

# **NCLUSIVE ODL: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ADOPTION OF BLENDED INSTRUCTIONAL LEARNING STRATEGY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TECHNOLOGICAL ERA**

**Professor Salawu, Ibrahim O.**  
**isalawu@noun.edu.ng**

## **Abstract**

*The need for the paradigm shift in the practice of education with emphasis on exclusiveness to inclusiveness has been in the forefront of debate for quite a long time. While the practice of exclusiveness seems to be predominantly evidenced in the conventional system, the open and distance learning (ODL) system is exceptional. At both pedagogical and philosophical spheres, ODL adheres itself to the dictates of inclusive approach to educational practice. It is however one thing to peripherally satisfy inclusive education through ODL, but another thing in using pedagogical instructional strategies that should go along with the actualisation of an ideal inclusive education. For this reason, the paper examines the whole of the concept of inclusiveness and relating it to blended instructional strategy (BIS) as globally accepted delivery mode in ODL. It critically examines the BIS in a manner that suggests the need for a new global understanding more suitable to applicability to the concept of inclusiveness. Some specific variables like geographical location, job orientation, learners' various and varied characteristics were examined as they relate to the new approach being suggested.*

Keywords: inclusive education, ODL, blended learning and instructional strategy.

## **Introduction**

Most ODL institutions around the globe have seen the need to democratise education based on the parameters of access and content delivery strategies. The need to accept the practice of blended learning (BL) as effective instructional delivery strategy has been one of necessity rather than choice. However, not all ODL institutions have demonstrated their full understanding of the concept. Thus their delay and or wrong application of the instructional pedagogy.

### **Brief about Inclusiveness in Education**

Inclusive education is defined as a teaching model whereby all students, regardless of their ability, learn together in one environment. The aim of an inclusive education environment is to ensure that all students are treated fairly and get equal opportunities. Within an inclusive education environment, student diversity and uniqueness should be celebrated without discrimination (Future Learn .com, 2021).

Gravestock (2017) opines that “Inclusive learning and teaching recognises all students’ entitlement to a learning experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers ,anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences.” According to him, it can be described as “The design and delivery of teaching, learning and assessment methods that allow all students to engage meaningfully with the curriculum and achieve their full potentials.”

Sadly, there are still instances of children being treated differently based on their unique qualities. Whereas no students should be discriminated or segregated based on their differences or learning capabilities, nor would any teacher ever consider doing this, if they knew what to look out for, yet we still can authoritatively talk of the existence of discrimination in our school system. Some issues that students are often discriminated against include disability, race, gender, their household income or the language that they speak. Inclusive education aims to combat discrimination against all students. These issues are not only present in physical classrooms but in online and blended learning environments too. Studies have shown that the number of students with known disabilities is increasing.

### **Types of inclusive education**

All students are different and therefore have different individual needs. It is important to choose the right type of inclusive education for the students based on their individual requirements. Thus in education parlance we speak of individual differences. No two human beings are exactly the same; even identical twins do

differ in some aspects other than physical. There are generally three types of inclusive education. These are;

### ***Full inclusion***

This teaching model is centred around the theory that all students belong within the main classroom. A full inclusion model means that students with visible or hidden disabilities will always work alongside their peers. If a school is using the full inclusion model, they will need to closely monitor student progression and ensure that the plan is working for students. If a full inclusion plan is too much, a partial inclusion plan can be implemented instead.

### ***Partial inclusion***

This teaching model is also built around allowing all students to learn and interact with the main classroom. However, partial inclusion also involves separated learning for students that need additional support outside of the classroom. For students involved in a partial inclusion plan, they will still spend the majority of their learning time in the main classroom. However, they will also spend time away from the main class to receive additional support from special education teachers. Some of the additional support given could also be disruptive if carried out in the main classroom; take speech-based lessons, for example. Partial inclusion is more flexible and allows classroom separation when it would be more beneficial for all students.

