

Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria - An Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria represents a vital mechanism for expanding access to higher education, catering for non-traditional learners, and solving problem of physical capacity constraints of conventional tertiary institutions. However, the functionality of ODL in the Nigerian is not without its challenges. The study assessed the state of open and distance learning in Nigeria. This research paper provides historical evolution of ODL in Nigeria, theoretical foundations underpinning open and distance education, expatiated it challenges and benefits and, future directions. The research was conducted using content analysis, with a review of various publications related to the course of study. Secondary data were the major data used in the paper, and they were collected from both print and online publications. While the analysis still reveals persistent issues such as digital divide, cost of data and connectivity, quality assurance, pedagogical engagement, and electrical supply epileptic. The overall success of ODL is centred to effective instructional design, institutional support, and public policies. The research concludes that investment in national digital infrastructure, strengthen infrastructure and broadband coverage, remote proctoring software which offers automated monitoring of student assessment, use of hybrid and blended delivery models, providing downloadable pdf materials, audio lectures, and low-bandwidth videos. Instructional materials should be learners centred, adequately designed, student support system and feedback mechanism, continuous professional development initiatives for educators with equitable ODL policy frameworks

KEYWORDS

Open and Distance Learning, Distance Education, Conventional University, National Universities Commission, Higher Education

I. INTRODUCTION

It is evident that in the space of contemporary Nigeria tertiary education system, there are now Open University and Conventional or Traditional University, both operating with their given licenses and accreditations by National Universities Commission (NUC). In the word of Smith, education is a wise, hopeful and respectful cultivation of learning undertaken in the belief that all should have a chance to share in life. He also stated that education has a primary vision which is commitment to the good of all and of everyone.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has evolved as a major paradigm in modern global education, shifting instructional paradigms from traditional, synchronous classroom settings to flexible, technology-driven learning environments. It is a supplemental educational approach which now serves as a primary engine of global higher education and lifelong continuous learning system, where learners are separated in time and space from their

teachers. To Bozkurt, the philosophy of "openness" in distance learning is removing formal, administrative, geographical, and financial barriers to entry, and utilizing media to bridge the spatial and temporal gap between teachers and learners. Over the past two centuries, ODL has moved from paper-based correspondence courses to complex, digital learning ecosystems driven by Learning Management Systems (LMS), Open Educational Resources (OER), mobile applications, and artificial intelligence (AI). The global disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this transition, compelling educational institutions worldwide to adopt distance learning models at an unprecedented scale.

The adoption of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria is widely recognized as a strategic imperative to address the country's high demand for tertiary education. As noted by Jimoh, the rapid expansion of ODL in Nigeria has generated ongoing academic and institutional debate. He further stated that the need for balancing work with studies, the need for decongestion in conventional or traditional universities, and the need to further acquire additional certificate or qualification irrespective of the distance or age pave way for online teaching and learning which birthed the creation of an open university system to promote open and distance learning education in Nigeria. However, critics point to high dropout rates, technological inequities, digital divide, and concerns regarding assessment integrity. In line with the above argument, this research systematically evaluates;

- The historical evolution of ODL or distance education in Nigeria
- The core theoretical models or frameworks underpinning distance education
- The primary benefits and impacts of distance education
- Challenges identified of ODL in Nigeria as identified in empirical research; and literatures
- Conclusion and future directions

A. Research Method and Scope of the study

Research design employed for the study is evaluation research design. Evaluation research entails the process of gathering data to be used as a basis for judging the effectiveness and impact of a project, programs or intervention.

The researcher adopts evaluation research to find out the current state of ODL in Nigeria, its practices and standards in Nigeria education system due to the growing concern towards educational evaluation as more of the nation's resources are involved in education. Review was carried out using content analysis to gather relevant information from various literatures on the study. The study reviews various existing literatures on open and distance learning from 2000-2026.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Open learning is seen as a higher learning programme instituted to enable individual learners to exercise choices over several aspects of the learning experience. Onyemaechi (2018) suggested that open learning means open entry and access to learning opportunities and the removal of barriers to learning opportunities.

