

Problems and Prospects of Open and Distance Learning: A Case of the Ilorin Study Centre

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Abstract

This study examined the problems and prospects of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) using the Ilorin Study Centre. The media for ODL were also discussed. The population for the study was limited to four National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) study centres in Ilorin South West. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 50 respondents, 40 copies of questionnaire for the students in open universities and 10 for the facilitators. Data generated through a designed structured questionnaire were analysed through Chi-square and Likert-rating scales. The results revealed that there were problems affecting the operation of ODL study centres in Nigeria. The main problems were unstable electricity and poor internet service. Analysis further revealed that there was no significant difference between the problems and prospects of ODL in the Ilorin Study Centre, since all the instructional media required were available and the NOUN is affiliated with many conventional institutions of higher learning. Based on the findings, recommendations were made that the various state governments should put the physical development of the NOUN study centres in their annual budget for the purpose of infrastructural development and for setting up a commission on Open Learning that will serve as the quality control for open education in the country. Various institutions, such as universities where the NOUN study centres are located, should take a giant step toward improving their power supply and internet facilities.

Keywords: ODL, National Open University of Nigeria, study centre

Introduction

According to Creed (2001), distance learning is an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone located away from the learners. Open Learning, in turn, is defined as an organised educational activity based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study activities are minimised in terms of access, entry, time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these. Thus, the concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) suggests an educational approach designed to reach students in their homes, offices

and shops, where learning proceeds without attending formal classes in person, no matter where or when they want to study. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO (2002) defines open education as organised educational activities based on the use of instructional teaching materials, in which constraints on studying are minimised in terms of access, in time and place, pace, method of study or any combination of the aforementioned.

The National Open University of Nigeria, NOUN (2006) explains that open university is an innovative approach where students have control over their learning through the avoidance of the traditional approach to learning. This approach provides a second chance for those who have been in school but had to drop out for one reason or another. ODL favours people who work as well as applicants who could not secure a position in an educational institution through a qualifying entrance examination. ODL is an alternative, innovative way of learning for students who are not admitted to university programmes due to a variety of reasons, such as working conditions, personal and social problems and financial security, among others. Therefore, it is considered self-study when students are engaged at work, home, or any other location. Different media, like print and electronic media broadcasts, like radio and television, the internet and interaction with tutorial facilitators and students, are used. According to Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye (2008), distance education is a system of education characterised by physical separation between the teacher and the learner, in which instruction is delivered through a variety of media.

According to the National Universities Commission (NUC) of Nigeria (2013), the Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE) has, over the years, recognised the place of open and distance learning in achieving life-long education and affirms that life-long education shall be the basis of the nation's education policy. The Commission went further to state that at any stage of the educational process after junior secondary education, an individual shall be able to choose between continuing full-time studies, combining work with study, or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later (NPE, 2004, cited in NUC, 2013). The NUC (2013) further reiterated that the policy has stated the goals of open and distance learning education, which are to:

1. Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied
2. Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place
3. Encourage internationalisation, especially of tertiary education curricula
4. Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilising experts as teachers, regardless of their locations or places of work (NPE, 2004, cited in NUC, 2013)

However, the NUC (2013) lamented that a critical appraisal of the scope of open and distance learning practise in the contemporary Nigerian educational system reveals a glaring mismatch between policy and practice. This is even in the face of obvious and acknowledged perennial inadequacies of the conventional face-to-face mode in meeting the higher educational aspirations of a large number of Nigerians, especially in the university sub-sector.

An open university is a university that takes care of all prospective candidates, irrespective of their academic background (Anderson, Benjamin and Fuss, 1998). The students have to be determined to self-study. They can interact with course facilitators online or at the study centre.

ODL also caters to students who cannot be admitted to a university through the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) cut-off points. However, the university system can accommodate only 20% of students who have passed the UTME cut-off points. The federal government of Nigeria approved 58 study centres as of 2015. These centres are resource sites where students pick up courses and other materials, as well as interact with instructional facilities, tutors, counsellors, study centre managers and students.

Purpose of the Study

The specific purpose of the study was to:

1. Investigate the problems confronting ODL in the Ilorin Study Centre

2. Identify the prospects for the problems confronting ODL in the Ilorin Study Centre

Research Questions

The study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the problems affecting the NOUN?
2. Are there prospects available for the effective operation of the NOUN?

Research Methodology

Research Type

A descriptive research survey method was used to provide facts, qualities, and characteristics of the population and areas of possible interest.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The target population for the study were students and teachers of NOUN study centres. Four study centres were purposely selected in Ilorin South West, Kwara State, Nigeria because they are the only centres in the Ilorin metropolis. The study centres are as follows: the National Open University, Kulende Centre; the National Open University, Sobi Centre; Kwara State College of Education and the Centre for Open and Distance Learning (CODL), the University of Ilorin, main campus. The sample consists of 40 students and 10 facilitators. The respondents were randomly selected.

