

# **OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) IN NIGERIA: NEW HORIZON, FROM ACCESS TO QUALITY**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

*Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is contrary to the traditional distance learning programme where materials are provided for learners in various volumes as modules, ODL movement is technology- driven and technology empowered effort to create and share educational content on a global level. More or less, it is a paradigm shift from the traditional ODL. The paper however, x-rayed the concept of ODL, role and contributions of ODL, origin of Open University, adoption and use of ODL, access issues and infrastructure, open courseware concept and challenges. The paper specified some recommendations.*

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is the most recent innovation in education. More or less, it is a paradigm shift from the traditional distance learning programme where materials were provided for the learners in various volumes as modules. Contrary to the traditional distance learning (dl) open and distance learning movement is technology driven and technology empowered effort to create and share educational content on a global level. Onwubere (2013) disclosed that Open Educational Resources (OER) has its origin from developments in open and distance learning and in the wider context of a culture of open knowledge, open source, free sharing and peer collaboration, which emerged in the late 20th century. However, the 21st century

witnessed part of the positive strides towards “opening up” what was previously “closed” to all except a limited number of people who paid for access to or use of information and services. ODL has advanced from sharing specific products as it was formally thought of, to embrace wider pedagogical function as well as learners to share their intellectual property freely with the rest of the world is the key notion of the ODL movement. The purpose of ODL is to provide open access to high quality digital educational materials. Many universities and private organizations have participated in this project (Onwubere, 2013).

It is pertinent to remark there that the Federal Government under the regime of President MuhammaduBuhari has reiterated its commitment toward improving access to quality and lifelong learning through its Open and Distance Learning (ODL) initiative. It is worth nothing that the issue of ODL became topical in a one day symposium on policy and practice in November, 9, 2017 by Hon. Minister of Education, MalamAdamuAdamu. According to him, ODL has been embraced as a panacea to adequate access to quality education as well as promoting lifelong learning in with the provisions of the National policy on Education (2004).

It is important to note that the said symposium on ODL was a collaborative effort of the NUC and the University of London. The Executive Secretary, NUC, Professor Abubakar Rasheed, opined that ODL would help ameliorate the problems of inadequate access to University education. He added that the collaboration between NUC and the University of London would provide and promote global best practices and assist in a more dynamic way to promote University education in Nigeria. He concluded that since 1995, the average global higher education participant rate had increased by 4% and made possible through ODL.

### **Concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)**

The concept of open and distance learning (ODL) have been defined by different scholars however, the key concept about the variety of definitions is that open and distance learning (ODL) are freely accessible, digitized materials, documents and media usually openly science which are useful for teaching, learning, educational assessment and research purpose. They are available for educations, students and self-learner to use and re-use for teaching, learning and research (Wikipedia) in Onwubere (2013). They reside in the public domain and they have been released under an intellectual property that permits their free use or re-purposing by others (Onwubere, 2013).

Omolewa (2017) in his keynote address while discussing “Thinking Open and distance Learning for Development in Africa” disclosed that ODL has been correctly identified as a panacea for the myriad of problems in Africa. For one thing, it is inclusive and free of restrictions imposed by distance and space. Moreover, it creates opportunities for those excluded from formal education because of their gender, age or status. Dr. OlusegunObasanjo is a beneficiary ODL. ODL makes education accessible to

those who are unable to study full time due to their social responsibilities and commitments.

According to Omolewa (2017), ODL is most relevant in places where access to learning is limited at various levels. He lamented that no other region in the world needs more urgent access to training, retraining and further training than Africa. He sadly remarked that all reports currently indicated that Africa is far behind all other regions of the world at all levels of educational development.

### **The Role and Contributions of Open and Distance Learning**

While attempting to discuss the above subject, it will not be out of place to carefully examine the questions posed by Kirkpatrick (2017) which are: what contribution has ODL made to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDG)? How else may ODL assist countries in rapid and scalable development?

