

# AN ASSESSMENT OF ONLINE FACILITATION PROCESSES IN THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA (NOUN)

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## **Abstract**

For efficient and effective management of educational delivery, innovations are required. One of such innovations is the online facilitation, which was on a lower scale at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) before the COVID-19 lockdown and now is being improved on. The purpose of this study therefore, is to assess the online facilitation processes at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). A survey design was used. Three research questions were answered and one hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance. 44 facilitators and 161 learners participated in the study, after face validation and reliabilities of the instruments were ascertained. Cronbach Alpha reliability test was used to determine the internal consistency of the instruments which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.929 and 0.846 for facilitators and learners' instruments respectively. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation statistics for the research questions and t-test for hypothesis. Findings from the study showed that NOUN lecturers at the headquarters were highly competent in the identified skills; they were also rated by their students to be effective in communication and class control. It was therefore recommended that the model of operation in NOUN; which include regular training, support from technical staff as well as accessibility to enabling facilities and resources be adopted by other universities in Nigeria that desires to have an efficient online facilitation system.

**Key Words:** Assessment, Online Facilitation, Competencies, Gender, National Open University of Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

The National Open University of Nigeria is the only single mode Open and Distance Learning (ODL) university in Nigeria. It seeks to bring education closer to the teeming multitudes of Nigerians, who either do not have the privilege of pursuing fulltime university programme or do not have the means to do so. NOUN's unique principle is flexibility; in order to accommodate all intending students, irrespective of their workplace, situation, location or circumstance. The above narration coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic that has necessitated a new normal, both in the administration and delivery of education make the online facilitation the only visible option for instructional delivery in NOUN. The technological advancement and the shift from the traditional method of doing things to the use of technology and internet also passes online facilitation as the best choice of instructional mode, going forward. The online facilitation is one of the inspiring innovations in education amidst limitations brought about by the pandemic. Assessment of its processes and implementation would no doubt produce data needed to bring about necessary changes and improvements in the system.

The online facilitation (also referred to as Online Teaching & Learning) can be described as Computer Mediated, Web – based learning environment that require people with different skills to drive (Setlhako, 2014; Angeli, Valamedes & Bonk, 2003). According to Gustafon and Gibbs (2000) and Martin, Wang and Sandaf (2020) successful online facilitators need to learn strategies to humanise the online course and identify new ways to engage the learners to construct meaning. Online facilitation therefore requires that the facilitator or instructor apply multiple strategies to facilitate the student's learning and critical thinking skills (Richardson et al, 2015; Schinder & Burkholder, 2014); improve student sense of community (Rovai, 2007); and promote students' connectedness and learning (Shea, Li & Pickett, 2006). Given the above, the role of an online facilitator has therefore shifted from just being a subject expert that dishes out the content to the learners, to someone who facilitates learning. Berge (1995) grouped the competencies

required for online facilitations into four; namely, pedagogical, social, managerial and technical competencies. They are however interwoven as there seems to be overlap, because some items seem to belong to more than one group. Since online facilitation is relatively new in NOUN, the research sought to assess issues that are of utmost concern in the process.

For successful online facilitation process, the facilitator in addition to being a subject expert should be able to among others display some technical competencies. Technical competencies require facilitator to be able to operate a computer and the tools involved in the course, such as internet, e-mails, zoom etc. (Berge, 1996; Setlhako, 2014). For the purpose of the study. Required competencies include recording virtual class conversation, creating and uploading interactive videos, initiating and coordinating interactive forum, setting up virtual library on the course page etc. It is expected and important that these tools are used to help learners become comfortable with the information and communication technologies being used within the online course as this increases students' learning and engagement (Berge, 2008; Martin, Wang & Sadaf, 2014). Using synchronous tools such as audio, video, text interactive white and applications provides opportunities for interaction between facilitators and learners, assists student to grasp the instructional content better and connect with their instructors (Martin and Parker, 2014; Borup et al, 2015; Rose, 2009).

Another competency required by an online facilitator is the communication competency. This becomes more important because the learner and the facilitator in most cases are far apart, therefore, securing and sustaining the attention of the learner require effectiveness in communication. The facilitator should be able to use the appropriate language at each stage of the lesson. Eskey and Schulte (2010) found that instructors' prompt responses to question in the discussion and via e-mail are two important facilitation strategies for students to be successful in online courses. Swan (2001) discovered that student to instructor interaction and active discussions significantly impact students' satisfaction and their perceived learning of course material in a synchronous online environment.

