was 729 written permissions for absenteeism, 2,066 verbal permissions and 6,678 with no permissions.

Additionally, Gyansah *et al.* (2014) also found that many teachers preferred, for their own convenience, to stay a few kilometres away from the school they teach. These schools were usually located in districts close to a metropolis or a municipality. This suggests that to attract many of these primary and junior high school teachers to enrol on distance education programmes for further studies, universities educational institutions must draw closer to these teachers to reduce the proximity and avoid teacher absenteeism (Acquaye, 2013).

Teacher/employee absenteeism has been identified by Khulekani and Phetan (2013) to have both direct and indirect effects/cost. The direct cost was said to involve monies used for paying absentee teachers for no work done, while the indirect cost also includes monies paid for replacing absentee teachers or workers, expenditure on incentive packages to attract teachers to work all the time and ensuring teachers perform their scheduled duties after reporting to school. Khulekani and Phetan therefore concluded by estimating that the indirect cost of absenteeism was at least 200 per cent of the direct cost of absenteeism at normal absenteeism levels.

### Methodology

This study adopted the pragmatics epistemic position that blends both the positivist and the interpretivism approaches. Thus, a mixed method combining both quantitative and qualitative research approaches was selected for this study. According to Hall (2012), pragmatism has gained considerable support as a stance for mixed methods researchers. His assertion was based on earlier studies conducted by Feilzer (2010), Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), Maxcy (2003) and Morgan (2007) that conceptualized that mixed method is oriented towards solving practical problems in the "real world" (Feilzer, 2010) rather than on assumptions about the nature of knowledge.

Specifically, the sequential explanatory strategy within the mixed method was used. According to Creswell (2009), a sequential explanatory strategy is a design characterised by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in the first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results. In this study, the initial quantitative results inform the secondary qualitative data collection. However, both the quantitative and the qualitative data, though separate, were connected in that the quantitative data earlier collected and analysed indicated regions and zones where absenteeism among workers/teachers on the distance programmes was prevalent upon which respondents were selected for interviews. Though the sequential explanatory design prolongs data collection period, the outcomes in terms of quality by achieving the research objective compensates for the weakness.

In terms of study organisation, CoDE of the UCC was chosen as a single case study. Yin (2009) and Stake (2006) identified conditions under which the case study design is appropriate. These conditions include when the researcher cannot manipulate the behaviour of research participants, and the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions.

The college is arguably the leading distance education provider in Ghana with the highest number of students (over 45,000 students) and study centres (83 study centre and still counting) as at 2018 (CoDEUCC, 2018). It thus stands to reason that if it can be established that the distance education programmes contribute to workers' absenteeism amid the distribution of several study centres in the country by CoDE, then it will not be farfetched to conclude for the rest of the universities providing distance education in Ghana.

The research population comprised a sample of 2,496 students for the quantitative or survey approach representing 7 per cent of the 35,016 total students' population for the 2014/2015 academic year pursuing education and business programmes at CoDE-UCC. The sample agrees with Amedahe's (2008) position that 5 per cent and above of any target population is acceptable for generalisation purposes. Additionally, the sample is more than 384 thresholds indicated by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample determination table. In the case of the qualitative aspect of the study, a sample of 28 respondents were chosen from 12 study centres in the ten regions hosting the study centres of the college.

Stratified sampling was used to draw respondents from the four programme areas such as Degree programmes in Business, Degree programmes in Education, Diploma programmes in Education and Diploma programmes in business on the one hand and all the five levels of students on the other side. Simple random sampling was then used to administer the research instrument to the students. Purposive sample and the snowball sampling methods were used to select students' study centre coordinators for the study. These study centres were Tumu and Nandom in the Upper West Region; Bolga Girls in the Upper East Region; Hwidiem, Nkoranza and Techiman in the Brong Ahafo Region; Ho in the Volta Region; Kasoa representing both the Central and Greater Region; and Damango representing the Northern Region. The rest were Tarkwa for the Western Region; Oyoko for the Eastern Region; and Wesco study centre for Ashanti Region.

The research instruments used were a questionnaire, unstructured interview guides comprising focus group discussion guide, key person interview guide and in-depth individual interviews, and non-participant observation guide. The questionnaire contained both open- and close-ended questions. Proximity was measured by hours, and distance respondents spent to commute to their study centres. Data collection was divided into two main phases. Quantitative data collection was the first phase followed by the qualitative data collection phase.

Absenteeism was also measured by days and times for departure to and from study centres and respondents' places of work/residence. In sum, 51 respondents were administered with a questionnaire in each of the 48 study centres. In all, 2,049 completed questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 82.1 per cent for the quantitative dimension of the study. Descriptive statistics tools such as cross-tabulation, frequencies, pie charts, bar charts and percentages were used to analyse the quantitative data.

Two focussed group discussions and twenty-four in-depth individual interviews were conducted at the 12 study centres selected for the qualitative data collection. The qualitative data were transcribed, coded and themes or categorisations were generated based on the objectives of the study. Pattern matching was employed for the analysis of the qualitative data. The qualitative data were thus used to support the quantitative data in terms of presentation of the research report.

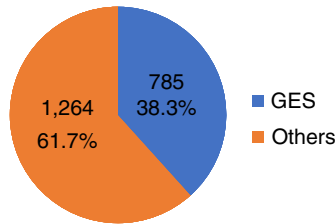
The result and discussion session are presented according to the four specific objectives of the study. These were to, first, identify the various types of employment of CoDE's students and the primary means of transport used by CoDE students to commute from their places of work/home to their study centres; second, to determine the level of teacher absenteeism among CoDE's students and the proximity to their study centres; third, to ascertain the perception of CoDE's students on the effects of their absence from the

classrooms on their students/customers; and, finally, to make a recommendation as to how the CoDE can improve upon the proximity of its study centres to its students and how to reduce teacher absenteeism among its students.