In attempting to answer, he noted that ODL practices have a clear and substantial contribution to making universal primary education. ODL techniques can be utilized effectively for providing education to communities in a cost effective and efficient way. Similarly, there are clear contributions that can be made by ODL for educating communities about hygiene and health, in matters of agricultural practice, sustainable environmental development practices and disease prevention and treatment.

By using ODL approaches the number of teachers and health practitioners, agricultural and environmental experts who can be educated and trained can be increased significantly above the numbers who could be trained using conventional educational methods. ODL can increase the number of trained professionals in areas of need without the need for expensive investment in bricks and mortar institutions. For example, if you consider that only 63% of children who enroll, complete their primary schooling, the scale of the challenges of up skilling training and educating the professionals who will contribute to progress is daunting.

Kirkpatrick (2017) also acclaimed that the Open University was a pioneer in the field of open and distance learning. Since its inception nearly forty years ago it has opened the door to more than two million people achieving more than 300,000 degrees. Throughout that time it has led to technological advances that support learning and education and currently over 200,000 people study with the Open University (OU). The OU has helped to establish over "Open" Universities around the world and these have grown at a remarkable rate. Dr. Olusegun Obasanjo, erstwhile President of this country, a military retiree has today attained the peak of academic (Doctor of Philosophy) through Open University.

### **Origin of Open University**

Kirkpatrick (2017) linked up the origin of OU to have been established in 1969. He noted that its original mission was explicitly one of democratizing education. At the time there was a huge pool of UK adults who had been unable to access higher and these

were identified by the government of the time as an undeveloped national resource, Advocates for open and distance learning, a new kind of “University of the air, argued that such an approach could open up the benefits of university education to a much wider range of the population. Distance education and its predecessor, correspondence educations have provided many women with their only chance to learn when other educational opportunities were inaccessible to them.

### **Adoption and Use of ODL**

According to Wikipedia, Open Educational Resources (OER) is a term that was first adopted at UNESCO 2002 Forum on the Impact of Open Course Ware for Higher Education in Developing Countries founded by the Hewlett Foundation. The development and promotion of Open Educational Resources (OER) is often motivated by its paradigm (Wikipedia encyclopedia). The OER movement was equally motivated by the ideal that knowledge is the common wealth of human kind and should be freely shared. Can you imagine a world without any restrictions on intellectual property, where educator can download lecture notes, lesson plans, e-learning courses and have the freedom to copy, modify and translate these resources to suit their own unique teaching styles and local learning needs, with the added advantage of redistributing these materials without restriction. The whole essence was to advance formal and informal learning through the world wide sharing and use of free, open high-quality educational materials organized as courses (1 Paye, 2012) in (Onwubere, 2013).

### **Access Issues and Infrastructure**

Open Educational Resources need to be accessible to those who need or want them. An inadequate Information and Communication Technology infrastructure, especially in less developed countries, is an obstacle to the dissemination and use of all OER and especially those that offer more than just basic texture content. There is a need to collaborate to make virtual environments more accessible to underserved groups.

As one provider put it “there is a tradeoff between using the latest technologies that provide rich virtual environments, simulations and robust feedback that will deliver a more effective learning environment but that require high bandwidth and limiting the environment to low bandwidth forms of delivery (text)”.

### **The Open Course Ware Concept**

Open Course Ware (OCW), is a term applied to course materials created by Universities and shared freely with the world via the internet (Onwubere, 2013). According to him, the movement started in 1999 when the University of Tübingen in Germany published videos of lectures online. The Open Course Ware (OCW) movements only lookoff, however Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) launched its Open Course in October, 2002. The aim was to enhance human learning worldwide by the availability of a web of knowledge. Many other Universities who

supported the project include: Yale, the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley. Several academiase these educational materials as courses in their Universities. These are the MIT, the OU, John's Hopkins, Kyoto University, Notre Dame and Korea University.

### **Challenges**

With good and highly digitized way of learning with free cost to materials, ODL is still be deviled with some challenges which are discussed below:

- Issues of scalability and sustainability require the development of smarter systems for working at scale, open learning can assist but it should not attempt to replicate campus-based courses. What is needed are structure, new forms of curriculum and different pedagogies.

