

EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AN IMPERATIVE FOR EFFECTIVE ODL DELIVERY

By

Chuks Odiegwu-Enwerem, *PhD*

Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences,
National Open University of Nigeria, University Village, Jabi, Abuja

Theme

INNOVATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE

Sub-themes

- 1. Fostering lifelong learning*
- 2. Building Resilience*

ABSTRACT

The use of external stakeholders in an Open and Distance Learning environment is an operational necessity and a strong component of the ODL system, but it could also be the weakest link if not properly managed. The use of external stakeholders by organisations ensures quality assurance through content reviews and readily available resources at a minimum cost. Because most of the external stakeholders are individually unknown to the institutional administrators, this creates a gap in the ODL process within an institution. Institutions must evolve a robust, sustainable engagement process, a more formal means to understand the stakeholders - individual doubts and capabilities, their limitations, motivations as well as their conceptions and views of the learning method that they are engaged with. To bridge this gap and achieve inclusive engagement with the numerous external stakeholders this study will utilise survey method to seek to understand their unique expectations. The outcome of this study will hopefully enable institution's managers and the internal experts/content creators to constantly manage their relationship with the external experts and hence construct more and effective engagement strategies and plans, and positive work environment for their diverse external stakeholders with attendant benefit for their students.

Key words: External stakeholders, Internal experts, Mass education, Face-to-face, Distance learning, Student engagement

INTRODUCTION

Global and national demand for higher education has continued to rise putting a strain on public resources almost to a crisis level (Stein and de Andreotti, 2015; Freeland, 2015). In many advanced and developing countries, providing access to education comes with the challenge of recruiting and sustaining a crop of qualified, motivated and ready academics. Once recruited, the process of continuous engagement with the resource persons becomes a necessary condition to ensure a

sustained and sustainable effective ODL delivery. In an open and distance learning environment, the need to engage outsiders to complement the work of internal academic staff has remained a growing phenomenon and necessity. Open and Distance institutions like the National Open University of Nigeria, has for long, supplemented the efforts of internal academic staff with support from adjunct, untenured staff sourced from various institutions of higher learning within the country. External stakeholders, in this regard, refers to non-tenured staff/lecturers who are engaged on an adhoc basis to assist internal staff in some aspects of their jobs. Once recruited as an adjunct staff, the need arises on how to get the best from this group of professionals who are not tenured but whose job lacks the job security of the tenured faculty – and also to get the best from them under the circumstances.

In a conventional institution, the scope of work assigned to an adjunct lecturer may vary according to need and situation. In some cases, some institutions may not even need the services of adjunct lecturers. However, for an Open and Distance Learning institution, the need for adjunct staff is a continuous and growing matter and requires the relationship between the institution and this class of scholars be maintained and monitored to achieve effective delivery. These adjunct lecturers or external facilitators/part-time faculty come from different institutions from across the country each with their unique culture, norms and expectations. Understanding these disparate cultures and individual expectations is quite necessary if the ODL institution would make their relationship with the adjuncts a meaningful and productive without little or no rancour. As a leading ODL institution in Africa, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), conducts much of its work with the combined efforts of internal staff and the contingent/external faculty.

This trend is not peculiar to NOUN. According to Danaei (2019:1), “Since the 1970s, higher education has become increasingly reliant upon adjunct faculty to fill gaps in class instruction, but institutions tend to offer adjuncts subpar professional support as compared to their full-time counterparts.” Danaei further states that the role of the adjunct professor is continually expanding in education because while the budget continues to shrink, the number of available, qualified applicants for few positions continues to rise.

In higher education, the perception of adjunct faculty as valued team members contradicts academia's lack of investment in supportive programs and educational opportunities for adjunct faculty. Harris (2017) posits that there is a relationship between poor treatment of an adjunct and the performance of their students, hence, adjuncts deserve to be treated well to encourage them to teach well also. In this regard, Danaei further posits that to ensure that students succeed academically, it is important to have adjuncts provided with appropriate and adequate resources that can enable them to build collegiality, and meaningful professional development opportunities

Although some research work on the impact of adjuncts highlight some negative educational outcomes in institutions where they are engaged, at the same time, some of these studies also agree that evidences in this regard are not clear-cut between the impact of full-time and adjunct faculties (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009; Jacoby, 2006; Toutkoushian, & Bellas, 2003; Jacobs, 1998; Leslie, 1998). The increasing demand for higher education among young persons and the lack of willingness of management to fill existing faculty vacancy make the need for adjunct staff almost an imperative.

