
Cost Effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning In Nigeria : Responses From Focus Group Discussions

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Abstract

This study reports the out come of a primary qualitative investigation of open and distance learning system of education as a panacea to the problem of socially induced constraints on the acquisition of education, that may lead to the inability to attend higher institutions of learning, acquire certificates, become a qualified skilled worker by being able to study for the course of study chosen by the individual. A major interest of the study was to determine the perception of the recipients about what the cost effectiveness of open and distance learning system is. The study based on interviews and focus group discussions with learners, facilitators, study centre managers and guidance counsellors who were the learners support providers and stakeholders in the open and distance learning and its expected results for the learners was discussed. The study sought to investigate whether these stakeholders subscribed to the fact that the open and distance learning system of education will achieve its desired objectives or not. The survey confirms the existence of the imperative that brought about the establishment of open and distance learning institutions. The fact that many recipients confirmed that more of these types of institutions are needed suggests that the samples are of the opinions that it is an effective approach to higher education in Nigeria . From the result of the investigation, it was concluded that open and distance learning institutions are highly effective in considering the purpose of establishing them within the general framework of the education system.

Introduction

It is a trite statement that education is the greatest social leveller and that education is the most potent instrument for mental and social emancipation. Nations of the world, in recognition of this, sought to provide quality education for majority of their citizens in an equitable and accessible manner (Fafunwa 1974). This is contingent on the realization of the leaders that a nexus exists between education and national development processes (Jegade 2000). This reality has led many countries, developed and developing alike, to make huge investments in the education of their people. However, the greatest challenge assailing many nations is how to provide educational opportunities for many of their citizens. This phenomenon is particularly disturbing in developing nations of the world where there is a preponderance of high population

growth rate and low per capita income (Jegade 2000). Providing quality education to millions has been one of the struggles facing developing countries like Nigeria . The formal system of education, via the conventional classroom setting which had been in existence for centuries has gained some sort of loss in momentum and is slow in responding to the challenge of the exponential rise in the population of those who have expressed interest in education. This rise in the population of those seeking educational opportunities in the conventional system calls for a radical departure from the traditional method of educating people. However, the increase in the development of information and communication technologies as they are applied to the education process has created a new set of learners who are not merely restricted to the brick and mortar classrooms, as they once existed. It is time to explore the possibility and effectiveness of alternative and innovative approaches to the educative process, since expanding educational opportunities through conventional means to groups that had hitherto been unreached such as *women in purdah, migrant cattle farmers, fishermen, offshore oil workers, prisoners, working women, full time house wives, etc*, means putting great strains on the already shrinking education budgets. It is against the backdrop of this that open and distance learning has been identified as the panacea to the perennial problems of equitable access to education, equality of opportunities as well as providing a second chance for those who had once been in the system but had to leave [dropouts].

UNESCO (2002) stated that open and distance learning is not necessarily the most cost-efficient approach – but then there is no reason why it should necessarily be. Distance education methods may be the only way to reach some target audiences, in which case lowering the cost of education will not necessarily be an objective of distance education. This will allow for enhancement of opportunities that support education for all and life long learning and also provide avenues for the acquisition of flexible and qualitative education for all categories of learners to justify the crave for learners' achievement.

What is Open and Distance Learning?

No definition has been found to be exhaustive in attempting to define open and distance learning; rather there are several approaches to defining the term. According to UNESCO (2002), the terms open and distance learning 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 groups of learners. Peratton, Robinson & Creed (2001) defined distance education as ‘an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and/or time from the learners. Open Learning, in turn, is ‘an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, entry, or time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these. Thus, the concept of open and distance learning suggest an educational approach designed to reach learners in their homes/offices/shops etc, provide learning resources for them to qualify without attending formal classes in person, or create opportunities for life long learning, no matter where or when they want to study. Hulsmann (1997) had approached the definition of the concept of open and distance learning from the characteristic point of view. He identified four crucial features of distance education as follows:

- The separation of the teacher and the learner in time or place, or in both time and place.
- Influence of an educational institution: necessity for institutional accreditation of programmes and courses.

- The use of technical media: involving mixed media courseware such as print, radio and television broadcasts, video and audiocassettes, computer based learning and telecommunications.
- The provision of two-way communication: allowing for interaction between learners and tutors either synchronously or asynchronously, as opposed to the passive receipt of broadcast signals.