In the face to face mode of teaching, the need for class control is key as it determines how successful the class session will be. Class control in the online facilitation mode is more important. Berge (2008) asserts that, in online learning promoting student to student or student to instructor relationship, developing cohesive groups and helping students work together for their shared benefit are helpful to the success of online learning activities.

The National Open University of Nigeria is the leading ODL University, providing online facilitation in Nigeria. The other Institutions look up to it for training and mentorship in online facilitation processes. To play this role well, the University Online Facilitation System must be efficient. The efficiencies expected cannot be, except the facilitators are competent in their roles. The roles are numerous and cannot be covered extensively in a single research work. The most urgent however is for the facilitators to be able to use the tools, communicate, and control the online class in an effective manner in order to engage the students and promote learning. It is on this note, that this research work assessed the online facilitation process of the National Open University of Nigeria, with focus on facilitation competencies in online technology use for various functions, effective communication and class control.

Gender generally is always an issue in educational research. Shea (2007) in a study explored instructors' motivations to teach online and found that female faculty were more attracted to online teaching than male faculty; Seaman (2009) examined online teaching and course development by gender and found that females were more confident in instructional skills and are more involved in course development than males. Since gender of facilitators as discovered from research and experience can play an important role in their online facilitation, having a clear picture of whether or how it affects facilitators' perceptions is essential to enhance student learning. Therefore, in this study an hypothesis will be tested to investigate the differences in the competencies of male and female participants.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The Purpose of this research work is to assess online facilitation processes in the National Open University of Nigeria. Specific objectives are to:

- investigate the level of competence of the online facilitators to carry out activities required for effective online facilitation.
- examine the communication skills demonstrated by facilitators while in the online class. assess the level of class control during the online facilitation.
- Assess the level of class control obtainable in online facilitation at the NOUN.

### **Research Questions**

- What is the level of competency of facilitators in the identified skills required for Online Facilitation in the teaching and learning process in NOUN?
- How effective are the facilitators in communicating with their students during the online class?
- What is the level of class control obtainable in online facilitation in NOUN?

### **Research Hypothesis**

- There is no significant difference between the competency possessed by male and female academic staff in handling online facilitation tools.

### **Methodology**

A survey design was used. Academic staff at the university headquarter in Abuja and students from the various centres within Abuja metropolis formed the sample for the study. The academic staff at the headquarters were used for the study because they have access to the technical staff at the Learner content management system directorate and the various facilities such as studio room, blackboard, sophisticated tools etc. Therefore, they have all that is required to respond to the items in the questionnaire. For a similar reason, students at the various centres within Abuja metropolis were used as respondents for the study. In all, 205 people participated in the study (44 academic staff and 161 students).

The research instrument used was titled Online Facilitation Assessment Questionnaire (OFAQ) for academic staff and then for students. OFAQ for students required that they rate their facilitators' communication and class control in Online Facilitation on a four-likert scale instrument labelled Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The academic staff were to assess their level of competency in accessing and navigating through the online facilitation environment in order to help students learn. Their responses were to be made on a five-likert scale instrument using; Extremely Competent (EC), Moderately Competent (MC), Somewhat Competent (SC), Slightly Competent (SLC), Not Competent (NC). The research instrument was validated by experts in English Language education and measurement and evaluation in the Faculty of Education of the National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja, Nigeria. Corrections made by experts were effected before the instruments were administered to the sampled respondents. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach Alpha reliability test. The reliability index of the instrument for academic staff is 0.846, while that of the students was found to be 0.929. The indices therefore showed a high level of internal consistency and as such the instruments were found usable for the study.

## Result

**Research Question One:** What is the level of competency of facilitators in the identified skills required for Online Facilitation in the teaching and learning process in NOUN?

