

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA: POLICY PROVISION, IMPLEMENTATION AND SEARCH FOR THE MISSING LINK

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Abstract

The world in the new millennium has entered an era that is knowledge-driven. And this contributes to the social and economic development of a country. It is a common knowledge that Nigerian conventional university systems and other forms of formal higher education cannot accommodate all those seeking university admission in Nigerian. Hence the establishment of open and distance education. This paper therefore discussed open and distance learning in Nigerian: policy provision, implementation and search for the mission link. It starts with discussing the concept of open and distance learning, followed by x-ray of open and distance learning and policy provision. Next is discussion on the implementation gaps in open and distance learning. Thereafter, it discusses the strategies for filling the implementation gaps. Finally, the paper concludes and recommends that the lofty goals of open and distance education in Nigeria should be properly implemented to ensure lifelong opportunities for self-development and fulfillment.

Introduction

Education is a tool through which an individual will develop his potentials and contribute positively to the development of the nation. Thus, government and private organization have established educational institutions at various levels so that knowledge will be acquired for social, economic, political and technological development of the nation. Thus, government and private organizations have established educational institutions at various levels so that the skills and knowledge which are required for social, economic, political and technological development of the nation will be acquired (Yusuf, 2014 & Olalaye, 2017). The nation's educational institutions are increasing more than the available space, it is common knowledge that the Nigerian conventional university system and other forms of formal higher education cannot accommodate all those seeking university admission in Nigeria. But the government's efforts have been to provide popular educational opportunities in the country for all citizens.

Thus the Nigeria's philosophy of education according to Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004:7) is based on:

- (a) The development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen;
- (b) The full integration of the individual into the community and
- (c) The provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system

Based on this philosophy, the Nigerian government accepts distance education as a process through which additional formal educational qualification can be acquired. Yusuf (2014) observed that the above belief has been aptly demonstrated through the recognition and coordination of distance and correspondence teaching institutions in Nigeria. He further stated that some Nigerian universities also embrace open and distance learning as a viable route to formal educational qualifications. The federal government also is deeply committed to ensuring a successful distance education programme in Nigeria through the recent re-establishment of the national open university of Nigeria. Government has also jettisoned the idea of satellite university campus initiative in the country and promised to roll out distance education as succor.

Many workers and professionals need further education for various reasons which include the need to update knowledge, skills, work and habits in line with change in techniques of production among others. Thus, continuing education for this class of people through open and distance learning will help them avoid high cost of full-time studies along with other predicaments. It is in line with this that the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the National policy on Education (2013:44) stated that the advantages of open and distance education is often taken for lifelong learning by those who:

- (a) Graduated from school and desire to update their knowledge and skills in disciplines or courses of their choice for their continuing professional entrepreneurial development;
- (b) Left school for one reason or other, but who having matured would want to make a re-entry into the knowledge arena;

- (c) 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;
- (d) Were not successful when they finished school but now wish to remedy their deficiencies and proceed for further studies.

World Bank (2010) has also stressed the relevance of extending higher education to more people in the developing countries so as to provide for the disadvantaged groups. It therefore becomes imperative that open and distance education to make individuals who wish to improve on their knowledge. It is on the stance of this vision that the writer got motivated to x-ray the open and distance education policy provision and ascertain the extent of its implementation.

Concept of Open and Distance Education

Open and distance education are twin modern concepts that have held the global educational reform in good stead. They have been described in various ways such as distance education, Open University correspondence university, Media University, Broadcasting University, University of the air and University of Walls (Mbakwe, Okafor & Anyanwu, 2014). Great Britain established an autonomous open university in April 1969 whose major aim is the advancement in disseminating of teaching and research by diversity of means (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2005), these include radio and television programmes, packaged course materials, correspondence tuition, and provision of computer facilities. Ebirim and Okenwa (2009) opined that the good thing about Open University is that it is open to methods and ideas that can give rise to creative and meaningful functional job creation.

The terms distance learning and open learning seem to be used interchangeably in our society. Distance learning is the same thing as home study, correspondence study off campus study or telemetric study whose goals are similar to and just as noble and practical as those of on-campus full time or face to face conventional education (Egwuatu, 2010 & Umezulike, 2017). Though some of the titles describe open and distance learning as a university programme, some other educational institutions like Colleges of Education, Polytechnic and the national Teachers Institute do offer teacher and other educational courses through distance learning. Distance learning according to Eze (2014) is a system based on selective use of instructional media both traditional and innovative to promote self-teaching/ learning process in order to achieve specific educational objective with potentially greater geographic coverage. The instructor and the instructional methods are subsumed in the learning material (popularly referred to as study materials) that was designed as self-directed learning guide for the students. On the other hand, Federal Ministry of Education (2002) sees distance learning guide as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by a facilitator removed in space and/or time from the learner. In the National Policy on Education (2013:44), Federal government stipulates that concept of distance education should be all-inclusive contact, no contact and part-time education. It also uses a variety of media and should use technologies to provide and/or improve access to good quality education for large number of learners wherever that may be. Likewise, Hubbard (2015) defined open and distance learning as an organized educational activity based on the use of materials in which the

constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, entry or time and space, pace method of study or any combination of the above. It is open and learning with no barriers in respect of time and space, age and no regard to sex, race, tribe, state of origin etc and it has developed from correspondence course to a full-fledged modern day technology driven and self-directed learning which involves learners who are often in locations far from the institutions and/or the instructional and tutorial facilitators. Hence Osuji (2007) posits that the concept of open and distance learning is a composite one. This is because it is made up of two components- open learning and distance education.

