

NEW HORIZON IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: FROM ACCESS TO QUALITY

By

JAMES O. EZEMA, Ph.D

*Department of Adult and Continuing Education,
Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Agbani,
Enugu State.*

Abstract

The paper looked at the various definitions and understanding of the concept of open and distance learning (ODL). It traced the historical origin of open and distance learning in Nigeria, the need for open and distance learning in Nigeria, distance learning, on-Campus based learning, models/types of open and distance learning, examination preparation model, the correspondence education model, the multiple (mass) media model, the group distance education model, the autonomous learner model and the network based model. The paper also addressed the development of e-learning in Nigerian schools and synchronous and asynchronous learning in open and distance learning (ODL). Conclusions and recommendations were made to guide new horizon: from access to quality in open and distance learning (ODL) system in Nigeria.

Providing access to education for knowledge acquisition and skills development to all people regardless of gender, age, race or location is very much important in every nation including Nigeria. Every economy of every nation demands education and training which must be all inclusive (inclusive education) which should also reflect the vast diversified fields of human needs.

Distance education or distance learning is any educational process 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 media.

However, every nation requires a dynamic educational system which should provide quality education which has been the problem of many developing nations including Nigeria. It has been observed and found in education literature that open and

distance learning (ODL) is relatively a new concept in educational science in many nations education system. Open and distance learning (ODL) usually has its main objective the attainment of mass education by providing opportunity and access to education to every citizen, both adults and youths without boundaries which our formal education system has not been able to achieve over the years. Consider the monumental achievement of various open and distance education institutions in Nigeria like the National Teachers Institute in the training and re-training of teachers for the improvement of Teacher Education in Nigeria and the other open and distance learning (ODL) institutions like the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

Conclusions have been on the need to improve on open and distance learning facilities in Nigeria in order to have open educational access to all Nigerians. Recommendations have also been made on this paper to include the role government, education policy makers, educational administrators, non-governmental organizations (NGOS) and other stakeholders play in providing education through open and distance learning (ODL) system in Nigeria.

History of Distance Education in Nigeria

The history of distance education in Nigeria is traced to the correspondence education era which prepared candidate for the General Certificate in Education (GCE) which in turn prepared candidate, for the London Matriculation Examination (LME). Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in 1960 provided a type of correspondence titled English by Radio programme (Onwe, 2013). This programme targeted both primary and secondary schools and covered core courses with more emphasis placed on the teaching and learning of science, Mathematics and English Language.

The emergence of Educational Television programmes of the then National Television of Nigeria (NTV) introduced the driven technology based indigenous distance learning. There were also the schools Educational Broadcast of Radio Nigeria stationed in Lagos which relayed all through the country. All radio stations were required to hook on at specific times of the day during school hours for broadcasting of the programmes.

In the higher education sphere in Nigeria, most of the tertiary institutions began to witness a lot of changes in the last 31 years in the areas of institutional delivery of open and distance learning (ODL). For example, the correspondence and open studies unit (OSU) of university of Lagos that started in 1974, but later changed its name to correspondence and open studies institute (COSI) and now known as distance learning institute (DLI) was the first attempt made to establish a distance education unit as part of a University in Nigeria (UNESCO, 2002). It began initially to offer programmes in science in Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Physics at first degree level and Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) for degree holders that did not possess teaching qualifications.

The National Teachers Institute (NTI) started in 1976 as a distance education institution with the support of UNESCO (UNESCO, 2002). It started with the training of Grade Two Teachers (TC II) and in 1990, the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) was introduced to meet the minimum teaching certificate in Nigeria. The institute also introduced the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme in 2005.

In another development in the history of distance education in Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, also started its distance education through a training programme known as Teachers in Service Education programme (TISEP) for graduates three and two teachers and later the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) (Onwe, 2013). The university established university of the Air programme for teachers in secondary schools and teacher training colleges in 1972.

