

**TRAINING NEEDS OF TUTORIAL / INSTRUCTIONAL FACILITATORS OF
MASTERS IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION PROGRAMMES OF NATIONAL
OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA**

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Abstract:

The needs for graduate management education in developing countries like Nigeria have long been identified. This is a result of the twin forces of globalization and democratic governance which the country subscribed to at the beginning of the 21st century. The Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme has been designed to equip participants with knowledge, skills and attitude for managing corporate concerns in the challenging environment of contemporary times. The programme which has also been designed to equip participants with skills for identifying and operationalising investment and entrepreneurial opportunities is provided with specialisation in both traditional areas like Corporate Governance; Banking & Finance; Human Resources Management; Marketing; and in non-traditional areas like e-Banking; e-Library; e-Business.

This study critically examined the various training needs of instructional/tutorial facilitators of MBA Learners of NOUN. MBA programme is a post-graduate programme domiciled in School of Business & Human Resources Management of NOUN.

The major sources of information for this study was gathered through the administration of questionnaires to incumbent and prospective facilitators; interviewing all the stakeholders in School of Business & Human Resources Management.

Finally, it was concluded that training of facilitators for this category of Learners (MBA) and those of other programmes of the institution is essential and of great importance for effective and efficient learning in an open and distance learning institution like NOUN.

Introduction:

Training as related to human resources development can be described as educational “maintenance”. This means the preservation and continuous refinement and updating of human capacity and skills to work in a given process of production. The process can be contrasted with effective deployment and utilization, which is the matching of their skills and potentials with a given job (Bukhala, 1970).

Hamza (2003) quoting Cole, G.A. (1979:341 – 343) had stated that human resources are the most dynamic of all the organisation’s resources. They need considerable attention

from the organisation's management, if they are to realize their full potential in their work. Thus, motivation, leadership, communication, work restructuring, payments systems and training/development may all be included in the issues, which have to be faced by management today.

NOUN as the only single mode (ODL) institution in Nigeria was established in October, 2002 through the National Open University Act of 1983 that was earlier suspended in 1984. The benefit of NOUN to the education sector is in its ability to provide educational services to as many people as have the ability, and are willing to benefit from the quality education provided by this institution. The institution operates through five Schools and a Centre, namely:

1. School of Arts and Social Sciences (SASS)
2. School of Business and Human Resources Management (SBHRM)
3. School of Education (SE)
4. School of Law (SL)
5. School of Science and Technology (SST), and
6. Centre for Continuing Education and Workplace Training (CCEWT)

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) dedicates itself to preparing professionals in various disciplines including instructional facilitators through the distance learning mode. It allows for stand-alone self-development courses through flexible delivery, so that learners can have the convenience to choose the time, place and what to study, Jegede (2007).

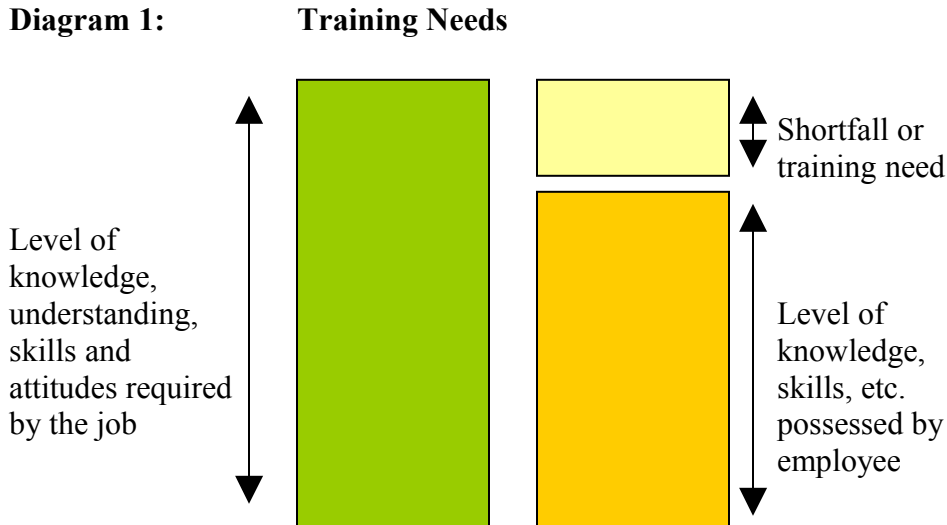
The School of Business & Human Resources Management houses the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programmes. Specialty areas of MBA programmes currently available are:

- Banking and Financial Services
- Corporate Governance
- e-Banking
- e-Library
- e-Business
- Human Resources Management
- Information Technology
- Marketing

This paper is centred on the training needs of tutorial / instructional facilitators for the above mentioned MBA programmes.

