APPRAISAL OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING EDUCATION IN NIGERIA THROUGH THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA.

BY

Wilson Friday Ohioze

Vivian Anietem Odishika

Liadi Abiodun Adedeji

Samuel Olumuyiwa Olusanya

Ganiyat Adejoke Adesina-Uthman, Ph.D Economics

ECONOMICS UNIT

NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

ABSTRACT

For the Nigerians, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a promising and practical strategy to solve the challenge of widening access and increasing participation in tertiary education. It is increasingly being accepted as an educational delivery standard which is viable, cost-effective, and flexible without sacrificing quality. This paper seeks to appraise the Nigeria experience of open and distance learning education with emphasis on its promises, performance and challenges. Primary data obtained from the existing documents of the National Open University of Nigeria and the National University Commission were analyzed. The research found out that National Open University of Nigeria has reduced the number of many qualified Nigerians who are willing to obtain higher education but denied access due to one barrier or the other. However, the provision of higher education opportunities through ODL came with some challenges such as students' attitudes, attitude of facilitators and academic staff as well as poor funding from government. For distance learning education to be sustainable it needs to be well funded, engage and train more academic staff in line with the operations of open and distance learning education mode and at the same time ensure that learners enjoy an educational experience that would lead to quality learning experience.

Keywords**: Open and Distance Learning Education, Tertiary Education, Promises, Performance and Challenges**

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has come into prominence during the last decades of the 20th century following the establishment of the foremost United Kingdom Open University UKOU in 1969. The confluence of the need for continuous learning and unprecedented technological innovation communications have pushed distance education approaches to the forefront of educational practice.
For the Developing World, ODL is a promising and practical strategy to address the challenges of widening access thus increasing participation in higher education. It is increasingly being seen as an educational delivery model which is cost-effective without sacrificing quality. In Africa, where resources are scarce and tertiary education provision is poor, Open and Distance Learning Education has been considered as a worthwhile and cost effective means of increasing provision without costly expenditure in infrastructure. Holding the promise of economies of scale and expanded geographical reach, it is not surprising that many African governments (Nigeria inclusive) are cashing in on this potential to increase the access to higher education for her teeming population.

Education is an important right and a key to social, economic, political and other developments of the individual and the nation, therefore Nigeria would not be taken seriously in the comity of nations if she neglects the role of education in the lives of her citizens.

It is worrisome that in the UNDP 2013 reports on Human development index Nigeria ranks 153 among 185 countries. The reason for this is not farfetched as 22.1 million out 42.1 million Nigerian are in primary schools, out of 33.9 million Nigerians eligible for secondary education,

only 10.4 million are attending, of all the student who sat for SSCE examinations, from 2000 to 2006, only 25 percent passed with credits in mathematics and English, out of 1.7 million candidates in 2013 seeking admission to tertiary education in Nigeria.

Table 2: Demand and Supply of University Education in Nigeria 1998/1999- 2012/2013

Year	No.of Universities	Application	Admission	% Admitted	Total Unplaced
1998/1999	39	537,226	64,176	11.9%	473,050
2002/2003	53	994,381	51,843	5.2%	942,335
2003/2004	54	1,046,950	105,157	10%	941,793
2004/2005	56	841,878	122,492	14.5%	719,386
2005/2006	75	916,371	76,984	8.40%	839,387
2006/2007	76	806,089	123,626	15.3%	679,846
2007/2008	94	911,653	107,370	11.8%	804,283
2008/2009	95	1,054,060	200,000	18.9%	854,060
2009/2010					
2010/2011					
2011/2012	117	1,493,604	400,691	26.83 %	993604
2012/2013	118	1,728,003	500000	28.94%	1024003

Source 1: Okeke, E. A. C (2009). Access in Nigerian education. Lead paper presented at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Nigerian Academy of Education, held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and updated by the researcher
Source 2: http://www.jamb.org.ng/Unifiedtme/

