

Distance and Open Learning in Nigeria: Progress, Concerns and Prospects

DR. BERNIE IKEGULU
NERDC, ABUJA

DR. SUSAN ORANUSI
UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT, PORT HARCOURT

ABSTRACT

Open and distance learning education in Nigeria started as a child of necessity born out of the need of people to learn at their convenience outside the confines of the four walls of the traditional conventional system of education. This need characterized its emergence and eventual growth which resulted in a paradigm shift from the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction to one that is delivered from a distance. These correspondence courses gradually and steadily metamorphosed through many stages to emerge as a mainstream instructional delivery mode covering a wide range of course/programmes in different fields of study, reaching people of varied ages and circumstances and using a variety of media. The progress made so far, the various concerns and challenges encountered in this process are enumerated in this paper. The future prospects are also highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning started as correspondence courses. As more people showed interest in this form of learning, ODE became more formalized in the middle of the 19th century when it assumed some form of approach as a result of industrialization (Peters, 2002). During this period many correspondence schools sprang up and provided tuition to those who were neglected by the educational system among the gifted persons who wanted to climb socially in order to improve the quality of their lives. In many instances tuition was offered from a distance not only to students within the countries where these schools were but beyond.

Correspondence courses gradually and steadily metamorphosed through many stages to emerge as a mainstream instructional delivery mode, covering a wide range of courses in different fields of study, reaching people of varied ages and circumstances and using a variety of media. The phenomenal growth of this mode of instruction especially at the close of the 20th century was as a result of the special features it assumed as well as the various technological advancements which had occurred and impacted teaching and learning in positive ways. Some of these features include convenience and practicality of learning; accessibility and openness to learning; flexibility in terms of programmes, pace, time, media and styles of learning. These features had over the years formed the basic concepts and characteristics that gave rise to the nomenclature – open distance learning/open distance education.

Philosophy

Okonkwo (2012) outlined the principles underlying the philosophy of distance education as that:

- Learning opportunity should be lifelong and should encompass both education and training;
- The learning process should centre on the learners build on their experience and encourage independent and critical thinking;
- Learning provision should be flexible so that learners can choose where, when, what and how they learn as well as the pace at which they will learn;
- Prior learning, prior experience and demonstrated competencies should be recognized so that learners are not unnecessarily barred from educational opportunities by lack of appropriate qualifications.
- Learners should be able to accumulate credits from different learning contexts, providers should create the conditions for a fair chance of learner success (SAIDE < 2007).

It is important to note that the philosophy of distance education and the principles underlying it are not exclusive as to the learner population targeted. This is in reference to the misconception that open and distance learning is only targeting those who cannot afford the resources to access traditional conventional face-to-face education or those who are academically inferior. On the contrary, open and distance learning is an inclusive instructional platform that caters for anyone who desires good education but constrained by factors such as distance, age, time, occupation and other circumstances to attend campus-based education.

Characteristics of Open and Distance Learning

Although there are many definitions of open and distance learning that by the Commonwealth of Learning is apt because it encapsulates the essence of all other definitions. It states that open and distance learning refers to education and training in which using learning resources, rather than attending classroom sessions, is the central feature of the learning experience (COL 2003). Okebukola (2009) states that Open implies “removing barrier to learning such as restriction on time or place of study” while Distance means “the learner and the tutor are physically separated from each other and teaching takes place via print, electronics and/or telecommunications media.

Ojo and Olakunlehin (2006) found out that experiences both nationally and internationally have shown that conventional education is extremely hard to meet the demands of today’s socio-educational milieu especially for developing countries like Nigeria. In Nigeria there exists a wide gulf between the demands for spots in the educational system at the tertiary level verses and actual number admitted annually.

In ODL system, learning occurs, mainly through learners’ interaction with learning resources and not with live teachers as is the case in the conventional system. By providing learning resources to the learners the system allows them to study whenever and however the desire. This is the reason for the terms “open and distance”. Distance learning in particular refers to situations where learners are physically separated from the educational provider, communicating in writing (using letter-main, email, fax or computer referencing), verbally (by telephone, audio conferencing), or in face-to-face tutorial sessions (COL 2003).

Open learning on the other hand refers to policies and practices that allow admission to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age gender, entry qualifications, duration and location of programme of study and with recognition of prior learning (Farreil, 2003).

From the foregoing the reader would note that accessibility, flexibility and learner centeredness are the key characteristics of the ODL system. These terms are defined and explained by the Commonwealth of Learning (2003) as follows:

- **Accessibility:** Education is made accessible to those who cannot attend regular classes due to social, structural or personal situations such as lack of places in educational institutions, distance from educational institutions and family, and work commitment.
- **Flexibility:** Learners should at a time and pace and place that suit them and subjects, courses and programmes that meet their needs.
- **Learner Centeredness:** ODL is learner – centered because of its
 - Philosophy of accessibility and flexibility
 - Provision of good quality learning materials in learner friendly formats; and
 - Provision of adequate learner support system.

