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**ISSN:**

Print - 2277 - 0593

Online - 2315 - 7461

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**Journal of Natural  
Science, Engineering  
and Technology**

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# PREDICTING STUDENTS' ENROLLMENT USING GENERALIZED FEED-FORWARD NEURAL NETWORK

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## ABSTRACT

An important obligation of educational planning is the projection of students' enrollment which forms the basis for many of the investment decisions. Enrollment projection provides information for decision making and budget planning hence, it is important to the development of higher education. As many factors have impacts on the enrollment number, and for the above reasons, students' population and enrollment number should be considered as a chaotic system. In this research, a **Generalized Feed-Forward Neural Network (GFFNN)** for students' enrollment prediction was proposed. The architecture of the proposed model was in-line with eight steps involved in developing a neural network model for predicting a chaotic system. The data used was obtained from Academic Planning and Quality Control Unit of Tai Solarin University of Education, Ogun State Nigeria. The results from the study showed that the mean absolute percent error of GFFNN has an average of 0.0101% unlike linear regression and autoregression models that were compared with it, with an average of 0.0570% and 0.0725% respectively. The proposed methodology is expected to assist the school management to adequately plan for the future needs of the students in the provision of facilities.

**Key words:** *Students' Enrollment, Generalized Feed-Forward Neural Network, Prediction, Higher Education, Regression*

## INTRODUCTION

Planned economic development requires data about various aspects of socio-economic conditions at different levels. Indicators of development are directly or indirectly related to the size and structure of the population. It is, therefore, of paramount importance to know various aspects of the size and structure of population at different points in time. Another important requirement of educational planning is enrollment

projections which forms the basis for many of the investment decisions. According to Guo (2002), enrollment projection provides information for decision making and budget planning. However, obtaining accuracy is not an easy task, as many factors have impacts on the enrollment numbers. For instance, factors like school fees, politics, quality of teaching (facilities), strike and security may affect the accuracy and reliability of students' enrollment prediction in Nigeria higher

institutions of learning. Consequently, students' population and enrollment number should be considered as a chaotic system. In this case, some small change in one of the conditioning factors may bring in a sizeable change in the enrollment figure of students at a given point in time.

Methods such as statistical procedures, conventional mathematical and artificial intelligence (AI) techniques have been used in enrollment projection. Different methods generate different error terms, which are often converted to a percentage so that error terms from different models can be used for comparison in order to determine which model produces optimal results for modelling the time-series of student enrollment. For example, Guo (2002) applied regression, autoregression, and three-component models to predict the year 2000 students' enrollments of six community colleges in California using 1992-1999 population information from the Department of Finance as impact factors. These techniques generated errors ranging from 0.08% to 4.87% with an average error of 3.03%. Song and Chissom (1993) applied the fuzzy time-series model and neural network approaches to predict university students' enrollments and the results found to be satisfactory than the equivalent statistical and mathematical methods. Keilman, *et al*, (2002) and as also, Bandyopadhyay and Chattopadhyay (2008) stated that statistical approaches are not very suitable for predicting a chaotic system like students' enrollment because they make assumptions, which are sometimes found unrealistic and cannot deal with the intrinsic chaos.

Artificial Neural Network (ANN) is found to be useful in the situations where underlying processes and relationships may display chaotic properties. Its applications

have been felt in the tasks involving pattern recognition, classification, and time-series forecasting. ANN does not require any prior knowledge of the system under consideration and as well suited to model dynamic systems on a real time basis. Unlike statistical and mathematical techniques which depend on influencing factors, the success of ANN prediction accuracy depends on parameters adjustment (Kaastra & Boyd, 1996; Maqsood *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, ANN was applied to predict the future enrollment of students in the four colleges of Tai Solarin University of Education, Ogun State Nigeria using data obtained from Academic Planning and Quality Control Unit of the university (2013). Model was built using a Generalized Feed-Forward Neural Network (GFFNN), and its prediction accuracy is compared with Linear Regression (LR) and Autoregression (AR) which have been the popular statistical methods of population projection over the years.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The changes in student population necessitate deep insights in enrollment projection. With the increasing changes in technology and the increased demands for various competencies and collaboration among employees, people of diverse ages feel the necessity to obtain more education. These factors, among others, indicate that colleges and universities attract not only students who are in their 20s and pursuing a degree, but also non-traditional students of different ages and with varied objectives. This is especially true for community colleges, whose mission, besides providing associate degrees and preparing transfers to four-year universities, is to train work force (Guo, 2002; Rufai, 2014). To adequately cater for the needs of these prospective students, there is need to predict

the enrollment number hence, the need for this kind of research.

