

Open and Distance Learning Effective and Accessible Approach to Higher Education in Nigeria

Ajudeonu Helen Ihieonyemolor
Gbenoba Grammar School, Agbor, Delta state

Nwaha Caroline Obioma
Primary Education Studies Department
College of Education, Agbor, Delta State

Abstract

Distance education, also called distance learning, has existed for centuries. It provides whatever educational opportunities needed by anyone, anywhere and at any time. The modern age of dynamic changes has new demands for persons, societies and the education system. These challenges have called for considerable increase in the role of education. The Open and Distance Learning is responding to the demands in introducing into the education system modern renovating, accessible and flexible means of acquiring knowledge. Open and Distance Learning provides tools that allow for increased access to education. It also enhances the system of education while insuring life-long opportunities for self-development and fulfillment. Open and Distance Learning offer accessible and effective approach to higher education. Adults and youths, working and non-working and other categories of persons in the society who never thought of having opportunity to have a higher education in Nigeria have taken the advantage of the Open and Distance Learning system to fulfill their desires.

Introduction

The Government's efforts have been towards providing popular education in the country for all citizens. The revitalization of Open and Distance Education at all levels of education received a boost in the year 2000, when the Nigerian democratic government started a gradual and progressive development of both structure and capacity building of staff of relevant institutions. The efforts of the government in the development of Open and Distance Learning dates back to Ashby report on Higher Education in 1960 when it recommended that there should be the establishment of the University of Lagos considering the concentration of people and the higher demand of university education. The feature in Section 5 stated that "Associated with university (but preferably under a Dean or Director with special knowledge of correspondence education), there should be a Department for correspondence courses. This Department should

offer properly qualified and enrolled students, correspondence courses leading to degree in a limited range of subjects, which can be taught by correspondence. It was in view of that fact that such institution would provide access to and encourage men and women who were already in employment to improve their education and fit them into better responsible positions.

Before the establishment of Open and Distance Learning, most Nigerians had been acquiring education through correspondence courses, especially through British institutions such as the popular Rapid Result College. In a bid to making Open University a reality, the second republic witnessed the establishment of an Open University with the National Assembly Act of 1982. The existence of this Open University was terminated by the subsequent military government. With the suspension of the Open University by the military government, the idea continued to strive through other circles. The University of Lagos established the Distance Learning Institute (DLI), Centre for External Studies (CES) of the University of Ibadan, University of Air of the Federal Polytechnic, Oko (NATCOM - UNESCO 2000) and the National Teachers Institute (NTI) Kaduna (UNESCO 2001) which is dedicated to the production of qualified teachers.

In the same view with the National Teachers Institute (NTI) in Kaduna, attempts for Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria included: The Nomadic Education Commission. This is the distance learning educational programme for nomads which aims at reaching the nomadic cattle-rearers with education wherever they reside.

Distance education, also called distance learning, has existed for a long time. It involves acquiring education outside the traditional or conventional classrooms and new and advanced technology have improved its programmes and process.

What is Open and Distance Learning?

Open and Distance Learning has many approaches to its definition. Different authors have attempted to give definition to Open and Distance Learning. Hulsmann (1997) tried to define Open and Distance Learning from the characteristics of the type of education offered by the Open and Distance Learning. He gave definitions covering the features of Open and Distance Learning as follows:

1. The separation of the teachers and learning in time or place, or in both time and place.
2. The influence of an educational institution necessity for institutional accreditation of programmes and courses.
3. The use of technical media, involving mixed media such as print, radio and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer band learning and telecommunications.

4. The provisions of two-way communication allowing for interaction between learners and tutors either synchronously, as opposed to the passive receipt of broadcast signals.

The Commonwealth of Learning (2000) defined Open and Distance Learning as involving the possibility of face-to-face meeting for tutorials, learner-learner interaction (Self-help Study Groups), library study, laboratory and practice sessions.

Open and Distance Learning also involves the use of industrialized processes that is in large scale Open and Distance Learning, operations are divided and tasks are assigned to various staff members working together in course development teams.

UNESCO (2002) saw Open and Distance Learning as the approach that focuses on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Here, the learner is not confined to a particular learning environment and a planned time.

Ojo, Ogidan and Olakulehin (2006) conceptualized Open and Distance Learning as an educational approach designed to reach the learners in their homes, office/shops or any place of residence where learning resources are provided for them to qualify without attending formal classes in person, or create opportunities for life-long learning, no matter where or when they want to study.

Furthermore, Paratton, Robinson and Creed (2001) defined Distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and/or time from the learner. Open and Distance Learning is an organised educational activity based on the use of materials, in which the constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, entry, or time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of the above.

Thus, the concept of Open and Distance Learning in an educational outfit at the tertiary level of education is virtually correspondent in nature.

North (1993) saw Distance Learning as simply a recent extension of the classroom environment into a remote location. This definition appears to be narrow and fails to consider aspects of distance education.

