The Role of Distance Learning System in National Development (A Study of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

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Abstract

Nigeria as a developing nation has over the years carried out different National Development Plans (NDP) from 1962, and up till 2019. All these spheres of development are targeted at economic development (financial aspects of people's life) with attention on total well-being of the citizens of which education is paramount. As a matter of fact, the realisation of Vision 20:20:20 objectives considered backwardness in education as a great factor against Nigeria's development. Successive government in Nigeria have always played lip service towards educational development. Over time, the leadership of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) raised an alarm that the 2019 Budget is the worst in the history of Nigeria in terms of what was budgeted for education. In view of this, the writer of this paper is of opinion that if the bulk of Nigerians are illiterate, then development objectives cannot be achieved. Therefore, this paper seeks to put its search-light on how Open and Distance Learning System can increase the level of literacy in Nigeria with specific focus on the study on National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

Introduction

Developed nations are those societies that can boost of well planned economy, politics, infrastructures, technologies and most importantly, high standard of living. A complete deviation from this is underdeveloped nations particularly in Arica, which lack industrialisation, infrastructure, developed agriculture and high rate of illiteracy as a result of their low level of development Ogwu, (2010).

For over two decades now, the number of out of school children has increased. The Honourable Minister for Education, Mallam Adamu Adamu, raised the fear. Some states like Jigawa, Kano, Kaduna, Yobe, Zamfara, Sokoto were listed among others. In addition to this, the number of both Federal and States Universities, Polytechnic, Colleges of Education and other Allied Colleges seem to be on increase, not to mention so many that are awaiting National University Commission (NUC) and other regulatory body's approval to start new institutions. Yet, the admission deficit is on the rise each year (Jegede, 2003).

In fact, projection shows that by the year 2010, almost 2.5 million applicants will be jostling for places in the universities. How should we handle the issue of access? It had been suggested that to catch up with a country like Japan and meet existing demand, Nigeria need to expand the capacity of our universities system by a factor of 10 (Jegede, 2000). There are two possible

ways of doing this; either we multiply the current admission by a factor of 10, or we expand the existing universities by a factor of 10. Nigeria cannot conveniently do any of the two as at now. Even if we do, how do we handle the issue of facilities, infrastructure, and production of academic staff? It has been suggested that one of the easiest ways of solving the problem of access is to rely on Open University Distance Learning, with the hope that what the conventional system cannot absorb, the Open University system will mop up (Jegede, 2003).

Education and National Development

Nigeria is often described as a developing nation because of the absence of many indices of development like infrastructure, access to quality education, and medical facilities. Education certainly is one of the ways through which a nation becomes developed. One of the objectives of education therefore, is to adequately equip the child with the necessary skills and knowledge needed for effective participation and contribution to national development (Chima, 2006).

In order words, provides the intellectual feat which is required for social, economic, political and technological development of a nation. Education is intended to improve the personal life of the student in terms of the knowledge and skills, which he requires and which enhance the quality of life and contributes to the well-being of his society (Gbenga and Akume, 2009).

Nigeria as a nation needs functional educational system that can equip learners with requisite knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable them relate and adapt successfully to the rapid socio-economic, cultural and political changes in the society. The importance of education in the development of the society has made government at all levels to be committed to the provision of educational opportunities to its citizenry (Okubanjo, 2006). According to National Policy on Education (2004), education is an instrument par excellence for effecting national development.

National development on the other hand, is the ability of a country to improve the social well-being of its citizens through the provision of such social amenities as medical care, infrastructure, quality education and other social services (Denga, 2011). This paper therefore, examines the Role of Distance Learning System in National Development (A Study of National Open University of Nigeria).

Understanding the Concept of Distance Learning Educational System

Distance learning, also known called distance education, e-learning, and online learning, form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instructions and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication in learning process (www.britannica.com).

Distance learning (DE) is a system of education characterised by physical separation between the teacher and the learner in which instruction is delivered through variety of media including

print and other ICTs to learner who may either have missed the opportunity earlier in life or have been denied the face-to-face formal education to due to socio-economic, career, family and other circumstances (Aderinoye, 1995).

Distance learning is further defined as education provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to and just as noble and practical as those of on campus full-time face-to-face education (Jedege, 2003).

It should be noted that the development in ICT in education in the advanced countries facilitated the establishment of 100% ICT-based university known as Virtual Universities. In Nigeria, for example, only few of her conventional universities can carry-out their academic activities through one form of ICT or the order. As a matter of fact, e-learning is still not visible because the infrastructure to make it possible is weak or lacking. However, the development in ICT in Nigeria brought the opportunities, convenience of time, and place, making a greater variety of learning resources, improve opportunities for individualised learning and emergence of more powerful cognitive tools (Khan, 1996, Pierre, 1998).

