



Prospects and Challenges of Distance Education in Nigeria

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Received: 30.08.2021 | Accepted: 20.10.2021 | Published: 26.12.2021

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Abstract

It is the critical objective of this paper to examine and unveil the prospects and challenges of distance education in Nigeria. This paper also clearly explained the concept of distance education, historical background of distance education in Nigeria, types of distance education and reasons for the introduction of distance education in Nigeria. A critical view point is also x-rayed through the examination of current demand for education to see if it conforms to the actual roles of education. This implies that distance education as it is practiced in Nigeria, whether is in line with the actual role of education as embedded in the National Policy on education. The paper further examined the challenges of distance education in Nigeria, ways of curbing the challenges and the prospects of distance education in Nigeria. This paper takes a position rather than going into self-exoneration, that all stakeholders in the education industry should take up the challenge and collectivity play their roles to better distance learning studies.

Keywords: Challenges, Prospects, Distance, Education, Nigeria, Learning, Studies

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INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, distance education is used as a factor to break the three cardinal concept- access, quality and cost – that has constrained or stands as an obstacle to education time immemorial. Also, in Nigeria gender inequality and poverty are two serious impediments, many woman have been victims of cultural, socio-political and environmental impacts of development. It is obvious that distance education has a clear impact on gender equality, poverty reduction, economic sustainability, political participation and accessible education. The concept of distance education should be all inclusive, distance education is the mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teacher. Distance education uses variety of media and technologies to provide and improve access to good quality education for large numbers of learners wherever they may be. Distance education is often taken for lifelong learning by those who left school for one reason or the other but who having reasoned matured would want a re-entry into the knowledge arena, those that do not avail themselves of the opportunity to go to school but who are still interested in acquiring basic education in view of the goal of education for all, those who desire to update their knowledge and skills in disciplines or courses of their choice and remedy their deficiencies and proceed for

further studies. National Technical Institute (NTI) as a typical example of distance education is a revised form focused on an improved delivery format, should continue to play a role in providing flexible, accessible, qualitative and cost-effective education to people especially the women to encourage capacity building.

Off course, education is the bedrock of any nation aiming at advancing economically, socially and technologically. It is a life wire of a nation. Time immemorial, education has been a means of human resource development an instrument to enhance human capabilities, it enable individual at various levels to make informed choice, expanding their horizons and opportunities and to have a voice in public decision making.

Distance education is a field of education that focuses mostly on the pedagogy, technology and instructional system design that aim to deliver education to students who are not physical “on site in a traditional classroom or campus [1]. It is a process used to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance or both. Distance education is the process of creating an education experience of equal quality for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom situation. Furthermore, the major current example of a

dedicated distance education institution in Nigeria is the National Teachers' Institute, which falls outside of the Universities system and colleges of education. Its entire institutional goals and infrastructure has been built up expressing to support delivery of distance education programme to improve and upgrade the quality of the nation's teaching force or education. Meanwhile, before now, there are notable examples of distance education delivery forming part of a "dual-mode" institution, university of Port Harcourt distance education situated in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nwafr Orizu College of Education distance education situated at various strategic places such as Port Harcourt, some major towns in Anambra State.

The Universities of Abuja and Lagos operate structured dual-mode distance education etc. This kind of distance education is controlled by the institutions head Vice Chancellor, Provost etc. Another institution that operates dual-mode distance education is the Imo State University situated at various cities especially in the Eastern States. However, this kind of distance education emanating directly from universities is not operational now. It was abolished by the National University Commission (NUC). Meanwhile, despite the pronouncement of National University Commission, investigation shows that some universities are actually deicing means to establish invisibles satellite campuses in some semi urban cities as a source of income to the school ever through is not actually meeting up the current education standard. Some scholars describe it as a means of buying and selling of certificates especially to those who cannot read and write effectively. This worrisome situation sometime creates some doubts if the NUC are actually doing or living up to their responsibilities.