Mugridge (1991) perceived Open and Distance Education as a form of education in which there is normally a separation between teacher and learner and thus one in which other means – the printed and written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing are used to bridge the physical gap. Open and Distance Learning provides whatever educational opportunities needed to anyone, anywhere, and at anytime.

Whatever definition given to Open and Distance Learning, it is necessary to state that the end result will be increased educational opportunities for broader segments of the population accommodating different situations and needs.

Objectives of Open and Distance Learning

1. To create learning opportunity for millions of Nigerians.
2. To provide alternative access for those who could not be accommodated in the formal education process.
3. Provide professional development and upgrading opportunities that do not remove learners from their workplaces.
4. To provide a dual-mode 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 institutions.
5. To re-integrate those that have recently been disengaged from the illegal opportunity provided by the satellite campuses.

Classes of People for Open and Distance Learning

1. **Adult Learners:** In the past, most distance education focused on adult learners, especially in rural districts (Fulton 1992). This remains the most usage worldwide. It was used for short courses to help farmers and small businesses adapt to new technologies. For example in China, about one to two million adults are in Distance Education programmes; in places like the UK, the Open University is largely for adults. In recent years, complete post-secondary degree programmes have begun to appear. In Nigeria, the Open and Distance Learning provides opportunity for adults to have access to higher education.
2. **K - 12 Education:** This is exclusively for the United States of America. In America, the K-12 Education is the most rapidly growing learning sector of pre-university age group. This is usually in the form of curriculum enrichment modules and ongoing telecommunications project (Sherry, 1994). This provides a medium where course programmes for middle school students, for which there is not enough demand at their local schools, to allocate resources, but which can prove profitable when made available to students at all of the area of K-12 schools.
3. **Disabled and Homebound:** This refers to individuals who cannot easily travel. This includes senior citizens and the disabled who are natural candidates for Open and Distance Learning. The group in Nigeria would include mothers often referred to as 'Full-time Housewives' who do not work but stay fully at home but require up-grading in their education.
4. **Government and Non-Government Workers on Compulsory Work without Study-leave:** This group includes adults and youth who work currently in government parastatals and non-governmental organisations but are denied access to higher education that can qualify them as professionals. These are workers who cannot be granted study-leave with or without pay and are not able or willing to risk leaving their job or employment to further their education.

5. **Youth Denied Access to Higher Education through JAMB:** Year after year, many youths of this nation seek admission into higher institutions but are denied access either due to failure of JAMB examination or post-UME screening as the case is now. The Open and Distance Learning has become the best alternative for these young Nigerians.
6. **Workers who are frequently transferred:** The group of people includes men of the Armed Forces and some security agencies. They are frequently moving from one station to another in accordance with the demand of their jobs. Only Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provides the opportunity for this group of people to have access to higher education due to the flexibility in the operations.

Open Distance Learning: Accessibility and Effective Approach to Higher Education in Nigeria

The demand of higher education for balanced development has led to the Open University System in Nigeria. Citizens of the country who are not privileged to attend the conventional university had demanded for higher education for job improvement. Obanya (1999) noted that there exists a great insufficiency of opportunities in access to quality education in Nigeria today with low quality education. This calls for a radical change in the approach to the education system and process in Nigeria. In the same vein, UNESCO (2002) stated that efforts should be geared to meet the new and changing demand for education and training. To this end, Open and Distance Learning could be seen as an approach that would be complementary to the conventional or traditional system of higher education.

The teeming population of Nigeria had no access to higher education. Every year, hundreds of thousands of youths are denied access to higher education either to the universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. Available information on the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) revealed that every year has seen the number of intending candidates that seek admission access to higher education keep increasing. But year after year, only a few thousands, about one-third of the applicants, gain access into institutions of higher learning in National Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education (See Table 1).

Universities		1996/97	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/2001
Number of Applicants	of	371,482	400,194	461,548	653,818
Number Admitted		56,055	78,550	78,550	50,227
Polytechnics					
Number of Applicants	of	168,981	123,231	110,831	198,850
Number Admitted		28,091	33,168	37,005	38,145
Colleges	of				

Education

Number of Applicants	16,546	27,916	<i>na</i>	14,438
Number Admitted	12,023	12,562	<i>na</i>	6,672

Source: Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board, 2004

The Open and Distance Learning system of education offers workers the opportunity to have access to higher education and self development to any level. Most government workers are denied access to higher education even at the professional level. The government does not release workers for higher education on study leave either with or without pay. In this era of scarcity of job opportunities, workers cannot risk losing their jobs. In the recent past, workers resorted to week-end studies with satellite campuses but with the closure of these satellite campuses all over the country, the Open and Distance Learning stands as a better offer for opportunity in balanced development for Nigerian workers.

The national institutions of higher learning lack the ability to accommodate the growing number of applicants due to lack of facilities. The Open and Distance Learning educational system offer access to higher education. Learners are not confined to place and time, learners are reached in their homes, offices and shops (Ojo et al 2006). The conventional educational institutions with inadequacies of lack of space and shortage of personnel and other infrastructure no longer pose as an obstacle to the acquisition of higher education and self-development for professional workers at their levels.

