

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as an Innovation in Education and a panacea for National Development

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Abstract

It is an established fact, globally, that education plays a significant role in national development. Education is the basic instrument for economic growth, technological advancement of any society and national development. Education has been a weapon with which to equip the people to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and habit for surviving in the modern world. Open and distance learning came to existence because of the universal demand for education, thirst for knowledge and the failure of the conventional education system to cater for higher education. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Education has become accepted as an integral part of higher education. This paper therefore discussed the Open and Distance Learning as an innovation in Education and its importance to national development; the benefits, challenges and the way forward are also discussed. It is recommended that facilitators of distance learning should be encouraged to register, attend distance learning educational institutions and be aware of students' individual differences when designing course materials.

Keywords: Distance, Learning, Innovation, Education, National, Development

Introduction

The National Policy on Education has described education in Nigeria as an instrument “par excellence” for effective national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2004). Learning is about change by developing new skills, understanding scientific laws and changing an attitude. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Education is promoted as learning that can be accessed from anywhere, at any time, by anyone. ODL could be explained as means to acquire knowledge, skills, attitude, ideas, and values to ease and improve students' and teachers' performance (Awolaju, 2016; Abdu-Raheem, 2017). Distance Learning Education can be collectively said to be all the things that are used to support, facilitate, influence or encourage acquisition of knowledge, competency and skills even when students are not physically present in the classroom (Akpan & Okoli, 2017).

Awolaju (2016) conceived Distance Learning Education as a wide range realistic, imagery and substitute experiences in order to enrich curricular experiences of many kinds with the aim of bringing in innovation to Education. Education has continued to be very crucial to national development because a well-educated and trained population contribute significantly to the socioeconomic development of any country (Marope, 2005). Since Independence, Nigeria has continued to demonstrate an irrevocable and unwavering commitment to education as a tool for national and personal development as it is the building stones of any scientific and technological advancement which lay a good foundation that would facilitate the development of human and capital resources that will bring about a sane society (Tenebe, 2014).

The need to enhance Education with physical and mental resources has existed for a long time (Amosun, Falade & Falade, 2015). In this 21st century, there is appreciable advancement in Distance Learning Education all over the world and the use of the computer system cannot be overemphasized; Internet and Global System of Mobile telecommunication have transformed many aspects of human existence. Advancement in computer system, Internet science and their applications in various areas of education have also yielded dividends (Etesike, 2013). Distance Learning Education is a major focus of education policy and reform in recent years in several countries. In Nigeria, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), Section 5, and sub-section 24 included sciences as core subjects, and Computer Education as elective; the increasing recognition of the role of open and distance learning was identified in the 2004 revised Nigeria's National policy on Education. The revised national policy had specified the goals of distance education as follows:

- i. To offer access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities.
- ii. To attend to special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplaces.
- iii. To boost internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula.
- iv. To lessen 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.

Distance Learning Education is further strengthened through the vocational electives in Applied Electricity, Electronics and Computer Education; nations are being strengthened as distance education is rapidly transforming the delivery of education at all levels within developed and developing countries. Key trends associated with its application in the more advanced economies are described including its rapid rates of growth and adoption, the trend towards technology convergence on the Internet, innovations in content creation, and the move towards horizontal integration as a necessary organizational strategy to sustain distance learning systems (Koko & Dambo, 2007). The researcher views this as an innovation in Education and indication of the government's quest to advance learning in Nigeria. The position of Education in the national educational system has made it a target of major concern (Ojedokun &

Aladejana, 2012). According to Cornell (2010), secondary education stands as a transition zone as it receives primary school leavers and turns out pupils for post-secondary and also for tertiary education; this therefore suggests that secondary education has both consumer and producer status. Ojedokun and Aladejana (2012), presents a related opinion, by saying that it is necessary for a person to have Education because it is a part of the process of gaining the right place in the society. According to Cornell, education is vital because it affords students with opportunity to acquire knowledge that assists in the development of critical and analytical thinking.

Open and Distance Learning Education needs trained manpower that is capable of handling programmes. This is learning through 'Massive Open Online Course' (MOOCS). Many in Nigeria presently are either computer illiterates or are not computer proficient. The ODL is a system that cannot do without fair knowledge of the computer. There are needs for fair knowledge in computer in order to fit in properly in ODL (Nwaocha & Inyama, 2012). Many of the learners have technophobia to the extent of hiring hands at a cost to fill admission forms. Some others that use computer cannot maximize its usage (Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, 2008).

The Concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Open and distance Education, according to UNESCO (2003), can be referred to as "distributed learning" or "distance learning" in which all or most of the teaching is with technology using voice, video, data, and print media as opposed to the face-to-face communication. Open and distance education can provide adults with second chance at a college or university education; get to those unreached by obstacles of time, distance or physical disability, and update the knowledge base of workers at their places of employment. Open and distance education, according to UNESCO (2003), can also be defined as an initiative in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between teachers and learners being conducted through electronic or print mediums. The advantaged positions occupied by open and distance education include among others, accessibility, social status and economic factor.

