

**QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN
NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA: CONCEPTS,
CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.**

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Abstract

Open and Distance learning was introduced to the university education system in Nigeria in 1983. However, it became functional in 2001. It is a timely and phenomenal evolution in the history of Nigerian higher education. The programme provides access to young, elderly and disadvantaged groups who are interested at any time and anywhere in the acquisition of University education. Open and distance education is flexible, and learner friendly. Multiperspective approaches to learning are adopted in order to ascertain the quality of instruction. However, the programme is confronted with challenges such as high cost of production of instructional materials and acceptability of the products by the general public. These challenges are capable of distorting the intended gains of the programme hence the paper calls on all stakeholders to address the recommended strategies such as adopting the discussed quality assurance framework, establishment of institutional press and ICT resource centres as well as the provision of financial support to the clientele.

Introduction

Education contributes to the growth of national income and individual earnings. In today's information societies, knowledge drives economic growth and development. Higher education is the main source of that knowledge - its production, dissemination and its absorption by any society.

Experiences both nationally and internationally have shown that conventional education is extremely hard pressed to meet the demands of today's socio educational milieu especially for developing countries like Nigeria. The limitation of spaces in the universities imposes restrictions on access. If they had their way almost every product of the senior secondary system will want a place in a conventional university.

However, statistics from the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) have revealed that they cannot have their way (see table 1).

Table 1: Number of Applicants and Admissions into Nigerian Universities

Year	No. of Applications	No. of Admissions	% Admissions
1995/96	508,280	32,473	6.4
1996/97	472,362	76,430	16.2
1997/98	419,807	72,791	17.3
2000/01	550,399	60,718	11.0
2001/02	823,214	78,416	9.5

Source: JAMB.

On the average, less than 12 percent of those who apply for admission are able to secure placement (Okebukola).

The National Universities Commission and the Committee of Vice Chancellors of Nigerian Universities (2008) have alerted the nation on the need to create space for prospective students. This is due to the fact that out of the 447,928 candidates who are qualified for university admission for 2008/2009 session, only 153,000 can be admitted in the existing universities because of the carrying capacities of each of the universities. According to Adediran (2008) this is retrogressive considering the fact that Nigeria has 92 degree awarding institutions, made up of 27 federal universities, 31 state universities and 34 private universities.

Odutola (2008) remarked that the situation was worrisome and that the nation should urgently do something to widen access to university education. To achieve this he suggested the following:

- a) Conscious and concerted injection of funds into the nation's universities by the proprietors of these institutions.
- b) More private universities should be given operational licences, while existing universities should be strengthened to admit more students

Okebukola (2007) expressed worries about the inability of qualified candidates to get a space in the universities. On his own part he put forward the following suggestions:

- a) Re-introduction of the Higher School Certificate
- b) Qualified polytechnics and colleges of education should be given degree awarding status
- c) The National Open University of Nigeria should be strengthened to take in more prospective undergraduates.

Varghese (2007) explained that studies have shown that income inequalities are higher where enrolments in higher education are low. Empirical evidence from India indicates that higher education contributes significantly to a reduction in absolute and relative poverty. This therefore implies that educating the poor helps to

reduce inequalities and poverty. He went further to enumerate the benefits of higher education

- a) It ensures better employment, higher salaries and a greater ability to consume and save.
- b) Educating the poor helps to reduce inequalities and poverty
- c) Building universities was a symbol of self-reliance. They provided a new knowledge base for policy decisions.
- d) Development of national education systems. Universities help design curricula, develop textbooks, train teachers and promote national languages and culture at all levels.
- e) Public universities contribute to the development of national education policies with a secular outlook thus protecting national identities and traditions even when challenged by globalization.

If higher education can ensure these benefits then it is worth discussing the quality assurance of open and distance learning mode of higher education-National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). This paper will therefore be discussed under the following heading:

- a) Concepts of Quality Assurance, Open and Distance learning
- b) Challenges of Open and Distance learning
- c) Prospects and Recommendations

Concept of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is a set of activities or procedures that an organization undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. Its goal is to create reliable systems by anticipating problems and designing procedures to avoid as many errors and faults as possible.

In the present day in National and International perspectives, quality is the top of most agenda. Quality of education has significant impact and invaluable contribution to the area of development, if quality could be ensured by innovating new methods, it could validate the quality of open and distance learning programme. This brings us to quality assurance in open and distance learning for sustainable development

A Framework For Quality Assurance

Although quality is improved incrementally, project by project, an institution needs an institution wide framework for managing quality if it is to have impact. The following checklist attempt to map the areas that a quality assurance system would need to cover

- a) Quality Policy and Plan: The open and distance learning organization should develop a policy on quality. All level of staff should have opportunity to shape its development and goals agreed upon, and this policy must be translated into a practical plan.
- b) Identifying Critical Function: The critical functions targeting goals must be identified. The procedures to implement these critical functions must be analysed,

mapped out and must match reality. These procedures should embody best possible practices.