However, this paper suggests that distance education is a promising and practical dimension or strategy to address the challenge of widening access to education, this increasing the participation of woman, less privileged ones, those in service in higher education, poverty reduction and empowerment.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Distance Education

Distance education connotes long-distance learning. It means that education of people (students) who may not be privileged to be physically present at a school. That is the normal conventional school. Traditional, this always involved correspondence comes where in the people (students) corresponded with the school. Mujibul, [2] opined that distance education is a situations in which learners are physically separated from the educational provider and communicate in writing (using letters, e-mail, fax or computer conferencing) verbally (by telephone, audio, conferencing, video conferencing) or in face to face tutorial sessions. This implies that distance education is a form of education and training in which using learning resources rather than attending classroom

sessions. This aspects of education focuses on the pedagogy which the method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept, technology and instructional system design, that aim at delivery education to people (students) who are not physical on site in a traditional classroom or campus. This can also be seen as a process or avenue to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by distance and period or both. In other hands, the concept distance education can be viewed as the process or a situation of creating an education experience of equal quality for those who desire to learn to best suit their needs but side classroom environment.

Obviously, the traditional way of education as we all know cannot be able to provide education to every one hence, the need for distance education in Nigeria. Distance education (learning) in Nigeria has recorded remarkable achievements in education in terms of providing quality education to the people, making education relatively accessible to the deserving people. This kind of education has a unique ability to meet some of the challenges of quality education delivery such as cost, quality and accessibility. These factors are imperative in providing sound education for those who actual desire to be educated and by so doing enhancing the growth of a country. Human capital development can be assured. Also, importantly, distance education (learning) in Nigeria has helped the government in achieving their goals to a reasonable extent.

Distance education programmes is regarded as strategies to absorb the large number of students who cannot currently be placed in face-to-face programmes as well as some of those currently using facilities on central campuses (because of high levels of demand, universities in Nigeria are all typically enrolling more students than their physical facilities and human resources can handle). Distance education is also a means to provide education to working students, who would not be able to attend full-time, face-to-face education, and distance education is seen as an opportunity to generate much-needed income for institutions. It decongests the number of illiterates by offering them an opportunity for access to education.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA (The Case of National Teachers' Institute (NTI) and National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN))

Distance education can be also explained as distance learning or long distance learning. Distance education is seen as a pattern of education which learners are removed in time and space from the teachers. It is usually done outside the classroom situation. Learners are separated by time and distance.

The National Teachers' Institute was established in 1976 to among other things provide in-service education for teachers through the distance learning system (DLS). As enshrined in Act No. 1 of 1978, with

its headquarters in Kaduna State. The institute saddened with the responsibility of making available courses of instruction leading to the development, upgrading and certification of teachers in Nigeria. The institute embarks, on programmes that re-train and upgrade teachers and refreshers courses that seek to update the knowledge and skill of teachers. Originally, the institute was established to take care of teething problems in educational sector especially at the primary school teachers to grade two level and to NCE level. However in the early 1970s to mid-1980s, distance education was gaining recognition internationally as a viable strategy for delivery large-scale educational opportunity, in many countries, especially developing ones, it was seen as a panacea to the challenge of providing education at affordable cost. In Nigeria, this led to the establishment of the National Teachers' Institute (NTI).

The NTI was the first institution specifically established by Federal Government to provide difference education courses designed to upgrade under qualified and unqualified teachers. In line with the minimum qualification directive mentioned above, NTI also introduced the NCE by distance learning in 1990, Bachelor Degree (B.ed) programme and post graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programmes. This is with a view to raising the quality of education in the country. The essence of the introduction of B.ed programme is to train and upgrade all qualified serving Grade 11 and NCE teachers to degree level. Improve the basic background of those who may wish to pursue their studies at higher levels and to help produce the required number of quality degree holding teachers for the successful implementation of the Universal Basic Education programme and the needed teachers at the senior secondary school level. At the B.ed level, each course is organized into two semesters per year for a minimum of three/four years and maximum of six/eight calendar years depending on the entry qualifications of the candidates. Conclusively, the National Teachers' Institute was set up to serve as a distance learning educational institution in order to provide additional means of tackling the challenges facing teacher education in Nigeria.

Following the cradle of National Open University of Nigeria (UOON), we look at the initiative of the civilian government of Shehu Shagari who established an Open University, which was based in Abuja. However, for various reasons and considerations, the scheme was scrapped by the military regime of General Mohammadu Buhari. His government recognized a dual. Mode set up at the University of Abuja. The centre for distance learning and continuing education (CDLCE) was mandated to provide a distance education component for every course that the University of Abuja would provide. However, it was not possible to meet this mandate. However, National Open University of Nigeria started on 12 April, 2001 by the Former President of Nigeria, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo.