Research Instrument

A structured researcher-designed questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Section A of the instrument comprised demographic information about the respondent, while section B included the problems and prospects of the Ilorin Study Centre of the NOUN. This questionnaire was answered by the respondents by selecting the correct answers of strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed and strongly disagreed in the appropriate column.

Validation of the Instrument

The instrument was vetted for content validity by experts (senior colleagues) in the Department of Educational Technology, University of Ilorin.

Data Analysis Techniques

The answers given by the respondents were quantified, coded and scored. The data were analysed through Chi-square and a Likert-rating scale of four points, as follows:

SA = Strongly Agree '4'
 A = Agree '3'
 D = Disagree '2'
 SD = Strongly Disagree '1'

Results

Research Question 1: What are the problems of ODL in the Ilorin Study Centre?

Table 1 Problems of ODL in the Ilorin Study Centre

ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	N
O-level candidate cannot enrol for ODL	5	4	13	6	50
ODL candidate should be above 30 years of age	11	2	17	4	50
ODL candidate must be a working-class person	17	2	23	3	50
The certificate issued from ODL is not widely recognised in the labour market	25	3	17	5	50
There are no sufficient or efficient instructional media at the ODL centre	22	21	3	15	50
Unstable power supply affects the use of media equipment	27	27	4	14	50
Poor internet service and insufficient bandwidth impedes transmission	27	9	18	6	50
Male facilitators are more effective than their female counterparts	4	29	5	12	50
High cost of personal computers and internet service maintenance	19	4	22	5	50
Total	157	101	122	70	450

The results in Table 1 show that 157 out of the 450 respondents strongly agreed that there are problems affecting ODL at the Ilorin Study Centre of the NOUN, while 122 disagreed about the existence of the problems. The results further revealed that the following existing problems were found: people's negative view about the ODL certificate, insufficient and inefficient instructional media, unstable power supply, poor internet services and the high cost of personal computers (PCs) and internet service maintenance.

However, the results indicated that ODL does not restrict candidates according to the entry requirements for age background and occupational status. It also does not restrict candidates according to marital status.

Research Question 2: Are there prospects available for the effective operation of the NOUN study centres?

Table 2 Prospects for the effective operation of the NOUN Study Centres

Prospects	SA	A	D	SD	N
NOUN's membership with international organisations gives it opportunity for recognition and support	32	4	12	2	50
NOUN is affiliated with universities and colleges of education for its study centres	18	24	2	6	50
Lecturers from universities and colleges of education serve as course facilitators of the ODL programme	25	4	20	1	50
Total	75	32	34	9	150

Table 2 shows the prospects available for the effective operation of the NOUN study centre. Most of the problems of ODL in the Ilorin study centre have available prospects. For instance, the problems of unstable power and poor internet service and maintenance could be overcome, since NOUN is affiliated with universities and colleges of education, as well as other international organisations that can provide support to the programme.

Summary of Major Findings

Table 1 shows that there were problems affecting the running of ODL in the Ilorin NOUN Study Centre. Additionally, most of the problems can be overcome via the available prospects observed. However, it was found that

there is no significant difference between male and female facilitators in effective instructional delivery. Other positive prospects are the affordability and flexibility of the ODL programme, which is not common in conventional universities and colleges of education.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, we conclude that ODL becomes an avenue to assist those who have the interest to study but who may not be admitted into conventional institutions of higher learning through the normal process. Hence, if Nigeria is committed to meeting the Millennium Development Goals on Education, then one must accept the reality and the challenges that open education poses. Through NOUN, Nigeria can effectively take care of the backlog from the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) admission to universities and other institutions of higher learning and also extend education to those who hitherto have not been able to get into those institutions because of social, economic, religious, financial security or any other reasons.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusion, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. The various state governments should be made to put the physical development of the NOUN study centres in their annual budget for the purpose of infrastructural development. Commissions should be set up, like the NUC or the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) on ODL, which will serve as the quality assurance opportunity for open education in the country
2. The delivery of courses through various multimedia, especially through satellites, should be fully exploited to the advantage of the millions of Nigerians yearning for university education. Young girls who drop out of school for socioeconomic and financial insecurity reasons and housewives, also, can be encouraged to go through ODL to support the saying that educating a woman educates the nation
3. The various conventional institutions of higher learning, such as universities and the colleges of education where the current NOUN study centres reside, should take a giant step toward improving their

power supply and internet facilities for smooth operation of the instructional process

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