

**CHALLENGES OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AS A
MECHANISM FOR INCREASING ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY
EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This paper in contemplation of the global challenge of access in higher education addresses the topic of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria. It defines ODL and states its relevance as an alternative means of increasing access to university education in Nigeria. It discusses some challenges of ODL programmes in Nigeria and chances of its survival as an alternative route to university education in Nigeria. The paper finally recommends that government, administrators of ODL institutions, ODL facilitators, students and other stake holders should all play their parts well

towards overcoming identified challenges, to ensure the success of ODL programmes and increased access to university education in Nigeria.

Key Words: Open and distance learning; access; university education; Nigeria

Education is a significant factor in the life of individuals and nations; it gives knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes for functional living in society. It is also an asset for national development. Dabu and Jem (2016) consider education as an acceptable tool and a key to success in life and community work. A number of declarations targeted at expanding access to education at various levels are based on these premises. Chapter II, section 18 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria declares education as a right due to all citizens. The National Policy on Education (NPE) in S.1(2) also stipulates that “every child shall have a right to educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disability” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, (FRN), 2014).

At the global level too, the African charter in Act 17 provides for the right of every individual to education. There is also the “Education For All” (EFA) goal which is founded on the Universal Declaration on Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1950. These declarations all show global concern on the issue of access to education. This means that the educational system of any nation should provide equal educational opportunities for all .to benefit from. It is unfortunate that in Nigeria, unfair and arbitrary factors have hindered access to quality education at all levels including university education.

Conventional universities in Nigeria are fast losing capacity to cater for contemporary demands for university education in Nigeria. It is obvious that with the rapid rise in populations and geometric increase in enrolment and high rates of product turn out at the lower levels of education in Nigeria demand for university education in Nigeria shall ever rise. The concern therefore is that of seeking alternative ways of expanding access to university education.

ODL appears to be a viable alternative to conventional university education. It is used in many other countries to open wide access or opportunities to individuals seeking university education in the contemporary world. Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) regard ODL as an innovative and cost effective approach to the educational process that offers structured learning in which the instructor and the learner are separated by time and space, making use of diverse instructional materials that include print, audio, visual, audio-visual materials, CD-ROM and other multi-media components. Jimoh (2013)

attests that ODL is a primary mechanism for the information driven age and has proved to be useful not only in expanding access to education but also in enhancing individuals socially, politically, economically and making them more productive.

The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in recognition of the role of ODL in offsetting the growing challenge of access to university education in the country established some institution for open and distance education such as the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) among others. These ODL offer programmes to many Nigerians that previously could not get admission and those who could not afford to leave their jobs to attend full time conventional educational institutions. The operation of ODL in Nigeria was well received. As at 2015, NOUN already had about 180,000 constituting 10% of total enrolment in conventional universities in Nigeria at the period (Atueyi, 2015).

The operation of ODL programmes in Nigerian amidst changing demands in a fast changing world is not devoid of challenges. The paper attempts to look at some of these challenges as a step towards addressing the pitfalls of past educational programmes in Nigeria. Other pertinent issues that will guarantee the sustainability of ODL in Nigeria also form thrust of the paper. but like other life enterprises cannot be without challenges, especially in a changing world with changing demands. To avoid pitfalls of past educational programmes in Nigeria and make it a vibrant avenue for increased access to education, this paper addressed pertinent challenges and suggests the way forward.

Concept of Open and Distance Education

ODL is a creative and innovative idea in providing equal opportunity to formal education to all citizens of Nigeria. The concept has several definitions arising from different perspectives of those defining the term. United Nations Educational, scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO) (2002), describes ODL as a concept representing all approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.

Perraton and Hulsman (2003) see open and distance education as an organized educational activity that is based on the use of teaching materials, where constraints on study are ameliorated in access, entry, or time and place, pace and method of study. According to Dabu (2015) open and distance learning is an art of providing instruction or education when learners and teachers are separated by physical distance and technology, often in tandem with face communication, is used in bridging the gap. The Federal Ministry of Education (2000) defines the concept as any form of education in

which the provider enables individual learners to exercise choices over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning and where a significant proportion of the teaching is done by someone removed in space and, or in time from the learner.

Based on the diverse definitions, Dabu and Jem (2016) summarised the concept of ODL with the following basic characteristics:

- i. The separation of an instructor and the learner in time or place, or in both time and place.
- ii. Effect of an Educational instruction accrediting the courses or programmes offered.
- iii. The use of technical media which may involve mixed media like print, radio, television, video and audio cassettes, computer and telecommunications.
- iv. The utilization of two-way communication which would allow interaction between learners and tutors synchronously or asynchronously.