In 2011, NOUN had about 57,759 students. The Vice Chancellor at the time was Prof. Vincent Tenebe. The University was for years operating from its Administrative Headquarters in Victorian Island, Lagos, before its current VC, Professor Abdalla Uba Adamu, moved it to its permanent headquarters in Jabi, Abuja, in 2016. It has over 75 study centers throughout the country. It offers over 50 programmes and 750 courses. NOUN does not provide lectures to students in normal classroom except some certain study center. The study Centre in Lagos for instance provide lectures to all its law undergraduates and supplies necessary course materials for all students after the payment of tuition fees. All the courses being offered by the University have been accredited by the National University Commission (NUC).

Features of Distance Education

The following are the characteristics of distance education in Nigeria:

- Mode of Administration
- Predominantly those in the labour force
- Immunity to strike
- No permanent site for learning
- Study Centre for learning
- Separation from teachers

Mode of Administration: The Administration of distance education in various centers is headed by Centre managers in case of NTI, Centre directors in case of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The teachers are referred to as facilitators.

Labour Force: Distance education is predominantly those in the labour force, women whose husband may not allow having direct education (schooling). It is important to note that distance education in Nigeria is majorly to cater for those who are not privileged or have limited access to the main campus education and the issue of upgrading of the existing work force such as teachers with less certificate or obsolete, however, this was the major reason that led to the establishment of National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna.

Immunity to Strike: Both National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and National Teachers' Institute (NTI) are established and structured in a way that there is total prohibition of any form of union either within staff or students. This has made them to be unaffected by strikes such as the ASUU and COESU strike. NOUN and NTI students have always and will continue to be immune to any form of strike.

No Permanent Site for Learning: Distance education has no permanent site for learning just like what we have in the conventional school. Example of these distance learning programmes is National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and National Teachers' Institute (NTI). Most time, they move use of existing schools such as secondary schools and tertiary institutions building.

Study Centre for Learning: A strong trend among the institution has been to establish “Study Centre”. Centers around the country, which have then generally been described as distance education centers. These centers are established in towns and semi urban areas using popular secondary schools in the areas. The major issue is to sub-contract tutors. These tutors or facilitators (Part time) organized face-to-face lectures and provide for assessment of participants or learners after all, successful students are then awarded B.ed, B.Sc (ad) and PGDE, and NCE depending on the institution that sit up the centers.

Separation from Teachers: The students are mostly separated from the teachers (facilitators) in terms of adequate learning process. This means that the teachers (facilitators) are not always available for any academic help just like what is obtainable in the normal conventional schools.

Prospects of Distance Education in Nigeria

Obviously, distance education might not be the best choice to every student or person, but understanding its prospects can help you decide if distance education is right for you. Therefore, there are some prospects of distance education, which include:

- Affordability
- Study at your pace
- Rising fulfilled citizen
- Access to quality education
- Work place advantages
- Time factor
- Flexibility

Affordability: The fee and other financial involvement of a distance education programme may be much more affordable or economical than the fee and financial involvement of a regular campus programme. Students or persons who are looking for affordable or economically viable options can go for a Distance Education Programme.

Study at your Pace: Distance Education provides the opportunity for you to learn at your own pace. The prospect of going back to classroom education can be intimidating for many of us, asking a question or revealing that you are unable to grasp a concept of class can be quite embarrassing for many students. Distance education comes to your rescue here. If you imbibe self-discipline and self-motivation, the best benefit of distance education is that you can learn at your own pace. Since you are given all course work before hand, in the case NTI is called Module; you can study as much or as little as you want every day, as long as you complete your study material within the stipulated time.

Raising Fulfilled Citizen: Distance education creates an avenue for the society to have people or persons who can continually update their skill and knowledge and at the same time be useful to themselves and the society at large.

Access to Quality Education: Distance education is a process used to create and provide access to quality education to people. It provides and creates an education experience of equal quality for the students to best suit their needs outside the classroom situation.