With external stakeholders/adjunct staff of the National Open University of Nigeria numbering between 1, 000 and 1, 500 (unconfirmed) and changing regularly, the expectation is that the institution would effectively combine the external resources with internally available hands to achieve a high level of productivity. This is so even as the University houses over 115 study centres across the country with about only about a few tenured staff. Without the service of external staff selected from nearby universities, the chances of effectively serving and managing the student population would pose a big challenge. Like it is the case in other parts of the world, many colleges and universities in North America rely on a growing body of contingent workers – primarily adjunct faculty – to mitigate spikes and troughs in its core business and to help curtail costs and declining income (Lyons, nd). Harris

In fact, the employment of adjunct faculty members offers Universities many benefits and opportunities besides the issue of saving cost. Universities rely on adjunct staff to improve student recruitment, retention and degree completion (Lyon nd). Despite the obvious positive role these external resource persons are meant to play in the smooth running of the University and effective delivery, there appears to be lackluster relationship between them and the Management of the University. This frosty relationship may have manifested in many ways including frequent changes in the adjunct staff, as well as grapevine complaints from some of them all of which signal poor engagement of Management with the external resource persons with the attendant challenges. The actual situation, the reasons and possible ways forward are reasons why this research has become important.

Statement of the problem

The need for adjunct/external non-tenured staff is an existential necessity for universities as these set of resource persons help to ease the burden for permanent staff of the institutions especially where hiring of new staff is not made easy. National Open University of Nigeria is in this class where hiring of new and needed staff is an uphill task. Ideally, the presence of these non-tenured staff lifts the burden of the tenured staff of the institution and helps in the achievement of their objectives especially if the relationship is well managed by the Management. However, instances have arisen in which external staff and Management of institutions appear not to be operating at the same frequency, giving the impression that all is not well. In National Open University of Nigeria, unofficial sources indicate external staff dissatisfaction with their treatment by Management with a possible implication for quality of service from them. It is the aim of this study to unravel the true situation and the reasons for it and possible way forward.

Objectives of the study

The overarching objective of this study is to determine the level of external stakeholder /adjunct lecturers engagement with the Management of National Open University of Nigeria as a condition to engender effective Open and Distance Learning delivery by the institution.

Specifically, the study aims to pursue the following objectives:

1. To determine the real status of existing external stakeholders/adjunct lecturers of NOUN

2. To determine areas of service they are mostly engaged in
3. To determine the external stakeholders' expectation from NOUN Management
4. To examine the external stakeholders real motivations for the job they do for NOUN
5. To determine the external stakeholders' perception of Management's approach to issues

Research Questions

To guide the study further, the following research questions are posed:

1. What is the real status of the existing stakeholders/adjunct lecturers to National Open University of Nigeria?
2. What are the areas of engagement by the external stakeholders of the institution?
3. What is the external stakeholders' expectation from NOUN Management?
4. What is/are the real motivation/s for the external stakeholders?
5. What is the overall external stakeholder perception of NOUN Management?

Significance of the Study

This study may be one of a few of such studies on the relationship between adjunct staff and University management even as it strives to identify possible areas of friction and suggest ways to manage it. For an ODL institution like National Open University of Nigeria, which of necessity, needs the services of these adjuncts, this study is significant as it will enable the institution to forge a useful and comprehensive approach to managing their interface with the adjuncts for effective delivery. Its utility lies in the empirical evidence it provides in terms of real or imagined reasons for occasional frosty relations between the adjuncts and Management; their motivation on the job and expectations from Management.

