

**Exploring Open and Distance Learning in Meeting the Learning Needs of Almajirai of
Northern Nigeria**

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Abstract

The Almajirai are pupils enrolled in traditional Quranic schools that are prevalent in many parts of northern Nigeria. Although Quranic schools are highly revered religious institutions that have played vital roles in muslim societies in pre-colonial northern Nigeria, the challenging demands of modernity tend to put the future of these schools at risk. Pupils enrolled are consequently denied effective participation in formal basic education, and are not adequately catered for by either the state or their communities. Concern over the future of millions of children enrolled in Quranic schools has led to the official adoption of integration policy by the Federal Government intended to position them within the framework of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme for the purpose of attaining Education for All (EFA) and Millenium Development Goals (MDGs). This paper contends that although the integration policy is widely accepted by stakeholders of the Quranic schools, there are number of contentious issues which devolve on the implementation of this policy vis-a-vis the peculiarities of these schools, their pupils, and the socio-economic rhythms of their local communities which have the tendency to exclude rather than integrate them into the regular schools. Consequently, the paper explores Open Distance Learning (ODL) as an alternative platform that has the potentials of delivering the promises and gains of the UBE to the Qur'anic school pupils in ways that are responsive to their peculiarities. The paper recommends, among other things, the adoption of a Dual mode of ODL system in which traditional classroom method is complemented by radio broadcasts in specially designed packages tailored to the needs of Qur'anic school pupils and thier teachers. This the paper believes will provide for flexiblity in the organisation of instruction, and respond to scarcity of personnel and resources in these schools.

Introduction

In its bid to widen the participation of all children, particularly the disadvantaged, in its basic education programmes, the Federal Government of Nigeria pursues a policy of instituting flexible programmes that are meant to be responsive and relevant to the peculiarities of these learners and their communities which had hitherto excluded them from conventional programmes of educational delivery. One of such programme initiatives is the integration of Qur'anic schools into the Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework through a process of cross-infusion of their curricula elements into each other. The aim of this policy thrust is to resuscitate the decaying structures of the traditional Qur'anic schools and empower them to dispense to the millions of children they enrol, the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to be functionally relevant in knowledge-driven societies of the 21st century. It is widely held that the implementation of the UBE programme and the attainment of Education for All (EFA) goals in northern Nigeria could be compromised by the continued neglect of the traditional Qur'anic schools (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2002).

However, the implementation of this integration policy is confronted with a number of challenges that limit its effectiveness and led to the failure of past attempts to address the needs of Qur'anic schools and their pupils (Junaid, Umar & Dukku, 2005, 18). These challenges include lack of strong political will on the part of governments; absence of a sustainable funding pattern; inadequacy of trained teaching force to implement the curriculum; resource scarcity; conflicting demands of child labour practices with the routine of the school, the perceived irrelevance of curriculum content to the realities of the pupils and their communities, etc. Therefore beyond the expansion of the Qur'anic school curriculum, programmes aimed at these pupils and their communities need to be widely accessible, affordable and flexible to local situations and needs. This paper explores how curriculum programmes of the Qur'anic schools stand to benefit from some of the inherent features and arrangements involved in Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

Almajiri – a Life of Abuse and Exclusion

A pupil of a Qur'anic school is generally referred to as *almajiri* (plural = *almajirai*). The word is itself a Hausa loan word which is derived from *al-muhajir*, a word in Arabic language which refers to an emigrant. The larger connotation of the word is to describe a long established practice of migration of scholars and mature students to other lands for the purpose of dispensing and/or acquiring knowledge (National Council for the Welfare of Destitutes, NCWD, 2001, 42). In its original conception, the practice of scholarly migration (*almajirci*) was restricted to learners who having completed the elementary stage of Qur'anic studies (i.e. Qur'anic school or *Maktab*), may emigrate to continue their studies under the tutelage of scholars resident in other locations. It also involved the movement of children from urban areas to the serenity of rural locations so that they could concentrate on their studies without any distractions. While on this migration, the upkeep of the *almajirai* and their teachers became the responsibility of the host communities where they decide to reside; it was therefore considered a religious obligation for individuals in host communities to support the feeding and accommodation of these religious emigrants. It was also a common practice for Qur'anic school pupils to move from house to house begging for food and items of clothing. Apart from being a means of sustenance for the Qur'anic school pupils and their teachers, the practice of begging by the *almajirai* is also considered by many Islamic scholars as training in endurance and humility (Okoye & Ya'u, 1999, 33).

