

Innovative Method of HIV/AIDS Education and Management through ODL: Contribution from National Open University of Nigeria

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Abstract

In a bid to fill the much needed gap in the effort to effectively address the HIV scourge in Nigeria, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) introduced a Post Graduate Diploma course in HIV/AIDS Education and Management that provides in-depth knowledge on HIV/AIDS and sexuality. This is considered innovative because it involves a flexible learning mode: the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) method. It also provides a much needed access to quality and continuing education under the generally accepted philosophy of 'work and learn'. Thus, health professionals as well as those working on HIV/AIDS related matter are given the much needed skills on the various aspects of HIV/AIDS Education and Management. Against the backdrop of NOUN's experiences, this study ex-rays the philosophy of ODL and its application to the study and management of HIV/AIDS. Specifically, it illustrates the challenges of designing and sustaining the programme which includes: planning, quality assurance and course material development. Lastly, the object of exploring the likely prospects of HIV/AIDS Education through ODL is the belief that it enables quicker, flexible and cheaper access to learning and development that could achieve sustainable intervention in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Introduction

The development problematique has occupied the attention of scholars, activists, politicians, development workers and international organizations for many years with an increased tempo in the last decade. Even though there are different perspectives to development, there is a general consensus that development will lead to positive change manifested in increased capacity of people to have control over physical, material, social and emotional well being. This is why some have argued that the purpose of development is to improve people's lives by expanding their choices, freedom and dignity (Igbuzor,

2005). Thus, African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) conference with the theme 'Open and Distance Learning for Sustainable Development' is a modest and innovative contribution towards achieving this goal.

Generally, education is widely accepted as central to sustainable economic and social development. African countries, however, face tremendous challenges vis-à-vis other parts of the world. Rapidly increasing demands for all levels and forms of education, coupled with local and international governments' limited capacity to expand provision of education through traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions, leave open and distance learning (ODL) as an alternative and viable option to address and satisfy growing demands. Thus the intrinsic human value of education, which include the capacity of education to add meaning and value to human lives without discrimination, make it a central component to attaining universal human rights. In short, education is the key that unlocks and protects the full spectrum of human rights (Aderinoye and Ojokheta, 2004)

Since the 1960's, ODL has enabled African countries to provide relatively inexpensive forms of access for formal education. Further, in recent years ODL scholars have been aiming to improve quality distance instruction, which in turn raises the overall standard of the end product.

In line with the vision of this conference, the entry point of our contribution is on the innovative method of HIV/AIDS education and management through open and distance learning. Responding to the pivotal role of education in the fight against HIV/AIDS, and most importantly the choices, freedom and dignity of all, the National Open University of Nigeria introduced an HIV/AIDS Education and Management Course. The intention being to create a means through which health workers and other stakeholders could improve their knowledge of HIV/AIDS and its management. Find below the HIV/AIDS situation in Nigeria.

An Overview of the HIV/AIDS Situation in Nigeria

There is no doubt that the greatest health problem threatening the human race in contemporary times is the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The greatest burden of this scourge is in sub-Saharan Africa. Located in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa with an estimated population of over 140 million people (Nigerian Census, 2006). Government reports claim that over 300,000 Nigerians die yearly of complications arising from AIDS. Over 1.5 million children are said to be orphaned annually and an estimated 8 million are expected to be infected by 2012. Official figures put the steady rise in HIV prevalence rate from 1.8% in 1988 to 5.8% in 2001, 5.0% in 2003 and 4.4% in 2005 (Nigeria HIV Info. 2006).

The 2005 survey released in 2006 estimated that there were 4 million adults living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria, and 57% of these are women. From the figures, there is significant variation in prevalence between states and between population groups. The epidemic is said to be fuelled in the country largely by poverty, lack of awareness, dense commercial sex networks, early age of sexual activity, poor gender empowerment, with religion and culture obstructing open debate about sexuality. The biggest challenge however, impeding progress of Nigeria's intervention effort, is corruption (Nigeria HIV Info, 2006).

