



## Digital distance education: From correspondence study to online learning- A historical review

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### Abstract

Every society tries to specifically meet the social, political and educational needs of its citizenry. Based on this premise, there emerged a correspondence system of education as a form of instructional delivery that hopes to address the educational needs of the people at the period. Consequently, this paper traced the evolution of conventional correspondence study, and the various elements inherent in this method of instructional delivery. The paper additionally explained some salient terms or concepts and creates awareness of a set of resources or media/technologies used for both instructional strategies. As well, the significance and the constraints or challenges posed by this technique of education programme were concisely discussed. The authors further distinguished the traditional correspondence study from the modern distance online education and as well highlighted the major merits and challenges of correspondence study programme.

**Keywords:** Distance education, Correspondence study, Instructional strategy, Home study, Online learning, and Instructional media

### Introduction

The traditional method of correspondence teaching and learning has a long history. Correspondence education, which sometimes referred to as “distance learning” has its history in the teaching and learning via correspondence courses, which started in the early 1700s, mainly as a means of adult education (Hmaidan, 2001) [18]. At the early times of correspondence study, the press regarded it as either a pathetic or a negligible teaching method (Holmberg, 1976), [19] and correspondence instruction was considered an inferior method of instruction (Rayner, 1949) [29].

There is no gainsaying that this method of education has gained prominence in view of its recorded achievements, and the need to enlarging educational facilities. Governments, organized bodies, and individuals are getting interests on a daily basis, and the demand has increased considerably during the last decade in view the possibilities offered by this method of instructional delivery (Holmberg, 1967) [19], especially in a knowledge-based society like ours.

### Correspondence

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defined the term “Correspondence” as communication by letter or a body of letters. It referred to any written or digital communication exchanged by two or more parties, which may be in form of letters, notes, text messages, emails, voicemails, postcards, etc.

(<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/correspondence.html>). “Correspondence implies that two or more parties are in contact with one another in writing” (Boerje, 1967) [6].

### Correspondence Education

Prior before now, correspondence education is mainly for those who did not have the opportunity to attend the conventional face-to-face educational institutions, but

presently, due to the adoption of multimedia instructional strategy/approach to correspondence education, it makes use of other media like, audiotape/cassette, disc, records, or diskettes in addition to print media (Ike & Iwu, 2001; Aggarwal, 2009) [22, 1].

[Correspondence education sometimes referred to as home study or independent study has been defined by Shabani and Okebukola (2001) as “terms used for distance learning methods that are based on stand-alone, self-study materials, usually, the materials are print-based with the major communication being the postal services or telephone.” It is part of distance education in which all the course materials are delivered to the learner via surface mail or electronic means so that the individual can master the materials on his own and at his own pace. This could also be defined as communication necessitated by the exchange of letters. Distance education has traditionally been defined as instruction through print or electronic communications media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors” (<https://www.scoop.it/topic/gxrltf/p/4114493748/2020/01/22/distance-education-definition-pdf>).

“Correspondence education involves the communication between the teacher and the learner through the print media... the teacher prepares the content of what to teach the learner in printed format and sends it to them to learner, the learner after reading the materials, answer prescribed questions and sends the answer script to the teacher for marking” (Ike & Iwu, 2001).

Presently, it means taking a higher education course through modern information and communication technologies, such as the exchange of documents via computers and the Internet, rather than taking a course in a traditional

classroom setting. Correspondence education is a method of providing education for nonresident students, primarily adults, who receive lessons and exercises through the mails or some other device and, upon completion, return them for analysis, criticism, and grading (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/correspondence-education>).

### Correspondence Study

Traditionally, correspondence study refers to a method of directly providing learners/students with learning materials at home or workplace. These learning materials (lessons and exercises) are received by the students via surface mails. The students upon reading and completing the assignments return same to the University or the organized body for the teachers to analyze, criticize, and grade for the purpose of awarding certificates.

Correspondence study is courses that are especially offered to accommodate students who are unable to attend classes on campus, which may be due to physical disability, fulltime employment, or those who cannot find a particular course offered on the campus at that particular time to meet their needs (Ediger, 1983)<sup>[12]</sup>.