### ***Mainstreaming***

With the mainstreaming method, disabled students will begin their education journey in a self-contained classroom away from the main classroom. If students are performing well within their self-contained classroom, they can be integrated into the main classroom based on their readiness. This method can be less daunting for some students, and allows them to gradually become a part of a fully inclusive classroom.

### **Key features of inclusive teaching and learning**

The peculiar almost all time present features of inclusive education are based on the following assumptions.

- All students have an equal right to education
- Classrooms should be made up of students with mixed abilities
- No children should be separated from main groups based on discrimination
- Appropriate activities should be planned and each student's personal needs taken into consideration

- Create an accessible environment (e.g. wheelchair ramps, and visual alternatives to lesson content for students with hearing impairments)
- Support should be provided to all students to assist and allow them to reach their full potential

### **Importance of inclusive education**

Inclusive education has some inherent values. First, inclusive education assists students with disabilities to become self-confident. The self-worth in them becomes real as they mix and play together with their counterparts who in most cases treat them as equal. Studies have shown that students with learning disabilities have lower self-esteem than those without, so we need to be careful and try to combat this.

An inclusive classroom allows for all students to improve their ability to communicate with one another. If students were separated, their social circles would be much smaller, and they would have fewer opportunities to interact with the wider classroom.

Inclusive education strategy impacts on the quality of educational instruction on offer. Every learner is exposed to the same contents in a variety of ways that guarantee equal coverage of the curriculum with recognition for collective and individual peculiarities. The goal is to ensure equity and fairness.

### **Brief about ODL**

Okebukola (2013) describes Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities. He further explained that distance education is any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between teachers and learners being conducted through electronic or print media 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 among other factors. The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible.

Another recent term, that reflects the growing trend of mixing ODL with conventional face-to-face teaching, is flexible or blended learning (Asha & Ricky, 2017). Open and Distance Learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, injection of flexibility of learning provision, adoption of student

centeredness, approach(es) supporting students and constructing learning programs with the expectation that students can succeed. Open and distance education could go a long way in widening accessibility to education for the majority of individuals and/or people with disabilities.

According to Barbara & Trust (2014) individuals with disabilities (IWD) and the support services they access in distance education settings have received relatively little attention in comparison to those students in more traditional post-secondary schools. They note the lack of information on whether distance education is reaching individuals with disabilities who might not have access to higher education. They concluded that more research is needed about the participation of students with disabilities in distance education, the services they access, and the success they experience in their studies.

### **The meaning of the Concept of Blended Learning**

Quigley (2019) defined this concept *also known as hybrid learning, as an approach to education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods.*”

The Glossary of Education Reforms (2013) refers to blended learning generally *as applying to the practice of using both online and **in-person** learning experiences when teaching students. In a blended-learning course*, for example, students might attend a class taught by a teacher in a traditional classroom setting, while also independently completing online components of the course outside of the classroom.

Blended learning (BL), or the integration of face-to-face and online instruction according to Graham (2013) is widely adopted across higher education with some scholars referring to it as the “new traditional model” (Ross and Gage 2006, p. 167) or the “new normal” in course delivery (Norberg et al. 2011, p. 207).

One early nationwide study sponsored by the Sloan Consortium (now the Online Learning Consortium) found that 65.2% of participating institutions of higher education (IHEs) offered blended (also termed *hybrid*) courses (Allen and Seaman 2003). A 2008 study, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education to explore distance education in the U.S., defined BL as “a combination of online and in-class instruction *with reduced in-class seat time for students*” (Lewis and Parsad 2008, p. 1, emphasis added). Using this definition, the study found that 35%

of higher education institutions offered blended courses, and that 12% of the 12.2 million documented distance education enrollments were in blended courses.

