

Prospects and Challenges of Open University in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper gives an insight into what distance education is and that it has been in existence since 1800 in the developed countries. During this time notable Nigerians benefited from the distance learning programme of University of London through correspondence study. The paper also traced the historical development of distance education in Nigeria to when some notable Nigerian scholars studied on their own at home for degrees of Universities in the United Kingdom using correspondence colleges located in the United Kingdom. This was prior to the establishment of distance learning institutions in Nigeria to the time when the University of College, Ibadan took over the extra-mural work of Oxford University in 1947 up till when Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, pioneered the distance teaching of grade III and grade II teachers through TISEP. The need for Open University in Nigeria was also discussed while dearth of trained staff, ICT challenges & power, bandwidth are some of the challenges facing NOUN, while qualitative increase in demand for university education, international affiliation, more programmes are some of the identified prospects of NOUN.,

Keywords: Distance education, Open education, Open University, Bandwidth, Mega-University

Distance Learning: Forerunner to Open Education

Before defining open education, it is apt to examine its forerunner which happens to be distance learning. Distance learning may be a new phenomenon in some developing countries but it is certainly not novel in the developed countries like UK and the USA. It can be traced back to the late 1880's when correspondence courses were first introduced (Wills, 1994). What is being witnessed today is the move of distance education to an integral part of overall educational provision from the marginal position it has occupied in the past (Moore, 2002; UNESCO, 2002). Omolewa, (1982), reported that as far back as 1887, a handful of Nigerians enrolled for the first time in the University of London examination as external students studying through correspondence without enjoying any formal ties to a conventional institution. Omolewa (1982) noted that in 1925, some Nigerians like Eyo-Ita and O. Davies passed the London Matriculation Examination. C.O. Ajayi and Alvan Ikoku also obtained University of London degrees in Philosophy in 1927 and 1929. While J. S. Ogunlesi had his in 1933. Aderinoye (1995) noted that besides these ones, a significant number of Nigeria's early educated individuals were products of the British Correspondence distance education system. For example, Samuel Ayodele Banjo obtained B.A Philosophy in 1933 and in 1939, S.O. Adebo, A.T.O. Odunsi, and A.Y. Eke. K.Sofola, O.Chukura, M.A. Adeyemo & N.K Adamolekun also bagged B.A. honours in English. Aderinoye (1995) observed that despite the establishment of a University College in Ibadan in 1948, many of its academic staff still passed through the higher degree programmes of the University of London as distance learners.

Distance Education in Nigeria

Distance education, also called distance learning, has existed for centuries. It involves obtaining knowledge outside of the traditional avenues of attendance at learned institutions. According to Ajadi, Salawu, & Adeoye, (2008) distance education (DE) is a system of education characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner in which instruction is delivered through a variety of media. So also the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2000) defined it as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Jegede, (2003) defined distance education as education provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to and just as noble and practical as those of on-campus full time face-to-face education. UNESCO (2002) also defined it as 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.

The first phase of distance learning in Nigeria according to Afolabi-Ojo (1986) was before the establishment of any university in Nigeria, when some notable Nigerian scholars studied on their own at home for degrees of universities in United Kingdom, using correspondence colleges located in the United Kingdom. They prepared themselves through private studies here in Nigeria for various examinations of the University of London

The second phase of distance learning in Nigeria was when the premier university in the country i.e. the university college, Ibadan, demonstrated an interest in extra-mural studies within the first few years of its existence. By 1949, it took over the extra-mural work of Oxford University which was extended to Nigeria in 1947. By 1951, the department of extra-mural studies of the university college, Ibadan was offering courses in Child Psychology, English, Political Science, Social History, Economics, Logic and /Religious Studies. It also ran vocational classes in Ibadan to satisfy urgent public demand. Most of the extra-mural courses were non-credit, non-examined, and led to no diploma or any academic standing. But by 1962, students in the extra-mural Studies Department (especially those in evening classes) were requesting that the existing programmes should provide examinations and credit. Even after it became autonomous, the university delayed but eventually it had to give in and offer examination-oriented extra-mural classes. By 1967/68 session, half of the university's extra-mural classes were preparing students for General Certificate of Education examinations, while students who did not seek credit courses were still admitted.

