

CHAPTER SIX

Open and Distance Learning: Educational Solution to COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria**Bappah Adamu PhD**Registry Department,
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&

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The educational system of every nation is in dilemma due to the outbreak and spread of Corona Virus (otherwise known as COVID-19). The outbreak of Corona Virus disease has been impacting millions of people and threatening life across the world. Schools closure is critical for social distancing in order to mitigate the spread of the disease acceleration of the cases will put a strain on health services. Open and Distance learning on the other hand provides effective solution that help learners to study at home. It is a recognised fact globally; that education plays a very significant and vital role in national development. Therefore, no nation can justifiably afford to leave the majority of its population in an educational disadvantaged position bearing in mind that it is human capital that accumulate capital exploit which constitute the ultimate basis of the wealth of a nation. To this end, this paper examined the role and relevance of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The Strategies, pedagogy and problems of Open and Distance learning were discussed. Recommendations were also made; Nigerian government should provide subsidy and support for ODL programmes at all levels of education just like the conventional school system, steady electricity supplies, enhance internet services and connectivity to the nation.

Key Words: COVID-19, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Pandemic, Education and Technology.

Introduction

The global educational system has completely changed in the past few months due to the spread of the coronavirus (otherwise known as COVID-19). The outbreak of corona virus disease (COVID-19) has been impacting millions of people and threatening their life across the world. The situation has changed completely in Nigeria especially in the educational sector, when the first case of coronavirus (COVID-19) infection was confirmed on the 27th of February, 2020 in Lagos by the Federal Ministry of Health. The virus has infected 8,786,931 persons worldwide, by June 20TH 2020, among these there are 19,147 confirmed cases in Nigeria, as reported by Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented situation whereby the educational system has been disrupted as governments enforce total or partial closures of schools in an effort to contain the spread of the virus. Higher education institutions programmes

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have also been suspended. As of late April, 2020, UNESCO estimates that 91% of those enrolled in formal education programmes have been affected.

All educational activities in Nigeria were suspended following the directives by the Federal Ministry of Education to close all schools on or before 26th of March, 2020. Nigerian Government and many others countries are taking all necessary steps to ensure that adequate preparations are put in place to contain the challenges and threat of COVID-19. Some of the necessary steps are:

1. Total or partial lockdown,
2. Regular washing of hand with sanitizer or soap under running water,
3. Use of face mask and
4. Social distancing to curb the speed spread of this virus.

Although studies by Uscher-Pines et al., (2018) admits that “During an evolving influenza pandemic, community mitigation strategies, such as social distancing, slows down virus transmission in schools and surrounding communities. To date, research on school practices to promote social distancing in primary and secondary schools has focused on prolonged school closure, with little attention paid to the identification and feasibility of other more sustainable interventions” (Uscher-Pines & *et al.*, 2018). The study concludes that information is too few for the schools to develop the social distance policies and procedures and additional research is needed. Therefore, the aim of this study is to show the significant role of Open and Distance learning during the COVID -19 pandemic. The technology has been playing a great role during the present pandemic. Open and Distance learning tools have been helping the learner to study at home. This study reviewed the concept of Open and Distance learning, features of Open and Distance learning and the role of it in teaching and learning. Finally, recommendations were made based on the current realities.

Open Distance Learning and COVID-19 Pandemic

In a situation where students are not allowed to go to school, the alternative is to move from traditional method-of-face-to-face-teaching to online education which is inevitable. In this case the most important parts are the internet access, connectivity, availability of computers or smartphones in the population. Studies demonstrate the need for readiness of countries in the cases of pandemic in the direction of education. Although, strangely, children are found to be protected from severe or deadly critical infections, they can become the sources of spread, which was the main reason to close the schools worldwide (Abdulmir, 2020) Online education is new in schools and can be considered for enhancing traditional schools and home-schooling (Muirhead, 2000).

According to Nigerian Communications Commission’s (NCC, 2019) today over 100 million Nigerians are connected to internet, with 250000 new subscribers logging on in the last quarter of 2019. The ODL teaching environments can be successfully used in schools or higher education by having appropriate technical environment and support from the government.

Although studies have shown that there are some examples of having a plan of using the distance/online learning during the pandemic, the Federal Ministry of Education and the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) have set up a separate Task Team responsible for a coordinated education response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the task team is to provide guidance, information and resources to support students across Nigeria’s 36 states and federal capital territory to continue their education and individualize their learning at home (World Bank,

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2020) they are mostly concentrated on small cases and not a global crisis as it is happening in COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Especially the countries that are having the limited technologies have problems in schools are not ready for the complete implementation of the countrywide online education (Sintema, 2020). ODL is a blanket term used for learning systems that offer varying mixes of openness and Distance (DFID, 2008). Its key features include: separation of teacher and learner in time, place or in both time and place; use of mixed-media courseware that is print, radio and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning and telecommunications (Valentine, 2002; COL, 2000; DFID, 2008). ODL also includes a two way communication which allows learners and tutors to interact and the possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials. The language and terms used to describe ODL activities makes it difficult to have one definition (COL, 2000). The commonly used terms related to open and distance learning include correspondence education, distance learning, open learning, technology-based education and flexible learning amongst others.