### Instruction

Instruction means the selection and arrangement of information, activities, methods and media to help students meet predetermined learning goals (Newby *et al*, 2016)<sup>[26]</sup>. In the same development, Heinich, Molanda and Russell (1985)<sup>[16]</sup> defined it as, “deliberate arrangement of experience (s) to help a learner achieve a desirable change in performance.” From the above definitions, instruction means nothing but the arrangement of necessary learning experiences and methods to meet the desired learning goals, which is a desirable change in performance of the students/learners.

Ajileye (2016) described instruction as “The deliberate arrangement of learners’ environment in order to produce specific known outcome in specified situation; it is the deliberated arrangement of events or experiences to help the learners achieve a desirable change in performance.”

Instruction is therefore planned, systematic, systematic and objective in nature Ajileye (2016)<sup>[2]</sup>.

### Definition and Evolution of Correspondence Education Programme

The history or evolution of distance education has come a long way. It is a method of education adopted to make teaching and learning resources, such as print materials, audio and video conveniently available to the learner to his doorstep without having to travel to places (Newby *et al*, 2006)<sup>[26]</sup>. In the course of its history, many terms were used to describe correspondence teaching. This includes “Correspondence study”, “Independent study”, “Home study”, “postal tuition”, and “tuition by mail” has been used to describe this method of teaching and learning process (Holmberg, 1967)<sup>[19]</sup>.

However, the word tuition is used in American, normally denoting not the teaching but the fee paid for teaching (Holmberg, 1967)<sup>[19]</sup>. In Germany, these terms were used - *Fernunterricht*, *Fernstudium*, *II eimstudium*, *Brief unterricht*; while the French seem to be fairly consistent in

using the term *enseignement par correspondance* (Holmberg, 1967)<sup>[19]</sup>. Generally, Holmberg (1967)<sup>[19]</sup> posits that correspondence teaching is taken to mean –

i. teaching in writing, in the course of which the student and the teacher are in regular contact with each other, normally by writing to each other.

ii. It is a natural means of instruction if the instructor and the student are at a distance from each other.

What is above all the characteristic of correspondence teaching is that there is two-way communication between the teacher and the student that cannot only be achieved in writing but also by tape recordings or telephone interaction (Holmberg, 1967)<sup>[19]</sup>.

Precisely, Great Britain, Germany, Sweden and America are the early adopters of this method of educating the adults. It is on record that the first instance of distance education occurred in Boston, United States of America, when "Caleb Phillips" advertised private correspondence courses in shorthand in the Boston Gazette (<https://elearningindustry.com/the-history-of-distance-learning-infographic>).

Correspondence study was the first formally structured method for independent study (Wedemeyer, 1981)<sup>[37]</sup>. The scholar also affirmed that by nature, it is an individual activity with considerable student control over the learning process. Holmberg (1986)<sup>[20]</sup> pointed out that the roots of teaching and learning by correspondence started in the early 1700s. The scholar affirmed that the first documented case of correspondence education occurred in Briton in 1730. It was also acknowledged that the first known home study course offered in the U.S. was in *shorthand* (Moore & Kearsley, 1996)<sup>[25]</sup>.

Furthermore, the first significant and successful distance education effort was made in North America, when in 1878, John Vincent established a home study reading circle that made a momentous impact at educating the adults at that period (Swanson, 1988)<sup>[34]</sup>. This significant effort was made due to John Vincent’s belief that education should be made available to all citizens’ and not only limited to the privileged few. This effort was made possible via the Chautauqua Movement (education for all – not just the privileged few) (Garrison, 1989; Moore & Kearsley, 1996)<sup>[13, 25]</sup>.

One of the remarkable landmarks in the history of correspondence education took place in Great Britain when Isaac Pitman began to teach *Shorthand* by correspondence after the establishment of Penny Post in 1840. Researchers have also proven that in 1886, in England, a graduate studies correspondence course was introduced; this medium became a means of adult education by which writing materials or letters including instructions were sent to individual learners through the surface mails at the cost of a penny. Such medium of instruction includes Textbooks, Workbooks, Study-guides, Newspapers, etc. which the learners receive through surface mail.

In addition, Sarramona (1975)<sup>[31]</sup>, Ward, Sawyer, McKinney, and Dettoni (1974)<sup>[36]</sup> affirmed that Berlin, in 1856, specifically in Toussaint and Langenscheidt founded a correspondence languages course. In 1873, in Boston, a “Society to Encourage Study at Home” was organized (Dib, 1988)<sup>[9]</sup>. The first formal correspondence education was also experienced in 1883 in New York, formally known as the “Correspondence University”.