## RELATED WORKS

Related studies based on methods for predicting population growth have been carried out on demographic information from countries, schools, colleges, and distance-educational centres, each with inherent strengths and limitations. Guo and Zhai (2000) applied survival ratio techniques to predict the students' enrollment number of a four-year university and generated errors ranging from 1.7% to 2.9%, with an average of 1.9%. Bandyopadhyay and Chattopadhyay (2008) predicted the population of India with ANN model using demographic data collected from "*International Brief: Population trends in India*" published by U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of Census (Report no IB/97-1). The results showed that the correlation between actual and predicted values is very high (0.94 and 0.98 for males and females respectively). In similar manner, Folorunso et al., (2010) used the same model to develop a system for predicting the population of Nigeria using the demographic information sourced from National Population Commission of Nigeria. Results from the evaluation of the system showed that the system produced better forecast when compared with the age-long cohort component method in use by the commission.

Using demographic information from schools and colleges, several mathematical techniques have been proposed. Notable among them are *Rate of Growth*, *Enrollment Ratio*, *Least Squares*, *Grade-Ratio* and *Grade-Transition* methods which have been used to project the population, enrollment and

teachers' strength in India, with emphasis on primary and upper primary school level (Mehta; 1994, and Mehta; 2004 respectively). Guo (2002) prediction results showed that the complexity of the model has no significant improvement on the accuracy of the prediction.

In the field of Artificial Intelligence, Song and Chissom (1993) applied the fuzzy time-series and neural network approaches to predict university students' enrollments. The predicted results showed that fuzzy time-series model generated errors ranged from 0.1% to 8.7%, with an average of 3.18%, and the error from neural network model ranged from 1.6% to 9.6%, with an average of 5.2%. Mathematical and statistical projection methods are usually based on extrapolation of past trends into the future for instance; there is an assumption of the presence of a high correlation between the population changes in successive periods. These methods are not very suitable for predicting a chaotic system like population because they are full of uncertainty (Keilman *et al.*, 2002; Folorunso *et al.*, 2010). From the stand point of accuracy, Boon and Kok (1995) argued that mathematical projection should be avoided as much as possible because assumptions made in this method are sometimes unrealistic. With the presence of unrealistic assumptions, ANN comes into rescue. The perception of ANN instigated from the attempt to build up a mathematical replica, capable of recognizing complex patterns on the same line as biological neurons work. In the present study a *Generalized Delta Rule* also named as *Backpropagation* learning is adopted to train *generalize feed forward neural network* developed on the basis of various students' enrollments related data. Detailed implementation procedure and the outcomes are presented in the subsequent sections. The study also seeks to

compare the accuracy of the proposed methods with two statistical/mathematical methods: Linear regression and Autoregression.

### METHODOLOGY

#### The proposed Neural Network Model

This research aimed at applying the Generalized Feed-Forward Neural Network (GFFNN) to predict students' enrollment figure in a tertiary institution due to the nature of its data. However, designing a neural network model for students' enrollment prediction followed eight distinct steps outlined in the work of Kaastra & Boyd (1996) and Rufai (2014). The data used in this study was sourced from Academic Planning

and Quality Control Unit of Tai Solarin University of Education, Ogun State Nigeria, from the year of inception of the University; 2005 to 2012. The data was based on four elements which gives a total of 120 inputs. These four elements are as follows: *No of applicant from Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), Performance at post-UTME, Admitted students and Graduate output*. Out of these four elements, the first three and factors such as *tuition fee, employment prospect and personal security* of a student are used as inputs to the neural network. The dataset was partitioned into train set, validation set and test set in the ratio of 65:20:15. Table 1 summarized other parameters that were set before the commencement of the training.