The Distance Learning Institute of University of Ibadan started in 1979 as external Degree programme adapting the distance learning model. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was established in July 1983 by an Act of the National Assembly as first distance learning tertiary institution in Nigeria when the Federal Government realised that the ever growing demand for education, especially higher education by Nigerians cannot be met by the traditional means of face-to-face instructional delivery. However, the institution was closed down few weeks after its establishment and the Act establishing the university was suspended in 1984 by the then Federal Military Government that overthrew the civilian government of Alj. Shehu Shagari (Ezema, 2010).

Understanding Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

There are usually difficulties in defining ODL, especially in many third world countries, where policies and practices of ODL portray to take firm root as an alternative to face-to-face teaching and learning model. However, there is need for clarification of terms of open learning and distance education. For the purpose of this paper, open learning and distance education refers to approaches to teaching and learning which focuses on freeing learners from any constraints of time and place. These issues of time and place make this mode of teaching and learning flexible. For many, open and distance learning (ODL) is a way of work-study the combination of family responsibilities with study programme.

In respect of the above perspective, Creed (2001) defined distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space/or time from the learners. On the other hand, open 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, pace, method of study, or any combination of these.

Thus, the conceptualization of open and distance learning suggests an educational approach designed to reach learners in their homes (home study/offices/shops, etc, provide learning resources for them to qualify without attending

classes in person, or create opportunities for life long learning or continuing education, no matter where or when they want to study. UNESCO (2002) sees open and distance learning as teaching and learning approaches which focus on opening access or opportunities to education and training, freeing of learners from the constraints of time and offering of flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.

Mudasiru (2006) defined distance learning as a term to describe the student centeredness of education which deals with the use of print and electronic technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. While correspondence study entails distance learning through postal services, that is, learning at home and communicating with the instructor using print materials. Adebayo (2007a) defined open and distance learning as the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system (formal face-to-face) classroom teaching and learning which is imparted without necessarily having personal interaction with students or learners with the tutor.

Need for Open and Distance Learning System (ODL) in Nigeria

Open and distance learning (ODL) has generated increasing interest from not only lifelong learners but also traditional high school leavers. Conventional universities are repositioning themselves to become dual mode university in order to satisfy the ensuring demand for ODL. Dual mode universities are those which offer both distance and on-campus based programmes of study (Aguti, 2009).

ODL is relatively a young phenomenon in dual mode universities. Thus, many of these dual mode universities are yet to fully appreciate and/or understand the modus operandi and treasures inherent in ODL. Consequently, in many dual mode institutions, ODL students have often been treated as second class students who are attended to in all respects only after attending to conventional students.

Distance Learning

Distance learning refers to a mode of study where a learner complete all or part of an educational programme in a geographical location apart from the institution hosting the programme (Keegan, 1990). The final award given is equivalent in standard and content to an award programme completed on Campus.

On-Campus Based Learning

On-Campus based learning refers to the traditional way of learning where learners attend full time studies at the University. These learners are not separated at all in time and space from their institutions and lecturers offering them the tuition.

In Nigeria, apart from the reopening of the National Open University of Nigeria, the implementation up to the planned actions on open and distance learning in Nigeria would be another area of inquiry. However, Nigeria has through the National Universities Commission (NUC), accredited the following distance learning institutions:

- The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

- The Centre for Distance Learning (CDL) Obafemi Awolowo University.
- The Distance Learning Institute (DLI) of University of Lagos.
- The Distance Learning Centre (DLC) of the University of Lagos.
- The National Teachers Institute (NTI), Kaduna.

These institutions have well-stated policies on the UNESCO's major components of distance education systems (Collis, 2010): the mission; programmes and curricula; teaching and learning strategies; learning materials and resources; communication between teachers and learners; interaction between learners; support delivered locally; the delivery system; the student and tutor sub-system; staff and other experts effective management and administration; the requirements of housing and equipments; and evaluation.

The National Universities Commission observes, however, that a critical appraisal of the scope of the practice of open and distance learning education in Nigeria against the backdrop of the long-standing recognition of its potential for increasing access to education reveals some mismatch between policy and practice. With respect to open and distance learning education, the national policy specifies that the open and distance learning mode of education shall not be applicable to academic disciplines in a university that lacks capability for such discipline.

