

# **Improving Access to Qualitative Education for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs): How National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Could Key in**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates how access to qualitative education for persons with disabilities (PWDs) can be improved through the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The paper is anchored on Moore's theory of distance education. It employs qualitative survey research and findings show that majority of respondents believe that NOUN can fast-track access to education for PWDs. Also, the majority of respondents are of the opinion that one of the fastest means of removing the stigma against PWDs is their inclusiveness and integration through their unfettered access to Open and Distance Learning (ODL). However, the majority of the respondents are of the belief that PWDs may face challenges in accessing ODL due to endemic poverty and cultural distortions. The paper, therefore, concludes with recommendations for advocacy on the importance of ODL for the education of the PWDs as well as for the government to provide enabling environment to support ODL education in Nigeria by institutionalizing ODL education for PWDs. It also recommends the improvement and development of relevant information and communications technology (ICT) and more open educational resources (OER) for accessibility and inclusion of PWDs in ODL education delivery architecture. They must be combined with appropriate content and pedagogy as well as legislation to institutionalize the education of PWDs through ODL as offered by NOUN.

**Key Words: Open and distance learning, Persons with disabilities, NOUN, Pedagogy**

## **1.0 Introduction**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank estimates, they are about one billion people who experience some form of disability globally (WHO & World Bank, 2013) with some 80 per cent living in developing countries (United Nations, 2021). Of these numbers, it is estimated that 93 to 150 million are children. Again, Plan International report estimated that these children are 10 times less likely to go to school than other children and when they do attend school, it is likely to be in a segregated setting (Plan International, 2013). In addition, the Global Partnership for Education estimated that 90% of children with disabilities in low and lower-middle income countries do not go to school (UNICEF, 2013). In the 2016 United Nations (UN) Report, for instance, it was stated that less than half of the world's six million refugee children were in school. About 25 million persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Nigeria (Uduu, 2020), which means that one in every eight Nigerians lives with at least one form of disability, with the most common of these been visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical impairment, intellectual impairment, and communication impairment.

Human rights law strives for direct tackling of these issues by making it obligatory on states to respect, defend, and realize the right to education of PWDs, through the implementation of inclusive education. Consolidating on several periods of UN's works in the fields of disabilities, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), embraced in 2006, has additionally promoted the rights and well-being of PWDs in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other international development frameworks. Despite everything, stigma and discrimination remained prevalent phenomena affecting all areas of PWDs' lives in Nigeria. PWDs may possibly start to believe what others say and think about them, which often leads to self-blame and a decrease in self-esteem. Looking forward to rejection due to stigma may result in PWDs decreasing their social interactions and not taking advantage of life's opportunities. This, in turn, may lead to isolation, refusal to enroll in school, unemployment and reduced income.

The Open University of Nigeria was established by the Nigerian government as a spring board for ODL in Nigeria in 1983 and revalidated as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2002 (Okebukola, 2013; NOUN, 2018). The aims and objectives “of the NOUN are in conformity with the Commonwealth of Learning on ODL systems with a philosophy that aims to remove educational barriers and give opportunity for students to study what they want, when, where and how they want it irrespective of learning pace” (Angba, 2019, p4). NOUN does not discriminate against gender, race, religion and disability and has 103 centres across the country. Both undergraduate and post-graduate programmes are accredited by the National University Commission (NUC). The university is a federal university that offers to every Nigerian a chance to have equitable access to education, hence, NOUN may be a veritable platform education of PWDs.

The purpose of this study is to find out how National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) can improve access to qualitative education for persons with disabilities (PWDs). In addition, the main objective of this paper is to investigate how access to qualitative education for persons with disabilities (PWDs) can be improved through the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The following research questions will be addressed:

1. Can integration and inclusiveness reduce social stigma against Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)?
2. Does NOUN have capacity for ODL that guarantees access to quality education for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)?
3. Should government institutionalize Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) and policy of reporting violations and abuses?

Following this introduction, the rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section II presents the conceptual and theoretical framework as well as the empirical review. Section III presents the methodology, and Section IV focuses on results and analysis, while Section V concludes the study.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conceptual Framework**

#### **2.1.1 What Disability Means**

Mohammed (2017) citing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), defines disability as the state in which physical and social obstacles thwart a person with impairment from participating in the normal life process of the community on an equal footing with others. A condition or function adjudged to be considerably impaired relative to the usual standard of an individual of their group is termed a disability. The word “is often used to refer to individual functioning, including physical impairment, sensory impairment, cognitive impairment, intellectual impairment, mental illness, and various types of chronic disease”. This usage has been described by some disabled people as being associated with a medical model of disability.

