

THE MANAGEMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: ACHIEVEMENTS, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Introduction

Distance learning is seen as part of the legitimate and effective means of acquiring formal educational qualifications in Nigeria since the colonial days. A sizeable number of Nigerians acquired their university education through correspondence study (Omolewa, 1985a). It is also on record that the attempt made to establish an autonomous distance teaching by the federal government failed before it could take off in 1985. The 'traditional obstacles' which bedevilled the efforts of the University of Ibadan from introducing non-traditional learning before 1989 (Omolewa, 1985a, 1985b) are being removed, although not without problems. More universities have since joined the University of Lagos to establish their own distance teaching units. In this paper, we shall refer to these as "university distance teaching units" (UDTUs) since all of them operate under the laws and regulations of the owner universities

Objectives of study

Based on ownership of the UDTUs, their achievements, problems and prospects are likely to differ. The objectives of this study are to assess the effectiveness of the management of these UDTUs within their home setting vi-avis the national educational goals. The specific management task areas examined are (a) objectives of the Units; (b) the determination of the status of the Units within the university setting; (c) policy formulation and implementation on crucial issues.

Management of distance education in Nigerian universities

Through the National Universities Commission (NUC), the federal government funds and controls the academic programmes of the universities to ensure that there is no deviation from set goals. Since education is on the concurrent list of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, both federal and state governments establish universities in Nigeria. However, there is only one NUC, which controls the quality of academic programmes of both the federal and non-federal universities to achieve a national minimum standard of university education. Each university has control over choice of programmes to mount to some extent, either as part of its normal function, or to provide constancy services to generate more funds. The common practice is to establish the distance teaching arm as a unit, dependent on other arms of the university (as at Ibadan); as an institute (as at Lagos and Uturu), or a centre (as at Abuja). A head or director is appointed to administer the programme. The university management has overall responsibility for the operations of the Unit as much as it

has for the conventional programmes. Policy decisions that are passed down for implementation from the apex of the university management to the UDTUs include financial, personnel, admission, course delivery and evaluation, as well as student achievement assessment issues. Usually, the head of the UDTU is a member of the senate at which decisions and policies on academic matters are arrived at. All he does is to deliver the 'message' to his team. Through their own Unit's management staff committee (as at Abuja), the staffers at the UDTUs contribute to policies on distance education of their universities. This is done by submitting their views to the professional and academic board on academic matters, or the management board for administrative matters (as in Lagos and Uturu). The policy committee receives reviews and monitors both academic and administrative policy implementation and the unit's management committee (as at Abuja).

It can thus be observed that the integrated model (Keegan, 1987) is the organisational structure adopted by Nigerian universities to manage their UDTUs. This model is the mixed-mode, multi-departmental Model in Keegan and Rumble's typology of distance teaching systems. In this model academic staff are responsible for teaching both internal and external students, and the External Studies Department. This is the equivalence of Nigeria's UDTU that serve as an administrative and not an academic unit (Keegan and Rumble, 1982). The development of course outline and study materials are also the responsibility of the same academic staff, while the UDTUs look after the production and distribution of course materials (Keegan, 1987). The internal academic staff (which may be complemented by qualified non-internal lecturers) also teach during the contact sessions. The UDTU organises and manages all student support services. Student achievement evaluation forms part of the tasks of the academic staff. While some UDTUs make their students sit the same examinations with their conventional students (e.g. COSIT), others administer only identical examinations to distance learning students. Hence, it can be said that the UDTUs in Nigerian universities have only administrative functions, they are basically embedded in the faculty structure, and thus, dependent on the departments and the senate for academic provisions. Any administrative autonomy has to be exercised within the confines of the management of the conventional institution.

Attainment of objectives.

Each of the three UDTUs will be looked at differently since they operated in different environments. This is however to be done within the conventional guidelines of assessment practice. This paper has focussed on three of Nigerian universities having UDTUs. These are the University of Lagos, being the oldest, the University of Abuja representing the youngest, and Abia State University, Uturu, which is atypical of the consultancy type.

The University of Lagos has the oldest UDTU, called Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (CSIT). Its purpose is to provide opportunities for evening and part-time studies, utilising the correspondence and open learning teaching strategies. However, for logistic reasons, the COSU, as it was then known, did not take off until 1973. Its course offerings are still basically management and teacher education programmes with emphasis on science education. It is heartening to note that enrolment grew steadily in COSIT programmes from 305 students in 1975/76 to 9,000 by 1993/94 (Maduabum, 1994). COSIT has since been producing graduate teachers and managers for Nigeria's development in scientific and managerial skills.