Specification of Standards: Standards for all critical functions must be clearly defined and specified. These standards must be clearly communicated and available in written form for easy reference. They must be reasonable and measurable and provision of regular opportunity for reviewing their appropriateness and amendments

- (d) Involvement of Users: Students, tutors, course developers, operational service units and all other stake holders must be involved in setting appropriate standards and developing procedures.
- (e) Documentation: All these procedures for achieving standards must be clearly documented and explicit. They must be reliable, user friendly, accessible and up to date and possibly reviewed when necessary.
- (f) Training and staff development: Adequate provision should be made for training and development of staff; this is closely linked to standards achievement. There should be proper mechanism put in place to assess training and needs of staff on a regular basis and resources allocated to meet them.
- (g) Monitoring: There should be systematic and routine monitoring mechanism for critical function, to check if standards are being met and procedures followed.
- (h) Cost: There should be a strategy for monitoring the cost of implementing and maintaining quality assurance activities. This should take into account both human and financial cost. There must be a review process to find out if the costs are greater than the benefits. (Robinson, 1994).

Quality assurance according to Harman (2000) has been defined as a systematic management and assessment procedure adopted by higher education institutions and system in order to monitor performance against objectives and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements.

In summary, it can be looked at as an approach to managing quality which focuses on the management of processes. It aims to apply agreed procedures to achieve defined standard as a matter of routine.

Concept of Open and Distance Learning

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, marginalized and those living in remote areas.

Distance education is the means by which the teacher is taken literally to the student. It is a teaching and learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communications technologies (Dhanarajan, 2001).

Open learning on the other hand refers to 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)

Generally, open and distance learning education courses are made up of a number of course components or learning materials which can include any of the following: teaching texts, study guides, course guides, readers or anthologies, assignments (with or without an accompanying tutor guide), television broadcasts or videotapes, radio broadcasts or audiotapes, software or online information and data, CD-ROMS, textbooks and laboratory materials.

Tuition materials are sent with questions to be answered, it could be recorded electronic materials and the students do this at their spare time. In addition, some students support may be provided, either through personal communication at local universities or through on-line student tutors. Both the media used for open and distance learning and the student support arrangements affect the possible level of interaction in an open and distance learning courses.

The emergence of the system of Open and Distance learning is an inevitable and phenomenal evolution in the history of educational development internationally. Unlike the formal system of education which has its inherent limitations with regards to expansion, provision of access, equity and cost-effectiveness, the growth of Open and distance mode of education has now made education to be flexible, Learner friendly and multiperspective in approaches to teaching and learning. This has helped to enhance creativity, leadership and integrated development of human personality

The vision of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is to be regarded as the foremost university providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. Aleazi, (2006).

NOUN reflects a novel development in the provision of higher education in Nigeria. It is the first full-fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education. NOUN focuses mainly on open and distance teaching and learning system, and delivers its course materials via print in addition with information and communication technology (ICT).

In summary, Open and Distance learning is a type of learning whereby opportunity is given to people (young and elderly) who have passed the ages of admission into regular universities to continue their education. It is also directed at youngsters beyond school age, who qualified and desire to earn a university degree. It enables people who are disadvantaged in various ways, some have part time employment, and some have disabilities, while some others are homeless to be educated. It avails people the opportunity to come in and out.

Challenges of Open and Distance Learning

During the colonial periods, many Nigerians including nationals patronized correspondence colleges of the United Kingdom for international and advanced level training (Owoeye, 2004). Later, Nigerians had the opportunity to travel to the United Kingdom to further their education. Training was later extended to the preparation of students for the General Certificate Examinations – Ordinary and Advance levels – by notable institutions such as the Rapid Results College, as well as Cambridge University and University of London (Owoeye, 2004). However, delivery from foreign providers stopped when Nigeria first assumed full independence. According to Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) international developments began in many sectors of the Nigerian economy including education. NOUN –an indigenous correspondence college was first launched in 1983 but was stopped in 1985. It was later relaunched in 2001.

