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Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Education: An Impetus to Achieving Education for All Nigerians in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Education has been recognized world over as a veritable instrument for development. It is a tool for the development of all human potentials which is the most powerful lever for shaping the future. The indispensability of education in human and national development especially in the new world order necessitated the United Nation's clarion call for 'Education for All'. This paper took an over view of Open and distance learning (ODL) and the challenges facing the realization of ODL objectives in Nigeria. Certain recommendations were given as imperatives for realizing ODL objectives. Some of them include: Government and ODL providers to establish link with conventional institutions to move ODL programs forward. The issue of epileptic and erratic electric power supply to be urgently addressed and improved upon.

There is a universal agreement as regards the roles of education in the development of individuals and the society at large. According to Eya (2013:28) "education is universally acknowledged as an effective tool for any meaningful development in the society, be it social, economic, technological or political". All over the world, education is regarded as an important tool for achieving national objectives. It is a venture that every individual and every society need. It is a veritable tool for both human and national development. Education improves the quality of human life and empowers people to solve all kinds of social and environmental problems. This implies that the effective use of material resources is dependent on the quality of

human resources. Eze (2002:54) observed that "the employees as well as the organizations concerned will benefit tremendously from opportunities to enhance knowledge, skills and abilities". Education is the pivot on which the survival, growth and development of any nation rests. A nation will achieve optimal personal and societal security, if its citizens are properly equipped through education.

Arikwandu and Ifesi (2003:1) defined education as "the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it. It is a training that involves the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, development of character, mental power and a continuous process in which one step prepares the ways to the next". Where education occurs, there must be a change in behaviour as a result of what has been acquired.

According to Maduewesi (2005:51), "education is a universal aspiration and also an instrument of development and social integration". In Nigeria, the seriousness attached to education was clearly elucidated in the National Policy on Education, FRN, (2004:4) where it stated that "the federal government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development" Education is therefore a great necessity for human existence on this planet earth because it helps to prepare, equip and secure learners for all aspects of life. It provides learners with the basic foundation to function and develop in their society.

Universal access to education has been the prime target of Nigeria since the middle of the 1970s when the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme took off (Nwokenna, 2005:27). Education is the liberator of human kind and every citizen of any nation needs basic education and skills necessary for poor functional living.

Education for All (EFA): Nigeria Experience

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are human development agenda which is not only environmental friendly but includes efforts aimed at maintaining a life-sustaining environment (Idowu, 2008:2). The MDGs are objectives agreed upon after series of international conferences and consultations in 1990 for reduction of poverty and enhancing human development. The objectives according to Nwokenna (2008:27) were approved by the United Nation in a millennium declaration in the year 1990 which are to be achieved in 2015. The MDGs are eight in number. However, the emphasis on this subsection is Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education and Target 3: Ensure that by 2015, children everywhere boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. This informed the world clarion call for Education for All (EFA). In Nigeria the Basic Education Programme is aimed at equipping every individual child, youth and adult with such knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable him/her develop to his/her fullest capacity, derive maximum social, economic and cultural benefits from his/her membership of the society and

fulfill his/her civic obligations (Maduewesi, 2005:116).Specifically, the universal basic education programmes are to: increase enrolment, retention and completion in basic education; reduce gender, access and equity disparities in basic education; enhance the quality of basic education and strengthen partnership in the provision of basic education through collaboration, cooperation and coordination.

The Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria which is the brain child of the World Education for all marks the beginning of carefully thought out programme of restoration in the education sector. In the Nigeria context, Basic Education includes: Early childhood and Pre-primary, Primary, Junior Secondary and Nomadic Education as well as Adult and Non Formal Education (Meduewesi, 2005:117). In spite of the efforts being made to achieve this all important education for all, it is regrettable however that many individuals in Nigeria society are without basic education while so many others are in dire need of further or special education (Eya, 2012:28). These groups that need either basic or special education are the unreached group. It is said that half education is dangerous. Lack of adequate education or better still, skills to function effectively in an environment pose lots of danger both on the individuals and the society at large. It is this groups (uneducated and less educated) that are mostly used to perpetrate atrocities in the society. It is against this background that the writer observes that the fastest way to connect these uneducated groups to education is through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Education.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Education: An Overview

