

Appraisal of Distance Learning and Sustainable National Development in the 21st century in Nigeria: Prospects Challenges

¹Umar Muhammad & ²Nura Bawa

¹*Department of Educational Foundations, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria*

²*Department of Curriculum and Education Technology,
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria*

Abstract

This Paper aims to look at prospects and challenges of Distance Learning and it affects Sustainable National Development in the 21st century. To this aim the paper will have examined the concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), the evolution of Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria, the prospect of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and the problems of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). It was discovered that despite the huge benefits of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme in Nigeria, proper implementation of the programme is still faced with a lot of challenges. The paper therefore, concludes that, Open and Distance Learning is important because it makes education accessible and reduces cost while maintaining quality. The use of distance education makes for equity of educational opportunities and services. It was recommended that the Nigerian government should thus subsidise ODL programmes just like the conventional school system and improve electricity supplies to the nation.

Keywords: *Challenges, Distance learning, National development, Prospects*

Corresponding Author: Umar Muhammad

Background to the Study

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme has been considered as one of the most important educational innovations in Nigeria is leading the country to a sustainable development. Open and Distance Learning has provided opportunities for those who could not afford to leave their job to attend to full time conventional 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'. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has offered access to many people who would have previously been denied access to educational opportunities based on where they live and work, poor-economic circumstances, social status and so on. Open and Distance Learning remains the primary mechanism for the information-driven age, a tool that has bridged the gap between developed and developing communities. The provision of quality education to millions has been one of the struggles facing developing countries such as Nigeria. Experiences both nationally and internationally have shown that conventional education is extremely hard pressed to meet the demands of today's socio educational milieu especially for developing countries like Nigeria. The limitation of spaces in the universities imposes restrictions on access. If they had their way almost every product of the senior secondary system will want a place in a conventional university. However, statistics from the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) have revealed that they cannot have their way see blow

Table 1: Number of Applicants and Admissions into Nigerian Universities

Year	No. of Universities	Application	Admission	% Admitted	Total Unplaced
1998/1999	39	537,226	64,176	11.9%	473,050
2002/2003	53	994,381	51,843	5.2%	942,335
2003/2004	54	1,046,950	105,157	10%	941,793
2004/2005	56	841,878	122,492	14.5%	719,386
2005/2006	75	916,371	76,984	8.40%	839,387
2006/2007	76	806,089	123,626	15.3%	679,846
2007/2008	94	911,653	107,370	11.8%	804,283
2008/2009	95	1,054,060	200,000	18.9%	854,060
2009/2010					
2010/2011					
2011/2012	117	1,493,604	400,691	26.83 %	993604
2012/2013	118	1,728,003	500000	28.94%	1024003

Source 1: Okeke, (2009). Access in Nigerian education. Lead paper presented at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Nigerian Academy of Education, held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and updated by the researcher

Source 2: <http://www.jamb.org.ng/Unifiedtme/>

On the average, less than 29 per cent of those who apply for admission are able to secure placement. Responding to this state of affairs, The National Universities Commission and the Committee of Vice Chancellors of Nigerian Universities (2008) has alerted the nation on the

need to create space for prospective students. This is due to the fact that out of the 447,928 candidates who are qualified for university admission for 2008/2009 session, only 153,000 were admitted in the existing universities because of the carrying capacities of each of the universities. Similarly, while expressing worries about the inability of qualified candidates to get a space in the conventional universities, Okebukola (2007) put forward the following suggestions:

- a. Re-introduction of the Higher School Certificate
- b. Qualified polytechnics and colleges of education should be given degree-awarding status
- c. The National Open University of Nigeria should be strengthened to take in more prospective undergraduates

Thus, given that Open and Distance education has, historically, been advanced as both a major means of upgrading the quality of education and succor for those who missed access to the conventional schools in Nigeria, the revised National Policy on Education (2004) detailed that the goal of distance education should be to:

1. Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied;
2. Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place;
3. Encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula;
4. Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

The Concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

There are several approaches to defining the term Open and Distance Learning (ODL). 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. 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. According to UNESCO (2002), ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web presenting 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. To Kaufman, Watkins and Guerra (2000), distance education means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of institution providing the learning opportunity.

The Federal Ministry of Education (2002) defines ODL as any form of learning in which the provider enables individual learners to exercise choices over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning. Alaezi (2005) refers to open and distance learning as educational patterns, approaches and strategies that permit people to learn with no barriers in respect of time and

space, age and previous educational qualification – no entry qualification, no age limit, no regard to sex, race, tribe, state of origin and so on. On the other hand, Dodds (2005) in his argument against the concept defines open learning as an approach which combines the principles of learner centredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning prospect in the expectation that learners can succeed and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.