Unlike the formal system of education which has its inherent limitations with regards to expansion, provision of access and equity and cost effectiveness. The growth of information and communication technologies has facilitated the expansion of Open and distance mode of education. It is now possible to adopt flexible, learner friendly and multiperspective approaches to teaching and learning. This has helped to enhance creativity, leadership and integrated development of human personality. However, the following challenges can frustrate the entire programme:

1. Epileptic or unavailability of power can mar the use of audiovisual materials and increase overhead cost if the use of generator has to be employed.
2. The printing of course materials require the use of electricity. For Nigerian economy that is generator driven cost of production will become very high. This could frustrate early production of printed materials thus causing delay in commencement of lectures.
3. Acceptability of the certificate by labour market because of suspicion and fear of quality compromise. This is a natural occurrence for any new product. It is therefore appropriate to be aware of this fact.
4. Affordability. Since it is not residential it will involve movement for the students. This therefore has its cost implications. The unemployed and the lowly paid may not be able to afford it.

Prospects and Recommendations

The birth of the National Open University has indeed helped Nigerians that hitherto would not have had access to higher education to be enrolled in one.

The National Open University of Nigeria dedicates itself to preparing professionals in various disciplines through the distance learning mode.

The emergence of the system of Open and Distance learning is an inevitable and phenomenal evolution in the history of educational development internationally.

It caters for continuous educational development of professionals such as teachers, accountants, bankers, lawyers, nurses, engineers, politicians, self-employed businessmen and businesswomen.

The range of target clientele is wide and should be continually reviewed to meet Nigerians ever-changing needs.

Learning is fundamental to the achievement of sustainable development. Development is a massive challenge of learning but conventional methods of teaching cannot meet the scale of the challenge. Technology must be used to enhance and extend education, just as it has transformed other areas of life. The technology of open and distance learning has proved particularly successful because it reaches more learners with better quality teaching at lower cost.

Open distance education is causing a revolution in higher education in Africa. From South Africa to the Sudan, Nigeria to Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, nations are experimenting with open distance education models in order to help meet growing demands for higher education places, meet the countries national development goals with diminishing resources and competing sectors of the economy. African governments are hereby urged, especially Ministers of Education to welcome, applaud and support these initiatives. This led to the establishment of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) in a conference of African Vice Chancellors/Presidents devoted to the development of distance education in Africa.

African council for distance education seeks to achieve the following goals:

- (a) Promote open and distance learning, flexible learning and continuing education in Africa.
- (b) To promote research and training in open and distance learning in Africa.
- (c) To contribute to the development of policies essential to the advancement of open and distance learning.
- (d) To foster continental and global collaboration in open and distance learning.
- (e) To provide forum where individuals, organizations and governments can deliberate on policy matters on open and distance learning.
- (f) To promote the development of appropriate methods and technologies in education and training relevant to open and distance learning.
- (g) To provide a forum for interaction, sharing and dissemination of ideas on open and distance education.

Open and distance learning has a huge role to play in progressing the development agenda. To meet the global challenge and global economy by producing effective manpower, quality of open and distance learning should be ensured

The emergence of the system of Open and Distance learning is an inevitable and phenomenal evolution in the history of educational development internationally. It is poised to impart education to anybody, anywhere and anytime. This is because, there is a large body of learners that are yet to be reached, and Open and Distance Learning system has the capacity to integrate the state –of –the art technologies with the time tested methodologies. In order to get the maximum value from this system, it is hereby recommended as follows:

The quality assurance of the programe should not be compromised. From time to time there is need to review the programe following the framework for Quality assurance. Open and distance learning has a huge role to play in progressing the development agenda. To meet the global challenge and global economy by producing effective manpower, quality of open and distance learning should be ensured.

The entry requirements such as Ordinary level credits should continue to be same as in conventional universities if it is to earn the recognition and acceptability of the labor market and the general public

NOUN should have its own press, ICT centre and resource centre. This will enable her to have control and meet the dates for material delivery. These projects are quite expensive but will be cost effective at the end of the day.

The beauty of NOUN is the provision of learning materials especially printed materials. This has earned it credibility and also has distanced it from the conventional university whereby the students are at the mercy of the lecturer who if not well suprvised may teach only what he knows.

If the emergence of NOUN is to reduce poverty and inequality and create access it is likely that poorly paid workers or unemployed may not be able to afford it. It is therefore being recommended that bursary, students loan and scholarship award from relevant organizations should be extended to NOUN students.

Conclusion

Conventional higher education will never be able to meet the demand for access to higher education. This is therefore an excellent opportunity for open and distance education to provide access. (Egerton University, 2004)

Open and distance learning has a huge role to play in progressing the development agenda. To meet the global challenge and global economy by producing effective manpower, quality of open and distance learning should be ensured.

However, open and distance education in Nigeria is confronted by some challenges which could be redressed if the suggested recommendations are adopted by the relevant bodies

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