The above three characteristics determine and shape an ODL instructional delivery framework that has the following features:

- i. Separation of teachers and learners in time or place or in both time and place.
- ii. Institutional accreditation that is, learning is accredited or certified by some institutions or agency.
- iii. Use of mixed media courseware including print radio and television, broadcasts video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning and telecommunications.
- iv. Two-way communication which allows learners and tutors to interact and one-way communication via broadcast signals.
- v. Face-to-face meetings for tutorials, learner interaction, library study laboratory work, practice or counselling session, and
- vi. Use of industrialized processes that is in large scale open and distance learning operations labour is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who work together in course development teams and other task groups.

It is to be noted that with technological advancement in the use of computers, more sophisticated computer-based learning platforms such as online learning, e-learning and virtual libraries have been added to learning media available to distance learners. These platforms have improved the application of information and

communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance distance education by making learning activities more flexible and enabling these learning activities to be distributed among many learning values (Farrell, 2003).

Progress

Open and Distance learning gradually expanded and grew as more and more educators and governments recognized its potential for mass education and as the number of people desiring this mode of learning increased. Peters (2002) described three periods of distance education according to the prevailing needs/circumstances as:

- **First period** – correspondence instruction by individuals which accompanied the industrialization of labour, filling gaps and compensating for deficiencies in the educational system especially in vocational training and paving the first alternative path towards university entrance qualifications.
- **Second Period** – Formalized distance education in the 70s, 80s, 90s which extended the capacity of universities in industrial and developing countries by enabling them channel a growing number of secondary school leavers through higher education.
- **Third Period** – Digitized distance education and the emergence of open universities.

According to Peters, it was during the third period of distance education that this special way of teaching and learning attracted worldwide attention and we have become witnesses to an unexpected breakthrough of this method in tertiary education.

Peters (2002) noted the significance of technologies in shaping each period of DE and explained how these technologies accounted for the growing importance of distance education. He noted for instance that one period was characterized by writing, printing and transportation by means of railways, cars and aircrafts; another was characterized by transmission via “old media” such as radio and television and another by “new media” such as the computer. Thus as new and improved technologies emerged; the provision and delivery of distance education received a boost. We must however, recognize that though each period emerged as a result of a new technology; earlier technologies are also incorporated in current practice. For instance, old technologies such as printed course materials, radio and television have remained in use in many distance education contexts.

The increased demand for distance education by learners and the support of individuals and governments gave rise to not a few institutions of higher learning devoted to offering distance education. Some of these are single mode institutions that offer only ODE programmes and conventional face-to-face campus based programmes. Some examples of single mode ODL Universities are Anadolu Universities Turkey; the Radio and Television University, China; Terbuka, Indira Gandhi National Open University, India; Open University of the United Kingdom. Others are University of South Africa; National Open University of Nigeria; Open University of Tanzania and Zimbabwe Open University. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is the only single mode ODL institution in Nigeria. Others are dual mode and include the University of Lagos; the University of Ibadan; the University of Abuja, and recently Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife and Federal University of Technology Yola.

The growth and expansion of Distance Education have been phenomenal worldwide. The expansion has spanned the five continents and the impact has brought about profound transformations in the personal, social and economic lives of people because of its special features. The first move at establishing Distance Education in Nigeria was at the tertiary institutions though not for degree programmes but for agricultural extension courses to farmers. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the University of Ibadan were early providers of such extension services from the early 1960s, via radio and television broadcast (COL, 2001). From about the 1980s, Distance Education was involved more at the higher education level for the training and re-training of teachers and for other areas of human capacity development. Four Universities were to pioneer its use during this early stage, by setting up special units to run Distance Education programmes to meet the increasing demand for higher education. These universities were Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, the University of Lagos, the University of Ibadan and the University of Abuja. At this pioneering stage, there was a non-university status institute, the National Teachers’ Institutes (NTI), set up to address the problem of teacher shortage using Distance Education mode.

Concerns

From their inception in the late 1980s to the close of the 20th century, the above institutions grew and expanded providing access to as many as they could absorb. But they lacked the carrying capacity to address the ever growing demand for higher education. For instance, the late 1990s were characterized by a yawning gap in

higher education provision. The result was an all comers' establishment of study centres popularly called 'outreach centres' in several cities in Nigeria, which offered unregulated programmes in the name of ODL. To respond to this need, the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2002 resuscitated the National Open University.

Again, establishing and operating a virile ODL system would require putting in place certain infrastructures and the right manpower to manage these. Among the critical infrastructures are units directorates charged with instructional resources development, learner support services, information and communication technology and unit for examinations and assessment. Other important structures are study centres where the learners receive instructions and obtain needed information and guidance.

