

THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA IN PROVIDING ENHANCED QUALITY EDUCATION FOR THE WORK AND LEARN STUDENT.

**Dr Ogidan Rotimi Joshua,
National Open University of Nigeria
ogidanrotimi@yahoo.co.uk**

ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, it is a general belief that the standard of education is falling. This is sequel to the liberalization policy of the federal government on education, poor teachers salary, poor funding, obsolete and inadequate teaching and learning facilities coupled with irregular supervision of teaching and learning activities. With these concerns, it is certain that the commitment of the educational institutions of learning in ensuring that there is quality assurance in service delivery would be hampered. It is also likely that institutions of learning will produce ill-equipped students who will eventually turn out to be poor products in the society. With the establishment of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and the recognition given to the already existing Open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria, there is a new approach to teaching and learning activities. As a single mode Open and Distance Learning institution, the National Open University of Nigeria was specifically established by the federal government to ensure that there is highly accessible and enhanced quality education in Nigeria. At present, it is on record that substantial population of the students in this institution are known to be working and learning at the same time (work and learn). This paper will therefore discuss the characteristics of the work and learn student population, their educational needs and the processes that are involved in providing quality education for them in the National Open University of Nigeria. The implications of this on the development of education in Nigeria would be discussed while necessary suggestions for improvement would be mentioned.

INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has over the centuries developed from a modest and inconsequential beginning through correspondence course to a full-fledge modern day technology-facilitated, flexible and learner- driven, self- directed learning (Jegade 2005,3). As a field of human endeavor, ODL requires a well trained crop of high quality human resources to operate, manage and sustain in order to provide effective and efficient instructional delivery and other services to learners who are often in locations that are remote from the institution or instructional facilitator.

In the Open and Distance Learning system, arrangement is made in such a way that people who are already in an employment can study. By this form of learning, Jegede (2005,4) observed that students will enjoy the opportunity of working and learning at the same time without one activity negatively affecting the other. It is also a reality for such a group of learners who are aptly regarded as work and learn students to move from one level of education to another. According to Ipaye (2007,56), progress will however be at individual's pace, ability and capability. Work and learn can also be regarded as a way of exploring the synthesis between the theories, conceptual frameworks in the study materials and work based practices which all put together can constitute veritable opportunity for students to acquire enhanced quality education.

The task for learners to combine work with learning can be an exciting opportunity for them to get quality education without leaving the work place. According to Ipaye (2007, 8), programmes that are built on skills and knowledge are the main focus in ODL. This is a reality in the Schools and Study Centres of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Generally, the learners' focus is to acquire skills from their studies which they can subsequently apply in their place of work or businesses. This could be part of the reasons why Ogidan (2007,8) stated that, the fact that Open and Distance Learning is flexible and that it accommodates the students, could be one of the reasons why

the federal government of Nigeria established NOUN to provide access for thousands of eligible applicants who have difficulties in gaining access to conventional Universities. This circumstance in Nigeria also made NOUN to introduce courses that are relevant to market needs thereby creating access for worker- students of different categories.

FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES.

Institutions of higher learning, particularly the conventional universities, have become helpless in solving problem of falling standard of education (Ipaye 2008,12). Invariably, according to him most of the graduates from the higher institutions are ill-equipped, poorly trained and lack the relevant skills and knowledge that are needed in the work- place. Utomi P. (2001, 6) enumerated the following as being the reasons for the falling standard of education in Nigerian universities.

Inadequate Funding: He stated that lack of adequate funding started from the military era and it led to the following inadequacies in the society.

- Lack of equipment
- Poor maintenance of infrastructure
- Poor remunerations for teachers and over employment
- Low morale
- Poor economic situation in the country.
- Incessant industrial action
- Indiscipline on the campuses
- Disrespect for teachers

Brain drain as a result of poor remuneration: This also eventually degenerated to:

- Poor quality of products from primary/ secondary schools who are eventually pushed to the tertiary institutions.
- Examination malpractice.

Poor quality education acquired also explains why most employers consider most graduates unemployable. Those who are lucky to get employment often have to be retrained in order to meet the challenges of their new jobs. This is sad because the value of education acquired is being questioned by these training and re-training exercises. However, NOUN epitomises a shift in paradigm where learners are able to combine work and study in order to acquire an enhanced quality education. The process of education in ODL is shifting from the conventional method where learning activities are carried out through books and face to face lecturing which sometimes makes learning ineffective and teacher - centered rather than learner - centered. The mode of learning delivery in NOUN is already addressing this by ensuring that quality education is enhanced among the learners.

