

Open and Distance Learning: Successful Implementation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Open and distance learning (ODL) has as its main objective, attaining of mass literacy and providing opportunities for those who could not gain admission through designated entrance examination agencies as well as those who could not afford to leave their job to attend a fulltime educational programme. Open and distance learning seeks to improve skilled manpower and also improve the skills for those already at work. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify both the internal and external implementation problems for ODL in Nigeria. Major recommendations are made based on the result of the study. The Nigerian government should thus subsidize ODL programmes just like the conventional school system and improve electricity supplies to the nation. In the same vein, Nigeria should emulate ODL implementation procedures of Brazil, Egypt and South Africa. ODL programmes should be seen as the avenue to produce a strong manpower for national development rather than an avenue for internally generated revenue by the stakeholders concerned. Students should develop a good culture of maintenance of the available facilities. ODL can only be sustained with the involvement of all stakeholders.

Introduction

Education is a veritable tool for establishing and managing change. Change in itself is essential for the development of individuals and the nation. In effect a dynamic nation needs a strong educational system. Therefore, providing quality education to millions has been one of the struggles facing developing countries such as Nigeria. However, inadequate access to education may result in many people not participating meaningfully in national development. Hence the need arises for open and distance learning to act as succour for the affected Nigerians, irrespective of tribe or ethnic background. Open and distance learning also provides a second chance for those who had once been in the system but had to dropout for one reason or the other.

Open and distance learning equally favours workers as well as applicants and those who could not secure a position in an educational institution through entrance examinations. Workers gain most benefit because they are exposed to training on the job. Companies and industries need workers who are willing and able to update their skills throughout their lifetimes, hence open and distance learning programmes has become a serious avenue for upgrading their knowledge. It is also crucial for preparing workers to compete in the global economy. It is a source for improving people's ability to function as members of their communities.

The Concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

There are several approaches to defining the term, Open and Distance Learning Creed (2001) defined distance learning as 'an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and /or time from the learners'. Open Learning, in turn, is defined as 'an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, entry, or time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these'. Thus, the concept of open and distance learning suggests an educational approach designed to reach learners in their homes/offices/shops, etc, provide learning resources for them to qualify without attending formal classes in person, or create opportunities for lifelong learning, no matter where or when they want to study.

According to UNESCO (2002), open and distance learning represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Mudasiru (2006) defined distance learning as a term to describe the student-centeredness of distance education and it deals with the use of print and electric technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance.

Correspondence study entails distance learning through postal subgroups, that is, learning at home and communicating with the instructor using print materials.

Adebayo (2007a) defined open and distance learning as the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system; it is imparted without necessarily having personal interaction with students or learners. The practice of ODL in Nigeria takes various forms, which include correspondence study education, distance learning (Sandwich programmes), Part-Time Teacher Training Programme (PTTP), Open University, weekend programmes, adult literacy education programmes, National Teachers Institute (NTI) and e-learning. From the above view, one can deduce that distance learning not only shares the goals of the conventional school system, but it also aims to provide access to a historically underserved, place bound, and highly motivated population.

The Evolution of Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria

Distance learning is not a recent concept in Nigeria. Akinpelu (1982) indicated that the Department of Adult Education at the University of Ibadan first proposed the need for distance learning in 1960. The programme was titled 'pilot correspondence programme in the Science subjects' to experiment in the field of science education at pre-university level and thereafter to expand gradually to certain other vital areas necessitating in-service training. This project was renamed 'Correspondence Courses Leading to University Degrees and Diplomas'. This notwithstanding, there had been correspondence colleges in Britain and other places that conducted correspondence courses for interested

Nigerians through 'Rapid results' as well as others where courses in business related subjects and administration were obtained.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was first launched in 1983 but was suspended in 1985 by the military government. President Olusegun Obasanjo re-launched it in 2001 and NOUN now provides instruction for some 60,000 students as at 2002 (ODL Paris 2002 report), the new United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) chair aims to build up the supply of skilled professionals to manage and design open and distance learning programmes through the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (Daniel, 2005).