In recent times however, the term *almajiri* has undergone a transformation in both its application and meaning due to increasing poverty levels particularly in rural areas, the resultant rural-urban migration, and deterioration of formal educational facilities (Khalid, 1997). For instance, the direction of movement has now changed from urban – rural to rural – urban migration i.e. a situation in which pre-school age children are thrown out of their homes to urban centres to study the Qur'an under a *Malam*. A *Malam* may therefore have a number of children (between 30 to 150) under his care but without any sustainable means for their upkeep as the communal support system which Qur'anic schools enjoyed in the past have either collapsed or are not tenable in the metropolitan life of urban areas. To make matters worse, very few parents make enough provisions for the upkeep of the children they send to the cities for Qur'anic learning. In the absence support, regulation or recognition by any of the three levels of governance in Nigeria (i.e. Federal, State, or Local), the management of Qur'anic schools is exclusively left in the hands of their sole-proprietors (the *Malams*).

This situation has given rise to the deterioration of Qur'anic schools in terms of their limited curricula content; absence of decent facilities for learning; critical welfare issues for the learners and their teachers; abusive and child labour practices, including the scourge of child-street begging, prevalent in many of these schools. Ultimately, despite the sense of reverence and self-sufficiency that traditional rural communities in northern Nigeria confer on Qur'anic schools, their restricted curricula and lack of linkages with the official education system renders the type of education they provide insufficient for their products to find a place within the educational, political, and socio-economic configurations of modern Nigeria. Despite this limitation, Qur'anic schools enrol more pupils than formal primary schools in many parts of northern Nigeria, and a large percentage of children enrolled in these schools do not attend any formal primary school (UNICEF, 1999, 136). This is what makes Qur'anic schools the biggest challenge in attaining vision of the UBE programme and actualizing EFA goals in Northern Nigeria.

Integrated Qur'anic Schools within the Context of the UBE Programme

The EFA goals are designed to ensure that all children, youths and adults have access to education as fundamental right, and that barriers of age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnic background, geographic location should not stand in the way of equitable access to good quality educational for all. However, this ALL is not a class name that describes individuals possessing common characteristics; it is a heterogeneous grouping of individuals each with different needs. This

emphasis on the heterogeneity of this ALL becomes necessary because of tendency by programmes of mass education to concentrate on easy-to-reach populations while neglecting those who are most desirous of the attention they need to succeed. It is in realisation of this fact that goal 2 of the 6 EFA goals is committed to ensuring that all children, particularly girls and other children in difficult circumstances have access to and complete free and compulsory basic education of good quality (UNESCO, 2000, 15). Children in difficult circumstances are those who do not have the chance to experience effective education on account of poverty, rural location, gender, ethnicity, disability or some special need which confer them characteristics that make them unfit for schools and schools unfit for them (Bernard, 2000). For this group, the mere expansion of educational opportunities only heightens their exclusion since existing school structures are generally too rigid and unresponsive to their peculiarities.

The Dakar Framework of Action anticipates that for education systems to attract children in difficult circumstances to schools and keep them there, they must be flexible to the circumstances and needs of all learners providing relevant content in ways that are accessible and appealing. While both Jomtien Declaration and Dakar Framework of Action acknowledge the centrality of Primary Education in the drive towards attaining EFA goals, they encourage the search for alternative learning and delivery systems to complement existing structures. It is therefore within this framework that present efforts for the reform of Qur'anic schools and their subsequent integration into the Nigeria's UBE programme is properly situated. Qur'anic schools which had hitherto operated outside the official circles; unsupported, unmonitored and unrecognised by the state or any of its apparatus for the delivery of education are now being encouraged to adopt the integration policy. This policy was given a boost with the approval of an FGN/UNICEF Non-Formal Education Curriculum for Qur'anic Schools by the National Council on Education in 2001. This was followed up in 2002 by drafting of an Action Plan and Implementation Guidelines for the states to adopt in the execution of the integration project (Junaid et al. 2005, 17).

However, the committee that drew up the Action Plan and Implementation Guidelines referred to above also entertained fears that the integration project could be marred by certain factors which it identifies to include (FRN, 2002): weak institutional structures of the Qur'anic schools; negative attitude of some stakeholders (particularly the Qur'anic school teachers cum proprietors i.e. *Malams*); inadequate and untrained teaching personnel in the Qur'anic schools to handle the integration; the deprivation of basic welfare provisions for the Qur'anic school pupils (*almajirai*); inadequate resource base to support the additional tasks of teaching secular subjects; and lack of sustained support, monitoring and regulatory mechanism for the Qur'anic schools. Recent studies by Junaid et al. (2005, 18) and Boyle (2006) confirm the existence of some of these shortcomings among schools that have embraced one form of integration or the other. In particular, the studies reaffirmed problems associated with teacher supply and quality; inadequate resources; pupil and teacher welfare concerns. Junaid et al. submit that the integration efforts tend to concentrate largely in urban centres where many of the children already have access to formal schools. These problems are symptomatic of the failure of the system to make some of the required shifts to acknowledge and make provisions for the peculiarities of the learners, the school system and their host communities because of the rush to formalise the Qur'anic schools without the corresponding attempts to non-formalise the rigid structures of the formal primary schools.