Distance education aims at increasing access to education for those who have difficulty in accessing it within the mainstream such as the poor, illiterate, women, marginalised and those living in remote areas. Distance education is the means by which the teacher is taken literally to the student. It is a teaching and learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communications technologies (Dhanarajan, 2008). Open learning on the other hand refers to policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning (Glen, 2005). General Open and Distance Learning education courses are made up of a number of course components or learning materials which can include any of the following: teaching texts, study guides, course guides, readers or anthologies, assignments (with or without an accompanying tutor guide), television broadcasts or videotapes, radio broadcasts or audiotapes, software or online information and data, CD-ROMS, textbooks and laboratory materials. Tuition materials are sent with questions to be answered, it could be recorded electronic materials and the students do this at their spare time. In addition, some students support may be provided, either through personal communication at local universities or through online student tutors. Both the media used for open and distance learning and the student support arrangements affect the possible level of interaction in ODL.

It can be deduced from these definitions that open and distance learning provides educational opportunities needed by anyone, anywhere and at anytime. It provides increased educational opportunities to a larger population in different situations and needs. Both students and employees with distance problems can benefit because it is more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered anywhere.

The Evolution of Distance Learning in Nigeria

Distance learning in Nigeria dates back to the colonial time. Owoeye (2004) opines that since the colonial period, correspondence colleges from United Kingdom have provided intermediate and advanced level training to a number of qualified Nigerians via correspondence courses. Distance studies in Nigeria started around the 70s at the University of Ibadan and this was followed by correspondence study, part time programmes offered by conventional universities and other schools, continuing education programmes of Adult Education Department of the universities, programmes offered by the National Teacher's Institute (NTI), the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and sandwich programmes offered by universities and other institutions. The sandwich programmes were

established in the mid 80s and run by some Nigerian Universities and Colleges of Education. The sandwich programmes were originally designed and run during the school long vacations to create opportunities for participation by workers, especially teachers. These programmes are open to all categories of learners with varied entry qualifications ranging from Primary School Certificate, attempted School Certificate, School Certificate holders, TCII teachers, National Certificate of Education (NCE) and first degree holders. More women enrolled in this programme. This was to create access for those who are not able to make it to the conventional schools because of time and other factors.

Although Open and Distance Learning was introduced to the university education system in Nigeria in 1983, it only became functional in 2001. It is a timely and phenomenal evolution in the history of Nigerian higher education. The programme provides access to young, elderly and disadvantaged groups who are interested in the acquisition of university education, anytime and anywhere. Open and distance education is flexible, and learner friendly. Multi perspective approaches to learning are adopted in order to ascertain the quality of instruction. The emergence of the system of ODL is an inevitable and unparalleled advancement in the history of educational development in Nigeria and internationally. Unlike the formal system of education which has its inherent limitations with regards to expansion, provision of access, equity and cost- effectiveness, the growth of open and distance mode of education has now made education flexible by providing increased educational opportunities to a larger population in different situations and needs. Thus, we are moving gradually from the exclusive, closed system mode of 'privileged' access to education, towards a more inclusive educational model, which supports and is reflective of UNESCO's goal of Education for All for the 21st century. Through various initiatives, such as those undertaken by UNESCO, COL, the British Council, the Literacy Enhancement Assistance Program, and others, the gap between education and world of work that many developing countries have experienced in the past is being narrowed. Distance learning has great potential in the developing world, offering a powerful channel for bringing education to groups that have previously been excluded.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was first launched in 1983. However, it was suspended in 1985 by the military government. President Olusegun Obasanjo re-launched it in 2001 and NOUN now provides instruction for over 60,000 students as at 2002 (UNESCO, 2002). The reestablishment of National Open University of Nigeria in 2001 was to prove that ODL is not only cost- effective, but is also a most appropriate avenue for widening access to education, which has helped to produce a better skilled workforce, which in turn has led to the growth and development of both local and national economies. Typically, graduates of distance education programmes find it easier to participate in the economic mainstream. NOUN is the first full-fledged university that operates in an exclusively (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 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 beginning of correspondence courses during the first half of the 19th century to the modern conception of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), students have been provided with useful knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities.

Premised on the foregoing, the features of ODL can be summarized as follows:

1. There is separation of learner and teacher in time and space.
2. There is flexibility in the use of multimedia devices and entry requirements for increased access and equity.
3. There is availability of programmes to learners at their chosen locations.
4. It is learner-centred.
5. There is openness with regards to access, duration, age, sex, goals and knowledge delivery technique.
6. It allows students to combine education with work.
7. It allows for a two-way communication between the teacher and the learners.

