

COMPLEMENTARY ROLE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PROVIDING EDUCATION FOR NIGERIANS

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Abstract

Distance education has been acclaimed as a great avenue for the acquisition of knowledge especially at tertiary level. Distance education is the mode of teaching and learning in which learners learn without physical contact with the facilitators, but through various media. Over the years, Nigerians have acquired considerable education through distance learning from overseas universities and examination bodies. Today distance education is becoming a global concern. So, Nigerians should also see the need to recognize and sustain it. Distance education also gives way for a reduction in some of the financial treats as most of the learning processes are being undertaken through the means of either radio, television, or other media used for communication, but one should also understand that there might be no chance for question and answer in the distance education when we undertake the distance mode of education, learning is made perfect when there are interactions amongst the two parties “the learner and the teacher”. It should also be noted that this type of education grants us the functioning part of on-the-job-training where people that might not have chance of going out to acquire more education sit back to achieve it. This paper tends to reveal the factors responsible for these noted setbacks and possible proffer solutions.

The ever growing demand for education by Nigerians cannot be met by the traditional face to face classroom instructional delivery alone. So, an industrialized form of education, in addition to occasional face to face tutorials, emerged. Before the writers proceed, it will be pertinent to look at the definition of distance education and a very brief history of distance education in Nigeria.

National Open University of Nigeria was initially established in 1983 as a base for takeoff for open and distance learning in Nigeria. In 1984, a better and more defined objective of the National Open University was brought to existence. The aim which is to tackle the country's educational problems was to be mined by the National Open University Commission. The aims are in line with the United Nations Development Programme Report of 1975.

There are various definitions of Open and Distance Education. These definitions are tailored towards the perspective at which the writer is looking at the distance education issues.

Ololube, N.P, Ubogu, A.E & Osai A.G. (nd), defined Open and Distance Education as a form of education in which there is normally a separation between the teacher and the students.

Ogidan (nd) sees Open and Distance Education as the way of creating access to learner through learning.

Jegede (2005) opined that Open and Distance Education is a way of providing learning opportunities that are characterized by the separation of the teacher and the learner in time and place or both time and place. So, Open and Distance Education is therefore making accessible, education to those that could not access it, distance and time notwithstanding. On the other hand Calvert (1986) said that Distance Education is a means of bridging the gap between demand and supply of education. This was further buttressed by Aderinoye and Ojokheta (2004) when they said that Distance Education is a correspondence education that prepares candidates for a pre-requisite certificate. In a situation where there is an increase in the demand for education with no corresponding assess for such educational demand for the people so as to comply with the United Nations recommendation on "education for all by 2015", there is the need for open and Distance Education.

Jegede (2004), defines distance education as that kind of educational mode provided 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.

However, for effective dissemination of information in such mode of study, good communication medium is required. Nigeria being a populous country with over 140 million people (NPC 2004) and of different ethnic and religious background coupled with socio-economic hardship deserves an equitable provision of education to all. The ever increasing population, poverty level, and difficulty faced by intending students seeking admission into the conventional universities, necessitated the government to find an appropriate and effective means to respond adequately to the huge unmet educational quest of the people which gave birth to the inception of distance education.

Concept of Distance Education

Distance education as referred to by Veduim and Clark in Mbonu (2010), covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous and immediate supervision of facilitators but which nevertheless, benefits from the planning, management guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization. Similarly, Moor (2005), saw open and distance education as all those methods in which because of the physical separateness of learners, the interactive as well as the proactive phase of teaching are conducted through print/electronic media, or mechanical device. He stated that this system of learning normally embraces a systematic programme of teaching through either the print/electronic media, feedback from students to the tutors and occasional face to face teaching and examination.

Also, Adekoye and Ubong (2007) were of the views that open and distance educational system is designed to offer opportunities for part time study, for learning at a distance and for innovations in the curriculum. They went further to say that the programme intended to allow access to wider sections of adult population, to compensate the students for lost opportunities in the past or to acquire new skills and qualifications for the future. So, open and distance education can therefore be seen as forms of education and training in which learning resources, rather than attending classroom sessions, are the central feature of the learning experience. It is a situation in which the learners use resources in a flexible way to achieve their goals. The resources could be print, audio, computer based, used at home, at a study centre in the work place, with or without the guidance of a mentor or facilitator. The learner's goals may vary greatly, from completing formal accreditation to learning a specific job related skill, to pursuing a leisure interest.

Types of Distance Education

Open and distance education is often distinguished by the type of learning resources and nature of interaction.