According to UNESCO (2002), ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web presenting 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. According to Kaufman, Watkins and Guerra (2000), distance education means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of institution providing the learning opportunity.

The Federal Ministry of Education (2002) defines ODL as any form of learning in which the provider enables individual learners to exercise choices over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning and distance.

Traditional classroom education is the mostly widely accepted and preferred mode of education. However, it is not easily accessible to all and it has not proved to be successful for all types of learners in different situations. The impact is severely felt today, especially in this time of novel corona virus. The lockdown in the country excluded most of the students from taking lessons and prolonged school closures and home confinement might have negative effects on children's physical and mental health (Brazendale, 2017). The "psychological impact of quarantine is wide-ranging, substantial and could be long-lasting" (Brooks, 2020). During this difficult time those who are able to integrate the ODL with traditional system reach their students via the ODL mode. For quality education, the needs of the country, the society and those of the students should be assessed and relevant systems have to be put in place in order to support all students in their learning process. The conventional face-to-face education is not accessible and convenient to all therefore, it does not give an equitable chance to all.

It is important to aspire towards building learner-focused educational systems with the relevant supports that distant learners require. With the present of technology and the internet, it is relevant to note that learners evolve in a digital world with easy access to information. Taking into account the African context, the opportunities and challenges of distance learners, relevant supports and

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practices are mounted with the aim of reaching the unreached. Currently, the Internet and technology has taken distance learning in new directions, allowing distance learning to happen in real time. Live video instruction is becoming the fastest growing delivery mode (Ostendorf, 2002) The power of technology has to be utilized in the design of ODL courses at all levels of education. Therefore, it is important to design and train teachers so as to use all the potential and available technology to make education accessible. The transition from traditional modes of teaching to ODL may prove to be disastrous if teachers are not well and sufficiently trained. ODL has its own pedagogy and andragogy. The instructors, technicians and administrators must be trained “not only to use technology, but also to shift the way in which they organize and deliver material” (Palloff & Pratt, 2000). Technology should not be used to replicate traditional methods and as a substitute to face-to-face instruction but to improve learning as well as taking education to the doorsteps of the learner in a form that best appeals to them. McKnight, (2000) states that proximity and eye contact are important factors in education which is limited in the distance learning environment provides inherent connection between the learner and the teacher, but with current advancement in the distance learning environment such as 3D virtual worlds both such gestural activity is not completely compromised.

Relevance of Open and Distance Learning to Nigerian Education

The relevance of ODL to Nigerian Education includes the following (Nwaocha & Iyama (2008).

- i. **Access:** It increases people’s access to education. Particularly with the present pandemic that calls for social distancing and lockdown. People who would have found it impossible to attend the conventional school system benefit from ODL. Many stakeholders in the education sector are interested in open and distance learning because it allows greater access to educational opportunities. This is in keeping with the stated objectives of the National Policy on Education 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, e-learning and work study programmes (NPE, 2004).
- ii. **Social Enhancement:** Open and distance learning schemes hold a number of potential benefits for various stakeholders in the education and development process. To the learners, ODL means more freedom of access as well as a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualifications, thereby improving their social status. It is often 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. Men of the armed forces and other security agencies are registered in large numbers for distance learning to enhance their social status.
- iii. **Economic Growth:** ODL is an avenue for institutions to improve their Internally Generated Revenue (IGR). It is also an avenue for many people to become learned and be better workers in any profession they choose or are currently engaged in. Students are allowed to read up to whatever level they want, hence contributing to the economic growth of the nation through better performance. For employers, ODL offers the possibility of organising 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

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means. For the government and educational policy makers, the system is a panacea for the perennial problem of provision, equitable and accessible education in an affordable and cost-effective way. ODL has also reduced poverty levels among teachers, since programmes are attended while at work. The government too incurs little cost on the training but develops the manpower to improve the economic situation of the nation. Nigerian prisoners or inmates enjoy distance learning programmes in Nigeria so as to be useful to the nation by contributing their quota to the development and economic growth of the nation during and after release (Marayo, 2013). ODL has given tremendous supports to teacher training in the drive to Universal Basic Education programmes in Nigeria. ODL is working towards the development of education and life skills for youth and the management of the available natural resources.

