# DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING: TRENDS, POLICY AND STRATEGY CONSIDERATION FOR IMPROVEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract**

*This paper addresses a wide range of potential partners, governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, specialized institutions, public sector partners interested in the field of distance and open learning to examine how it can effectively help meet today's urgent education and training needs. It reviews distance and open learning in the context of present challenges and opportunities, describes relevant concepts and contributions, outlines some significant trends, policy and strategy considerations. It also looks into the impact of distance and open learning in educational innovation and highlights the constraints. Finally it concludes with the way forward and prospects of distance and open learning.*

**The Concept of Distance and Open Learning**

The term distance and open learning is used throughout this paper in recognition that this is a familiar term that is of everyday usage in many parts of the world. The discussion is not limited to learning alone, it also includes activities aimed at guiding and supporting learning that is normally referred to with such terms as training, facilitating, etc. The rationale for distance education from its earliest days has been to open opportunities for learners to study regardless of geographical, socio-economic or other constraints. The use of the term Open is intended to highlight the feature of the theory and practice of distance education. [Bates,1995].

Distance education is any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space/or time from the learner, with the

effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, electronic or print. By definition, in distance education, the normal or principal means of communication is through technology. However, teachers in conventional classrooms may use technology as a supplement to their teaching, but it is not their principal means of communication. [UNESCO,2001a]. Another way of differentiating between distance and other forms of education is to ask where the principal educational decisions are made. Who is deciding what is to be learnt? When and how is it to be learnt? When has learning been satisfactorily completed? If such decisions are made in the classroom, this is not distance education. If they are made elsewhere and communicated by technology, the programme is defined as distance education. [UNESCO,2000d].

The 'Open' nature of education that is mediated by electronic or printed technologies might be formally institutionalized in such policies as open admissions, freedom of selection of what, when and where to learn. Distance education organizations may indeed limit the extent of their openness, but traditionally, they have shown a strong bias towards supporting the freedom of individual learners to exercise choice over one or more of the main processes of their learning. Typically, this involves helping learners take responsibility for aspects such as what they learn, how they learn, where they learn, how quickly they learn, who to turn to for help and whether, when and where to have their learning assessed. The openness of distance education is also seen in relatively flexible organizational structure, delivery and communication patterns, and the use of various technologies to support learning. [Bang and Wilson,1999].

Distance and Open learning is usually contrasted with 'conventional' or 'face-to-face' education. The later may be described as the form of education which takes place in classrooms. However, both 'distance and 'face-to-face' education are labels covering a wide range of variations and methods. Face-to-face education may vary along a continuum from one-to-one tutorials, group activities, seminars and classroom teaching to lectures for large audiences. In each case, different educational philosophies may be applied and different methods may be used. Face-to-face education may be supported by a range of media and may be combined with periods of independent study. In a similar way, distance education has a variety of forms, according to the underlying educational philosophy, organizational approach and choice of technology Distance education may incorporate into their programmes an element of face-to-face teaching. [Bradley and Yates,2000].

**What the Policy Says**
Nigeria's National Policy on Education, in Section 9 article 93 (iv) stressed the importance of the under-use of information media for public education and states that the National Broadcasting Services would explore this use further, thus liaise with

media houses, information and communication technology providers and other relevant bodies in enhancing Open/Distance education. (FRN, 2004). It states that correspondence courses and open universities should constitute one way of obtaining higher education. Article 91 (b-d) of the policy makes it clear that the Distance Education could be employed to provide secondary education to those who;

- left school for one reason or the other, but who having matured would want to make a re-entry into the knowledge arena.
- did not avail themselves the opportunity to go to school but who are still interested in acquiring basic education in view of the goal of Education For All.
- were not successful when they finished school but now wish to remedy their deficiencies and proceed for further studies, (FRN, 2004).