Work place Advantages: Distance education creates work place advantages. Distance education is gaining recognition among employers both in public and private enterprise; it has finally found some acceptance and recognition which is an encouraging sign. In Nigeria, the National Commission of Colleges of Education (NCCE) approved that the NTI NCE programme and National University Commission (NUC) approved that of National Open University Commission of Nigeria (NOUN) and National Teachers’ Institute (NTI) degree programmes. Many employers of labour especially Government parastatals and agencies, tiers of government automatically recognized them for the purpose of employment, up-grading and promotions.

Time Factor: Distance education provides time for the students. Those students who don’t have enough time on their hands can turn to distance education as an option and pursue it from the comfort of their homes.

Flexibility: Distance education helps in meeting the needs of the student whenever, and however they need to learn.

Challenges of Distance Education in Nigeria

Distance education in Nigeria is faced with numerous challenges as identified by Mbonu F.O. and Ubbaonu B.N. [1]:

Appointment of non-education administration as centre manager in National Teachers’ Institute (NTI) and Centre director in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). As a centre manager or centre director their main duties or responsibilities are to get things done in a proper way from the workers, they are supposed to be experts in the field of educational administration, planning and supervision. Aguna [3] explains that inadequate planning, recruitment of staff, course materials and non-utilization of experts in the field of educational administration and planning are affecting the adequate implementation of the programmes.

Problem of Accommodation: All the centers (mostly the NTI and NOUN) for distance education are functioning in either hired structure or hosted by already established institutions building provided for offices and lecture rooms are inadequate, resulting to slow rate of work in the office as well as in teaching and learning. Obayi [4] maintained that no effective work can be done in a congested environment. Nuraga [5] pointed out that lack of space has affected student’s guidance and counseling services. Moe [6] stipulates that in the environment where human being work, the interface between them and environment affect and determine the level of human performance and output at the work place.

Irregular payment and omission of some facilitator's honorarium: This is a situation where the facilitators are not being paid regularly and also omission of their names in the schedule for payment of their honorarium. Sometime when that happened, no supplementary voucher is raised to pay them before the next semester or session runs out. This result to negative motivation and the facilities becomes less committed to their jobs.

Leadership style adopted by manager and director: The growth and success of distance education in Nigeria is majorly depended on the quality of its leadership. The leadership style adopted by most centre managers could be branded as "Achaic". They are autocratic in managing their centers. Autocratic leadership style is a style of leadership through force and is commonly referred to as dictatorship and leader may be feared but not necessarily respected [7].

Inadequate funding and lack of receptive to distance education: Funds are not adequately released to them by government. Most people who are used to the conventional (traditional system) tertiary education are not receptive to distance education resulting to low reenrollment in many countries. Especially those who don't actually understand that it is a waste of time and money and distance education is not recognized in terms of seeking for job and societal belief concerning the inability of the administrators to recommend and recruit qualified and committed facilitators. It is the responsibility of the state coordinator as in NTI and the personnel department of National Open University of Nigeria to recruit their part time staff (facilitators). Because of the peculiar nature of the programme only very few qualified candidates apply for facilitating in the programme thereby making it difficult to recruit enough facilitators to cover the entire course in difference centers. Therefore managers in various centers waste a lots of time, searching for qualified facilitators willing to handle core courses.

High cost of technology to support distance education: Distance education attracts high cost of technology to ensure its effectiveness. Such as continuing cost of installing, maintaining, using and upgrading and also staff training cost.

Insufficient and unequal distribution of course materials: The Centre manager's office in the case of NTI in different approved centers are always invaded by students asking for their course materials (modules) which are inadequate in number and the distribution of the materials (modules) are not equal. This challenge has led to delay in facilitation and misunderstanding between the Centre managers and the student.

Staff Disobedience: Some staff employed by the management and posted to their centers is seen such as threats by the centre managers because of the differences in academic qualification and experience.

In centers where many facilitators are more experienced and qualified academically, their centre managers feel inferior and find it difficult to control them. Also most

facilitators who find themselves in it is situation tends to impose their decisions on the centre managers thereby making the study centre a living hell for the centre managers.

Issue of course allocation: Most times, Centre manager favour those who he thinks are loyal to him not considering the area of specialization of the facilitators. This lopsidedness in course allocation has resulted to unhealthy situation in the various centers.