There are several approaches to defining the term Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Creed (2001:16) had a piecemeal definition of the concepts. Creed defined distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and or time from the learners. Open learning on the other hand he defined as an organized educational activity based on the use of teaching materials in which the constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, entry or time and place, pace, method of study or any combination of these. Thus the concept of open and distance learning suggests an educational approach designed to reach learners in their homes, offices, and shops, provide learning resources for them to qualify without attending formal classes in person or create opportunities for lifelong learning no matter where or when they want to study. UNESCO (2002:5) defined ODL as the 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. Adebayo (2007:82) defined ODL as "the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system; it is imparted without necessarily having personal interaction with students or learners.

Open and distance learning in Nigeria takes different forms. These include correspondence studies, sandwich programmes, part-time teacher training programmes, Open University, weekend programmes, Uni-air programmes, adult literacy education programmes, National Teachers Institute (NTI) programmes, e-learning programmes and so on. According to Nwaocha and Inyiama (2012:2) "one can deduce that distance learning not only shares the goals of the conventional school system, it also aims to provide access to a historically undeserved, place bound and highly motivated population".

Historically, distance learning is not a recent education system in Nigeria (Nwaocha & Inyiama, 2012:2). According to Akinpelu (1982:52), "the department of adult education at the University of Ibadan first proposed the need for distance learning in 1960". The programme then was named "Pilot Correspondence Programme in the Science Subjects. The role of the programme was to experiment in the field of science courses leading to University degrees and diplomas". Apart from this programme there have been correspondence Colleges in Britain that had conducted corresponding courses for interested Nigerians through rapid results. The present National Open University of Nigerian (NOUN) was first launched in 1983 but was suspended in 1985 by the military government (Nwaocha & Inyiama, 2012:3). It was later re-launched in 2001 by President Olusegun Obasanjo. NOUN is the first full-fledged University that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education. The University focuses mainly on a distance teaching and learning system and delivers its course materials via print in conjunction with ICT. The NOUN currently has twenty-three study centres which are stratified into the six geopolitical zones of the federation.

The Case for Open and Distance Learning

Open and distance learning education system like earlier stated is a form of education that focuses on expanding access to learning. It is characterized by two factors, namely: its philosophy and its use of technology. Most ODL systems have a philosophy that aims to (1) remove barriers to education and (2) allow students to study what they want, when they want, and where they want. ODL systems typically use technology to mediate learning for instance they use printed workbooks, audio cassettes, radio and the web.

The case for ODL can be argued from many perspectives namely for students, employers and providers/governments (Moore & Tait, 2000:15). From the students' angle, the overriding benefit of ODL is that it gives them access to an education that they would not otherwise, have. There are reasons that will make a potential student not to have access to an existing education. Some of these reasons include living a long way from a providing institution, being unable to travel to a centre, not being free to study at set hours, physical disability, overloaded provision etc. ODL has the

potentials to address these issues by bringing education to the students through workbooks, audio cassettes, telephones or the web, enabling students to study at times that suit them, expanding provision, expanding capability and expanding range.

Another case for ODL is flexibility. It fits better with the complexities of adult students to maintain and manage effectively work and family commitments while continuing to study. From government and providers perspectives, ODL has various advantages which include cost reduction, reach which makes it possible for ODL to reach groups who could not otherwise be reached integration of work and learning which makes it possible for ODL students to improve their knowledge and skills in relation to their current employment, cost effective training and development. It must be admitted though that most employers are attracted to ODL because it costs less than traditional training and development approaches. Most of the cost saving, results from employees studying in their own time at home, rather than in their employer's time (Moore & Tait, 2000:19).

Areas of Emphasis of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Education

According to Murphy, Anzalone, Bosch and Moulton (2002:9) "although some ODL systems provide courses for school age children, most systems are aimed at adult/post school populations". Generally, a huge success has been reported with post school ODL programme. One group with whom ODL is extensively used is practicing teachers, since it enables them to upgrade their skills without leaving the classroom. This is a great advantage in countries where teacher numbers are low (Moore and Tait, 2000, & Murphy et al, 2002).