**Table 1: Level of Facilitators Competence for Online Facilitation in NOUN**

Please indicate your level of competence in the following online facilitation related skills	NC	SLC	SC	MC	EC	Mean	St. Dev.
Facilitate and record the virtual class conversation.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (6.8)	20 (45.5)	21 (47.7)	4.41	0.622
Create interactive videos for a synchronous facilitation.	2(4.5)	0 (0.0)	4 (9.1)	22 (50.0)	16 (36.4)	4.14	0.930
Lead forum discussions.	1(2.3)	2 (4.5)	6 (13.6)	19 (43.2)	16 (36.4)	4.07	0.950
Lead chat forums.	1(2.3)	2 (4.5)	8 (18.2)	20 (45.5)	13 (29.5)	3.95	0.939
Set-up 'meet your facilitator page' on the course page.	1(2.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	20 (45.5)	23 (52.3)	4.45	0.730
Create announcement on the course page.	1(2.3)	0 (0.0)	4 (9.1)	15 (34.1)	24(54.5)	4.39	0.841
Prepare a lesson plan for online facilitation on the course page.	1(2.3)	1 (2.3)	1 (2.3)	20 (45.5)	21 (47.7)	4.34	0.834
Set up a virtual library on the course page.	2(4.5)	1 (2.3)	5 (11.4)	17 (38.6)	19 (43.2)	4.14	1.025
Create introductory videos on the course page.	1(2.3)	1 (2.3)	2 (4.5)	17 (38.6)	23(52.3)	4.36	0.865
Set up zoom online class on the course page.	1(2.3)	0 (0.0)	4 (9.1)	14 (31.8)	25(56.8)	4.41	0.844
Use whiteboard in the zoom class.	3(6.8)	8 (18.2)	5 (11.4)	20 (45.5)	8(18.2)	3.50	1.191
Create a discussion forum on the course page.	1(2.3)	0 (0.0)	6 (13.6)	12 (27.3)	25(56.8)	4.36	0.892

- Percentages in parenthesis
- **KEY:** NC – Not Competent; SLC – Slightly Competent; SC – Somewhat Competent; MC – Moderately Competent; EC – Extremely Competent

Table 1 above shows the level of competency of facilitators in the identified skills required for online facilitation process in NOUN. More than half of the respondents accepted all the twelve (12) items as true. Those that agreed and strongly agreed with each of the twelve (12) items are above 50%. The mean ratings of each of the twelve (12) items are each above the 3.00 benchmark for the acceptance of a statement in a five-likert scale. This is a confirmation of the result found from the frequency and percentages analyses. Conclusively, in the opinion of the majority of the respondents; who are academic staff on the level of competency of facilitators in the identified Online Facilitation skills in NOUN, they agree that they are competent in those identified technical skills required for online facilitation processes:

- Facilitate and record the virtual class conversation.
- Create interactive videos for a synchronous facilitation.
- Lead forum discussions.
- Lead chat forums.
- Set-up 'meet your facilitator page' on the course page.
- Create announcement on the course page.

- vii. Prepare a lesson plan for online facilitation on the course page.
- viii. Set up a virtual library on the course page.
- ix. Create introductory videos on the course page.
- x. Set up zoom online class on the course page.
- xi. Use whiteboard in the zoom class.
- xii. Create a discussion forum on the course page.

Particularly, table 1 showed that the majority of the participants rated themselves moderately and extremely competent in almost all the skills highlighted. The rating in ten out of the twelve skills gave that more than 80.0% were either moderately competent or extremely competent. Also the mean rating in 10 out of the 12 items are each above 4.00 out of a total of 5.00. This implies a very high competence level in the highlighted skills exists among the respondents.

**Research Question Two:** How effective are the facilitators in communicating with their students during the online class?

**Table 2: Communication in Online Facilitation**

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	St. Dev.
The facilitator uses language appropriate for the students.	0(0.0)	2 (1.2)	95 (59.0)	64 (39.8)	3.39	0.513
The facilitator's introduction of lesson is always interesting.	1(0.6)	8 (5.0)	102 (63.4)	50 (31.1)	3.25	0.570
The facilitator asks appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students.	0(0.0)	56 (34.8)	71 (44.1)	34 (21.1)	2.86	0.737
The facilitator asks appropriate follow up questions to sustain student's engagement in the course.	0(0.0)	10 (6.2)	106 (65.8)	45 (28.0)	3.22	0.544
Facilitator delivers instructions that are accurate, clear and concise.	0(0.0)	11 (6.8)	47 (29.2)	103 (64.0)	3.57	0.620
Facilitator summarises the lesson to enhance retention of the content learnt.	0(0.0)	9 (5.6)	98 (60.9)	54 (33.5)	3.28	0.561