Ways of Ensuring Effective Distance Education in Nigeria

Effective distance education is concerned with ensuring that both students and facilitators become comfortable with the system. And that delivery system (teaching) can and should be adapted to best meet the need of students. Therefore, some of the ways of enhancing effective distance education in Nigeria are as follows:

- Employment of specialist
- Adequate accommodation
- Adequate course materials
- Qualified facilitators
- Adequate funding
- Sensitization on the need for distance education

Employment of Specialist: This has to do with the employment of specialist in educational administration and planning as centre managers/directors. The centre manager or director must be knowledgeable and flexible enough to be able to alter things as the need be through his knowledge of educational management and planning. As a centre manager as in case of NTI and director as in case of NOUN must possess the required skills and knowledge of school administration. It is believed that the essence of educational administration is to ensure that the objectives of school system are achieved through the good functioning of the school. This is enhanced through the following functions of (centre manager) of educational administration as stated and explained in Okoroma [7].

- Policy making and programme planning
- Procurement and development of personnel
- Curriculum development and programme of instruction
- Student personnel or pupil administration
- Maintenance of effective interrelationship with the community and external agencies.
- Provision and maintenance of funds and facilities

Adequate Accommodation: School building, space is an essential pre-requisite for teaching and learning. There must be adequate accommodation for smooth running of distance education programme. There should be a permanent furnished accommodation for teaching and learning to take place effectively for example the National Teachers' Institute (NTI); it has been a re-occurring problems, when to stay to facilitate the programme, sometime the host may decide to decide

otherwise by not allowing the programme (centre) to use their facilities. Most centre managers are often confronted with this embarrassing situation.

Adequate Course Materials: This has to do with the number of modules supplied to various centers (NTI). It is believed that especially NTI, their major material in facilitating teaching and learning is module. And the fact is that, most time these modules are not made available with the corresponding number of student in a given centre. And it is has being a major problems in the programme. Therefore, adequate course materials should be made available in all centers and also at the right time to enable the students to prepare for the semester examination and other form of examination that the centre or institute deemed necessary.

Qualified Facilitators: This means that better and qualified facilitators should be recruited. Most time, one of the major problems of distance education is inadequate qualified facilitators. Many centers sometime make do with available person to make up the number of facilitators. Just like the popular adage that says “When the desirable is not available, the available becomes the desirable”. Therefore, government should be meticulous through the centre managers of various centers to recommend and appoint reliable and qualified facilitators.

Adequate Funding: Distance education is capital intensive. Most times the fund allocated are grossly inadequate. This makes the system difficult to realize its objective. Therefore it imperative for government to allocate more funds into the programme (distance education) to ensure the objective is realized. Sometime facilitators are owned of their honorarium even through the amount is small and this has become a common phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Distance education in Nigeria has proven to be a worthy programme, this is because it has excelled in providing quality education to the people, and it has also helped in increasing access to education which is significantly help in accelerating socio-economic development of the nation. Though, there are a lot of challenges in the advancement of distance education which include lack of fund, poor leadership, irregular payment of honorarium, inadequate accommodation to mention a few. However, distance education is a step taken by the government to bridge the gap between the “have” and “have not” bringing education to the door steps. That is why; some believed that distance education is the process of creating an education experience of equal quality for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom situation.

Suggestions

the suggestions include:

- Adequate accommodation should be made available by government in case of NTI and NOUN. Better still, erecting a permanent structure.
- Government should adequately fund distance education especially NTI and NOUN. This will enable them achieve the desire goals and objectives.
- Adequate and qualified facilitators should be employed.
- There should be adequate production and distribution of course materials for the students to avoid procrastination in facilitation and encourage prompt completion of course content.
- There should be employment of specialists in educational administration and planning as centre managers in case NTI and centre directors in case of NOUN in all the approved study centers.
- Assigning of courses and projects to the facilitation should be sincerely done. Area of specialization of the facilitators should be the utmost concern. This is to ensure effectiveness in the system.

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CITATION: Igbegiri Dominic Chiosom, & Mbagwu, Justine Ukaeju. (2021). Prospects and Challenges of Distance Education in Nigeria. *Global Journal of Research in Education & Literature*, 1(3), 31-36.