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AUTHORS: Emmanuel Chisa IBARA

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OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: An Emerging System for Alternative Higher Education in Nigeria

Dr. Emmanuel Chisa IBARA
Course Coordinator
School of Education,
National Open University of NIGERIA

ABSTRACT

Nigeria no doubt is at the threshold of transformation in information and communication technology (ICT), a development that should be utilized to meet the demand of time, especially in the education sector. One area in which ICT has made enormous impact is in open and distance learning. Undoubtedly, the demand on the conventional higher education delivery system in the country is high and ever increasing that the system at the moment is unable to accommodate the number of candidates seeking admission. This paper, therefore, attempts some definition of open and distance learning as well as its practices with a view to advancing the prospects of open and distance as alternative system of higher education in Nigeria.

Furthermore, it concludes that considering the level of infrastructural decay in the conventional higher education system, open and distance learning as an alternative system of education has become imperative for the realization of the primary objectives of higher education in Nigeria. Recommendations that will enhance the prospects of open and distance learning as viable alternative system of higher education were proffered.

Keywords: Alternative system; conventional system; open admission; higher education; information and communication technology.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty first century has witnessed increasing paradigm shift in the conventional system of imparting knowledge. Indeed, it is no longer absolutely necessary to be physically present in a classroom in order to learn. Modern electronic technology tends to render the conventional system of teaching and learning irrelevant. For instance, a situation where lecture takes place in a classroom and the students listen, take notes, and at the end of the semester writes examinations to demonstrate the level of knowledge acquired is becoming out-dated.

The modern information and communication technology (ICT) will determine the manner instruction is delivered. Students who are unable to attend classes for one reason or the other, or those who will want to have a second chance to have education will be the greatest beneficiary. In school and after school, at home and at work, youths and adults can enjoy the benefits of learning through the media and the new information technology around (Heinich, Molenda, Russell and Smaldina, 2002).

In Nigeria today, it is an unarguable fact that the demands and pressure on conventional educational delivery system is very high, such that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the system to meet the nation's demand at the present.

Thus, making open and distance learning system a more viable option in ensuring education for all, in terms of its openness to whosoever is interested and prepared to learn. It is, therefore, evident that open and distance learning, if well organized and effectively operated, will assist the nation in solving the problem of admission and accessibility to education which the present conventional system has not sufficiently addressed.

This paper therefore attempts to explore the prospects of open and distance learning as an alternative system for higher education in Nigeria.

WHAT IS OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING?

In this discussion, it is important to have an overview of open and distance learning. Open learning is an elastic concept in which decisions about learning are taken by the learner himself rather than the teacher as to:

- Whether or not to learn (the right or authority to make such decision);
- What to learn (the lesson, skill, subject matter);
- How to learn (the media, method, routes);
- When to learn (time, entry and the exit);
- From who to learn (the teacher, the radio, on-line, the papers, close circuit);
- How to assess learning (the form of feedback provided); and
- What to do next (other courses, career directions); (Barikor, 2003).

Arising from the above, open learning implies freedom from traditional barriers of the conventional system. In other words, in open learning, there is openness to admission, teaching methods, ideas, space, and time, and it is characterized by a commitment to assisting students, especially adults overcome traditional barriers typical of the conventional system. As rightly observed by Osuji (1981) cited in Barikor (2003), open connotes removal of restrictions, exclusion and creating opportunities for study for those debarred from it on account of qualifications, shortage of staff, vacancies, funds, age, distance and even domestic problems or social responsibilities.

This means the removal of discriminatory practices in terms of admission, and other restrictions inherent in the conventional system. Hence, open learning system can immensely help to transform conventional educational practices which have created unnecessary barriers to learning. To maintain such characteristic openness the institution must be decentralized using multimedia approaches to reach the target audience (Barikor, 2003). A good example of an institution with decentralized operation is the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). At present, the university has 28 study centres across the country. NOUN, vision is to be regarded as the foremost university, providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transforms all barriers with a goal of reaching the unreached (NOUN, 2002). Thus, open learning system seeks to remove the impediments to learning, while also providing learners with reasonable opportunity to succeed.

DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance learning can be described as a variant of open learning. Fagbamiye (2002) noted that distance learning has tended to lead to open learning and may promote openness but it is not necessarily synonymous with open learning. Distance learning is characterized by the following:

- physical separation of learners and teachers;
- an organized instructional programme by an educational organization;
- use of media (low technology, that is, books, media technology, television, audio cassette, video cassette, radio, high technology-computer and internet (Heinich et. al, 2002)

It is therefore evident that in distance learning, the teacher and students do not need to be at the same place or interact at the same time. This means that there is a separation in distance and time, implying that a student in Rivers State can study course materials prepared by teachers in Lagos State or that a student in Nigeria can also study course materials prepared in London. Distance learning has therefore become more convenient because large number of people who ordinarily might have been denied access to formal education are able to have education in their chosen time and place.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AS AN EMERGING ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM

Open and distance learning represents veritable means of expanding education without the monumental capital investment required for new structures. Moreover, the present inadequacy of facilities and infrastructural decay in the conventional system as well as the increasing pressure on the available educational resources make the open and distance learning system relevant to the Nigerian education system. Adelemo (2001) noted that the Nigerian education system need to adapt to a student-centred, rather than a teacher-centred approach and must redirect investment from physical structures to technology-driven system of education.