Bates in Mbonu (2010), categorized it in terms of generation thus;

First Generation: situation in which learners study alone, with limited contact from the educational provider. This was a model used for some forms of correspondence study and it is still used to provide learners with resources they can study independently to prepare for examinations offered by an accreditation body, such as a professional organisation or a university.

Second Generation: distance education provides learning resources (in one or more media) and consistent communication between the learner and the facilitator, and sometimes, additional learning support from the educational provider. This approach is used in many situations in which the learner study individually rather than in group.

Third Generation; here, learners are provided learning resources in one or more media and also refers to interaction among learners as well as between the facilitator and learner. Interaction in this form of open and distance learning may use one or many types of conferencing technologies (audio, video and computer), e-mail, face to face meeting and is used in situations where learning is combined with individual learning. Bates in Mbonu maintained that all the generations discussed above are still part of the current practices and that some models include characteristics of more than one generation.

On the other hand, it is worthy to note that the department of education, citizenship and youth, classified open and distance education into three form (Knox in Mbonu, 2010).

- i **Independent study option:** this option provides the opportunity and flexibility for both school-age and adult learners to study a wide range of compulsory optional point based distance education courses.
- ii **Web-based course:** the courses are made available by schools wishing to deliver high school courses on the internet. While being delivered through the internet, these courses are taught by lecturers who may be off-site. Assignments are submitted online by students to lecturers (facilitator), and their final examinations are written on site.
- iii **Teacher mediated option (TMO) or Teacher Facilitated Option (TFO):** this option has taken over the baton from the completely independent study option. It supports the delivery of distance education courses that are scheduled either in evenings within the school days or within the weekends or both. The option uses a variety of technologies and teacher facilitation for limited hours per course.

Examples of such teacher mediated or facilitated option in Nigeria include, the University of the Air, established in Enugu in 1979 to train technical students to pass their OND and HND examinations. It employed the services of lecturers from university

of Nigeria Nsukka, Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri and some polytechnics in the then Eastern states. These lecturers wrote the course scripts and recorded the lectures that were later broadcasted to the students. The lecturers also had few hours to face questions and answer periods with the students. People's statements of need for such institutions, the inability of the already established Nigerian universities to absorb qualified students who wanted to obtain higher education and to provide opportunity for out-of-school learning and workers who wished to further their educational career, led to the establishment of National Teachers Institute (NTI) in Kaduna and later National Open University of Nigeria in 1983.

Trends of Distance Education in Nigeria

Distance education is not new in the world. It has been in existence for nearly three centuries from 1728, in Boston when Caleb Philips, teacher of the new method of "shorthand" adopted the method to send lessons to his students weekly. Since then constant changes in models resulting to modern distance education has been in practice, for instance, Isaac Pitman through correspondence taught shorthand in Great Britain in 1840s. In line with this, the University of London established its external programme in 1858 and became the first university to offer degree through distance learning. The University of Queensland in Australia established its department of correspondence studies in 1911. Emulating their steps, the University of South Africa in 1946 became the pioneer institution in Africa to offer correspondence education courses. Also in 1960, Massey University, in New Zealand mounted her university level distance education or extramural study (Bates in Mbonu 2010).

From 1964 to 1968, the Carnegie foundation founded Wedemeyer's Articulated instructional media project (AIM) which brought in a variety of communications technologies aimed at imparting learning to an off campus population.

According to Moore's (2005), recounting, AIM impressed the British who imported these ideas and used them to create the first Open University, now called United Kingdom Open University (UKOU), UKOU was established in 1969 and to distinguish it from other open universities which had emerged, it used television and radio as its primary delivery methodologies, thus placing it in the forefront of applying emerging technologies to learning. In Germany the Fern universities in Hagen was founded in 1974.

In addition, there are many private and public, profit and non-profit institutions offering courses and degree programmes in developed and developing countries through open and distance education. More successful examples during this period include; Coastline Community College and University of Phoenix, California College and

University of Phoenix, California, Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities in Ontario.

Kinnaman in Mbonu (2010), Nigeria have National Teacher Institute Anambra State Polytechnic (ANAPOLY) at Oko, College of Education Nsugbe, I. C. E. P. of Imo State University, I. D. E. of Abia State University and National Open University of Nigeria.

According to Fabinu in Mbonu (2010), the development of distance education with its examples mentioned above in Nigeria can be traced to “the Ashby Report of 1960” which led to the establishment of private correspondence colleges to cater for drop-outs and those who could not gain access in formal education but were gainfully employed; following the trend, university of Lagos opened a successful correspondence courses leading to the award of degree of the university of Lagos.