According to Moore and Tait (2000:25), UNESCO's current priorities for the use of ODL are:

Basic Education for All: In this area, ODL can be used to reach the unreached. The word unreached according to Hornby (1999:708), "is an existing distance over which something or somebody could be touched, contacted or communicated". It also refers to barrier, gap or limit to which somebody/something has the power or influence to be contacted. Un-reached according to Eya (2012:30), "is a relative term used to describe the extent of privilege/ opportunity given to a people". It is categorized according to levels and extent to which people are privileged such as poverty level, literacy level, gender discrimination, marginalization, disability, level of ignorance. For the purpose of this paper, the un-reached are those people who have little or no literacy and hitherto have no meaningful job for livelihood, people with some levels of literacy that may have gotten them into some job opportunities but many require some forms of job competence which may require some trainings which will be possible through fresh schooling, re-schooling so as to be employable, as well as in service on-the-job

vocational and professional training for professional training and proficient job performance.

In the area of basic education for all, UNESCO particularly recommends the use information and communication technology (ICTs) combined with other media such as print and radio. Teacher training for basic education is seen as a key area for development via ODL (Common Wealth of Learning, 2004:11).

Adult Education: In this area, ODL is seen as the means for increasing access to higher education.

Renewing and diversifying education system: In these areas, ODL is recommended for sharing information and best practice and diversifying conventional educational provision, particularly in technical and vocational education.

Teacher Training: ODL is suggested in this area as an effective way of providing in service teacher training. UNESCO also recommends that teachers should become proficient in the use of distance education.

Higher Education: In higher education, ODL is recommended both as a means of increasing access and also as a means of creating 'high-quality' systems of education.

Capacity Building: The final UNESCO priority is in capacity building to create staff capable of building ODL institutions.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Education for All

Education as earlier stated is an instrument per excellence in the pursuit of the national goals and aspirations. Education brings about improvement on the quality of the labour force which consequently brings wealth. Be that as it may, the clarion call for Education for All (EFA) in the contemporary Nigerian society is a right step in the right direction and also timely.

Open and Distance Learning with its philosophy, vision and objectives which have been clearly elucidated in this paper stand out as an indispensable instrument for achieving education for all in our new world order characterized by ICT and information super highway. In Nigeria, the human resources yet to receive adequate education or those yet to acquire high level of competence while on the job are still many. They are the un-reached groups. These categories of people need to be reached through special arrangements like ODL. Such education systems like Almajeri Schools, Prison schools, Migrant schools can also be used to give them basic education to help improve their competence. Furthermore, in Nigeria society, there exist the

literate un-reached. They are those who have received some education but require updating their knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them to improve in their job areas. This class of un-reached requires training in basic skills acquired while on the job; they need vocational and professional training. For the fear of lack of job opportunities, they require self learning at a distance for convenience and job security. This can be taken care of by Open and Distance learning with its wide access. The literate unreached include military workers, naval workers, bankers, industrial technologists, teachers etc. These categories of people have attained and acquired some level of basic literacy, skills and attitude. However, their jobs have placed certain time constraints that cannot allow them to continue with the conventional education system. To ensure job security, such categories of people will require Open and Distance learning to continue in their jobs and to attain the required job competence to continue with their jobs.

The 21st century is characterized by on-line activities called the "cyberspace". This has transformed the whole world into a global village through the use of different and sophisticated telecommunication and computing technologies. Most activities in the education system have gone digital making way for e-learning, e-marking, e-examination and so on. All these are facilities used by ODL. E-learning also refers to as on-line learning has come to remedy educational imbalance and barriers (Eya, 2012:31). E-learning as an aspect of e-literacy is the most enterprising and convenient form of education in the 21st century which has taken the whole world into digital revolution. This is where e-learning tool off giving rise to e-education which is the use of cyberspace craft, the internet or the world wide web (www) which Jegede (2004:5) posited that "it is a real world with specific location, communities, organization and transactions". The world wide web transmits reality and even transcends reality because every imaginable thing done in the real world is done in cyberspace such as classrooms, shops, banks, markets, government, hospital, games, conferences, relationships and transactions of all kinds.