Furthermore, Open and Distance Learning offers easy access to higher education for many Nigerians giving room for mass education. According to the National Population Commission Census of 1991, about 62 million Nigerians are illiterate. The Open and Distance Learning system of education gives opportunity for mass literacy in the country, especially for the youth who have been denied admission to higher institutions by JAMB.

The Open and Distance Learning is an easy means of achieving the global objective of providing education for all by the year 2015. This system of learning provides personal development for people who never thought they could have access to higher education. There has been a group of people in the society who could not further their education after their secondary education and they could not afford schooling without being at work. This group of people has remained at their secondary school education level in their work place. The ODL has opened up opportunity to have a higher degree.

According to Ojo, Ogidan and Olakulehin (2005), the Open and Distance Learning is favourable to particular classes of people, especially the Armed Forces and other security agencies whose jobs, involve frequent movement from one place to another. As these students move from one place to another, they are able to apply for change of study centre. The conventional institutions of higher education cannot cater for this particular need effective for this peculiar group of people.

In addition, there are other peculiar groups of learners who the ODL has offered access to higher education. Among them are young married women who could not easily go back to school with tender children, the ODL offers opportunity for them to still be nursing mothers at home and acquire higher education through Open and Distance Learning.

Another group comprises graduates who had finished university education but did not have the opportunity to read a course of their choice due to circumstances either not scoring the expected mark for the course. After graduation, the ODL offers opportunity to students to read courses of their choice.

Open and Distance Learning is an effective approach to higher education. Our conventional higher institutions of education, from time to time, suffer closures of schools due to one reason or the other. In recent times, students' violence, especially due to cult clashes, had led to closures to such schools. With ODL, there are no school closures. Educational needs and attainment of degree at the stipulated time by the learner is guaranteed.

Researchers like Hulsmann (1997) and UNESCO (2002) reported on ODL as effective approach for higher education. Their research revealed that ODL allows for economics of scale and convenience of learning. This makes it an attractive model of education for a broad category of learners to partake in the programme.

Open and Distance Learning brings flexibility into the learning system. Learners learn at their own pace in terms of time and cost. They are able to spread the period of the study time and ability to afford the fees payable for the programmes (Ojo et al, 2005). The learners are not put under any pressure in terms of period for completion of their programmes and specified time frame for completion of programme. The ODL approach to education development in Nigeria has brought innovations into educational system with attendance, accessibility and flexibility.

Challenges of the Open and Distance Learning for the Learner

Open and Distance Learning, while offering ample opportunities, have some challenges. For now, the challenges facing Open and Distance Learning educational system on the part of learners include:

Lots of self-discipline and motivation are needed for the learners (Collis 1996). There are no structured meeting times, and no regular instructor contact, learning means the students must be independent and self-motivated to complete the programmes.

Also social interaction in Open and Distance Learning is on-line only. Learners require basic computer skills with word processing, internet browser and e-mail softwares. This could be expensive.

Social interaction is minimal between teachers and learners since learning depends on technological skills of the use of the computer and access to internet could be a significant cost.

Open and Distance Learning requires good writing skills on the art of the learners. Classes are held at specified times and places. Learners are expected as much as possible to be disciplined to keep with time schedule and be able to take down instruction as fast as possible.

With ODL, the individual is alone with his study and at home, he faces the challenges of family, work and other social demands (Ojo and Olakulehin, 2006).

The learner requires technological literacy including computer literacy. The learner will require training in the use of the tools in order to enjoy connectivity. As Sherry (1994) pointed out that without the relevant knowledge of the use of the tools, distance learning degenerates into the old correspondence course model of independent study.

The cost of ODL is an issue of concern to learners. It is often conceived by people that Open and Distance Learning is mostly for workers who could afford the cost but studies by Ojo and Olakulehin have shown in Nigeria that non-working learners of the Open and Distance Learning are more than the working learners. The non-working learners are 59% while the working learners are 41% (Ojo and Olakulehin, 2006).

ODL has cost implications. Studies have shown that the costs per average student of distance education is more expensive than that of the traditional setting (UNESCO, 2002). The ODL system of education has increased in enrolments of number of students despite the challenges.

Conclusion

The Open and Distance Learning is a new innovation in the educational system. There are twenty-three study centres in the six geo-political zones of the nation. The re-introduction and re-opening of distance learning is a channel for quality and an accessible opportunity for the higher education of the Nigerian populace. The Open and Distance Learning system now remains the possible, accessible and effective alternative approach to meeting the educational needs of different groups in the country. Education has become accessible to offshore oil workers, prisoners, women in the purdah, the homebound full-time housewives, senior citizens and the disabled, to mention but a few. For once, the perennial problem of equitable access to higher education, equality of opportunities for all citizens and provision of a second chance for people who for some reasons had dropped out of the system is gradually being solved.

The Open and Distance Learning educational programme in Nigeria holds a number of potentials for various stakeholders in the 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 qualified educationally. There should be sustenance of this process.

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