- Percentages in parenthesis
- **KEY: SD** – Strongly Disagree; **D**– Disagree; **A** – Agree; **SA** – Strongly Agree

Table 2 above shows the effectiveness of the facilitators in communicating with their students during the online class as opined by their students. More than half of the respondents agreed with all the six (6) items. Those that agreed and strongly agreed with each of the six (6) items are above 50%. The mean ratings of each of the six (6) items are each above the 2.50 benchmark for the acceptance of a statement in a four-likert scale. This is a confirmation of the result found from the frequency and percentages analysis.

Conclusively, in the opinion of the majority of the respondents; the following statements on the effectiveness of the facilitators in communicating with their students during the online class are true:

- i. The facilitator uses language appropriate for the students.
- ii. The facilitator's introduction of lesson is always interesting.
- iii. The facilitator asks appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students.
- iv. The facilitator asks appropriate follow up questions to sustain student's engagement in the course.
- v. Facilitator delivers instructions that are accurate, clear and concise.
- vi. Facilitator summarises the lesson to enhance retention of the content learnt.

Particularly, table 2 indicated that the majority of the participants demonstrated a very high level of communication skill during online facilitation. Aside item 3 where only 65.2% either agree or strongly agree, in the remaining items, more than 90.0% either agree or strongly agree that facilitators studied possessed those communication skills. In item 3 which states that; “the facilitators ask appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students”, even though those that agree and strongly agree are in the majority (65.2%), a sizeable number however disagree (34.8%). This is worrisome as this implies that about 35 out of every 100 facilitators do not possess the skill. Something need to be done.

**Research Question Three:** What is the level of class control obtainable in online facilitation in NOUN?

**Table 3: The Level of Class Control During the Online Facilitation in NOUN**

ITEM	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	St. Dev.
The facilitator ensures sessions hold in a quiet environment devoid of background noise and other distractions.	0(0.0)	15(9.3)	73(45.3)	73(45.3)	3.36	0.648
The facilitator promotes confidence in their students.	1(0.6)	14(8.7)	105(65.2)	41(25.5)	3.16	0.587
Facilitator collaborates with their students to ensure efficiency.	0(0.0)	17(10.6)	106(65.8)	38(23.6)	3.13	0.572
The facilitator understands and consistently applies best techniques for starting the session.	0(0.0)	10(6.2)	104(64.6)	47(29.2)	3.23	0.551
The facilitator understands and consistently applies best techniques for sustenance of student’s interest.	0(0.0)	12(7.5)	109(67.7)	40(24.8)	3.17	0.543

- Percentages in parenthesis
- **Key:** SD – Strongly Disagree; D– Disagree; A – Agree; SA – Strongly Agree

Table 3 above shows the level of class control during the online facilitation in NOUN. More than half of the respondents agreed with all the five (5) items. Those that agreed and strongly agreed with each of the five (5) items are above 50%. The mean ratings of each of the five (5) items are each above the 2.50 benchmark for the acceptance of a statement in a four-likert scale. This is a confirmation of the result found from the frequency and percentages analysis.

Conclusively, in the opinion of the majority of the respondents; the following statements on the level of class control during the online facilitation in NOUN are true:

- The facilitators ensure sessions holds in a quiet environment devoid of background noise and other distractions.
- The facilitators promote confidence in their students.
- Facilitators collaborate with their students to ensure efficiency.
- The facilitators understand and consistently apply best techniques for starting the session.
- The facilitators understand and consistently apply best techniques for sustenance of students’ interest.

As in tables 1 and 2, table 3 also indicated that the majority of the participants demonstrated a very high level of class control during online facilitation. Four out of the five items had more than 90.0% either agree or strongly agree that the facilitators demonstrated a high level of class control. The only item with a percentage below 90.0% majority had over 88.0% majority which is also very high. In conclusion problem of class control is not at all a threat among the respondents for this study.

**Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the online facilitation skills possessed by male and female academic staff members.**

**Table 4: T-Test Analysis of Difference in Online Facilitation Skills Across Gender**

GROUP	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Male	26	49.77	10.041	-0.689	42	0.495	NS
Female	18	51.61	6.289				

Table 4 above presents the t-test comparison of online facilitation skills possessed by male and female academic staff. The t-test comparison showed that the difference in the online facilitation skills possessed by male and female academic staff was not statistically significant. This is evident from the sig-2 tailed value that is more than the 0.05 benchmark. Since any t-test comparison of means of two groups which is more than the 0.05 benchmark signifies a no significant difference in online facilitation skills possessed by male and female academic staff, it therefore follows that the difference is not statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference between online facilitation skills possessed by male and female academic staff is accepted. The values of the mean online facilitation skills possessed by female academic staff is slightly higher than that of their male counterparts. Since the difference is not statistically significant, it can therefore not be generalized. The difference observed might have occurred due to sampling error.

## Discussion

Sampled academic staff are competent in using the twelve (12) identified tools for online facilitation. Some of these include; setting up a zoom class, recording, initiating and coordinating for a, chat etc. This is encouraging. The high competency might be because of the regular training received by respondents, opportunities and facilities accessible to them during the online facilitation. At the beginning of the semester, academic staff are usually given refresher training before the commencement of facilitation for the semester. Technical staff are also allocated to the faculties for consultations during the facilitation period. In addition, modern computers equipped with all the software needed, studio for recording if needed as well as internet access are both available and accessible to academic staff and technical staff are always available to also assist. The training and follow up opportunities as well as the enabling facilities and resources must have contributed to the high rating of staff in competency in online facilitation skills. A number of scholars submitted that when facilitators are competent in the various identified skills required for online learning, students will be better engaged and it becomes easy for students to understand learning materials (Berge, 2008; Martin, Wang & Sadaf, 2014; Martin and Parker, 2014; Borup et al, 2015; Rose, 2009).

Students while rating their lecturers both on communication and class control agreed that their lecturers did well in all the identified areas of both communication and class control. As it applies to competency in online facilitation skills, the same explanation of regular training, opportunities of follow up and assistance from technical staff as well as availability and unrestricted accessibility to enabling facilities and resources is a possible explanation. Various scholars also agree that possession of these competencies by facilitators, will bring about satisfaction of students with the process and also encourage collaboration (Eskey and Schulte, 2010; Swan, 2001). However, the research showed that a particular item - "the facilitators ask appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students", attracted a disagree of about 35.0%. The implication of this is that a sizeable number of the lecturers still are weak in asking appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students. Gender differences in the possession of identified online facilitation skills showed a difference that is not statistically significant. In this study however female participants had higher score. A closer look showed that the male's standard deviation was higher, meaning that their mean score in identified online facilitation skill may not be the true representation. Some men might have scored very high while some scored very low. Few of the scholars however, noticed a difference in the possession of online

facilitation skills across gender. For example, Seaman (2009) in a study examined online teaching and course development by gender and found that females were more confident in instructional skills and are more involved in course development than males. The differences cannot however be generalised, it must have occurred as a result of sampling error.

## Recommendations

Findings from this study showed that NOUN lecturers at the headquarters were highly competent in the identified skills; they were also rated by their students to be effective in communication and class control. This suggests that with enough and regular training and retraining, along with availability of support staff as well as accessibility to enabling facilities and resources obtainable in NOUN and as enjoyed by the respondents; efficiency in online facilitation is attainable. It is therefore recommended that the model of operation in NOUN be studied by other Universities for implementation in their institutions. Provision of and accessibility to enabling facilities and resources and services of support personnel should be extended to staff outside the headquarters. The Nigerian University Commission (NUC) should also collaborate with NOUN in order to ensure that trainings given to NOUN staff are stepped down to other Universities. One of the item on communication in online facilitation; “the facilitators ask appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students” got a sizeable proportion of disagreement in students’ rating of their lecturers. It is therefore recommended that subsequent training of staff should lay more emphasis on asking appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students. Satisfactory performance on assignment related to asking appropriate starting questions that helps to engage the students should be made a criteria for clearance of participants to be qualified for receiving certificate of participation on the such training. It is also recommended that more elaborated research that will be funded be carried out.

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