#### **2.1.2 Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Systems**

What is ODL? Distance education is the delivery of learning or training to learners who are separated, mostly by time and space, from those who are teaching and training. Because learners and teachers are separated by time and space, some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them. Open learning means that there are minimal barriers to entry in terms of age, gender, prior qualifications. The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. Although open learning and distance education are distinct, they are clearly complementary. If we open up learning, we also need to introduce some elements of distance education. Similarly if we introduce distance learn, we open up educational opportunities to more people. Therefore, it has become common to bring these two terms together in the expression open and distance learning or ODL.

#### **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted the Moore's theory of distance education which is a classification method for distance education programs. Molded in part by Moore's adult education and university extension experience, it examines two variables in educational programs: the amount of learner autonomy and the distance between teacher and learner. In addition, Moore (1994), distance education is comprised of two elements, each of which can be measured. The first element is the provision for two-way communication (dialog); some systems or programs offer greater amounts of two-way communication than others. The second element is the extent to which a

programme is responsive to the needs of the individual learner (structure); some programmes are very structured while others are more responsive to the needs and goals of the individual student.

### **1.2.1 Problem Statement/Gap in Literature**

Stigma and discrimination remained pervasive phenomena affecting all facets of PWDs' lives in Nigeria. These occurrences are noticeable in the individual homes and household lives, works, and even at the society level, spreading to challenges of meeting the basic needs of living. Disabled people over and over again describe the stigma and discrimination as worse than their main conditions (Michael, 2013). To worsen the matter, some family members of disabled persons cannot comprehend the implications of these biased attitudes and prejudiced behaviour. Looking forward to rejection due to stigma may result in PWDs decreasing their social interactions and not taking advantage of life's opportunities. This, in turn, may lead to isolation, refusal to enroll in school, unemployment and reduced income.

### **1.3 Empirical Literature**

Bunch (2016) examined the experiences of learners with learning disorders enrolled in online degree programs. He applied the phenomenological research design in his research in which 17 disabled learners partook in the focus group discussion and the interview. His study postulated that the most frequently mentioned challenge was getting lodgings. In addition, contributors were confronted with challenges of communication gaps between the course schedulers in the department, as well as academic advisors, office of disability and academic support.

Jalovic (2017) examined the structure of experience of interaction for learners with disabilities in online university programs. He applied descriptive method in which the author interviewed 16 participants and found that students received a varied accommodations together with technologies (assistive), alternative formats course materials, alternative formats assessment, cue sheets, extra time to complete a course/exam, tutor, reduced course load, a single contact person at the university, funding and advocacy with instructors. He then concluded that students encounters obstacles in the system like strenuous procedures of accessing housings, discrepancies in provision of lodgings, an absence of a awareness of disability, lodgings, privileges and responsibilities among teachers, reaction of the system to learners' inquiries, and too much reliance on texts and text-based interfaces in course materials design.

Lago and Acedo (2017) examined inequities in accessing e-learning by deaf or hard of hearing students. He conducted the study through an electronic survey with a non-probabilistic sample, consisting of 484 deaf and hard-of-hearing persons. The authors found that inaccessibility is the reason why some learners do not participate in e-learning activities (28%) and the main reason for dropping out (38.8%). In addition, the most frequently mentioned requirements were hiring of videos, instructors' proficient in sign language, the translation of texts into sign language, and the availability of texts at different levels of reading difficulty".

Cole (2019) investigated the experiences of physically disabled learners in virtual courses. In his qualitative study, he conducted interviews with 8 disabled students, and found that students experienced certain obstacles alternating from psychological (anxiety, isolation) to academic (unclear assignment expectations, reluctance of teachers to accommodate) to financial (increased costs due to unclear understanding of a available accommodations). In addition, ignorant of existing resources, miscommunication in relation to exchanges with instructors and fellow students, and the sense of being overcome are the other obstacles students are confronted with.