Summarily, correspondence education is a technique of providing instructions or education for non-resident students, principally the adults, who receive lessons and exercises through parcels/letters and other devices, which oftentimes are accompanied with exercises and tests, and upon completion, return them for analysis, criticism, and grading by the teacher/instructor. This method of instructional delivery supplements other forms of education and makes independent study programs readily available (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/correspondence-education>). The teacher/instructor segments the course materials to be taught based on students' abilities. At the completion of each of the units, the students have a set of questions, which may be written, or experiments that are made based on teacher's/instructor's instructions. This may as well be accompanied with orally recorded assignments that are to be sent to the school, from which are returned with the instructor's corrections, comments and suggestions (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/correspondence-education>).

### **Traditional Correspondence Study Media/Technologies**

Correspondence study at its early development was powered by Face-to-face contact. Prints medium, however, dominated the programme within the period. The mode of delivery greatly relied on print media, such as Textbooks, Journals, Workbooks, Study-guides, Newspapers, Assignments, Tests, Papers.

Additionally, tape-recorded instructions were also employed for the same purpose. The learners received these materials through the surface mail with little face-to-face contacts. The two-way mediated communication has long been identified as the major distinguishing criterion for its operation (Holmberg, 1967) <sup>[19]</sup>.

### **Merits of Correspondence Study Programme**

Correspondence Study programme has been attributed with lots of advantages. The following under-listed advantages have been ascribed to it.

- to provide unlimited access to education for all citizens
- to provide educational opportunities for those, who, for a variety of reasons, were unable to attend the traditional classroom instruction, especially, to reach out to handicapped learners
- to bridge the hegemony (domination) of formal traditional classroom instruction
- to provide educational independence for learners (self-directed education)
- to provide on-the-job training opportunities for career civil servants and company workers, and
- to obtain professional certificates to enhance their job performance and other opportunities (Ike & Iwu (2001) <sup>[22]</sup>).

### **Demerits of Correspondence Study Programme**

There is hardly anything that has merits that do not have the opposite. Correspondence study/education, at its initial stages, had its own constraints within the timeframe. Holmberg (1986) <sup>[20]</sup>, Moore & Kaersley (1996) and Picciano (2001) <sup>[28]</sup> outlined some of the disadvantages of correspondence education.

1. The great weakness of correspondence education in most cases has been attributed to the slowness of communication process caused by the correspondence

nature of the programme and the time.

2. Many print-based institutions that run distance education usually assign a tutor, who contacts learners that require help.
3. Motivation overtime is lacking in this kind of education process
4. The rate of dropout rate is very high in correspondence education, which most of the scholars attributed to lack of motivation. Garrison (1989) <sup>[13]</sup> affirmed this when the scholar stated that independence alone does not ensure that students will successfully reach worthwhile educational goals.
5. Lack of appropriate and immediate feedback hampers the success of correspondence study.
6. Correspondence education is limited in terms of interactivity.
7. It is dependent on the reading skill of individual learners.
8. Learners suffer in isolation.
9. Certificates obtained from correspondence courses receive less appeal to employers of labour and even the general public.
10. Similarly, when teaching in a correspondence course, you need to understand how to effectively communicate in writing, and not just writing, but the writing of a particular kind that will be "interactive."

### **Differentiating Correspondence Study from Modern Distance/Online Education Programme**

Lots of differences exist between the Correspondence Study programme and modern distance/online education. Correspondence Study is a type of education that mostly uses the postal services with lessons and study materials sent by mail (<https://regent.ac.za/campus-news/is-distance-learning-the-same-as-correspondence/>). However, the contemporary online/distance education demands the use or application of newer technologies for teaching and learning, which may be devoid of time and place, and at the learners' convenience. Nevertheless, examining some of the major characteristics of the two forms of instructional delivery will make for a better grasp of the subject matter.

#### **Correspondence Study Programme**

There are certain characteristics that differentiate the correspondence study with modern digital distance education system. Below are some of the reasons advanced by the following scholars, Holmberg (1967), Rayner (1949) <sup>[29]</sup> and Bennett (1956) <sup>[5]</sup> for the differentiation of the two patterns of instructional delivery.

