OPEN UNIVERSITY AND DISTANT LEARNING: A PANACEA TO ENHANCED ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Mabel Okafor Kalu[1]* & Ezinne Judith Ngwakwe[2]

Department of Educational Management, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nigeria

*mabelokaforkalu@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Open and distance education has offered access to educational opportunities on the basis of where they live or work, poor economic circumstances, and social status. It was low access to higher education in the country that necessitated the establishment of Open University in 1983 to ensure equity and equality of opportunities and wider access to education, with a view to mopping all those who need higher education but are left out by the conventional education system. Open and distance learning is important because it makes education accessible and reduces costs while maintaining quality. This paper therefore stresses the use of open and distance learning as an avenue to attain knowledge and education that would put all Nigerian individuals who were denied access to conventional universities in a better path toward achieving their desired aspirations in life.

Keywords: Open University, Distance Learning, Higher Education Access, Nigeria Education System, Educational Equity and Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Education is all efforts, conscious and direct, incidental and indirect, made by a given society to accomplish certain objectives that are considered desirable in terms of the individual's own needs as well as the needs of the society where that education is based (Fafuwa, 2003). Education improves productivity, labour, prostitution, crime and other vice. UNESCO (2002) reported that education opens the door for all citizens to participate in development activities, and when citizens are denied education, they are excluded from the development process, which in turn puts them at a disadvantage vice-visa their compatriots with the benefits of education. This is why there has been much emphasis, particularly in recent times, for all citizens of the world to have access to basic education of good quality. Education in Nigeria is directed towards self-realization; better human relationships; individual and national efficiency; national unity; and social, cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological progress by the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004).

Education is one of the basic means of human and cultural self-realization as well as the means of realizing the productive power of a nation. The very concept of development implies the constant improvement of the productive capabilities of individuals. Education is a decisive tool for promoting the socioeconomic, political and cultural development of individuals. According to Taiwo (2012), education is a life-long process that has interpretations of purpose, type and level. It is a means of socializing people into the community, upholding customs and traditions, and modifying them in conformity with emerging ideologies, expansions and reformations.

The Concept of Higher Education, Open Learning and Distance Learning

Higher education is a study beyond the level of secondary education. It is a study at the end of which a degree, diploma, or certificate is awarded. Institutions of higher education include universities, colleges, polytechnics, professional schools in fields such as law, theology, medicine, business, music, art, etc. Benefits of higher education include, among others, higher earning potential; lower blood pressure and stress; healthier lifestyles; choices; employer-provided health care coverage; job satisfaction; job stability; and future child benefits. According to Okebukola (2008), higher education provides high-level human resources for driving the economy and ensuring rapid societal transformation. That is, the greater the opportunity given to the citizenry for higher education, the more expansive the horizon for rapid social and economic development. In other words, higher education is a panacea to the ills of a society, and how much a nation progresses is a function of the quality of the educational attainment of its citizens. This implies that the higher the level of educational attainment is, the more progressive a nation is. This is why Nigeria must build and maintain good schools and treat education as an elixir that has the capability of curing the ills of the Nigerian nation (Kpolovie & Obilor, 2013).

Open University and Distance Education

The best purpose of Open University and distance education, more frequently referred to as open and distance learning (ODL), is that it increases access to higher education through nontraditional means. Access implies the ability of people to obtain opportunities for enrolment in appropriate educational programmes, as well as the sustained encouragement of learners to complete such programmes irrespective of their location and job nature. Open education enhances the provision of literacy, numeracy, and technical and vocational skills in a flexible, largely free and learner-friendly manner.

There are several approaches to defining the term Open University and distance learning. Adebayo (2007) defined Open University and distance learning as the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system; it is imparted without necessarily having personal interaction with students or learners. Creed (2001) defined it as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and/or time from the learner."

According to Ajadi, Salawa, and Adeoye (2008), distance education is an educative system that is characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner, in which instruction is delivered through a variety of media. This implies that distance education is provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method, whose goals are similar to adjusting as nobly and practically as those of on-campus full-time face-to-face education.

According to UNESCO (2002), ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of internet-based information technologies, particularly the worldwide web presenting 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. To Kaufman, Watkins and Guerra (2000), distance education means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at

convenient places and times for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity.

The Federal Ministry of Education (2002) defines Open University and distance learning as any form of learning in which the provider enables individuals or learners to exercise choices over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning and distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching conducted by someone far removed in space and/or in time from the learner. Alaezi (2005) refers to open and distance learning as educational patterns, approaches and strategies that permit people to learn with no barriers with respect to time and space; age and previous educational qualifications; no entry qualifications; no age limit; and no sex, race, tribe, or state of origin.