NOUN is the first fully fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education. The university focuses mainly on a distance teaching and learning system, and delivers its course materials via print in conjunction with information and communication technology (ICT). The National Open University of Nigeria currently has twenty three study centres, which are stratified into the six geopolitical Zones of the nation.

Significance of Open and Distance Learning to Nigerian Education

UNESCO (2002) stated 'in efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, open and distance learning may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary and under certain circumstances, an appropriate substitute for the face-to-face methods that still dominates most educational systems'.

The relevance of ODL to Nigerian Education is enumerated below.

Access

It increases people's access to education. People who would have found it impossible to attend the conventional school system benefit from ODL. Many stakeholders in the education sector are interested in open and distance learning because it allows greater access to educational opportunities. This is in keeping with the stated objectives of the National Policy on Education that 'maximum efforts shall be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities or correspondence courses or open universities or part-time, e-learning and work study programmes' (FRN, 2004).

Social Enhancement

Open and distance learning schemes hold a number of potential benefits for various stakeholders in the education and development process. To the learner, ODL means more freedom of access and thereby a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualifications, thereby improving their social status. It is often a cheaper means of attending school for the student since some people may not be able to leave their places of work to go to school full time. Men of the armed forces and other security agencies are registered in large numbers for distance learning to enhance their social status.

Economic Growth

ODL is an avenue for institutions to improve their Internally Generated Revenue (IGR).

It is also an avenue for many people to become learned and be better workers in any profession they choose or are currently engaged in. Students are allowed to read up to whatever level they want, hence contributing to the economical growth of the nation through better performance.

For employers, ODL offers the possibility of organizing in-service training for their staff without necessarily releasing them for long periods of productive time. With sufficient number of employees being trained, ODL is often the most cost-effective means. For the government and educational policy makers, the system is a panacea for the perennial problem of provision of equitable and accessible education in an affordable and cost effective way.

ODL has also reduced poverty levels among teachers, since programmes are attended while at work. The government too incurs little cost on the training but develops the manpower to improve the economic situation of the nation. Nigerian prisoners or inmates enjoy distance learning programmes in Nigeria so as to be useful to the nation by contributing their quota to the development and economic growth of the nation during and after release. ODL has given tremendous supports to teacher training in the drive to Universal Basic Education programmes in Nigeria. ODL is working towards the development of education and life skills for youth and the management of the available natural resources.

Implementation Problems of ODL in Nigeria

The problems that need to be addressed for the effective implementation of ODL in Nigeria are discussed under internal and external problems.

I. Internal Problems

The Teacher Factor: Absence of teachers trained in computer to teach the practical aspects of computer skills, coupled with non-availability of computers and allied tools at the centre, militate against actual realization of the goals and objectives of ODL in Nigeria. However, the teacher factor problem calls for an urgent need for all employed and practising teachers to brace themselves for the challenges of communication technology. Also, the successful implementation of any curriculum is dependent on the informed and rational choice the classroom teacher makes about curriculum programmes and materials required for use in school. Teachers are not adequately remunerated; hence the exorbitant rate of selling their textbooks which does not augur well for the students.

School Factor: The removal of government subsidies for staff and students' welfare has greatly affected Nigerian higher institutions that were at the verge of collapse. Hence, ODL was used as a revenue generating venture and a way of increasing their Internally Generated Revenue (IGR). This observation was supported by UNESCO's (2001) study that the lack of government funding hindered the quality and effective coordination of distance education initiatives in Nigeria. The institutions and their location do not always provide hostel accommodation, the conditions of the rooms and environment are always very poor, and water, electricity and cleaners are not available.

Moreover, library facilities are not provided for students to update their knowledge.