**Identifying the various types of employment of CoDE’s students and the major means of transport used by CoDE’s students to commute from their places of work/home to their study centres**

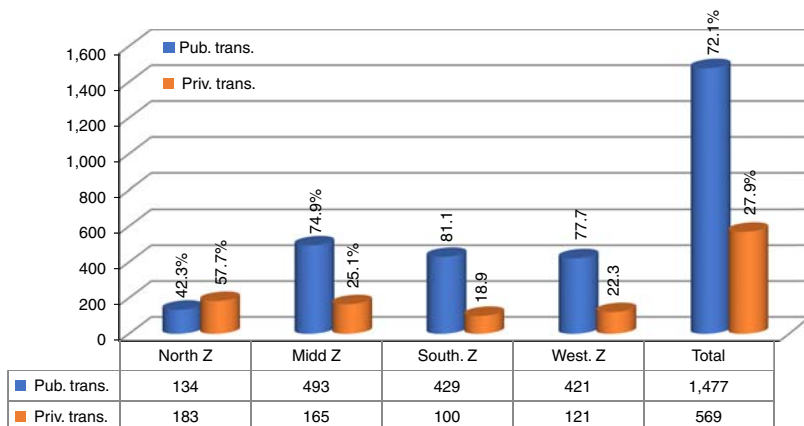
The first objective of the study considered the types of employers and means of transport used by CoDE’s students to their study centres. Figure 2 shows the result of the kind of employers of CoDE students. It is clear that 785, representing 38.3 per cent of the respondents, were teachers and were employed by Ghana Education Service (GES), while the remaining 1,264 representing 61.7 per cent of the 2,049 respondents were employed by other employers such as private schools and business organisations/companies.

The second aspect of the objective one was to determine the major means of transport used by the students commuting from their places of work/home to their study centres. This was achieved using cross-tabulation of respondents’ means of transport against their respective regions. The ten regions were grouped into four specific zones such as Northern Zone (Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions), Middle Zone (Ashanti and Brong Ahafo Regions), Southern Zone (Greater Accra, Volta and Eastern Regions) and Western Zone (Central and Western Regions). The result for the cross-tabulation for means of transport against the various zones of respondents can be seen from Figure 3.



**Figure 2.**  
Employers of CoDE students

Source: Field Data (2014)



**Figure 3.**  
Means of transport of CoDE’s students in their respective zones

The majority of the respondents (183, representing 57.7 per cent) in the Northern Zone (Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions) used private means of transport to their study centres. However, respondents in all the other seven regions constituting the other three zones recorded a higher percentage in the use of public transport to their study centres. Meanwhile, 1,477, representing 72.1 per cent of the 2,049 respondents, used public transport, while 669, representing 27.8 per cent, used private means of transportation to commute to their study centres.

A group of students who used motorbikes as a means of transport to their study centre at Tumu study centre disclosed in a focus group discussion that the private means of transportation was convenient, affordable, more comfortable and faster. A discussant shared a widely accepted view that:

Because I use my own means of transport, I decide when to leave for the study centre. At the centre, it makes me mobile and is always able to return to the house on time. (DESIBA2, June 2018)

The only disadvantage associated with travelling by bike was that a student could be beaten by rains. The assertion of the possibility of been beaten by the rain was confirmed with an observational data at Hwidiem study centre in the Brong Ahafo Region by the research team. A male Diploma student came to the study centre late and in wet clothes during the continuous assessment test (CAT/Quiz 1) which took place on 16 June 2018. As part of the student's response to the questions from the research team, he indicated that: "it was raining, and there was no car in the village, so I was compelled to come with the motorbike in the rain which I always use as my means of transport" (DESIBA2, June 2018).

Other students who used public means of transport also explained that it was the only alternative means of transportation at their disposal. It was helpful during the raining seasons. However, the waiting time at the bus terminal before departure sometimes delays their arrival at the study centres for academic activities.

Meanwhile, some students in the Northern Zone indicated in an interview that they used both private and public means of transport to their study centres. The students claimed that it was challenging to quickly get a means of transportation on time from Sandema to Bolga for their studies. For this reason, some of these students used motorbikes from Sandema to Wiaga and continued their journey with public means of transport to Bolga. A statement from a female respondent elucidates this better. She stated that:

I always commute with public means of transport from Wiaga to Bolga study centre every other week. However, my colleagues from Sandema used private means of transport like motorbikes to commute to Wiaga, before we all continue our journey with Metro Mass Transport's Bus to Bolga Study Centre. (DESIN1, June 2018)

It was revealed in a focus group discussion involving students at Wesco study centre in Ashanti Region and Oyoko study centre in the Eastern Region that various means of public transport were always used. Respondents explained that it was difficult for them to get a straight bus commuting from their places of work to their study centres. A focus group discussant revealed that she uses two public means of transport, cross a river with a ferry or boat and, lastly, used another two public means of transportation to her study centre every other week. For example:

I always commute with four different cars and a ferry to my study centre. I commute from Amankwakrom (Afram Plains) to Donkorkrom (District capital). I will then board another car from there to Echi-Aman from and cross the river Volta with a ferry to Adowso. I then commute with the metro mass transport' bus to Nkawkaw and continue to Kumasi where my study centre is located. (DESIA2, June 2018)



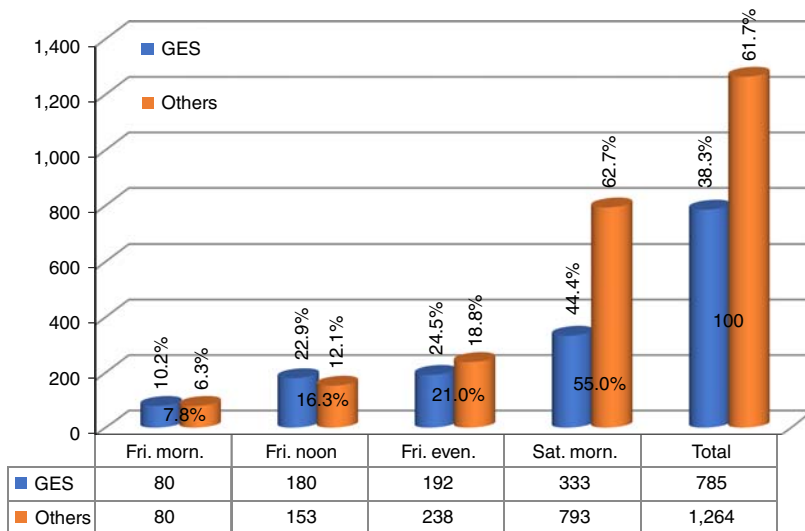
It is clear that motto bikes dominated the private means of transport in the Northern Zone. Some respondents also used both public and private means of transportation to their study centres. Commercial, public means of transportation was mostly used by respondents in the southern and middle zones.

