

ELECTRONIC LEARNING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: NEED FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The wave of globalization, fuelled by the advancement in technological innovations has produced a global economy and its attendant challenges to educators. The government of Nigeria has taken giant strides to introduce the distance education programme as a panacea to providing mass literacy and equal educational opportunities to all citizens, irrespective of tribe, religion, sex, socio-cultural backgrounds, as well as those who could not afford to attend the full time educational programme. The role of electronic learning in distance education in Nigeria for quality assurance can therefore not be overemphasized. This paper discussed distance education in Nigeria, the reasons for electronic learning in distance education in Nigeria, philosophy of distance education, as well as ICT resources for sustainable national development in Nigeria. Challenges facing distance education as well as the solutions to the challenges facing distance education in Nigeria for quality assurance and sustainable development.

Keywords: E-learning, distance, education, quality, assurance, sustainable, development

Introduction

Education is the bedrock for the development of any nation and society as well as a necessary instrument for nation building and development. For

quality education to be achieved in a nation, the principal actors of learning, who are the teachers, learners and the environment must be cooperatively organized. In other words, the teachers must be adequate in quality and quantity, the students must be well trained and facilities must be provided as well. In recent time, the upspring and rapid establishment of private schools in Nigeria's education system which has adverse effect in the development of the nation (Adegbasan, 2011). Education at all levels forms a veritable tool for addressing virtually all global challenges. It is not only an end in itself but a means to an end. Education is instrumental for bringing about the desired changes in knowledge, values and behaviour that is required to attain sustainability within and among nations.

Education is regarded as the greatest force that can be used to bring about changes. The greatest investment any nation can make for the development of its economic, sociological and human resources is that of education. Education provides individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to win a nation's state and to even export brains. This justifies the reason why the Federal Republic of Nigeria enacted a policy document for the attainment of sustainable national development (Abubakar, 2013). Education shall continue to be highly rated in the national development plans because education is the most important instrument for change; any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any nation has to be preceded by an education revolution.

According to Ogundele (2008), for any nation to be accorded high respect at both national and international levels, such nation should not toy with educational provision of her citizens. Ogundele described mass illiteracy as the bane of national productivity and development. Dare (2013) observed that despite the fact that the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognized the need for sustainable educational provision of her citizens, yet there are tangible population of Nigerians that want to be educated but are prevented due to their socio-economic backgrounds and vocation. This problem led the Federal Republic of Nigeria to design another system of education called Nigerian Distance Education for the citizens irrespective of their tribe or ethnic background. It is also crucial for preparing workers to compete in the global economy. It is a tool for improving people's ability to function as members of the society (Uchegbue & Okoro, 2016).

Electronic learning, according to Hedge and Hayward (2004), is defined as an innovative approach for delivering electronically mediated, well-designed, learner-centered and initiative learning environments to anyone, anyplace, anytime by utilizing the internet and digital technologies in concern with instructional design principles. It is all about learning with the use of computers. In this age, learning with the use of computer is simply online

ways of acquiring knowledge through the internet or through the offline-CD-ROM. The online involves the use of internet Explorer/Navigator. It may be in form of audio, visual and or audio/visual. The convergence of the internet and learning, or internet enabled learning is called e-learning. The application and process of e-learning include computer-based learning, web-based learning, virtual classroom and digital collaboration where content is delivered via the internet, intranet/extranet, audio and or video tapes, satellite TV and CD-ROM (Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, 2008). Ajadi et al, noted that e-learning is not a new phenomenon in promoting education in some parts of the world. Presently, some institutions in Nigeria are using it to promote distance education (DE) and lifelong learning. It is the application and use of electronic technology to deliver education and training applications, monitor learner's performance and report learner's progress.

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 including print and other ICTs to learners who may have missed the opportunity earlier in life or have been denied the face-to-face formal education due to socio-economic, career, family and other circumstances. According to Creed (2001), distance education is 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. Distance learning, in turn, is defined as an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, entry, or time and place, method of study, or any combination of these. Thus, the concept of distance learning suggests an educational approach designed to reach learners in their homes/offices/shops etc. (Uchegbue & Okoro, 2016).