Managerial Factor: The major task of a manager is to match educational purpose, administrative roles and teaching methodology to achieve the predetermined goals and objectives of the organization. The question is how effective are the managers of ODL in their various institutions? Borisade's (2007) study revealed some ineffectiveness in the area of manager staff, manager student, and manager community relationships. This was due to some extraneous variables such as temporary lecturers, non-availability of accommodation for students during the programme and community outrageous cost in the provision of accommodation for staff and students. The lecturers also face study center managers with the problem of achieving the objectives due to faulty implementation. Most of the lecturers are interested in the monetary benefits, to the detriment of what the students would achieve.

The criteria for admission of students were not the same as those of conventional institutions or as stipulated by the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) or National Universities Commission (NUC). Primary Six, General Certificate of Education (GCE), National Examination Council (NECO) Grade Two Teachers Certificate, West African Senior Secondary School Certificate (WASSC) holders were admitted for six year programme, especially sandwich programmes. Entrance examinations were not conducted for admission into ODL programmes. This casts doubts on the credibility of the students' admission. The time schedule for the programme is inadequate and insufficient for the lecturers and students to adequately complete their course work.

Management admitted an outrageous number of candidates, which increased the staff student ratio and overstressed the available human and nonhuman resources. When the regular university lecturers cannot effectively cope with the teaching of all the courses that have to be taught, lecturers have to be locally recruited (Borisade,2007). This is as a result of the profitmaking motive behind the establishment of distance learning programmes by Nigerian institutions and it is gradually taking precedence over academic and professional reasons. Moreover, students' results are usually delayed, lecture and examination timetables are haphazardly prepared and these directly or indirectly affect students psychologically.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) education reform programme (Draft Benchmarks and minimum Academic Standard (MAS) posed problems for the managers. According to Adebayo (2006b) most lecturers were not aware of the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) needed by their institutions.

Student Factor: The approval of ODL by the federal government and the NUC gave an opportunity to Nigerians to attain their academic desires, hence the explosion in enrolment of students. The available facilities were not enough for the students, especially during examinations, which gives room for examination malpractices such as cheating, copying, bringing in scripts etc. Also, the increase in enrolment makes teaching and learning difficult for the lecturers and the students. Most students too lack a maintenance culture. The available facilities are vandalized and misused by them. Study habits of the students are poor; courses are crammed just to pass. Students do not consider it necessary to attend orientation / induction courses at the beginning of their study. Some of the

students do not know how to use the library and library facilities. Students are not interested in the acquisition of knowledge and skills; rather they are essentially interested in the acquisition of certificates (Obemeata 2000).

Borisade's (2007) study revealed the concept of 'sorting' which is a recent coinage in Nigeria for a variant of academic corruption; a condition when an academically deficient student 'sorts' herself or himself out with the lecturer or other persons in authority in the institution with a view to securing favours that will wipe out any deficiency.

II. External Problems

Energy related problems: Power supply all over the country appears erratic.

Successful ODL cannot be assured without the use of communication technologies (radio, television, computers). Incessant power failure creates problems for the effective integration of most instructional materials in the delivery of ODL. The poverty level among Nigerians makes alternative sources of electricity, such as generators, unavailable to them.

Low Tele-Density: Access to telecommunication tools such as telephone, the internet and computers among others is still at low ebb. Even with infusion of Global System for Mobile (GSM) communication in 2001 in Nigeria, access is still limited, services are yet to be perfect and the service charge is too high for users.

Lack of Consistency in Programme and Policy Implementation: It is a known fact that access to any educational policy is contingent on the involvement of all stakeholders and sponsorship of the funding agency. The government in power often launches programmes; as soon as the previous government steps out, the current one throws the programme into the dustbin. The political instability of Nigeria since independence has led to poor development plans and implementation of open and distance learning.

