

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Distance Education as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face education has been seen as the teaching-learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance, which is often bridged by modern communication. It comprises all patterns of student-centered learning process in which the teacher has limited role.

In Nigeria, Africa, the introduction of this form of learning programme, is relatively new and therefore pose some challenges to all stakeholders in the education industry. In trying to meet up with the enormous demands for formal education, Nigerian government established some institutions for distance learning. These included the National Teachers Institute (NTI), the National Open University (NOUN) among others.

This paper therefore, examined the historical development of this programme and particularly in Nigeria, the theories and philosophies of distance education, the challenges and prospects of the programme in the country.

Keywords: Distance Education, Distance Education Development, Management, Challenges and Prospects.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has always seen education as an instrument for empowering people and equally the best legacy any nation can bequeath to its citizenry. Agheta (1992), Ajibade (1993) and Adeyemi (2006), writing on the role of education in national development agreed that for development to take effect, a country must have a very considerable proportion of trained, educated citizens not only to act as doctors, engineers, teachers, agriculturists, scientists and the like, but must create a new class sufficiently large and hence, sufficiently strong to establish its own value of justice, selection on merit, flexibility, empiricism and efficiency. Hence, the pursuit of educational achievement has been one of the paramount focuses of most countries of the world – Nigeria inclusive. Adeyemi (2006; 2007) summing up the national objectives of Nigerian education, as stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) described education as the integration of individuals into sound and effective citizens. The broad "objectives of Nigerian Education" therefore, include:

- The inculcation of the right type of values and attitude for the survival of the individual and society;
- The training of the mind in building valuable concepts, general actions and understanding of the world around them;

- The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competencies both mental and physical, as equipment for the individual to live in his society;
- The acquisition of a relevant and balanced knowledge of facts about local and world technology (NPE, 2004).

As part of the programmes and educational structures are in achieving the set objectives of education in Nigeria. Distance education has also been used to provide learning opportunities to students. Distance education provides Nigerian education system multi-made approach (a combination of face-to-face, print, audio/video broadcasts, teleconferencing etc.) to teach students. Distance education can therefore be conceptualized as any form of organized educational experience in which teaching and learning take place, with the teachers at a distance from the learners most of the time. It is a form of education that enables a limited number of teachers to reach a very large number of learners which pave ways to cost reduction and economics of scale (Dodds, 1991; Fagbamiye, 1999, Oguntimehin and Adeyemi, 1999; 2000). In addition, Oguntimehin and Adeyemi (1999:2000) Fagbamiye (1999) and Chandler (1991) define distance education and open learning as follows:

"... distance education is used as a generic term to comprise all patterns of student-centered learning process in which the teacher has only a limited role. The old forms of correspondence education, external or extra-mural studies and home-based study come under this description. All of them have certain common characteristics that keep them separate from the traditional pattern of face-to-face learning. The most outstanding characteristics is the physical distance between the students and the teacher... Distance education (as well as, open learning) is a self-paced learning process wherein the student can frame his own time-table according to the time at his disposal. This makes it possible for the people employed in full-time jobs, house wives with numerous household chores and youths waiting for employment to carry on education at their leisure available to them..." Therefore, distance education can be defined as the teaching-learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by modern communication media".

In all, it can be safely said, that distance learning is mainly structured as an intentional and systematic educational enterprise outside of traditional schooling. The terms "distance education" or "distance learning" have been applied inter-changeably by many different researchers to a great variety of programmes, providers, audiences, and media. Its hallmarks are the separate of teacher and learner in space and/or time (Perraton, 1988), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen, 1992), and non-contiguous communication between student and teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986; Garrison & Shale, 1987).

A REVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The development of correspondence pattern of education in the early part of the 18th century marked the beginning in the provision of educational opportunities for several people the world over. This distance education, according to Adekanmbi (1994) and Omoyeni (2000) evolved a departure from the traditional face-to-face teaching-learning system. In Nigeria, the introduction of this form of learning programme is relatively new and therefore, poses some challenges to all stakeholders in the education industry.

In trying meet up with the enormous demand for formal education, Nigerian government established some institutions for distance learning. These include the National Teachers Institute (NTI), the National Open University (NOUN) among others.

Modern distance education has been around at least since Isaac Pitman taught shorthand in Great Britain via correspondence in the 1840s. Since, "the development of the postal service in the 19th century. Commercial correspondence colleges provided distance education to students across the country." Computers and the internet have only made distance learning easier, just as it has for many other day-to-day tasks.