Nigeria is the most populous black nation with the estimated 168 million people, of which 30million are students(U.S Embassy 2012). The ever-increasing population annual growth rate of 2.38 per cent(NPC, 2008), ever-counting demand for higher education, lack of political commitment on the part government, limited carrying capacity of the existing public and private tertiary institutions in Nigeria(universities, polytechnics, monotechnics and colleges of education) providing face-to-face classroom bound mode and the compelling challenge to provide education for all irrespective of environmental, religious, social or cultural background. Given the astronomical numbers to deal with, the diverse nature of un met demands, the constraints of resources, the need for flexible tailor-made delivery of instruction with little disruption in the national, family and individual circumstances; and taking advantages of emerging information communication technologies (ICT) in relation to Nigeria's peculiar situation, the most logical pathway is by the distance education method (Jegede, 2009)
Erroneously, distance learning is being considered a new phenomenon. However, it has been in existence for over 100 years (Valentine, 2002). One of the earliest forms of distance learning was correspondence courses which started in Europe. This was the primary means of distance learning until the middle of 20th century when instructional radio and television became more popular (Imel,1996).

Open and distance learning was established as a programme of studies which provides opportunities for educational advancement for members of society who find themselves in any of the following stations in life: workers who desire education to improve their skills but who cannot afford to leave their jobs for full-time study; persons who appear frustrated with the bottlenecks in the processes of seeking admission to conventional institutions; persons who began their studies in conventional institutions but had to drop out for various reasons, including

loss of educational sponsors /benefactors. The mass of people who seek education to improve themselves find solace in open and distance learning programmes (Omoh, 2012). It is against this background that the Federal Government of Nigeria deemed it fit to chart a new course for the education sector in Nigeria by coming up with different policy documents; National Policy on Education,1977:25, the open university act (1980) volume XVII which spelt out goals of open and distance education:

• Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.

• Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place.

• Encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula.

• Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.(NPE, 2004)

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, and in particular the World Wide 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 place and time for learners, irrespective of institution providing the learning opportunity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Education increases the capability, skills of humans, making them more productive factor of production and as such, individuals, owners of factors of production and governments the world over have always faced the challenge of attaining higher learning to achieve economic growth.

With this in mind, Nigeria falls in the category of countries whose government and people are looking for ways to provide and acquire (respectively) higher education. Having stimulated enrolment into both primary and secondary school level, it has now become incumbent on the government to provide access for the graduates of these schools to have higher education which has become a bit costly for both individuals and government. The researchers consider the model Peters Model (2000) which states that structure/model for university education should include three basic modes of academic learning namely: self-learning, tele-learning and social intercourse" The model further extends independent forms of learning at a distance (i.e., self-learning and tele-learning) with the inclusion of social intercourse. Peters argument is that communications technology and lifelong learning demands will precipitate a transformation of the traditional university [and, presumably, all higher education] into an institution of self-study and distance teaching". In his view, self-learning and tele-learning are very much autonomous

THE POTENTIAL OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

In the work of Doug (2002), he asserted that many of the promises of distance learning are financial in nature. Universities hope to save money by delivering education to students that are unable to attend classes because of time or distance. The theory is that class size increases while the overhead remains the same. Both Bollag and Overland (2001), concluded that developing countries are turning to state run distance education programs to take the place of ever increasing enrollments and a lack of physical building space. Places such as Beijing, Jakarta, and South American countries such as Brazil and Argentina have all begun to use distance-learning techniques to reach those that would by any other means be unreachable. Bollag and Overland 2001 also said that countries like China are moving from "elite to mass education," and that "traditional universities cannot meet the demand". China uses a radio and television delivery system to serve 1.5 million students, two-thirds of which are in a degree program.

The question whether a country like Nigeria would meet the increased demands at a time of reduced resources, maintaining continuous access, with the use of information and communication technology (ICT) more efficiently, and allocating resources across study centres so that students in various locations would not be excluded from the system is answered by the immature National Open University of Nigeria . Distance learning mode has what it takes to address all of the challenges faced by conventional universities. However, administrators hope that distance learning methods will help make higher education more cost-effective (Dibiase, 2000). A hope of this nature may be considered as a quick fix for many administrators. If not approached seriously however, the distance programs can quickly become second rate (Doug 2002).

