

# Reflective Student Engagement: A Necessity 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

And

Uchenna Christie Chuks-Enwerem, *PhD*

Faculty of Education, ISL  
University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos

## **Abstract**

Education providers need to be effectively engaged with their students in order to better understand their expectations and therefore tailor their deliveries to meet their needs accordingly. In a normal conventional, face-to-face small class arrangement, this is feasible and even sufficient but not so in an era of mass education delivered through open and distance learning method coupled with student diversity and less homogeneity in their class composition. This arrangement presents a challenge for teachers to understand the peculiarities and expectations of their students. To achieve better inclusive engagement with students and to deliver learning content based on their expectations, a more formal means to understand students as learners becomes necessary. This calls for a method that can enable teachers to learn and understand students' expectations of teaching, learning and assessment as well as their conceptions and views of learning, their belief system and their reflective thinking capabilities. Survey was used in this study and 100 students of National Open University of Nigeria, were randomly selected. Sixteen item questionnaire administered with 56 returns. Results showed effective engagement of students occurs through class participation, interaction and collaboration with peers, attentiveness in class activity, emotional connection – and were found necessary for effective open and distance learning delivery. Management needs to also make deliberate effort to enhance students' engagement by being responsive to their (students') needs as expressed from time to time, such as extra-curricular activities and creation of physical interaction between and among staff and faculty.

**Key words:** Mass Education, Face-to-Face, Distance Learning, Student Engagement, Reflective Thinking

## **INTRODUCTION**

Are students of a university to be seen as products, consumers, clients or customers? The answer varies: To some people, students are consumers not customers, because consumers use a product or service. Others say, unlike a “client,” a “student” is responsible for earning his or her education. This applies not only in the classroom, but also when students and college applicants seek guidance and tutelage from private counselors, advisers, tutors, and educational consultants (Council of International Schools, 2017). Certainly, many students both pay for and use the product of higher education. However, because higher education in the United States was created to produce an informed citizenry for a democratic society, students are clearly the consumer (Council of International Schools, 2017).

Similarly, Obermiller, Fleenor and Raven (2005), surveyed faculty and students and found that each category saw the issue differently: while faculty saw students as products, students preferred themselves as customers. In National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Management views students as customers – without whom the whole effort of the University would be in vain (Peters, 2021). The foregoing underscores the importance of students in any given institution of higher learning and therefore calls for measures by education providers to highlight, underline and optimize that mutual relationship.

Whether they are consumers, products, clients or customers, what is clear is that students are integral to the existence of any educational institution, nay, university. Consequently, education providers need to be effectively engaged with their students, in order to better understand their expectations and therefore tailor their deliveries to meet their needs. In a normal conventional, face-to-face small class arrangement, this is feasible and even sufficient but not so in an era of mass education delivered through open and distance learning method coupled with student diversity and less homogeneity in their class composition. In National Open University of Nigeria where learning is delivered over and across distance, unhindered by time and place, the

arrangement presents a challenge for teachers to understand the peculiarities and expectations of their students. To achieve better inclusive engagement with students and to deliver learning content based on their expectations, a more formal means to understand students as learners and their expectations becomes necessary.

This calls for a method that can enable teachers to learn and understand students' expectations of teaching, learning and assessment as well as their conceptions and views of learning, their belief system and their reflective thinking capabilities. Survey method comes handy to achieve this milestone. Regular and diverse outcomes from these surveys hopefully will enable teachers, institutions' managers and content creators to constantly construct more and effective learning materials and conducive environment for their diverse students of varied demographics.

### **Statement of the problem**

What does it take to engage students? As easy as it sounds, how feasible is it for an educator to have a classroom full of diverse students all actively engaged and paying full attention? In a conventional institution, this may be challenging, but it can be done with adequate planning. In a face-to-face teaching arrangement, some strategies have been suggested as ways of engaging students. Yaluma (2017), suggests: first making the content relevant to students' lives; second, putting the students in the role of a teacher and, third, fostering a positive – yet challenging – learning environment. n National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Management views students as customers – without whom the whole effort of the University would be in vain (Peters, 2021). The foregoing underscores the importance of creating student engagement in any given institution of higher learning and therefore calls for measures by education providers to highlight, underline and optimize that mutual relationship and therefore justifies this study.