One of the oldest distance education universities is the University of South Africa, which has been offering Correspondence Education courses since 1946. The largest distance education university in the United Kingdom is the Open University founded 1969. In Germany the FernUniversitat in Hagen was founded 1974. There are now many similar institutions around the world, often with the name Open University (in English or in the local language).

There are many private and public, non-profit and for-profit institutions offering courses and degree programmes through distance education. Levels of accreditation vary; some institutions offering distance education in the United States have received little outside oversight, and some may be fraudulent diploma mills. In many other jurisdictions, an institution may not use the term "University" without accreditation and authorization, normally by the national government. In the twentieth century, radio, television, and the Internet have all been used to further distance education.

Today, distance learning has become one of the innovations in Nigerian education. It has become an instrument for the provision of education to Nigerians especially in the production of teachers, and other professionals of all grades at all levels.

THEORIES AND PHILOSOPHIES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

According to IJE (1996), the theoretical basis on which instructional models are based affects not only the way in which information is communicated to the student, but also the way in which the student makes sense and constructs new knowledge from the information which is presented. Currently, there are two opposing views which impact on instructional design: symbol-processing and situated cognition.

Until recently, the dominant view has been the traditional, information processing approach, based on the concept of a computer performing formal operations on symbols (Seamans, 1990). The key concept is that the teacher can transmit a fixed body of information to students via an external representation. She represents an abstract idea as a concrete image and then presents the image to the learner via a medium. The learner, in turn, perceives, decodes, and stores it. Horton (1994) modifies this approach by adding two additional factors: the student's context (environment, current situation, other sensory input) and mind (memories, associations emotions, inference and reasoning, curiosity and interest) to the representation. The learner then develops his own image and uses it to construct new knowledge, in context, based on his own prior knowledge and abilities. The alternative approach is based on constructivist principles, in which a learner actively constructs an internal representation of knowledge by interacting with the material to be learned. This is the basis for both situated cognition (Streibel, 1991) and problem-based learning (Savery & Duffy, 1995).

According to this viewpoint, both social and physical interactions enter into both the definition of a problem and the construction of its solution. Neither the information to be learned, nor its symbolic description, is specified outside the process of inquiry and the conclusions that emerge from that process.

Prawat and Floden (1994) state that, to implement constructivism in a lesson, one must shift ones focus away from the traditional transmission model to one which is much more complex, interactive, and evolving.

Though these two theories are totally different in nature, effective designers usually start with empirical knowledge: objects, events, and practices which mirror the everyday environment of their designated learners. Then, with a firm theoretical grounding, they develop a presentation which enables learners to construct appropriate new knowledge by interacting with the instruction. To quote the AI researcher, Herbert A. Simon, "Human beings are at their best when they interact with the real world and draw lessons from the bumps and bruises they get" (Simon, 1994).

Hilary Perraton (1988) defines the role of the distance teacher. When, through the most effective choice of media, she meets the distance students face-to-face, she now becomes a facilitator of learning, rather than a communicator of a fixed body of information. The learning process proceeds as knowledge building among teacher and students

Distance education systems now involve a high degree of interactivity between teacher and student, even in rural and isolated communities separated by perhaps thousands of miles. The Office of Technology Assessment stresses the importance of interactivity: distance learning allows students to hear and perhaps see teachers, as well as allowing teachers to react to their students' comments and questions (US. Congress, 1988). Moreover, virtual learning communities can be formed, in which students and researchers throughout the world who are part of the same class or study group can contact one another at any time of the day or night to share observations, information, and expertise with one another (VanderVen, 1994; Wolfe, 1994).

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CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Challenges

Fagbamiye (1999) pointed out in his study on the state of the art in distance education in Nigeria that there is perhaps no distance education institution in some parts of the world. Many of the institutions in Nigeria depend mainly on the print medium and face-to-face meetings which are meant to supplement the printed course texts. Many of the institutions are handicapped by low-level development of communication facilities and the inadequate infrastructural facilities in the country as a whole. The National Teachers Institute (NTI) is perhaps the best developed of the distance education institutions with more study centers than other institutions, yet it has its problems. Distance education as an alternative to traditional face-to-face education may face both open and silent opposition from those who see education par excellence as traditional classroom teaching.