Generally, ODL has been used to give students a second chance at education, and this seems to have been particularly the case in teacher development programmes in Africa (Holmberg, 1995; De Wolf, 1994; Rumble, 1992)

Prospect of Open and Distance Learning to Nigerian Education

According to Nwaocha. & Iyama (2008) the relevance of ODL to Nigerian Education include the following:

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 ODL 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, elearning and work study programmes (NPE, 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 learners, ODL means more freedom of access as well as a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualifications, thereby improving their social status. It is a often 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 on full time basis. 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 organising 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. Calvert (1986) asserts that distance education helps extend the market for education to clientele who have not been previously served. The problem of unsatisfied demand for education versus actual supply of educational services contributed to the acceptance, growth, and implementation of distance education programme in Nigeria as a means to bridge the gap between demand and supply (Aderinoye & Ojokheta, 2004). Reflecting on how distance education has influenced development in teacher education in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, the Nigerian situation reveals the high degree of influence distance education initiatives have had on personal, community and overall national development. Nigeria can now boast of capable and competent teachers working in its education sector, improvement in the quantity and quality and overall capacity of education managers as well as school administrators necessary to lead the nation's educational system (Dennis, 1997).

In addition, more than 300,000 primary school teachers that enrolled in National Teachers' Institute (NTI), have successfully earned their 'Teacher's Grade 11 Certificate. NTI has similarly registered serving teachers in its Nigeria Certificate in Education and the Pivotal Teacher Training Programmes, thereby improving the quality of those teachers already working in the field (Dennis, 1997).

The power and growing use of Information and Communication Technologies and the resulting trends towards globalization have reduced the world into that of a small village (Mcluhan, & Powers, 1989). ODL together with the appropriate information and communication technologies (ICT's) have the potential to impact significantly on education content and delivery in teacher development in Africa.

The Problems of Open Distance Learning in Nigeria

In spite of the benefits of Open and Distance Education, overall problems that may hinder proper functioning are better understood and taken care of. These problems are discussed as follows.

- a. **Poor funding:** It is common knowledge that education is poorly funded in Nigeria. Lack of or low level of provision of the facilities for ODL programmes in the country is one major fallout of poor funding. Investment in ODL is therefore low because the soft and hard-wares required are costly. It is very expensive to get some of the software because they are not developed locally, they are developed in Europe and other developed countries to suit their own system and make their own living. This is a major impediment because according to Yusuf (2006), success in any educational policy is contingent on the involvement of all stakeholders and the sponsorship of funding agencies.
- b. **Power supply:** The problem of power instability in Nigeria is perennial and has been a major setback for our technological development. Most ODL students that reside in cities and towns are faced with the problem of epileptic power supply. Worse still, majority of them live in rural areas that are not connected to the national grid.
- c. **Lack of skills in designing course-wares:** Instructional delivery in ODL is greatly affected by some facilitators' lack of knowledge and skills in designing and delivering courses in electronic format. This scenario is fallout of the non ICT-compliant status of the facilitators.
- d. **Poverty and Poor ICT Penetration:** Statistics reveal that many Nigerians live in poverty. The result of this is that the cost of computers and other ICT resources are far beyond their reach. Therefore, like most African countries basic ICT infrastructures are inadequate. There is still low level of computer literacy among the Nigerians.
- e. **Internet connectivity:** Statistics has shown that there is low level of internet connectivity in Nigeria. The cost of accessing internet is still very high in West Africa. Most ODL students make use of Cyber Café where they are made to pay so much on hourly basis despite the poor services and slow rate of the servers. To make both students and teachers computer literate, the government should make projects that promote information and communications technology a priority.
- f. **Low teledensity:** Another major challenge to open and distance learning programme delivery is teledensity. Access to unhindered use of ICT tools such as telephone and internet has been very low (Asogwa, 2007). Despite the advent of the Global System of Mobile (GSM) telecommunication, the use of ICT resources for educational purposes in general and open and distance learning in particular is still very low.
- g. **Technophobia:** Most of the ODL students have no computer education background; hence they are afraid of using one. Some of them go to the extent of hiring experts at a cost to fill their admission, registration and other documents meant for them to fill online. However, the very few who have access to the computers do not know how to use it and take full advantage of its usage.
- h. **School Curriculum:** Most of the students admitted have no information technology/computer education knowledge because it was not entrenched in the curriculum at their elementary and secondary education level. Not until recently

when computer education is been introduced at elementary level and it is not yet a compulsory subject at the secondary level of our education (Adebayo, 2007).

Conclusion

Open and Distance Learning is important because it makes education accessible and reduces cost while maintaining quality. The use of distance education makes for equity of educational opportunities and services. It also improves the quality and variety of the resources and support available to learners while opening up new avenues to professional development. However, despite the innumerable advantages accruing from the aims and objective of ODL, achieving these can only be made possible when the problems of low tele-Density, electricity, inconsistency in programme and policy implementation, poor economy, absence of trained teachers, poor postal system, bad public image, are no longer prevalent in the system.

Recommendations

Based on the problems identified, the following recommendations are made:

- a. The government should subsidize ODL programmes and improve the electricity supply to the nation.
- b. Management should admit students in line with the available resources on the ground and make the criteria for admission of students to be in line with conventional institutions.
- c. Alongside the modes of delivery being used presently, course materials can be delivered through other interactive media like radio, TV etc which are more accessible to ODL learners.
- d. 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.
- e. 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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