Genç and Koçdar (2020) examined the needs and priorities of disabled students for support services in an open and distance learning context in Turkey. The authors employed exploratory sequential design with semi-structured interviews with six individuals from each group, which consisted of the hearing impaired, visually impaired, and physically disabled to decide the needs of the students. They thematically coded the comprising managerial, pedagogical, social, and technical support. The authors found that students with special needs have need of a wide-ranging assortment of services regarding managerial, pedagogical, social, technical and vocational support. They recommended that present support systems should be improved and consciousness for these systems should be enlarged to make services more all-encompassing

Angba (2019) in her paper titled, “Enhancing Inclusive Education through Open and Distance Education for Individuals with Disabilities in Nigeria”, found that the flexible operation of the ODL offers the student the utmost likely control over time. The author postulated that the ODL movement has unlocked the perspective of learners in so doing re-shaping what they learn and access learning. She argued that regardless of the gains of the ODL, persons with disabilities are still marginalized and socially/educationally excluded. The author, therefore, postulated that ODL could integrate the disabled in the best way if interested parties develop instructional materials/facilities and curriculum in ODL that can enhance teaching and learning for the disabled persons in Nigeria.

From the foregoing review, it is clear that ODL institutions offer a wide variety of support services for learners with special needs. Nevertheless, the initial studies in related literature show that a variety of challenges for learners with special needs still exist in ODL environments. Nigeria is not exempted to these challenges, hence the need to investigate how access to qualitative education for persons with disabilities (PWDs) can be improved through the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

### 3.0 Methodology

The study employed the qualitative research method in which the research design used was the survey. Consequently, in the present study, the purpose was to reveal the participants’ experiences regarding how access to qualitative education for persons with disabilities (PWDs) can be improved through the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). A total of 150 participants responded. The participants were students, lecturers, and PWDs randomly selected within and outside NOUN who responded to questionnaire designed through Google form and sent to them by emails, WhatsApp, Facebook, SMS, etc. The research data were collected with semi-structured survey. In this respect, a questionnaire questions were developed by the researchers. The questionnaire questions were generally related to i) participants’ individual characteristics; ii) Disability-related discrimination, and iii) Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and the researchers deepened the interviews with additional questions in line with the data they obtained in the data collection process. For the analysis of the data, Google analyzed participants’ responses into pie-charts, histograms and Bar-charts.

### 4.0 Findings and Discussion

Results generated from the instrument are presented in table 1 and figures 1-8. Figures 1-16 shows the item-by-item percentage analysis of the structured questionnaire on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents developed by the researchers.

#### 4.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

From the table 1 it can be seen that males are dominant (68%) while females few (12 percent).

**Figure 1: Socio-Demographic Data of Respondents**

S/No.	Item	%
Gender	Male	68
	Female	12
Age	Less than 20 years	1.3
	21-30 years	9.3
	31-40 years	29.3
	41-50 years	30.7
	51-60 years	18.7
	61 years and above	10.7
Occupation	Self-employed	3.4
	Salaried	85.3
	Regular wage	6
	Casual labourer	1.3
	Trader	0.7
	Pensioner	0.7
	Retired public officer	0.7
	Legal practitioner	0.7
Qualification	First School Certificate	0.0

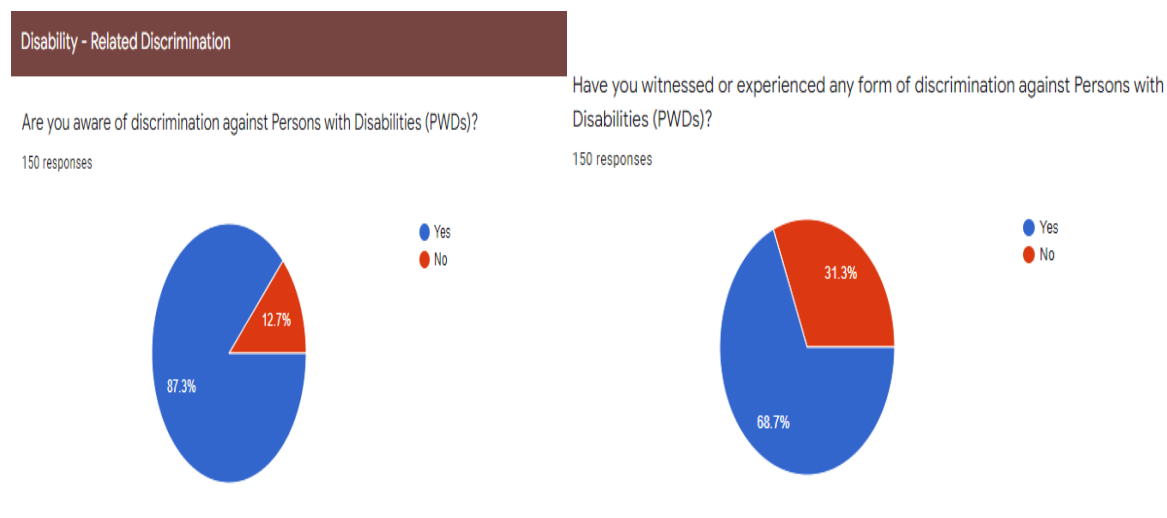
	Secondary School certificate	2.6
	OND/NCE	0
	B.Sc./HND	28.5
	Post-graduate	68.9
Marital Status	Married	76
	Single/Never Married	18.7
	Widowed/Widower	4
	Divorced	0.7
	Separated	0.7