It is interesting to note that in addition to its many outreach and extra-mural courses, the University of Ibadan (the new name dates from 1962) has been giving, since 1956, considerable thought to the issue of degree programmes for external or non-residence-based students. These innovations however, seem to have been overtaken by other events

Each of the other first generation Universities has its own success story in the field of extra-mural studies. The University of Nigeria, Usukka, went as far as wanting to implement a programme of correspondence education for non-residence-based students in 1981. That firm resolves to provide distance – oriented education through correspondence, radio, television and vacation course instruction but was put aside as the Open University was then in the horizon.

Ahmadu Bello University has shown much interest in, and directed a wide range of programmes towards educational innovation of benefit to the general public. It pioneered the distance teaching of Grade III and grade II teachers with a view to helping them qualify for the next higher grade. The academic structure, through which this type of training is being done, mainly by correspondence, is known as Teachers-In-Service Education Programme (TISEP), and later TISEP was also providing correspondence courses leading to the National Certificate of Education (NCE) qualification. The concern of Ahmadu Bello University for distance education at the tertiary levels was further articulated in November, 1972 when it established a University of the Air Programme for teachers in secondary schools and teacher training colleges. The programme was designed to provide

special television courses run by the General Extension Services Unit, emphasizing the urgent need for teaching aids and instruction in hygiene.

The University of Lagos has a well defined programme which is fairly close to what may be described as an ideal distance education unit. Its Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) was established in 1972 in the belief that a correspondence unit would give the University a chance to offer its course and facilities to a much wider public than is possible through regular residence-based methods. However, despite the university's determination to offer programmes, both on-campus and off-campus, to the general public, and its attempts to diversify its mode of tertiary education, it has been, much like other Nigerian universities, mainly residence-based, and only a tiny proportion of its students benefit from the evening courses administered by the University. Furthermore, its Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU), was later upgraded into an institute and renamed Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (COSIT). It began initially to offer programmes in science education at first degree level in Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics and Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) for degree holders that did not possess teaching qualifications.

One of the major objectives of the Nigerian National Policy on Education is the provision of equal educational opportunities to all Nigerians at different levels of education. With regards to higher education, an aspect of the policy encourages distance learning to be organized and delivered by tertiary institutions. Ali (2006), observed that between 1982 and 1997, the number of universities offering distance learning programmes have increased from 2 to 8, while students' population increased from 1,760 to 27,690. This means that a significant number of learners have received their education by distance learning. Meanwhile, the recent advancements in technology offer many options for delivering and receiving education over geographical distances, thus paving the way for open education.

Open Education/University

As implied above, open education is in fact an aspect of distance education. In other words, open education is essentially a distance education, but distance education may not be open. UNESCO (2002) defines open education as an organized educational activities based on the use of instructional teaching materials in which constraints on study are minimized in terms of access (either in time and place, pace, method of study or any combination of the aforementioned).

In the open system of learning, educational opportunities are provided for learners in their locations, providing learning resources for them to enable them qualify without attending face-to-face/conventional institution. It can also be used to keep people up-to-date in their field no matter their location and job specification. To achieve this end, different media like: print (which undoubtedly is the most popular), electronic media broadcasts (radio and television), internet and interaction with tutorial facilitators and fellow students are used.

An Open University is a university that takes care of all prospective candidates, irrespective of their academic background (Anderson, Benjamin & Fuss, 1998). The door of the university is open to all; candidates are admitted at will and are allowed to study according to their speed. Open University has various programmes designed to take care of interest of various groups of people despite their deficiencies. It is a university that does not shut the admission door to any candidate. Candidates who are not admitted due to one/more entry qualification deficiencies are considered for admission based on their age, work experience, or are given programmes at literacy, remediation, certificate or diploma levels.