Access to University Education in Nigeria

The concept of access to education generally builds on the foundations of Universal declaration on human rights which recognises education as everyone's right. Access to education implies a right, opportunity or pathway of making education available to every citizen of a nation (Aluede, Idogho & Immikhe, 2012). It is unhindered opportunity at all levels of education to knowledge, skills, and abilities available at a level needed to optimally participate and contribute to society's development. Access to university education is unbiased and robust educational opportunity at the university stage (Garba, 2014). Aluede et. al (2012) observe that lack of access to university education suggests limited opportunity to enrol in a university, difficulty in getting opportunity to attend school regularly or inability to prescribed programme of study or denial of opportunity to transit to the next level of education.

Rapid population increase in Nigeria in recent times has led to astronomical rise in demand for university education. Expansion at the lower levels of education has equally made it difficult for conventional universities in the country to meet up with the quantum of admission seekers over the years. Many factors have limited conventional universities carrying capacities, especially as the National Universities Commission pegs the number of admissions each university offers every year (Aluede, 2012). Limited funding, infrastructure, staffing, space and so on have exacerbated the problem of giving access to university education.

In the past, the numbers of universities in Nigeria were few and candidates seeking for admission were equally few. Agboola and Ofoegbu in Dabu and Jem (2016) observe that, the realisation of benefits of university education by the citizens as from

1980's now caused an upsurge in the demand for university education. The pressure of social demand for access and equal opportunity to education especially as from 1999 presented further challenges of access to university education and consequently triggered the establishment of private universities in the country. Presently, there are 118 universities in Nigeria yet an estimated 10million students seeking enrolment into universities cannot get through. The higher education participation rate (HEPR) defined as the proportion of 18-35 year age group that are enrolled in tertiary institutions in Nigeria as at 2006 was just 8.1%. This is low when compared with the developed countries like USA, Australia, Korea that have 64%, 41% and 51% HEPR respectively (Daniel, Kanwar and Uvalic-Trumbic, 2006).

The problem therefore is that, not all qualified Nigerians have access to university education even with consistent establishment of universities by government and the private sector. This means that nation is far from achieving the goal of equal educational opportunity at the university level. This calls for a look at the relevance of ODL as an access enhancing alternative to university education in Nigeria. To address the problem, challenges of ODL programmes and chances for its survival are discussed in this paper.

Relevance of ODL as an Access Route to University Education in Nigeria

Literature is replete with information on relevance of ODL. Dabu and Jem (2016); Ayo, Odukoya and Azeta (2013), Morayo (2013) as well Yusuf (2006) indicate that ODL is very relevant to Nigerians in a good number of ways. According to these authorities ODL is: convenient, cost effective (affordable), flexible, work friendly, migratory friendly, all-embracing and recognisable.

i. **Convenient:** ODL allows learners to enroll and progress at their own pace. People who are actively engaged in business and official work schedules can conveniently get education through ODL programmes. ODL by its nature saves time and energy and frees the mind of the learner from the kind of stress and anxiety experienced by learners in regular programmes of conventional universities. With the ODL system students who live even in remote areas can access learning, even in the comfort of their homes.

ii. **Affordable:** In these times of economic hardship ODL seems to be a most cost effective route to university education. Pursuing an ODL course may be less expensive than attending a conventional university or college course. This however, may not always be the case. Mbakwem, Okafor and Anganwu (2014) observe that, the cost of ODL is not very high when compared with many conventional universities and there is

no limit to number of students to enroll and so is accessible to everybody eligible for admission. This also limits the costs associated with making repeated applications.

iii. **Flexible:** with ODL an individual has the advantage of studying as his or her schedules permit. ODL programmes allow one to do course work and take examinations at times that fit his or her busy life. The student is therefore the master of his or her own schedule and can choose to stay up late or early for studies.

iv. **Work Friendly:** Open and distance education is by design less interruptive of the daily life activities of the learner. It allows learners to continue in their full or part-time work schedule or even look after a family or carry out other commitments while they pursue a degree, diploma or certificate. Such learners therefore have the best of both worlds without much of an interruption to their daily routine

v. **Migratory Friendly:** ODL is relevant to the needs of individuals in occupations and careers that take them out frequently or occasionally on transfer or seasonally the new locations. For instance people in migratory occupations such as fishermen, cattle rearers, military and para-military officers may benefit from the flexibility and convenience of ODL programmes.

vi. **All Embracing:** ODL is of much relevance in Nigeria especially now because it opens doors of education to all. It accommodates all categories of learners. These categories of people may include prisoners, those on remand homes, those involved in productive ventures or essential shift duties and those that may be considered too old to be in conventional institutions. Its relevant features have made it equally relevant to diverse shades of Nigerians. It caters for educational needs of primary and secondary leavers, as well as others seeking higher education or self improvement. It is also relevant to teachers. It affords them and the other categories greater access to education, training, retraining and upgrading and generally the acquisition of university education qualifications for those that need them.