BENEFITS OF QUALITY EDUCATION

Learners have a lot to benefit from quality education, particularly when they are able to stand on their own in rendering services that add productive value to their jobs in their places of employment. Fjortoft (1996,16) reported that work and learn experience improves persistence and commitment to acquiring functional skills. Similarly, Mealy and Loller (2000,28) revealed that work and learn mode of education tremendously assists students to adjust to independent learning just as it enhances learners' movement towards professional growth. These findings corroborate Schwiebert (2000, 10), who stated that work experience complements learning by providing direction and feed back which eventually culminate in meaningful self development.

Keegan (1998 ,5) had earlier stated that work and learn influences the learner's retention, and this directly affects the quality of academic performance. His theory suggests that student retention is

enhanced when available academic work is followed up with active complementary use of skills that were acquired in learning. Invariably, the learner's exposure to work is being utilized in reconstructing the interpersonal relationship that exist in the face to face classroom.

NOUN'S VISION AND MISSION

Specifically, the NOUN vision and mission depicts the mandate of providing access and ensuring a good quality in the educational services rendered to the students. Scholarly distinction is promoted in all its ramifications so that graduates are products that everybody can be proud of any time and any where. The Vision and Mission statements of National Open University of Nigeria are therefore stated below.

Vision

To be regarded as the foremost University providing accessible and enhanced quality education anchored in social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach.

Mission

To provide functional, cost effective flexible learning which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WORK AND LEARN STUDENTS IN NOUN

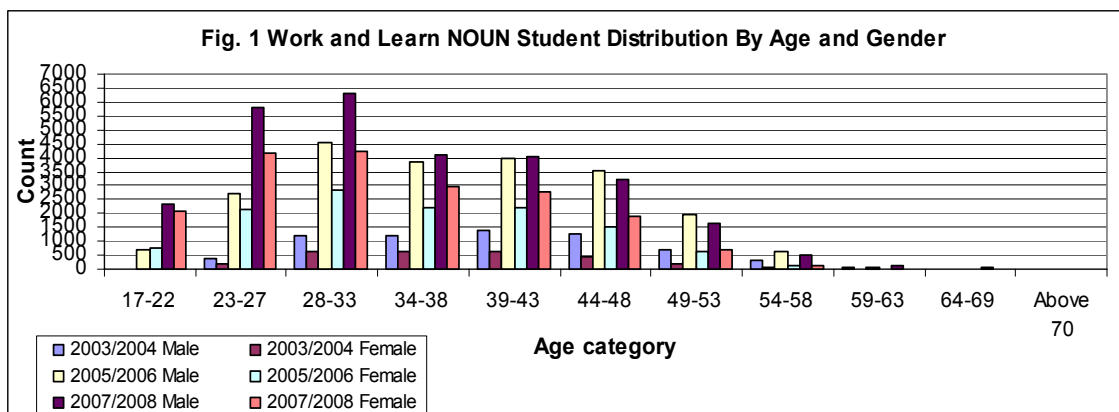
Interactions with the NOUN work and learn students show that they have some common characteristics. The characteristics are as follows,

- They value wisdom.
- They seek to socialize particularly in tutorial classes
- They are emotionally flexible
- They are mentally flexible
- They exhibit goal directed behaviour
- They often work with a set plan
- They set aside a special time for learning.
- They prefer, simple, explicit, structured learning materials
- They possibly feel a sense of isolation but not abandonment

Table 1: Work - and - Learn NOUN Student Distribution

Age Range	Count			
	2003/2004	2005/2006	2007/2008	Total
17-22	51	1,480	4,398	5,929
23-27	572	4,869	9,952	15,393
28-33	1,933	7,401	10,495	19,829
34-38	1,920	6,057	7,107	15,084
39-43	2,055	6,198	6,827	15,080
44-48	1,773	5,017	5,160	11,950
49-53	939	2,568	2,300	5,807
54-58	391	765	657	1,813
59-63	110	71	148	329
64-69	27	20	47	94
Above 70	11	16	24	51
Total	9782	34462	47115	91,359

Source–National Open University of Nigeria Student Registration Data Base



Source– National Open University of Nigeria Student Registration Data Base
12TH May,2008

Table 1 and Figure 1 above show both tabular and graphical expression of the population of National Open University of Nigerian students. Figure 1 displays the students’ population on the basis of age in the academic sessions of 2003/2004,2005/2006 and 2007/2008. Students in the 2003/2004 and 2006/2006 have written some of the university examinations while students in the 2007/2008 have done their matriculation. But some of them are still going through the registration exercise and as such have not attended any examination. This group of students have registered and collected their study materials. The table and figure show that majority of the work and learn students in NOUN are between the ages 23-48 years while students in ages 17-22 are more in number than students in ages 54-69. More male students are identified to be involved in the work and learn programme than female students

Table1 and Figure 1 is a clear indication that several students are combining work with studies at the same time. However, the number of the mature work- and- learn students is more than the number of the students who are relatively young and are just graduating from the secondary schools. As young as they are, they combine studies with work in order to care for themselves and at same time improve their educational standard.