**Determining the level of teacher absenteeism among CoDE’s students and proximity of CoDE’s students to their study centres**

In order to achieve this objective, the study looked at the specific areas of days of departure and return, hours spent to commute to study centres, seeking permission for absence and feedback on permission sought.

In determining the days of departure and the return from the study centres, the descriptive statistics were used. Specifically, frequencies, percentages, bar charts and cross-tabulations were used to represent responses of respondents. Figure 4 indicates the result for the cross-tabulation between the type of employer and the days of starting the journey to the study centres.

The majority (1,126 representing 55.0 per cent) of the 2,049 respondents started their journey on Saturday morning, while 160 respondents, representing 21.0 per cent, 333, representing 16.3 per cent, and 430, representing 7.8 per cent, also started their journey to their study centres on Friday evening, Friday afternoon and Friday morning, respectively. Out of the 785 respondents employed by GES, 80 respondents, representing 10.2 per cent, and 180 respondents, representing 22.9 per cent, started their journey to their study centres on Friday morning and Friday afternoon, respectively. This means that the 80 GES teachers representing 10.2 per cent of the 785 teachers would be absent from school on Fridays to enable them to travel to their study centres. The majority of the respondents who were teachers employed by GES, however, started their journey on Friday evening (192, 24.5 per cent) or after school and Saturday morning (333, 42.4 per cent). Respondents employed by companies and private schools recorded higher responses for travelling on Saturday morning (793, 63.7 per cent) followed by Friday evening (238, 18.8 per cent)



**Figure 4.**  
Type of employer against days of starting the journey to the study centres

Source: Field Data (2014)

and Friday afternoon (153, 12.1 per cent). The least (80, 6.3 per cent) was recorded for Friday morning.

Some selected respondents in an in-depth interview also confirmed starting their journeys to the study centres on both Fridays and Saturdays. Students who were teachers in GES schools who began their journeys on Fridays while schools (places of work) were in session indicated that the distance between the place of work and study centre warrant that early departure. A degree student from the Afram Plains in the Eastern Region revealed that he always leaves his workplace (school) around 10 a.m. on every other Friday:

I am on my way to the bus station as I talk to you now (researcher, around 9:48am on a Friday) to start my journey to the study centre. It will take about six to seven hours to get to the study centre around 4:00 to 5:00 pm. I don't own my own means of transport so I am compelled to leave now. (DESIE2, June 2018)

Some of the respondents who start their journeys on Fridays after work also claimed they spent about 4 h travelling to their study centres. This compels them to travel in the night, especially during CATs and examinations periods. A student from Asankragua in the Western Region of Ghana had this to say:

I am a banker and always travel to the Tarkwa study centre for academic activities after work every other Fridays. I need to travel in the evening amidst the tiredness and risks because most of the academic activities start at 7.00am on Saturdays. Other times, I start the journey early dawn around 3 or 4am. (DESIW2, June 2018)

That notwithstanding, several respondents indicated in individual interviews that they always start their journeys to their study centres on Saturday morning. The majority of these respondents revealed that it took them less than 1 h either by walking (by foot) or using a commercial taxi to commute to their study centres. For example, a Business student at Kasoa study centre in the Central Region of Ghana commented that:

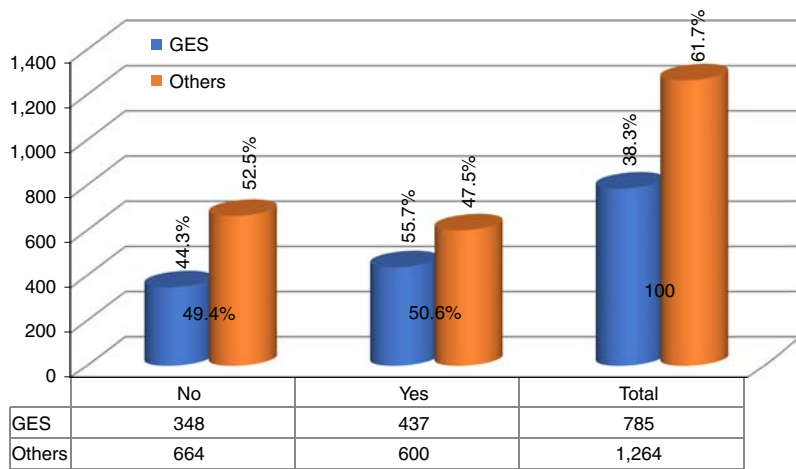
Even if I should leave the house around 6am in the morning I still get to the study centre before 7:00am on Saturdays. Sometimes, I walk to the study centre. Cars are readily available to the study centre. (DESIC1, June 2018)

Some respondents also complained when they were interviewed on the cost of accommodation for the number of nights they spend at study centres. Due to the expensive cost of accommodation, some of these respondents either spent these nights with relatives, friends or in classrooms at the study centres since they could not afford hotel bills. These challenges have led some study centre coordinators to provide subsidised and sometimes a free temporal accommodation for students coming from afar. Coordinators for Ada and Hwidiem study centres among others confirmed this.

Figure 5 shows the result of the type of employment and permission sought by respondents. From Figure 5, 1,037 respondents, representing 50.6 per cent of the 2,049 respondents, always sought permission from their employers/supervisors (headmasters/headmistresses). The respondents indicated that the permission was sought for absence from work on Fridays whilst 1,012 respondents, representing 49.4 per cent, also did not seek permission before they left for their respective study centres because their departure was after work and did not affect their employers in any way. Additionally, the majority of respondents (teachers) employed by GES (437 respondents, representing 55.7 per cent) also sought permission for their absence from school on Fridays, while 348, representing 44.3 per cent, did not seek approval. However, the majority of other respondents employed by companies and private schools (664 respondents, representing 52.5 per cent) do not also seek permission.