Identifying Training Needs:

Training need is any shortfall in terms of employee knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes against what is required by the job, or the demands of organizational change. In diagrammatic form, this can be expressed as shown below:



Role of Instructional Facilitators in ODL

They are expected to have reasonable subject / discipline expertise, like the job, willing to contribute their time and effort in helping the learners and be meticulous with learners' records.

They must be versatile i.e. both academically and administratively. They should understand the workings of the institution (NOUN).

Facilitators are expected to attend to learners' difficulties, complex concepts, learners' doubts and proper interpretation of course materials.

Facilitators are encouraged to give assignments to learners as instruments for promoting interaction and evaluating learners' performance. Significant comments on TMA sheets of learners should be encouraging because such comments help learners improve on their learning strategies. Non-teaching comments that are harmful and misleading should not be used by facilitators.

Response to TMAs should be within the shortest possible time.

How do we determine training needs of facilitators?

Because the provision of education through open and distance learning mode is a new, dynamic and radical innovation in Nigeria, there is the need to devise an equally radical

approach to training the instructional facilitators of this institution. The reason for this approach is not far-fetched. Most of the tutorial/instructional facilitators employed by the National Open University of Nigeria, are drawn from the existing conventional (face-to-face) universities, polytechnics and colleges of education where personal interaction between the lecturers and students are paramount.

In an open and distance learning environment, interaction between tutors and learners are less as most of the time, learners are provided with their course materials in hard published materials, CDs, DVDs, uploaded in the internet for downloading, etc. The only time when interaction takes place between learners and instructional facilitators is during the face-to-face tutorial sessions at the university's study centres. Qualified tutors/facilitators who are part-time staff of the university and who are experts in the various fields of study are used to conduct the facilitation.

There is therefore the need to prepare the facilitators to understand the operations and workings of a distance learning education or pedagogical mode. To determine the training needs of these facilitators for the school's MBA programmes, the School of Business & Human Resources Management distributes questionnaires to existing and prospective facilitators seeking such information as: length of time of involvement in tutorial facilitation, how they have been coping, and what areas of their work requires training, etc. It is on the basis of responses received from the facilitators that the training needs are determined.

Once these needs have been conceptualized, it is now easy to organize a workshop, symposium or induction where experts in the field of open and distance learning are brought in to train. After training, participants brainstorm to come up with communiqué or working paper that would guide their future activities within the National Open University of Nigeria.

Systematic Training

A term frequently used to describe well-organised training (and development) is 'systematic training'. This can be illustrated diagrammatically as a cycle of events, which is initiated by the institution's policy, and sustained by its training unit, as shown in the diagram below:

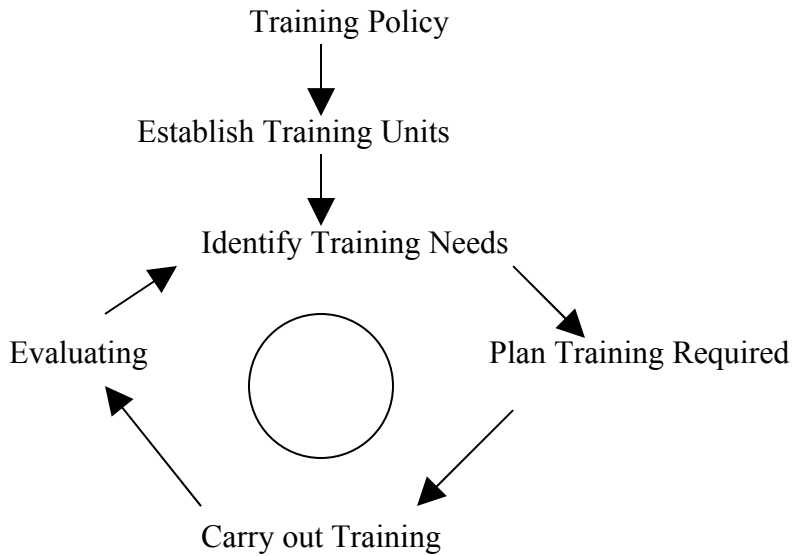


Diagram 2: Systematic Training: The Basic Cycle

Benefits of Systematic Training

These include:

- Provision of a pool of skilled manpower for the institution
- Improvement of existing skills.
- Increase in the knowledge and experience of employees.
- Improvements in job performance with resulting improvement in overall productivity.
- Improved service to learners
- Greater commitment of facilitators (i.e. increased motivation).
- Increased value of individual employees' knowledge and skills, and
- Personal growth opportunities for employees (Onwarishi, Francis, 1974).

Why is Training Needed?

Training of both new and existing facilitators in open and distance learning programme is essential to the development of the competencies of the practicing facilitators. It is important that NOUN sees training as an investment rather than a cost, and give it high priority in institutional plans and funding allocations. It is also important for the NOUN to ensure that when training is provided, the institution is ready to utilize the new learning so that opportunities for capacity building are not lost.