Literature Review

In spite of the growing reliance of institutions of higher learning on adjunct faculty for the execution of their activities, there appears to be a dearth of literature on in this area, particularly in specific reference to Management relationship with the resource persons. Moreover, in the case of open and distance institutions which rely more on these adjunct resources for their operations, this scarcity of literature is even more yawning. Nevertheless, in the course of literature search, most materials found had more to do with samples from the western world and much less with African

situation. Some literature consulted deal with issues of in-house faculty and their motivation as well as engagement with their students. A few focused on the key issue of adjunct faculty and their effective engagement with institutions' management.

Elaborating of engagement with stakeholders is considered an important consideration for retaining and sustaining the contribution of adjunct staff especially for an ODL institution like NOUN. Attracting and retaining quality adjunct staff to complement tenured staff goes a long way to enhance the quality of student output. According to *Achieving the Dream* (2016), there are significant opportunities to positively impact student success if enough support is given to pedagogy-focused professional development of adjunct faculty. The organisation said that “two-thirds of community college faculty (nationwide) are adjunct faculty and nearly 60 percent of community college classes are taught by adjunct faculty” (*Achieving the Dream*, 2016 p.2). They further posited that there is a strong correlation between the quality of faculty-student interactions and student persistence toward completion, and eventual success.

Achieving the Dream further posited that higher institution's leadership have a duty to inspire constructive faculty engagement as well as demonstrate this engagement of both full and adjunct staff. Furthermore, institution's management needs to strive to understand who their adjunct faculties are and what constitute their needs in terms of professional learning and engagement. In addition, there is the need for articulating the processes for hiring, reviewing and package of incentives for adjunct faculty.- in a way to institute and encourage deep, sustained engagement between adjunct faculty and management.

Excess workload is one major complaint of staff of National Open University of Nigeria although Ingbegbedion (2017) suggests that a mix-up in integrating the mode of planning workload in the conventional universities into the open and distance education universities could be the actual problem. Inegbedion however posited that the quality of the programmes and courses in ODL depends on the academics that plan the programmes, develop the curriculum, manage courses and programmes and carry out administrative duties. To accomplish this adequately in the face of dwindling revenue, universities resort to adjunct staff.

Method of study

Survey method was used for this study.

The Population.

The population of study comprised all external academic stakeholders to National Open University of Nigeria who operate either as external examiners, project supervisors, examination markers or question moderators or project moderators among others – who are not tenured staff of the institution. Specifically, they are drawn from virtually all the faculties/departments of the University where their expertise is required. At the time of this study, the total number of adjunct faculty in National Open University of Nigeria could not be made available to the researcher although the process of getting it had commenced. Moreover, the size could not be determined in specific terms; however, a random picking of about 100 persons was picked and questionnaire mailed to them.

Sample size

For the study, a sample of 100 from the available number were purposively selected from 10 departments at the NOUN Headquarters in the ratio of 10 persons per department.

Data gathering instrument

Data for the study were gathered with the aid of 16-item questionnaire which solicited for responses about the adjunct lecturers' status in the university – whether officially engaged or not; which type of services they render/have rendered, their perception of management's attitude to them as well as what constitutes their primary motivation to work as adjunct staff to NOUN. The questionnaire sought and established that:

- 1). the respondents/adjunct staff were officially engaged by NOUN;
- 2). that they had been engaged for at least two years
- 3). that they render one or more of the following services to NOUN: exam setting, exam marking, student supervision, exam moderation, project moderation, etc.

The adjunct faculties available to fill the questionnaire were limited to a few that were reached on one-on-one effort with the various heads of department. Request from the Management for a comprehensive and up-to-date list of adjunct staff was yet to be attended to at the time of writing this report, hence the research is based on the limited population as mentioned above. Subsequently, when the authentic, comprehensive list of adjuncts is made available, a new effort to get their views may become necessary.

The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended and open-ended types requiring the respondent to describe their views on particular questions. Out of the 100 copies of the questionnaire sent out through Google forms, 46 (46%) were filled and successfully returned for this analysis. The low

return was expected given the short time available to pursue the respondents. All the respondents responded to all the questions and made their views known clearly.

Findings/Data presentation

Presented below are the preliminary findings as shown in the order of the research questions.