The term 'quality' is often used as a vague, blurred way. If someone talks about 'working on quality' they may simply mean activities designed to improve the organization and its services. Quality is essential about learning what you are doing well and doing it better. It also means finding out what you may need to change to make sure you meet the needs of your service users. There are two definitive types of 'quality'. Quality of design and quality of the process. Quality is defined as the level of value in a product or a level of achievement, a standard against which to judge others (Uvah, 2005). Quality assurance, which is the process for determining this, is defined as both fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose. While fitness for purpose is related to the university's missions, that is what the universities have set for themselves, fitness of purpose refers to their capacity to satisfy the national goals of higher education (Odejide, 2007). Odejide noted further that the principal responsibility for quality assurance rests with the institution themselves and

not with the National Universities Commission as it does at present. In other words, it is in the interest of the institutions to carry out periodic audits of their programmes in which they identify their strengths and weaknesses. Audit should cover teaching effectiveness, assessment of courses and lecturers, textbook facilities, capacity development. The purpose is to institutionalize self-regulation and ensure continuous improvement and innovation.

Arikewuyo (2004) viewed quality in education to be judged by both its ability to enable the students perform well in standard examinations and relevance to the needs of the students, community, and the society as a whole. Quality serves as determination of gradations based on standard of excellence beneath which a mark of inferiority is imposed or adduced and above which grades of superiority are defined. However, quality assurance is related to quality control, but it functions in a rather proactive manner in the sense that quality control serves as series of operational techniques and activities used to fulfill that requirements are met. While quality assurance goes beyond that, because it extends the focus from outcomes or outputs to the process which produces them. Ehindero (2004) avers that quality assurance focuses on:

- (i) Learners' entry qualification, characteristics, and 'attributes including some demographic factors that can inhibit or facilitate their learning.
- (ii) The teacher entry qualification, values, pedagogic stalls, professional preparedness, subject background, philosophic orientation etc.
- (iii) The outcomes, which are defined for different levels in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude including appropriate and relevant instruments to assess these objectives.

Previously, the attention was basically on the concept "development". However, the Bruntland Commission shifted the attention by reshaping and modifying the concept to "Sustainable Development". The most interesting aspect of sustainable development is the fact that it puts into consideration the present conditions of people as well as not compromising those that come later. Therefore, the concept of sustainable national development remains the modern parameter of measuring development (Abubakar, 2013).

Education and sustainable national development are interwoven, intertwined and interconnected. While on the other hand, development is geared towards producing or creating something new or more advanced for the society and its members. On the other hand, education is a tool which can enhance the desired sustainable development (Abubakar, 2013). Education and sustainable development are two sides of the same coin. Olubademo (2006) said it is only educated population that can command skills necessary for sustainable economic growth and a better quality of life. Sustainable national development could therefore be viewed as the target goal since it is meant for the society and its members; education on the other hand remains the

instrument for achieving and attaining the target goal/objective. The role of e-learning in distance education towards achieving sustainable national development in Nigeria, can therefore not be overstressed.

Distance Education Defined

According to UNESCO (2002), distance education represents 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. Distance learning is the student-centeredness of distance education which deals with the use of print and electronic technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. Etejere and Ogundele (2008) regarded distance education as the educational system provided whereby teachers and learners are separated in terms of instructional facilities, time and space whereby both the teachers and students interact together during their instructional activities using computer-based instruction and social media for their teaching.

Distance education is the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system, which is impacted without necessarily having personal interaction with students. The practice of distance education in Nigeria takes place in various forms, which include correspondence, study education, distance learning (Sandwich programme) Part-Time Teacher Training Programme (PTTP), Open University, weekend programme, adult literacy education programme, National Teachers' Institute (NTI) and e-learning.

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Jegade (2003) regarded distance education as education provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face. Study centres are the main place for students' learning activities.