The convenience of time and space is a big promise made by distance learning. Students do not have to physically be with the instructor in space and, depending on the method used, they do not have to be together in time as well. This is a great advantage for non-traditional students who cannot attend at regular times (Savoye, 2001).

 Satellite campuses which hitherto filled in the gap would die a natural death and National university commission would save a lot of resources and time from unnecessary taskforce and media education programmes to enforce closure of these recalcitrant mushroom satellite campuses. The study centres will bring out the latent market of both adult learners in small towns and recent high school graduates who do not want to face stress of travelling to a urban/congested cities to get an quality education. The evidence from the latest students enrollment at Lagos Study centre with over 40000 students as shown in table 2 below testify to the fact that open and distance learning education is long overdue in Nigeria.

Table 2: Registered Students in Lagos State

Academic Session: 2011/2012

S/N	Study centre	No of Student
1	Agidingbi,Ikeja	37,802
2	Akoka,Yaba	1
3	Lagos Apapa	9,095
	Total	**46898**

Source: NOUN Portalpro Plus Report July 2013

Many universities are feeling the pressure to control their costs, improve quality of instruction, focus on customer needs, and respond to the competitive pressures (Horgan, 1998). Distance learning technologies have the potential to assist in solving these problems. This position was corroborated by the work of Basom and Sherritt 1994 which surveyed higher education administrators and state politicians to find out what they thought would be the major problems facing American higher education in the next millennium. With the current level of local and foreign partnerships these challenges will fade away in the course time.

The National Open University of Nigeria Milestone

For ten years of its unbroken existence NOUN has made remarkable milestone in the fulfillment of Federal Government strive to provide education for all realizable. The achievements of the university shall be discussed under the following objectives: widening access, gender equality, poverty eradication, vocational and lifelong education, cost effectiveness, economies of scale, on the job training, course relevance

1.   Widening Access

There are 36 federal universities, 37 state universities, and 45 private universities accredited by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria (US Embassy 2012). With the combined carrying capacity of all of them they can only admit 500,000 out of 1.7 million applicants seeking higher education in Nigeria in 2013 leaving more than 1million applicants to wait for another year to apply with no guarantee. Prof. Rufa'i current Minister of Education in Nigeria supported this claim after the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board released the 2013 candidates results. She said *"For this academic year, we expect carrying capacity to increase from 400,691 admitted last year to over 500,000. I urge all institutions to carefully examine their carrying capacities in relation to their expanding infrastructure. You must make sure that you fill the quota for each course."*

The admission gap created by the existing conventional universities can only be filled by a university like National Open University of Nigeria with no limiting carrying capacity as demonstrated in the last ten years. As rightly pointed out by the current Vice-chancellor of the university:

'*We are limitless, that is why we are called open. Our capacity is at infinity. Open Universities today can accommodate 5 million, 10 million students. As many as are interested in acquiring education, we have room for them. We are opened as wide as the capacity of this country. As I speak to you, the Open University of India has a student population of 3.8 million. At the moment we are already at the capacity of 132,000 students. I want to assure you that in the next two sessions, we want to hit 500,000 students. My dream for the Open University is that in the next five years, we should have at least 1.5 million students. So there is no carrying capacity. This is the only university that has the mandate to admit as many students as possible because we have the technology to accommodate the academic needs of these students. Open University is a peculiar and special university, designed to do this without undermining quality.' (Tenebe, March 2013).*

The National Open University of Nigeria started with unprecedented admission of 34000 students which no single conventional university in Nigeria having the capacity to absorb such. Since then the figure has been on the increase, as at July 2013 the National Open University of Nigeria has 198,547 registered students. NOUN has fifty-two study centres across Nigeria, fully run on information and communication technology with the intention to open more.(NOUN website, July 2013).