Challenges of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria

Nwaocha and Inyiama (2012:4) observed that the problems that need to be addressed for the effective implementation of ODL in Nigeria are categorized into two namely: internal and external problems.

Under the internal problems, there are such challenges as:

Teacher Factor: Absence of teachers trained in computer to teach the practical aspects of computer skills, coupled with non-availability of computer and allied tools at the ODL institutions or centers. All these militate against the actual realization of the goals and objectives of ODL in Nigeria.

School Factor: In a study by UNESCO (2001), it was revealed that lack of government funding hindered the quality and effective coordination of distance education initiatives in Nigeria. The institutions and their location do not always provide hostel accommodation, the conditions of the room and environment are always very poor and water, electricity and cleaners are not readily available.

Management Factor: The major task of a manager is to match educational purpose, administrative roles and teaching methodology to achieve the pre-determined goals and objectives of an organization. The critical issue here is how effective are the managers of ODL in their various institutions. Studies abound which revealed some ineffectiveness in the area of manager – staff, manager – student and manager – community relationships (Borishade, 2007:138). All these create certain problems for ODL policy implementation in Nigeria and also affect its effectiveness.

Student Factor: The approval of ODL in Nigeria brought about explosion in students' enrolment. The available facilities obviously were not enough for the students especially during examination which creates room for examination misconducts. More so, the increase in enrolment of students makes teaching and learning difficult for the lecturers and students. This directly, affects learning outcome and hence disrupt the realization of objectives of ODL.

Under the external problems, there are such challenges as:
Energy related problems in which power supply is generally poor, epileptic and erratic. Successful ODL cannot be assured without the use of communication technology which is all electronic gadgets.

Low tele-density: This has to do with access to telecommunication tools such as telephone, internet, computers which is still very low.

Lack of consistency in programme and policy implementations is yet another external problem facing ODL in Nigeria.

Economic Factor: ODL is a capital intensive venture. The low level of funding of ODL is as a result of inadequate budgetary allocation by the government to that sector. The poor state of the national economy has impoverished most Nigerians. An average income earner cannot afford basic technological tools such as computer, thus a computer set is still a luxury in some institutions, offices and homes. This definitely makes the integration of necessary online resources like internet, e-mail into ODL in Nigeria very difficult.

Other hindrances to the full and effective implementation of ODL in Nigeria include: lack of relevant software that would be necessary for reaching the un-reached via e-learning, complexities of resource design which require a high level of competence that may not be easy for a developed country like Nigeria due to human and material resources.

Conclusion

Education for all cannot be over emphasized. The vast un-reached population in our society need to benefit from the world acclaimed Education for All (EFA). It is obvious that one of the fastest ways to give education to all citizens of this country is to embrace Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems with its attendant e-education culture. When everyone is educated, chances are, that the citizens will be more functional, effective, civil, and less violent and peace will be the order of the day. Developing nations like ours with great human and material resources should imbibe innovative phenomenon that is capable of improving our lot in education. This will consequently improve our education and enhance our manpower development. To be able to join the rest of the world in the global technological education systems, the vast majority of our educationally un-reached population should be reached. This can be achieved through the Open and Distance Learning education programme.

The Way Forward

To be able to achieve education for all using Open and Distance learning education programmes, the following recommendations are imperatives:

1. The prevalent problems enumerated above should be addressed.
2. Government and ODL providers should establish link with conventional institutions including libraries, NGOs, community leaders and potential students to move the programme forward.
3. Government should subsidized ODL programmes to make it affordable for an average income earner in Nigeria.
4. Admission of students into the programme should be proportionate to the existing and available facilities for teaching – learning to be meaningful and for the learning objectives to be achieved.
5. Government should address the issue of erratic and epileptic power supply in Nigeria to make ODL programmes functional.
6. Admission requirements into ODL programme should be in line with that of conventional institution to avoid making the certificate obtained through the ODL programme look as if they are counterfeit or inferior certificates.

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