Historical Antecedent of Distance Learning System in Nigeria

The National Teachers Institute (NTI), Kaduna, started the Distance Learning System in Nigeria in 1972; the National Teachers Institute (NTI), Kaduna, which was established to produce qualified teachers that are expected to meet the needs of the defunct Universal Primary Education (UPE). The NTI, was established by an Act i.e. Institute Enabling Law Act No. 7 of 1978 which state among other objectives, to provide courses of instruction leading to the development upgrading and certification of teachers as stipulated in the relevant syllabus using Distance Education Techniques (NOUN Handbook, 2009).

When Universal Basic Education (UBE) came on board by Federal Government of Nigeria in 1999, the National Teachers' Institute was further mandated with the task of producing qualified teachers using Distance Learning System with intent of meeting the new emerging problems emanating from serious shortage of teachers who are expected to implement the programme (NOUN Handbook, 2009).

Later, the Correspondence and Open Studies Unit of University of Lagos now called Distance Learning Institute was established in 1974 to produce graduates of universities in various fields of study to meet the manpower needs of the nation (e.g. clerical officers, teachers, laboratory technologists, food processors, architects, engineers, builders, journalists etc.). with the success recorded by University of Lagos in 1976, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, followed suit by starting a special training programme called Correspondence and Teacher-in Service Programme (TISEP) to prepare middle level teachers of primary schools in Nigeria who were many at that time (NOUN Handbook, 2009).

Thereafter, precisely in 1988, University of Ibadan External Studies Programme (ESP) which later became the Centre for External Centre (CEC) was established by the University of Ibadan Senate under the Nigerian Department of Adult Skills. There is no deny the fact that the knowledge acquired through the on-the-job training and the in-service training enables those that benefited the opportunity to raise their present status of holders of Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) to full-fledge University Certificate holders (NOUN Handbook, 2009).

The history of distance learning system in Nigeria is however not complete without mentioning the coming of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). From as back as the early 1960's, there had been a rising commitment to strengthening the delivery system of education in Nigeria. Education was identified as a tool to be used to speed up socio-economic development in Nigeria. In the process of getting to the 'root' of the education problems of Nigeria it became clear to government that the colonial education strategy which targeted only a few privileged people in selected regions of the country did not quite fit the needs of the newly independent Nigeria. Hence, the establishment of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 1984. The idea of an Open University System for Nigeria as a separate and distinct institution to be organised nation-wide was appropriately reflected in the 1977 National Policy of Education which states emphatically and unambiguously that *maximum efforts will be made to enable those who can benefit from other education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities or correspondence courses, or open universities, or part-time and 'work-study programme* ((National Policy on Education, 1977).

Role of Open and Distance Education in Nigeria

Open and Distance Education (ODL), provides education for all and promotes lifelong learning in Nigeria, fills the gap created by the closure of sub-standard Outreach/Satellite Campuses across the nation and is cost-effective in the education delivery system. Open and Distance Learning improves on the economies of scale i.e., more Nigerians receive quality education but at a reduced cost (Besser, 2004).

The Open and Distance Education will provide a flexible education delivery system in our country, which will help meet up with the economic realities where a lot of people desire to work and learn simultaneously. Open and Distance Learning also maximizes the utilization of academic personnel and is therefore in the long run a cost saving measure in Nigeria (Jegede, 2003).

Open and Distance Learning helps on the job teacher training as more teachers can receive education without leaving their immediate vicinity. Some of the other long-term benefits of ODL are poverty reduction, and life-long education. ODL can help with provision of National Orientation and non-formal education and provide education to reach the 'un-reached' i.e. girls and women who cannot leave their homes regularly (as they live in Purdah, etc.) (Jegede, 2004).

Technical and Vocational Education have in recent years played important roles in assisting individuals to improve their employment prospects in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment (Haque, 2000). In this regard, the role of the NOUN in open and distance learning in the field of technical and vocational education is significant.

ODL responds effectively to the growing demand of working adults or any others who have difficulties in getting in conventional education because of lack of flexibility in the timing and duration of academic programmes. ODL provides an opportunity for empowerment of those disadvantaged examples of their choice within their vicinity (Khan, 1996).

ODL can be used as a platform for promoting National ethics and values. It can also allow for the dissemination of knowledge and information to target groups, with respect to government policies and activities thereby providing better understanding of government's intentions at all times. This will improve general understanding, reduce misconceptions and promote social and political harmony. (Omolewa, 1982).