ROLE OF NOUN IN PROVIDING ENHANCED QUALITY EDUCATION

At present, NOUN is the only Federal Government established single-mode tertiary institution in Nigeria that is dedicated to quality open access education through distance learning (Jegede 2003,10). Management practices in NOUN are strictly and consistently aimed at achieving quality education which takes into cognisance the global perspective of what quality education should be on one hand, and on the other, synchronises the effort and aspiration of the Nigerian nation which is clearly stated in the nation’s educational policy. In specific terms, the National Open University of Nigeria is playing a good role by paying attention to the following important areas that can enhance the quality of education among the work and learn student population. The areas are,

Academic Interactions

- Use of self instructional learning materials through access devices and learner activities
- Use of Tutor Marked Assignments
- Inclusion of tutor comments in the Assignments
- Introduction of individual and group project

- Introduction of practicals and field work

Academic Support Services

Academic Support Services are rendered to the students, to provide guidance in regulating or checking students' activities in the following areas.

- Inadequate level of students preparedness
- Poor study and reading skills
- Poor time management skills
- Pressure of time (adult learners are on jobs and have family obligations)
- State of isolation, where there is no peer pressure.
- High level of anxiety/frustration
- Bad choices of programmes/courses
- Readability and Assimilation level of course materials
- Nature and level of assignments

Regular Interaction with the Students.

NOUN ensures that there is regular interaction with the students either by phone, face to face or through the use of internet which eventually helps learners to achieve the following

- Get introduced to the course effectively,
- Divide course work appropriately so that studies can get better organised
- Make studies and learning to be more stimulating
- Correct learners when they go wrong
- Reinforces learning with encouragement
- Apply learning to real or hypothetical problems
- Revisions of course material becomes easier
- Builds purposeful relations between learners and the institution
- Provides contact between learners, the tutors and the institutions(tutorials, laboratory work , etc)
- Provides communication between the learners, the tutors and the institution(assignments, project)
- Aids continuous and uninterrupted non-time bound interaction with counsellors during which the counsellors provide help to the students on issues like, taking appropriate decisions about time management, social concerns and encouraging self motivation.

Media for Counselling

The media for counselling is effectively serviced and utilized by the university. Through each medium, appropriate support staff, tutorial facilitators, counsellors, information technologist and library staff provide information twenty four hours and seven days in a week to students . They also help to monitor and encourage students in what they do from time to time. The available functional media are as follows:

- Face-to- face interaction
- Telephone contact
- Writing letters
- Audio cassettes
- Video CD
- Radio broadcast
- On-line synchronous mode of interaction

On-line asynchronous mode of interaction

WORK- PLACE EXPERIENCE OF NOUN STUDENTS

Interactions with the students on-line and in face - to - face during counselling and tutorial facilitation revealed that learning through work is an exciting opportunity for them to get university education without leaving the workplace. It affords students -workers privilege to build on existing academic knowledge and utilize such knowledge in work- related functions.

Most learners enjoy the unlimited opportunity of learning at their own pace and place ,while the possession of study materials makes it possible for them to be able to decide on when to do self learning through the materials that have been specially prepared for them. They are also exposed to the use of electronic medial like radio, television, audio video materials, telephones and computers. Just as they are routinely exposed to elaborate support services, they are acquainted with the modern techniques of evaluation. The students are however encouraged to work in line with the procedure of earning cumulative credits that will lead to the award of desirable degree.

The mode of learning in NOUN programmes encourages students to go through their study materials and apply the knowledge at work place. This will make them to be self-referral in their studies. The knowledge acquired is enhanced because they have the natural tendency to grow and evolve through the processes of working and learning in ways that they can develop their full potential. Enhanced quality education inspires, motivates, and guides the students to learn. An educational approach that teaches students to be self referral involves a process where students discovers that the basis of all disciplines is consciousness and as they grow in consciousness and acquire deeper knowledge they come to understand things in terms of themselves and how knowledge relates and connects to the world around them.

The students enjoy the use of study materials with simple language expressions that bring inspiration, motivation and guidance to them by the holistic approach. For example, if students recognise creativity, intelligence, professional expertise, artistic productivity and other such qualities, they will naturally use such in developing useful qualities in themselves.

The students are receptive, and so intrinsically motivated to learn instead of being extrinsically motivated solely by grades or peer pressure to learn. An enhanced quality education makes students to enjoy learning. Deeper understanding of learning materials along with practical application by them creates new possibilities for students. They therefore experience a sense of accomplishment and success.

Enhanced quality education also has the goal of creating enlightened students. It also gives room for students to develop to their full potential. Teaching accomplishes this goal of enlightening the student when they have improved in mind and learning. A student is truly educated when he is able to experience knowledge in terms of himself, and to express it in ways that are of value to himself and to others. When others appreciate his worth, then a student feels fulfilled because he has achieved something worthwhile for himself and his society.

IMPLICATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Enhancement of quality education through the educational activities of the National Open University of Nigeria will have a far-reaching implications on the development of education in Nigeria. The method of service delivery particularly for the work and learn student population will help the society to re-gain the confidence once reposed in the university as a citadel of learning. The human products would be able to put the knowledge they possess into practical use.

Information technology would not only be embraced but become more crucial in the dissemination of knowledge. This is so since it would be a mark of positive response to the demand of the modern age that applicants must be computer literate and be able to use computer skills in diverse ways to solve problems.

With enhanced quality education, the modern day method of teaching and learning would become functionally learner centred to the extent that learners would have the responsibility of deciding what knowledge they want to acquire thereby dictating, what they want to learn. It may have a drastic effect on the curriculum since subject areas that are obsolete would be jettisoned and replaced with functional knowledge that can stand the test of time. While market demand will take over what the curriculum should offer as subject areas for teaching.

If enhanced quality education is integrated in the development of study materials backed up with on-line guidance, learning would become easier. With this, learners will be able to rely on and return to their study materials any time they need guidance instead of concentrating on face to face lecture method of receiving instruction. With this new approach to disseminating knowledge, learners would be able to enjoy self-referral instead of running from pillar to post.

Educational institutions, administrators and educationists have no option than to embrace the procedures for providing enhanced quality in Nigerian education. Each level of the Nigerian educational System must be equipped with the necessary processes and ingredients of quality measures which would make the education more functional, meaningful and relevant to the needs of the society generally but particularly reflect the demand in the work place.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In addition to the various innovative efforts in operation by NOUN, towards achieving an enhanced quality education for the students, it is suggested that NOUN should continue to carry out constant review and do regular assessment of the following.

- Quality of the various academic programmes .
- Quality of the Course Materials, Course writers Editors and ancillary staff.
- Quality of the support services (academic, administrative.)
- Quality of the medial inputs and the medial-mix
- Quality of the interactions between learners and the University support staff.
- Culturally Specific learning materials
- Level and types of technology required and use for service delivery.

Moreover, need for student support should be emphasized in interpersonal communications. This is important since it is obvious that responsiveness reduces the sense of isolation that a distance learner can feel. The frequency and content of the contact between students and the facilitators of learning strongly connects the learners to studies. Student Counsellors' contact with the learner through written, the telephone, face-to-face, or electronic demonstrate concern for the learners' academic

welfare. The University' policy should further encourage the learners to combine work with study since such an arrangement is strategic, helpful and is integral to the process of enhancing the quality of education provided to the students. It can also be helpful in making learners to endure the rigours of studies. If work and learn is a good and effective strategy for man power development, and which also enhances qualitative education, the conventional universities and other tertiary institutions would do well by embracing and incorporating this new trend into their development plans.

CONCLUSION

It is from enhanced quality education that meaningful education can be derived. If education must therefore be meaningful and useful in solving daily human problems as they arise, it must be of very good quality which is characteristic of what the work and learn student of the National Open University of Nigeria enjoy. With this kind of pragmatic system integrated into the students' learning activities, NOUN is poised to continue to assist in raising the standard of education in Nigeria and become a good model to other institutions particularly the conventional universities.

REFERENCES

- Fjortoft, N. (1996,16). Persistence in a Distant Learning programme: A Case in Pharmaceutical Education. *The American Journal of Distance Education*10 (3): 49-59
- Ipaye, B.(2007,8). Study Guides and Learning Strategies in Open and Distance learning, Lagos: Printserve Ltd.
- Jegede, O. (2003). Welcome! ... Experience a Whole New World of Learning. Prospectus, National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos. The Regent Ltd
- Jegede O.(2005,4). Induction Workshop for the Staff of the National Open University of Nigeria, lagos facilitated by the Commonwealth of Learning 17th-21st January ,2005.
- Keegan, D. (1998,5). Foundations of Distance Education, London: Routledge.
- Mealy, L.,and Loller, B. (2000,28). E- learning: Expanding the Training Classroom through Technology, Austin, TX: Rector Duncan and Associates.
- Ogidan R. J. (2007,8). Counselling As a Tool for Conflict Resolution among Open and Distance Learners in Nigeria. *Biudiscourse*, Vol.1No1. (A multi-disciplinary Journal of faculty of Arts & Education). Benson Idahosa University, Nigeria.
- Schwiebert, V. L. (2000,10). *Mentoring: Creating Connected, Empowered Relationships*, Alexandra, VA: American Counselling Association.
- Utomi P. (2001,6). The University, the Fallen House of Nigeria and the Nehemian Complex, Nsukka. A Lecture delivered at an Anniversary lecture on the occasion of the celebration of forty years of the university of Nigeria.