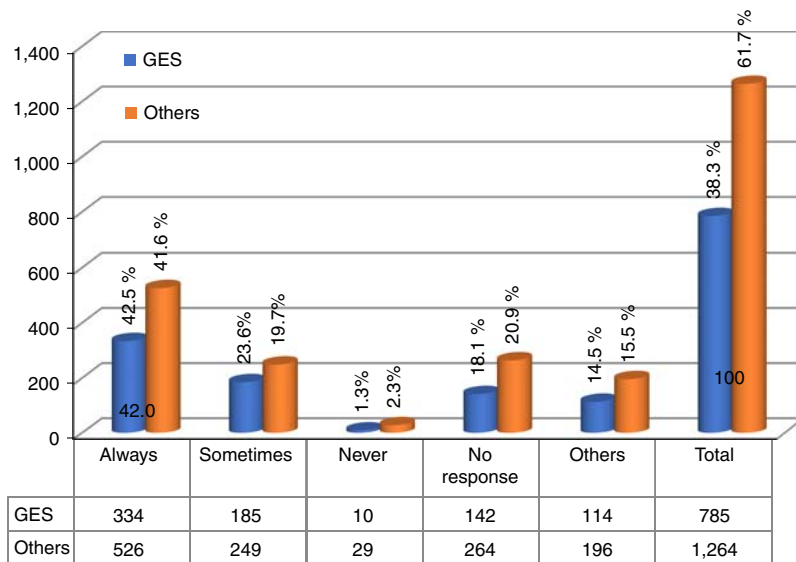
Figure 6 shows the summary of responses on whether or not supervisors/superiors granted permission for respondents who sought permission before their departure to their

**Figure 5.**  
Distribution of  
respondents in terms  
of permission seeking  
and type of employers



Source: Field Data (2014)

**Figure 6.**  
Distribution of  
affirmative and  
negative responses  
from respondents'  
superiors/superior



Source: Field Data (2014)

study centres on Friday. It is palpable from Figure 6 that the majority (860, representing 42.0 per cent) of the 2,049 respondents admitted that their superiors granted them permissions before they could embark on their journeys and this was supported by both GES employees (334 respondents, representing 42.5 per cent) and other employees of organizations/companies and private schools (526, representing 41.6 per cent). However, only 10 respondents, representing 1.3 per cent, and 142 respondents, representing 18.1 per cent of GES teachers, as well as 29 (2.3 per cent), 264 (20.9 per cent) of other

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employees, respectively, indicated that their permissions were never granted, and there were no responses to their permission before departing to their study centres on Fridays.

Almost every teacher interviewed who started his/her journey on Fridays indicated that permission was always sought and granted by either their headmasters/mistresses or supervisors. A female psychology student pursuing a bachelor's degree at the Wesco study centre made the following statement: "My headmaster is very much aware that I travel to Kumasi every other Friday. I leave school around 10; 30am on such Fridays" (DESAV1). Seeking permission was also confirmed by another female student pursuing Bachelor of Management Studies at the Ho study centre. Her corroborative statement is as follows:

A colleague at Nkwata who works with (name withheld by researchers) always get his permission granted by the boss' before we all start our journey on Friday's afternoon to the Ho study centre (Volta Region). (DESIV1, June 2018)

In an interview conducted with a Diploma in Basic Education student at Nandom study centre in the Upper West Region of Ghana, it was further confirmed that supervisors granted students permission before the students could travel. Some of these respondents who teach in some villages in the Upper West Region said it was expedient for them to seek permission before their departure to the study centre.

A banker pursuing a Diploma in Business Studies at Tarkwa study centre in the Western Region, however, could not leave the workplace during working hours because the supervisor does not grant him permission to leave for studies during working hours. He recounted his ordeal for leaving the office for the study centre during working hours upon the boss' refusal to grant him permission:

I sought permission and was not granted but left the office around 3:30 pm without my supervisor's consent. I return to work the next Monday to meet a query from my boss. Since then I always start my journey to the study centre after work. (DESIW2, June 2018)

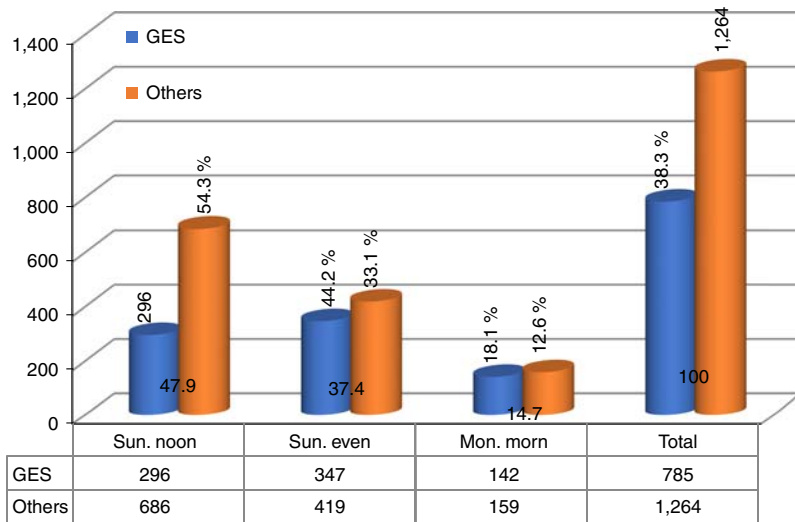
Another receptionist at a hotel in Kasoa pursuing a Diploma in Management Studies at Kasoa study centre was 1 h late for her weekend academic work at the study centre. Upon interrogation by the research team, it was discovered that she was on night shift the previous night at the hotel because she could not obtain permission from the boss. This consequently made her report to the study centre late on 1 and 7 July 2018.

Self-employed and the unemployed respondents need not seek permission. Some other respondents who did not seek permission were those who started their journeys to the study centre on Saturdays because of geographical proximity.

Figure 7 shows the result for the cross-tabulation of type of employers against days of returning from the study centres. It is clear from Figure 7 that 982 (47.9 per cent) and 766 (37.4 per cent) of the 2,049 respondents return from their study centres to their places of work/residence on Sunday afternoon and Sunday evening, respectively. Most of the GES teachers (347, representing 44.2 per cent) return from their study centres on Sunday evening and only a few of them (142, representing 18.1 per cent) returned from their study centres on Monday morning due to the lack of means of transport after lessons on Sunday. Thus, there was the possibility that these 142 GES teachers would be absent from work on Mondays. Similarly, 686 (54.3 per cent) and 159 (12.6 per cent) of the respondents belonging to other employers other than GES such as business organisations and private schools also return from their study centre on Sunday afternoons and Monday mornings, respectively.

