Problems and Prospects of Open and Distance Education in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Distance education as a mean of providing access to education, particularly tertiary level education, has gained great prominence in the world. Nigeria has taken giant steps of recent to introduce open and distance education programme. This paper explores the major terms inherent in open and distance education, its potentials, possible factors that may inhibit successful implementation of the programme, and the use of low and high technological tools for its implementation. The paper recommended the use of Organisation Element Model (OEM) as suggested by (Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001) for its planning and implementation, and also stressed the need for improvement in electricity and communication services.

Keywords: **Distance education, Nigeria, Open and Distance Learning Blue Print, Media, Low tech, High tech, Organisational Element Model.**

INTRODUCTION

Every nation invests in education because it can produce unquantifiable benefits for individuals, organisations and the society as a whole. Education is provided through formal and informal means. In formal settings the conventional (face-to-face school instruction) and distance education (offered with separation in terms of physical location of instructors and students) have been used to provide educational opportunities to recipients. Open education though not new in Nigeria has been given much prominence of recent. Many Nigerians benefited through the open education (correspondence) of Rapid Result College, and Exam Success Correspondence College, among others. In fact, like the Universal Basic Education (UBE), distance education is one of the major pivots, on which the present Federal administration in Nigeria hopes to improve the quantity and quality of instruction in Nigerian schools. It is also a means of providing access to basic and tertiary education for Nigerians. Policy statements and actions have given fillip to the determination of the government to make a success of the programme.

The revised national policy on education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN 2004) detailed the goal of distance education should be to:

- **Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.**
- **Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place.**
- **Encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula.**
- **Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work (p. 45).**

To achieve these goals it is stated that the federal government of Nigeria shall ensure that distance education programme are equivalent in structure and status to those offered by face-to-face mode of instruction, and that the government shall encourage and regulate distance education programme in Nigeria. It shall also establish distance education advisory body to advice government on distance education, promote distance education nationwide, liaise with existing educational regulatory bodies and institutions offering distance education, liaise with media establishments, encourage provide efforts and other non-governmental organisation the provision of quality distance education, and encourage participation in distance education programme at all levels and strengthen the capacity of existing institution providing distance education (FRN, 2004).

An advert by the National Open Distance Learning Programme (NODLP, 2002) gave insight into efforts made to kick-start the open and distance learning programme in Nigeria. It noted the enactment of the national Policy on Open and Distance Education; the development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Blueprint; organisation of National, Sub-regional and Regional Conferences and Workshops on material development for ODL; seeking assistance from international development partners, and the appointment of National Co-ordinator for ODL. The advert opined that the programme is meant to;

> ***...Be used to tackle the priority areas of national need, and provide access to equitable education opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied. The plan is to establish the National Open University, National Open Polytechnic and National Open School within local government areas. The priority now is starting the National Open University (p. 16).***

Despite these laudable steps and commendable mission statements, the question remains, whether Nigeria can make a success of the open and distance learning programme. Will the "Nigerian factor" not impact on the implementation of the programme? Will there be continuity so that this experiment will not end like that of the early 80's? These and other pertinent questions will agitate the minds of discerning Nigerians who had witnessed consistent failures in previous education programmes.

The failure of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) which was launched with great expectations in 1976 has engendered the launching of Universal Basic Education (UBE), which is yet to make any appreciable impact on the enrolment, the quantity, and quality of instruction in Nigerian Primary and Junior Secondary Schools, since 1999. A score and four years after the National Policy on Education (FRN, 1981) is supposed to have taken off; several aspects of the policy are yet to be implemented. The computer education programme, which was to take off in Nigerian secondary schools in 1987, is yet to commence in most schools. Open and distance education should not be seen as a cost-saving educational measure which can be implemented without serious planning and good implementation, but rather it should be seen as an educational innovation that requires greater attention to planning and guided implementation.