Why open and distance learning

Open and distance learning (ODL) is an education strategy which is used to solve the problems of ever – growing number of candidates which need higher education. It serves as a bridge for the educationally disadvantaged members of the society. Open and distance learning refers to 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 and state of origin (Alaezi, 2005). It means an irreplaceable key to understanding our world, to anticipate the future and to understand our natural environment for the benefits of all human beings.

ODL is a special form of education in which the facilitators and students work apart from one another, do not communicate eye – ball – to – eye ball with one another; in which printed materials are exchanged with aid of a mailing system and the teaching and learning process assumes the form of self-study but guided by the facilitator.

Characteristics of Open and Distance Learning

Some of the characteristics of open and distance learning are that it accommodates different levels of learners, it enhances openness of entry time and space, it paves way for improvement of quality of teaching and learning, it also makes the use of multi – media flexible. Others are that it allows new innovation of curricular technology for learning and research, it gives allowance for open and flexible entry requirements to increased access and equity, Degrees, diplomas and certificates are awarded by cumulative credits to give learners time to attend to their personal – social commitments. It also ensures that programmes are made available to learners at their chosen places, homes, school or work places, it allows capacity building for human resources development especially in the areas of acute deficiencies such as vocational and technical education, science and technology, Education for all, especially to reduce or totally eliminate illiteracy and poverty, Life – long and life – wide education in order to build a learning and knowledge – based society, access to and capitalization on emerging market and opportunities both within the state, nation and globally and it creates an avenue for transforming our higher education sectors to make our institutions respond to contemporary issues and changes.

Relevance of Open and Distance Learning to Nigerian Education

ODL to Nigerian Education increases people's access to education. People who would have found it impossible to attend the conventional school system benefit from ODL. Many stakeholders in the education sector are interested in open and distance learning because it allows greater access to educational opportunities. This is in keeping with the stated objectives of the National Policy on Education that maximum efforts shall be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Open and distance learning schemes hold a number of potential benefits for various stakeholders in the education and development process. 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 economic growth of the nation through better performance. ODL has also reduced poverty levels among teachers, since programmes are attended while at work.

Contribution of open and Distance Learning Education to Innovation in Education

Open and Distance Learning is a massive way of educating people of all sections in the society. Massive Open Online Course (MOOCS) improves and expands education that

is essential ingredient of any national development policy. This is because Open and Distance mode allows students from different ethnic and geographical setting to acquire education at their own pace. It will increase the levels of qualitative education so as to reduce incompetence and unemployment. It is also a means of capacity building of human resources through knowledge, skills, values and attitudes acquired. It is a process of increasing productivity through qualitative education. This reduces poverty, diseases, and superstition.

Lips (2010) listed the advantages of ODL to include a) Access to equity for comprehensive national development. b) Provide the much needed tool for fighting poverty and the elimination of illiteracy since it equips the recipients with the skills necessary for gainful employment and wealth creation. c) Provide viable alternatives to the conventional mode in our crisis-torn educational system. Distance learning provides stable environment and learning culture that is devoid of interruption arising from prolonged strikes. d) Since it is ICT driven, it provides spillover effects on the economy as more people are able to acquire Information Technology skills for the production of goods and services. e) Enhances national and international capacity for human capacity development and innovation in Education.

Open and Distance learning holds a number of potentials for various stakeholders in education and development process. To the learner, ODL means more freedom of access and thereby, a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualification. It is often a cheaper means of attending school for students since some people may not be able to leave their places of work to go to school fulltime. For employers, ODL offers the possibility of organizing in-service training for their staff without necessarily releasing them for long periods of productive time. For government and educational policy makers, the system is a panacea to the perennial problem of provision of equitable and accessible education at an affordable and cost effective way (Ojo, Ogidan & Olakulehin 2000).

Some of the advantages/benefits include:

- i. Provision of Education for all and promotion of lifelong learning
- ii. Cost effectiveness and improved economy of scale
- iii. Flexibility of delivery system and maximum utilization of academic personnel in the teacher training institutes.
- iv. Poverty eradication, vocational and lifelong education, reaching the unreached and propagation of national orientation.

It is worthy to note that no nation can rise above the level of its education. Therefore, innovation in Education is the life of any nation. In fact, it is the bulwark of any nation's defence. The conventional institutions are trying their best but due to the teeming population in Nigeria, their efforts are not equitably distributed to as many people who desire to enroll in the system.