The 2017 New Media Consortium Horizon Report found that blended learning designs were one of the short term forces driving technology adoption in higher education in the next 1–2 years (Adams Becker et al. 2017). Also, blended learning is one of the key issues in teaching and learning in the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative’s 2017 annual survey of higher education (EDUCAUSE 2017). As institutions begin to examine BL instruction, there is a growing research interest in exploring the implications for both faculty and students. This modality is creating a community of practice built on a singular and pervasive research question, “How is blended learning impacting the teaching and learning environment?” That question continues to gain traction as investigators study the complexities of how BL interacts with cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of student behaviors and examine its transformation potential for the academy. Those issues are so compelling that several volumes have been dedicated to assembling the research on how blended learning can be better understood (Dziuban et al. 2016; Picciano et al. 2014; Picciano and Dziuban 2007; Bonk and Graham 2007; Kitchenham 2011; Jean-François 2013; Garrison and Vaughan 2013) and at least one organization, the Online Learning Consortium, sponsored an annual conference solely dedicated to blended learning at all levels of education and training (2004–2015). These initiatives address blended learning in a wide variety of situations. For instance, the contexts range over K-12 education, industrial and military training, conceptual frameworks, transformational potential, authentic assessment, and new research models. Further, many of these resources address students’ access, success, withdrawal, and perception of the degree to which blended learning provides an effective learning environment. Currently the United States faces a widening educational gap between the underserved student population and those communities with greater financial and technological resources (Williams 2016).

The most used blended learning models are: flipped model, face-to-face driven model, and enriched virtual model. The flipped model of blended learning allows trainers to prioritize active learning during class time, by giving learners the training materials and presentations before the actual class. The trainer can simply share the content via a learning management system (LMS), email, face-to-face or any other interactive teaching-learning model(s).

As regards the face-to-face driven model, it is the closest to a traditional classroom structure. Thus, instead of the session taking place in a physical classroom, learners log into a webinar or meeting session, like a Zoom Meeting. The learning happens

online, with assignments being set afterwards. This blended learning model is easily delivered using an LMS. With one, you can deliver the training session and share assignments with learners before or after the session has taken place.

Finally, the enriched virtual blended learning model refers to full-time online training that allows learners to complete the majority of coursework online, and also attend webinars or face-to-face learning sessions with an instructor. Attendance is ad hoc and at the learners discretion, giving them the flexibility to learn at their own pace.

### **Characteristics of Blended or Hybrid Learning**

Blended learning is, by definition, eclectic in nature and could include:

- Critiques of podcasts
- Online debates
- Online discussions
- Research activities
- Language tutorials
- Video presentations

In addition to these, the expected features of BL system (L.M.S) are:

- Course management

This is a basic function of any LMS, but some systems are more powerful than others. The choice of the LMS should be one that allows for the use of multiple formats; PDFs, slides, videos, audio. It is essential that courses can be easily created and consumed to meet the needs of a corporate blended learning environment.

- Interactivity

In order to reduce the tendency of isolating learners through the use of opportunities for interactivity should be deliberately built in the virtual learning environment in such a manner that learners are compelled to utilize the features such as forum, chatting e.t.c.

- Reporting

It is essential for the managers of LMS to ensure that reporting is taken seriously. It is through the reporting that management gets feedback on the effectiveness of the blended strategy being adopted. Learners attendance, their performance, views about the platform and other things could be part of the report.

- Webinar integration

Integration of webinar sessions into instructional contacts via the LMS in a seamless manner would make for an effective inclusive ODL service. This is becoming a common feature of virtual instructional delivery. Among favorite webinar tools, that are readily available are: Zoom, MS Teams, Go To Meeting or Webex. A first-class LMS should provide additional integration features such as auto or self-enrolling registration, real-time polling, virtual breakout rooms and attention monitoring tools, making implementing a blended learning model easy.

### **Brief about NOUN**

The National Open University of Nigeria was established by the Federal Government of Nigeria as a springboard for open and distance learning in Nigeria in 1983 and revalidated as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2002 (Okebukola, 2013; NOUN, 2018).

