

DISTANCE EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE INITIATIVE

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Abstract

This paper highlighted on the historical evolution of distance learning in Nigeria from the practice of correspondence education. It equally examined the concept of quality assurance and outlined some recommendations that would help to ensure quality in distance learning education in Nigeria.

The history of distance learning education in Nigeria dates back to the practice of correspondence education as a means of preparing candidates for the general certificate in education a pre-requisite for the London Matriculation. This was described by Bell and Tight (1999), who said... the university of London has been termed the first “open university”, because of this move students all round the world, but principally within the British Empire and its dominions, were soon looking for tutorial support to supplement the bare syllabus they received. In this sense, Nigeria was not left out of the opportunities provided by university of London.

Omolewa (1976) reported records that showed a handful of Nigerians, as far back as 1887 that enrolled for the first time in the university at London Matriculation examination as external students studying through correspondence, and without enjoying any established formal ties to that educational institution.

Omolewa (2002) also noted that in 1925, several Nigerians, among them Eyo-Ita and H.O. Davis, passed the London Matriculation Examination later, E.O. Ajayi and Alvan Ikoku both obtained university of London degree in Philosophy in 1927 and 1929 respectively, and J.S. Ogunlesi obtained a degree in philosophy in 1982. Access to such educational opportunities at a distance contributed immensely to these individuals productivity. Besides these individuals, a significant number of Nigeria’s early educated elites were products of British correspondence distance education system. Indeed, inspite of 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, enabling them to combine work with high degree programmes. They thus, acquired the advanced skills and knowledge needed for teaching and research at a time when the college was introducing its own higher degree programmes.

With the emergence of many conventional higher institutions in Nigeria, most of which once were based on purely correspondence modalities, distance education still constitutes an integral part of these institution’s educational offerings (Aderinoye, 2000).

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Distance Learning Education in Nigeria:-

Institutions in Nigeria that offer distance education include:

1. Ahmadu Bello University, which offers a special training programme called “The correspondence and teachers’ service programme (TISEP), established in 1976 to prepare middle teachers for Nigeria’s primary schools.
2. The correspondence and open studies unit (COSU), now called Distance Learning Institute, which was re-established in 1974 by the University of Lagos to produce University graduates in disciplines necessary to meet national labour needs (eg. Teachers, nurses etc).
3. The first independent institution dedicated solely to distance education, the National Teachers’ Institute, which was officially established in 1978, to upgrade unqualified teachers working in the nation’s primary schools and accelerate the preparation of qualified teachers needed for the implementation of the university Primary Education Programme introduced in 1976 and the universal Basic Education programme introduced in 1999.
4. The External Study Programme (ESP) that later became the centre for external studies (CES) and today is called the distance learning centre (DLC) was established by the University of Ibadan’s senate in 1988 under the umbrella of the Nigerian Department of Adult Education to provide opportunities for teachers working in the field to improve their skills and training. This in-service training enabled them to subsequently raise their status from holders of Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) to full-fledged university degree holders.
5. To offer similar programme, the University of Abuja established its centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education in 1997.
6. After being closed for 16years, the National open university was re-opened in 2001 under a new name, the National Open University of Nigeira (NOU).
7. Private entities also engage in providing distance learning that includes professional bodies and governmental bodies and governmental institutions some of which offer courses in areas as law, business administration, accounting, and various sciences along with the more commonly found teacher training.

Concept of Quality Education in Distance Learning Programme.

With the proliferation of Distance Learning providers and the challenges presented by the distance education sector to state regulators and accrediting bodies it is not surprising that “clients beware” is the watchword for students, institutions and public agencies alike. In the current environment, it is incumbent on organizations to demonstrate the quality of their services in ways that are intelligible to potential students, faculty and staff, regulators, and government agencies. The admirable attempts to define quality standards and best practices for distance education have done little to assuage the skepticism of representatives in the academy, who are more accustomed to face-to-face delivery directed to bounded communities.

Distance Education: Quality Assurance Initiative.

Purveyors of distance learning programmes may be inclined to attribute a lack of broad acceptance among their colleagues to the paradigm shift that higher education has been undergoing in the past 15 years. In many cases, however, it must be admitted that potential of electronic delivery modes has not been fully realized in the execution of online courses. Some have suggested that these shortcomings are the result of trying to replicate the classroom environment, instead of maximizing the new configurations of knowing and community formation, possible in an interactive distance learning environment (Kayode, cited by Candron, 2001).

At a basic level, the characteristics of quality educational delivery to be demonstrated in distance education should include (1) providing clear statements of educational goals; (2) sustaining the institutional commitment to support learners and (3) engaging in a collaborative process of discovery (4) improving the teaching and learning environment. Recognizing that the terms “quality” and “distance education” are so burdened with assumptions as to create their own problem, is a necessary prelude to what follows.