Challenges of ODL

1. **Manpower:** This field of Education needs trained manpower capable of handling programmes in ODL. There should be workers who are specialists in writing course materials for use by the learners. The course materials used in ODL differ from ordinary lecture notes and handouts to which lecturers used. Course materials need to be handled by specialists who should bear in mind learners' characteristics and other personal and group factors of the many and often differing learners that would benefit from the materials. The ODL is a system that cannot do without knowledge of the computer. This means that no matter the qualification of the teacher, he needs adequate knowledge in computer in order to fit in properly in ODL. Nwaocha and Inyiama (2012) wondered how teachers not well trained in computer can teach practical aspects of computer skills or make use of computers in ODL.

2. **Infrastructure/Facilities:** Open and distance education in Nigeria still leaves much to be desired in terms of adequate provision of infrastructure like lecture halls, studios, workshops and laboratories. Ali (2009) found out that classroom for teaching at some Distance Learning centers were inadequate while there were no large halls that could properly accommodate large classes of about two hundred students or more. Most tutorial contacts of ODL take place in secondary schools which laboratories and studios are meant for secondary education and are substandard. This ordinarily renders such facilities inadequate in terms of basic tools, essential equipment, chemicals, specimen and other laboratory consumables. Libraries are not better as many centres have no libraries and where they exist, they fall far short of the standard. Computer facilities for e-mail, fax, video conferencing, audio conferencing gadgets etc are not adequate for teachers and students.

3. **Lack of power supply:** The problem associated with electricity in Nigeria has become hydra-headed. The lack of supply and/or sudden and frequent outage of electricity in the country do not encourage any educational programme that would depend on regular power supply. Most ODL teaching and learning should be electronic using the audio, video, data and print as already discussed in this paper. Often learning is distorted and completely disrupted by lack of power supply. Electricity Generating plants kept in few homes and offices that can afford them to serve as alternative are not helping the matter as damages often occur while cost of petrol or diesel as well as maintenance costs are very high. Worse still, this alternative source has caused more harm than good because of the harmful environmental pollution and outright disaster to many homes as breathing polluted air puts one at a higher risk for asthma and other respiratory diseases, and high levels of particle pollution have been associated with higher incidents of heart problems. Communication technologies such as radio, television, video, computers, and internet are strong tools of ODL. The technology hinges on power supply, which is very erratic in our country and this impinges on the achievement of the goals of open and distance education in Nigeria.

4. **Funding:** Government budgetary allocation to the education sector in Nigeria still remains low. The poor state of the nation's economy has left many citizens with meager resources to contend with life and have little or nothing for further education. Even when some learners can pay their school fees, they find it difficult to own and maintain basic technological tools which are necessary for ODL. This situation pushes the learners to opt for buying textbooks and for the organizers to provide instructional materials, classrooms and lecture halls which are capital intensive. The ODL sector is also inadequately funded as observed by Ali (2009), Bandele (2008), and Nwaocha and Inyama (2012). The fact that the training cost per average student of ODL is more expensive than that of a regular conventional university student was observed by UNESCO (2002). As the education sector is under-funded, institutions see distance education as an avenue to improve their internally generated revenue while lecturers see the learners as ready market for their textbooks and handouts. In the midst of this rather chaotic state, the ODL suffers in its objectives of giving education for all and life-long education to the citizenry in our nation.

5. **Administration:** The administration of distance education in Nigeria has not come to the needed standard. In many centers, there seem to be inadequate specialists. Staff strength does not match the students' in-take so as to give the necessary student support services. There is need for adequate counsellors and administrative, technical and support staff to coordinate teaching and learning and to render students' support services that are vital to distance education programmes. The nature of the students requires adequate study guidance, counselling and proper orientation. Mechanisms for information dissemination and feedback systems are not in place. People with adequate technical knowledge to cope with the technological demands of ODL are lacking.

6. **Poor Network:** The major problem of e-transactions in Nigeria is poor network. In addition to inadequate supply of electricity, there is poor data network all over the place. To open a file in the internet takes several minutes while to attach files or download documents and other such transactions take hours, many times ending unsuccessfully. This kind of situation discourages users and keeps them limping from one network provider to the other or from one cyber cafe to the other. The result of this is dwindling interest in the use of electronic transactions and consequent poor performance by the learners.

Conclusion

Open and distance education permits the learners to work on their own. Open and distance education enables learners to combine work, family responsibilities with educational opportunities. This type of innovation in Education disregards age, previous level of academic achievement and other factors such as sex, rigid evaluation system, social and cultural barriers to Education as a life-long pursuit in a democratic environment.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. Government and ODL providers should launch connection with conventional institutions including libraries, NGOs, community leaders and potential students to move the programme onward.
2. Government should fund ODL programmes to make it inexpensive for an average salary earner in Nigeria.
3. Admission of students into the programme should be equivalent to the current and available facilities for teaching – learning to be expressive and for the learning aims to be achieved.
4. Government should address the problem of irregular and epileptic power supply in Nigeria to make ODL programmes efficient.
5. Admission into ODL programme should be in tandem with that of conventional institution to avoid making the certificate attained through the ODL programme look as if they are fake or sub-standard certificates.

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