The aims 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. Further, the expected outcomes of NOUN as an ODL institution among others are;

- Raise literacy level of the population incrementally and systematically so that the goals of EFA shall be met on schedule;
- Provide a sustainable infrastructure for the government to meet its social obligations to the different segments of the population by providing access to quality education at all levels by all who desire it;
- Improve the existing teaching force as well as train new teachers through other methods complimentary to current teacher education practices so that UBE objective can be attained as scheduled;
- Establish an infrastructure that supports wealth creation at national, community and individual levels to meet the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) Objectives;
- Harness the opportunities of the information age for the enhancement of skills acquisition so that Nigerians shall be on the right side of the digital vital;
- Develop a frame-work to facilitate national orientation and civil responsibility and thereby creating a reliable avenue for the delivery of “education for living together”.
- Increase penetration, wider reach, affordable and cost effective educational opportunities for all so that nobody is left behind;

- Institute in an organized and comprehensive manner an open and distance learning which will facilitate workshop training and professional development;
- Enhance community ownership and participation in the management and provision of education at all levels nation-wide, especially through Community Resource/Study Centres

### **NOUN Experience in the Integration and Provision of Blending Learning Strategy and way forward**

NOUN has provided itself as an ODL institution from where some lessons can be drawn in its efforts at integrating blended learning. Suffice to mention that the Blueprint that established the University which was published in 2002 has it that:

*“The overriding principles that have informed the choice of delivery methods for the Open Distance Education being proposed in this Blueprint is that the best way to reach a learner is to use the technology that the learner already has or can easily be made available to him or her. The chosen media are those that are easy to use and do not rely on the skills of a limited number of programmes or designers with sophisticated skills. The media is cost-effective and as much as possible be flexible enough to take advantage of the huge amount of global knowledge which, to a large extent, currently resides on the internet (World Wide Web) (Blueprint on Open and Distance Learning Programme, 2002, page 15).*

Specifically, the Blueprint highlights the choice of formats and/or delivery channels. The different delivery channel shall include:

- Printed materials
- Audiotapes
- Videotapes
- CD Rom
- On-line Multimedia Interactive and Non-Interactive presentations
- Direct TV and Radio broadcast
- Face-to-face Tutorial presentations

The score-card of the University based on its activities since inception in 2002 to date has been impressive. The University’s operation as an ODL institution with the consciousness to provide inclusiveness has reflected in its extension of admission opportunities to those who ordinarily and naturally be excluded from having opportunities to high quality education. Among its over five hundred

thousand (500,000) students are prisoners, women in purdah, working class, aged, youths being deprived admission into the conventional universities even when they were qualified in terms of possession of admission requirements but for lack of space.

Equally, the University's instructional delivery modes are multi-dimensional but without some challenges. The instructional delivery modes in use by the University include: course-materials, compact-disc (in some courses), on-line content delivery through the Learning Content Management System that is robust as to allow for facilitation, chatting, evaluation, video presentation, feedback mechanism, etc, face-to-face facilitation, online asynchronous access of course content etc. Learners are free to access instructional content without any form of restriction.

The University has a recurring record of graduating inmates at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In fact, the University has a record of producing an inmate with a doctorate degree.

- NOUN is currently operating a policy of production of braille for the visually disadvantaged students in some few courses. There is the need to increase the zeal to cover more courses. In addition, the University may need to provide courses in alternative formats such as Assistive Technologies, exam accommodation and referral services as is the case in Athabasca, Canada's Open University.
- The NOUN FM Radio on Frequency 95.9 megahertz may need to upgrade its services to enable it broadcast content with bias for courses registered for by students with disabilities. Asynchronous use of live recorded radio lessons could be encouraged. Such recorded lessons could form part of the resources to be made available at the regional and each of the Study Centres across the country.
- Currently, as a matter of extant policy, all inmates in all the Correctional Centres in Nigeria running any of NOUN's programmes are on free education. This inclusive policy is highly commendable but restrictive somehow. In order to encourage more people with different forms of disabilities, free education policy should be extended to them at quality higher education level.