**Table 1: GFFNN Model Design Paradigms**

S/N	Parameters	Values
1	Layers	3
2	Input nodes	6
3	Hidden layer	2
4	Hidden nodes	14
5	Output nodes	1
6	Training Algorithm	Backpropagation
7	Optimization Algorithm	Gradient descent
8	Transfer function	Sigmoid
9	Epoch	1000

**Source: Experimentally generated values, Aug., 2014**

The proposed GFFNN model used a gradient descent training algorithm which adjusts the weights to move down the steepest slope of the error surface as shown in Table 1. According to the information on the same table, the training of the GFFNN is set to terminate at iteration equals 1000 epoch. The objective of training is to minimize the mean square error defined in equation (1) as follows:

$$E = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{p=1}^P \sum_{k=1}^K (y_k^p - t_k^p)^2$$

where  $y_i$  is the simulated output by the GFFNN, and  $t_i$  is the target or actual values and E is MSE. The momentum term determines how past weight changes affect current changes. The modified BP training rule is defined as

$$\Delta w = -\frac{\partial E}{\partial w_{jk}} = -\eta \partial_i y_i \quad (2)$$

where  $\eta$  is the momentum term called learning rate,  $w_{jk}$  is the weight; and  $E$  is the error parameter. The detail gradient descent algorithm for training GFFNN is presented in the next section.

### IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of GFFNN is carried out on MATLAB 7.6.0 (2008a) platform.

Since the research also intends to compare the accuracy of GFFNN with linear regression (LR) and autoregression (AR), the same datasets were used to construct the models for the two statistical tools as well. The results from the implementations are presented in the subsequent section. Fig.1 shows the block diagram of the proposed GFFNN.

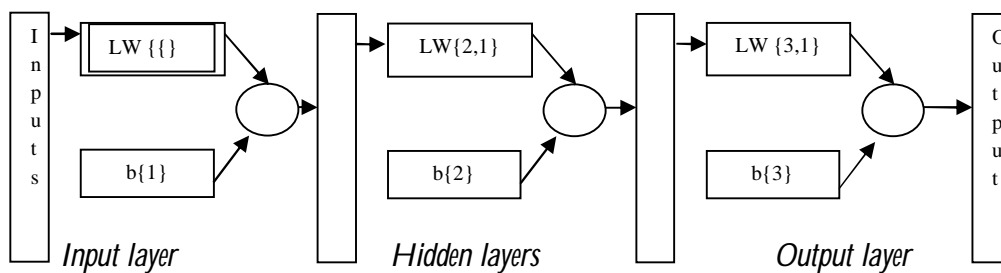


Fig.1: Block Diagram of GFFNN

Where LW is the sum of synaptic weight of all nodes in the input layer,  $b\{1\}$  is the bias of input layer;  $LW\{2,1\}$  is the sum of synaptic weight of all nodes in the hidden layer,  $b\{2\}$  is the bias of the hidden node,  $LW\{3,1\}$  is the sum of synaptic weight of all nodes in the output layer and  $b\{3\}$  is the output layer bias.

The most common errors function minimized in neural networks are the sum of square errors (SSE) and mean square error (MSE). In this study, MSE was calculated because it shows the average square error between the actual values and predicted values from the network. When MSE is found to be much smaller than 1, the predictive model is found to be reasonable. Other performance evaluation criterion used is mean absolute percent error (MAPE).

### GRADIENT DESCENT ALGORITHM

Input vectors are applied to the network and calculated gradients at each training sample are added to determine the change in weights and biases. *Traingda*, an adaptive learning rate function which update the neural network weight and bias values according to the Gradient Descent Optimization, was used for the training of the GFFNN. The network is created using *newff*. The *newff* creates generalized feed-forward back-propagation network with the following syntax:

#### Syntax:

```
net = newff (PR,[S1,S2,.....Sn]
{TF1,TF2.....TFn}, BTF, BLF,PF)
newff takes several arguments.
PR = R x 2 matrix of min and max values for R
input elements
S1 = size of ith layer, for N1 layer
TF1 = Transfer function of first layer (tansig)
TF2 = Transfer function of second layer (log sig)
TF3 = Transfer function of third layer (purelin)
BTF = Back propagation network training function
(traingda)
```

*BLF = (Back propagation weigh/bias learning function (learnngdm) and returns N – layer generalized feed-forward back-propagation network.*

The connection of the input to the first hidden layer, second hidden layer and then to output layer is automatically achieved when *newff* function is called. And as each layer has its own transfer function, the *newff* provides a means of specifying the transfer function of the layers in its syntax. The five parameters associated with *traingda* are epochs, show goal, time, min-grad, max-fail. The neural network uses the *tansig* and *logsig* for the first and second hidden layers. The aim of using these is to get outputs in those two hidden layers of values between -1 and 1. But since the target values the GFFNN is created to approximate values greater than the range of values between -1 and 1. *Purelin* is used at the output layer. This enables the network to output values of any magnitude.

