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## THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract;**

*Distance education as a means 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, starting from introduction, its history, challenges and prospects. It also went further to make recommendations for further improvement. In the introduction and history of open and distance learning in the paper, various kinds of definition of open and distance learning were presented but all boil down to a process of education in which the guide or facilitator and the student are separated geographically but communicate via information communication technology gadgets. The paper also discussed some of the challenges of ODL; such as lack of ICT materials, institutional problems, infrastructural problems, economic problems, attitudinal problems of both the students and the teachers, etc. Despite some of the challenges, the paper discussed some of the prospects of ODL. Such prospects are flexibility, provision of educational opportunity to large population, individual approach to education, etc. The paper therefore recommended the use of organizational element model (OEM) as suggested by Kaufman, Watkins and Guerra, 2001) for its planning and implementation, and also stressed the need for improvement in power system or electricity and communication services. Furthermore, the paper recommended that both the students and the facilitators have to change their attitude towards distance learning.*

**Keywords:** Challenges, Prospects, Open and Distance Learning, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Open and distance learning was first known as distance learning before it became “open and distance learning”. Indeed, the concept “distance learning” emerged from the idea of “distance education” which came from “correspondence education” which itself arose from non-formal education. Distance learning is a process of education which emphasizes learning; it is an educational enterprise during which, a facilitator of learning who is usually separated from the learner by spatial or mental distance, gathers, collates and presents information in learnable form to one or a group of learners who have accepted the responsibility to learn.

Distance education on the other hands, is a process whereby an individual or institution packages information in a learnable way with the view to helping another individual or group of individuals to learn at a distance. In fact, distance education is “a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance or both” (Honeyman & Miller, 1993: 68). While in distance education, the facilitator does all that is necessary to help the learners learn, the responsibility to learn lies with the learners; and this responsibility includes the choice and decision to enroll on a

programme, the choice of media through which to learn and most importantly, what to learn and how to learn it.

Improving the quality of education through the diversification of content and methods, and promoting experimentation, innovation, the diffusion and sharing of information and the best practices as well as policy dialogue are UNESCO's strategic objectives in education.

The effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for education addresses both the problems, challenges and solution to technology based learning, which is the main tool for open and distance learning. ICTs play a key role as enabler to help us better manage the complex information flow and to integrate such information into effective policy formulation and planning towards the utmost maximization of human capital and potential in society. We must develop effective and integrated tools as well as training modules to enable their application through effective education agenda (Mac-Ikemenjima, 2005).

The term flexible education, known to most people in Africa as distance education or learning, has until very recently been considered as inferior to the traditional conventional method of face-to-face education or training. However, this attitude is gradually changing as telecommunications and new educational challenges emerge. Several studies have been carried out in North America that compared traditional teaching methods with those delivered via telecommunications. Using final grades as indicators to determine outcomes, the studies revealed almost no difference in outcome. In fact, the studies often showed slightly better results from students learning via an ICT medium. Telecommunications have closed the gap between and within instructional methods; many teaching and learning now use telecommunication media to augment, extend and enhance face-to-face meetings. Students in one institution can take courses from another institution making the concept of distance no longer the issue (Mason, 1994). Distance learning in this context is an approach aimed at fostering active learning through using educational technologies to improve course and programme design to support learning, aimed to provide choices for students in terms of how, where, when and what they study.

In Nigeria, a distance education system is being considered as the most viable solution to the menace of satellite campuses that were banned by the federal government. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is Nigeria's leading and only specialist provider of open distance learning at tertiary level. The course delivery of the open university is through a combination of web-based modules, textual materials, audio and videotapes as well as CD Roms (common wealth of learning international, 2001).

Another medium used in Nigeria to provide a distance education is via the National Teachers Institute (NTI). With over 600 study centres spread across the country, along with media, particularly print and other media, to allow individual students to learn at their pace, the institute was established to provide refresher and upgrade courses for teaching personnel, to organize workshops, seminars, and conferences and to formulate policies and initiate programmes that would lead to improvement in the quality and content of education in the country (Yusuf & Falade, 2005). In pursuit of these responsibilities, the institute initiated training programmes for helping unqualified primary school teachers and refresher courses in teacher training colleges.

Recently, the institute also embarked on the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) programme through a distance learning system (DLS). The institute also provides training for the Pivotal Teachers Training Programmes (PTTP) by means of distance learning system. The PTTP was introduced in 2002 as a means of producing teachers to fill the gap in teacher

supply for the federal government's newly introduced Universal Basic Education (UNBE) Programme (Osunde & Omorugyi, 2004).