The University of Abuja has its distance teaching unit called Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education (CDLCE) which came on board concurrently with the conventional arm of the University. The CDLCE has the functions of the suspended National Open University as its objectives. This entails the provision of programmes existing, in the conventional arm through distance learning modes to those who, for one reason or the other, decide to study off-campus. This strong component of the University bears in mind the adults, workers, homemakers and those who have intrinsic satisfaction in seeking after knowledge. Although the University started student enrolment for the conventional mode in 1990/91 session, the distance learning mode did not take off until 1992/93 session. The modest beginning enrolment of 2,500 students in 1992/93 has grown only gradually to a little over 5,000 in various disciplines in 1997/98 session. The most popular courses are Law, Social Sciences and management programmes. Apart from English Language, other programmes such as History and Education have very low enrolments. Most of the CDLCE programmes are just maturing as we expect only about 350 students to graduate at the end of the fifth year (the CDLCE programmes take a year longer than the stipulated duration of some conventional mode programmes). The Centre has now suspended its non-degree programmes since the Consultancy Services Unit of the University has assumed responsibility for such programmes.

The Institute for Distance Education (IDEA) of Abia State University, Uturu, was established in 1988

to provide university education for those learners who may not wish to do so. It is virtually a truism that the Institute is a 'University within a University', as it has on roll more than 8,500 students currently (Ozuzu, 1997). Like COSIT, the IDEA has been producing graduates who have been contributing their quota to national development.

The areas of differences in objectives of each of the three UDTUs derive from ownership, funding, and policies. The University of Lagos added open learning as an attachment to its responsibilities, that is, to produce managers and professionally qualified science graduate teachers while still working.

At inception, the CLDCE was to be a strong component of the University of Abuja. This was reinforced by the Longe Commission report of 1992, which states that the University should concentrate and expand its distance learning programmes. It is not easy to objectively assess the extent of the achievements of the CDLCE, as there are uncontrollable external factors that worked against this. If we go by enrolment projections at inception, the annual enrolment was to be about 5,000. However, the enrolment for the first year 1992/93 was 2,500 in the humanities and some social science courses that were being offered in the conventional mode. Study centres were established to run the programmes outside Abuja. These study centres were closed down two years later because of the uncooperative stance of Nigerian university lecturers who were on a prolonged nation-wide industrial dispute against the Federal Government (Agboola, 1997). Consequently, more than one-half of the students who could or would not come to the only Abuja Centre dropped out of the programme. Only about 700 students out of over 2,500 enrolled will be graduating this year, giving about 28% course completion rate at the normal duration of programme. Eventually, only 5000 or 20% of the expected 25,000 students are currently on roll. Thus, enrolment stands at about one-fifth of expectation despite the increase in number of course offerings in management and social sciences. There is nothing like economies of scale for now. The financial support from the NUC keeps the Centre going for now.

The IDEA of Abia State University is a unique distance teaching unit of its University as it represents the consultancy model of UDTUs. The term "consultancy" model emanates from the set objectives of the unit. It is expected to be a source of revenue generation for the University. It is thus run as a consultancy service to its clientele. It has no financial support from the NUC. Hence, there is a concentration of efforts in offering mostly management and social science courses commanding a high demand in its catchment area. Its network of study centres and tutorial system might have been militating against proper funding of its activities (Ozuzu, 1997; Onwuka, 1997).

Reviewing the above, one can say that distance teaching units of Nigerian universities only struggle to achieve their set objectives, but constraints exist every where. When compared nationally, one can readily see that it is only a wishful thinking that open learning will help the equalisation of educational opportunities at the tertiary level. By 1991/92 session there were only about 22,000 on role in the UDTUs representing only about 12.2% of enrolment in Universities at the same time Network Meeting, Lagos, 1992). This is only an insignificant number of admission seekers who go through JAMB every year. Something drastic needs to be done to satisfy the yearning for university education in Nigeria.

Status and structure of UDTUs

The status and structure of the UDTUs in Nigeria can be compared to that of any other dual mode university elsewhere. They serve as the management hub where non-academic activities are performed. All course writing and face-to-face teaching are only managed by the UDTU. The corresponding departmental staffs are accorded preference over qualified outsiders for all academic activities.

One problem noted is that most of the directors are picked from the academic departments irrespective of their knowledge of or preparation in distance learning. Ashby Commission's (1960) suggestion against this (in the case of Lagos) is often ignored. This erroneous assumption manifests in glaring mismanagement of the unit, as it is only trial-and-error management method that is being used. Some of these administrators do not understand what they are managing; therefore planning for action is usually unobservable. They only ensure the maintenance of the *status quo*. The 'boss' approach to management has to be employed to cow down the specialist (some of these acquire their specialisation only through experience too) to carry out instructions devoid of the knowledge and peculiarities of distance and open approach to learning. The non-education specialist, are even worse off as the basic principles and rubrics of designing individualised instruction materials are not known and therefore, often violated with impunity. They perceive these as cogs in the wheel of progress.