Similarly, Sait (2000) identified some of the benefits associated with open and distance learning system as thus:

- It can enhance the expansion of universities, educational environments at less cost per student than under the traditional resident campus system.
- greater flexibility in the design and delivery of curriculum content than is normally associated with classroom teaching, enables distance learning courses to adapt to specific students' needs or work requirements, thereby enabling greater relevance.
- Distance learning accommodates the growing demands for life long learning more easily than do traditional school settings.
- It opens the doors for those otherwise denied opportunities to quality education.
- Makes quality programme hitherto not available in our part of the world easily accessible.

From the foregoing, the present higher education system which is virtually conventionally-based need restructuring in order to inject the system with effective open and distance education opportunities as well as remove unnecessary barriers as to time, place, age, locations, cost and infrastructure as prerequisite for teaching and learning. Arising from the above, Nigeria, no doubt is at the threshold of revolution in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and it is a welcome development which the nation's education system should take advantage of; to be able to meet the demands of the time, especially the large number of candidates seeking university admission but are constrained by space, time and location. To corroborate this view, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, the former President of the Federal Republic of

Nigeria, while delivering a speech at the convocation ceremony of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria Nigeria, remarked that the essence of the ongoing education reforms, especially the consolidation of Polytechnics and Colleges of Education into Universities is to enable the creation of at least 500,000 spaces to cater for thousands of prospective candidates who fail to gain admission into the university yearly (The Punch, 2007). Similarly, Dhanarajan (2000) observed that only 5% or 6% of post secondary educational demands of the citizens of the Commonwealth countries is currently being met by the present conventional system of higher education. Furthermore, Rumble (1992) cited in Fagbamiye (2002) pointed out that the distance learning enables a limited number of teachers to reach a very large number of students thereby opening the way to endless economies of scale and cost reduction. The implication is that open and distance learning system can be cheaper and far-reaching and can also absorb a large number of the population that cannot be admitted by the conventional institutions. What is more, learners and the teachers are freed from the restriction of time, space and cost and other unnecessary rigidity inherent in the conventional system.

Although, open and distance learning systems have the problems of its dependence on non-human communication media and capital intensive facilities, with high initial costs and the risk of occasional power failure (Barikor, 2003). According to Thorpe and Grugeon (1987), the overall result of these problems often result in high rate of withdrawal and non-completion of courses and programmes (referred to attrition), especially at the early stages of distance courses. Nevertheless, it is clear that the benefits of open and distance learning system far outweighs its problems especially its ability to provide access to learners who would either because of work commitments, or geographical location be denied access to education.

CONCLUSION

This paper has identified open and distance learning system as a coherent learning alternative to the present conventional system in Nigeria, and equally established that open and distance learning system is an effective alternative for higher education in Nigeria. The system has the inherent capacity of relieving the enormous pressure on the conventional system and also ensuring education for all. The problems of open and distance learning were highlighted in the paper; suffice to add that the benefits of open and distance learning system outweighs its problems.

Recommendations

The paper therefore recommends as follows:

- The federal and state governments and the policy makers in Nigeria should have a rethink on the current practice of spending virtually all the financial allocation to tertiary institutions for the sustenance of the conventional education system which has not yet been able to meet the needs of candidates seeking admission into the university.
- In order to ensure that the quality of products and service delivery in open and distance learning are of acceptable standard, there is the need for institutions offering distance programme to have good administration of the learning, assessment, monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure quality control.

- It is imperative to provide steady power supply in the country, since distance education depends on a great deal of information and communication technology.
- There is the need for the federal and especially state governments with universities that are running distance education programmes to inject more funds to the system given the initial high cost involved in running distance education.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHOR



Dr. Emmanuel Chisa Ibara, is a seasoned educationist who has taught Educational Management in several universities in Nigeria. He holds B.Sc degree from the university of Port Harcourt, Nigeria; Post Graduate Diploma in Education, M.Ed and Ph.D degrees in Educational Management from the Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Dr. Ibara, is presently a Course Coordinator in the School of Education, National Open University of Nigeria. Dr. Ibara, is an indigene of Omoku, in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Dr. Emmanuel Chisa IBARA
 Course Coordinator
 School of Education,
 National Open University of Nigeria
 14/16 Ahmadu Bello Way, Victoria Island, Lagos, NIGERIA
 Tel: 08033394214
 Email: emibrax@yahoo.com

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