In two sentences, open and distance learning (ODL) is defined in general terms as the use of telecommunication to provide or enhance learning; the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information.

### **History of Distance Education in Nigeria**

Distance education is traditionally defined as any educational or learning procedure in which the guide and student are separated geographically. There is no interaction between the students. Distance education also known as distance learning or distributed learning or remote education, has now existed for ages. It involves acquiring information from methods other than the traditional way of gaining knowledge – attending institutions. Some recent definitions have focused on it as a new development involving advanced technology. Present-day distance learning is influenced a lot by computer and electronics technology. The technology has now made it possible for the guide or facilitator and students to connect almost immediately. Study resources can be delivered instantly through computers, satellites, internet, cable television, interactive video etc.

Correspondence education, the initial form of distance education, developed in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and then spread to the United States and so on. Initially, distance education used the finest technology available at that time, the postal system, to open educational prospects to people who wanted to study but were not able to attend traditional schools. People who gained most from correspondence education were women, professional people, physically disabled and individuals who lived in areas where schools did not exist.

Isaac Pitman, a British man is attributed to pioneering the concept of “distance education”. He started by teaching shorthand via correspondence in 1840. Students were asked to copy passages from Bible and send them for grading via the new Penny Post System.

In America, the distance education began in 1874 at Illinois Wesleyan University where bachelor and graduate degrees could be obtained without being actually present in the classes. The Chautauqua movement in the year 1882 gave the much required thrust to correspondence education.

Correspondence education became quite famous by 1900 and problems of excellence and fair practice arose with the popularity. The National Home Study Council (NHSC) was formed in 1926 in part to deal with such issues. Distance education went through a major change after the invention of radio in the 1920s and the arrival of television in the 1940s. Distance education is increasingly using combinations of different technologies to improve communication between teachers and students. In 1900, after the arrival of computers, distance education took a big leap. Now the teachers and students can converse sitting face-to-face.

The earliest offering of distance education in Nigeria was in the 1930's when some Nigerians had to take courses through correspondence from British universities (Enukwu & Ojogwu, 2006). Distance education progressed until the establishment of the first Nigerian University, the University of Ibadan in 1948. Distance studies in Nigeria started around the 70s at the University of Ibadan and this was followed by correspondence study, part time programmes offered by conventional universities and other schools, continuing education programmes of adult education department of the universities, programmes offered by the NTI.

### **Challenges of Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria**

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

- 1. Problem of ICT and distance learning in Nigeria:** Despite the eagerness of institutions of higher learning to establish distance education programmes, they are confronted with enormous problems that may impede proper implementation. The greatest of these problems is poor ICT penetration and usage among Nigerian distance education practitioners. Almost all African countries basic ICT infrastructures are inadequate; this is a result of lack of electricity to power the ICT materials, poor telecommunication facilities, poor postal systems, and lack of access to the needed infrastructures because of insufficient funds due to Nigeria spending less than 12% of its annual budget on education in general.
- 2. Institutional Problems:** Another basic problem that distance education programmes in Nigeria face is how to address the issue of technology. The goal of educational technology in education programmes is to provide a complete education as much as possible to students. ICT knowledge and skills are essential for today's student. Educational technology allows students to stay current with computer and telecommunications technology. However, this is impossible as there are limited efforts that support the integration of ICT into the unique education programmes in Nigeria. Fundamentally, there are limited or no programmes that students can use to develop their perception as well as conception of ICTs. As a result, students lack words to address all contemporary terminology that is used in describing educational technology (Ololube, 2006a,b). Policy makers, administrators in Nigeria lack the necessary expertise to manage new innovations (Mac-Ikemenjima, 2005). Nigerians do not have a mechanistic view of the world (Ifinedo, 2005; Ololube, 2007).
- 3. 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 the funding agency, that is, the government. Any attempt by any ruling government to truncate the programme, a successive government in Nigeria should be able to continue with the programme.
- 4. Separation from teachers:** Those who engage in distance learning are separated from their teachers; as a result of this, they do not have access to the teachers in situations where clarification is to be made on a particular subject or topic. Also in this situation, teachers are unable to monitor students one on one as in the case of non-distance learning.
- 5. Access to facilities:** As good as the idea of distance learning sounds; it will be a failure without the right facilities. In Nigeria, the problem of electricity makes it highly difficult for students. It is not just enough to have a personal PC and internet access (not all Nigerians can even afford these and even those who can are still met with the problem of power supply) constant power supply must also be available and this is not the case in Nigeria. This problem is at its peak in rural areas hence for those engaging in distance learning from rural areas, it is very challenging.
- 6. Financial cost:** Distance education in Nigeria is quite expensive and in most cases even more expensive than the cost of a higher institution. Most people cannot afford the fee and for those who can afford it, keeping up with the trend throughout the duration is challenging. This results to cases of drop-outs at the end of the day. Not only is the fee

expensive, the cost of purchasing a laptop is not what everybody out there interested in distance learning can afford. And for those who can afford the laptop, cost of internet connection is another barrier they must face and overcome.