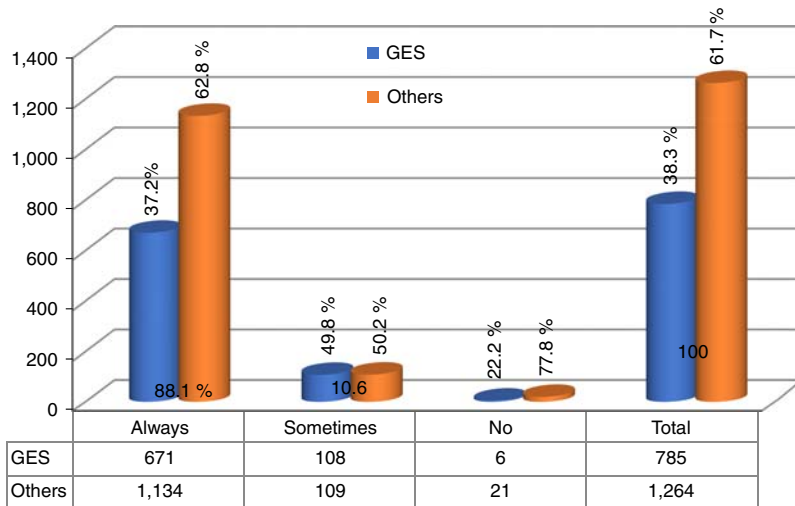
The result for cross-tabulation of responses on whether respondents go to work on every working Monday against the type of employers can be seen from Figure 8.

A total of 1,805 of the respondents, representing 88.1 per cent, went to work on every working Monday; 217, representing 10.6 per cent, indicated that they sometimes go to



**Figure 7.**  
Type of employer  
against days of  
returning from the  
study centres

Source: Field Data (2014)



**Figure 8.**  
Type of employers  
and students'  
attendance to work  
Monday

Source: Field Data (2014)

work on every working Monday; and 27 respondents (1.3 per cent) also said they never went to work on every working Monday. The inability to report to work on Mondays was said to be as a result of their failure to return from their study centres on time to be present at the post. Additionally, employees from business organisations and private schools dominated both category of respondents who said they sometimes absented themselves from work (109, 50.2 per cent) and those who said they never went to work on every working Monday (21 respondents, representing 77.8 per cent) after face-to-face sessions.

Some respondents confirmed in an interview that they were able to go to work on Mondays, however, very tired and exhausted. A banker said: “I cannot absent myself from work on Mondays. I must, so I do. Though I get tired after returning from (Tarkwa) the study centre on Sundays, I do not have any option” (DESIW2). Tiredness and exhaustion on Mondays after academic activities over the weekend was thus a problem for some students who stay closer to the study centre.

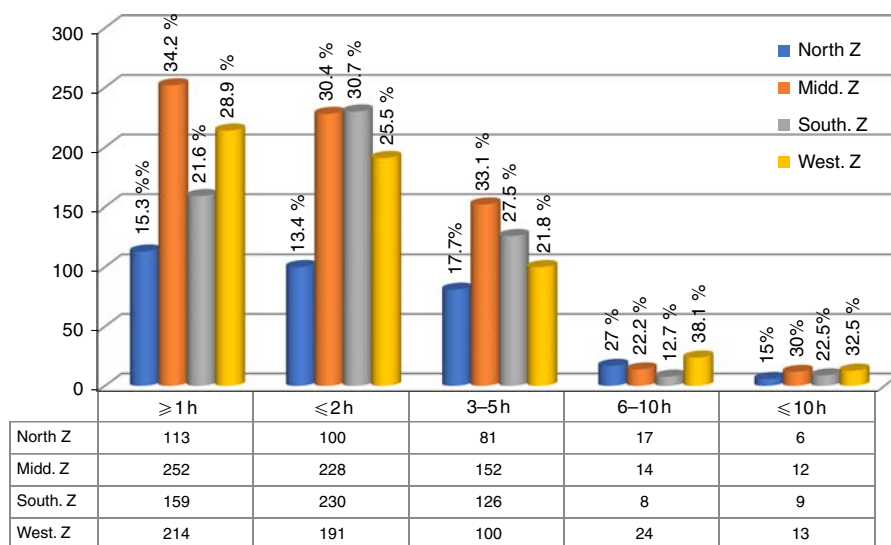
Some student from both Oyoko and Wesco study centres confirmed their inability to go to school on Mondays in individual in-depth interviews. According to these students, they usually travel back to their places of work in the Afram Plains on Mondays. The working week for these students thus reduces to three working days in the week (Tuesday to Thursdays). A statement from a Bachelor of education student explains this better. She said:

I mostly return to my place of work on Mondays and sometimes unable to go to school because of the distance. In such cases, my working days reduces to three days that week. Typically, as a teacher am not on duty for either Mondays or Fridays. Some other teachers stand in for me when I am away, but most of the times, my lessons are on Tuesdays to Thursdays. (DESI A1)

The second aspect of objective two was to determine the proximity of the various study centres to CoDE students. Figure 9 shows the result for cross-tabulation for hours spent to commute from places of work to study centres by respondents and their respective regions.

These regions were grouped into four specific zones such as Northern Zone (Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions), Middle Zone (Ashanti and Brong Ahafo Regions), Southern Zone (Greater Accra, Volta and Eastern Regions) and Western Zone (Central and Western Regions).

Middle Zone (Ashanti and Brong Ahafo Regions) recorded the proximal distance between the places of residence/workplace and the study centre as more (252, representing 34.2 per cent) of them spent 1 h, and a considerable proportion of them (152, representing 33.1 per cent) also spent 3–5 h to reach their study centres. Southern Zone (Greater Accra,



Source: Field Data (2014)