It can be seen that majority of the respondents aged 41-50 years (30.7%), followed by those who are 31-40 years old (29.3%) and 18.7% respondents aged between 51-60 years old. 9.3 percent of the respondents fall into the 20-30 years age bracket. However, the number of respondents aged sixty-one years or above is 10.7% while those aged less than 20 years is 1.3 percent.

The occupational status of the respondents, and it can be seen that majority are salaried workers (85.2%), followed by self-employed (3.4%), casual labours (1.3%) and others (10.1%). Post-graduation qualification (68.7%), followed by B.Sc./HND certificate (28.7%). However, a combination of the respondents with primary school certificate (0%), secondary school certificate (2.7%) and diploma certificate (0%). Similarly, majority of the respondents (76%) are married, while 18.7 percent are singles/never married. However, 0.7 percent of the respondents are divorced and widowed/widower.

#### 4.2 Disability-related discrimination

Figures 1-5 are about the disability-related discrimination and in figure 1, participants were asked if they were aware of discrimination against Persons with Disability (PWDs). While 87.3 percent answered in the affirmative, the rest (12.7%) said they were not aware of any discrimination against PWDs.



**Fig. 1: Awareness of discrimination against PWDs** **Fig. 2: Witnessed or experienced any discrimination against PWDs**

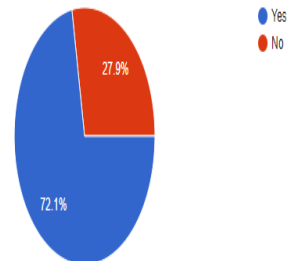
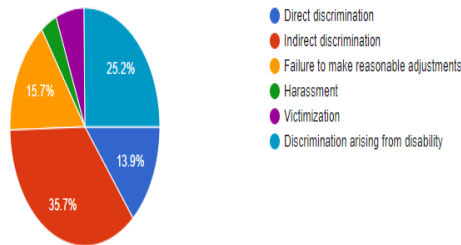
In figure 2 participants were asked if they witnessed or experienced any form of any discrimination against PWDs. Majority of the respondents (68.7%) witnessed or experienced some form of discrimination against PWDs while 31.3% didn't.

Figure 3 is the response of those witnessed or experienced any form of form of discrimination against PWDs and the type of such discrimination. While majority (36.2%) witnessed or experienced indirect discrimination, the least (3.4%) witnessed or experienced harassment. In between these two extremes are cocktails of those who witnessed or experienced other discriminations such as discrimination arising from disabilities (13.8%), failure to make reasonable adjustments (15.5%), direct discrimination (25%) and victimization (6%).

If yes, can your observation be described as any type below?  
115 responses

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Are Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) victims of injustice your society?  
147 responses



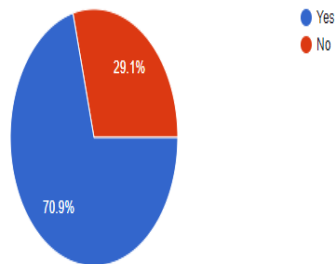
**Fig. 3: Type of Discrimination.**

**Fig. 4: PWDs are victims of injustice in some societies**

Figure 4 asked respondents if PWDs are victims of injustice in some societies. While 72.1 percent of the respondents answered in the affirmative, 27.9 percent said no.