The policy recommended that Distance Education methods be employed to provide teachers in remote areas with on-the-job training or retraining, and make for their general upgrading. The goals also stipulated that it shall meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work places in order to encounter internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula. This also helps to ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigeria experts as teachers regardless of their locations and places of work. The policy believed that correspondence and other forms of distance education should be encouraged since they constitute low-cost method of mass education. It is recommended however, that standards should be set on the basis of which it would be possible to check the springing up of too many correspondence institutions. It is clear therefore that the policy recognized and welcomed the contribution of the private sector in correspondence education, [FRN, 2004].

**Components of all Distance Learning Systems**

It is the *mission* of a distance learning system to define its roles within the context of national policy on education. The mission may be directed towards particular purposes, target groups, regions, sectors or levels of education and training and driven by particular values and philosophies of learning and education. The mission statement of a public institution is part of a national policy, while the mission of private organizations may fulfill subsidiary functions in relation to the public institutions. On the other hand, private organizations must respond to the needs of particular market segments, especially the labour market, both quickly and efficiently, [Economic Commission for Africa, 2002].

**Courses and Curricula**

These define the profile of a system or institution. They relate to the mission and to defined needs or markets. Many distance education systems provide courses in preparation for examinations and degrees which are equivalent and similar to those

offered by conventional institutions, and subject to similar regulations as regards content, admission and assessment ECA (2002)

**Teaching Strategies and Techniques**

This depend on the type of programme and the need they are designed to meet, but they also depend on the educational philosophy and values of the particular system, the educational characteristics and potential of the technologies used. There may be a connection between teaching strategies, economy and the choice of technology.

**Learning Material and Resources**

These are essential components in all distance learning systems. Comprehensive, well designed materials may stimulate self-directed learning and thus influence the quality of the system as a whole. Designing, developing and producing of materials are often considered as a sub-system in distance teaching. Previously produced, existing materials, textbooks, software etc, may be used but in most cases each programme benefits from having specifically designed learning materials. [Euler and Von Berg, 1998].

**Communication**

Communication that flows between teachers and learners is a necessary component in distance education, as in all other forms of education. Communication technologies distribute message in text, still and moving images, and sound. Knowledge-generating message may be communicated to large numbers of learners, either synchronously or asynchronously, "pushed" by broadcasting or accessed on demand through audio/video players or internet. As these devices change, so the quality and nature of the messages will change.

Communication serves two purposes. One is the distribution of information. This delivery system may comprise both distribution of pre-packaged material and transmission of synchronous or broadcast programmes, lectures etc. The second sole of communication is the crucial component of all education which is the interaction between teachers and learners, where possible, learners and learners also. In some forms of distance education, this learner-learner interaction is practically non-existent, but in most cases, it is considered important and may be provided in different ways. Often students meet together physically in groups, sometimes connected with other forms of local support. New technologies allow the organization of "vital groups', and in countries where access to internet is common, this is the fastest growing approach to distance teaching, [Miller, 1993].

**Support Delivered Locally**

Is a common component in most single mode institutions. A letter, a telephone call or e-mail message is of course delivered locally and is more likely to be the means

of learner support in dual mode institutions.  What is meant here is, however, support in a form that allows some king of direct (face-to-face) interaction between the learner and the teacher or a mentor/facilitator.  This component may be organized completely as face-to-face events, or in combination with communication at a distance (teleconferences etc).  local support is usually given in a study centre or resource centre. The centre may also offer access to other learning resources equivalent etc. [Bradley and Yates, 2000].

## The Student and Staff Management Sub System

This is often distinguished from the course materials sub-system.  From an administrative perspective, the student and staff management sub-system comprise admission, allocation of courses and student services, administering the learning and teaching procedures, assignments and assessment, monitoring drop-outs completion and examinations.  Staff may be contracted on a part-time basis or may be in the core faculty in the case of a dual mode institution but in either case, they have to be recruited, trained and monitored.  A range of other experts with different qualifications is also needed, either as full-time staff or as external consultants, planners, instructional designers, developers and producers, researchers, media experts, marketing experts and administrative staff.