On the other hand, Dodds (2005) defines open learning as an approach that combines the principles of learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning, provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition of credit for prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programs in the expectation that learners can succeed and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems. Distance education aims at increasing access to education for those who have difficulty accessing it within the mainstream, such as poor, illiterate women, marginalized and those living in remote areas. Distance education is the means by which the teacher is taken literally to the student. It is a teaching and learning process in which the students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance, which is often bridged by communication technologies.

Open learning, on the other hand, refers to policies and practices that permit entry into learning with no minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition from prior learning (Glen 2005). It is also an organized educational activity based on the use of teaching materials in which constraints on study are minimized in terms of either access or time and place, method of study or any combination of these. Open and distance learning is a type of learning whereby opportunity is given to people (young and elderly) who are denied admission to regular universities to continue their education. It is also directed at young people beyond school age, who are qualified and desire to earn a university degree.

It can be deduced from these definitions that open and distance learning provides educational opportunities needed by anyone anywhere and at any time. It provides increased educational opportunities to a larger population in different situations and with different needs. Both students and employees with distance problems can benefit from this approach because it is more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered anywhere.

Table 1: Distance Education Initiatives in Nigeria

S/N	Type	Institution	Year
1.	Correspondence Courses	University of London	1947
2.	Extra moral studies	Oxford university	1950
3.	Direct entry course by radio	Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation (NBC)	1960
4.	Educational television programmes	National Television of Nigeria (NTN)	1966

5.	University of the Air	Ahmadu Bello University (Nigeria)	1972
6.	Teachers In-service Education Programme (TISEP)	Ahmadu, Bello University, Nigeria	1974
7.	Correspondence and open university unit (COSU)	University of Lagos Nigeria	1975
8.	Teacher's training programme	National teacher's institure (NTI)	1976
9.	Open learning	National open university	1983
10.	Centre for distance learning (CDL)	University of Abuja	1990

Source: Nigeria Open University: the metamorphosis of the Nigerian satellite education programme in merit research Journal (2013)

Relevance of Open University and Distance Learning to Nigerian Education

According to Nwaocha and Iyiama (2008), the relevance of Open University and distance learning to Nigerian education include the following:

Access: It increases people's access to education; people would have found it impossible to attend conventional school systems to benefit from Open University and distance learning because it allows greater access to educational opportunities. This is in keeping with the stated objectives of the National Policy on Education that maximum efforts should be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities, correspondence courses, open universities, or, part-time, E-Learning and Work Study programmes (NPEs) (2006).

Social Enhancement: Open University and distance learning schemes have several potential benefits for various stakeholders in the education and development process. For the learners, Open University and distance learning means more freedom of access as well as a wide 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. Men of the armed forces and other security agencies are registered in large numbers for distance learning to enhance their social status.

Economic Growth: Open University and distance learning constitute an avenue for institutions to improve their internally generated revenue. It is also an avenue for many people to learn and be better workers in any profession they choose or are currently engaged in. Students are allowed to read to whatever level they want, hence contributing to the economic growth of the nation through better performance. For employers, Open University and distance learning offer the possibility of organizing in-service training for their staff without necessarily releasing it for long periods of productive time. With a sufficient number of employees being trained, ODL is often the most cost-effective means. For the government and educational policy makers, the system is a panacea for the perennial problem of providing equitable and accessible education in an affordable and cost-effective way. Open university and distance learning have also reduced poverty levels among teachers, since programmes are attended while at work. The government too incurs little cost in training but develops manpower to improve the economic situation of the nation. Nigeria prisoners or inmates enjoy distance learning programmes in Nigeria to be useful to the nation by contributing their quota to the development and economic growth of the nation during and after release. Open University and distance learning have given tremendous support to

teacher training in the drive to the Universal Basic Education Programmes in Nigeria. Open University and distance learning are working towards the development of education and life skills for youth and the management of the available natural resources.

Calvert (1986) asserts that distance education helps extend the market for education to clients who have not been previously served. The problem of unsatisfied demand for educational services contributed to the acceptance, growth and implementation of distance education programs in Nigeria as a means to bridge the gap between demand and supply (Aderinoye & Ojokheta, 2014).

Reflecting how distance education has influenced the development of teacher education in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, the Nigerian situation reveals a high degree of personal, community and overall national development. Nigeria can now boast capable and competent teachers working in its education sector, improving the quantity and quality and overall capacity of education managers as well as school administrators necessary to lead the nation's education system Dennis, (1997).

In addition, more than 30,000 primary school teachers enrolled in National Teachers Intsitute (NTI) have successfully earned their "Teacher's Grade 11 Certificate, NTI has similarly registered serving teachers in its Nigerian Certificate Training Programmes, thereby improving the quality of those teachers already in the field" (Dennis, 1997).

