

EVALUATION OF SOME DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES AT NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Background:

One of the major objectives of the Nigerian National policy on Education is the provision of equal educational opportunities to all citizens at different levels of education. With regard to high education, an aspect of the Policy encourages distance learning to be organized and delivered by tertiary institutions in Nigeria. For instance, between 1982 and 1997, both the number of universities offering distance learning and undergraduate distance learning programmes have increased. In 1982, only two universities offered distance learning programmes. In 1997, the number was 8. The number of undergraduate programmes by distance learning rose from 11 to 27 while for the Master's Degree programme, the number rose from 0 to 11. As would be expected, the number of students enrolled in these two programmes rose astronomically over the same period, for the undergraduates it rose from 1,760 in 1980 to 27,690 in 1997. The present study focused on undergraduate programme of distance learning programme. It is quite conceivable that these quantitative increases have taken their toll on the quality of the programmes the affected universities offer to the students. The argument for this observation is closely linked with the fact that in the last two decades or so, the human and material resources of Nigerian Universities have shown considerable decline in quality, quantity and variety at a time students enrolments, number of academic programmes offered to students, etc have increased in leaps and bounds, both for on-campus academic programmes and out-reach programmes offered outside the campuses. For instance, the number of university professors in the different disciplines who have left the university system in Nigeria either due to retirement, brain drain, deaths, etc have continued to increase from 273 professors in 1982 to 793 professors in 1995. Similar losses of non-professorial academic staff members have also been reported in the literature (Adaku 1997). In addition, facilities for teaching, learning, research and development have not kept pace with the increased demands arising from large student enrolment numbers, public service functions and university consultancy services.

Some universities, fully aware of these short-comings, went along to start new distance learning programmes at satellite/extension centres. Initially, the introduction of such programmes was seen as one way universities could maximise the use of human and material facilities already in existence at another location, and by doing so, the nation was getting full value for its human and material facilities that would have otherwise been idle. While this argument may be theoretically sound, there is no empirical evidence to support its veracity. Evidence on the ground need to be documented to ascertain whether this is actually so. In other words, there is need to find out how adequate and satisfactory the facilities are in terms of the number and quality of staff, quality and size of buildings including class-rooms, laboratories and workshops; library facilities, instructional support

services such as photocopy and secretarial centres, staff/student ratio, and so on. Furthermore, there are concerns expressed by some educators the quality of teaching as well as that of students admitted into the distance learning programmes are poor. Recently, former Vice-Chancellor whose university was adversely criticised by Udoh (1997) described these concerns as frivolous and went on to without facts and figure, defend its distance learning programmes. It is against this background that the need for empirically evaluating the human and material facilities used for teaching undergraduate degree distance learning programmes of two Nigerian universities that currently have distance learning centres that this study was undertaken.

Method:

Two universities in Nigeria which currently have distance learning centres were contested and requested to participate in this evaluation. They concerted to participate. Both universities are owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria. One of them is located at Abuja, while the other is located in Lagos. They were expected to supply to the researcher data on the following performance indicators: the qualifications and teaching experiences of the academic and non-academic staff that participate in their distance learning undergraduate programmes and the nature and scope of their participation; the admission requirements for and duration of the different undergraduate programmes; the number, adequacy and accessibility of classrooms, laboratories and workshops for teaching and learning vis-a-vis student numbers that use them; the adequacy of library facilities and instructional materials, the types and appropriateness of instructional delivery systems, lecturers' compliance to scheduled lecture periods and frequency of lectures/workshops/laboratory classes; organisation and methods of evaluation; and the quality of educational services available to distance learning students. The two universities also provided the researcher the list of their distance learning first degree graduates and their contact addresses. The list was for their graduated for the last four years. The researcher used the addresses to locate 1067 out of 2281 graduates. Unbeknownst to them their employers were contacted and requested to rate their teaching job performance. On the basis of the performance indicators for evaluating the distant learning programmes described earlier, the researcher developed an instrument for collecting the data of this study. Distant Learning Evaluation Schedule (DLES), this instrument DLES was validated by Ali (1997). The instrument has been successfully used in two studies reported in the literature by Villas (1997) and Coffle (1998). The second instrument was a Job Evaluation of Performance Inventory (JEPI). the researcher used the DLES, personally at the two distance learning centres, to collect data and or rate the quality of the items of evaluation that were the performance indicators of this study. The JEPI was administered to employers of first degree graduates of distance learning programmes, to ascertain their ratings of the graduates' teaching job performance.