Goals of Distance Education in Nigeria

According to the National Policy on Education (2014), the goals of Distance Education in Nigeria shall be to:

- (a) provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied;
- (b) meet special needs employers by mounting special certificate courses ASPROAEDU for their employees of their workplace;
- (c) encourage internationalization especially to tertiary education curricula;

- (d) 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.
In pursuance of these goals, the Federal Government shall;
- (a) ensure that programmes are equivalent in structure and status to those offered by face-to-face mode of delivery in the appropriate tertiary institution.
- (b) encourage and regulate Open/Distance Education (DE) practice in Nigeria.
- (c) establish an Open/Distance Education advisory body which shall:
 - (i) advise the government on the practical of Open/Distance education.
 - (ii) promote Open/Distance education nationwide in collaboration with Federal, State and Local Government Education Authorities.
 - (iii) liaise and collaborate with existing educational regulatory bodies and institutions offering Open-Distance education programmes to ensure maintenance of standards.
 - (iv) liaise with media houses, information and communication technology providers and other relevant bodies in enhancing Open/Distance education.
 - (v) encourage private efforts and other non-governmental organizations in the provision of quality education using Open-Distance education.
 - (vi) encourage participation in Open/Distance education programme at the local level.

Reasons for Electronic Learning in Distance Education

In Nigeria, awareness of the government on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have offered an opportunity for the adoption of e-learning in delivering distance education (DE) for educating a vast mass of uneducated or less educated Nigerians (Ajadi, 2008). The electronic learning facilities when provided and judiciously implemented would;

1. Reduce and/or eliminate the costs for instructor fees and materials to the bearest minimum.
2. Reduce time of learning and the time employees absents themselves from duty.
3. Help managed instruction and progress via portal.
4. Help fast learners go with speed in any course and avoid redundancy.
5. Make slow learners go on their own pace by eliminating frustration with themselves.

6. Enhance evaluation as it become self-paced because e-learning is a networked phenomenon.
7. Make easy delivery of content using standard internet technology as it enhances surf ability.
8. Be highly interactive as it engages users and pushes them than pulling them to progress.
9. Increase ration and enhanced hands on application unlike traditional methods.
10. Allow for automated monitor of user's progress with supervisor and teachers. (Okafor, 2012).

Philosophy of Distance Education

According to Okonkwo (2012), the principles underlying the philosophy of distance education are that;

- Learning opportunity should be lifelong and should encompass both education and training.
- The learning process should centre on the learners build on their experience and encourage independent and critical thinking.
- Learning provision should be flexible so that learners can choose where, when, what and how they learn as well as the pace at which they will learn.
- Prior learning, prior experience and demonstrated competence should be recognized so that learners are unnecessarily barred from educational opportunities by lack of appropriate qualifications.
- Learners should be able to accumulate credits from different learning contexts, providers should create the conditions for a fair chance of learner success.

It is important to note that the philosophy of distance education and the principles underlying it are not exclusive as to the learner population targeted. This is in reference to the misconceptions that open and distance learning is only targeting those who cannot afford the resources to access traditional conventional face-to-face education or those who are academically inferior. On the contrary, open and distance learning is an inclusive instructional platform that caters for anyone who desires good education but constrained by factors such as distance, age, time, occupation and other circumstances to attend campus-based education (Ikegulu & Oranusi, 2014).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Resources for Sustainable Development

The primary resources of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) according to Attama and Owolabi (2008) include;