It has become necessary to state that adult education is that aspect of education that does not entertain drop-outs. In fact drop outs of formal school system are encouraged to drop-in through adult education. But what is witnessed currently is a relatively high "drop-outs" of the distance learner (Omoyeni, 1999; Fagbamiye, 1999; 2000, Oguntimehin, 2005: 2006). For example, from the data collected by Omoyeni, it is noted that between 1990 and 1995, there was a steady average increase of about 8.62% annual enrolment of the University of Lagos distance learning programme. That of the NTI, attracted an annual increase of about 20.47% on the average. But between 1995 and 1998, there was a sharp decline of 25.1% and 34.3% on-enrolment respectively. Those who had registered failed to continue with the programme.

Other challenges confronting distance learning include the non-easy access to tutors and other educational resources by students. The students only rely on handouts. The result of these is poor study-skills and examination malpractices. Also, very little or no guidance and counseling benefits are available to learners.

Finally, the costs of distance education seem to be a major set-back, the payments for transportation, books, handouts, photocopies and maintaining homes.

Prospects of the Programme in Nigeria

After taking a cursory look at the challenges facing distance education in Nigeria, it is pertinent to examine the prospects of this programme.

Distance education challenges the learning relationship from the common, centralized school model to a more decentralized, flexible model. It also reverses social dynamics by bringing school to students, rather than students to school. This leads to a host of new issues for administrators to debate and popularize the programme. These issues include:

- the impact of electronic education on tenured teaching;
- balancing the budget with potentially low-cost electronic learning options;
- redefining what it meant to have a teacher present in the classroom;
- revising teacher certification requirements to accommodate those teachers who electronically cross service area boundaries (Holloway and Ohler, 1991 & Sherry, 1996).

Distance education enterprises are partnerships, they are characterized by the integration of a great many parts working towards a common goal (Schlosser and Anderson, 1994 & Pacific Mountain Network, 1994).

Each school has its own aims, goals and objectives both stated and unstated. Each school also has its own culture, urban or rural, as well as its own perceived value of students learning. There are personnel issues, with clerical, technical, and educational support staff forming a vital link between teacher and students. Many facets of the project must be considered, especially linking student needs within the particular school district with current and projected technology resources. As opportunities arise, so do problems which must be dealt with. New policy issues must be addressed, as well. According to Sherry (1996) items for further consideration include:

- new forms of assessment and evaluation, including means to ensure that the students work is original and authentic
- a set of nationally accepted institutional accreditation standards to ensure the quality of distance education.

- **A nationally accepted set of teacher certification standards which meet a minimum criterion including training in distance education theory, methods and strategies**
- **The need for cooperation among business, government and education sectors**
- **Technology training and accessibility for all, not just for progressive students and teachers**

The current situation in Nigeria Call for the adoption of concerted efforts from both private and public organizations in making distance education viable to compliment the conventional system already in existence.

Generally, in managing distance education and open learning, the following functions have to be planned, implemented and assed: course development, course presentation, teacher-student contact, use of communication media, organizational structure, student evaluation and student motivation and counselling.

These functions to a large extent, determine the structure of administration in distance learning system. Apart from the functions mentioned about; the overall monitoring of the programme is an important aspect of management for the development of distance education, the world over. Where effective monitoring is lacking, there is the tendency for an organized programme to fail. Omoyeni (1999) sees monitoring as part of the standardized procedure and for performance advancement proper monitoring is indeed a good device to further develop the human and material aspect of distance education programme. The purpose of monitoring is not only for quality control mechanism but also, a tool to result quickly to challenges/problems that require immediate and remedial action. This explains the control role of monitoring as a process of standardization and feedback on the performance of the programme generally, and the learners in particular.

CONCLUSIONS

It is imperative for governments at all levels in Nigeria and the world over to realize the potential benefits of distance education to the actualization of providing education to the teeming population of the human society. In Nigeria, Africa today, as indicated above the introduction of distance education is relatively new hence, the need to address the emerging challenges of the programme. To this extent the collaborative approach of the new initiative Universal Basic Education should be adopted to ensure that all stakeholders in the administration of distance education are well enlightened and made to adequately participate in the programme. The areas of collaboration could include funding, provision of facilities, policy formulation, and policy integration among others. With these in place, the development and realization of functional and sustainable distance education would be achieved in the nearest future for the benefit of the human community.

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