Open and distance learning which was born out of socio economic compulsions faced by various individuals within the society according to Onuorah (2007:223) has the following characteristics:

- Relaxed entry qualification and procedure;
- Learning at one's own place and pace
- Two way didactic communication:
- Use of electronic and multi-media material, television, audio-video material, telephone, computer etc:
- Elaborate students/learners –supports services:
- Non-traditional techniques of evaluation: and Degrees by cumulative credits.

To Kamba (2009), open and distance learning education have other characteristics as the separation of the teacher and learner in time or place. And influence of educational institution necessary for institutional accreditation of programmes. Open and distance learning therefore emphasize flexibility which enables the operating institutions to provide education at all grassroots'. The adherence to the aforementioned characteristics is of utmost importance if the reason for the birth of open and distance learning is to be actualized.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND POLICY PROVISION

Open and distance learning is an approach that focuses on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraint of time and offering flexible learning opportunity to individuals and group of learners. In fact, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013:44) stated that it is a mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teachers. The end result of open and distance learning will eventually increase educational opportunities for broader segments of the population and accommodate different situations and needs. It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that Ajudeonu and Nwaham (2007:204) articulated the following as the importance of open and distance learning:

- a. Open and distance learning create learning opportunity for millions of Nigerians, by providing alternative access for those who could not be accommodated in the formal education process.
- b. It provides professional development and upgrading opportunities that do not remove learner's from their workplace.

- c. It provides dual-mode of learning process that will take care of the educational needs of those that are qualified for university education but could not be accommodated for lack of space in the existing tertiary institution.
- d. Open and distance learning also reintegrates those that have recently been disengaged from the illegal opportunity provided by the satellite campuses.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013:45) in the National policy on Education stated in clear terms that the goals of distance education in Nigeria shall be to:

- a. Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied;
- b. Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace;
- c. Encourage internalization especially of tertiary education curricular;
- d. Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or place of work.

The policy further stipulates that in pursuance of these goals, the federal government shall:

- a. Ensure that programmes are equivalent in structure and status to those offered by face to face mode of delivery in the appropriate tertiary educational institution;
- b. Encourage and regulate open/distance education practice in Nigeria; and
- c. establish an open/distance education advisory body which shall:
 - i. Advise the government on the practice of open/distance education;
 - ii. Promote open /distance education nationwide in collaboration with federal, state and local government education authorities.
 - iii. Liaise with existing educational regulating bodies and institutions offering open/distance education programmes to ensure maintenance of standards;
 - iv. Liaise with media houses information and communication technology providers and other relevant bodies in enhancing open/distance education.
 - v. Encourage private efforts and other governmental organizations in the provision of quality education using open/distance education.
 - vi. Strengthen the capacity of existing institutions providing open/distance education.

The above provisions in the policy are by no means utopian. How far have they been implemented? What are the missing link in the policy implementation? All these questions and others lead us to the next subtopic.

Problem of Policies Implementation in Open and Distance Education

The policy provision has been heart-warming but can the same be said of implementation? Only a highlight of journey so far can tell. The policy according to Ogbonnaya (2009) appears to be riddled with problems both in its provisions and implementation. Thus, Obanya (2009) noted that there exists a great insufficiency of opportunities in access to quality education as a whole in Nigeria today with low

quality education. Supporting this, Abdalla (2022) opined that there is need to review the current policy and practices of open and distance learning in Nigeria in relation to issue of access, equity, quality and cost. These call for a radical change in the approach to the education system. Ani (2007:175) identified the problems which constitute impediments to effective policy implementation of open and distance learning in Nigeria as:

- 1. Insufficient Funding:** There is lack of fund to provide sufficient infrastructure, teaching materials, pay salaries etc even though the money charged in the programme is higher than those of the conventional universities (regular programmes)
- 2. Lack of Personnel:** In the centers, there are no competent teachers in sufficient number. Many of the available ones did not have proper understanding of distance learning methodology. Their understanding was on the conventional ways of teaching and learning. Another set of personnel for this programme are the educational administrators. Those with special skills in open and distance learning are not available. Success would hardly be achieved in an organization where necessary human skills are lacking.
- 3. Curriculum:** Many of the programmes mounted at the learning centers are not focused on national needs. The ultimate goal of the proprietors and managers was to make money. They would admit any student for any course. Also, they gave more attention to arts-based courses than the sciences. This is against the present move to encourage the study of science and technology.
- 4. Lack of Power Supply:** The use of electronic gadgets in transmission of knowledge is essential in open and distance learning. In area where there is erratic power supply or there is no supply at all, it becomes difficult if not impossible to make use of knowledge transmission equipment. Many of the centers did not have a regular supply of electricity. Hence, they resorted to face-to-face teaching and the use of course materials.
- 5. Poor Administration:** Poor monitoring of the programme, poor motivation of teachers and poor supply of course materials on the part of the administrators could lead to failure of the programme. Also at the centers, teachers and programme co-coordinators had not been very much sincere with the evaluation of students' performance.

Strategies for Filling the Implementation Gaps

Open and distance learning effectively serves an educational strategy that will make for lifelong learning. It creates opportunity for people to continue to receive and update their education during their working life. This aspect is beneficial both for the employers and the employees. Empirical evidence has shown that there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained at traditional institutions and distance learning (Keegan, 2010; Gagne and Shepherd, 2011; Russell, 2012 & Edomwande, 2022).

Recommended strategies for filling implementation gaps in open and distance learning include:

1. **Curriculum Review:** The rate of changes in the society is very rapid. Therefore there should be constant review of the curriculum in order to suit the changing society. This will enable the distance learners to acquire appropriate knowledge, skills as well as ethical, moral and civic values needed for productive life.
2. **Funding:** The initial cost of establishing and operating open and distance education is borne by the government in order to make it firmly established. Financial assistance could be sought from generous donors nationally and internationally in order to achieve this. Also the institution should embark on internal and fund generation to supplement government's efforts. Money that is made available by the government, by general donors or by internal generation should be well managed. Center managers and facilitators should not see it as "their share of the national cake". In this regard effective accountability is required.
3. **Personnel:** Individuals to be employed as tutorial facilitators must be professionals in their fields. Also those to be employed as directors, course co-ordinators and study centre managers must be specialists in educational management. Alternatively, they must acquire training in educational management as soon as possible. The staff must be well motivated in order to sustain them on the job and to guide against staff withdrawal. Also, regular in-service programme should be organized for the staff to keep them abreast of new development in their environment and to make them continuously relevant in the programme. Experts in technology who will handle the teaching- learning equipment should be employed and properly oriented. The equipment become useless when there are no experts to handle them.
4. **Facilities:**
 - i) **Electricity:** Power supply is very vital in the operation of open and distance learning. Many rural areas are yet to be electrified. Also many developed areas in many urban centers are yet to have power supply. This could constitute impediments to the operation of the programme. Also, power supply is not reliable in many parts of the country. While it is necessary for Power Holding Company, Nigeria to improve its services and embark on extension exercise. Alternative source of energy as a matter of urgency should be provided.
 - ii) **Equipment:** Necessary equipment for communication and transmission of knowledge should be provide in sufficient quantity and quality. The Government and the institutions authorities should make laboratory equipment, audio an video tapes and internet facilities available for teaching and learning.

- iii) **Course Materials:** These should be supplied regularly, punctually and sufficiently by the government and the authorities of the institution.
- 5 **Control:** Control measures like recruitment of facilitators and supervision should be introduced into the system in order to maintain high standard of performance. Evaluation should be consistently and sincerely conducted. Results of such evaluation should be used by guidance counselors to assist different categories of learners. Monitoring of facilitators performance and behavior is another form of control. It assists them in skill development and enhancement of performance.
- 6 **Awareness:** members of the Nigerian populace should be aware of the vision and mission of open and distance learning. The authorities at local and national level should make use of information media such as radio, television and national dailies to publicize the activities of the programme.
- 7 **Admission of Learners:** It was stated in the National policy on Education that not less than 60% of places shall be allocated to science and science oriented courses in the conventional universities (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004): In line with this policy statement, admission of candidates into the open and distance education should be for 60% science and science –oriented courses. This would enhance the production of required man power for science and technological development.

Government and the educational leaders should therefore run open and distance institutions effectively and efficiently. They must strive to continuously improve the quality and always seek to expand their educational provisions.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion. It is evident that there are implementation gaps in open and distance learning in Nigeria. This has been attributed to a number of problems. To avert these problem, sound policy should be made regarding provision of facilities, personnel, curriculum review, control and funding. A well-organized open and distance learning will assist Nigeria in training her citizens to have sufficient and responsive knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will help them to live functional life. Open and distance learning in Nigeria holds a number of potentials for various stakeholders in education and development process. To the learner, open and distance learning means more freedom of access and a wider range of opportunities to acquire higher education and become more qualified educationally. There should therefore be sustenance of open and distance learning because it is an essential tool in all ramifications of the educational development process of enhancing qualitative and functional education.

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