Objectives and Expected Outcomes of the Nigerian Open and Distance Learning Programme

The programmes available under the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) are essentially designed to widen the access to education and to ensure equity and equality of opportunities for all and sundry. Open and Distance Learning education is to be used as instrument for poverty alleviation especially in rural communities, by providing opportunities that support Education for All (EFA) and lifelong learning. Open and Distance Learning is to equip the Nigerian populace for the emerging global culture of technological literacy via its programmes and the use of information and communication technology (Jegede, 2004).

ODL will help to improve the existing teaching force as well as train new teachers through their method complimentary to current teacher education practices. Infrastructure that supports wealth creation at national, community and individual levels via education will be provided to the society via Open and Distance Learning programmes (Jegede, 2004).

It will also help to increase penetration, wider reach, affordable and cost effective educational opportunities for all so that nobody is left out behind; ODL will facilitate workplace training and professional development and enhance community ownership and participation in the management and provision of education at all levels nation-wide, especially through Community Resource/Study Centres. (Haque, 2000).

Model for the National Open University of Nigeria

(a) **Learner Targets:**
   The NOUN is designed to increase the access of all Nigerians to formal and non-formal education in a manner convenient to their circumstances. It also caters for the

continuous educational development of professionals such as teachers, accountants, bankers, doctors, engineers, politicians, self-employed businessmen and business women. The range of target clientele is elastic and kept constant review so as to be able to meet their ever-changing needs (Islam, 1997).

(b) Methods of Delivery:

There are some overriding principles that have informed the choice of delivery methods utilised at NOUN. The best media are those that are easy to use and do not rely on the skills of a limited number of programmers or designers with sophisticated skills (Islam, 1997):

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- The media utilised is cost-effective and flexible enough to take advantage of the huge amount of global knowledge, which to large extent currently resides on the internet World Wide Web. (WWW).
- Printed material by correspondence is the most basic method of delivery that is adopted for NOUN.
- Audiotapes, Videotapes and CD-ROM are offered as complimentary media based on user preference.
- Special and properly scheduled radio and television educational programmes have played a major role in the delivery of distance learning. Such as, higher education and professional training in wide areas which also include arts, business, education, social sciences, science and technology etc.
- The National Open University of Nigeria has taken full advantage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to provide learners with access to internet. The NOUN also utilises currently available and easily deployed wireless communication systems such as microwave radios and VSATs are to be used at each study centre as and when they are available (NOUN Student's Handbook, 2015/2016).

(c) Study Centres:

The University currently has 30 Study Centres which are located in state capitals spread all over the six geo-political zones of the country as well as the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). Some of these Centres are permanent NOUN structures whilst some are situated within some selected Colleges of Education and Polytechnic. NOUN particularly went into partnership with these selected Colleges of Education and Polytechnics as temporary Study Centres for purposes of practical based courses. These locations were selected based on geographical and demand assessment criteria and on the existence of complimentary infrastructures such as Visual Libraries as well as existence of traditional universities to enable the pooling of expertise and other resources. A student of the University is expected to select a study centre most suitable for him or her to enable participatory tutorial sessions.

A student of NOUN can however still use any of the Study Centres in Nigeria at anytime especially if hitherto private life requires a lot of travelling. This feature of non-specificity of a student of the university to a Study Centre in any part of the country is a feature of the flexibility of NOUN. The facilities which are expected at a standard Study Centre run by NOUN for the open and distance learning programme mostly consist of the most of the following:

1. Auditorium/Lecture Theatre for up to 300 users.
2. Tutorial/Meeting Rooms.
3. Library.
4. Computer Centre (for at least 20 computer stations.
5. Material Store.

Challenges of Open Distance Learning in National Development

e-learning system of education in Nigeria's tertiary institutions is still a new thing because of poor ICT infrastructure with other socio-economic issues. Most developing countries are affected by these challenges of high cost of infrastructural development and the need to increase public access to internet and other ICTs. Nigeria, for instance, is far behind from getting benefits from the e-learning. Succinctly, the major problems facing the proper implementation of e-learning in Nigeria's tertiary institutions and NOUN as well, are as follows:

- The cost of laptop or personal computer is still high in Nigeria especially when compared with income of most average worker in Nigeria.

- There is this technophobia thing: Most students admitted in NOUN do not have computer education background before coming to the university; and this create fear or anxiety when confronted with operating a computer system.

- The cost of internet connectivity: Most of the NOUN students have no information technology or computer education knowledge and often resort to cyber cafes for their works. This often cost them a lot of money for the services provided by the cafes.

- Attitude of students: ICT refutes independent learning and most of NOUN students are reluctant to take responsibility for their own learning. They often want to be taught at all times without much input from them.

- Software and licence cost: Software are expensive and mostly not developed locally. They are developed in Europe and other advanced countries to suit their system and needs. The cost and interpretations of these software are often problems for NOUN students, who finds it often difficult to interpret.