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives that underlie this study are:

1. To determine the extent to which students strive to succeed
2. To determine the extent of engagement of students of National Open University of Nigeria;

3. To determine the extent to which students of NOUN participate in educational/learning activities
4. To determine the extent of NOUN students' interaction and collaboration with one another
5. To determine what motive/s students of NOUN to study harder

### **Research Questions**

1. What effort do students of NOUN make in towards succeeding?
2. What is the extent of academic engagement of students of National Open University of Nigeria?
3. To what extent do students of NOUN practically participate in educational/learning activities?
4. To what extent do NOUN students interact and collaborate with one another?
5. What motivate/s NOUN students to study harder?

### **Significance of the Study**

Studies about student engagement in higher institutions may be few and far in-between; his study present study is about the students of an Open and Distance Learning institution which operates a different teaching and learning mode. This study, therefore is significant as it may be one of the very few that will provide empirical justification for examining that idea as it concerns National Open University of Nigeria. The institution operates as a pure business entity, hence its students' (customers') reflective and engagement ability are factors necessary for its sustenance. hence the outcome of this study will be important to the Management.

### **Literature Review**

Conceptually, student engagement refers to a meaningful engagement-throughout-the-learning-environment – more or less - that relationship between the student and the school,-teachers peers, instruction and curriculum (Martin and Torres). The term is historically rooted in-a-body-of-work concerned with student involvement, particularly-in-North-America and Australasia, where it has been firmly entrenched (Trowler, 2010). Ciric and Jovanovic (2016) aver that In the contemporary conceptualizations of education, students' and teachers' engagement is considered as an

important attribute of behaviour because of the connection with the quality of teaching and learning and with the-development of potentials of all the previously mentioned actors.

According to Fredericks, et al., (2004), student engagement is in three dimensions:

1. Behavioral
2. Emotional
3. Cognitive

Behavioral engagement refers to student's participation in academic and extracurricular activities. Emotional engagement refers to student's positive and negative reaction to peers, teachers and school. While cognitive engagement talks about student's thoughtfulness and willingness to master difficult skills.

Some studies have linked student engagement with successes in the classroom. For instance, according to Reckmeyer, (2019), a Gallup study which involved 128 schools and more than 110,000 students found that student engagement had a significant positive relationship with student academic achievement progress (growth) in math, reading, and all subjects combined. Abbing (2013) advises that in order to understand the relationship between student engagement and achievement, one has to consider the different components of engagement in the context of the students' stage in their school career.

Coates (2005), explains that student engagement is an important construct necessary for understanding the behaviour of students towards the teaching and learning process. This understanding of students' behaviour in the academic institutions helps in explaining how the instructions and academic practices go on in the university. Coates explains further that teachers and academic supervisors use the tool to design an effective pedagogical techniques to maximize-the-learning- experiences of the students. Moreover, such information from the engagement process have been found useful in providing information on what students are actually doing. The data so gathered has a broader significance for the management of institutions, students and academic programmes. Rather than work from assumptions about student activities, institutions can make decisions

based on more objective information and empirical data (Schmidt, Kacker-Cam, Straati, & Shumow, 2015).

For the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) with about 500000 students and 103 study centres across Nigeria (www.noun.edu.ng, 2022), student engagement should be a top priority because with accurate and reliable information on what students are actually doing, institutions can move beyond taking student activities for granted. Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong (2008) linked student engagement to the improved academic performance and demonstrated it to be a predictor of achievement and behavior among students.

Courtner (2014) examined various students to consider the impact the level of student engagement had on the quality of relationships with other students, faculty, and administrative personnel. Furthermore, the study sought to determine if there was a significant difference in the quality of relationships with other students, faculty, and administrative personnel between traditional and nontraditional college students. Courtner found a significant difference between traditional and nontraditional students based on academic performance and level of student engagement – with traditional students having higher levels of student engagement while nontraditional students had higher levels of academic performance. Level of student engagement had a significant impact on the quality of relationships with other students, faculty, and administrative personnel for both traditional and nontraditional students.