Challenges of ODL in Nigeria

ODL as an innovation in the education sector in Nigeria has some operational challenges as enumerated by Scholars including Dabu and Jem (2016), Ayo, Odukoya and Azeta (2013), Morayo (2013), Ojo and Olakulehin, Yusuf (2006) among others as follows:

i. **Discipline:** ODL as a predominantly self study programme demands a lot of commitment and effort from the learner for successes to be achieved. The discipline

often imposed on conventional university students by teachers to make them keep to standards in study is not likely obtainable under ODL settings.-up. An OD Learner for instance, needs to complete assignments, under his/her own steam to meet deadlines, so sometimes fails to meet up with schedules. This unnecessary extensions of schedules affects the flow of activities and may delay graduation time of the learners. Sometimes too, owing to pressure of work, some of the learners may farm-out their assignments, which defeats the essence of study.

ii. **Time demands and constraints:** ODL depending on the type of course one is involved with may require quality time to complete assignments that involve getting work experience. For instance, one studying a distance journalism course may need to attend a council meeting to report on proceedings. The time demand in such courses seem to remove the flexibility feature of ODL programmes.

iii. **Lack of the ‘college spirit’:** many open and distance education students feel that post-secondary education relating to them should be an ‘experience’ which includes more than just classroom learning. Distance education lacks the on-campus atmosphere and ‘college experience’ that for some learners is one of the main reasons for attending conventional universities. To some people, there is a stigma attached to distance education just for similar reasons. Such people therefore have a disdain for ODL and tend to see it as inferior.

iv. **Lack of facilities and infrastructure:** ODL programmes by the nature of their delivery require a lot of facilities especially information and communication technology (ICT) facilities to be effective. In many ODL institutions in Nigeria facilities and infrastructure including libraries, classrooms, examination halls, teaching aids and equipment, ICT facilities and others are grossly inadequate to the ratio of learners enrolled on various programmes or courses mounted. In many study centres of ODL institutions in Nigeria, supply of study materials is either delayed or denied and students have to cut corners to move on. Mbakwem, Okafor and Anyanwu (2014) point out that, quality ODL cannot be achieved in the absence of necessary facilities to promote activities.

v. **Poor/Delayed remuneration of instructors:** many ODL institutions in Nigeria offer poor remuneration to their facilitators and instructors. Facilitators both of the National Teachers’ Institute (NTI) and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) complain of heavy workloads but poor pay. Such poor emoluments are equally delayed. This has effects on their morales and commitment to work and is capable of impeding the quality of output.

vi. **Monitoring:** Monitoring of programme implementation in many of the open and distance education institutions in Nigeria is inefficient. Although this is attributed to

lack of funds, absence of good vehicles for monitoring visits, or the non-challant attitudes of monitoring officers in carrying out their responsibilities, it affects the quality of activities at study centres of ODL institutions in Nigeria. As a result of lack of proper monitoring many engage in practices that undermine the credibility of ODL programmes in Nigeria.

vii. **Limited course options:** there is an increasing variety of accredited courses available through ODL in Nigeria. Certain professional courses that require in-class work such as hands-on practical applications and experimentation, such as medicine, pharmacy, law, engineering, nursing and so on are hardly mounted by ODL institutions in Nigeria. The law programme of the NOUN is currently faced with acceptability challenges. Similarly, the B.Ed programmes of the NTI was questioned by the NUC even as approval for its programmes came from the Federal Ministry of Education. The B.ed programmes in many study centres cannot offer certain courses even as they are on the approval list because of the requirement that a minimum number of students must be available for the course in a centre for it to start the course. Meeting this demand is affected by the apathy generated by public apprehension of the credibility of ODL certificates.

viii. **Credibility of ODL Certificates in Nigeria:** Certificates offered under the ODL programmes often suffer acknowledgement by some employers; who do not see them as worthwhile. This attitude makes some members of the public to undermine certificates, products or graduates of open and distance learning in Nigeria. A public statement by the NUC in 2016 denying the credibility of degrees offered by NTI, though resolved is one of the ODL campaigns that constrains its successes in Nigeria. The refusal of Council for Legal Education to grant law graduates of NOUN spaces into the Nigerian law school is another case in point of challenges facing ODL in Nigeria.