- Maintenance and technical support: ICT technologies requires high level of technical maintenance. NOUN students most often finds it difficult to access technical support when problems arise from their computers. They often resort to roadside unqualified technicians.

- Poor power supply: it is a common knowledge that electricity supply is epileptic in Nigeria. It is even worse in rural areas where some NOUN students have their study centres. This challenge is big and has affected all fabric of Nigeria economy.

Discussion of Findings

The paper in order to come up with empirical and objective discussions and findings, used an in depth interview as its primary source of data collection. The reason is that it allows small number of respondents. Hence, twenty (20) interviewees which include students and staff of National Open University of Nigeria (Ilorin Study Centre) were interviewed.

The Result of the Interview

On whether distance learning education has lived up to its expectations, seventy -five percent (75%) were of opinion that distance learning is playing its role in mopping up admission deficits in Nigeria. Question was also asked if Nigeria as a country is able to harness distance learning education potentials like India and Malaysia. Eighty-two percent (82%) said though Nigerian government is trying, but her effort is far below that of India and Malaysia. The respondents said India and Malaysia have sustained the use of distance learning in their education process for a long time. Again, a question was posed on how desirable distance learning education is to the working class population; the responses received indicated that sixty-five percent (65%) are of opinion that the programme is suitable and convenient. In the area of patronage, sixty-three percent (63%) of the respondents were of opinion that large numbers of prospective students have secured admission into the distance learning system of education.

Furthermore, question was asked, if National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is carrying out its mandate, sixty-nine percent (69%) agreed that NOUN is carrying out its task. But when asked if NOUN has done that effectively, fifty-five percent (55%) said NOUN is incapacitated due to infrastructural deficiencies. On the issue of cost-effectiveness of distance learning in NOUN, sixty-four percent (64%) of the interviewee argued that the programme is cost-effective when compared with conventional universities. About issue of convenience of study, eighty-nine percent (98%) agreed that NOUN provides the convenience of study than the conventional universities.

However, ninety percent (90%) disagreed that video tapes and other instructional materials are usually readily available. Question was further asked if NOUN has the capacity to compete

with its counterparts especially India and Malaysia. Seventy-two percent (72%) disagreed with the statement, arguing that electricity is an essential ingredient for success of NOUN operations, and power is epileptic in Nigeria. unlike in India or Malaysia, where there is more power supply than that of Nigeria.

Furthermore, ninety-two percent (92%) of the responses indicated that they agreed with the fact that NOUN is designed to increase the access of all Nigerians to formal and non-formal education in a manner convenient to their circumstances. In the same vein, when asked if NOUN has optimally utilised the ICT potentials in its activities, seventy-three percent (73%) disagreed with this question, indicating that NOUN as it is today do not have the infrastructure to fully utilise the potentials of ICT.

Summary/Conclusion

This article gives background information though briefly what the concept of developed and underdeveloped nations is by indicating what is obtained in each of them. For example, the writer was able to picture poverty, poor infrastructure, bad economy, low income per head and illiteracy among others things as the lots of underdeveloped nations; while the developed ones are said to have good economy, well designed infrastructural plans, good health system and most importantly, good and standard education. The purpose of this background knowledge is not to compare nations but to see how education can play a major role in development of Nigeria.

Also, the article highlights the few definitions of what education is and how it relates to national development and society in general. Education was said to be a good platform for providing responsible citizens and giving room for right development. The writer was able to showcase how illiteracy which is on increase had and still affecting negatively our national development plans.

Furthermore, the article gave historical antecedent of Open Distance Learning System as a way of augmenting the admission deficit usually experienced by prospective students who are unable to get into the conventional tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The paper also sign-post the objectives and gains of the Open and Distance Learning Programmes which are: Education designed to widen access to education and ensure equity and equality of opportunities for all and sundry; as instrument for poverty eradication especially in the rural communities; equip the Nigerian populace for the emerging global culture of technological literacy etc.

Recommendations

1. Ministries of Education both at state, federal and local governments should begin to play a role in the development of distance learning education. This is a veritable tool for poverty reduction and boost in literacy level among Nigerians.

2. Poor funding constitutes a big problem to distance learning education in Nigeria. Government should consider voting reasonable allocation of resources to this sector.

3. E-learning requires ICT to function; government and relevant stakeholders may consider investing their monies in this sector. This will be a money spinning venture for the investors and facilitate work for users especially students.

4. NOUN should compete favourably with conventional universities and not to be seen as 'last option' for students that are unable to secure admission into the conventional universities.

5. NOUN graduates should be included in the National Youth Service Scheme as stipulated by law and as applicable to other tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

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