Figure 5 asked respondents if they think violation of PWDs' rights exist in their society. While 70.9 percent of the respondents answered in the affirmative, 29.1 percent said no.

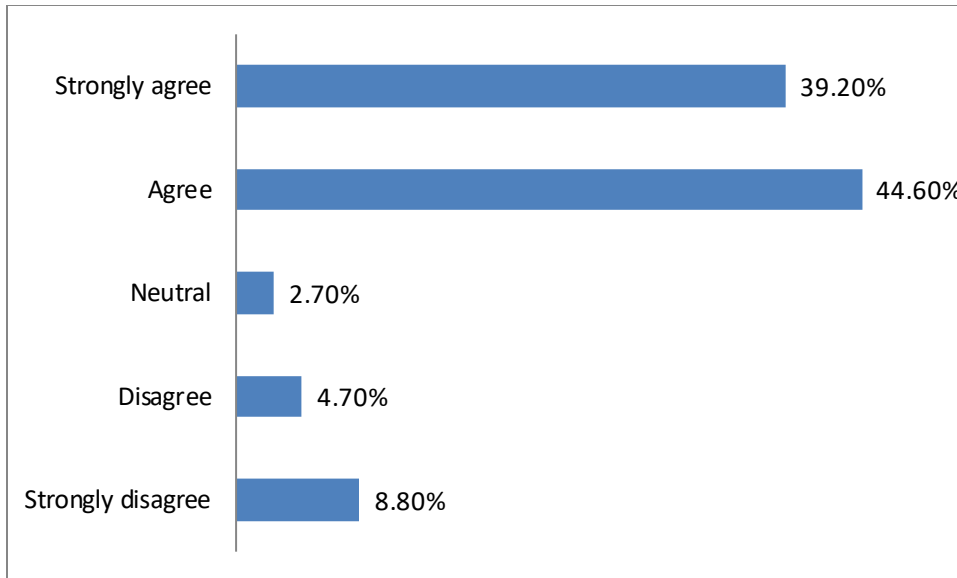
Do you think violation of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) right exist in your society?  
148 responses



**Figure 5: Violation of PWDs' rights exist in their society**

### 4.3 Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

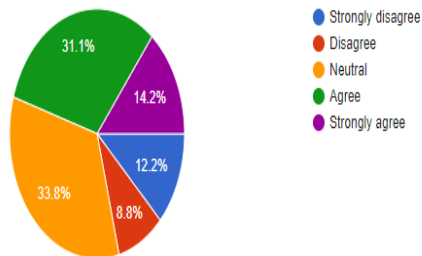
Figures 6 – 18 show responses in open and distance learning (ODL), in which respondents were asked ODL is important for access to quality education by PWDs (figure 6). 43.2 percent of the respondents strongly agree that ODL is important for access to quality education by PWDs while 33.3 percent also agree. However, 18.9 percent strongly disagree, with both who disagree and neutral 2% each.



**Fig. 6: ODL is important for access to quality education by PWDs**

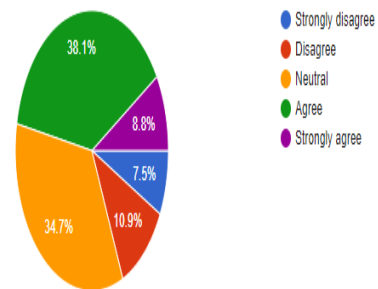
Figure 7 is response by respondents when asked if most PWDs prefer ODL mode of education. 33.8 percent of the respondents were neutral, while 31.1 percent agree. 14.2% strongly agree while 12.2% strongly disagree. However, 8.8 percent of the respondents disagree.

Most Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) prefer Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of education  
148 responses



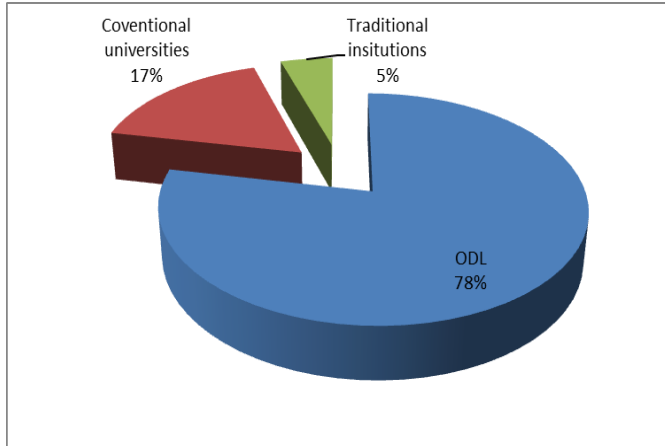
**Fig. 7: Most PWDs prefer ODL**

Stakeholders prefer Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of education  
147 responses