It is alarming, but HIV/AIDS has become a localized epidemic in many states of Nigeria. For instance, if we look at the HIV prevalence rate even with the 2005 figure (serious doubts exist about the credibility of official figures), Benue State has a 10% prevalence rate, with Akwa Ibom following in line with 8% and Nasarawa, Enugu, Rivers, and Taraba all in the 6% range. A 3.3% prevalence rate was ascribed to Lagos, but in some parts of Lagos, on Lagos Island specifically, the rate is 9%. We had asked officials what the peculiar situation is on Lagos Island that is not present in other parts of Lagos. The most credible explanation given is that Lagos Island has the highest concentration of Voluntary Counseling and Testing Centers (VCT), so, more people receive test here than other parts of the city!

According to Nigeria's ministry of health, the country intended to spend about N247 million to conduct a new sero-prevalence survey between November and December 2007. Indeed the National AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections Control Programme (NASCAP) of the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH), plans to adopt a new but costlier model in the survey in order to better reflect the number of People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in the country. According to Araoye Segilola, the Assistant Director, project programme of NASCAP in justifying the Ministry's decision, "if you conduct a study among the high risk groups and at the hot spots, you will realise that the five or even 10 percent prevalence is not reflective of the HIV/AIDS situation in the country. Conduct a study in any university and you will find that nothing less than 37 to 40 per cent of the populations are HIV positive. The problem we are seeing on paper as 4.4 per cent prevalence is a tip of the iceberg. When you carry out studies with the high risk groups, you will know we have a problem at hand (Nigeria HIV Info. 2006).

To be certain, the treatment situation is such that more than half million people of those who are HIV positive in the country need to be on treatment. In reality what we have is that less than 30,000 people are on treatment presently. Of this figure, almost half access their treatment from sources other than government, yet, every year, HIV/AIDS gulps so much from the federal budgets and commands heavy grants from donor agencies.

Between 2005 and 2006 alone, a total of N14.7 billion was budgeted to fight HIV/AIDS from the federal allocation. A quick glance at NACA's budget reveals that stupefying overhead cost come first before matters that have direct and immediate impact with corresponding benefits in terms of quality of services to PLWHAs. In other words, nothing in the documents suggests that the 6 million PLWHAs in Nigeria will fare better as it is (HIV Info, 2006).

Political commitment actually began in 2002 when the Nigerian government with a \$3.5 million order commenced what some then referred to as an ambitious antiretroviral (ARV) treatment programme to get 10,000 adults and 5,000 children onto ARVs within one year. In 2004, several PLWHA who commenced the ARV treatment eventually lost their lives when they skipped treatment for up to three months when the programme was

hit by a shortage of drugs. In 2005, Government again announced that PLWHAs will henceforth access ARV free of charge, and also came up with a presidential mandate to place at least 250, 000 from the more than half a million people on treatment before the end of 2006. With the presidential mandate came increased funding and a political commitment by former president Obasanjo which is yet to be rivaled. Meanwhile, at several treatment sites across the country, the few PLWHAs on the program still pay through their noses to access treatment Nigeria HIV Info, 2006).

Questions put forward to gauge the impact of the intervention on the life of an average person who is HIV positive and on the community include: How many of our healthcare facilities have the required equipment necessary for HIV/AIDS management? Do our people have enough information necessary to take informed decisions? Do people now see the need for voluntary counseling and testing? Are our women now more empowered to negotiate safer sex and have a decisive say on issues that affect their sexuality? Do we still stigmatize and discriminate based on HIV status? How easy has it become for someone who is positive to hold on to his/her job, and how easy is it to secure paid employment with ones positive status, and how adequately trained are the trainers?

If these questions will be honestly answered, it could represent the state of response as a community of people against the level of resources at our disposal. Now, let us examine the concept of ODL.

The Concept of ODL

There is no one definition of open and distance learning. Rather there are many approaches to defining the term. Most definitions, however, pay attention to the following characteristics: separation of teacher and learner in time or space, or in both time and place; institutional accreditation; that is, learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency. This type of learning is distinct from learning through your own effort without the official recognition of a learning institution. Also inclusive is use of mixed-media courseware, including prints, radio, and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning, and telecommunications. Courseware tends to be pre-tested and validated before use. Also two-way communication: allows learners and

tutors to interact as distinguished from passive receipt of broadcast signals. Communication can be synchronous or asynchronous. (COL 1999).