The university has further increased the access by creating more study centres in Military Barracks, Nigerian Prison Yards, Immigration Office, Nigerian Security and Civil Defense and most recently National Union of Road and Transport Workers.

2.   GENDER EQUALITY

One major aspect of education gap in Nigeria is the discrepancy with respect to equal opportunities in education for girls and women. It is a known fact that distance learning mode reach large number of women especially full house wives and women in Purdah. The National Open University of Nigeria has overcome this challenge by creating unfettered opportunities for women in Nigeria. The table below shows the NOUN gap bridging effort so far on gender equality.

Table: **Distribution Students According to Sex**

S/N	School	Female	Male
1	Access and General Studies Unit	3907	5519
2	Center for Life-Long Learning and Workplace Training	381	685
3	School of Arts and Social Sciences	13081	28138
4	School of Business and Human Resource Management	20	42
5	School of Education	11232	8936
6	School of Law	5288	14292
7	School of Management Sciences	22576	32125
8	School of Science and Technology	23243	28804
	Total	**79,728**	**118,541**

NOUN website, July 2013

 The above table has shown that with time NOUN will remove the existing wide disparity in gender education in Nigeria**.**

VOCATIONAL AND LIFELONG EDUCATION

NOUN has responded effectively to the growing demand of working adults or any others who have difficulties in obtaining higher education in conventional universities as result of lack flexibilities in timing and location. The acceptance of open and distance learning mode has gained tremendous acceptance among young and old citizens of Nigerians. Among the alumni of NOUN was the former president of Nigeria Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and some of the newly matriculated students include prominent Nigerians some of which were mentioned by the current Vice-Chancellor in his interview granted Daily Trust newspaper:

'*….that I have seven vice chancellors from other universities including myself as students of NOUN. I am a student of Post Graduate Diploma in Education. I have the Vice Chancellor of Berita University who is a student of Law; I have the Vice Chancellor of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, who is also a student of Law. I can tell you so many prominent Nigerians who are students of our university. The Awujale of Ijebu, somebody who is 78 years old and has been on the throne for 52 years, is a student of 100 level Law in NOUN. The more than 22 Obas under his domain have also enrolled in NOUN just because the Awujale, the paramount ruler of Ijebu land enrolled. The Emir of Bauchi has just filled in his form for admission......not long ago, the Commissioner of Finance, Nasarawa State, Prof. Mainoma a former Deputy Vice Chancellor of Nasarawa State University…'(Tenebe ,2013)*

COST EFFECTIVENESS:

It costs a student one-third of what it costs in a conventional university offering a similar programme. Students have no problem of unplanned expenses like buying of lecturers' hand-out and other illegal dues. NOUN students can pay per course/exam which is not the case in the conventional universities thereby making the university affordable and convenienti The average fees in any federal institution in Nigeria for year is about N150,000, state university N200,000 and private university fees per student is about N400. These fees do not include textbooks which NOUN students paid for, once N70,000(average fees per student for session).

ECONOMIES OF SCALE

This refers to the decrease in the long-run average cost of NOUN as admission capacity is expanded in the long-run. Thus, if the doubling of all inputs (infrastructure, staff-both academic and non academic, technology and the likes) brings about absorptive capacity which are proportionately greater than the (doubled) cost/inputs. So this means that NOUN in no time as new students enrolled at additional marginal cost, lower than additional marginal revenue meaning that the more the students, the lower the unit cost. At an average semester admission growth rate of 30,000, funding would never be a problem to the university and crisis resulting from lack of staff training, motivation and infrastructure development would not be encountered.