The power and growing use of information and communication technologies and the resulting trends towards globalization have reduced the world to that of the small village McLuhan and Powers (1989). Open University and distance learning, together with appropriate information and communication technologies (ICTs), have the potential to significantly impact education content and delivery in teacher development in Africa.

The Problems of Open University and Distance Learning in Nigeria

Poor Funding: Education is poorly funded in Nigeria. A lack of or low level of provision of facilities for open university and distance learning programmes in the country is one major fallout of poor funding. Investment in Open University and distance learning is therefore low because the software and hardware required are costly. It is very expensive to obtain some of the soft wares because they are not developed locally; they are developed in Europe and other developed counties to suit their own systems and make their own living. This is a major impediment because, according to Yusuf (2006), success in any educational policy is contingent on the involvement of all stakeholders and the sponsorship of funding agencies.

Power Supply: The problem of power instability in Nigeria is perennial and has been a major setback for our technological development. Most open university and distance learning students who reside in cities and towns face the problem of an epileptic power supply. Worse still, the majority of them live in rural areas that are not connected to the national grid.

Lack of skills in designing courseware: Instructional delivery at Open University and distance learning are strongly affected by some facilitators' lack of knowledge and skills in designing and delivering courses in an electronic format. This scenario is a fall out of the ICT-Complaint Status of the Facilitators.

Internet Connectivity: Statistics have shown that there is a low level of internet connectivity in Nigeria. The cost of accessing the internet is still very high in West Africa. Most open university and distance learning students make use of cyber cafés, where they are made to pay so much on an hourly basis despite the poor service and slow rate of servers. To make both students and teachers computer literate, the government should prioritize projects that promote information and communication technology.

Low Teledensity: Another major challenge to Open University and distance learning program delivery is teledensity. Access to unhindered use of ICT tools such as telephones and the internet has been very low. Despite the emergence of the global system of mobile (GSM) telecommunication, the use of ICT resources for educational purposes in general and for open and distance learning is still very low.

Technophobia: Most open university and distance learning students have no computer education background; hence, they are afraid of using one. Some of them go to the extent of hiring experts at a cost to fill their admission, registration and other documents meant for them to fill online. However, the very few who have access to computers do not know how to use it and take full advantage of its usage.

School Curriculum: Most of the students admitted that they had no information technology/computer education knowledge because it was not entrenched in the curriculum at the elementary or secondary education level. Computer education has not been introduced at the elementary level until recently, and it is not yet a compulsory subject at the secondary level of education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Open and distance learning is important because it makes education accessible and reduces costs while maintaining quality. The use of distance education allows equity in educational opportunities and services. It also improves the quality and variety of the resources available to learners while opening new avenues for professional development.

However, the world over that education determines not only earning capacity but also the very quality of human life (Dike, 2002). Higher education gives one a greater sense of how to reduce risk in life and improve one's behaviour. Confidence, self-reliance, and adaptability are all hallmarks of advanced education (Davies 2001). Open University and distance learning, in addition to providing higher education, are expected to achieve the following:

1. The literacy level of the population should be incrementally and systematically increased so that the goals of education for all (EFA) can be met on schedule.
2. The existing teaching force should be improved, and new teachers should be trained through better methods that are complimentary to current teacher education practices.
3. Harness the opportunities of the information age for enhancing skills acquisition so that Nigerians will be on the right side of the digital divide.
4. Develop a frame—work to facilitate the delivery of education for national orientation and civil responsibility and thereby create a reliable avenue for the delivery of "education for living together" to all citizens.
5. Increasing penetration, wider reach, and affordable and cost-effective educational opportunities are needed so that no one is left behind.

6. In an organized and comprehensive manner, open and distance learning facilitates workplace training, professional development, and life-long learning (FME 2002).

Despite the innumerable advantages accruing from the aims and objectives of Open University and distance learning, achieving these advantages can only be made possible when the problems of low teledensity, electricity, inconsistency in programme and policy, implementation, poor economy, absence of trained teachers, poor postal system, and bad public image are no longer prevalent in the system.

On the basis of the problems identified, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government should subsidize Open University and distance learning programmes and improve the electricity supply to the nation.
2. Management should admit students in line with available resources on the ground and make the criteria for the admission of students to be in line with conventional institutions.
3. In addition to the modes of delivery currently used, course materials can be delivered through other interactive media, such as radios and TV, which are more accessible to open universities and distance learning learners.
4. No national educational system can rise above its teacher's quality; hence, teachers of Open University and distance learning should be well trained to improve their effectiveness and efficiency in the teaching/learning process.
5. The enthusiasm shown by the government and steps taken thus far can be sustained only with the involvement of all stakeholders (the government, business groups, community leaders, teachers, students, conventional institutions, UNESCO and grassroots citizens).

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