ODL offers a number of advantages to both learners and providers of opportunities of learning. Problems such as distance and time, which are barriers to conventional learning, are overcome in open and distance learning. Such advantages include: overcoming physical barrier, solving time or scheduling problems, expanding the limited number of places available, accommodating low or dispersed enrolment, making best use of the limited number of teachers available and dealing with culture, religion and political considerations (COL, 1999).

HIV/AIDS Education and Management: Contribution from NOUN

While offering curative care to AIDS patients seem to be a distant reality in the absence of a vaccine, evolving various strategies to prevent and control the unabated spread of this pandemic is desirable and possible. For this, immediate and effective response in new programme areas through teaching, research and extension is required. It is in this context that the role of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) assumes much importance. Situated in the School of Science and Technology, NOUN introduced a Post Graduate Diploma PGD HIV/AIDS Education and Management course to provide the much needed and timely support towards HIV education in Nigeria.

Taking cues from its forerunners like the Indira Gandhi National Open University, IGNOU, with a programme on 'HIV/AIDS and Family Education' and National Teachers' Institute Nigeria, (NTI) amongst many, the programme: HIV/AIDS education and management is skillfully and professionally designed with the following courses:

- Basics of HIV/AIDS
- Basics of Family Education
- Alcohol, Drug and HIV/AIDS
- Disease, Illness and Society
- Basic Anatomy and Physiology of Human Body

- Communication and Counselling in HIV/AIDS
- Clinical and Diagnostic and Therapeutic Services on HIV/AIDS
- Management and Care of HIV/AIDS
- Human Behaviour in Illness
- Economics of HIV/AIDS
- Legal and Ethical Issues in HIV/AIDS
- Global Initiatives on HIV/AIDS
- Primary Health Care and HIV/AIDS
- Biostatistics

Basics of HIV/AIDS introduces the students to concepts of HIV and AIDS, the evolution, origin, theories and spread of HIV, developing global epidemic of HIV/AIDS. It also provides information on the biology of HIV/AIDS. This course further highlights HIV transmission modes; symptoms and diagnosis. The last two modules look at comprehensive HIV prevention and management strategies. Basics of Family Education traces the role of the family towards health education. Alcohol, Drug and HIV/AIDS expose learners to the relationship between the aforementioned variables. The course, Disease, Illness and Society as the name implies introduce learners to different conceptualizations of disease, illness and effects on society. Further more, the course: Basic Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Body enable students understand basic concepts in anatomy and physiology which includes, for example the human skin, skeletal system, the nervous system, endocrine system, reproductive system, circulatory system and so on.

The course: Communication and Counselling in HIV/AIDS is broken into six modules and 23 study units. It introduces the students to concepts of communication, approaches to HIV counselling, counselling process, pre and post test counselling, counselling skills and styles, stigma and discrimination, etc. Clinical and Diagnostic Therapeutic Services on HIV/AIDS is broken into 4 modules and 12 study units. It introduces the students to basics of HIV/AIDS, types and structure of HIV, HIV modes of transmission as well as replications in HIV. It will further highlight clinical manifestations of HIV as well as

several assessment techniques. Furthermore, it equips students with classical diagnostic methods of HIV and various management techniques.