1. **Computers:** Computers are no longer just mathematical tools but essential management resources. As we all may know, different operations can be handled more efficiently using computers. With the computer, such activities as information generation, processing, analyzing, storage and communication for sustainable development could be executed easily. The greatest assets of the computer are speed, cost-effectiveness and optimal utilization of available resources. Some other computer accessories worthy of mentioning are CD-ROM, diskettes, flash drive etc.
2. **The Internet:** This has power to the most valuable vehicle for accelerated information flow. According to Ogbomo (2004), it is a network of computers that communicate with each other, often over telephone lines. The potentials of the internet lies in the provision of global platform for information sharing among organizations and individuals. Information sharing creates awareness, ensures continuous use of products and services, provides feedback and support for organization. The contention here is that any organization or government that has current and useful information is empowered to enhance productivity and organizational communication.
3. **Electronic Mail (E-mail):** This is the most widely used resource of the internet. It is provided for sending and receiving mails (messages) through electronic devices. Intra and inter organizational communication has been made faster and cheaper. E-mail has become the life-wire for many business and organizational communication.
4. **World-Wide-Web:** World-wide-web is also an internet-based resource. It is a utility-based on hypertexts (Hypertexts simply documents through keywords in document or page). A visit to a website helps individuals or organizations to locate products, information, pursue political or social agenda and transact business (Chiwetalu, 2003). From the above, we can infer that being on the web would put any nation or organization on the right course of speedy and sustainable development in line with the emerging changes in technology, economic and political paradigms. Consequently, many organizations, ministries and parastatals in Nigeria have their own websites through which they make relevant information available to members of the public (Nwabueze & Ozioko, 2011).

Relevance of Distance Education to Nigeria

The relevance of distance education in Nigeria is an important issue for several cogent reasons. Some of the reasons advanced by Ochegbue and Okoro (2016) are as follows:

Access: It increases people's access to education. People who would have found it impossible to attend the conventional school system benefit from distance education programme. Many stakeholders in the education sector are interested in distance education programme because it allows greater access to educational opportunities. This is to maintain 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, e-learning and work study programme (FRN, 2014).

- 1. Social Enhancement:** Distance education programme schemes hold a number of potential benefits for various stakeholders in the education and development process. To the learners, distance education means more freedom of access and thereby a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualifications, thereby improving their social status. It is often a 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 full time.
- 2. Economic Growth:** Distance education is an avenue for institutions to improve their Internally Generated Revenue (IGR). It is also an avenue for many people to become learned and become better workers in any profession they choose or are currently in. For employers, distance education programme offers the possibility of organizing in-service training for their staff without necessarily releasing them for long periods of productive time. With sufficient number of employees being trained, distance education programme 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.

Distance education programme 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. Distance education programme has given tremendous supports to teacher training in the drive to Universal Basic Education Programme in working towards the development of education and life skills for youth and the management of available natural resources (Uchegbue & Okoro, 2016).

There are easily perceived long and short term advantages to the government to using an open and distance learning mode to complement the traditional methods of education in Nigeria. This according to Jegede (2016), can be grouped into the following areas:

- access and equity for comprehensive national development.

- alleviation of capacity constraints for economic, human resources and rural development.
- education for all especially to reduce or totally eliminate illiteracy and poverty.
- capacity building for human resource development especially in areas of acute deficiencies such as vocational and technical education, science and technology.
- life-long, life-wide education in order to build a learning and knowledge-based society.
- access to, and capitalizing on emerging market opportunities both within the African region and globally.
- avenue for transforming our higher education sector to make our institutions respond to contemporary changes, developments and needs of Nigeria.
- providing the answer to the perennial problems of teacher education.
- appreciating, educating the citizens about, and using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to accelerate national and community development and provide an organized entry into the global information super highway.
- generating spin-off effects on other sectors of national development such as rising development in telecommunications, the information technology industry, broadcasting, postal and informatics and the development of many education-related small-scale industries; and
- alleviating budgetary constraints as expenditure on open and distance education which has been shown in other countries to be as low as 30 percent of the total cost of the conventional form of education beyond the fake-off costs.

From this assertion, Jegede added conclusively that distance education can complement human resource development, and satisfy the exceptionally large demand for education by our huge and rapidly expanding population, which is still mainly rural, remote, underrepresented, and marginalized in terms of resources, location, economic and other reasons. Distance education will enable Nigeria to provide access for all and achieve equitable distribution by “taking the distance out of education” (Jegede, 2016).

Challenges of Instructional Delivery at Distance Education in Nigeria

According to Holmberg in Uchegbue and Okoro (2016), the overall problems that may impede proper implementation of instructional delivery in distance education are;

- 1. Lack of consistency in programme policy implementation:** It is known fact that the success in any educational policy is contingent on

the involvement of all stakeholders and sponsorship of funding agency, that is the government, which means that it must be supported through adequate fund to allow the continuation.