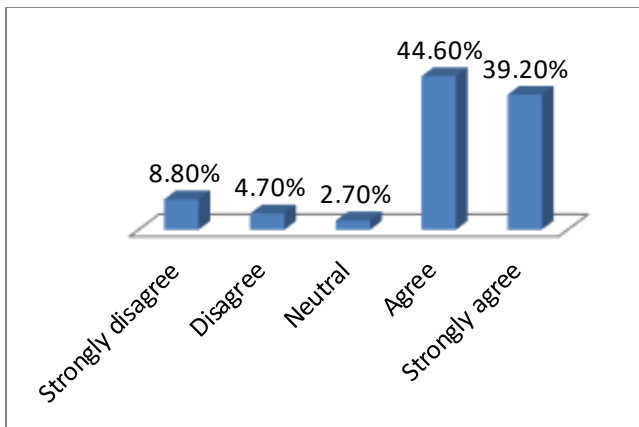
**Fig. 8: Stakeholders prefer ODL**

Figure 8 is response by respondents when asked if most stakeholders prefer ODL mode of education for PWDs. While majority (38.1%) of the respondents agrees, 34.7% were neutral. 10.9% disagree, 8.8% strongly agree while 7.5 percent strongly disagree.



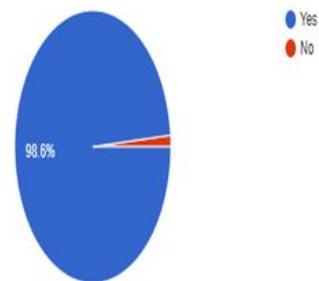
**Fig.9: Prefer mode/access of education for PWDs**

Figure 9 is response by respondents when asked access to quality education by most PWDs is better handled by (i) ODL, (ii) conventional institutions, and (iii) traditional institutions. Judging from the responses, the most preferred channel is ODL (78.8%), followed by conventional institutions (16.4%), and traditional institutions (4.8%).



**Fig. 10: Integration/inclusiveness reduces stigma**

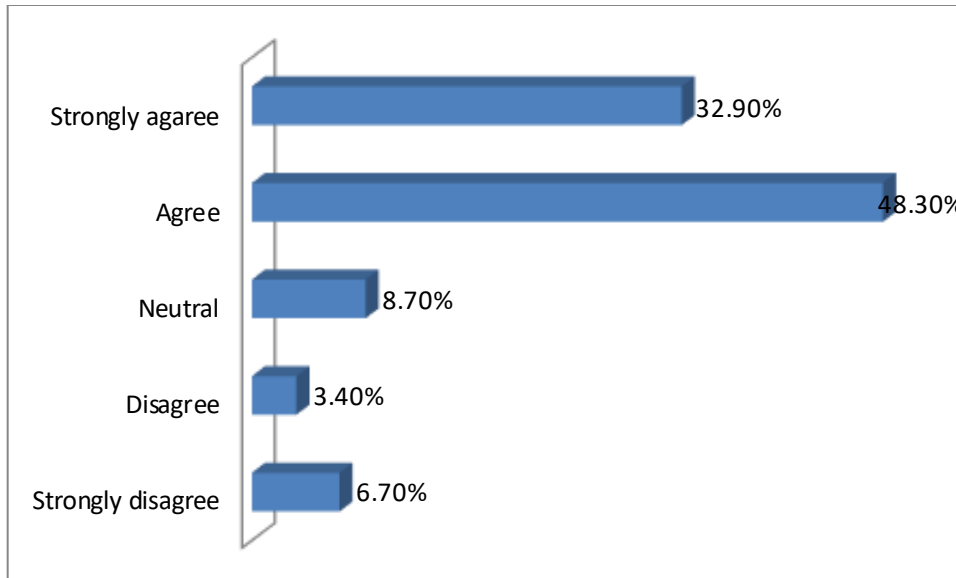
148 responses



**Fig. 11: Aware of NOUN as ODL**

Figure 10 is response by respondents when asked if integration and inclusiveness can reduce social stigma against PWDs. Majority agree (44.6%) and strongly agree (39.2%) while those who are neutral are 2.7 percent, strongly disagree (8.8%) and disagree (4.7%). 64.9 percent of the respondents are aware of peace education, while 35.1 percent are not.