Models/Types of Open and Distance Learning Systems

In open and distance learning literature, there are various models and types for adaptation by institutional and non-institutional educational policy makers and administrators. Some of these models/types according to Otto (2010) are discussed below.

The examination preparation model

It appears this model is non famous in the literature, its prerequisite is a university which limits itself to holding examinations and conferring degrees and abstains from teaching. The students or learners have to teach themselves. This model was institutionalized when the University of London was founded in the mid 19th century for the benefit of those persons who could not afford to be enrolled at Oxford or Cambridge University.

The correspondence educational model

This is the oldest and most widely used model. It is a combination of the examination preparation model, a regular teaching by presenting written or print texts, and by assignments, their correction, and by a regular and ad hoc correspondence between teaching institution and the students. The model is simple and relatively cost effective to administer. It is used to a great extent by distance teaching universities that are multi-media and open. The University of South Africa is a good example of the universities that use this model.

The multiple (mass) media model

This model emerged in the 1970s. It is characterised by a regular and integrated use of radio and television, together with print materials and the systematic support of the students' by means of study centres. This model supported the movement toward open learning and open universities.

The group distance education model

This model is similar to that of the multi-media model, as radio and television are used as teaching media, especially for transporting lectures helped by professors. But these lectures are received by groups of students' not individual students attending obligatory classes where they follow the explanations of an instructor, discuss what they have heard and watched, do their assignments and take their tests. No special printed teaching material is developed and distributed, except for customary lecture notes. This model is prominent in China, Japan, and Korea.

The autonomous learner model

This model provides for freedom to develop independent learning. In the model, the students do not only organize their learning themselves, but they also tackle the task of drawing the curricular. They set their own learning objectives and decide on strategies and media they want to apply. Here, the tradition of expository teaching does not apply. Instead, professors function as advisers and facilitators who meet the students regularly and through interviews. In these meetings, the students present, discuss and negotiate their objective and plans.

The network-based model

This model is presently emerging as part of the digital transformation. It provides the possibility of working in digitalized learning environment. Here, the students have access to even the remotest teaching programmes and data bases carrying relevant information. Thanks to the Black Berry innovation.

Development of E-learning in Nigerian Schools

The development of e-learning in Nigeria could be traced back to the development of telecommunication which began in 1886 when e-cable connections was established by the colonial masters between Lagos and the colonial office in London to transmit information and receive feedback. By 1893, all government offices in Lagos were provided with telephone services for easy communication, feed back and easy access and later all other parts of the country were provided with telephone services. A lot of changes have been witnessed in the telecommunication industry since 1886. The provision of telecommunication services was initially monopolized by the Nigeria Telecommunication (NITEL) until sometimes in 90's when the federal government of Nigeria commenced the liberalization policy of telecommunication industry.

Four (4) private telephone service providers (Mtel-NITeL) Econet to Vmobile now Airtel, MTN and Communication investment Limited – CIL were initially licensed to provide General System for Mobile Services. The CIL services was later revoked for inability to pay the license fee before the prescribed date which was later given to Globacom (GLO) Nigeria. Etisalat Nigeria began commercial operations on 23 October, 2008. With this development, more companies were licensed to provide internet services in Nigeria (Onwe, 2013) and this led to improved access with internet by Nigerians. The country has less than 100 TSPs in 2000, but by the year 2011, it has risen to above 100 and many got connected to the information super-highway through broadband VSAT connection.

In Nigerian schools, the commonest type of e-learning adopted is in form of lecture notes on CD-ROM, which can be played as at when the learners desire. The challenge of this method is that the number of students per computer in which these facilities are available are un-interactive as compared to when lectures are been received in the classroom.

Some institutions adopted the use of intranet facilities; however, this is not well maintained because of incessant power problem and high cost of running generating set.