### A Simplified Algorithm for Training Generalized Feed-Forward Neural Network for Student Enrollment Prediction

Below is a simplified algorithm for training the proposed neural network model for population prediction:

Assemble the training data

1. *Initialize the weights that connect inputs to hidden layer 1*
2. *Multiply the input vectors with their connecting weights*
3. *Compute the total weighted input*
4. *Threshold the total weighted input by **tansig** to get output for the first hidden layer*
5. *Use the output for the first hidden layer as the input for second hidden layer.*
6. *Initialized the weights that connect hidden*

*layer 1 to hidden layer 2*

7. *Repeat step 2 and 3*
8. *Threshold the total weighted input by **logsig** to get output and input for second hidden layer and output layer respectively*
9. *Initialize the weights that connect hidden layer 2 to output layer*
10. *Repeat step 2 and 3 to get the output values*
11. *Threshold the total weighted output by **purelin** to get the actual output values*
12. *If the output values are equivalent to the target values then Goto Stop Else*
13. *Compute  $\sum A // \sum A$  is the difference between the actual values and the target values.*
14. *Convert  $\sum A$  to  $\sum I // \sum I$  is the rate at which error changes as the total input received by a unit is changed.*
15. *Compute  $\sum W // \sum W$  is the error derivatives of the weights. That is how the error changes as each weight is increased.*
16. *Multiply those  $\sum As$  of those output units and add the products*
17. *Compute  $\sum As$  for other layers by repeating step 12 to 15 moving from layer to layer in a direction opposite the way activities to propagate.*
18. *Repeat 12 and 13.*
19. *Stop*
20. *End*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of the Training and Simulation Results

Though the focus of this research is the use of *Traingda* other training functions: *Traingdm* (gradient descent with momentum) and *Trainlm* (Levenberg Marquardt) were also used in the experiment as a test on the reliability of *Traingda*. The results are shown in Table 2.

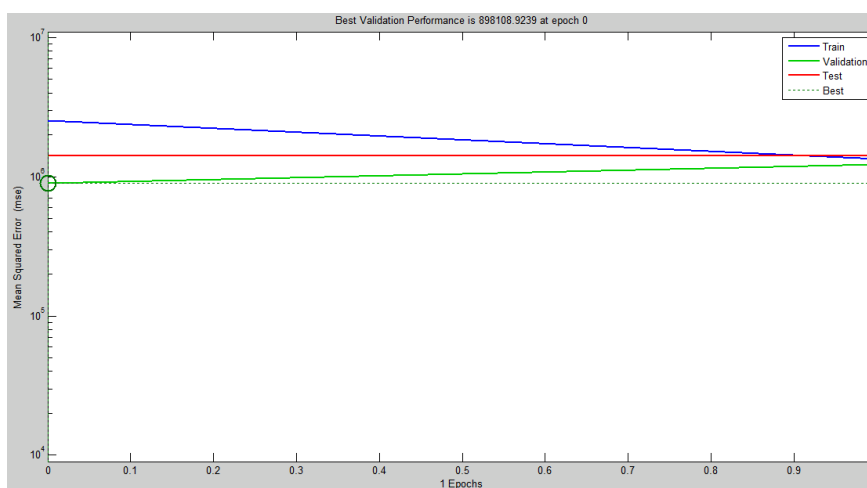
**Table 2: Determining the best training function for GFFNN**

Admission year	students Enrollment	Traingdm simulated	Trainlm simulated	Traingda simulated	MSE	MSE	MSE
	(Target)	Outputs	Outputs	Outputs	Traingdm	Trainlm	Traingda
2005	4433	3934.6363	4333.3301	4426.1198	0.01263855	0.00050551	0.00000241
2006	3390	2902.3659	3345.9673	3339.4726	0.02069135	0.00016871	0.00022215
2007	862	902.4833	821.7428	849.6076	0.00220565	0.00218109	0.00020668
2008	2095	1910.1316	2009.1345	2150.4301	0.00778677	0.00167985	0.00070004
2009	3627	2964.8389	3536.2137	3765.3414	0.03332976	0.00062654	0.00145482
2010	2734	1945.5259	2701.5674	2867.1437	0.08317213	0.00014072	0.00237162
2011	2431	2338.3415	2257.4947	2353.2605	0.00145278	0.00509396	0.00102262
2012	2727	2562.1885	2719.4421	2726.9312	0.00365262	0.00000768	0.00000000