RQ1: What is the real status of the existing stakeholders/adjunct lecturers to National Open University of Nigeria?

It was necessary to establish the current status of the respondents to determine whether their engagement with NOUN was official or from the grapevine. To this effect, those who were officially engaged amounted to 93.5% against 6.5% who were not. As officially employed by the institution, it became clear that these respondents were the most relevant group to interview in the matter under study. Similarly, those who were officially employed responded to the question of how long they had served. Their responses varied: those who said they had served in that capacity for five years and above were 47.8%; those who had served for three to four years were 34.8%. This shows that the responded were not only officially employed on part-time basis, but many had been on the role for a long time making their views useful in the research.

RQ2: What are the areas of engagement by the external stakeholders of the institution?

Table 1

Services rendered	Frequency	Percentage
Setting of exam questions	11	23.9
Marking of exam questions	28	60.9
Supervision of students	35	76.1
Moderation of exam questions	10	21.7
Project moderation	18	39.1
Facilitation	1	2.2
Online facilitation	1	2.2
Total	104	226,1

The respondents were asked to indicate the specific areas of your assignment out of such duties as setting examination questions, marking of scripts, supervision of projects and moderation of

questions, among others. Supervision of students topped the list with 35 (76.1%), followed by marking of examination scripts 28 (60%), followed by moderation of student projects and examination – two important programmes that always demand external intervention.

RQ3: *What is the external stakeholders' expectation from NOUN Management?*

Table 2: external stakeholders' expectation from NOUN Management

Expectations from management	Percentage
Regular inter-semester interaction	32.6
Prompt payment of adjuncts' entitlements	47.8
Regular review of adjuncts service delivery to ensure quality assurance	15.2
Others	4.4
Total	100 n = 46

Respondents were asked to state their expectations from management of NOUN.

Nearly half of the respondents (47.8%) said their uppermost expectation from management is prompt payment for work done. Another 33% said they expect a regular inter-semester interaction with management to keep abreast with the goings-on in the organisation. They believe that this way, they would make more impact with their contribution to the institution.

RQ4: *What is/are the real motivation/s for the external stakeholders?*

Response to this question indicates that the majority of the respondents (71.7%) said they are motivated by the desire to render a service and support the institution to achieve its aims and objectives. Another significant fraction of the respondents said their motivation was to practise their profession in order to remain relevant. Remuneration as a motivating factor came to 21.7%.

RQ5: *What is the overall external stakeholder perception of NOUN Management?*

Respondents' response to this question was measured by their responses to two linked questions: (1) their commitment to assignment and, (2) their reason for it.

Data shows that 50% of respondents are totally committed while 37% give minimal commitment and 13% indicate just a little commitment. Similarly, 54% of the respondents indicate that Management handling of issues concerning them is a major factor that informed their their levels of commitment to the roles assigned them.

Discussion of Findings

This study set out to determine among other things, the real status of existing external stakeholders/adjunct lecturers of NOUN; determine areas of service they are mostly engaged in; the external stakeholders' expectation from NOUN Management; examine their real motivations for the job they do for NOUN and determine their perception of Management's approach to issues

Research question 1. Data shows that most of the respondents were duly and officially recruited by the University management on adjunct capacity ostensibly after going through due process. This means that their relationship with the institution is not accidental but deliberate hence their expectations need to be given some considerations and their potentials fully utilised as done in other climes where adjuncts are given significant responsibilities to handle..

From Research question 2 the adjunct lecturers indicate the areas they are mostly involved in National Open University of Nigeria. Supervision of students (76%) and marking of examination scripts (60.9%) occupy their time with NOUN the most. These two aspects of the teaching and learning as well as evaluation of students in the university can be considered as one of the most critical (Airasian, 2001). Students' projects are six credit loads and go a long way to determine a student's overall ability and final result. That this critical aspect is determined by adjuncts is a good reason that they need to be effectively engaged with the University and good relationship maintained with them. In the same vein, marking of students' scripts puts the students' future in the hands of these external stakeholders, hence managing their (adjuncts') expectations should be a major consideration by management.