## **Implications of the Adoption of BL for inclusive ODL**

In terms of operationalizing inclusive philosophy using Blended Learning approach, the attention of the ODL institutions is drawn to the under-listed points

- The need to have a policy that will attract seeking for prospective learners with disabilities. Such students should be sought for, through the adoption of aggressive and consistent natural campaign rather than waiting for them. Institutions may need to adopt the University of South Africa strategy that has yielded a positive result with the number of students with disabilities grown by 59% between 2007 and 2011 as reported by Asha and Ricky (2017).
- The policy on “securing Greener accessibility” adopted by the Open University of UK which has attracted the largest number of students with disabilities in the UK (Asha and Ricky, 2017) is worthy of being recommended for consideration by NOUN. The strategy attracted nineteen thousand (19,000) students with disabilities, that is 12% of the institution’s student population, enrolled in the undergraduate programmes.
- It is necessary to remind ourselves of the semblance of early adopters, late adopters, panic adoption, and systematic adoption as we found in literature in the integration of the BL into ODL with regards to technology integration into inclusive ODL. One is of the opinion that it will be suicidal to abandon integration of technology into provision of educational services especially ODL-based. The driving force of ODL is technology. The existing gap of space and time, the urge to cater for the diversified types and interests of ever increasing students’ enrolment call for proper adoption of the blended approach, indeed not only in the aspect of instructional delivery, but also in the totality of service delivery. There is therefore the need to articulate a policy that will stand the test of time with clear identification of what is to be blended, how is it to be blended, when is the blending to be done and how will the blending be evaluated. Adoption of blended strategy must be seen to go beyond rhetoric but be specific to address the issues alluded to have. The watch word should be the use of “appropriate technology”. The technology tools to be adopted must be simple, relevant, common, cost effective, available, durable and easily accessible to the learners. It must be environmentally compatible.
- It is necessary to take a decisive decision on blended learning approach as it affects programmes handling, course content delivery, evaluation (pen-on-paper, e-exam, on-demand exam) among others. The implications of the

adoption of the blended learning approach as a single mode, dual mode or mixed mode institutions must be sorted out.

- The foundation for the integration of functional and effective BL into ODL delivery system lies in the Commitment of many resources into the production of each of the multi-modes prior the decision on BL integration. One can hardly build something on nothing. Therefore to allow for seamless, easy, combination of instructional modes, each mode should have been developed to reflect the best of global framework.
- A note of working to the developing countries with emerging ODL institutions is the need to resist the temptation of total adoption/adaptation of the BL technology tools as it were in the advanced climes. Such decision would be dangerous as it may not at end yield the derivable results. There is the need to be conscious of the peculiarities of the environment you are operating; the characteristics of your learners, their peculiar needs, their familiarity with the existing technologies cum their possession of competencies among other factors must be taken into consideration.
- Training of both the staff and the learners who are supposed to be the direct beneficiaries of the BL ODL inclusive approach is to be considered as key. There is the need for regular exposure of both the staff and the students to the emerging technologies. The training can be handled by the competent staff within or be outsourced. Participation at International Workshops where firsthand information and competencies can be acquired especially by the staff could be considered.
- The efforts of ODL institutions like NOUN is making available its over 2,660 course materials available on the public domain should be emulated by others. The materials are being adopted and adapted both at the national and continental levels. The reviews of the materials have been so demanding in terms of financial requirements. It is therefore necessary for such continental and Global organization such the COL, AU, EU, ACDE and others to partner with NOUN in her efforts at actualizing the all of Asha Kanwar that the resources produced using public funds should be made freely available to the public.

## **Conclusion**

Blended approach is appropriate strategy aimed at providing practitioners and managers of ODL a sure way of addressing the inclusive nature of ODL. Its

adoption has produced different models of instructional delivery strategies independent of the blending bond being mutually implemented. It therefore becomes necessary that a better understanding of the concept is solicited as a prerequisite to effective integration of the approach especially in the developing countries.

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