The problem of unsatisfied demand for education versus actual supply of educational services contributed to the acceptance, growth, and implementation of distance education programme in Nigeria as a means to bridge the gap between demand and supply (Aderinoye & jokheta, 2004). Reflecting on how distance education has influenced development in teacher education in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, the Nigerian situation reveals the high degree of influence distance education initiatives have had on personal, community and overall national development. Nigeria can now boast of capable and competent teachers working in its education sector, improvement in the quantity and quality and overall capacity of education managers as well as school administrators necessary to lead the nation's educational system (Marayo, 2013).

In addition, more than 300,000 primary school teachers enrolled in National Teachers' Institute (NTI), have successfully earned their 'Teacher's Grade 11 Certificate. NTI has similarly registered serving teachers in its Nigeria Certificate in Education and the pivotal Teacher Training Programmes, thereby improving the quality of those teachers already working in the field (Marayo, 2013). The power and growing use of information and communication technologies and the resulting trends towards globalization have reduced the world into that of a small village (Mcluhan, & Powers, 1989). Open and distance learning together with the appropriate information and communication technologies (ICT's) have the potential to impact significantly on education content and delivery in teacher development in Africa.

Features of Open and Distance Learning

Approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time (asynchronous learning) and place (distance learning), and offering a high level of autonomy and flexible learning opportunities to individual and groups of learners. This flexibility is related with the content of the course, the way in which it is structured, the place, medium and timing of its delivery, the pace of the process and the forms of support available. Types of open and distance learning are correspondence education, home study and independent study, continuing education, self-education, adult learning, technology-based education, learner-centred approach to education, open learning, flexible learning, e-learning, computer-based training (CBT), and distributed learning. Open and distance learning offers a number of advantages to learners and to providers of learning opportunities (Marayo, 2013)

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The concept of open and distance learning has the following features according to (Marayo, 2013).

1. Separation of trainer and learner in time or place which is having four typologies.
 - a. Same Time-Same place
 - b. Same Time-Different Place
 - c. Different Time-Different Place
 - d. Different Time –Same Place
2. Institutional accreditation (with the official recognition of a learning institution)
3. Use of mixed-media courseware (use of radio, television, video, audio, computer-based instruction and telecommunications)
4. Two-way communication (allow interaction between learners and tutors)
5. Possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials (in libraries, laboratories, and practice sessions)
6. Use of industrialized processes (in a large scale of open and distance learning, labour is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who work together in course development teams) (Marayo, 2013).

There is need to emphasise the demand for learning as a social activity, this will generally promote blended approaches to learning in the Nigerian institutions. In predicaments such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, sharing physical space is not always possible, therefore, if resources are in place, the continuation of learning and sharing of virtual space as an integral component of learning may still be feasible. It is also important to consider adjustments and adaptations to business as usual that will enable sustained, quality learning experiences during this time.

Pedagogy

Building digital literacy among students and parents

Digital skills are vital to actively convert the present situation of Corona virus pandemic in Nigerian education system. These skills suddenly becomes a necessity when issues like COVID-19 emerge and digital learning becomes a requirement. During COVID-19, digital literacy can be enhanced by enrolment in a number of partnerships with relevant stakeholders (COL, 2008).

Assisting Educators with Instructional Design

Educators also need support in knowing how best to support digital learning. Governments and stakeholders need to equip educators with skills for effective Connected Education, through initiatives like Instructional Design for E-Learning, Massive Open online Course (MOOC) and Training. (CLCC, 2020)

Increase Virtual Support

The Government and stakeholder's adoption of blended approach to learning is necessary since face-to-face learning is not an only option, it is important to move facilitation and support mechanisms online or via text, and provide additional support especially during the present condition of COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**Identify immediate needs and place them according to priority**

ODL Institution needs policies for government and operations which include aspect such as geographical, service area, and physical boundaries. Governing policies such as the board, collaborations, course offerings, curricula, support, staff training, conflict management, profit sharing, control of resources and certification must be developed (Bramoh & Lekoko, 2005). An ODL institution also needs human resources policies on compensation, evaluation, promotion, performance management and intellectual freedom. Regarding staff support, staff development/ training, skills training, course/ programme support, local facilities, and leave aspects need to be addressed in different policies (Simonson & Bauck, 2003).

National Open University of Nigeria: The Type of Education Delivery during COVID-19 Pandemic

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was established to provide learning opportunities that is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place (Jegade 2003). It can also be regarded as a transition from the formal classroom situation, to a system where the learners pursue their studies independently and in their homes. The idea of establishing Open University system for Nigeria, was reflected in the National Policy on Education (NPE), which stated emphatically and unambiguously that “maximum efforts will be made to enable those who can benefit from Higher Education (HE) to be given access to it (NPE, 1981).