Of utmost importance to the adjunct lecturers, as shown in table 2 are: Prompt payment of their entitlements (47.8%) as well as regularly holding of inter-semester interactive sessions (32.6%). It is a given that workers will always expect their wages when due; the need for regular interaction goes a long way to indicate their willingness to contribute much more substantially to the institution's growth through

the interactions, especially as it would give them an opportunity to communicate and comment on areas not covered in their reports when they do submit them after each assignment.

Of particular interest is the finding that most of the respondents (71.7%) said they are motivated by the desire to render a service and support the institution to achieve its aims and objectives. Another significant fraction of the respondents said their motivation was to practise their profession in order to remain relevant. Remuneration as a motivating factor came to 21.7%. Clearly, these adjuncts have demonstrated, that contrary to the general belief, money is not the primary driver for some professionals, but the need to offer service. This mindset needs to be built on through purposeful engagement with the adjuncts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

External stakeholders are an integral part of higher institutions and for an open and distance university like NOUN, their role in the overall strategy to achieve meaningful result is very crucial. Beyond that however, to make them to effectively support the institution, they need to be positively driven by engagement initiatives based on their own assessment of the situation and the role they play. This study concludes that the external stakeholders to National Open University of Nigeria are eager and poised to collaborate with the institution, but they also need much better engagement with the institution through some identified strategies.

It is therefore recommended that:

1. The management of NOUN should periodically hold interactive sessions with the stakeholders to hear their views;
2. The management should endeavour to settle the adjuncts' entitlements within a reasonable time after rendering their services;
3. Management should draw the attention of the adjuncts to the importance of students' projects and their examination questions and thus demand high professional attention and treatment of these from the adjunct lecturers. This should be one of the issues to discuss at some of the interactive sessions.

REFERENCES

- Airasian, P. W. (2001). *Classroom assessment* (4th Ed.) Boston: McGraw-Hill DOI: [10.5944/openpraxis.9.3.498](https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.9.3.498)
- Danaei, K. J. (2019). Literature review of adjunct faculty. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice*, 30(2), 17-33
- Eagan, M. K., Jr., & Jaeger, A. J. (2009). Effects of exposure to part-time faculty on community college transfer. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(2), 168-188. doi:10.1007/s11162-008-9113-8
- Freeland, R. M. (2015). Quality education is as important as affordability. *The Boston Globe*, July 5, 2015. Available at: www.bostonglobe.com.
- Harris, M. D. (2017). Focusing on Adjuncts: Enhancing Teacher Effectiveness and Academic Quality Through Institutional Support. Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository website: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/dsw/8>
- Hussey-Freeland, D. M. (2015). The demand for legal education: The long view, *Journal of Legal Education*, 65(1) (August 2018), pp. 164 – 189
- Inegbedion, J. O. (2017). Academic Workload Planning for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Universities: The Experience of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), *Open Praxis*, 9(3), 313
- Jacobs, F. (1998). Using part-time faculty more effectively. In D. Leslie (Ed.), *The growing use of part-time faculty: Understanding causes and effect*. New Directions for Higher Education (pp. 9-18). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jacoby, D. (2005). Part-time community-college faculty and the desire for full-time tenure-track positions: Results of a single institution case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 29(2), 137-152. doi:10.1080/10668920490891629
- Leslie, D. (Ed.). (1998). *The growing use of part-time faculty: Understanding causes and effects*. New Directions for Higher Education, No. 104. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Lyons, R. E. (nd). *Success strategies for adjunct faculty*. Pearson: New York, pp. 1 – 14
- Stein, S. (2018). Higher education and the Im/Possibility of transformative justice, *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 4(1) (Spring 2018), pp. 130 – 153
- (Stein, S. and de Andreotti, V. D. O. (2016). Higher education and the modern/colonial imaginary, *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, 17(3), DOI: 10.1177/1532708616672673

Toutkoushian, R. K., & Bellas, M. L. (2003). The effects of part-time employment and gender on faculty earnings and satisfaction. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 74(2), 172-195. doi:10.1080/00221546.2003.11777195