**Source: Experimentally generated values, Aug., 2014**

From the results in Table 2, one can infer that *Traingda* produced the best result and hence suitable for the training of GFFNN. Also from the plots in Fig.2, 3 and 4, it can be observed that *Traingda* enable GFFNN to minimize mean square errors efficiently

that the other two functions that were used to check its consistencies. According to these figures, the blue plot shows how well the training functions minimize the MSE with the best performance from *Traingda*.



*Fig.2: Traingdm function*

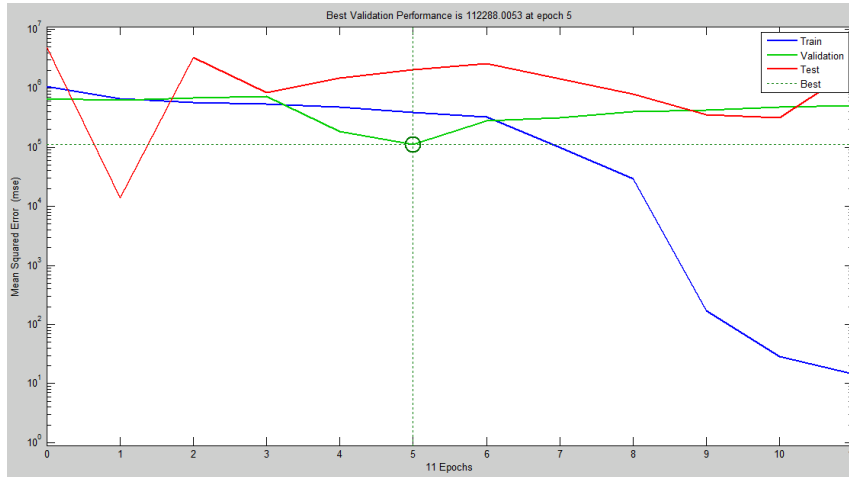


Fig.3: Trainlm function

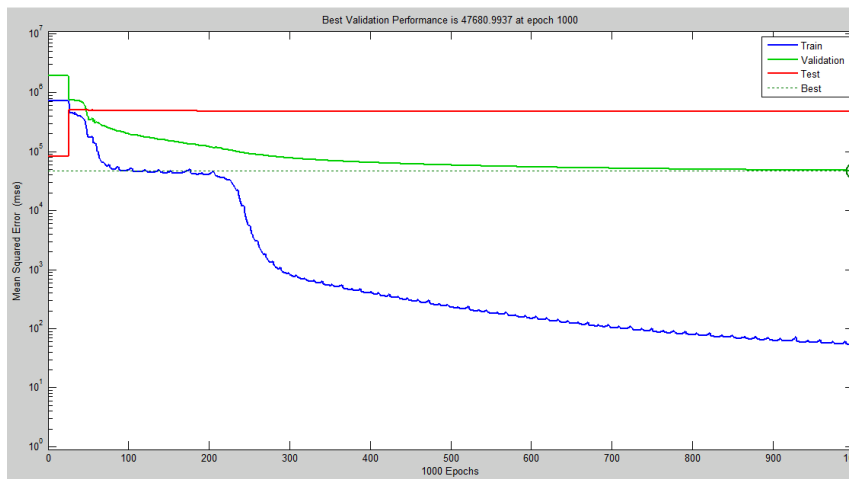


Fig.4: Trainingda function

### ANALYSIS OF PREDICTED RESULTS ON COLLEGIATE BASIS

Immediately after the training phase, the best function for the proposed model was determined and its performance was compared with the selected statistical approaches: Linear Regression (LR) and Autoregression (AR), these were done on collegiate basis for simplicity and ease of colla-

tion. Measures for evaluating the performance of these models are based on the mean absolute percent error (MAPE) defined in equation (3):

$$MAPE = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{|Predicted_i - Target_i|}{Target_i} \quad (3)$$



Linear Regression (LR) model uses linear analysis. Total enrollment, performance in Post-UTME, university budget, tuition fees and student personal security are factors that have impact on enrollment. Total enrollment was linearly regressed on the school ages 16-35, school budget, and tuition fees.