The reopening of NOUN brought into dominance the use of distance education as a modality that can meet general demand for quality higher education in all spheres of life. Open and distance education as an educational method and philosophic construct has been identified as the most potent instrument for combating the educational problems assailing a nation like Nigeria (Ojo & Olakulehi, 2006). NOUN has played a vital role in combating the current situation of COVID-19 using a virtual space, information, meetings, seminars, facilitation of courses, examinations and assessments of students are conveniently going on in the University. The university currently matriculated its 15,000 students virtually and on demand examination is currently going on. This shows that the university can admit and graduate students in a situation of COVID-19. Therefore, other institutions can take example from NOUN and improve upon to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Problems of Open Distance Learning in Nigeria

Open and Distance Learning has its share of challenges, but students, teachers and administrators can succeed with right tools. These problems are discussed as follows.

Lack of Support from Government and Stakeholders

The physical absence of the teachers means that they may not be available instantly to guide students and support them timely. This happened rarely in real time classes (same time-same place) but in a situation where distance learning occur other typologies students find it difficult to assimilate some concept by missing the vital building blocks in their knowledge (Marayo, 2013).

COVID-19: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**Poor Funding by the Government**

It is generally accepted that education is poorly funded in Nigeria considering the budget allocation which is below the standard recommended by UNESCO. Lack of provision for facilities in ODL programmes in the country is one of the major fallouts of poor funding. Investment in ODL is therefore low because the soft and hard-wares required are costly. It is very expensive to get some of the software's because they are not developed locally, they are developed in Europe and other developed countries to suit their own system and make their own living (Marayo, 2013). Success in any educational policy is contingent on the involvement of all stakeholders and the sponsors of funding agencies (Yusuf, 2006).

Erratic Power Supply

The problem of power instability in Nigeria is perpetual and has been a major setback for our technological development. Most ODL students that reside in cities, towns and rural areas are faced with the problem of epileptic power supply. This can greatly affect the operation of ODL particularly when it requires the use of technology. Effective and efficient power supply therefore will enhance the smooth drive of ODL in the country (Marayo, 2013).

Lack of skills in Designing Course-wares

Instructional delivery in ODL is greatly enhanced by the skills of the facilitator in designing and delivering courses in electronic format. Therefore, lack of knowledge and skills designing and delivering courses may seriously affect the ODL delivery, (Marayo, 2013).

Poverty and Poor ICT Penetration

The National Bureau of Statistics (2019) revealed that 40 per cent of Nigerians lived below its poverty line. The implication of this is that the cost of computers and other ICT resources are far beyond their reach. Therefore, like most African countries basic ICT infrastructures are inadequate. There is still low level of computer literacy among the Nigerians.

High Cost of Internet Access and Connectivity

The cost of accessing internet is still very high in Nigeria. Most ODL students make use of their phones and Cyber Café where they are made to pay subscriptions despite the poor services and slow rate of the servers. This will seriously affect the delivery of ODL particularly when it comes to streaming live videos and live meetings due to data consumption (Marayo, 2013).

Technophobia

Technophobia is the constant and persistent fear of technology and, in greater depth, is defined as "the feeling of severe anxiety associated with using anything technologically advanced. Sometimes fear can be a rational response when it comes to new technology. Fear of the unknown and how it will impact your role within an organization is a legitimate feeling; People fear new technology and the fear giving up what they are comfortable with in exchange for the unknown. ODL students with zero computer education tend to have fear and severe anxiety of working with technology (Marayo, 2013).

Conclusion

It is an established fact, globally, that education plays a significant and important role in national development. Therefore, adoption of Open and distance learning is necessary because no nation can justifiably afford to sacrifice the majority of its populace in an educational disadvantaged position bearing in mind that it is human capital that accumulate capital exploit which constitutes the ultimate basis of the wealth of a nation. The use of distance learning makes educational opportunities and services available to our students especially with the current COVID-19 pandemic and improves the quality and variety of resources and support available to learners while opening up new avenues to professional development. However, despite the tremendous advantages obtainable from ODL system, achieving these can only be made possible when the problems of poor electricity, inconsistency in programme and policy implementation, poor funding, absence of trained teachers, technophobia and high cost of internet are no longer prevalent in the system.

Suggestions:

Governments can provide immediate support by updating and training school administrators, teachers, students and parent about simple ways of adopting ODL system.

1. Educational television programme and radio broadcasts in combination with text messages are effective communication channels between educators and students when the internet connectivity is poor or not available, therefore, such activities should be integrated at different levels of education.
2. Government in conjunction with agencies like NITDA, NCC and other relevant stakeholders should provide support in terms of ODL facilities for effective operation of the system in the country.

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