The greatest challenge for trying to define quality in any product or service is that quality remains a relative experience, realized in large part through an individual’s level of expectation. Since quality necessarily rests in the eye of the beholder, at first glance, systems developed around the concept must necessarily be exercises in systematic subjectivity.

In a higher education, quality is a construct relative to the unique perspectives and interpretations of different stakeholders (students, alumni, faculty, administrators, parents, oversight boards, employers, state legislatures, local governing bodies, accrediting associations, and the general public (Cleary, 2001, P.20).

It follows therefore, that the effectiveness will be as much a function of the ability to foster agreement around common goals as of any substantive input or process adjustments attempted by an institution. In many circles, the term “quality” is understood as shorthand for Total Quality Management (TQM) or its close cousin, Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). The international standards organization makes the central principle of the pursuit of quality clear-to establish processes that will maximize service to customers. The pressure to apply management techniques to higher education came from a perceived crisis in confidence with post-secondary system. The Federal Government in 1977 in order to ensure quality in distance learning education decided to crystallize ideas and the approach to this kind of education by creating through law Machinery for accreditation and standardization of the practice.

A number of reasons accounted for the need for distance learning education. Sergeant (2004) pointed out that some groups of people are best served by the open/distance learning system. They include geographically isolated people, home bound student, people who work odd hours and people with disabilities.

Sergeant further explained that distance learning has proved helpful in reaching these categories of people. Many students at various levels-primary, secondary and tertiary do not like the

rigid and strenuous nature of the programmes of the conventional institution, this made them prefer the distance learning system. Also adults who seek education to re-enter the job market or for personal enrichment, children in rural areas who need specialized courses for enrichment or college preparation, and those employed in business and engineering firms who wish to update their skills to remain relevant are served by the distance learning system (Stem, 2006). Many opt for distance learning to enable them acquire necessary skills, enlightenment and attitude.

These required competencies are for use in liberating themselves from social, political and economic inconveniences and strangulations.

Egbezor (2002) pointed out that distance education is unique in its ability to reach those who are unable to utilize the conventional face-to-face educational programmes. He further emphasized that this unique importance had made it useful in many countries of the world. For example, about 1.5 million or 30% of all students in institutions of higher learning in USSR came through distance learning.

Kaye in Egbezor, (2000) explained that distance education has helped in no small measure in reaching greater number of people who by the nature of their jobs, location and occupation cannot go through the conventional university system. Distance education is also a veritable tool for nation building as it offers opportunity to people to be educated and make contributions to development of the nation-technologically and economically. This is why its quality must be ensured and sustained.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that distance learning is best conceptualized as “an environment” that integrates collaboration, communication and engaging content with specific group and independent learning activities and tasks. At the basic level, the characteristics of quality educational delivery to be demonstrated in distance education should include providing clear statements of educational goals, sustaining the institutional Commitment to support learners and engaging in a collaborative process of discovery including improving the teaching and learning environment.

Recommendations for the Insurance of Quality in Distance Learning Education. The accreditation standards should be organized into the following discrete operational areas:

1. The course objectives and outcomes should provide clear statements of what will be achieved on successful completion, having objectives that are compatible with the method of delivery.
2. Course contents – providing sufficient content to enable the target group of learners to meet the course objectives.
3. Admission procedures – communicating the terms of the course, including its scope and the requirements needed to realize the intended out comes, and providing applicants with enough information to assess their own needs and level of preparation.
4. Learning support and monitoring – student’s progress: providing appropriate supports, including supplementary materials, and facilitating peer group interactions should be adequate.
5. Open learning centers – identifying groups of users and ensuring that sufficient resources are available to serve them.

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6. Learner Welfare – maintaining accurate records, providing appropriate guidance, demonstrating learner satisfaction and appropriate completion rates.
7. Providers should have appropriate plans and resources to meet their mission, adopting good business and employment practice, adhering to relevant legal requirements, ensuring that staff have appropriate qualifications, and monitoring performance.
8. Joint provision and specification of respective rights and responsibilities, including procedures to meet standards.
9. Accreditation of distance learning centers should have procedures for application, limitation and review.
10. Instructional delivery materials – printed materials remain a major instructorial mode until such a time that the infrastructure for total online teaching will become available. Each course should have study material written specially for the course and which students are expected to study prior to being examined. In order to ensure quality in the education, these materials must be qualitative enough.
11. The students should be tested with items that are standardized with acceptable psychometric characteristics of validity, reliability, difficulty index, discrimination index etc.

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