Autoregression (AR) model uses the same variables as the first model, that is, total enrollment was autoregressed on the applicants' population of ages 16-35, performance in the Post-UTME, school budget, tuition fee and personal security, using 0.5 as the rho parameter ( $\rho = 0.5$ ). The difference between the second and the first methods is that the second method weights the data of more recent years more heavily than the previous years; while the first method gives the same weight to the data of each year.

After all the necessary computations, the comparison of these models with the proposed model is done on the college basis. There are four colleges in the case study used: College of Applied Education and Vocational Technology (COAEVOT), College of Humanity (COHUM), College of Science and Information Technology (COSIT) and College of Social and Management Science (COSMAS). Fig.5 shows the results simulated by GFFNN and the two models that were compared with it for COAEVOT. From the figure, it can be observed that the performance of GFFNN is better than those of LR and AR. GFFNN only showed poor performance in year 2010 with actual enrollment of 591 students and the predicted value of 589 students. On the general note, GFFNN predicts students' enrollment number for College with a high accuracy. Clearly from fig.6, the perform-

ance of GFFNN is poor only in 2006 when compared with the actual enrollment with value of 409.0 instead of 509 students. The two other models performed quite well here as observed from the graph. The overall remark is that the GFFNN performs well in predicting students' enrollment number in the College of Humanity as shown by Fig.6. The results simulated for COSIT is presented in Fig.7. According to the figure, GFFNN and linear regression performed better than autoregression with the best performance on the side of GFFNN, as shown from the graph. Finally, from fig.8, which shows the results simulated by the models for COSMAS, it can be observed that this college admitted the largest number of undergraduates hence, remains the most populated college in the University. On the overall, the performance of GFFNN is very comparable with the actual enrollment values unlike LR and AR models. From analysis of the results simulated by the models for different colleges of the case study, it can be concluded that ANN trained with *traingda* function provides the better model for the time series of students' enrollment in tertiary institutions.

## PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF MODELS

The students' enrollment trend by different colleges of the University was studied taken into consideration the growth and development of the school coupled with the recent reduction of tuition fees by the state government. The result was then used to extrapolate and predict the students' enrollment for 2015. The results simulated by the models were computed and evaluated on the basis of Mean Absolute Percentage Errors (MAPE) defined in equation (3) and results are presented in Table 3.

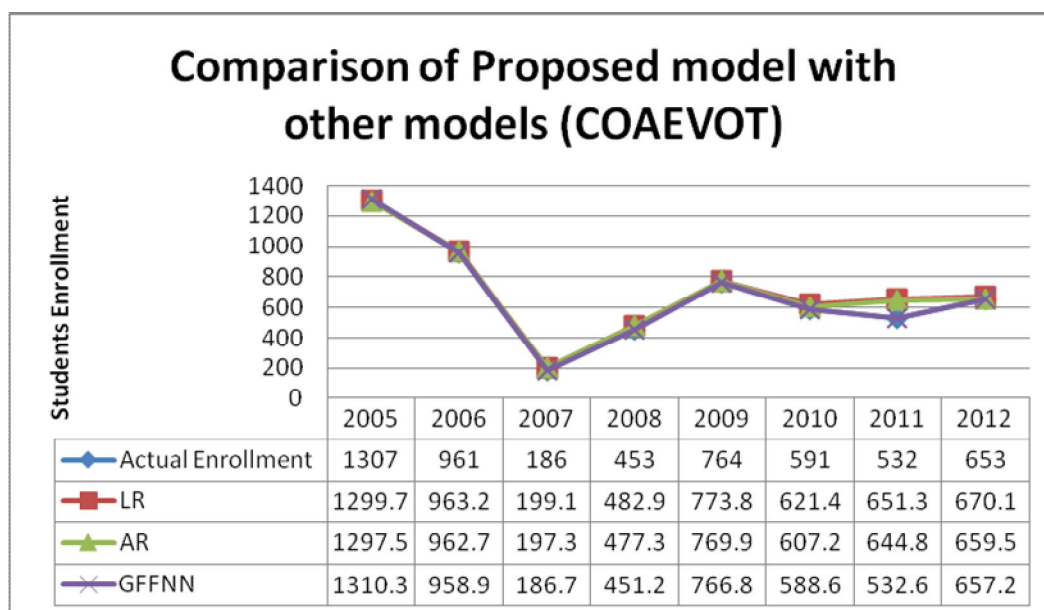


Fig.5: Comparison of GFFNN results with other models (COAEVOT)

