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Enhancing Forestry Education through E-Learning and Open Access Education

By

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Abstract

Open and distance learning is dedicated to open access education geared towards taking the distance out of education for many people who would not normally have the opportunity to study through the conventional mode of face-to-face, full-time study. Instruction is provided through flexible delivery which allows learners the convenience to choose the time, place and what to study. Forestry education in Nigeria is presently limited to a few conventional Universities whose combined total graduate output cannot meet the forestry manpower needs of the nation. Forestry Education delivery through this innovative and dynamic system of learning would definitely enhance the increased production of manpower to this sector. It is recommended that forestry education should be incorporated into the ODL mode learning system and the Federal Government should mandate the National Open University of Nigeria being the only ODL institution in Nigeria to commence degree programmes in Forestry.

Open and distance learning (ODL) has over the centuries developed from a modest and inconsequential beginning through correspondence course to a full-fledged modern day technology-facilitated flexible and learner driven self-directed learning.

Developing into a distinct field of education has its own philosophy, systems and myriad of operation likened to an industrial system (Jegade, 2005). Open and distance learning is dedicated to open access education geared towards taking the distance out of education for people who would not normally have the opportunity to study through the conventional mode of face-to-face, full-time study. Introduction is provided through flexible delivery which allows learners the convenience to choose the time, place and what to study. (National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN, 2007). Oyeweso (2009) also said that it is important that there is open access to education because education is a weapon of liberation from ignorance, poverty and disease. He stated further that education is an asset that gives man the ticket when you give a child you could not really take it back.

According to Koul (2005), ODL delivery systems comprise innovative features of far reaching consequences: open and flexible entry requirements to increase access and equity; degrees and diplomas by cumulative credits to allow students time for learning if they need to and/or attend to their other social obligations and commitments; multi-media course packages to suit not only the specific needs of a particular subject matter but also the differing learning habits and techniques: courses prepared by course teams including a variety of experts to provide up-to-date and rich content and specialized instructional design for easy access, grasp, retention and retrieval; programmes made available to students at their own places to be completed in their own time at their own place, and in most cases at affordable costs. With the support of technology, the system is fast extending its global dimensions – whatever possible students can access knowledge and courses from anywhere in the world. Koul said further that ODL methodologies make it possible to mount short academic as well as training programmes which suit situations where saturation levels are reached quite early in the day. The immense variety in its representation, the unprecedented accommodation it has allowed to communication and computing technologies within its ambit, its economies of scale and its transcendence over limitations of space, time and one's pace have undoubtedly poised ODL as the system of delivering education for this new millennium. The essence of this paper is to highlight in a nutshell what ODL is all about and its potential in enhancing forestry education in Nigeria and thereby increasing manpower production in this sector of the national economy.

Background and Mandate of ODL Education in Nigeria

The ODL mode of education institutionalized as NOU was initially established on the 22nd July, 1983 as a spring board for open and distance learning in Nigeria. However, it was suspended on 25th April, 1984. But later in recognition of its tremendous role in tackling the country's educational problems and providing access to education for all, it was resuscitated on 1st October, 2002. (NOUN, 2007) The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is designed to increase the access of all Nigerians to formal and non-formal education in a manner that is convenient to their circumstances. It dedicates itself to preparing professionals in various disciplines through the distance learning mode. It offers a choice of qualification from certificates,

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Diploma to PhD Degrees. It is heart-warming to know that NOUN now offers degrees in some field of studies up to PhD level (www.nou.edu.org, 2009). It also caters for the continuous development of professionals such as Teachers, Accountants, Bankers, Lawyers, Nurses, Engineers, Politicians, the self-employed, Businessmen and Businesswomen. The range of target clientele is wide and shall be continually reviewed to meet Nigeria's ever changing needs. Opportunities are also available for stand alone self-development, proficiency certificate courses (NOUN, 2007).

NOUN employs a range of instructional delivery methods to take education to the people and make learning an enjoyable activity. These methods include:

1. Printed instructional materials, audio, video tapes and CD-ROMs;
2. Television and radio broadcast of educational programmes; and
3. Electronic transmission of materials in multimedia (voice, data, graphics, video) through fixed line (telephone or leased lines) terrestrial and VSAT wireless communication systems (NOUN, 2007).

Basic Operational Concepts of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

According to NOUN (2005) some of these basic operational concepts are stated below:

The Main Features

- a. Relaxed entry qualification and procedures;
- b. Learning at one's own place and pace;
- c. Two-way didactic communication;
- d. Use of self-learning materials (specially prepared)
- e. Use of electronic media-radio, television, audio-video materials, telephones, computers, etc.;
- f. Elaborate student/Learner support services;
- g. Non-traditional techniques of evaluation; and
- h. Degrees by cumulative credits.

Avoidable ODL Misconceptions

ODL is not Non-formal Education, Extramural Education or Continuing Education, but it accommodates all of them. Key features of ODL that minimizes constraints are two-way didactic communication, student/learner support services and use of multi-media materials and/or components.