- There is the need to be more clever and creative about the ways in which we embed new technologies. This should be done progressively. Rather than thinking of it as a process of adding more, it should be one of changing and adapting, integrating new technologies where they allow us to do something better or in ways that were not previously possible.

- Cost effectiveness is a key criterion affecting the sustainability and uptake of any approach and we should be willing to build on models that have demonstrated proven success.

- Absence of a developed and proved generalizable model of a education and training delivery. It is not sustainable to develop customized models for each environment whether geographic or professional. By looking at the context and what has worked it is possible to develop simple generalizable models that can be replicated and applied in a variety of contexts.

- There is substantial evidence that one of the key factors in ensuring sustainability relates to policy- small-scale, "owned" innovations at community level. It may be more agile and responsive. It appeared to engender greater levels of ownership but well-designed national projects that seek to embed change have been remarkably successful at generating change at scale. It seems that what is needed is a blend of approach allowing local ownership and decision making within a centrally designed and supported frame work.

- Where money divides and disparity already exists, what is the role for new technologies where they may further isolate and exclude those living in remote and isolated Communities? Serious questions of equity arise (Kirkpatrick, 2017).

Ipaye (2012), however, identified a number of approaches to sustainability which should be considered and need to be explored:

- Encourage institutions, rather than just individual pioneer faculty, to buy into the ODL movement so that institutional resources will be committed to sustaining it

- Stimulate ODL collections not as distinct from the courseware environment for the formally enrolled students but as a low marginal derivative of the routinely used courses preparation and management systems.
- Encourage membership based consortia to share cost and expertise
- Explore roles for student in creating, enhancing and adopting ODL.
- Consider a voluntary (or mix of voluntary and paid) wiki-like model, in which ODL is the object of micro-contributions from many.
- Examine ways that social software can be used to capture and structure user's commentaries on the materials.

### **Benefits**

Akpereka (2016) remarked that from the educator's perspective, the value of online resources may lie more in enabling them to enrich their student's learning experience than in saving time developing resources themselves.

### **Education:**

- Can use affordable (mostly free) learning resources
- Can have updates content
- Are available to translate resources into other languages
- Can broaden access to learning and
- Ensure publicly funded resources are available to the public.

Learning can benefit from:

- Enhanced quality and flexibility of resources;
- Seeing/applying knowledge in a wider context than their course would otherwise allow;
- Freedom of access and enhanced opportunities for learning;
- Support for learner-centred, self-directed, peer-to-peer and social/informal learning approaches; authentic or "real-life" learning experiences through ODL that link to employer or professional sector activities, and so forth.

### **Conclusion**

ODL remains the easiest, laudable, digitized and modified mode of accessing materials or studying with cost free. It is more or less like a key been referred to what is known as "Open up" as against the previous one known as "closed". Open Educational Resources (OER) was first adopted at UNESCO'S 2002 forum on the impact of Open courseware for Higher Education in Developing countries with Nigeria inclusive funded by the Hewlett Foundation. The various types of OER and OER policies identified include: textbooks, course materials, videos, tests, software and any other tools, materials or techniques used to support access to knowledge, audio-video lectures, sounds and music lesson plans, gauzes, syllabic etc whereas OER policies or tenets was adopted by governing bodies in support of the used of open content and practices in educational institutions.

The ODL movement as earlier stated above is technology-driven and technology empowered effort to create and share educational content on a global level. ODL like OER share synonymous characteristics hence is the easiest, laudable, digitized and modified mode of accessing materials or studying with cost free.

### **Recommendations**

It is therefore recommended that:

- Government should formulate policies that will foster further enhancement of the system
- Appropriate legislation should corroborate awarding of grant to resource persons of ODL programme so as to foster their researchers as well as procession on net.
- Every Nigerian government in particular and Africa at large should edify the programme's succession and progression.

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