MEANING, NATURE, AND CHARACTERISTIC OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The need to clarify common terms used to describe distance education becomes important in order to give direction to discussion of its implementation in Nigeria. Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to distance education. These terms include distance learning, distance teaching, correspondence study education, home study, external study and independent study. The compound concept distance education subsumes other terms as most of the terms merely address specific aspect of distance education (Keegan, 1996). Distance learning is used as a

term to describe the student-centeredness of distance education and it deals with the use of print and electric technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. Distance teaching refers to the didactic strategies of delivery of instruction to students, and this is instructor-centered.

Correspondence study entails distance education through the postal sub-groups. That is, learning at home and communicating with instructors using the print materials as fundamental element of distance education. Home study was used extensively in United States of America but condemned as a term for distance education because distance learner may not, in fact, study at home or may study part at home and part at other places (Keegan, 1996). External study is a form of education that is external to but not separated form the faculty staff of the institution offering distance education programme. Independent study is used for a range of teaching-learning activities, which indicates students' control over learning time, pace and place. However, this is misconstrued as independence from an educational institution which is not usually the case (Keegan, 1996; Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra; 2001).

Distance education has within its purview elements of these terms. Thus, Holmerg (1990) defined distance education as:

> ***The various forms of teaching and learning at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or in the same premises but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition (i.e. tutoring, teaching) of the staff of the tutorial organisation. Its main characteristic is that it relies on non-contiguous, i.e. mediated communication (p. 1).***

Therefore, distance education means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity (Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001). Generally, distance education has four major characteristics as identified by ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (2002). These characteristics are: institutional accreditation where learning is certified by an institution or agency; use of variety of media for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure tutor-learner, and learner-learner interaction; and possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials for leaner-learner interaction, laboratory or practice session or library study.

Distance education not only shares the goals of conventional education, but it also aims at providing access to historically under-served, place bound, and highly motivated population. Distance education is said to be open because of students' freedom and programme flexibility. It is flexible and open in terms of its admission requirements, that is, not as rigid as in conventional institutions, freedom in terms of place of study, time, place, and composition of study programme, content and didactic approach. It is intended to offer useful learning opportunity to recipients at a time and local environment convenient to them. Contacts between the student and institutions are provided through interactive and non-interactive media. It may also be provided through some contact at study centre. Unlike the conventional face-to-face instruction, the delivery medium plays a crucial role in minimising the gap between teaching and learning (Keegan, 1996).

COMMUNICATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Conventional or distance education programme is dependent on good communication for successful learning to take place. Good communication promotes needed interactions (teacher-teacher and student-student) in teaching /learning situation. This is because interaction is essential to students' learning and

to the overall success and effectiveness of distance education. Recent studies by distance educators have confirmed that interaction in distance learning environment may lead to increased academic achievement (ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning, 2003; Lenning & Ebber, 1999; Neibuhr & Neibuhr, 1999), and also greater retention rate of instructional content (Lenning & Ebber, 1999).

Since distance education entails the absence of face-to-face contact embedded in conventional education, media with high interactivity must be used. That is, media which can promote both teacher-student and student-student interactions. In this context interactivity in the words of Garrison (1993) is the "sustained two-way communication among two or more persons for the purpose of explaining and challenging perspective" (p. 160. In a learning context it is the interaction among two or more people for the purpose of task/instructional competition or social relationship building (Gibert & Moore, 1998). Media must be used in distance education to ensure both asynchronous and synchronous communication (Huang, 2000; Liaw & Huang, 2000). Asynchronous communication gives learners the freedom of choice in learning. This communication is not dependent on learners being present together at a specific time to conduct teaching and learning activities.

Asynchronous communication environment provides learners with discussion that allows participant access to the conference or instruction at different times. Therefore, learners can work at their own convenience, when or where they want and at their own place, thereby providing learners more time to reflect on their own ideas and encourage them to do more critical thinking. On the other hand, synchronous communication occurs in real time as all participants in the interaction, including instructors must be present at the same time, although they may not necessarily be at the same physical location. Thus, synchronous communication serves the role of a thinking device for collaborative construction of knowledge and enhances learners' high-order thinking skills and creative abilities (Huang, 2000, Liaw & Huang, 2000).