2. **Problem of electricity:** Since successful distance education cannot be assured without the use of communication and technological tools, example (e-mail, fax, internet, television, radio, etc.) then electricity comes into focus – because several rural areas in Nigeria are yet to have electricity, this will create problems for effective integration of most technological media in the delivery of distance education programme.
3. **Poor telecommunication facilities and lack of access:** Just like electricity, most Nigerians do not have access to telephone and other telecommunication facilities. Like in the urban centres, they are not adequate to serve the learning population – service for those who have access are in most cases epileptic which may make the integration of telecommunication in delivery of distance education difficult. In addition, even the use of GSM to some places are limited and may make GSM unattractive for distance education learners.
4. **Poor ICT penetration:** Most African countries basic infrastructure are inadequate. This has made the penetration of ICT facilities very difficult.
5. **Poor economic situation and its effect on middle level manpower:** This situation has pauperized most Nigerians that even an average middle income earner cannot afford basic technological and communication gadgets which may make the integration of necessary online resources (e.g. e-mail, news group, world-wide-web) into distance education in Nigeria difficult to operate.

Solutions to the Challenges of Distance Education in Nigeria

Distance education in Nigeria is not without challenges are enumerated previously in this paper. However, there are some possible suggestions put forward by Jegede (2016) for the Nigerian government and its supporting population to start enjoying the advantages of open and distance learning in Nigeria to solve national development issues through human resources development. These solutions include:

1. Expanding existing ODL institutions, establishing new ones, and providing facilities and spaces using reliable statistics of those needing higher education in Nigeria.
2. Integrating the distance learning mode with a traditional face-to-face education system in order to reduce the institutional resistance to innovation and to overcome the negative perception of poor quality with regards to distance education.

3. Establishing Open Schooling, Open Colleges of Education and Open Polytechnics to enable us to develop the required middle level human resources for all sectors and at the same time to achieve education for all (EFA).
4. Providing large scale mass higher education and democratization of open access to tertiary education as aid in the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the African Higher Education Summit of 2015.
5. Using cutting-edge Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including the internet, massive open online courses and other modalities in ODL that meet accepted quality standards to improve access to higher education.
6. Designing course material with a variety of methods that guarantee effective web-based instruction.
7. Effective and efficient management of the dividend of demography so that every citizen willing and able has unrestricted access to higher education.

In addition, there should be involvement of the affiliated universities in the curriculum and programme monitoring and supervision. Their involvement will aid conformity and adherence to the standard norms of the affiliated bodies and Nigerian distance education will adequately meet their challenges. The Federal Ministry of Education and non-governmental agencies should come to the aid of Nigerian distance education system in the area of infrastructural facilities development like internet facilities, web design and e-library. The assistance will aid in quality assurance of the Nigerian distance education products and will help them to meet up the needs of the society. All Nigerian distance education lecturers should be adequately trained in the area of computer science since the training received will be useful for integrating e-learning, e-library, e-recording, e-examination, e-experiment and all associated computer systems into the Nigerian distance education programme.

Last but never the least, there should be effective implementation such as sponsoring lecturers to attend conferences, workshops, seminars, research publications and in-service training opportunities will go a long way in acquiring and updating lecturers and students' knowledge for sustainable development of the Nigerian distance education (Uchegbue & Okoro, 2016).

Conclusion

Electronic learning has been commonly accepted and proven to be the engine to effective and efficient 21st century learning in Nigeria and beyond. This is because, electronic learning charts the course for economic, social cultural, legal and sustainable development in a technology-driven society.

The application of electronic learning especially in distance education has emerged as the most radical transformation of the 21st Century Nigeria. It is a truism that e-learning is very indispensable to sustainable drive of Nigeria's development. The potential benefits of electronic learning in distance education have been accepted as an imperative paradigm. This paper discussed the role of electronic learning in Nigeria and the need for qualitative education for sustainable national development.

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