

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Open and Distance Learning: The Gateway to Education for All in Nigeria

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Abstract:

University education in Nigeria both public and private ones have their limitations as regards enrollment capacity which hinders many of the teeming applicants from getting spaces in them. Considering the rate at which primary and secondary education level churned out their products in millions, it becomes a serious challenge to applicants, parents/guardians, proprietors, society at large and all other stakeholders how to make these candidates for university education achieve their goal. Open and distance learning have allayed the admission challenge by widening the admission capacity of the ivory towers from mega to giga which made the system admissible to all who are willing to achieve their university education dream even while working and at their conveniences. Ultimately, the ivory tower is now open to all that are willing regardless of status, location and background.

Keywords: *University education, open and distance learning, admission capacity*

1. Introduction

Nigeria has a large number of out-of-school children and young adults with limited literacy and numeracy skills who have little hope of ever joining the formal workforce. UNICEF (2018). Reported in a survey conducted that the population of out of school children Nigeria has risen from 10.5 million to 13.2 million, the highest in the world and also about 69 percent of the country is out of school children are in the Northern part of Nigeria.

Nigeria literacy rate is estimated at 69.1 percent which is relatively low compared to literacy rates in countries like Cuba, Poland and Estonia that is as high as 99.8% (UNDP, 2019). This low literacy rate and high percentage of out of school children in Nigeria is a clear pointer to government deposition to education which is relatively poor among commonwealth of nations.

With a steady growing population and a dwindling allocation to education sector on a yearly basis by Nigerian government, no magic should be expected from various levels of public institutions that are becoming feeble by the day because of dearth of fund and other necessary motivation from the government. This public failure for a very longtime has allowed for private participation at all levels i.e. (primary, secondary and tertiary institutions). Meanwhile, the private sector participation which was perceived as complement or succor to the access challenge for Nigerian applicants could only cater for few buoyant ones who could afford the relatively high fees. Hence, significant proportion of Nigerian population have dropped from the formal system at one time or the other due to their inability to cope with cost and other various demands. Between the year 1999, which marks the emergence of private universities in Nigeria to the tail and of 2018, there are a total of 79 privately-owned universities operating in Nigeria complementing the 91 public ones. The total of 170 approved universities by National University Commission (NUC) in Nigeria should have accommodated significant figure out of the massive eligible applicants that besiege the universities for admission yearly. Also, in 2017, NUC was reportedly cited to have remarked that only 30 percent out of the 1.7 million candidates who wrote the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in 2017 will be admitted (Ameh, C.G:2017). Hence, private participation in University education has not brought any significant improvement on the access problem which is largely because of their high rising charges which is beyond the reach of most applicants for university education.

With the concerted efforts of Nigerian government through policies of establishing Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) which is assisting in improving the lot of primary and secondary education in Nigeria, and also with private bodies participation at these two levels, the available tertiary institutions are definitely not adequate for the turn-out in secondary level of education. Thus, there is need for institutions that can accommodate commendable percentage of the eligible applicants for university education in Nigeria.

2. Education for All Phenomena and Nigeria Response

Education for all has become a popular slogan in many developing nations of the world with Nigeria inclusive. This is borne on the high illiteracy level prevalent in most of these developing nations particularly sub Saharan Africa.

The drive in making education a common public good has been inherent in Nigerian policies and programmes but with inadequate running grants or allocation from the government. This move is apparent with her several participation in regional and international summits and conference where issues in making education for all is thematic. Some of these high-level conference as submitted by Ige (2014) are:

- World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 which advocated for the right of all people to education and knowledge.
- World summit for children in New York in 1990
- Education for All Summit of nine countries with the highest illiteracy rate in the world (i.e. Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, India, Mexico and Palestine), held in New Delhi in 1993 which requires the countries to drastically reduce the illiteracy within the shortest possible time frame;
- Pan Africa Conference on Education for Girls, held in Ouagadougou in 1993;
- Statement of Commitment, held in 1998 in Durban, South Africa which require Africa Education ministers to pursue the goal of lifelong learning;
- OAU Decade of Education in Africa (1997-2000) requiring Africa States to generalize access to qualitative basic education as foundation for socio-economic development; and
- World Education Summit, held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 where the need to achieve Education for All by 2015 was emphasized.
- United Nations Summit, held in New York, USA in 2000 where eight Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) were initiated for member nations.