The ODL trainers' toolkit published jointly by the Commonwealth of Learning and the Asian Development Bank (2000) identified two additional features of distance education as:

- Possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials, learner-learner interaction (self-help study groups), library study, laboratory and practice sessions.
- Use of industrialized processes; that is, in large scale open and distance learning operations, labour is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff working together in course development teams.

Cost Effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning

Obanya (1999) reported that there exists a great insufficiency of opportunities in access to quality education in Nigeria today with low quality education and its frequently observed irrelevance. This calls for a radical change in the approach to the educative process in Nigeria. UNESCO (2002) had stated that “in efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, open and distance learning may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary and under certain circumstances, an appropriate substitute for the face-to-face methods that still dominates most educational systems”. The distance education alternative with all its palpable advantages of access and flexibility seems to be the solution to the problem.

The open and distance learning scheme holds a number of potentials for various stakeholders in the education and development process. To the learner, ODL means more freedom of access and thereby, a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualification. It is often a cheaper means of attending school for the student since some people may not be able to leave their places of work to go to school full time. For employers, ODL offer the possibility of organizing in-service training for their staff without necessarily releasing them for long periods of productive time. With sufficient number of employees being trained, ODL is often the most cost-effective means. For the government and educational policy makers, the system is a panacea to the perennial problem of provision of equitable and accessible education at an affordable and cost effective way.

Hulsmann (2000) defined Cost-effectiveness as the capacity of a system to attain the goals determined by the system. Cost effectiveness maximizes the ratio of outcomes/cost of inputs. In simple terms, efficiency means reducing the cost of inputs for a given outcome. Outcome is viewed in educational contexts, since in most cases in the educational system, the objectives are both numerous and impossible to measure with the same yardstick. Creed (2001) stated that one of the most important questions on cost effectiveness analysis is how do the costs of conventional and distance education compare? Bartley & Golek (2004) are also of the opinion that the question that is most deluging is how to determine the cost effectiveness of education programmes offered via the distance when compared piecewise to the traditional medium.

Rumble (2001) argued that the factors affecting the costs of face-to-face education include

whether small tutorials, seminars, lectures or independent and resource-based learning strategies are adopted. But it is important to note that the technology adopted also plays a crucial role in the determination of the aggregate costs of an education system. In most conventional institutions in Nigeria where face-to-face instructional model is in use, the application of technology is extremely limited. The technologies used for delivery of instruction such as radio, television, audiocassettes and videotapes are not among the instructional materials popularly used in higher institutions in Nigeria. In developing countries, the high costs associated with Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) have greatly prevented the use of computers in teaching and learning, especially in the conventional education setting. In most of the approaches adopted in the dissemination of instructions in the conventional system, there is little or no application of instructional media whatsoever and where these are used, all the learners usually make use of them corporately. Thus, it is not a learner centred instructional method. Rumble (2001) also mentioned that a system would be more cost efficient than another if the unit cost of its output is lower than the unit cost of the system with which it is being compared. When one considers the fact that each of the technologies adopted in the instructional processes of open and distance learning education has its own associated cost implications, it is easy to see why studies have shown (UNESCO 2002, Rumble 2001, Hulsmann 2000) that the costs per average student of distance education is more expensive than that of the traditional setting. UNESCO (2002) found that open and distance learning is not necessarily the most cost-efficient approach, but the greatest benefit is that it opens up access to certain target audiences. Moreover, an examination of the cost implications of the programmes on offer at the National Open University of Nigeria reveals that there may be some form of institutional subsidy for the programmes from the Federal Government. This is also corroborated by the experience of sister institutions like the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) in Nigeria. This is so considering the fact that Distance Education programmes have been found to be costly at the initial stage and gradually becomes cheaper due to economies of scale (Rumble 1997; Orivel 1997) in Hulsmann 1997; Hulsmann 2000). Many stakeholders in the education sector are interested in the open and distance learning scheme because it allows greater access to educational opportunities, this is in keeping with the stated objectives of the National Policy on Education (revised in 1998) that “maximum efforts shall be made to enable those who can benefit from higher 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 programmes”. This brings to mind the possibility of a rise in the cost of the courseware when the government removes the subsidy. Another perspective is that the flexibility of the open and distance learning system allows learners to stretch the period of the study at a convenient pace both in terms of study time and ability to afford the fees payable for the programmes. This is a palpable advantage which the open and distance learning enjoys above the conventional system moreso when it restricts the period for programme completion to specified time frames.