ix. **Cost and complexity in technology:** ODL offers many learning options and opportunities to the learner but at inevitable accompanying costs. Live video communication for example, may require careful planning of equipment and facilities. In the case of online learning, the learner needs a computer (with access to internet). The required technology may not always be available at study centres of ODL institutions in Nigeria. The limited technologies at the disposal of OD learners for practice make some of them technophobic and restrict their progress on ODL programmes.

x. **Lack of Advance planning:** Both facilitators and students involved in open and distance learning sometimes need to make sacrifices to get things done in time. For instance, provision of extra tutorial classes to cover courses that are yet to be covered before examination or final assessment. Such commitment is sometimes lacking on both sides. Sometimes facilitators fix tutorials but fail to turn up, sometimes too facilitators

come to meet no or few students on ground to attend to. This affects the quality of education offered.

xi. **Lack of immediate feedback:** In a traditional setting, a student's performance can be immediately assessed through questions and informal testing. With open and distance learning; a student has to wait for feedback until the instructor has reviewed their work and responded to it. Even where Teacher Marked Assignments (TMA) is e-facilitated, examination results are not released on time. This sets confusion on the mind of the students regarding their performance on the programme, especially when proceeding to a new level where new courses have to be registered..

There are other operational challenges experienced in the implementation of ODE programmes in Nigeria. These include lack of consistencies in programmes and policies due to frequent changes in government which affect commitments including funding, absence of critical technology tools and power needed for effective ODE, poor ICT penetration among students and poor and late delivery of low tech in form of print media which affects learner engagement as well as delayed feedback to students on performance.

Chances of ODL as a Mechanism for increasing Access to University Education in Nigeria

ODL is faced with many challenges. There are doubts on the minds of many Nigerians concerning the quality of ODL in Nigeria yet many others have accepted it as a significant revolution in higher education in Nigeria. According to Atsueyi (2015), the then President of Nigeria Goodluck Jonathan at the fourth convocation of NOUN re-emphasised the important position of ODL in Nigeria's educational system. He observed the increasing enrolment into NOUN programmes and that the institution will soon attain the status equivalent to Indira Gandhi university in India and other similar institutions in the world. Also opposition of NTI B.Ed programmes by NUC has now been resolved. The recent passage of a bill by the National Assembly to give ODL programmes equal status with conventional universities is a step towards boosting its recognition by all relevant organisations including the Nigerian Law School and the NYSC. These are indications that ODL has good prospects of survival in Nigeria. For sustainability and promotion of the quality of ODL in Nigeria however, the following strategies should be observed:

a. ODE students in Nigeria should be committed to their studies. This will enable them to defend their certificates and credibility of acquiring them. Students of this category should not expect their tutors or instructors to crack the whip before they get things done on time.

- b. Each ODE learner should watch out in considering his/her circular or work schedule before enrolling into the programme. Once he/she is enrolled, total commitment should be made in all ramifications to complete the course(s) in flying colors by ensuring that nothing conflicts with his/her circular and academic pursuit.
- c. The ODE learner should not feel undermined for not having on-campus spirit. These categories of students should consider that their privilege and advantages outweigh many students in the conventional institutions in several ways.
- d. Government, other stakeholders as well as students themselves should make efforts in providing the needed basic facilities and infrastructure in open and distance education institutions in Nigeria.
- e. Practitioners of open and distance education in Nigeria should as a matter of priority offer robust and good remuneration commensurate to the qualifications of respective instructors and based on their work load. This may go for in boosting their motivation for optimal performance.
- f. Efficient monitoring measures should be galvanized by all practitioners of ODE in Nigeria to ensure conformity to standards.
- g. ODE institutions in Nigeria should consider the basic needs of the society and mount courses or programmes very relevant to Nigerian. In essence, institutions for ODE should consider providing unlimited course options to Nigerians
- h. The Federal Government of Nigeria should enlighten and encourage all employers of labour in acknowledging the certificates of ODE graduates. The Government should equally make laws in ensuring that ODE graduates are given a fair share in employment opportunities.
- i. The government and other well meaning stakeholders should consider providing computer tablets and accessories as well as other technological tools free of charge or at subsidized rate to ODE institutions and the learner.
- j. ODE institutions in Nigeria should endeavor to have annual planned schedule of activities. This schedule should be followed with commitment, while immediate feedback should also be given to students after the conduct of tests, continuous assessment, examinations, release of results and certificates

Conclusion

It is absolutely clear that, ODE has a vital role to play in savaging Nigerians from illiteracy and subsequent promotion of formal education. Clarion call is therefore that, the government of Nigeria, open and distance education institutions, other stake holders, instructors and students should have their hands on deck in ensuring efficient implementation of ODE approaches, surmounting the aforementioned challenges

through proper implementation of the measures in the way forward proffered in this paper.

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