ODL: Born of Socio-Economic Compulsions

ODL has at its base socio-economic considerations which bothers on explosion of knowledge and information with the growth of industrialization, sciences and technology, educational needs of industrial society vastly different from those of pastoral and feudal societies, focus on the shaping of personality has shifted to socio-economic relevance of education, education as a human right – mass education and consequences: New curricula, new subjects, new locales, new models, of teaching/learning and new procedures required for sustained human development.

ODL: Target Groups/Learners

The target for ODL delivery are essentially those who missed the first chance at the relevant age, dropouts who want to come in once again, those who cannot attend regular courses because of hostile situations – geographical, social, economic, etc, those who want to pursue studies without disturbing their normal routines such as house wives, etc, working people looking for upward/horizontal moves, professionals who want to update their skills and knowledge and those who look at education as a lifelong affair.

Systems in Single-Mode Institution

These systems are essentially ICT driven such as relevant infrastructure (applications-based-broadcasting, study centers operations, servers, etc), liaison with national/state ICT systems, LAN, WAN arrangements, data bases and servers (single, multiple, etc), maintenance and security of ICT applications and electronic course-wares.

History of Forestry Education in Nigeria and Its Impact on Forestry Manpower Production

Forestry degree programme commenced at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria with the assistance of Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) which led to the birth of the birth of the Department of Forest Resources Management on 2nd October, 1963 (Department of Forest Resources Management and Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, University of Ibadan, 1988.)

According to Alao (2010) there are presently twenty (20) Universities of Nigeria offering Forestry and Forestry related courses yet their combined graduate output has not been able to meet the manpower needs of the Forestry sector. This is aptly captured in a study by Alao (2005) on the professional forestry manpower needs of nine (9) selected states forest services in Nigeria covering a period of 1999-2002. The result is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Professional Labour Available in the Forest Services of the Nine States (1999-2002).

State	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total
Benue	(9) 5	(9) 4	(9) 3	(9) 3	(36) 15 <u>41.7</u>
Borno	N/A	N/A	N/A	(21) 15	(21) 15 <u>71.5</u>
Cross River	(34) 19	(34) 18	(34) 17	(34) 17	(136) 71 <u>52.2</u>
Delta	(12) 12	(15) 13	(18) 15	(21) 15	(66) 55 <u>88.3</u>
Kaduna	N/A	N/A	N/A	(10) Nil	(10) Nil
Kano	N/A	N/A	N/A	(27) 19	(27) 19 <u>70.4</u>
Kwara	(17) 7	(19) 7	(17) 7	(17) 7	(68) 28 <u>41.2</u>
Oyo	(17) 9	(17) 10	(17) 11	(17) 11	(68) 41 <u>60.3</u>
Sokoto	N/A	(17) 10	N/A	(8) 5	(8) 05 <u>62.5</u>
Total	(89) 52	N/A	(95) 53	(164) 92	(440) 249 <u>56.5</u>

* Figures in parenthesis represent established positions

* The underlined data are in percentages and represent filled positions

Source: Alao, 2005

In all it could be seen from the table that the professional hands on board between 1999 and 2002 were 249 from 440 established position representing 56.6% only living a short fall of 43.4%. This scenario has not changed significantly in the Nigerian State Forest Services (Alao, 2009). In view of these shortfalls and the problems inherent in gaining admission into conventional Universities-problems like basic educational deficiencies limited University space and other socio-economic issues, it is pertinent to explore the ODL mode in boosting forestry education. This will be apt because of the open access and flexibility among other factors. The inadequacy of professional manpower in these states could be attributable to these factors: first in the issue of availability of qualified people with basic entry qualification; and paucity of fund available for training.

The professional foresters, holders of minimum of a first degree or postgraduate diploma in forestry are supposed to be forest policy initiators and managers in any state forest Department. In all the states, the minimum qualification for a professional forester is a Bachelor of Science Degree in forestry or related discipline. Those of them with a non-forestry and Master of Science degree without a degree in forestry were being proposed for training so that they can be exposed to the basics of professional forestry practices. This gap coupled with other socio-economic factors are windows of opportunity for Forestry education using the ODL mode.

Conclusion

It is imperative to state here that social evolution allows us moment of real transformation only periodically, emergence of ODL is one of them. It is not a substitute for education, which including ODL will as ever remain the preserve of thinkers, researchers and teachers. Instead it is a mechanism that provides education with speed, variety and reach the major positive imperative imposed by the selfsame evolution. It is socially and temporarily relevant education that will bring about desired changes and concomitant development. ODL is there to facilitate such education and by implication any change and development at a speed educationist have never imagined before, on a scale we have never dreamt of and at a cost which most can afford. To this end it is recommended that in view of the laudable attributes of the ODL mode, forestry education should be incorporated into this learning system and also the Federal Government should mandate The National Open University of Nigeria being the only ODL institution in Nigeria to commence degree programmes in Forestry.

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