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is doing well in this regard, as there is no student who applied for the university's admission that was turned down. They are either admitted for the programmes applied for, if they meet the criteria set for the programme or are given alternative programme qualified for or programmes at literacy, remedial, certificate, or diploma levels. All these are available at NOUN.

The British Open University, now known as Open University of United Kingdom (OUUK), was the first Open University to be set up in 1969 to widen access to education in Britain when it was discovered that there is the need to provide long-life education and take care of those shut out by the conventional universities. To date OUUK remains the largest Open University in the world. It has thus served as a model to many others. Bells and Tight (1999), and echoed by Tait (2003):

The University of London has been termed the first Open University because of this, students all around the world but principally within the British Empire and its dominions were soon looking for tutorial support to supplement the bare syllabus they received or registration wherever they lived. (www.undp.org/info21/public/distance/pb-dis2.html)

Other countries that have also done well in using the Open University system include: Australia, India (which has about six open universities), Hong Kong and South Africa, among others.

Justifying the Need for Open University in Nigeria

The continued increase in the population demanding university education in the last ten years revealed that there are more university applicants unabsorbed than those admitted by the universities into their conventional programmes despite the increase in the number of universities in the country. Jegede (2004) opines that about 15% of the qualified students could gain admission to the conventional universities. To support this stance is the table of applicants and admission of students into Nigerian universities from 2002/2003 academic session:

Table I: Number of Applicants and Admissions by Universities from 2002/2003 – 2007/2008.

| Year | No of Universities | No of Applicants | No Admitted | % Admitted | Left Over |
|------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|------------|-----------|
| 2002/2003 | 53 | 994,380 | 51,845 | 5.2% | 942,535 |
| 2003/2004 | 54 | 1,046,950 | 105,157 | 10.0% | 941,793 |
| 2004/2005 | 56 | 841,878 | 122,492 | 14.5% | 719,386 |
| 2005/2006 | 75 | 916,371 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| 2005/2007 | 76 | 803,472 | 123,626 | 15.4% | 679,846 |
| *2007/2008 | 95 | 1,054,053 | 200,000 | 19% | 854,053 |

Source: Joint Admission and Matriculation Board

(* Note that the figures of 2007/2008 are as given by the reports of NUC and JAMB in the Punch, Wednesday, May 21, 2008, p.7)

As this table reveals, the 95 universities in Nigeria made up of 27 Federal Universities, 34 States Universities and 34 Private Universities can still not admit up to 20% of eligible candidates. Considering the role and the importance of education in a developing country, this is a dangerous trend. If necessary steps are not taken to address this trend then the realization of the Millennium Goals in Nigeria would remain a mirage.

Another reason justifying the need of an open university in Nigeria is the continued demand for higher qualifications by employers of labour especially for promotion and assessment factors. The scenario is such that those already employed cannot resign for further studies and study leaves are hardly granted these days. Thus Open University system provides the opportunity for such people to maintain their employment and still attend and improve their knowledge as well as their academic status.

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN): A Brief History

The history of NOUN could be traced to the second republic when in 1983, after a prolonged debate at the National Assembly passed an act establishing the Open University of Nigeria. This University has hardly taken off when the military junta took over power and suspended the act establishing the

university. In 2002, the longstanding suspension was removed by President Olusegun Obasanjo and the university started with the current name: National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Though, its headquarters is at Lagos, the NOUN has a campus in Kaduna, an office annex in Abuja and 36 study centres scattered all over the country including three special centres: a study centre for the Army at Sobi Barracks, Ilorin one for the prisoners at the Kirikiri prison in Ikoyi, Lagos, and the third one for the Air force at the Air force base Apapa, Lagos

Challenges Facing National Open University of Nigeria

Since open education has re-surfaced in the mainstream of the Nigerian educational system in 2002, after it has been suspended for sixteen years, certain challenges ranging from staff, infrastructures, ICT technical experts, institutional support, student-community acceptance, staffing and course material development have been facing the National Open University of Nigeria.