Economic Factor: Low level funding of ODL is as a result of inadequate budgetary allocation by the government to that sector. The poor state of the national economy had pauperized most Nigerians. An average middle income earner cannot afford basic technological tools such as computers, thus a computer set is still a luxury in some institutions, offices and homes. This may make the integration of necessary online resources (internet, email)

into open and distance learning in Nigeria difficult. Most of the approaches adopted in the dissemination of instructions in ODL programmes, such as the purchase of books, instructional materials, and provision of facilities such as lecture rooms and laboratory equipment, are capital intensive in a Nigerian setting. UNESCO's (2002) study supported this observation of the cost implications of ODL when it stated that the cost per average student of distance education is more expensive than that of conventional institutions. Nigerian students too considered it as highly exploitative and a way of making money by the institutions and the lecturers.

Poor Postal System: Although improvements have been made in the postal services by NIPOST, the level of services are not yet up to international standards because the services cannot guarantee efficient two-way communication between distant learners and distant education institutions.

Public Image: It seems as if some Nigerians do not value the certificates of those who attend open and distance learning. They believe that ODL students are not subjected to, or rather exposed to, all the practical aspects of some courses. Some believe that their certificates were for sale; that is a rich student could easily find his way out. ODL students are not also exposed to direct university environments such as libraries, laboratories, university cyber cafés, student unions and lecture theatres. Hence some employers and the Teaching Service Commission do not upgrade their staff who have acquired additional qualifications. Some secondary school principals do not recognize graduates from sandwich programmes because they believe they were not well tested (Borisade, 2007).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aims and objectives of Open and Distance Learning cannot be achieved where the problems of low TeleDensity, electricity, inconsistency in programme and policy implementation, poor economy, absence of trained teachers, poor postal system, bad public image, 'sorting' among students, poor study habits, inadequate facilities, delayed results, high cost and managerial ineffectiveness are prevalent. ODL as a tool for increasing access to education should liaise with conventional institutions including Libraries, NGOs, community leaders, and potential students to move the programme forward. Based on the problems identified, the following recommendations are made.

The Government should subsidize ODL programmes and improve the electricity supply to the nation. Nigeria as a nation could emulate Brazil's A-Plus television series that gives teachers regular access to examples of classroom teaching together with the voices of teachers talking about their experience and concerns. These extension activities aim to assist or help teachers extend teaching practices in ways that include community involvement, participation and development. Other countries worthy of emulation are Egypt's national network distance training which uses interactive TV technology (ICT medium) and South Africa's reorientation of teachers for curriculum reform and change, titled 'English in Action', an interactive radio programme by a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). Nigerians should adopt this for better education reform up to the tertiary level.

Management should admit students in line with the available resources on the ground. The criteria for the admission of students should be in line with conventional institutions. The idea of ODL programmes being an avenue to generate revenue or improve IGR should be changed to the production of strong manpower for national development. The use of computers for computing results will reduce the problem of delayed results. Course materials can be delivered through radio and television broadcast, videotape, interactive telephone, satellite, cable or Integrated Service Digital Network (ISDN) Lines. Many would be distance learners in Nigeria have access to radio, television, and videotape; this makes these media good potential delivery systems for open and distance learning.

With the combination of communication and technology tools, the delivery of distance learning may be effective. This can be ensured through the integrated involvement of all stakeholders and effective planning to ensure successful implementation of distance learning programmes in Nigeria. No national educational system can rise above its teachers' quality; hence teachers of ODL should be well trained to improve their effectiveness and efficiency in the teaching learning process. Students should be more focused, adopt a good maintenance culture for the available facilities, develop good study habits and avoid 'sorting'.

Programmes that combine conventional and distance methods are strongly recommended for Nigeria because of its dual role of face-to-face and print learning. This could remove the society idea that the ODL students are undeveloped professionals.

ODL should not be seen as a cost-saving educational measure, which can be implemented without serious planning and good implementation but rather it should be seen as an educational innovation that requires greater attention to planning and guided implementation for the development of manpower.

The enthusiasm shown by government and steps taken so far can only be sustained with the involvement of all stakeholders (Government, business groups, community leaders, teachers, students, conventional institutions, UNESCO, and grassroots citizens).

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