1. This method of teaching requires critical reading and independent judgment
2. Provides teaching in the students' home with experienced help always available
3. There is more absence of oral instructions, but independent study
4. The course materials are mainly prints. Consequently, students can complete their study mainly through print materials/resources.
5. Population of students constitute of more working adults and family holders
6. Students are subjected to isolation
7. Involves personal contacts with the teacher and the student
8. Constitutes physically handicapped learners, children

- suffering from disabilities of various kinds whose conditions could not permit them to attend physical institutions
9. Admissions and registrations are mostly done offline and face-to-face
  10. Suits deaf and pre-school children
  11. Correspondence study improves efficiency in the teaching of facts and skills
  12. People do not have more confidence in the quality of certificate awarded
  13. Requires less technical and managerial abilities
  14. Promotes good technique of study, the methods of finding and utilizing various sources of knowledge
  15. Correspondence study promotes critical reading skills and independent judgment.
  16. Admission procedure is mainly offline and limited by geography
  17. Courses are less open to scrutiny, and also restricted to a particular institution or body
  18. It is based on oral instruction
  19. Learning resources are limited, comes only from the teachers' texts, handouts, guides, etc.
  20. Feedback between student and instructor is usually delayed
  21. Adopts a two-way communication system, which cannot only be achieved through writing but
  22. also via tape recordings or telephone interactions
  23. Adopts a natural means of instruction between the instructor and the student when at a distance
  24. from each other
  25. Correspondence course materials are thoughtfully written or prepared with clear languages, and provide complete explanations that are usually accompanied by elucidating examples and illustrations
  26. Course materials are usually segmented, and students are advised to learn one unit at a specific time. These study units may range from 16-24 pages in length as opposed to booklets of 50-100 pages or normal books

### Modern Distance Online Education

Just as the correspondence study programme, there are some peculiarities that are associated with modern-day distance education system. These particularities are outlined hereunder by Holmberg (1967)<sup>[19]</sup> and Sun & Chou (1996)<sup>[33]</sup>.

1. Administrators of traditional education worry less about availability of physical facilities (classrooms) and class scheduling.
2. Admission procedure is mainly online and not limited by geography.
3. Courses are critically scrutinized before hosting on the Internet
4. Courses are not time-bound. The courses are taken in piecemeal and at the learner's convenience
5. Heavily rely on new technologies devices and software, especially computers
6. Students and teachers are not primarily confined to any classroom, but rely on websites and other newer technological devices
7. Instruction is not time-bound
8. viii. Learning resources/materials are abound on the Internet
9. ix. Teachers are facilitators or guidance counsellors

10. x. Teachers and learners collaboration is not limited
11. xi. Teachers and students lack physical presence and intimacy
12. xiii. Hybrid method of instruction is sometimes adopted
13. xiv. Learners/students are more isolated. There is lack of social presence because valuable social experiences are normally denied to children who cannot attend school also observed that cooperative and collaborative learning that provide windows that convey both verbal messages, such as voice, and nonverbal messages (e.g., facial expressions) that increases the social presence of the system is highly lacking.
14. xvi. There are no variant admission criteria as in the Nigerian context, where quota system is
15. emphasized. This is a situation where candidates from less educationally disadvantaged areas
16. are given greater preferences in admission process.
17. xvii. There is no gender, colour, religions inequality in admission process

### Modern Distance Education Technologies

Modern technological advances have ushered in different means of reaching students/learners at a distance. Students are no longer compulsorily constrained to physical classrooms as previously practised. Different ways of doing the same time have emerged in the educational arena in recent times. Modern distance education system operates with different media/tools to perfect its instructional delivery. However, some of these technological innovations that have shaped the present distance education system are:-

1. email
2. chat
3. cell phone
4. video conferencing
5. teleconferencing
6. Social media, et cetera

### Summary

The traditional correspondence study, which was born out of the need to enlarging educational facilities to the less privileged, has come a long way, though with sceptical acceptance at its inception. However, there is no doubt that this technique of instructional delivery later gained prominence in view of its recorded achievements. In this write-up, therefore, some of the technical or essential terms of correspondence study were explained. The historical development of correspondence study cum contemporary distance/online education was concisely discussed. Much effort was made to distinguish between the olden day's correspondence study and modern online/distance education, and at the same time examined the merits and demerits of each of the instructional delivery system. Besides, the characteristics between correspondence and the contemporary online/education studies were succinctly highlighted. Further discussed are the technologies of both correspondence study and modern online education.

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