OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND THE GLOBAL EDUCATION POLICY SHIFTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP, MOBILITY AND GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

The rapid global shifts in the creation and delivery of open and distance learning (ODL) and education policies is playing a critical role more than ever before in the global mobility of staffs and students in the knowledge economies. These shifting patterns and new working practices are affecting the influence and adoption of education policies and even more the nature of new partnership and of communication and learning in complex ways.

Contemporary education policies in Nigeria, for instance extends far beyond government-controlled. What characterizes the education policy scenarios surpasses what ordinary eyes could see in terms of measurement. Over the last decade, global cooperation with Nigeria in the education sector to promote ODL has been mainly guided by Notes of Cooperation, thus, making major reforms in Nigeria solely conducted through the Education Sector Analysis (ESA), which oftentimes undermine and results in sets of incomplete diagnoses and information for evidence-based planning and policy formulation.

Extensive dependency on traditional generic models such as EPSSim (Education Policy and Strategy Simulation Model) as a tool for adapting specific context of learning in Nigerian education system has been engendering difficulties in the use of consistent education data and undermining cost-related information for the purpose of policy simulation and resource projections.

This paper will aim to assess the emerging dynamics in present government education policies and how these impacts on ODL. The paper will attempt a cursory assessment of various education policy statements which several governments, past and present had made and their attendant obstacles for teachers and other education providers, and conclude on a better option for Nigerian education policy as it relates in contemporary ODL contexts and the promotion of competitiveness.

The concluding aspects of the paper will examine a cursory description of the emerging pursuit for sustainability and the attendant challenges facing teacher's representative bodies, individual institutions, governments and communities promoting ODL. This will spotlight identified cross-cultural relationships as well as their attendant Institutional responses.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: EDUCATION POLICY SHIFTS AND MOBILITY TRENDS

Educational policy in Nigeria has passed through two significant stages --- the colonial and the post independent era. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate in Nigeria in 1914, that brought people of different ethnic group and faith together, as one country created a pluralistic society as well as a pluralized education system and curriculum which varies as you migrate from the South to the North. Also, the end of the Second World War coincided with the process of democratic transformation and national liberation from colonialism, heralded an educational policy shift towards a national development based on political and social-economic consideration and global best practices.

The relationship between education and development is now internationally accepted as a key development index. However post-colonial educational policy succinctly made visible the legacy of British colonial educational policy's philosophy, of the right of all people to education, material and cultural well-being, and reflects nation-building as a factor that is continually being modified by new policy demands. The national educational policy in Nigeria at independence was enormous and includes irrelevant curricula, obsolete methods of teaching and learning and left a huge drop-out gap, which made attributing the problem to include inequality of access, rural urban disparities and the educational gap between ethnic groups among others --- this partly led to the 1969 National curriculum conference and the national policy on education in 1977.

Year 2004, ushered in the 4th National policy on education which is based on a dynamic model of formulating educational policies that is adaptive to change and most appropriate for developing countries which specifies on adult education, non-formal education, specific-education type and open and distance learning (ODL). The open and distance learning aspects of these policies provides opportunities for those who are unable to complete their regular channels, hence prepare them for useful living in the society, along the lines of strictly guided international standards. Open education though not new in Nigeria has been given much prominence of recent; it is becoming a notable access to basic and tertiary education for Nigerians. Open and distance learning (ODL) within this new context for Nigerians not only

shares the goals of conventional education, but it also aim at providing access to historically under-served, place bound and highly motivated population.

Since the early 1970's and even with the changing trends in modern times till date, distance education has been an increasingly important policy option for educational planners in developing countries of Africa and many of these countries have come to accept that this mode of educational provision can play a part in national development. As on record, in the West African region of Africa, the national open university of Nigeria of Nigeria (NOUN) is the first full-fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning mode of education. NOUN focuses mainly on open and distance learning system, which is more typically of conventional universities in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Its constant academic renewal and relevance and the dynamics of globalization it projects, plus the introduction of information and communications technologies (ICT), resulted in a tidal wave of information that has in many cases, overwhelmed the Nigerian educational sector in the last few decades and this has resulted in radical changes in the educational needs of individual and society at large to meet the changes of the 21st century. The attendant lack of required capacity by our tertiary institutions, noticed as a result, has brought to the fore, as a viable and readily-available option the issue of open and distance learning as an innovative and cost effective approach to the educational process as ODL offers structured learning in which instructors and student are separated by time and space, making use of materials such as print materials, audio and video cassettes, CD ROMs, television and radio broadcasts, as well as multimedia components such as computers and satellite transmission.

ODL within the Nigeria experience encourages physical attendance of tutorials in addition to academic counselling services made available as compliments for tutorial sessions. To foster interaction between learners, in certain cases online support is offered through real time chat and email discussion groups with staff and other students. In Nigeria, ODL has however become grounded and remains an alien system of inculcating knowledge to students, who are not accustomed to conventional universities. Nevertheless, and in spite of these progresses, there is still the myth that the Nigerian education circle still struggles with the perception of distance learning.

DISTANCE LEARNING, DYNAMICS AND THE EMERGENT RELATIONSHIPS IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIES AS IT RELATES TO ODL WITHIN THE NIGERIA CONTEXT

The term 'Distance Education' refers to an educational approach in which there is a quasi-separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space (Keegan 1996). In distance education, the instructor and the instructional strategy/ methods are subsumed into the learning material (popularly referred to as Study Materials), that have been designed as a self-directed learning guide for the student. The term 'Open Learning,' on the other hand, refers to the philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality, lifelong education. ODL as an educational method and a philosophic construct has been identified as the most potent instrument for combating the educational problems assailing a nation like Nigeria. Moore and Tait in 2002 asserted that *". . . in developing countries, human knowledge resource development through initial and continuing education is not only seen as crucial for growth and competitiveness, but also has far reaching social impact, for example in influencing birth rate, increasing the independence of women, and improving standards of health and rural environment"*.