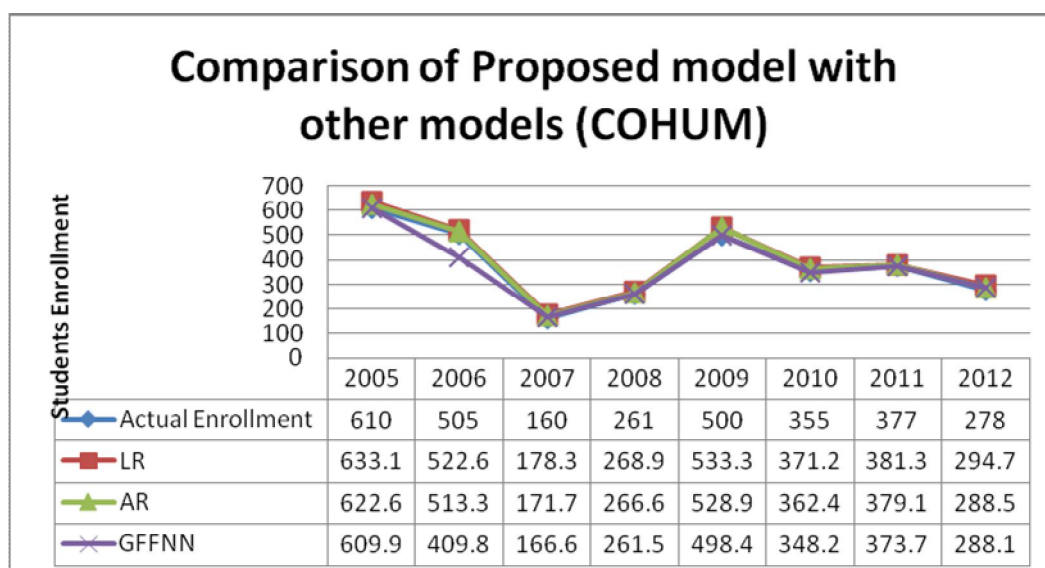


Fig.6: Comparison of ANN results with other models (COHUM)

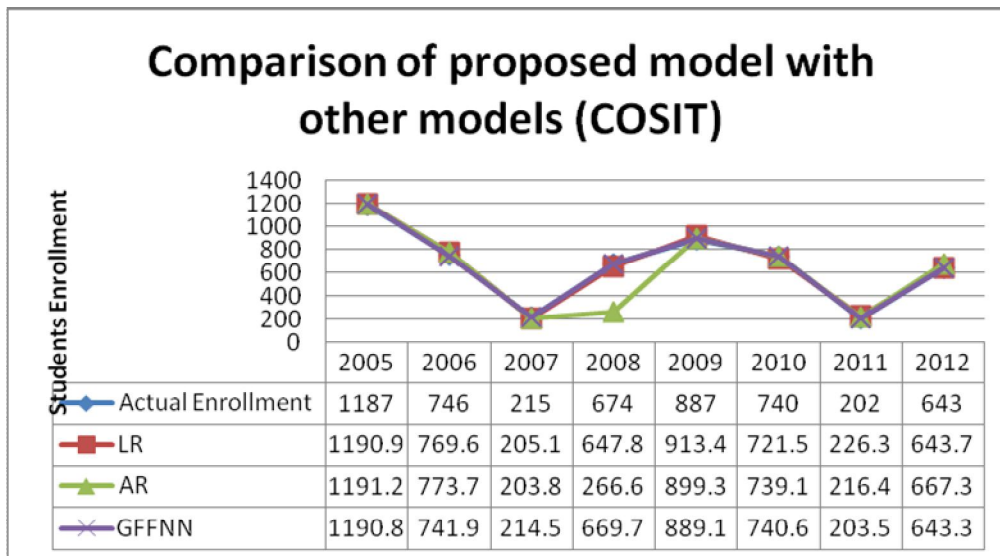


Fig.7: Comparison of ANN results with other models (COSIT)