7. **Societal belief:** In a country like Nigeria, it is believed that those who are graduates of a distance learning institute do not have equal qualifications as those who went through the normal means. The result of this is damage on students' self-esteem as society does not see them as proper graduates.

8. **Shortage of qualified e-teachers:** Distance learning requires not just ordinary teachers but teachers who are qualified and capable in the field of e-learning. This is one challenge facing distance education in Nigeria.

9. **Lack of computer knowledge:** Since distance education makes use of the e-learning system, it is therefore paramount that students have a basic and solid knowledge of the computer. Lack of knowledge or inadequate knowledge or inadequate knowledge poses a great challenge to computer illiterates as this is needed to proceed in the various fields.

10. **Discourages socialization:** Unlike the traditional college settings where you get to relate and mingle with colleagues; distance learning does not really give room for such as most of the students learn from the comfort of their rooms.

11. **Infrastructural problems:** In terms of a range of ICT indications, African countries, including Nigeria score lower than the global average; in other words, the gaps between African and other developed countries and emerging economies persist; indeed, they have intensified over the last decade, indicative of a growing digital divide (Gillwald, 2005). The term digital divide is used to refer to such differing standards or imbalances between countries fully poised to reap the benefits of the information age and those that are unable to do so (Ifinedo, 2005a). The growing digital divide includes both ICT products and outputs (internet access, e-mail, fax, television, radio, cellphones, etc) and inputs (engineers, scientists, etc) and this divide could make other development gaps impossible to bridge. According to Yusuf (2006), successful distance learning cannot be assured without the use of communication and technological tools (e-mail, fax, internet, television, radio, etc). Several cities and rural areas in Nigeria are yet to have electricity or have fluctuations in its supply. Additionally, most Nigerians (82%) do not have access to telephone and other telecommunication facilities. Services for those who have access are in most cases epileptic. These may make the integration of telecommunications in the delivery of distance learning difficult.

12. **Economic problems:** The poor economic situations and their effects on middle level manpower stand as the major obstacle in the implementation of ICTs in distance learning. Over 85% of the Nigerian population live below poverty level. 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 computers are still a luxury in institutions, offices and homes. The cost of computer related gadgets in Nigeria is three times the monthly wage of an average worker. The cost of subscribing to a telephone line or owning one is beyond the reach of an average Nigerian citizen. The same is true for the procurement of internet access in Nigeria; ordinary citizens find it difficult to own such services. This has made the integration of necessary on-line resources (e-mail, news groups, world-wide-web, etc) into distance learning in Nigeria most difficult. Nigeria spends less than 12% of its annual budget on education in general and even far less on ICT in particular due to

insufficient funds. This is on the most part compounded by illiteracy, which incidentally is widespread, in the country, thus, about 33% of the population is unable to read and write according to CIA: The world fact book (2006)

13. **Lack of motivation:** It is quite glaring that most people involved in open and distance learning in Nigeria are neither motivated by government nor the society in general. Both the government and multinational companies in Nigeria do not offer any form of scholarship to the students of distance learning as a motivation.

14. **The students' attitude:** The attitude of the students of distance learning is another problem imposed on the programme. Most of the students do not take the programme serious. They often show lackadaisical attitude towards learning.

15. **The facilitators attitude:** Most facilitators are not committed to their duty. In most cases they fail to package the mediated information to the learners.

16. **Lack of sufficient time for study:** Another challenge for ODL is lack of sufficient time for study. The learners or students of ODL do not create sufficient time for themselves to study their packaged study materials like the modules. They seem to be crowded with other home activities and therefore pay little or no attention to their studies.

17. **Ineffective feedback and lack of study materials:** Another challenge facing ODL students is ineffective feedback mechanism since it is not face-to-face learning with an instructor present. They therefore lack the zeal to study at home.

18. **Inadequate academic staff:** ODL programme in Nigeria is often associated with inadequate academic staff. This is clearly shown in Nigerian Open University (NOUN) and NTI where the management always go a long way looking for academic staff.