This affirms the crucial role that education can play in developing countries like Nigeria. Education is an important ally in the role of social and economic development. The potential of ODL in realising these educational goals has been viewed ambivalently, however. In efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, ODL may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary – and in some circumstances a more appropriate substitute – for face-to-face classroom methods that still dominate most educational systems. Despite the rapid growth in the popularity of distance learning, the quality of higher learning via distance education has been called into question.

Walter Perry, the first vice-chancellor of the Open University of United Kingdom noted the "scepticism garnished with ridicule and hostility" of distance education universities. According to empirical evidence, however, there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained at traditional institutions versus distance learning.

While its benefits can be evaluated by technical, social, and economic criteria, distance learning methods also have their pedagogical merit, which leads students to a different way of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition. Different people perceive the

advantages of ODL differently, and their perceptions have influenced attitudes and in fact, global mobility towards acceptance and use of ODL in the education system in Nigeria and across the globe. However, in the global realm of policy conception, there remain concerns, about the effectiveness of distance education for learners who may be considered less independent and thus may require direct interaction throughout the instructional process. Another issue of concern is the cost of ODL programming for individual students across the North and South. With these polarizations edging globally, there is a perception that most of all distant learners are members of the working class, but this is not entirely true as shown by several researches and statistics.

Widely held attitudes within frameworks governing the Education Sector Analysis (ESA) in Nigeria are fundamental to understanding social perception of people because they play a critical role in recent educational policy statements. Flexibility is very difficult to achieve in the conventional universities because their activities and management are more rigid and thus restrictive by design.

The emerging trend is that innovative use of instructional technology has become the rallying point of potential contact between students and the institution. Use of instructional technology may also be the reasons leading to favourable findings that students indicated toward ODL. Other favourable factors may be personal, social, academic, and situational – factors that may influence students' intention to enrol for programmes offered by ODL institutions.

Recommendations and experiences from teacher's representative bodies, individual institutions, governments and communities promoting ODL are very critical in appropriating what becomes of ODL within the context of policy development and implementation. Although students' recognition of the worth of a conventional university education was never in doubt, they nonetheless had purposefully chosen to enrol in an ODL institution. In a recent, research, students' responses are positive and the overwhelming perceptions and attitudes towards ODL hence suggest a strong rationale for the expansion of the ODL institutions in Nigeria, however, it is obvious that ODL institutions have reached the critical tipping point of acceptance, and as such ODL institutions are well positioned to become a permanent component of the formal education system in Nigeria. Sustaining students' favourable perceptions and improving any and all shortcomings as they arise now rests on the shoulders of those charged with running Nigeria's ODL institutions. These educational leaders must not

only run ODL institutions effectively and efficiently, they must strive to continuously improve the quality of their institutions' educational offerings and seek ways to expand their educational provision.

The onus for improving the stake has always been about the adaptation and use of instructional technology in the ODL, which is as prevalent as those used in the conventional system thus indicating that the use of instructional technology/ ICT remains rather sparse in the pedagogical practice of distance education in Nigeria. It is suggested, however, that this shortcoming is more a reflection of the entire education system throughout Nigeria and, by extension, its entire socio-economic system. Indeed, most Nigerians still grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide; access to instructional technology and capacity to use such technology is negligible compared to those of developed nations .It would be proficient that the administrators and leaders charged with oversight of distance teaching institutions in Nigeria may want to concentrate their research efforts on overcoming the deficits that underpin and perpetuates this identified digital divide.

The emerging pursuit of sustainability and cross-cultural relationships in ODL cuts across the salient issue of 'standard-setting' that existed between the North and the South, however; there is no clear cut difference in-between ODL and conventional universities irrespective of their territories. Though, variations may be attributable to the fact that ODL students are at liberty to answer the Tutor Marked Assignment given to them in course materials provided. This practice can be compared to that of the conventional universities in which students are required to answer questions in a face-to-face classroom setting. Thus, whatever standard-setting endeavour that may be inspired by ODL students as compared to those students enrolled in conventional universities may not be easily deciphered, hence requiring the need for parameters to be set in place, on an international-standard basis to ammonize the gaps that emerges. Moreover, perhaps because such differences cannot be accurately measured simply by aggregating the rationale for giving ODL students the answers in the learning materials in the first place, this by commission puts emphasis on the functional application of knowledge as opposed to mere memorization and recalling, which often characterizes conventional learning settings.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, this would mean that it is easy to conveniently argue that distance learning institutions should remain focused on developing open-book, portfolio, and problem-based learning situations wherein students work together to find creative solutions to problems posed in the learning materials. The use of proctored examinations will sure help to ensure ODL students' assessment of learning outcomes is 100 percent reliable. Exam results will be pivotal to understanding students' comprehension, knowledge, and application of the study materials, and will be needed for critically assessing the learning materials itself. Though, ODL may however still be evolving within this sense, quality concerns and the development of policies on a general note, and especially as it affects varying contexts of countries, may still be addressed through the administration of functionally-purposed think-tanks and structured end-of-semester exams that are conducted in face-to-face settings. Only in these ways, and more others yet to be discovered in researches, will the issues of leadership and governance of ODL as well as policy development assumes a directional posture within the Nigeria educational sectors and across the globe through and through.

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