PROGRAMME AND COURSE RELEVANCE

As at 2010, NOUN offered about 102 programmes under six schools/faculties but currently due to ever increasing demand from hitherto deprived Nigerians and unparallel relevance of programmes on offer by the university, the available programmes have soared to 134 with 997,770 course materials developed. Many of these programmes are not run by any university in Nigeria for example (BSc. and MSc.) Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, Medical Office Management, Hospital Management, Hotel Reception and Supervision, e-Banking, e-Learning, Criminology and Security Studies. These show that NOUN would always be proactive and relevant with the dynamics of Nigerian society and producing human resources for different sectors of Nigeria.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The National University Commission (NUC) which is a regulatory body for all universities in Nigeria has added a unit to its fold to supervise the activities of open and distance learning Education in Nigeria. Interestingly, National Open University of Nigeria is the only one for this unit to relate with. One of the greatest achievements of NOUN was the accreditation of NOUN programmes by NUC. NOUN has become only single mode ODL institution to go through NUC accreditation scoring 97% overall in its academic programmes. The university has the least incidence of examination malpractice in the country because of the adoption e-exams system which Joint Admission and Matriculation Board just started using to conduct her examination because of examination malpractice challenges.

LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

The collaboration of NOUN with both local and international organizations has yielded a lot of benefits for the university and the Nigerian population at large. These benefits include the implementation of ODL in Nigeria, development of new courses, training teachers and managers, programme evaluation and quality assurance, sharing of experience on common

policy issues. The University signed memoranda of understanding with some foreign universities on human capacity building for academic and non- academic staff. Some of these are; Institute of Chartered Accountant of Nigeria (ICAN), Anglo-Nigerian Welfare Association for the Blind (ANWAB), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Kingdom Open University (UKOU), University of Huddersfield, University of South Africa (UNISA), Indra Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU), Open University of Hong Kong, Asian Association of Open University, African Council on Distance Education ACDE, Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Chinese Cultural Exchange Centre among others.

CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

In spite of the potentials and glaring advantages of open and distance learning in Nigeria, there are challenges that need to be fixed. These challenges include the student attitudes, facilitator attitude, costs, technology infrastructure, attitudes of facilitator, and inadequate academic staff. Each one of these has an effect on the overall quality of distance learning as a product. In many ways, each of these issues are interrelated.

1. ATTITUDE OF STUDENTS

Students found it difficult to adapt to NOUN's system of operations because of its nature which is different from what is obtainable in the conventional universities. Most of the Students are new to virtual learning, facilitation method of ODL, virtual library, e-examination and independent learning structure which they find so difficult to adapt to thereby getting some of them frustrated and dropping out from the programme. The course materials are inadequate and unavailable, some of them are not sufficiently self-explanatory, and do not communicate effectively. Due to unprecedented demand for NOUN admission the support services seem inadequate to attend to all the challenges faced by the students.

2. ATTITUDE OF FACILITATORS

Tutorial facilitation and comments on the assignments, give the students necessary feedback. Stowel (2012) however observes that many tutorial facilitators do not give concrete suggestions for improvemen; tendency to teach by facilitators instead of conducting tutorials; difficulty in sourcing facilitators for some courses (for example tourism) and the delay in payment of the engaged ones thereby encourage high turnover of experienced facilitators.

3. INADEQUATE TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

The inadequacy of computer and frequency of down time of internet facilities for students during examinations (e-examinations) largely due to poor planning and uncooperative attitude of rented e-examination centre. This sometimes unnecessarily prolongs the examinations which affect the work schedule of many students. Equipment and hardware malfunctions can be a great detriment to the effectiveness of distance learning. When a problem happens in an e-examination centre as most of the computers for the examination are networked, everything comes to a dead end and the learning environment is broken and frustrating. If there are too many instances, the entire examination exercise can be delayed /affected. For instance, if an overhead projector goes out during a lecturer's presentation, an alternate way of delivering that information can easily be found it is not so for an e-examination that is conducted nationwide at the same time.

4. **INADEQUATE FUNDING FOR OPERATIONS AND PROGRAMMES OF THE UNIVERSITY**.