## Effective Management and Administration

These need not only competent staff, but also well designed, efficient administrative systems and routines, planning and monitoring systems, budgetary and accounting systems etc.  Many of these will be quite different from the corresponding systems needed in the management of other forms of education.

## Housing and Equipment

The requirement of housing and equipment may also be very different from conventional educational institutions.  A single mode distance learning system has no resident students and thus, there is little need for classrooms, lecture theatres etc at the central location.  Such facilities may be needed locally and are often provided in co-operation with local institutions.  At the central location, there will be need for production and storage facilities , although some decentralized production is also possible. In a dual mode institution these distance education facilities have to be accommodated alongside the space dedicated to the institution's primary mission.

## Evaluation

This should be a component, in order to provide information relevant to the adjustment of the roles and operation of system components, and in order to secure their optimal contribution and development.  The success of any distance education institution, dual or single mode, is highly dependent on the efficiency and effectiveness of the monitoring and evaluation system, without which it may be impossible for

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administrators to be aware of problems in the system until the system itself breaks down.  It is not possible to rely upon the kind of informal, unstructured feedback that may be sufficient in the conventional classroom.  [Bang and Wilson,1999].

## Major Contribution of Distance and Open Learning

Distance and Open learning is used for a wide range of purposes.  Some main areas and sectors where distance and open learning has made major contributions are summarized:

## General Education

Distance education can be used at primary and secondary levels to provide both-in-school and out-of-school learning in schools, distance education programmes are used to support teaching in schools when learning materials are lacking or where enrichment is thought to be desirable.  A variety of approaches are used including interactive Radio Instruction (IRI), schools radio, educational television through terrestrials  and satellite networks, multi-media schemes delivered through satellite, and web-based delivery of multi-media schemes.  The material may be designed for young children or for adolescents and adults.  [Bradley and Yates,2000]

## Teacher Education

Teacher education is an important area where distance education has been used extensively to provide pre-service teacher preparation, upgrading of academic qualifications and in-service continuing professional development in particular subjects, content areas and instructional methods.  Distance learning initiatives are used to prepare new teachers or upgrade skills of the existing teaching force.  The use of distance and open learning for teacher education is therefore a crucial strategy when expansion or quality improvement is needed in the public education system.  Distance education and the new tools for learning may serve as a catalyst for changing teaching practices, the roles of teachers and students as part of an overall strategy for systemic change of the educational system to reflect current knowledge on human learning and to help the educational system be more responsive to local and national needs as well as global trends.  [Ding,2004].  Examples of developing  and developed countries embracing this initiative include Burkina Faso, Chile, China, India, Nigeria, and South Africa.

## Vocational and Continuing Education

Technical and Vocational education have in recent years played important roles, not only contributing to the improvement of productivity of a national labour market, but also in assisting individuals to improve their employment prospects in rapidly changing socio-economic conditions.  In this regard, the role of open and distance learning in the field of technical and vocational education is significant.  It has two main functions namely:

- to respond effectively to the growing demand of working adults or any others who have difficulties in getting training in conventional education because of lack of flexibility in the timing and location of courses.
- to provide an opportunity for the empowerment of those most disadvantaged by existing provision – the unemployed, the disabled, women and ethnic minorities. [Bosch, 2007].

Continuing education and training is an expanding field in which distance and open learning is used to a great extent. The need for recurrent and continuous updating of knowledge and skills is recognized as a fundamental demand in society today. Distance and Open learning with its decentralized and flexible delivery and its modular structure of courses and curricular has become an obvious way of meeting this need. Distance and Open learning institutions offer their courses and programmes for this purpose and they are developing particular courses for particular needs.