Student engagement is beneficial to not only academic status of the school but also its financial life too. As described by Markwell (2007) at a time when universities and colleges are increasingly focused on the importance of outreach to alumni and other potential friends of the institution for the purpose of greatly increasing philanthropic support for higher education, it is becoming more widely recognized that how engaged students are and feel themselves to be during their student years will have a great bearing on how connected and supportive towards the institution they are likely to be in later years.

### **Method of study**

In this study survey method was used to gather data.

### *The Population.*

The population of study comprised all registered and active students of National Open University of Nigeria who are scattered in the 103 study centres around the country. At the time of this study, the total number of students was put at about 500, 000. Again, due to time constraints and bureaucracy, all their contacts could not be obtained, hence a few available ones were targeted for this preliminary study.

### *Sample size*

For this study, a sample of 100 students from the available number were randomly selected for administration of questionnaire via Google form, using their email addresses.

### *Data gathering instrument*

Data for the study were gathered with the aid of 18-item questionnaire which solicited for responses about the students' engagement statuses. The questionnaire sought to establish:

The efforts students of NOUN make in to make success in their career; the extent of their academic engagement; the extent to which they participate in educational/learning activities; the extent they interact and collaborate with one another and what motivate/s them to study harder.

The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended and open-ended types and required the respondent to describe their views on particular questions. Out of the 100 students that were targeted, with the questionnaire sent out through Google forms, 56 (56%) responses received for this analysis.

## **Data Presentation**

Below is the presentation of relevant data in the order of the research questions.

### ***1. RQ1: What effort do students of NOUN make towards succeeding?***

Respondents were asked to state the extent to which, as ODL students, they make reasonable efforts to achieve success. Individual effort is considered a very crucial element in the struggle to succeed. The majority of the respondents (48%) said their effort is to a great extent while 37% said to some extent. This means that over 80% of the respondents are not just aware that they need to make efforts, but they actually do it, in order to succeed. This is in spite of the about 14% that are not enthusiastic about the idea of making reasonable efforts

### ***2. What is the extent of academic engagement of students of National Open University of Nigeria?***

**Table 2: Which of these describes your emotional engagement in class?**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Every time I feel so much boredom	5%
Sometimes I feel bored	37%
I find myself excited in class	33.3%
I feel a sense of anxiety most times	18.5%
I fee anxious sometimes	6.2%
Total	100%
	<b>n = 56</b>

The respondents were asked to describe what they consider their emotional engagement in class. They described their respective feelings in three key ideas as the above table 2 shows: every time I feel so much bored (5%); sometimes I feel bored (37%); I find myself excited in class (33.3%) and I feel a sense of anxiety most times. These emotional symbols speak a lot about how and why students can be effectively engaged in school.

***RQ3: To what extent do students of NOUN practically participate in educational/learning activities?***

**Table 3: Students' Practical participation in activities**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
I always attend class promptly	51.9%
I sometimes attend classes but not promptly	29.6%
I hardly attend classes/academic activities promptly	14.8
I do not attend classes/academic activities promptly	3.7%



Total	100% <b>n = 56</b>
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The research question examined student’s attentiveness and attitude to learning activities. As shown in table 3 above, out of the 56 respondents, 51.9% claimed that they always attend class and promptly too; another 29.6% said they sometimes attend class but not promptly and nearly 15% said that they hardly attend class/academic activities promptly. In total, a good number of the respondents do not attend activities promptly. In another related question about the respondents’ attitude to class/academic activities, 70.4% were attentive while 29.6% were always very attentive.

***RQ4: To what extent do NOUN students interact and collaborate with one another?***

This research question sought to know the frequency with which students interact with one another; data shows that most of the students (40.7%) interact with one another on a weekly basis; some students (22.2%) said they interact with fellow students on monthly basis and another 22.2% also said they see themselves on daily basis while 14.8% of them said their interaction takes place twice weekly. Evidently, despite being an ODL institution, students manage to create an interactive forums for themselves. Interaction and collaboration are important backbones of university life.