The unit usually has its own organisational structure, subdivided into sections or departments on basis of functions. The University of Abuja's CDLCE, for instance, has six departments at inception, namely (i) academic planning; (ii) course material production; (iii) student affairs; (iv) field service; (v) technical unit, and (vi) continuing education unit. An assistant director headed each section. All of them report severally to the director. There are other subordinate staffers who complement their efforts. Co-operation among the sections is imperative, as no one can operate successfully independent of the other. The CDLCE has a management board set up by the university to handle management issues. This Management Committee, in turn reports to the CDLCE Policy Committee that formulates or ratifies policies that are recommended from the management board.

All academic matters are first taken to the academic board in which all heads of departments of the programmes being offered by the centre are members. From here, approved issues are taken to the College Board of the respective programme departments. The Senate of the university has to ratify all academic proposals, results and recommendations before they are implemented. This ensures the maintenance of the traditions of university education in order to maintain parity with the conventional mode programmes. It can thus be noted that the CDLCE is left with only the management functions while the academic functions are the responsibility of the departments, colleges and the senate. The same pattern is observable in the two other UDTUs.

Policy formulation and implementation

Effective management hinges on proper policy formulation. Since the UDTU does not have a full complement of its own staff, it is very essential that the policies on various aspects of the unit be comprehensive, hence, the involvement of the other arms of the university. Each section handling various activities of the department is usually involved at the management committee level. Both the problems and suggested solutions are passed on to the management board for review and confirmation. From this stage, the solutions are implemented if they do not need to move up to the policy committee. Authority is then given for implementation on behalf of the University. Curriculum development, student evaluation, course writing and editing, as well as teaching at contact sessions are issues for the departments to deliberate upon, although they may have to be ratified by both the appropriate college boards and the Senate. Matters of student indiscipline associated with academic matters, like examination malpractice, are normally referred to Senate for determination in accordance with University regulation. The students also have all the rights and privileges of the conventional arm.

Problems and prospects

The forgoing has highlighted a lot of the management issues, peculiarities and problems prevalent in the dual mode universities. It can be noted that the practice in Nigeria is not significantly different from what obtains elsewhere in the world. This is an observed trend in Africa as there are, so far, only two autonomous open universities and at least 35 dual mode types (Roberts and Associates Survey, 1998).

Several publications have focused on the problems inherent in the dual mode universities because of the inflexibility of the faculty over standards. Where the UDTU is not on the same campus with the conventional arm, decision making, instruction, and regulations guiding practice descend from some heights. This also renders the powers of the staff of the unit inferior to their counterparts in the conventional mode.

It can also be noted that in the dual mode universities the size of the UDTU is small and may not necessarily be cost effective except the consultancy model that must make profit. This is because of the limited ability of the conventional mode to carry the responsibility for the distance teaching unit. Much reliance cannot be placed on outside staff or similar institutions in the field centres (Agboola, 1997). Pulling all students together for either contact seasons or examinations pose serious logistic challenges (Agboola, 1993). The light emphasis put on continuous assessment creates some disadvantages for the distance learners compared to their conventional mode counterparts. Where there is much reliance on the printed course materials, course material production is erratic and unpredictable (Agboola, 1994, Ibeh, 1994). The quality of the printed materials also leaves much to be desired (Olaofe, 1983, and Ozuzu, 1994).

Considering financial matters, the universities that receive financial assistance from NUC find it easier to run their UDTU, as they do not place financial hurdles in the path of their students as it is often done in the

consultancy model. However, the financial requirement of a UDTU is often over-simplified by the management of most of our universities. They only consider the personnel and physical facilities on ground. Often, the initial costs are underrated as course material production and maintenance of field centres often cost a lot of money. The ad hoc way in which course material production is handled hides away the total cost involvement of course material production.

The quality of staff at the UDTU is always a bone of contention... Like in any other enterprise, training and retraining of staff is a *sine qua non* for effective performance of staff that will bring about the attainment of the objectives of the enterprise. We hope that the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) will keep to its earlier plan, to establish a training unit at the University of Abuja for training of managers and technocrats of distance and open learning institutions in Africa. The award of fellowship visits and short but infrequent courses through regional associations such as West African Distance Education Association (WADEA) may not contribute to solving this personnel problem.

Considering the flexibility, the openness and the successes achieved by autonomous distance teaching universities in other countries, the NOU should be revived to provide a wider avenue for the training and development of Nigeria's human resources for capacity utilisation. Until this is done, all UDTUs should be funded by the NUC to enhance equalisation of higher educational opportunities in Nigeria.

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