## Non-Formal Education

Although distance education has been used to considerable effect in the non-formal and community development sectors of education, it is probably true to say that its potential has never been fully realized. Enthusiasm for basic adult education grew in the 1960's and 1970's just as technology began to be used more widely in education. An early and influential prototype – the Canadian Farm Forum of the 1940s – suggested a way forward through the motto Read, listen, discuss, act'. This approach was later used in India and Ghana. Radio campaigns were another early and influential mode. Botswana also used the approach in 1976 to raise awareness on a new policy for cattle on tribally owned land. Lately, radio and television dramas have been used by Gambia and Nigeria as a means of educating people about health issues such as Family planning and HIV/AIDS. Indeed, radio in particular has a powerful role to play in non-formal education. Nigeria today, runs a programme of literacy by radio. [Dock and Helwig, 2009].

## Higher Education

There are more distance courses offered at the tertiary level than at any other. This has been the case since the invention of the distance education method near the end of the nineteenth century when the use of new technology (i.e. national rail systems that supported national postal systems) made it possible to deliver higher education beyond the boundaries of the campus, especially in such 'new' and large nations as the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Russia.

In turn, these countries lead the way in the use of radio for university level teaching, then television and today, the Internet. In these nations, the preferred organizational form was, and remains, the dual mode university. [Daniel,1997].

**The Impact of Distance and Open Learning in Educational Innovation**

Distance and Open learning has major impact on thinking and practice throughout the whole educational system. This includes such critical matters as how students learn, how they can best be taught and how educational resources might more efficiently be organized to deliver the instruction that is needed. It is closely linked to innovation in information and communication technologies, to the identification of new learning needs and new ideas about how information may be accessed and applied in the information society. Innovation in how resources are organized is essential and distance and open learning has demonstrated how the labor (i.e. teacher) to capital (i.e. technology) ratio can be improved to lead to greater efficiency. In some projects, distance learning is used systematically to support conventional systems at basic and secondary levels (UNESCO, 2001a). A second innovative model is the Independent Study model, which gives learners control of their own learning programmes through use of new technologies.

**Challenges of Distance and Open Learning**
**(i)      Non-Provision and late Delivery of Course Materials**
Not all the public institutions produce regular course materials for participants. Obviously, these course materials are the central learning implements in distance education but in some cases materials are not supplied promptly to learners. When they are not produced or not sent at the appropriate time, students resort to engaging local tutors and lecturers and the annual face-to-face meeting forms the participants teaching medium. In such cases, the distance learning system degenerates to face-to-face sandwich programme

**(ii)     Non use of Multi-Media**
For meaningful distance teaching of vocational and science subjects, the use of television is important. At the moment, few (if any) of the public distance institutions make use of television. This limits their curriculum to liberal arts subjects and thus inhibits their contribution to the development of technical manpower. Where science courses are taught at all, as in COSIT, too much reliance is placed on face-to-face laboratory work in nearby institutions.

**(iii)    Ill-Equipped Study Centres**
Study centres are venues where distant learners ought to meet rather regularly with other learners and local tutors. Such centres should be stocked with relevant reference books and teaching aids. Hardly any distance learning system in the country operates adequately equipped study centres and yet, these are important activity centres.

**(iv)     Absence of Students' Counseling System**
A number of cognitive distance and social factors militate against the individual distant subjects. Some of these problems centre on student isolation, lack of encouragement at place of work, lack of peace and quiet at home and inability to master distance learning

techniques.  The consequence of all these is high dropout rate in distance learning.  It is therefore, important that institutions running distance education should install zonal counseling systems whereby students whose enthusiasm appears to be waning can be counseled and helped with their problems.  [National Teachers Institute, 2009].

**Conclusion**

Most distance education institutions in Nigeria seem to be concerned with Nigeria Certificate of Education and University level qualification.  It is important to note  however, that elsewhere in the  world (even in  developing countries), this approach has  been  successfully employed for adult literacy education, extension education of various kinds, leisure education, education of isolated persons like women in purdah,  sick people, prisoners, soldiers and so on, and for workers' education.  It is only by so applying distance education that its full merits will become fully apparent.

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