Other infrastructures include technology, electricity and internet connectivity (Yaqub and Suleiman, 2008), these are very critical for meaningful ODL delivery. Technology for example which accounts for the phenomenal growth of distance education and which has made instructional delivery flexible is in poor stage in Nigeria. The same is the case for electricity. There is also a huge gap in human capacity development in such areas as instructional design, development and delivery, examination and assessment, student support services and ICT. Poor internet connectivity, irregular supply of electricity and slowness of some staff and students in acquiring IT skills are huge challenges to be surmounted. Okebukola (2009) listed some challenges of delivery ODL as follows:

- Erratic power supply
- Poor reading culture among the youths
- Teaching of practical subjects not feasible
- Inadequacy of trained tendencies to run the system.
- Perception of the public of inferior status of ODL certificates.

Prospects

In 2002, Peters noted that with overcrowded lecture theatres and seminar halls there would be a considerable increase worldwide in the number of those seeking higher education through ODL. Ten years on, in 2012 Peter's assertion remains valid. Existing delivery models cannot address the growing global demand for post-secondary education. Many countries do not have the resources to build the number of conventional universities that would be required to meet the future demand for tertiary education.

Current information by stakeholders in the higher education sector in Nigeria paints a dismal picture on access. For example, the National University Commissions Executive Secretary, Prof. Julius Okojie in 2011 at a conference on the theme "Increasing Access and the Quality of University Education in Nigeria", reported that the capacity of tertiary institutions in the country could only accommodate about 250,000 candidates as against the annual demand of about 1,000,000. In an effort to tackle the problem of access in Nigeria, the National University Commission (NUC) in the last six years licensed additional 46 Federal, State and Private Universities bring the number of Universities in Nigeria to 117 but despite this additional number "access still remains a formidable challenge" (Okojie, 2011).

The prevailing situation leaves one in no doubt that ODE is the way to go not just for now but for the future. Managers of conventional Universities have realized this and have had to make structure adjustments to be able to meet the new challenges (Peters, 2002). This is the case in many countries of the world and in recent time has become so in Nigeria where not a few conventional Universities have gone dual mode and many more are moving towards doing that. The questions therefore is not about the viability of ODL in education delivery but whether Nigeria has the political will, the human and infrastructure capability to build and sustain the system.

Conclusion

Distance Education mode from all indications seem to offer the way out of the present problem of giving access to the world's burgeoning population. The system is even the more attractive because of its varied and flexible media of instructional delivery made possible by advancement in technology. What is needed is the political will by governments, the enabling environment and the right manpower and infrastructure to build virile distance education programmes that would unlock the potential of many people who may never have such an opportunity because of limited space in the conventional system of instructional delivery.

While it is expected that the managers of tertiary institutions and their staff and students have roles to play especially in acquiring and adopting appropriate work attitudes and study skills respectively, the Nigerian Government must provide the enabling infrastructures, financial and otherwise for ODL to thrive in Nigeria if the nation is to achieve its vision 20-2020 which requires that the majority of her citizens have access to education. Steady power supply and dependable technological environment are very critical.

REFERENCES

- Commonwealth of Learning International (2001): Building capacity of Deliver Distance Education in Nigeria's Federal University System. A Report prepared for the World Bank Vancouver: COL international.
- Commonwealth of Learning International (2003): Tutoring in Open and Distance Learning: A Handbook for Tutors. Vancouver: The Commonwealth of Learning.
- Farrell, G. (Ed) (2003): A Virtual university for small states of the commonwealth Vancouver: The commonwealth of learning.
- Okebukola, P. (2009).New Initiatives on ODL and National Development: A paper presented at 2-day Advocacy workshop on ODL in Abuja from 28-29 April, 2009.
- Okojie J. (2011). An Address presented at the 2011 Annual conference and general meeting of directors of academic Planning of Nigerian Universities with the theme "Increasing access and the quality of University education in Nigeria, held at the National Open University of Nigeria, 25th – 28th October, 2011.
- Okonkwo, U.M. (2012): Open and Distance learning in Nigeria in Ivowi U.M.O. and Akpan B.B: Education in Nigeria from the Beginning to the Future, A book of readings in honour of Prof. Obioha C. Nwana; pp. 359-386.
- Peters, O. (2002) : Distance education in transition, New Trends and Challenges Oldenburg: Carl von Ossietzky University Centre for distance education.
- SAIDE (2007): Open Learning Principles. Retrieved December 10, 2008 from <http://www.saide.org.za>.
- Yaqub, N. And Sulaima, A. (2008). Capacity building for Open and distance education in Nigeria, *African Journal of Distance education* (2), pp. 80-97.