NOUN appears conscious of this fact when virtually all its workforce were sent on three days' training at NIEPA in Ondo town, Ondo State on piecemeal basis between July, 2007 and January, 2008.

National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) has, as its mandate, to develop the workforce of educational institutions through capacity-building, continuous training, consulting, research, information dissemination and resource centre services.

The role of NOUN at NIEPA was, therefore, a collaborative management strategy aimed at empowering its academic and non-academic staff with specialised and relevant skills in planning, administration and management of educational services.

When is Training Needed?

The practice of open and distance learning generates a variety of roles and needs. Existing and prospective facilitators often require to learn new work practices and skills. Individuals and groups have to:

- take on new roles, especially if open and distance learning is unfamiliar as is the case for NOUN facilitators which are drawn from conventional tertiary institutions on ground;
- adapt to new ways of teaching and communicating;
- use of new technologies such as A-Tutor software package, which alter familiar processes of teaching and communication;
- manage dispersed and decentralized institutions or complex processes;
- be responsible for supporting learners at a distance;
- develop better skills in teamwork, coordination and the management of schedules and records, and
- take on unaccustomed roles as trainers.

Steps in implementing Training Programme for Facilitators

Weimin and Dhanarajan (2005) had stated that “whatever policy and strategy for training facilitators are adopted, the same steps are involved in implementing the plan”. According to them, these steps are:

- define and agree within the institution the general and particular needs for training, based on a systematic needs analysis;
- review possible ways of meeting needs and the availability of financial resources;
- establish priorities;
- select appropriate training events and interventions;
- construct a coherent training plan in the light of available resources;
- communicate to all facilitators and build a supportive climate for training;
- prepare an evaluation approach and plan;
- provide the training and evaluate its efficiency and effectiveness, and
- use the evaluation data to assess its impact, to improve training provision and to inform future plans.

Effects of training on Facilitators' Performance

Transfer of skills acquired during training to the actual job to be performed is not automatic (Weimin & Dhanarajan, 2005). A number of factors affect the effectiveness of this transfer. They are:

- the nature of the skills learned; for example, interpersonal skills transfer less well than psychomotor skills;
- the time lag between learning something and using it in a 'real work' context; new skills need to be used in practice before they deteriorate;
- the number of elements common to the training and the job situation; that is, the greater the number, the stronger the transfer;
- perceptions of relevance and quality of the training by participants; and
- attitudes of colleagues, schools and the institution as a whole towards the training.

The Distance Learner as a Facilitator

It must be emphasized that the facilitators, above all, and also a number of the distance tutors receive further training every time they meet the learners when seminars are held. These talks with distance learners do not merely provide information on the training sessions and guidance offered by the institute. They give to the teaching staff great insight into the problems of the learners, information on their private and professional lives, how learners handle the teaching material, how they actually study and what learning difficulties they have. The expectations learners have of the ODL institution and of the distance tutor in particular are expressed quite clearly, meaning that the distance tutors and counselors are given the opportunity to review their own work and discuss this with learners. This is a form of training not directly organized by the institution and it cannot be stressed enough how important this 'type of training' is (Delling, 1988).

Attributes of Tutorials in an ODL

Tutorials are very important because they bridge the distance between the learners and facilitators.

Tutorials must be problem-specific. Facilitators are not expected to teach but to help learners solve problems resulting from the tutor marked assignments and self-assessment questions in the course materials.

Tutorials schedule should be a mutual agreement between facilitators and learners.

Review of Responses from Questionnaires and Interviews

200 questionnaires were administered on learners and facilitators at 100 apiece. Out of that number that was administered on learners, 90 (90%) responses were received while 50 (50%) came from the facilitators. A review of the responses shows that all learner and facilitator respondents consider open and distance learning to be an unfamiliar mode of

learning. Similarly, 30 (33%) of respondents that represent younger learners prefer the face-to-face teaching as opposed to distance learning mode; while 67% (60) respondents that cover matured learners are more comfortable with the facilitation system.

Out of the 50 responses received from the administered questionnaires on facilitators, 40 (80%) who represent existing facilitators claimed that they are not familiar with the facilitation system, but are however not averse to a change which they feel should be gradual and not instantly. They consider changes from face-to-face teaching to facilitation to be a great challenge, but needed time to adjust the new mode.

Conclusion:

We have tried in this paper to examine the role of training of facilitators for MBA programme in an open and distance learning environment.

The study critically examined the various training needs of instructional/tutorial facilitators of MBA Learners of NOUN.

For the facilitators to discharge their responsibilities effectively and efficiently, it is recommended that they must be properly trained to imbibe the new work culture of open and distance learning system.

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