Data Collection

The National Open University of Nigeria currently has twenty-three study centres, which are stratified into six geo-political zones. This categorization was based on the geographical spread of Nigeria as an entity and the ethnic affiliations of each zone. The zones made up of three or four study centres are south-west, south-south, south-east, north-west, north-central and north-east. The focus groups (subjects) were chosen among the students, student counsellors, centre managers, facilitators who work for the five academic units in the University across the country. These schools are: School of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Science and Technology, School of Business and Human Resources Management and the Centre for Continuing Education and Workplace Training. Each group of participants was considered as an

independent group. The procedure used for group selection was varied. The students' members of the group were chosen from the randomly selected centres in each zone. The students group was made up of forty undergraduate or postgraduate students.

The student counsellors group was made up of the guidance counsellors of the purposive randomly selected study centres. This group was made up of twelve student counsellors. The centre managers' group was made of six centre managers/overseers who are the chief operating officers of the study centres under their auspices (authority). The facilitators' group members were chosen through the assistance of the Study Centre Managers/Overseers of the selected study centres. They suggested the names of the facilitators to be invited to participate in the discussions.

Fifteen focus group discussions were conducted with each focus group meeting three times. Each focus group discussion lasted for two hours and all participants spoke during each session. Respondents were required to discuss cost effectiveness (and efficiency) of the open university (and distance learning as they perceived it); the mode of operation; time of facilitation; availability of course materials; tuition fees; examination fees; course materials fees; time available programme and its exigencies. The participants were intimated of the purpose of the discussions in order to elicit objective and truthful responses on their perception (what they feel) of the cost effectiveness of distance learning connotes.

Responses from focus group discussions were analysed by controlling all statements about a particular aspect, by summarizing the main point of consensus existing among the focus group respondents and by noting the differences if there were disagreements and by selecting illustrative comments for inclusion.

Samples of the responses provided by each group of respondents are highlighted as follows:

Responses of Learners

Participants expressed positive comments about the consequences of Open and Distance Learning System of education. It is seen as the avenue through which their inability to get educated at a higher level and to also obtain degrees could only be solved when all encumbrances blocking them earlier are considered.

I see it as an avenue to further my education. I have Bachelor's degree but my job cannot allow me to go back to the four walls of any institution as a full time student. As a proprietor of my venture if I try it, that will be the end of the business.

- PG student (Graphic Artist) Male

This is the kind of school that can help people like me. Although it is possible to get study leave from my place of work but there is no certainty that one will get the job back when he is back with whatever certificate he would have acquired from the study he went for. There are lots of people who will just fill up the vacancy created immediately one proceeds on a leave of absence. With this distance learning programme, I know that I will get a Master degree after completion and still have my job.

- PG student (Banker) Male

I have been dreaming of studying Law but the normal (conventional) university will not allow this because I have to write entrance examination which my schedule of work has not permitted me to prepare for in the last four years. Whatever it will cost, this system of distance learning has made it possible for me to start the Law programme and definitely I will finish it and get my Law degree.

- Law student (Nurse) Female

Although I have just finished a degree at the University of Benin . I actually read English since I could not score the expected mark for Law. My parents bought me the admission form for this distance learning and since we have started it I am confident that in a few years time I will achieve my law degree ambition.

- Law student (unemployed) Female

I gave birth to my second child last year and my husband, a protocol officer with an oil company, is away from home very frequently, so I am usually alone with the children. If the Open University had not come I would not have been able to further my education as I could not go back to the polytechnic for my HND. Now I am studying Hotel and Catering Management while managing my own small catering outfit and I give my sons all the attention they require.

- Undergraduate student (Caterer)

Female

I work for a Lebanese organization producing synthetic billboards. My work hours range from 12 – 14 hours daily. Since I completed my Bachelor's degree 8 years ago and I started work three years ago, I had wanted to go back to school for a Master's programme, the open university can allow me to do the master's programme without resigning my job.

- PG student (factory supervisor) -

Male

Responses from Facilitators

Respondents' responses in this group are not different from the way the ODL system of education and the purpose it stands to achieve were viewed and perceived by other three groups. They have the same opinion about what ODL system of education is out to achieve in Nigeria in terms of its purposes of establishment. These, they confirm is radiant and observable in the attitudes of the learners that attend the courses they facilitated.

Learners of various programmes in this university are very lucky. They are working and still pursuing the academic programme in their course of choice and before you know it, they would have acquired a degree. We were not lucky like this during our own time. There was no opportunity to work and school; you either face one of the two.