Findings:

The findings of this study derive from evidence collected through the use of the two instruments of this study; namely, DLES and JEPI. With regard to the qualifications of the lecturers who teach the undergraduate distance learning programmes, 40% of them have Ph.Ds in their relevant areas of specialization; 25% of them have masters degrees in their relevant areas of specialization while the remaining 35% lecturers have first degree qualification or its equivalent in their various areas of specialization. A doctorate degree

is considered an important pre-requisite qualification for lectureship in the Nigerian university sub-sector. The average length of experience on the job for the lectures at the distance learning centres was 4.7 years. The staff-student ratios on the average for both distance learning centres, for the different programmes for the following programmes were recorded as a different extension satellite centres:

Education = 1:86, as against 1:14 approved by government

Social Sciences = 1:69, as against 1:20 approved by government

Arts = 1:93, as against 1:20 approved by government

Science = 1:48, as against 1:10 approved by government

Business Administration = 1:69, as against 1:20 approved by government.

The qualifications and administrative experience of the non-academic staff who participate in the distant learning programmes show that 20% of the administrators have higher degrees: Masters and Ph.D while 50% have first degree or its equivalent. A first degree is considered a pre-requisite qualification for entry into administrative position in the University. The average work experience of the non-academic staff members at the two centres is 6.8 years.

With regard to the number, adequacy and accessibility of classrooms for teaching at the distance learning centres, it was found that none of the centres has large halls that could properly accommodate large classes of about two hundred students or more. In one of the centres, even small lecture classrooms were inadequate as a result of which some already small rooms, were partitioned to allow for 2 classes to hold simultaneously. This resulted in over-crowding and some students standing outside the classes for lectures. The large student population coupled with the several courses for which lectures must be concurrently held was partly responsible for the limited access to classroom space in the distant learning centres.

Only one university needed the use of studios, workshops and laboratories. The two studios available at the distant learning centre were rather small with inadequate working materials and they were poorly lighted. Because of pressure on the use of the studio, it became necessary to stagger the lecture periods so as to accommodate more courses. Of the 2 laboratories present in one distant learning centre, one was only a laboratory in name, since it lacked some of the most basic and essential tools, specimens, chemicals, equipment and consumable. The other laboratory that was being used for teaching science courses was fairly well-equipped, although substandard for university level courses since this laboratory is actually meant for secondary school level courses. The three workshops (wood work, metal work and home economics) at this same centre can be characterised as well established and fully well-utilized. Unfortunately, consumable were not readily available for use in teaching students. Funds were not made available for procurement of consumable.

For some strange and unexplained reasons, none of the 2 distant learning centres had a library or negotiated with the owners of the centres for beefing up some sections of the existing secondary school libraries at these two locations, to enable their students use the sections. Indeed, the 2 libraries at these centres are out of bounds for the distance learning students. Apparently, the need for a library at these two centres may well be both an academic and administrative oversight. In addition to the lack of library facilities, instructional materials such as pictograms, instructional/teaching modules, maps, video tapes, reference books, course outlines, computers, etc, were also not

provided for lecturers to use. It appears that each lecturer was supposed to make his own arrangement for whatever he needed for teaching his students.

A wide variety of instructional delivery systems were observed to be in use at both centres. these delivery systems include lectures, demonstrations, practical work, assignments, projects, modelling and group discussions.

Most of the lectures, practical and studio work organised by the two centres take place in the evenings, beginning from 5-8 p.m and on Saturdays from 11 am to 4 p.m 49% of the lecturers and 45% of the students find the time for lectures unsatisfactory in the sense that the lectures were rather too congested and did not allow sufficient time for teacher-student interaction or even student-student interaction since the venues for lectures are locked up immediately after lectures, laboratory and workshop lesson. A disturbingly large number of lectures/laboratory workshop were not held during the two week period the researcher visited one of the centres. In those two weeks, on the average, it was found that 26% of the lectures, 30% of the laboratory classes and 58% of the studio classes were not held at all. Over the same period, 48% of the classes did not begin on time, while 20% of the classes ended earlier than scheduled.