Most students in Nigeria go to the cyber cafe but because there are people of diverse intention on the net at the same time, and the bandwidth problem, a multimedia interactive cannot be done. Despite all these and other challenges facing e-learning in Nigeria educational institutions such as Yaba College of Technology, University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Benin, University of Abuja, University of Lagos, National Open University of Nigeria, among others have the facilities for e-learning. The number seems very low (compared to other parts of the world and the usefulness of the e-learning in the economy development) because of the location of most institutions bandwidth issue and mostly the challenge of electricity. Though, most of the educational institutions (private and public) have started setting up their ICT centres for internet services alone without actually taking into consideration other components of e-learning.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

E-learning may either be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous learning occurs in real time, with all participants interacting at the same time, while asynchronous learning is self paced and allows participants to engage in the exchange of ideas or information without the dependency of other participants' involvement at the same time.

Synchronous learning refers to the exchange of ideas and information with one or more participants during the same period of time. Examples are face-to-face discussion, online real-time live teacher instruction and feedback, Skype Conversations, and chat rooms or virtual classrooms where everyone is online and working collaboratively at the same time.

Asynchronous learning may use technologies such as email, logs, wikis, and discussion boards, as well as web-supported textbooks (OECD, 2005), hypertext documents, audio, video courses, and social networking using web. At the professional educational level, training may include virtual operating rooms (Bates & Poole, 2003). Asynchronous learning is particularly beneficial for students who have health problems or have child care responsibilities and regularly leaving the home to attend lectures is difficult. They have the opportunity to complete their work in a low stress environment and within a more flexible time frame (Johnson, 2007).

In asynchronous online courses, students proceed at their own pace. If they need to listen to a lecture a second time, or think about a question for a while, they may do so without fearing that they will hold back the rest of the class. Through online courses, students can earn their diplomas more quickly, or repeat failed courses without the embarrassment of being in class with younger students. Students also have access to an incredible variety of enrichment courses in online learning, and can participate in college courses, internships, sports or work and still graduate with their class. Both the asynchronous and synchronous methods rely heavily on self-motivation, self-discipline, and the ability to communicate in writing effectively.

Conclusion

The paper has looked at open and distance learning from the definitional view points, historical perspective, understanding open and distance learning, need for open and distance learning, definitions of distance learning, on-campus –based learning to various models/types of open and distance learning.

Recommendations

Due to development of open and distance learning (ODL) in the world and in most developing nations, government and other stakeholders should make sure that many people have access to education through open and distance learning which has been accepted as a veritable educational alternative to the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning.

Since technology facilitates access to open and distance learning, government should make sure that all the technology which aid open and distance learning are available, accessible and affordable.

References

- Adebayo, A.M (2007a). *Open and Distance Learning in Southwest. Ado-Etiti*: University press.
- Aguti, N.J. (2009). *Educational Technology for development*. Markerere: University press.

- Bates, A. & Poole, G. (2003). *Effective teaching with technology in higher education* San Francisco: Jossey Base.
- Collis, B. (2010). *Tele – learning in a digital world: the future of distance learning.* London: IT
- Creed, C. (2001). *The use of distance education for teachers.* Cambridge: Department for International Development.
- Ezema, J.O. (2010). *History of distance education.*Nsukka: Alossana.
- Johnson, H. (2007). Dialogue and the construction of knowledge in e-learning. *Eurodl. Org.*
- Keegan, D. (1990). *Open Learning: Concepts and Costs Successes and failures.* Perth: ASET.
- Mudasiru, O.U. (2006). *Problems of and prospects of open and distance learning in Nigeria.* Ibadan: University press.
- OECD(2003). *E-Learning in tertiary education: Where do we stand?* Paris: Author
- Onwe, O.J. (2013). *Policies and practice of open and distance learning models in sub-Saharan African Countries: A literature Survey.* Lagos: National Open University.
- Otto, P. (2010). Concepts and models of open and distance learning: pedagogical models in distance education. <http://www.uniddergurg.de>
- UNESCO. (2002). *ODL: Trends and Strategy Consideration.* Paris: Author.