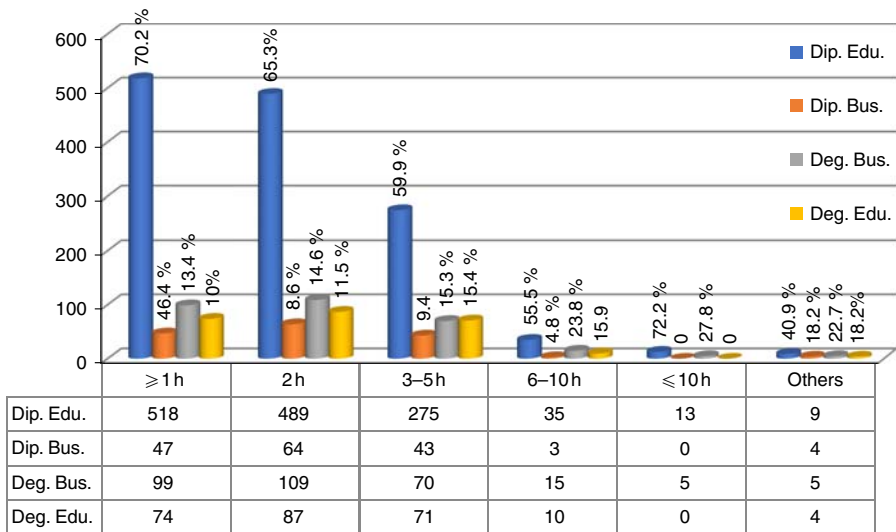
**Figure 9.** Hours spent to commute from places of work to study centres by respondents in their respective regions/zones

Volta and Eastern Regions) on the other hand recorded more responses for 2 h. The majority of the respondents (75.2 per cent) comprising 113 (representing 35.7 per cent) and 214 (representing 39.5 per cent) of the respondents in the Northern Zone (Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions) and Western Zone (Central and Western Regions), respectively, spent 1 h to commute to their study centres. Additionally, Western Zone dominated all the other three zones in terms of those who spent 6–10 h (24, representing 38.1 per cent) and more than 10 h (13 respondents representing 32.5 per cent) to their study centres. Northern Zone and Middle Zone were the second and the third highest zones after Western Zone that, respectively, spent 6–10 h and more than 10 h to commute to their study centres.

Figure 10 shows the result for hours spent to commute to the study centres against respondents' programmes of study. More responses were recorded in favour of Diploma in Education and Degree in Business, respectively, for all the hours that respondents spent to commute to their study centres for their respective programmes. However, in terms of 3–5 h, more responses were recorded for Diploma and Bachelor of Education.

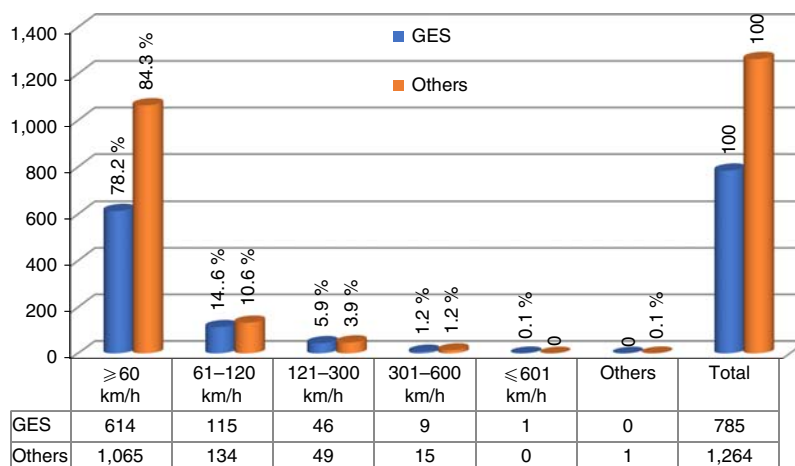
The result for the cross-tabulation for the type of employers of respondents and the average distance in kilometres travelled from places of work to their study centres can be seen from Figure 11. From Figure 11, out of the 785 respondents employed by GES, the majority (614, representing 78.2 per cent, and 115 (14.6 per cent)) travelled less than 60 and 61–120 kilometres, respectively, to their study centres. Similarly, 1,065, representing 84.3 per cent of the 1,264 respondents employed by organisations and private schools, also travelled less than 60 kilometres to their study centres, and 134 (10.6 per cent) also travelled over 61–120 kilometres to their study centres. Thus, most of the respondents (1,679, representing 81.9 per cent) travelled less than 60 kilometres to their study centres.

Amongst all the respondents interviewed, it came to light that respondents who had study centres which were distant from the place of abode/places of work felt their study centres were not close to them. According to some of these respondents from the Afram Plains, though the Abetifi study centre was closer them, because of accommodation challenges, they prefer to go



**Figure 10.** Hours spent to commute to the study centres against respondents' programmes of study

Source: Field Data (2014)



Source: Field Data (2014)

**Figure 11.**  
Average distance in kilometres and type of employment

to study centres at either Koforidua or Kumasi where they could spend the nights with relatives. These students indicated that the 7–8 h spent travelling to the centre was just tiring and unbearable, which was having a tolling effect on their academic and professional lives. Other respondents from Asenkregua who travel for 4 h to Tarkwa study centre also felt their study centre was far from them.

Additionally, some respondents also revealed that other study centres closer to them do not host their respective programmes hence the need to travel far. A typical example was a business student at Jasikan whose business programme was hosted by the Ho study centre in the Volta region. Therefore, this candidate could not attend to academic activities at the Jasikan study centre.

Other respondents in the cities though indicated that their study centres were very close to them, complained about the hectic traffic situation experienced almost every morning and evening they journey to and from their study centres. Respondents from Accra and Kasoa study centres mostly expressed these complaints. A third-year Diploma in Psychology discussant stated that:

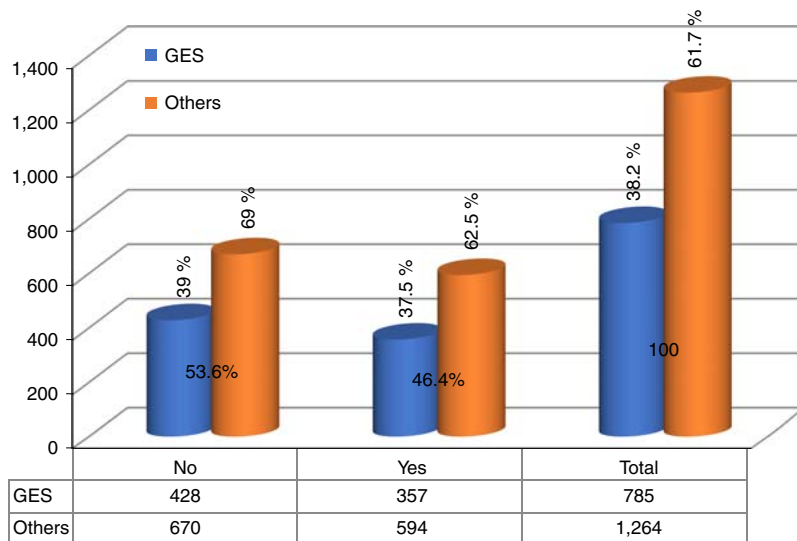
Though the study centre is close yet, we experienced a lot of vehicular traffic most at times in the morning and evening on our way to and from the study centre. I was coming to the study centre one time to write a quiz, but due to traffic, I got to the study centre when the quiz was over. This resulted in waiting for one year to write that quiz. (DESIG1, June 2018)

### Ascertaining CoDE's students' perception of the effects of absenteeism on their employers and students/customers

The last objective of the study was to ascertain CoDE's students' perceptions of the effect of their absence from the classroom on their employers and students. Frequencies, percentages cross-tabulation and bar charts were used to represent responses. The result for whether respondents agreed or otherwise that their absence from work affects their employers can be seen from Figure 12.