Dearth of trained staff

NOUN lacks staffs that are trained and versatile in the operation of open and distance learning. The personnel (both academic and other support staff) are drawn from the conventional background and without adequate training and exposure to the principles and practices of open and distance education. This often led to conflict of interest between the background from where the staffs are coming from and their new environment. This have resulted in slow pace in making policy decisions, arguments about what should and ought to be done and constant drawback to the conventional practices instead of open education practices.

ICT Challenges and Power

All over the world, best practices have shown that open and distance learning runs most effectively on information communication technologies. This has become a challenge to the university in many respects:

Bandwidth

For effective running, the university needs an effective bandwidth that would put all its internet facilities on-line for twenty-four hours and allow the high volume of traffic expected in such academic institution. Since NOUN has no bandwidth of her own, (mostly due to cost and operational procedures) the university has to depend on internet service providers at not just only exorbitant cost but also at unsatisfactory performance.

Power

There is no gainsaying that internet and computer related facilities run on power. The problem of electricity in Nigeria has thus become a pain in the neck for the university. Consequently, the university runs virtually on generating power and with the cost of maintenance, it is eating too much into the meager resources of the university. This has also led to the situation where there would be no power supply in the university for days of the week.

Cost of PCs and Internet Facility in Nigeria

Nigeria is one of the nations where the cost of the internet facility has been said to be very high in comparison with the West. While this may not be a problem directly for the country, the students that have to be accessing the internet for information and other academic activities may have to be paying through the nose on the hourly basis and that is if they have any internet service provider close to their base. Consequently, many NOUN students find it difficult to access their records as at when expected.

Infrastructural Challenges

While the conventional universities would be limited by time, space and infrastructure in the number they could admit, NOUN is designed to be a mega-university and to function effectively therefore, there is the need for certain infrastructures at every study centre. The situation as of now is the practice where the State Government would donate a building and a site for the university without equipping such. NOUN is thus left with the task of using out of its limited resources to equip the centre which are been done at snail speed. Nasarawa and Ondo States are examples of the few states that have built and equipped the site for NOUN study centres in their respective states. If all state governments have taken cue from this, facilities at state level would have been very excellent.

Course Material Development

In an open education system in the developing world, there is an undeniable dependence on the print for course material delivery. The course materials are thus the wheel on which the tyres of the Open University run. NOUN however, is confronting the challenges of course material development. There are several areas where the delivery of course materials has become problematic: beginning from the selection of course writers, and the slow pace in which they write, to editorial stage, to the correction stage and then the internal editing where the language editing is done and then the printing stage all have one logjam or the other that serves as impediment to the quick writing and delivery of course materials.

Official and Unofficial Mindset

In many governmental offices, the workings of the open university is creating ripples and many are feeling uncomfortable about it and are expressing such through attitudes to the university. For example, hitherto, all forms that have been sent to NOUN by National Universities Commission (NUC) are those that are being used for the conventional universities and are inadequate to assess or measure the standard of Open University. There is thus the need for a change of mindset in the NUC and the partnering with NOUN and if need be other Open Universities in Africa or the West to develop a standard for the measuring of NOUN.

Apart from this, from interactions with colleagues in the conventional universities; they have always been concerned about the so-called standard of the academic work in NOUN which more or less is critical stand on the operations of NOUN. This feeling is also felt among the general populace about the acceptability and the recognition of their certificate at the end of the day by the society that will be the future employers.

Prospects of National Open University of Nigeria Quantitative Increase in Demand for University Education

As it has been shown in table 1, the number of students that has been admitted into the university education system each year in the last five years is a mere 20% of the number seeking admission. What is more poignant is the increase in secondary school enrolment in the last ten years. There has been a geometric increase in secondary school enrolment in Nigeria in numerical terms. As at 2005, secondary school enrolment has increased by more than 50% than what it was in 1996. There were 4,201,334 secondary school students in 1996 and in 2005, the enrolment stood at 6,174,522 (FME2007). The effect of this is that the population of eligible university candidates would be on the increase year after year, the Open University would have the carrying capacity of mopping up the excess.