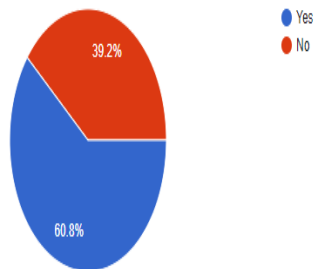
In figure 11 is response by respondents when asked if they are aware of NOUN as an ODL institution. While 98.7 percent of the respondents are said they are aware, 1.3 percent is not.



**Fig. 12: NOUN ODL may reduce abuse and discrimination against PWDs**

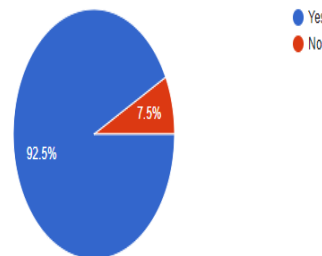
Figure 12 is response by respondents when asked if ODL as offered by NOUN may reduce abuse and discrimination against PWDs. While 48.3 percent of the respondents agree, 32.9 percent of them strongly agree. Others were strongly disagree (6.7%), disagree (3.4%) and neutral (8.7%).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as offered by NOUN may not work where there is endemic poverty.  
143 responses



**Fig. 13: ODL in NOUN may not work in poverty**

Government should institutionalize Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) and policy of reporting violations and abuses  
146 responses



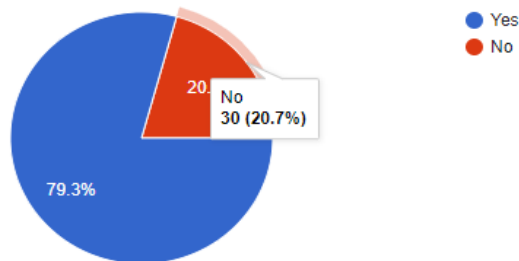
**Fig. 14: Government should institutionalize ODL for PWDs and policy of reporting violations and abuse**

Figure 13 is response by respondents when asked if ODL as offered by NOUN may not work where there is endemic poverty. Majority of the respondents (60.4%) agree while a mere 39.6 percent of them disagree.

Figure 14 is response by respondents when asked if government should institutionalize ODL for PWDs and policy of reporting violations and abuses. Majority of the respondents (92.5%) agree while a mere 7.5 percent of them disagree.

Religious organizations have assisted in special education, and it has reduced discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (PWDs).

145 responses

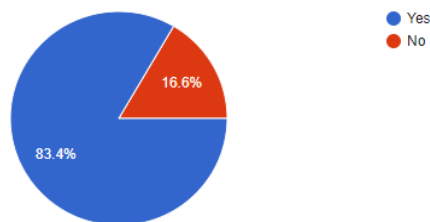


**Fig. 15: Religious organizations have assisted in special education**

Figure 15 is response by respondents when asked if religious organizations have assisted in special education and it has reduced discrimination against PWDs. Majority of the respondents (79.3%) agree while a mere 20.7 percent of them disagree.

Cultural distortions have affected access to education for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

145 responses



**Fig. 16: Cultural distortions have affected access to education by PWDs**

Figure 16 is response by respondents when asked if cultural distortions have affected access to education by PWDs. Majority of the respondents (83.4%) agree while a mere 16.6 percent of them disagree.

## 5.0 Conclusion/Recommendations

This paper investigated how access to qualitative education for persons with disabilities (PWDs) can be improved through the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). It is under the tract: Promoting Equity and Inclusion. The paper, therefore, concludes with recommendations for advocacy on the importance of ODL for the education of the PWDs as well as for the government to provide enabling environment to support ODL education in Nigeria by institutionalizing ODL education for PWDs. It also recommends the improvement and development of relevant information and communications technology (ICT) and more open educational resources (OER) for accessibility and inclusion of PWDs in ODL education delivery architecture. They must be combined with appropriate content and pedagogy as well as legislation to institutionalize the education of PWDs through ODL as offered by NOUN.

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