The majority of the respondents (1,098, representing 53.6 per cent) indicated that their absence did not affect their employers because they made arrangement for their absence and some respondents also stated that they were at a post on every working Mondays and





**Figure 12.**  
The perception of the effects of absence from work on employer

**Source:** Field Data (2014)

Fridays. However, 951 respondents, representing 46.4 per cent, also agreed that their absence from work on Fridays and Mondays affected their employers. These effects obviously and consequentially could affect students/customers.

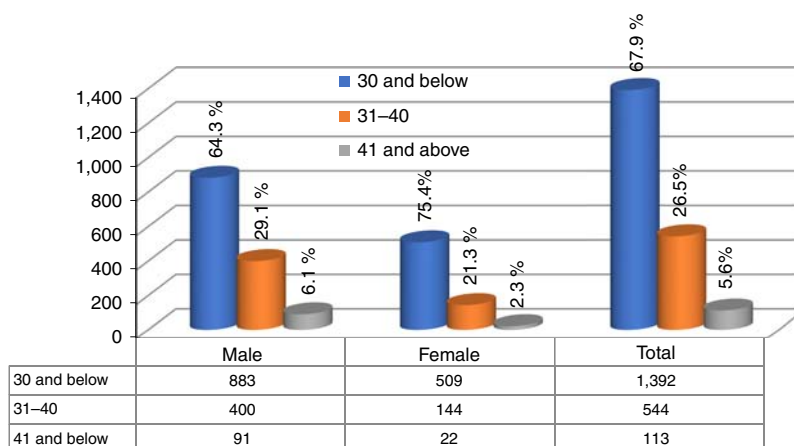
A respondent described the need to pursue a further study on the distance mode as the “necessary evil”. According to her, it was necessary for the pupils she teaches as well as the country. A statement from this respondent explains this better:

I was a “pupils’ teacher” without any professional or academic qualification but have been able to finish my diploma in education and now pursuing the first degree through the distance mode of education. I can now teach better than before. So, the outcome of my further studies exceeds the few hours I would not be in school. (DESIE2, June 2018)

Another teacher also revealed that Fridays in most school were characterised with sporting activities; hence, the absence of few teachers for a good course does not affect the pupils in any way. Some respondents also confirmed that they swap lessons with colleagues so that pupils do not suffer academically. Another reason for which respondents concluded there was no effect on pupils was that these teachers claimed they taught ahead of the weeks that they were going to be partly absent on Fridays.

Respondents who admitted that there were adverse effects on themselves and the pupils they teach mentioned pressure due to work overload and a lack of work–life balance as the main effect. Other effects were tiredness due to the weekend’s fatigue and the possibility of underperforming on Mondays. A banker disclosed in an interview that: “due to the tedious academic activities over the weekend, I am almost always unable to do my follow-ups for loan retrieval from customers on Mondays” (DESIW1, June 2018).

Figure 13 presents the result for the cross-tabulation of respondents’ age against their gender. The majority of the respondents, 1,392, representing 67.9 per cent, were aged 30 years and below, while the minority 544, representing 26.5 per cent, were aged 31–40 years. Most of the respondents (1,374, representing 67.1 per cent) were male students, and few (675, representing 32.9 per cent) were female students. Both male (64.3 per cent) and female (75.4 per cent) were in the age range of 30 years and below.



Source: Field Data (2014)

**Figure 13.**  
Cross-tabulation of  
respondents' age  
against their gender

## Discussion of results

The study revealed that the majority of the learners on the distance education programmes were employed by GES. Thus, Keegan's (1996) findings that employed adult learners mostly pursue distant education were confirmed by this study. Distance learners use several means of transport including bicycles, motorbikes, buses, minivans and taxis. The use of motorcycles and bicycles as a means of transport is common among distance students in the three Northern Regions of Ghana. The finding confirms the usual assertion and personal observation at the various study centres in Northern Region that people in the Northern Sector owned and used private means of transport, such as motorbike and bicycles, more than vehicles as compared to individuals in the Southern Sector. This phenomenon is equally catching up with even regular students on university campuses in the south where students ride bikes to lectures. The possible benefits such as convenience, low maintenance and fuelling cost could have influenced these students to use this means of transport.

The advantages of these private means of transport among students are however challenged when one must travel over a long distance. Students going over long distance therefore either use the private means of transportation to augment or solely rely on commercial, public means of transport to their study centres. Commercial, public means of transport in Ghana utilise buses, minivans, taxis, among others. These vehicles would mostly take off only upon all seats of the car on the scale are booked. These tickets/seats could not, however, be reserved or purchased in advance. This obviously explains why a student would have to spend so much time on their journeys in terms of waiting time and time spent on actual journeys.

Time spent on the journey as discovered in this study was not limited to only long-distance travels but also related to that of short distance in cities. Time spent in vehicular traffic equally delays the distance learners' times for arrival at the study centres. This result agrees with Flood and Barbato (2005) findings that journeys that are characterised by frequent stops due to traffic congestion or by the breakdown of the means of transport due to mechanical problems or poor condition of roads usually frustrate both drivers and commuters-distance learner.