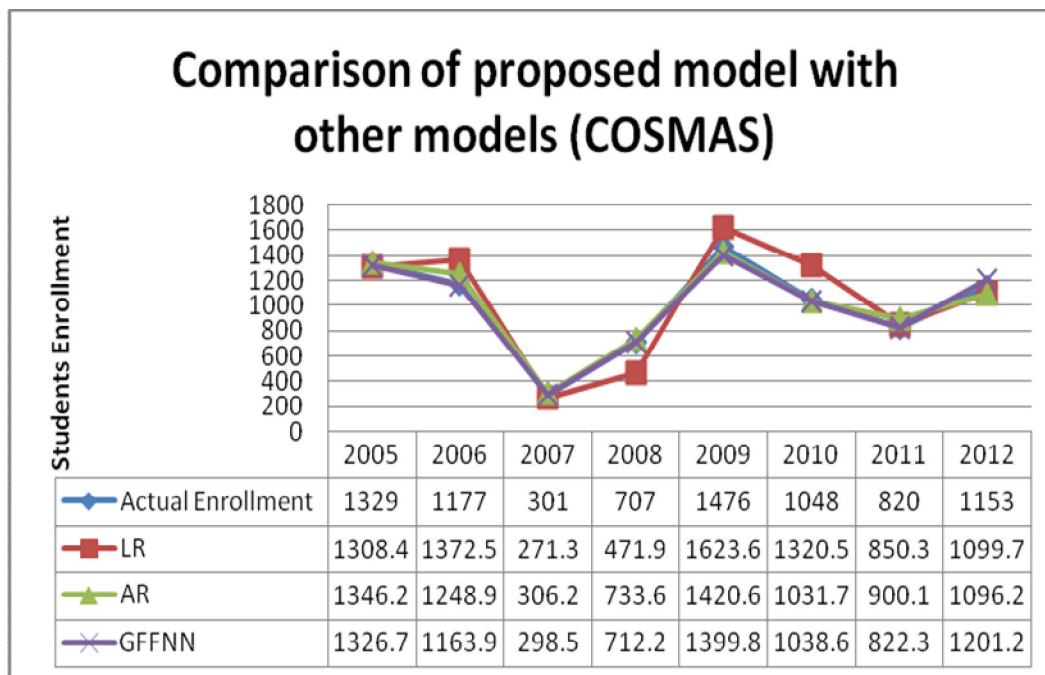


Fig.8: Comparison of ANN results with other models (COSMAS)

Table 3: Performance Evaluation of Models in Predicting 2015 Enrollment

COLLEGE	Target Value	Predicted (LR)	Predicted (AR)	Predicted GFFNN	MAPE of LR (%)	MAPE of AR (%)	MAPE of GFFNN (%)
COAEVOT	1270	1341.2	1293.4	1262.4	0.0561	0.0184	0.0060
COHUM	967	1023.7	1103.8	992.3	0.0586	0.1415	0.0262
COSIT	1178	1281.5	1299.1	1177.1	0.0879	0.1028	0.0008
COSMAS	2186	2241.6	2245.3	2169.7	0.0254	0.0271	0.0075
Average					0.0570	0.0725	0.0101

**Source: Experimentally generated, Aug., 2014**

From the above table, MAPE value for linear regression ranges from 0.0254% to 0.0879% with an average of 0.0570%; while for autoregression 0.0184% to 0.1415% with an average of 0.0725% and for GFFNN from 0.0008% to 0.0262% with an average of 0.0101% implying that GFFNN generated the least mean absolute percent errors. Therefore, its simulated results is reliable than the selected statistical approaches used.

## CONCLUSION

From the various tests performed on the results of the train, validation and test results in the previous sections, it is confirmed that Artificial Neural Network performs quiet impressive at estimating the students' enrollment figures. Analysis of the experimental results shows that MAPE value of ANN model ranges from 0.0008% to 0.0262% with an average of 0.0101%, far better than the two statistical models that were compared with it. The MAPE values of LR ranges from 0.0254% to 0.0879% with an average of 0.0570% and that of AR ranges from 0.0184% to 0.0254% with an average of 0.0725%. Hopefully, as the method is adopted in educational matter, the accrued benefit of the model is that, it will help the school management plan ade-

quately for the future needs of the learners in provision of facilities. Also, government, public and private sectors will make reliable and enduring plans that will benefit both the planners and the beneficiaries. The said benefits will also result into more profitability and improvement in the standard of living for all and sundry. Further research can be geared towards the use of another Artificial Intelligence approach for the same task.

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(Manuscript received: 3rd November, 2014; accepted: 13th May, 2015).