19. **Problem of adaptability:** Students of open and distance learning in Nigeria find it difficult to adapt to the new innovation of information and communication technology in learning. This poses another challenge in open and distance learning in Nigeria.

20. **Problem of inferiority complex:** Most students undertaking open and distance learning in Nigeria in most cases feel too inferior in the mix of those who are undertaking the conventional traditional face-to-face learning. This could be as a result of acute separation among themselves and the facilitators.

21. **Procrastination and the temptation to quit:** Most students of open and distance learning in Nigerian are highly occupied by the psychological feeling of procrastination to start the programme and if started the temptation to quit the programme midway.

22. **Problem of risk:** Most students stand the risk of both road accident and the risk of losing the packaged ICT if the computer or the gadget develops a virus. Some viruses will go along to destroying even a previous stored material. In the area of road accidents, some students of open and distance learning may decide to visit the institution from where they are receiving ICT materials occasionally. Some of these institutions are located far away from the students' home; road accident may then occur in the course of transit. Because of these risks, many of the students of open and distance learning in Nigeria are being discouraged and those who have already started the program may quit the program. Majority of people of Nigeria

prefer the conventional traditional face-to-face learning to open and distance learning in Nigeria.

23. **Distraction:** most of open and distance learning students in Nigeria are married with children. So even at home as they read the packaged ICT materials, they are either distracted by children or duties in the house. Those of them working are also distracted by their office duties or field work.

24. **Students are not well rooted in both learning and in character:** Unlike the conventional traditional face-to-face learning or university where students are facially instructed by a lecturer or a tutor and good morals or discipline are usually given to unserious students, this is lacking in open and distance learning. In the conventional traditional university there is this common saying that “a student has to pass through the university and the university has to pass through the student”. Certificate is only awarded to students when they are seen worthy both in learning and in character in a conventional traditional universities; but it is not so in open and distance learning in Nigeria where the students neither knows the campuses nor their facilitators.

25. **Laziness:** Some students of open and distance learning in Nigeria who have not build the reading culture attitude may not follow up the program since the system lacks one of the strategies that motivates students teaching and learning. This strategy is gesculature and also visual contact. These can make the students to be very lazy since they are continually bombarded with packaged ICT materials to read.

Having x-rayed some of the challenges of open and distance learning in Nigeria, we can as well glean outcome of its prospects.

### **Prospects of Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria**

1. **Opportunity to learn at any time:** A student who studies remotely can decide when and how much time to devote during a semester to studying the material. They make an individual study schedule for themselves. Some educational institutions give their students the opportunity to postpone and return to their studies without having to pay tuition fees again.

2. **Opportunity to study at one’s own pace:** Students do not have to worry that they will leave their classmate behind. You can always go back to studying more complicated questions, watch video lectures several times, read correspondence from the teacher(s), and you can skip already known topic. The main thing is to successfully pass intermediate and final examination.

3. **You can study any place:** Students can study without leaving their home or office, anywhere in the world. To start learning, you must have a computer with internet access. Absence of the need to attain an educational institution everyday is a definite advantage for people with disabilities, for those living in hard-to-reach areas, imprisoned parents with young children.

4. **Offers on-the-job training:** It is possible to study remotely in several courses simultaneously to receive the next higher degree.

5. **High training results:** Studies by American scientists show that the results of distance learning are not inferior or even superior to traditional forms of education. Distance learning students study most of the learning material on their own. This improves memorization and understanding of topics learned.



6. **Offers mobility:** Communication with teachers/tutors is carried out in different ways, both on-line and off-line. Consulting with a tutor by e-mail is sometimes more effective and faster than scheduling face-to-face meeting in person or by correspondence.
7. **Availability of training materials:** The students who study remotely are unfamiliar with such problems. Access to all necessary literature is available to students after registration on the university web-site or they receive educational materials by mail.
8. **Teachers' convenience:** Teachers and tutors who teach remotely can pay attention to more students and work while on maternity leave for example.
9. **Individual approach:** In traditional teaching, it is quite difficult for the teacher to give the necessary amount of attention to all students in the group and to adjust to the work pace of each. The use of distance technologies is suitable for organizing an individual approach. In addition to the fact that the student chooses their own pace of learning they can quickly get answer from their tutor.
10. It increases educational opportunities to a larger population in different situations and needs. Both students and employees with distance problems can benefit because it is more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered anywhere.
11. **Flexibility:** Distance learning allows students to earn a degree without living near a college campus. On-line classes allow you the further flexibility to complete course work in your time, allowing you to prioritize carrier, family and other responsibilities that keep you busy. Whether watching a lecture or taking a quiz, you can complete assignment where they fit within your schedule.
12. **Personal growth:** Knowledge gained through course materials is just the beginning of your on-line learning experience. Distance students gain other important transferrable skills, including time-management, research, writing communication, leadership and experience, utilizing of variety of technology used in education.
13. **Net-working:** Your classmates include a diverse community of on-line students from all over Nigeria. These colleagues enter the on-line classroom with their unique carrier and life experience that enhances discussion and learning. In addition, open and distance learning in Nigeria has the prospect of providing wider access to teacher-education generally in an open distant learning environment. According to Osunde to Omoruyi, (2004) open and distance learning in Nigeria have the prospects of providing flexible but qualitative teacher-education in Nigeria and therefore should be encouraged. Open and distance learning in Nigeria have the prospect of enhancing professional ethics by laying emphasis on both national and international teaching codes of conduct (Creemer, 2004).
14. Open and distance learning in Nigeria have the prospect of integrating information technology media in the provision of teacher-education programme (Ololube, 2007).
15. Open and distance learning in Nigeria have the prospect of embarking on training and retraining of those in the teaching profession with a view to enhancing their productivity (Osabor, 2006).