***RQ5: What motivate/s NOUN students to study harder?***

This research question sought to know things that motivate students to give in their best. While recognition and getting high grads in examinations rank fairly high (25.9%) and (22.2%), the most prominent motivating factor is the need to understand and master the subject matter (48.1%).

**Discussion of Findings**

The study set out to determine, among others, the extent to which students strive to succeed their extent of engagement of students of National Open University of Nigeria; the extent to which students of NOUN participate in educational/learning activities, the extent of NOUN students’ interaction and collaboration with one another and what motive/s students of NOUN to study harder.

**Research Question 1:** The majority of the respondents said that they may individual efforts to succeed; this implies that the ODL nature of the university may have informed their attitude to put in their individual efforts to ensure success. It is also believed that with that level of efforts, reflective student engagement would be possible and operational.

In **Research Question 2** their responses revealed the multidimensional nature of students' motivation in terms of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement (Olson & Peterson, 2015). The 43% (in total) feeling of boredom and 33.3% feeling of excitement are both elements of student engagement which have been referred to as, "the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education (Olson & Peterson, 2015:2). The data suggests lower levels of motivation, hence, engagement among these students. This much is revealed in Research question 3, where 52% of the respondents indicated that they always attend class while the rest indicated that they either "sometimes I attend classes but not promptly," "I hardly attend classes promptly," to "I do not attend classes promptly" – all of which are indications of negative engagement by the students." The low level of engagement revealed in this data is an indication of the degree to which students value the tasks they are asked to do. This view is supported by Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong (2008) who aver that, in order for challenge to be motivating, -the-actor-has to perceive some value in the challenging task.

On Research question 3, students' interaction and engagement as shown by the data, appear to be high as some interact on weekly, daily and bi-weekly basis. Despite being an ODL institution, students manage to create an interactive forums for themselves, perhaps virtually or physically. Interaction and collaboration are important backbones of university life. According to Cavinato, Hunter, Ott and Robinson (2021) students must actively develop their capabilities to become better in what they do. The use of small-group, active learning exercises in the classroom leads to improvements in academic achievement, better reasoning and critical thinking skills, increased retention of students, and improved relationships with faculty and other students.

Motivation of students is important in their success hence, factors suggested by data include: recognition and getting high grads in examinations which had (25.9%) and (22.2%). However, the most prominent motivating factor is the need to understand and master the subject matter (48.1%). Reamen (2015) agrees with this view as she posits that some students seem naturally enthusiastic or motivated about learning, but many need or expect other factors to inspire, challenge and stimulate them – in relation to and depending on the interest that brought students to the course.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Student engagement has been proved, from extant literature and the present study, to be an important factor in their academic performance. In ODL environment, this fact is even more to be desired due to the nature of the open and distance learning where students learn on their own. This study has found that reflective student engagement through class participation, interaction and collaboration with peers, attentiveness in class activity, emotional engagement as well as specific motivators are - necessary for effective open and distance learning delivery. There is a feeling among students that while they have striven to keep themselves motivated and reflectively engaged, management should do much to improve and enhance their level of engagement and by implication, their overall performance.

Arising from the foregoing, therefore, this study recommends the following:

1. Students should enhance and improve their individual efforts to succeed in their studies including being attentive in class or other academic activities. Open and Distance learning is student-focused, hence individual effort is paramount.
2. Students should build their emotional resources by eliminating a sense of boredom and anxiety but increasing their excitement in their learning effort. To achieve this, effective participation in academic activities is highly recommended;
3. Students should develop their sense of collaboration and mutual partnership in the course of their studies
4. Students should develop or sharpen their sense of motivation especially as regards the need to better understand and master their subject matter.
5. Management needs to also make deliberate effort to enhance students' engagement by being responsive to students' needs as expressed from time to time, including need for

extra-curricular activities and creation of physical interaction between and among staff and faculty.

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