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY AT A DISTANCE IN NIGERIA

In spite of the enthusiasm generated by the new thrust in open and distance education, overall problems that may impede proper implementation are better understood and taken care of. These problems are discussed as follow.

1. **Lack of consistency in programme/policy implementation: It is a known fact that success in any educational policy is contingent on the involvement of all stakeholders and sponsorship of funding agency, that is, the government. A succeeding government truncated the attempt at Open University in the early 80's. Thus, successive governments in Nigeria must not only allow the continuation of open and distance education programme, it must be supported through adequate fund.**

2. **Problem of electricity: Since successful distance education cannot be assured without the use of communication and technological tools (e-mail, fax, Internet, television, radio, etc.), then the problem of electricity comes into focus. Several rural areas in Nigeria are yet to have electricity, while the urban arrears experience epileptic power supply. This will create problems for effective integration of most technological media in the delivery of distance education programme. Poverty among Nigerians makes alternative sources of electricity non-visible to most Nigerians.**

3. **Poor telecommunication facilities and lacks of access: Just like electricity most Nigerians do not have access to telephone and other telecommunication facilities. Even, telephone lines in the urban centres are not adequate to serve the teeming population. Services for those who have access are in most cases epileptic. These may make the integration of telecommunication in the delivery of distance education difficult. In addition, poor state of telephone has led to increase in dial-up cost for most Nigerians. Even with the recent introduction of GSM in August, 2001, access is still limited and services are yet to be perfect and service charge may make GSM unattractive for distant learners.**
4. **Poor Postal System: The postal system in the country is not yet up to international standard, in terms, of safety of goods, quick delivery of correspondences, accessibility to remote areas, and so on. Although of recent improvements have been made in the post services by NIPOST, the level of services, cannot guarantee efficient two-way communication between distant learners and distance education institutions.**
5. **Poor economic situations and its effects on middle level manpower:- The poor state of the nation's economy has pauperised most Nigerians. Even an average middle income earner cannot afford basic technological and communication gadgets. Thus, computer related telecommunication facilities might not be useful for most Nigerians, as computer is still a luxury in institutions, offices and homes. This may make the integration of necessary on-line resources (e-mail, newsgroups, world-wide-web, etc.) into distance education in Nigeria difficult.**
6. **Poor ICT Penetration: Like most African countries basic ICT infrastructures are inadequate. A study by Nigerian Information Technology Professionals in America in 2002 indicated that given current ICT penetration it may take Nigeria 50 years to catch up with America on the aspect of Pc count per households (Iromanto, 2004). The most significant problem being the cost of PC.**

These problems if not addressed will impede proper implementation of open and distance education in Nigeria. Therefore, efforts should be intensified to improve electricity, telecommunication and other communication facilities in both urban and rural areas.

COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

There is an array of communication and technological tools available for the delivery of distance education programme in Nigeria. The nature of distance education and the need to provide opportunity for learners to interact with instructors and other learners makes it imperative for the use of media, which can ensure effective communication.

It should be emphasised that media in themselves cannot ensure good teaching but the way they are integrated. Therefore, courses using "media mix", that is, printed materials, electronic media, interactive and non-interactive media are essential. There is the need for appropriate mix of "low-tech" delivery approach using the print media and technology based delivery system.

Since learners are social beings, no technology regardless of its interaction ability can serve as perfect substitute for human interaction. Thus, the use of study centres for adding face-to-face communication where appropriate is important. This will provide opportunity for teacher-student and student-student interaction which can greatly enhance the delivery of distance teaching (Willis, 1998).

Low-tech" delivery using the print option should also be part of delivery system. This becomes imperative in a country like Nigeria where the electricity and telecommunication facilities are below the required standard for distance education. Print documents should be such that get students involved through its structuring, exercises, and pacing. Print materials which can serve as a fundamental element should include print formats of textbooks, study guides, workbooks, course syllabi, and case study (Willis, 1998).