International Affiliation

The National Open University of Nigeria is not in isolation, but a member of the African Council of Distance Education (ACDE), a member of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), as well as International Council of Distance Learning (ICDL). With these memberships in place, quality assurance and standard control is ensured.

A Lofty Blueprint

The blueprint of the university is to ensure affordability, flexibility, and education for all Nigerians. As a result, it is expected in the next ten years that the Open University would have study centres in all the local government headquarters. If this is done, it means that the university would have 774 study centres and the populace would have education at their footsteps

The Deployment of Satellite Services

One of the greatest prospects of the university is the partnership coming up between the university and NASRDA to ensure that the Nigeria Communication Satellite (NIGCOMSAT) facilities are deployed to boost the academic activities of NOUN. It has been reported that they are ready to hold all the NOUN equipment and allow the transmission both on radio and television to hold from there. If this is done, it would go a long way to boost the operation of NOUN.

More Programmes

During the first admission exercise by the university in 2003/2004, there are only four (4) schools (schools of Arts, Business and Human Resources, Education, and Science and Technology) and one centre (Centre for Continuing Education and Work training) in the university, and there are fifty-five (55) programmes (NOUN 2003) in offering, but during the second admission exercise in 2006/2007, there are five (5) schools (schools of Arts, Business and Human Resources, Education, Law and science and Technology) and one Centre (Centre for Continuing Education and Work Place) with eighty-three (83) programmes in offering as against fifty – five (55) offered in 2003/2004 (NOUN2006). From this it is evident that more schools and programmes will be available for students to offer in the university in the nearest future.

More fund

NOUN is saddled with the responsibility of bringing education to the door step of every Nigerian, irrespective of age, sex, tribe, background and any other differences. This is a way of eradicating illiteracy in Nigeria and since the international communities is committed to eradication of illiteracy worldwide, there is the possibility of NOUN assessing fund from funding agencies like UNESCO, UNDP, COL for the purpose of eradicating illiteracy. The federal government who is the major financial of NOUN will also see the need to increase the allocation to NOUN because of unequal role the university is expected to play.

Establishment of National commission of Open and Distance Learning

The issue of using appropriate accreditation instrument for NOUN and as an institution and its programmes is envisaged with the policy of establishing a study centre at each of the local government headquarter in Nigeria. The policy would popularize NOUN as a university

Course Materials

There seems to be a better understanding of what open and distance education (ODL) is all about particularly by the management of conventional universities in Nigeria as exemplified by an increase in

the number of such universities running distance learning. With this development, there seems to be a way for NOUN in getting willing course developers/writers from the conventional universities for the development of course materials

Recommendations

Based on the above, the following are recommended:

The current educational reforms should aim at given open education a place in the educational policy of the nation

All academic staff employed by NOUN should after their first year be sent on an internship course in any of the existing open universities in Africa or any other developing countries

The various state governments should be made to put the physical development of the NOUN study centre in their annual budget for the purpose of infrastructural development

The delivery of courses through the various multimedia especially, through the satellite should be fully exploited to the advantage of the millions of Nigerians yearning for university education

Setting up a commission on Open Learning that will serve as the quality assurance room for open education in the country

There is the need to develop the open system of education for the secondary school system. This will take care of the failures of the nomadic education as well as provide education for the women in purdah and others that have been cut-off from secondary school education for economic and other reasons.

Conclusion

If Nigeria is serious at meeting the Millennium Development Goals on Education, then, she cannot but accept the reality and the challenges that the open education poses. Through NOUN, Nigeria can effectively take care of the back log from JAMB admission to universities and also extend education to those who hitherto have been shut out from the university education because of social, economic, religious or any other reasons.

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