- Law Course Facilitator (Male)

Anybody who is very serious among the learners will easily achieve the degree he or she is admitted into the university for. Working and schooling at the same time requires devotion and seriousness and that is an essential ingredient towards achieving the golden opportunity of becoming a graduate (degree holder) while still working.

- Male Facilitator

I see the objective of establishing a University of open and distance learning in Nigeria as an avenue for many people to become learned and be a better worker in whatever profession any of them chooses or is currently engaged. It will allow the students to read up to whatever level they want.

- Female Facilitator

The advantages of the distance education system are numerous. When one considers the number of working mothers who appear for tutorial classes, with infectious eagerness every weekend, it is easy to conclude that distance education is meeting the objective of providing access to those who had previously been denied access or who may want to go back to school for higher studies.

- Male Facilitator

Responses from Study Centre Managers

Remarkable unity is evident among respondents in their opinions about the issue of ODL. For the most part, informants revealed how enthusiastic the learners are about the opportunity which this learning system avails them.

- Study Centre Manager (Male)

This mode of education will really cater for the educational need and attainment of the students who enlisted for its programmes. In this mode of education, the students will not experience the problem of school closures that students of conventional universities face and they will also have their degrees without having to be looking for jobs after completing their degree programmes since they already have their jobs while studying.

- Study Centre Manager (Female)

The university will achieve two goals simultaneously. The learners will not be looking for jobs since they are already employed and also complete a degree programme at whatever level they enrol.

- Study Centre Manager (Female)

An interesting development is observable from the trend of our registered students. I interviewed a number of students registered for our first degree programmes and found that in many cases, some of them are not working. This suggests that the open and distance learning university is also providing a chance to those candidates who have not been able to secure university admissions through JAMB.

- Study Centre Manager (Male)

Responses from Guidance Counsellors

Respondents' comments about ODL system of education is almost a mirror image of those cited by the study centre managers' focus group.

This ODL system of university education is a blessing to many students especially those registered for Law programme. Many of them have pursued Law admissions for years before entering to study other various programmes. Now through this ODL University , they have been registered for the course of their choice and interest. This translates to the fact that they will have a law degree in the next four years when they graduate.

- Students Counsellor (Female)

The system rekindled lost hope in many students. There are many matured students whose hopes of attaining university degrees had been dashed before the emergence of this ODL University . You will see the enthusiasm in them and the way they go about tutorial classes shows that the system has really come to fill a gap in university education here in Nigeria .

- Students Counsellor (Male)

Honestly speaking, open and distance learning mode of university at this time of our development has really helped lots of people who never thought it will be possible for them to attempt any university education. I am referring to lots of our students who could not afford schooling without being at work. Many of them have enrolled for various courses and before we know it, they will become degree holders.

- Students Counsellor (Male)

My observation is that the open and distance learning system is particularly favourable for those learners whose jobs demand that they are always on the move. For instance, men of the armed forces and other security agencies are registered in large numbers at our study centre. But a number of them have come to seek for change of study centres due to the transfer of their duty posts from our state to some other states in Nigeria . I know that there is no other university in this country which can cater for the needs of its learners so effectively.

- Study Center Manager (Female)

S/N	Participants	Male	Female	Total
1	Learners	20	20	40
2	Facilitators	9	6	15

3	Study Centre Managers	3	3	6
4	Guidance Counsellors	4	8	12
	Total	36	37	73

In the light of the above stated results, it should not come as a surprise that despite the availability of other federal, state and private higher educational institutions (universities) in Nigeria, individuals who do not have the opportunity to attend these institutions and get certificated are still very large in population. This views expressed also confirmed that ODL system of education will definitely stand a test of time and always, it will be achieving its purposes as long as it is run appropriately. This is in consonance with the opinion already indicated by researchers that the cost structure and pattern of instruction of ODL allows for economies of scale and convenience in learning, thereby making it an attractive model of education for a broad category of learners (Hulsmann 1997; UNESCO 2002).

Conclusion

Contemporary behaviours and attitudes of the ODL students have rightly showed that transformation has taken place in the lives of the ODL system of education within the short period of its operation. Students are confirmed to take their studies seriously and attend to tutorial and facilitation classes as agreed. They really consider the establishment of the Open University as an opportunity to learn and get educated to the educational level they wish, read the course of their choice and above all, move against the odds that had been blocking them from attaining higher level of education. The above indices, insinuated the fact that the objectives of establishing an Open University system in Nigeria will be achieved.

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