At both centres, there were educational services made available to students. These include typing and photocopying centres, book binding centres, telephone and fax services, bookshops, computer services, reading rooms and guest houses.

Surprisingly, it was found from a sample of 6117 students records at both centres that all of them met the entry qualifications as specified in their respective academic programmes. Each pron's certificates had also been certified to be genuine.

Three major employers of labour rated the two distant learning centres first degree graduates under their employment, using the JEPI. among the Management/Consultant (Banks, finance Houses, etc) employers of labour, the overall level of job performance by the graduates was rated by 65% of them to be adequate while 31% rated their job performance as unsatisfactory. Only 4% of them rated their job performance as very good. Among the industrial manufacturing/production and service (household products, maintenance etc) employers of labour, 56% of them were satisfied with the work performance by the distance learning graduates while 42% of them rated their job performance as unsatisfactory. Only 8% rated their job performance as very satisfactory. Among the government (teachers, police, nurses, estate officers etc) employers of labour, the ratings of the job performance of distance learning graduate were 58% for satisfactory, 36% for unsatisfactory and 4% for very satisfactory.

Discussion of Results:

On the basis of the evidence obtained in this study, it would appear that most of the adverse criticisms levelled against Distance Learning Programmes are justified. This is because most of those involved in teaching and administering distance learning programmes are not as qualified as they should be. For instance academic and non-academic staff are not as qualified as would be expected, in terms of their academic qualifications and on-the-job experience. The class-size in terms of the staff-student ratio

for the different disciplines appear to be over-whelming whereby. For instance, a lecturer in the arts subjects handles almost five times more numbers of students than he is expected to handle. With a large class-size, less well qualified and experienced academic and non-academic staff, one would normally expect the quality of teaching and administration of distance centre programmes to be less than adequate. The classrooms at both centres were found to be substandard in terms of quality and the overwhelming large number of students that can conveniently receive lectures in them. Large lecture halls are completely non-existent in one centre, yet the need for large lecture halls is compelling since some of the courses have upwards of 500 to 600 students. Laboratories for science practical work are grossly inadequate in one centre in terms of the required tools, equipment, chemicals, specimens, and so on. Money is hardly provided, as and when needed for procuring these items, so much so that many practical classes are held as if they were theory/lecture classes. This same observation is also true of studies. Nonetheless, one was impressed by the workshop facilities at one of the centres. In both centres there were no library facilities of any sort and this is a very serious lapse since a well-equipped library is a university's dream of what a centre of academic excellence should have. Although educational services were readily available at both centres because the services are privately provided, teaching materials were found to be in gross short supply at both centres. The employers of first degree graduates of distance learning centre programmes generally rated the job performance of these category of workers as averagely satisfactory. One would have expected a better rating than was the case in this study, especially since according to Carlson (1995), a high rating of 75% to 80% is considered satisfactory in terms of one's job performance. The two universities investigated in this study clearly contribute immensely to the nation's human development and have indeed been commended for their efforts (Abdullahi, 1997). It would therefore seem appropriate and desirable that the Federal Government should come to their aid, especially since these two centres are statutorily recognized by Nigeria's Federal Government. Some suggestions as to how Government can help them is with regard, to providing funds to the centres especially from the Education Tax Fund, Education Bank & Book Development Project. Indeed, an aspect of the Education Tax Fund, by law, is entirely geared towards strategically financing distance learning programmes in Nigerian Universities. Eight years later, this Tax Fund had not commenced operation even though it has amassed billions of Naira. There is also the need for the two universities to streamline the organisational frame-work of the centres, especially as it concerns ensuring that lecturers start teaching in time and till the end of lectures. The two universities will need to locate and use bigger and better physical facilities, than is the case now. Larger physical facilities will most certainly allow for the establishment of recreational facilities, reading rooms, university level libraries and one of two large lecture halls, until these facilities are provided and organisational management lapses overcome, the concern expressed by critics of distance learning programme would appear to have merit.

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