In Oladejo and Gesinde, (2014), the terms 'open learning' and 'distance education' according to the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organizations, UNESCO (2000) represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and group of learners. Several founding fathers of distance education had earlier come up with different definitions.

To Burge (1993) he stated that open education is a situation in which the learner uses resources in a flexible way to achieve their goals. The resources herein could be print, audio, computer based; used at home, at a study center, in the workplace, with or without the guidance of a tutor or mentor. Jegede, (2003) defined distance education 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.

Mujibul (2008) sees distance education as 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, videoconferencing), or in face to face tutorial sessions. Cited in. Also, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in the National Policy on Education (2004), described ODL as life-long learning, life-wide education, adult education, media-based education, self-learning.

In line with the above stated definitions of open and distance education, or open and distance learning interchangeably, those definitions are within the province of subjectivity, however in this study, open and distance learning is an educational framework, where educational contents dissemination are carried out in a flexible and timely manner between the learner and the teacher who are separated by geographical or physical locations and time. This educational content could be print media or non-print media which is facilitated by use of technology. Open and distance learning (ODL) provides opportunities to learners irrespective of age, gender, or location and independence to choose convenience mode of learning by themselves and suitable technology or platforms.

B. The Historical Evolution of ODL or Distance Education in Nigeria

The history of Distance Education in Nigeria dates back to 1887 with the practice of correspondence education as a means of preparing candidates for the General Certificate in Education, a pre-requisite for the London Matriculation Examination. Thus, University of London was tagged the first "Open University". In spite of the establishment of a University College in Ibadan in 1948, many of its academic staff passed through the higher degree programs of the University of London as distance learners, which gave them the opportunity to combine work with studies. Consequently, a significant number of Nigeria's early educated elites were products of the British correspondence distance education system. This is the beauty of a well-run Distance Education programme.

In Nigeria, the first Distance Education programme was the University of Lagos Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) programme. Initiated in 1974, it has since metamorphosed to Distance Learning Institute (DLI).

The year 1983 marked a turning point in the history of open and distance education (ODE) in Nigeria. It is the search for alternative implementation agents for educational policies that gave rise to the evolution of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in Nigeria cited in. ODL is supported by the Nigerian government as part of her efforts to provide "Education for All (EFA)". This is why different online and distance education programmes and institutions have been approved to run concurrently with conventional institutions of learning, especially for tertiary education. Today there is an array of Distance Education programs in Nigeria. The most prominent of them all is the National Open University. Onyemaechi (2018), observed that the Nigerian government has accredited different online and distance learning institutions through the National Universities Commission (NUC), and these include but are not limited to:

- The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).
- The Centre for Distance Learning (CDL), Obafemi Awolowo University.
- The Distance Learning Institute (DLI) of the University of Lagos.
- The Distance Learning Centre (DLC) of the University of Lagos.
- The National Teachers' Institute (NTI), Kaduna.
- MIVA Open University, Abuja

Ohioze et al, 2013, posit that, Open and distance learning was established as a programme of studies which provides opportunities for educational advancement for members of society who find themselves in any of the following stations in life: workers who desire education to improve their skills but who cannot afford to leave their jobs for full-time study; persons who appear frustrated with the bottlenecks in the processes of seeking admission to conventional institutions; persons who began their studies in conventional institutions but had to drop out for various reasons, including loss of educational sponsors or benefactors.

The mass of people who seek education to improve themselves find solace in open and distance learning programmes. According to Federal government National Policy on Education; the goals of open and distance education are:

- Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.
- Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace.
- Encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula.
- Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.
- Encourage lifelong learning opportunities (National Policy on Education, 2013)

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. The core theoretical models or frameworks underpinning distance education

1. *Theory of Transactional Distance*

The idea of transactional distance theory was birthed by Michael G. Moore in 1972, He posits that "distance" in distance education is not merely about physical distance, but pedagogical and psychological gap between the teacher and the learner. Transactional distance had three principles or variables, which are

- Programme Structure: This is the rigidity or flexibility of the course design
- Interaction or Dialogue: The interactive pattern and nature of interactions between the teacher and the students
- and Learner Autonomy or Independent: The motivations and student ability to learn at their own pace, the degree to which the student can direct their own learning, determine their own schedule and balance it with dialogue and programme structure.