The course: Management and Care of HIV/AIDS is a very rich course that exposes students to basic concepts of HIV/AIDS, psychological management of HIV/AIDS, nutritional management techniques as well as chemotherapeutic management measures. It also deals with HIV palliative care, patient adherence and treatment support. The course: Human behaviour in Illness, introduce the learners to concepts of illness behaviour. Specifically, it entails concepts like, human behaviour, health, disease, models of illness, and illness and mind-body relationship. It also reviewed the changing patterns of illness, but anchored on the stages of illness behaviour namely: symptom experience, assumption of the sick role, medical care contact, dependent patient role and recovery/rehabilitation stages. Economics of HIV/AIDS is broken into 24 study units. It introduce the students to concepts of health and the health continuum, STIs and their relationship to HIV/AIDS, prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria, peer education, economic implications of HIV/AIDS, HIV/AIDS programmes in the work place, evaluations and interventions of HIV/AIDS, etc. Primary Health Care and HIV/AIDS introduces students to health concepts and prerequisites, concepts of primary health care, health promotions, general analysis of health care services and evaluations, health education, etc. Legal and Ethical Issues in HIV/AIDS highlights inherent ethical and legal issues in management of HIV+ individuals. The course Global Initiatives on HIV/AIDS introduces students to global trend, research and funding associated with the curbing of HIV. Lastly, in Biostatistics, students are exposed to applications of statistics to a wide range of topics in biology and health. Suffice to note that course writing and development entails systematic and articulated stages, which is briefly outlined in the next segment.

Stages of Course Material Development

Course Material development is a critical activity in NOUN as well as other ODL institutions. Guidelines are presented below:

1. Pre-planning Need Assesment Stage

2. Design (Planning Stage)
3. Development Stage
4. Production Stage
5. Review Stage

Pre-planning stage consists of in-house preparation of the academic unit or schools to mount a programme and the determination of relevant courses for the programme. This entails market survey and need assessment for academic programme, preparation of outline programme proposals (OPP) and Detail Programme Proposal (DPP), approval of OPP and DPP and selection of course writers, editors, e-Learning content developers, etc.

Course material design stage comprises finalisation of course syllabus, determination of course delivery mode, identification and purchase of possible adaptable materials, writers and editor's workshop.

Course material development (authoring) stage includes the following: authoring of course material manuscript, collection of course material manuscript (in electronic and printed version), editing of course material by (in-house or external) content experts, correction of manuscript by writers, obtaining copyright permission (where necessary) and proof reading of manuscript by academic unit.

Course material production stage entails proof reading and house style editing, copy editing, effecting corrections and formatting of manuscript, final checking by instructional designer and printing of course material.

Revision stage becomes necessary to update course material contents due to review of curriculum, new trends and practices. This stage thus involves the original course writer, except if they are not available, and providers (for adaptable courses).

Specifically, the above illustrates the challenges of designing and sustaining the programme which includes, planning, quality assurance and course material development.

So what makes the HIV Education and Management Programme Innovative?

Within the sphere of professional education for HIV education and management, a combination of factors makes this programme highly innovative in that:

- It is a programme designed for professionals in the field of health management and associated disciplines.
- It assists in training the trainers, professional HIV counselors are equipped with necessary skill needed in their profession.
- It enables students to study at a distance in a mode that can be organized in relation to personal and career responsibilities.
- It seeks to provide the much needed professional education in HIV education and management, much needed in the country, to address the glaring ignorance about the disease.
- It seeks to recruit experienced and established practitioners, from different professional backgrounds for whom other modes of study in health promotion may be inaccessible or inappropriate;
- It encourages autonomy as students have a student-centered, individual programme
- It promotes networking and sharing among the learners.
- The programme focuses on links between health theory and current practice issues and concerns.
- It synthesizes the personal, professional and political dimensions of theory and practice through critical reflections on learning.
- Ultimately students are exposed to ICT through ODL.

Conclusion

We have tried in this paper to present NOUN's contribution to HIV/AIDS education and management through the development of a programme designed to address what is considered as a short-coming or lacuna in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the country especially among professionals. The point however, is that ODL could be used as an

instrument or means of reaching special groups, in this case, HIV/AIDS professionals within society responsible for addressing certain social malaise. The intervention, though generated as a programme, has the ability to not only improve the knowledge base of the health workers, but also invariably has a positive impact on the efforts at addressing the scourge of HIV/AIDS in the country.

There is therefore much that can be learned from this innovation from NOUN, and goes to show that ODL, more specifically the programme (HIV Education and Management), could serve to better the lot of the people. To this extent, the relevance of ODL to augment the traditional sources of education cannot be overemphasized.

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