16. According to (Akhahowa, 2006) open and distance learning can provide opportunities for academic and professional growth of those in teaching profession which in turn will impact positively on the academic excellence of the students.
17. Open and distance learning can provide programmes that will produce highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers for all levels of educational system.
18. According to (Ololube, 2007), open and distance learning have the prospect of encouraging teachers to develop the spirit of enquiry and creativity.
19. According to National Open University of Nigeria (2007), open and distance learning helps teachers to fit into the social life of the community and the society at large and enhances their commitment to national goals. Open and distance learning have the prospect of providing teachers with the intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and make them adaptable to changing situation (National Open University of Nigeria, 2007). Open and distance learning have the prospect to improve the quality and content of education in the country (Yusuf & Falade, 2005).
20. It has the prospect of helping unqualified primary school teachers and refresher courses in teacher training colleges for instance, the pivotal teachers training programme (PTTP) by means of distance learning was introduced in 2002 as a means of producing teachers to fill the gap in teacher supply for the federal government's newly introduced universal basic education (UNBE) programme (Osunde & Omoruyi, 2004).
21. Open and distance learning have the prospect of helping the continuity of both the conventional traditional face-to-face education and the open and distance learning programme in the event of a global epidemics requiring total lock-down as a part of solution to solving such epidemic. This is the case of the ongoing global epidemic – corona virus (Covid-19) ravaging the whole globe. Almost all the countries in the world locked-down and resorted to distance learning system in order to keep their educational system alive.
22. **Workers convenience:** Workers who undertake open and distance learning programme have the convenience of fixing time to read or not to read. So, the students can go ahead working either as a civil servant or as a company worker or even go into business while undertaking an academic program which will earn him a degree or NCE on completion of the duration. This is the case of most of Nigerian local government workers who were employed with either first school leaving certificate, WAEC or GCE and NCE. They stay on the job and upgrade their certificate at their own convenience via open and distance learning.
23. **Improvement of workers' efficiency:** Upgrading of workers certificate via open and distance learning in Nigeria, impacts positively in increasing their knowledge and skill. This increase in knowledge and skill go a long way to improving the efficiency of the workers. That is, the workers become more efficient in their jobs since a new knowledge and skill have been acquired. It enhances increase in workers' wages, since the workers have upgraded their certificate via open and distance learning which in turn increased their knowledge and skill on the job, efficiency will therefore increase which will give rise to high productivity. This will therefore lead to the appraisal of the workers and hence increase in their pay pocket.

### **Conclusion**

Open and distance learning is important because it makes education accessible and reduces cost while maintaining quality. The use of distance education makes for equity of educational opportunities and services. It also improves the quality and variety of the resources and support available to learners while opening up new avenues to professional development. However, despite the innumerable advantages accruing from the aims and objectives of ODL, achieving these may only be possible when the problems of inconsistency in programme and policy implementation, poor economy, absence of trained teachers, poor postal system, bad public image, are no longer prevalent in the system.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the enormous challenges of open and distance learning, the paper recommended the use of organizational element model (OEM) as suggested by Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001) for its planning and implementation.

It also recommended the need for continuous and regular supply of electricity or power by the government. Furthermore, the paper recommended that both the students and the facilitators have to change their lackadaisical attitude towards distance learning.

Government that is embarking on open and distance learning should be able to provide all necessary ICT materials for the programme.

Consistency in policy implementation of the programme as well as sustainability of the program by Nigerian government are also recommended.

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