Moore indicated that gap exists in every educational setting, but it is highly common in online and distance learning and if the transactional distance is too wide, learners may feel isolated, confused, unmotivated and disengaged.

2. *Theory of Industrialization of Teaching*

Otto Peters challenges the conventional way of thinking about education, Peter beliefs that there is growing increase in population, and this population explosion, has rendered the conventional system of education inadequate to fulfil the educational needs of the ever-growing and unlimited number of learners. Peters further hold assertion that traditional classroom education operates like a craft.

Otto Peters (1967, 1988), conceptualized distance education as an industrialized form of teaching and learning. He argued that ODL relies on structural division of labour, mass production of standardized instructional material, administrative centralization, and automation mechanisms that allow distance systems to scale far beyond traditional classrooms settings. Peters stated that structure or model for ODL should include three basic modes of academic learning namely: 'self-learning, tele-learning and social intercourse", cited.

More importantly Peters (2008), had observed that distance education endeavour to

- Produce more graduates at a lower per student cost
- Provide for greater equality of educational opportunities
- Provide access to adult students
- Provide professional qualifications
- Assist in the development and democratization of their respective countries.

C. *Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework*

Attributed to the work of Garrison et al (2000), the Community of Inquiry framework, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, has become a leading pedagogical model. The CoI model asserts that deep and meaningful online learning experiences occur through the interaction of three core presences:

1. *Cognitive Presence:*

The degree to which learners construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse.

2. *Social Presence:*

The ability of participants to project their personal characteristics into the community, presenting themselves as real people.

3. *Teaching Presence:*

The design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to realize intended learning outcomes.

D. *Wedemeyer's Theory of Independent Study*

Charles Wedemeyer emphasized learner independence as the core feature of distance education. He posited that non-traditional adult learners require flexible systems that grant them autonomy over where, when, and how they learn. Wedemeyer advocated for breaking down traditional institutional rigidities, arguing that self-directed learning, mediated through technology, fosters self-reliance and democratic access to knowledge.

E. *Holmberg's Theory of Guided Didactic Conversation*

Börje Holmberg (1989, 1995) emphasized the interpersonal, emotional dimensions of distance study. His theory of "guided didactic conversation" posits that effective learning occurs when students feel a personal connection to their institution and instructors. Holmberg argued that instructional materials written in a conversational, friendly style, combined with prompt and empathetic tutor support, increase student motivation, lower feelings of isolation, and enhance learning outcomes.

F. *Connectivism Learning Theory*

Developed by Siemens and Downes (2005) as a learning theory specifically tailored for the digital age, Connectivism views learning as a process of building networks of information, contacts, and resources. Knowledge is distributed across social networks, digital platforms, and non-human repositories; the core capacity for modern learners lies in navigating and synthesizing these decentralized networks and collaborative connection

IV. BENEFITS AND IMPACTS OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

A. *Broadening Educational Reach*

ODL serves as an indispensable tool for expanding higher education opportunity across board or globally. In developing nations Nigeria inclusive, physical university infrastructures often lack the capacity to meet demand from overgrowing populations. Open universities such the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), and Miva Open University serves hundreds of thousands of learners, providing degrees that would otherwise be structurally inaccessible.

B. Economic and Professional Integration

By accommodating asynchronous learning schedules, ODL enables workers and professionals to continue to study and acquire new skills or knowledge while working, balancing job and study together. This dynamic reduces the opportunity cost of higher education, stabilizing household income while building human capital aligned with changing labor market requirements.

C. Democratization of Educational Access:

ODL serves as a primary vehicle for expanding access to higher and continuing education. It removes geographical constraints, enabling rural, remote, and internationally dispersed learners to enrol in quality programs without relocating.

D. Flexibility and Inclusivity for Non-Traditional Learners:

Adult professionals, primary caregivers, and employed students benefit from the temporal flexibility inherent in asynchronous ODL models. ODL allows learners to balance formal education alongside personal and professional responsibilities.