There are many similar institutions around the world, often with the name open university or open and distance learning (in English or in the Local Language). More than a thousand of them have grown to become mega-universities, a term coined to denote institutions with more than 100,000 students with their study centers in different parts of the world (Coldway in Mbonu, 2010).

Features of Distance Education in Nigeria

Open and distance education in Nigeria like in every other nation of the world, have the following features;

Accessibility: one of the main reasons for providing open and distance learning was to make education and training accessible to people who could not attend regular classes, for any number of reasons. These reasons may be due to social or structural situations, (e.g. Not enough places in educational institutions; distance from educational institutions; a specific programme is not available at the nearest educational institution), and or to personal situations (e.g. family commitments; the need to continue earning while learning, the high cost of travel). Because accessibility is so important for open and distance learning, the methods and media used should enhance accessibility rather than limiting it, for example, a course that requires learners to use e-mail regularly may limit accessibility if most learners do not have reliable computer access. Giving learners the choice of writing or audio taping assignments, and of submitting them by conventional mail, fax, e-mail or in person, can improve accessibility for everyone. As well, method and media should not limit access for people with disabilities (Mbonu, 2010).

Flexibility: this term covers different aspects; physical flexibility: the opportunity for learners to study at a time and place that suits them; and educational flexibility; the ability to study courses and programme in an order and manner that is most appropriate to their needs. Educational flexibility is less common in conventional academic institutions, where the content, sequencing and structure of programmes tend to be determined after long deliberations by academic committees. However, some educational institutions that offer open distance learning are becoming more flexible about requirements for admission to courses, and are open to restructuring programmes to meet the need of specific cohorts, such as professionals who require specialized training on a more individual level, many learners prefer ODL, that accommodates their approach to learning, for example, they may print and text based courses to classroom sessions if they like to learn by reading, reflection and writing.

Learner Centeredness: while the phrase “learner-centredness” is used a great deal in distance ODL, not everyone agrees on what it means, at the very least, learner-centredness states a goal, to provide education and training in a way that addresses learner’s needs, rather than giving priority to the institutions convenience. At another level, learner-centredness means enabling learners to pursue their studies in a way that is appropriate for their circumstances, learning goals and style. For the educational institution, the most basic implications of learner-centredness are; providing good quality learning materials that use appropriate and accessible media; with sufficient support to ensure learners have a reasonable opportunity for successful completion. The term “support” can be unpacked to mean administrative, academic and personal support.

Conclusion

The first government effort towards providing opportunities for workers to improve their ambition of higher education started from recommendations proffered in Asquith and Elioth’s report of 1945. They included among other things that the university college should start from their earliest stage to cater for those members of the population whose studies must necessarily be restricted to the leisure left from their other work (Osuji, 1991).

English by radio programme of Nigeria broadcasting corporation (NBC) marked the first indigenous distance learning programme in 1960. The programme initially was meant for primary and secondary school levels with emphasis placed on the teaching of mathematics, English and sciences. As time went on, the learning progressed up to the tertiary institution beginning from university of Lagos as correspondence and open studies unit (COSU) in 1974 but recorded their first set of students in 1976. COSU later changed to correspondence and open studies institute (COSI) and now known as distance learning institute, marking the first distance learning unit to be introduced in the Nigerian university. National Teachers’ Institute (NTI), with

the support of UNESCO, started in 1976 as a distance education, institute that trains grade II teachers (TC II) and advanced to the introduction of Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) programme in 1970, later in 2005, they also introduced the post graduate diploma in education (PGDE) programme. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) started distance education with the teacher-in-service education programme for grade II and grade III teachers and NCE in 1972 before delving into special training for teachers in secondary and teachers training colleges which they called university of the Air programme. University of Ibadan was the first tertiary institution to plan for the introduction of distance education in Nigerian higher institutions.

As reported by Akintayo (1994), their objective was to prepare students for pre-science degree through face to face contact, correspondence, radio, and television; nevertheless, there was setback to this objective because of the clause of the “funding only by the external bodies” mandate given to them by the NUC which was not met. This was because it was only university of Lagos that was earmarked by NUC for correspondence and open studies (1966-1970) in the nation’s university plan. The external degree programme started in 1986, has been functional ever since. The National Open University was established in 1983 by an act of the national assembly as the first tertiary institution for pure distance learning. Unfortunately, the institution was closed down in 1984 after a change in government but was resuscitated in 2002 on the reactivation of NAN act of 1983. Subsequently, almost all the universities in Nigeria have education units which cater for the teaching and graduation of degree students in various fields of endeavour.

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