There are defining features of Qur'anic schools and their pupils that have emerged from research studies conducted in Nigeria over the years (Khalid, 1997, 2005; UNICEF, 1999; Okoye & Ya'u, 1999; Bakari, 2003; Junaid et al. 2005; Boyle, 2006) which need to guide efforts aimed at reforming and making them functional in the UBE scheme. These include:

- a. Qur'anic schools enjoy large patronage among rural dwellers and the urban poor, and for many of the children from these backgrounds Qur'anic schools are the only schooling experience they have;
- b. Almajiranci is largely a boy-child phenomenon whereby boys of primary school-age are sent to the cities for Qur'anic studies during dry season and are required back home to assist in agricultural activities during the rainy season. Girls only engage in begging indirectly by serving as guides to the disabled or elderly beggars; however, a number of girls enrolled in Qur'anic schools engage in street hawking (*talla*) to supplement family income;
- c. Almajiranci therefore fits very well into a cultural practice of rural – urban migration of able bodied men during the dry season (known as *ci rani*) as a strategy of reducing pressure on limited stock of food back home and supplementing family income.
- d. The primacy of Qur'anic recitation and religious instruction in the curriculum of Qur'anic schools and the willingness of stakeholders to support the integration so long as it does not threaten this arrangement.
- e. Qur'anic schools are largely one teacher schools but they also have a tradition of drafting older students to assist in teaching jobs. Teachers are therefore few and untrained; the main qualification required to be a teacher is having graduated from a Qur'anic school. Only few of the teachers in Qur'anic schools have attended formal schools, but among those who did, some have acquired additional qualifications of Higher Islamic Studies and Grade II Certificates.
- f. Qur'anic schools operate in austere circumstances and resource – lean environments.

The import of these revelations is to provide a better understanding of the existing circumstances and needs of the Qur'anic schools and their pupils which are necessary for instituting a relevant and responsive framework for their reform.

Open and Distance Learning System and its Relevance in Reforming Qur'anic Schools

Distance learning systems have existed in different forms over the years, and they are particularly noted for their relevance in adult and continuing education programmes. Their relevance to the needs of adult learners in particular, stem from their convenience and ease of learning since learners could acquire education in the convenience of their locations mediated by artificial source i.e. print or electronic. That is the point of emphasis in a definition given to distance education by UNESCO (2002, p.22) i.e. “any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print”. Therefore a distinguishing feature of Distance Learning programmes is that technology, rather than face-face contact, is the major medium of communication.

It is however, in their ‘open’ nature that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes hold the most promise for their utilisation beyond the needs of adult learners. The open nature of these programmes devolve particularly in the freedom they grant the individual learner in the choice of one or more of the main processes of learning, and in the adoption of “...relatively flexible organisational structures, delivery and communication patterns, and the use of technologies in supporting learning” (UNESCO, p.23). The practice of this openness involves allowing the learner freedom and flexibility in the choice of what, how, where they learn, at what speed, under whose guidance or assistance, and whether, where and when to have their learning assessed. This is a significant departure from the practices of the regular schools which are tailored to the needs of the average learner who possesses characteristics that are adaptable to the ethos of the formal school. For learners who are already disadvantaged, they come to school with some background characteristics which make them unfit for the curricula and organisational patterns of the regular school. In keeping with recommendations of the Dakar Framework of Action, there must be in place flexibility, relevance and choice in design of

programmes meant for these categories of learners. It is in this respect that ODL particularly fits in as appropriate delivery system for disadvantaged groups.