E. Cost-Effectiveness and Scalability:

From an institutional standpoint, once digital infrastructures and course materials are established, the marginal cost of educating additional student's drops significantly compared to physical campus expansions. For learners, distance programs often reduce overall expenses associated with commuting, campus housing, and physical study materials.

F. Promotion of Lifelong Learning and Professional Upskilling:

Rapid shifts in global labor markets economy require continuous skills development. ODL enables modular credentials, micro-credentials, and professional certification programs that allow workforce participants to continually upskill without career interruption.

V. CHALLENGES OF ODL IN NIGERIA

A. Digital Divide and Access to technology

While ODL seeks to democratize education, it can inadvertently widen socio-economic divides, when compared with other countries of the world, digital divide in Nigeria is a main constraint in open and distance learning. The underdeveloped areas, face challenges in accessing information technology as a result of poor infrastructure.

As World Bank (2021) reports demonstrate, students in rural communities and developing regions often lack access to reliable high-speed broadband, stable electricity, and modern hardware. Oladokun and Aina (2011), also noted that various researchers corroborate digital divide and access to technology as a major barrier for online teaching and learning, which blocks the distance learners and marginalized the underclass of 'info-poor'.

B. High Attrition Rates and Isolation

A persistent vulnerability in ODL programs is high student dropout rates, which are often significantly higher than those found in traditional on-campus programs. Scholars trace.

C. Learner attrition to three main causes:

Psychological Isolation: Physical separation from peers and campus life frequently generates feelings of detachment and cognitive fatigue. Without deliberate social presence and social gatherings which are common in traditional campus settings (Garrison et al., 2000), learners can feel unsupported, decreasing intrinsic motivation.

Inadequate or lack of self-regulated learning: As highlighted in Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, ODL requires significant student autonomy. Students who lack strong time management, self-monitoring, and goal-setting skills often struggle with self-paced course structures, leading to procrastination, falling behind, and eventual drop-out.

Inadequate Support Systems: Distant students often face delayed academic feedback, insufficient academic advising, or difficulty accessing mental health and technical support resources.

D. Quality Assurance, Pedagogy, and Assessment Integrity

Ensuring instructional quality, academic rigor, and assessment validity in decentralized learning environments remains a central debate and identified issues are;

1. Academic Integrity:

Managing cheating, impersonation, and unauthorized assistance in remote, un-proctored examinations present ongoing institutional challenges. Assessing learner performance accurately without physical supervision remains a major operational challenge in the light of widespread availability of online resources and generative AI tools.

2. Pedagogical Alignment:

A frequent critique in the literature is the tendency of institutions to migrate traditional face-to-face lecture slides directly onto LMS platforms without redesigning content for interactive online engagement. As Bates (2019) notes, effective online instruction requires intentional instructional design, active learning components, clear communication channels, and modularized content rather than passive digitized lectures.

3. Faculty Preparedness:

Effective ODL delivery requires specialized digital literacy and online facilitation skills as instructors should acquire new technical and pedagogical competencies. Many teachers are inadequately trained and teaching effectively online requires active e-moderation, timely written feedback, dynamic multimedia curation, and administrative upkeep.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The confluence of the need for continuous learning and unprecedented technological innovation communications have pushed distance education approaches to the forefront of educational practice. In the Open and Distance Learning mode of education delivery discourse around the world, Nigeria is not left behind as she has also integrated ODL into her education system and must continue to update the frameworks and gives directions to it in order to increase access to higher education in Nigeria.

However, exploiting the full potential of ODL's requires systematically addressing its core challenges as stated earlier. Instructional materials should be learners centred, adequately designed, student support system and feedback mechanism, continuous professional development initiatives for educators with equitable ODL policy frameworks. The future directions are but not limited to, investment in national digital infrastructure, strengthen infrastructure and broadband coverage, remote proctoring software which offers automated monitoring of student assessment, use of hybrid and blended delivery models, providing downloadable pdf materials, audio lectures, and low-bandwidth videos.

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