Though the college has spread the distribution of its study centres in all districts in Ghana, all study centres do not offer the same programmes. Some study centres are limited to a Diploma in Education programmes and Business and/or Degree programmes. This explains why there could be geographical proximity but no programme proximity pushing students to travel over long distance for studies. This could explain why some students on

the distance programme started their journeys on Fridays during working hours and returned on Mondays, which leads to absenteeism at the workplace. Thus, proximity contributes to absenteeism and corroborates the findings of Gyansah *et al.* (2014). Gyansah, Esilfie and Atta found that teachers who must travel over a long distance sometimes absented themselves from school when they lack the means of transportation to arrive on time or are tired from fatigue experienced during their journeys.

Other challenges encountered by students who travelled over a long distance included the cost of accommodation. A distance learner who could not afford the cost of accommodation either spend the nights with a friend in the town hosting the centre or in the classrooms. This could increase students' fatigue, concentration and assimilation in class, which could eventually lead to poor academic performance. Thus, the lack of proximity (geographic or programme) could not just be a cause of absenteeism but also a predictor of fatigue and poor academic performance. The finding agrees with that of Raposo and Alves (2007) that found students preference for study centres within distances less than 200 kilometres to enable them easily visit home.

The cost of both transportation and accommodation at the study centre can also affect the distance learners' ability to attend bi-weekly academic activities at the study centres frequently. This is possibly getting to the end of the month because the distance learner in Ghana has other financial commitment towards the family and themselves. This could explain why some distance learners are unable to attend bi-weekly academic activities at their study centres which could eventually lead to poor academic performance among some learners. Some students also attend only one out of the two days slated for educational activities at the study centres.

Despite all these challenges, students were convinced that the outcome of their toil and effort is worth the fatigue. The UCC's certificate is the most recognised and respected certificate on the Ghanaian job market (Segbenya *et al.*, 2015). Students (those employed by GES) concluded that, apart from the enviable certificate, the contents of their programmes impacted on the content and methodology of their classroom deliveries which offer high benefits for pupils and the nation. Other benefits include getting a government appointment and promotion in the workplace. All these benefits articulated seem to be the long-term effects of the distance education programme pursued on the beneficiaries and their schools, pupils and the nation at large. In terms of the immediate impact of the distance programmes on the pupils, respondents who were teachers concluded that because they do not single-handedly teach a class but swap classes as subject teachers, their absence could not affect pupils. Additionally, since serious academic activities are not done on Fridays in primary schools, their absence has less effect on the pupils they teach (that is sporting activities are mostly carried out on Fridays). Permissions sought from supervisors made it possible for the heads of the institutions involved to adequately address such challenges by getting a replacement or allowing them to swap with colleague teachers.

### **Critical findings/conclusion and policy implications**

With regards to the various types of employment of CoDE's students and the major means of transport used by CoDE's students to commute from their places of work/home to their study centres, 38.3 per cent of the respondents were teachers employed by GES, whilst 61.7 per cent were employed by private schools and business organizations/companies. In terms of means of transport to the study centres, it was realised that 72.1 per cent used public transport whilst 27.8 per cent used private means of transportation to their study centres. That notwithstanding, the majority (57.7 per cent) of the respondents in the Northern Zone (Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions) used private means of transport to their study centres.

The second objective which sought to determine the level of teacher absenteeism among CoDE's students and proximity of CoDE's students to their study centres, it was found that 10.2 per cent of the 785 GES teachers were absent from work on Fridays preceding their

face-to-face session because they embarked on their journey to the study centres on Friday morning. Similarly, on the days of return, 18.1 per cent of the 785 GES teachers returned from their study centres on Monday morning for the lack of means of transport on Sunday after lessons. This was further confirmed by 13.8 and 0.8 per cent out of the 785 GES teachers who indicated that they sometimes go to work on every working Monday, and never went to work on every working Monday. Additionally, 6.3 per cent of the 1,264 respondents employed by private schools and organisations were also absent from work on Fridays preceding their face-to-face session.

For the second part of the objective 2, which was on proximity of CoDE's students to their study centres, it was found that the Middle Zone (Ashanti and Brong Ahafo Regions) recorded more (34.2 per cent) responses for using 1 h to commute to their 2 h (30.4 per cent) and 3–5 h (152 respondents, representing 33.1 per cent) as compared to the other three zones. Additionally, the Western Zone dominated all the other three zones in terms of those who spent 6–10 h (24 respondents, representing 38.1 per cent) and more than 10 h (13 respondents, representing 32.5 per cent) to commute to their study centres. Northern Zone and Middle Zone were the second and third highest zones after Western Zone that, respectively, spent 6–10 h and more than 10 h. In terms of programmes, a Diploma in education and a Degree in business spent 1 and 2 h, respectively, to their study centres. However, in terms of 3–5 h, more responses were recorded for Diploma in Education and Degree in Education.

With regards to students' perception on the effects of absenteeism on their employers and students/customers, the majority of the respondents (53.6 per cent) indicated that their absence did not affect their employers and students/customers since they sought permission which was granted and also made arrangements for other teachers to take up their lessons. Meanwhile, 46.4 per cent also indicated that their absence affected their employers and students/customers.

The above conclusions indicate a need for specific actions to be taken. It is therefore recommended that the management of CoDE should:

- (1) Open more study centres across all regions especially Eastern (Afram Plains area to be specific), Western, Ashanti, Upper East, Northern and Upper West Regions to reduce the number of hours spent by students to their study centres.
- (2) Consider introducing business programmes (in addition to education programmes) and degree programmes (in addition to Diploma programmes) in education at the existing district centres to reduce the average distance covered by these students to commute from their places of work to their respective study centres for academic activities.
- (3) Introduce online and electronic learning platforms so that students would not necessarily have to travel to the study centre to participate in lectures/face-to-face sessions.
- (4) Introduce audio versions (impersonal communication) of the study modules to take care of students who could be late due to problems associated with means of transport, vehicular traffic and hours spent to reach the study centre.
- (5) Partner up with the Distance Education Students Association and the hosting institutions of their study centres to secure or put up some sort of temporary accommodation for distance learners coming from a far distance.
- (6) Introduce a clause in the admission letters that require students to officially inform employers of the official days for face-to-face sessions to avoid students from frequent absenteeism. This clause should be signed by the supervisors/headmaster/headmistresses to enable employers to make proper and advanced preparation for the absence of the students if the students need to travel on a working day.

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1034

**Plate A1.**

Means of transport  
mostly used by  
distance learners in  
the Northern  
Region of Ghana

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**Plate A2.**

Means of transport  
mostly used by  
distance learners in  
the Upper East  
Region of Ghana

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