The funding of education generally is poor in this country but for NOUN peculiarity which requires high technology back up to cater for large number of students across the federation bearing it mind that it is the only university that has the capacity to fill in gap in the provision of quality education without barriers and for very large number of candidates. The university requires much more than what is given. The 8.42% of the 2012 national budget is allocated to education sector; which is the second largest priority in the budget (U.S EMBASY 2012) seems not enough for NOUN capital and recurrent expenditures itself to fulfill its mandate to provide higher education for all Nigerian at lowest cost.

Year	Total Federal Budget in Trillion	Education budget in Billion	% of Education Sector
2009	3.4	2.3	7%
2010	4.2	2.7	6.45%
2012	4.7	4.2	8.4%
2013	4.9	4.3	8.7%

5.   **INADEQUATE ACADEMIC STAFF**

Over 60% of academic staff in the Nigerian university system is in the category of lecturer 1 and below; due to inter and intra-sector brain drain.

Faculty Staff in Tertiary Institutions

S/N	SYSTEM	ACADEMIC	NO. REQUIRED	SHORTFALL
1	Colleges of Education	11,256	26,114	14,858 (56.9%)
2.	National Teachers Institute	6,526	7,000	474 (06.8%)
3.	. Poly/Monotechnics	12,938	30,016	17,078 (56.9%)
4	Universities	30,452	50,000	19,548 (39.1%)
5.	NOUN	5,220	15,000	9,780 (65.2%)

*2007 System wide Staff Audit

Dr. Jamila Shu'ara, paper presented at UNESCO institute of statistics workshop on education statistics in Anglophone countries, Windhoek, 17-21 October, 2010.
The above showed that NOUN has the worst position among higher institutions indentified in term staffing especially academic staff. This further showed that NOUN academic are constantly under pressure to deliver which is not good for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the discussed appraisal open and distance learning education mode one may conclude that ODL has come to stay as a way out of present problems been encountered by the Nigerian who very eager to improve their on performances and contribute better to the national growth and for the young one who have frustrated by artificial barriers(UTME, Post UTME, High school fees, frequent strike actions and) placed on their ways by the conventional universities. The problem of catchment area for admission, fear of job transfer to different locations, purdah barriers for muslim women, rigidity of the conventional system that does not allow time flexibility are becoming things of the past because of ODL mode. However, the challenges of poor funding, inadequacy of technology infrastructure , poor attidue of students, inadequacy of lecturer, poor attitude of facilitators are prevalent in the system thereby making the lofty aims and objectives of ODL in Nigeria through NOUN difficult to attain.

The researcher hereby suggests that the federal government the owner of the first open and distance learning institution in the West Africa sub-region should not only increase the funding for this university but also treat the university as different institution with special qualities which requires special allocation from national budget yearly.

The dearth of lecturers in the university can be solved by implementing special packages for them which may include housing scheme, human resources capacity building with special focus on open and distance learning education with these in place more academic staff within the country and abroad will be willing to join the university.

The engaged university facilitators should be trained in ODL way and should be motivated to deliver effectively. The facilitators/instructors needed to be comfortable with the medium, and that the students needed to have more guidance on how to fully take advantage of the presentation and course materials (Teaster & Blieszner, 1999). In the work of Inman & Kerwin, 1999 it was observed that students were highly satisfied with the instructors and the course, but that direct interaction with the instructor played no role in the students' satisfaction. Therefore, the university must find a way of addressing this issue through quality training through study centres. Timely payment is important to avoid losing valuable tutor as sugeested by Isreal-Cookey, 2012.

Despite the need for improvement, the future of distance learning seems bright. Increasing numbers of students enrolling in distance learning classes underscore the need for "comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance education if it is to become the educational model of the future" (Harnar, et al., 2000, pg. 37). Despite the cost, coordination, and training that must be put into a programmes, it has "great potential to deliver and receive educational programs to and from remote sites" (Weber, 1996, pg. 219). Perhaps Keegan (1995) puts it best when he says "the challenge is to design cost-effective and educationally-effective systems for use in the new millennium of the new technologies that permit for the first time in history (electronic) teaching of students face-to-face at a distance" (pg. 53).

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