Relevant "high-tech", latest technology will be needed to provide both asynchronous and synchronous communications. This deals with computer networks and computer based multi-media. These include using computer-based instruction (CBI) as self-contained teaching machine to present individual lessons. CD-ROM can provide structured courses with well-designed programmes. Distance learners can study the content through their own computer, thus providing opportunity for individual drill and practise. Electronics mail (e-mail), computer conferencing, and World Wide Web (web) applications can also be used. The web has the capabilities to include several audio and video facilities, textbooks, study guides, workbooks, and course syllabi (Huang, 2000). Distance learners can use online search to conduct research or collect relevant information to assist their learning. The introduction of virtual library into the nation's educational system will also serve to promote the use of computers in distance education.

Traditional technological tools can also be relevant. Distance education course materials can be delivered through broadcast radio and television, videotape, interactive telephone, satellite, cable or Integrated Service Digital network (ISDN) lines. Many would be distance learners in Nigeria have access to radio, television, and videotape; this makes these media potential delivery systems for distance education.

With the combination of communication and technology tools discussed earlier the delivery of distance education may be effective. This can be ensured through integrated involvement of all stakeholders and effective planning to ensure successful implementation of the distance learning programme in Nigeria.

EFFECTIVE PLANS FOR USEFUL RESULTS IN NIGERIA'S DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Since distance education has come of age in industrialised society, Nigeria can also make a success of the programme with adequate planning and conscious efforts to achieve success. Kaufman, Watkins, and Guerra, (2001) have suggested the framework for strategic planning, needs assessments and decisions making to achieve success in distance education.

This is the Organisational Elements Models. The elements are Outcomes (e.g., future self-sufficiency), Output (e.g., distance learning), and inputs (e.g., course content or technology). Using this model distance education will not rely on conversions of conventional instructional instruction to a different mode of delivery rather it is concerned with the design of learning opportunities as well as linkages among the curriculum, the learner and completion of programmes (Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001). In planning, distance education will not be considered as a cost saving device, but rather as a mean of increasing access to education. Therefore, outputs, products processes and inputs are considered on definable problems and students' needs. Strategic alliance should be developed with conventional institutions, including libraries; media services, computer services, and include input of business/industry representatives, community leaders and potential students (Willis, 1998).

Adequate technical support should be provided, because of the vital link of technology in course delivery and support services for students. Technical support should be available for needed hardware and software maintenance, and upgrade. Thus, technical support should be available for planning, implementation and troubleshooting when technical problems occur (Willis, 1998). Provide opportunity for staff growth and development in line with new developments. Build in effective evaluation for distant sites and students. This is critical as a feedback tool for students for formative and summative dimensions as well as quantitative and qualitative components (Wills, 1998). Since effective implementation is content specific it is important to understand the unique characteristics and constraints of distance education within the context of Nigeria and the envisaged audience.

CONCLUSIONS

Open and distance education can provide needed access for Nigerian who are presently disadvantaged through the conventional educational system. The enthusiasm shown by government and steps taken so far can only be sustained through proper planning and monitored implementation. For distance education goals to be achieved, proper steps must be taken not only to involve all stakeholders (community leaders, business groups, conventional educational institutions, etc.). Valid performance model like the OEM should be selected and then rigorously applied in the planning and implementation of the distance education programme in Nigeria. This will ensure that responsible and responsive educational opportunities are provided for Nigerian through distance education. Various communication and technology tools have been identified for distance education; their successful use can only be assured through proper selection for specific group of learners and their relevance (quality, attributes, and instructional strategy). Since distance education lacks the face-to-face contact in conventional education, necessary infrastructures, equipment and fund must be available to provide means of communication with students and offering counselling services to them. Such means should not only be for the delivery of instructional contents to students but also for guidance, time management techniques, technology training and assistance, and also initiatives to guard and encourage students' progress (Huang, 2000 de Wolf, 1996).

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