UNESCO (2002, 23) traces the historical evolution of Distance Learning system to four main phases, each with its own organisational form determined by the mode of communication it adopts. These four phases are: i) correspondence system; ii) educational television (ETV) and Radio Systems; iii) Multimedia Systems; and v) Internet – Based Systems. Advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have enriched these options and integrated them into one platform mediated through the use of internet and World Wide Web (www). Through these media, materials in print, multimedia (audio, visual, video, and animations) are widely accessible to anyone with internet access. However, for the types of populations that are served by Qur'anic schools, with no access to computers, internet or even stable power supply, the use of modern sophisticated technologies is largely limited or even impossible. Despite this limitation, the use of Radio Broadcasts can be a very effective option to ensure that Qur'anic school pupils have well structured instructions delivered to them at a place and timing of their convenience. Proprietors/teachers of Qur'anic schools could also benefit from these radio broadcasts specifically tailored to inculcate basic literacy and effect attitudinal changes in them towards the integration programme. This option is particularly appealing in view of the limited supply and poor quality of teachers as well inadequacy of basic textbooks and materials for teaching both secular and Qur'anic components in Qur'anic schools. Radios are generally cheaper to own and maintain than either Television or Internet, and they require less infrastructure and logistics for their operation. The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2003 (National Population Commission, NPC, & ORC Macro, 2004, 21) indicates that Radio ownership among urban households in Nigeria stands at 85.3% while for rural areas it is 65.8% as against 58.6% (urban) and 15.4% (rural) for ownership of Television sets. Households in Northern Nigeria have an average radio ownership of 69.4% as against Television ownership of 19.1%.

Within this framework, therefore, ODL for Qur'anic school pupils could adopt a Dual Mode i.e. offer a combination traditional classroom based methods and distance methods (Commonwealth of Learning, COL, 2000, 8). Instructions in both the secular and Qur'anic components could be offered in both modes so that the two instructions could be mutually reinforcing and allow more flexibility in the organisation of instruction. Qur'anic schools, despite their limitations, are known for their flexibility and responsiveness to local circumstances particularly the socio-economic rhythms of their host communities. It is in fact, this feature that explains their persistence despite long years of official neglect. The use of ODL will therefore fit very well into this pattern of flexibility, openness and responsiveness. The use of Radio broadcasts as a component of the Qur'anic school ODL enhances their capacities to put in place flexible organisational structures to cater for the special needs of all learners enrolled.

The major challenges in the use of ODL for Qur'anic schools will be in securing the cooperation, support and active involvement of proprietors of Qur'anic schools and community members. Given the extensive control they have over the curriculum and management of their schools, the *Malams* will be crucial to the success or otherwise of this proposal. Another major challenge is designing flexible curriculum content and materials which teachers and education resource managers can adapt to suit local requirements of different schools and communities.

Recommendations

In order to ensure proper integration of ODL into the curriculum framework of the Integrated Qur'anic schools, the following measure are recommended:

- i. Mass mobilisation aimed at creating awareness particularly among key stakeholders of Qur'anic school system i.e. the *Malams*, Parents and community members. A positive disposition to the integration programme is critical for success;

- ii. A review of the existing curricula to make it more flexible and incorporate Qur'anic component which the government left untouched and exclusively in the hands of individual proprietors. In the absence of uniform minimum curriculum for use in all schools, it is difficult to design radio programmes that have common applications in all the schools.
- iii. Provision of basic infrastructure and logistics in the Integrated Qur'anic schools to enable them implement the additional responsibilities brought about by the integration. In particular, the provision of school buildings (classrooms and offices) is necessary for effective working of the ODL system.
- iv. Rehabilitation and empowerment of Education Resource Centres (ERC) and Divisions of Educational Support and Services (DESS) in state and local government levels is very necessary if any ODL system is to be fully operational. These bodies could work in tandem with the National Educational Resource Centre (NERC) in designing and packaging programmes appropriate for use in Qur'anic schools.
- v. Expansion of Radio broadcasts services to all parts of the states covered by the programme. When there is increased accessibility to local stations, it is possible to design programmes tailored for particular schools and localities.
- vi. A sustained programme of continuous teacher training is necessary to sustain any arrangement made to integrate ODL into the Qur'anic schools. Both existing Qur'anic school teachers and those that will be recruited to hand the basic education component need to be trained on the applications of the ODL in Qur'anic schools.
- vii. Because the problem of almajiranci is highly associated with poverty, welfare issues in Qur'anic schools should be a paramount concern. No amount of curriculum reform can make pupils to have meaningful learning, when learning time has to compete with battle for survival on the streets.

Conclusion

The tasks of attaining the goals of EFA are numerous, and Nigeria is classified among countries not likely to reach the targets by the year 2015. This is a major challenge which calls for the mobilisation of structures and resources for the dispensation of UBE. Qur'anic schools have remained largely ignored in the scheme of educational structures in the country, and that has produced ugly circumstances in these schools with dire consequences on millions of children whose future is put at risk. The integration of Qur'anic schools into the UBE has the potential of offering a lifeline to this endangered children, however, their demographic profile dominated by poverty and rural location requires that these schools and their pupils get a flexible structure that is responsive to their peculiarities, limitations and potentials. This paper has argued that ODL provides a delivery platform on which the integrated curriculum could be executed in ways that are flexible, responsive and relevant to the peculiarities of these schools, their learners and communities.

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