The objectives of all these conventions are targeted towards making education accessible and affordable to all and sundry in Nigeria. Several programmes like Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1955, which was later replaced with Universal Basic Education in 1999' was introduced to address the problems of primary education, junior secondary education as well as the non-formal aspect of the education system. The Federal government through Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) also placed much emphasis on teacher training programme, provision of enough schools and equipments for eligible children, paying attention to comprehensive adult literacy programme and focusing on the teaching of standard and traditional components of knowledge, citizenship and morality.

The efforts of government though remarkable, was only able to make quantum progress but far from achieving the Education for All goals which are stipulated as;

- Expanding Early child care and Development Education;
- Providing free and compulsory primary education for all;
- Promoting learning and life skills for youths and adults;
- Increasing adult literacy by 50%
- Achieving gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015; and
- Improving the quality of education.

According to 2015 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (GMR), it was established that Nigeria and all sub-section African has failed to reach any of the global education goals. An instance of Nigeria was cited by Eno-Abasi (2015) as regards EFA goal four; that adult literacy just as it noted that there were 17 million more illiterate adults in the country in 2008, than there were in 1991, an increase of 71 percent. In sum the 2014 GMR posited that there were 40 million illiterate adults in the country as at 2013. He further claimed that an extra \$22 billion a year is needed on top of already government contributions in order to ensure the achievement of new global education targets being set for the year 2030.

UNESCO's communications and Advocacy specialist on EFA, GMR (Kate Redman) in a release submitted that 'corruption, conflict and lack of investment has resulted in Nigeria having one of the worst education systems in the world'. It was also reported that enrolment rate for primary school education dropped drastically from 35 percent to 25 percent in 2013 partly due to Boko Haram's insurgency and campaigns against education.

Okebukola in Eno-Abasi (2015) also reiterated that the only way that can enable Nigeria catch up with the rest of the world with the new development target of EFA which has been set for 2030 is through investment and targeted funding of education that will not leak into pockets along the way. He further suggested that Nigeria investment in education has to be elevated at least three times the 2015 rates (9.5 percent of the total budget) for significant impact to be recorded two or more years down the road.

Nigeria's response to Education For All (EFA) call has not been impressive as the country is still far from UNESCO recommendation of 26 percent allocation of yearly budget to education. If this allocation could be disbursed to education without any diversion or misappropriation, education in Nigeria will move from its poor state to a lofty height.

3. Status of University Education Access in Nigeria

On the premise of six internationally agreed education goals (Dakar; Education For All) which was aimed at meeting the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015, it was established by Global Monitoring Report (2014) who took stock of progress since 2000 that Nigeria is one of nations still far from the EFA goals. GMR (2015) noted that Nigeria remains far from the target at both primary and secondary level. Child marriage and early pregnancy continue to hinder girls progress in education, coupled with the gap between the poor and the average in Nigeria which has increased with the number of children from the poorest households going to primary school falling from 35 per cent to 25 per cent in 2013, adding that enrolment rates will continue to fall even more given the increase in Boko Haram's insurgency and campaign against education.

At the tertiary university level, the chances of admission are even more worrisome as the institutions have been given a stipulated enrolment quota which must not be exceeded, if such university does not want to face sanctions from the management body (NUC). The enrolment irony in Nigerian education system is the unrestricted and ever growing rate (statistics) at the primary and secondary level (public and private schools), which is not commensurable with the ever dwindling enrolment at the university level. A show of reality to this demand and supply imbroglio in university admission is revealed in the yearly admission statistics of 2011-2015 from Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB)

Year	Applications	Admission %	%	Total unplaced	%
2011	1,575,522	1,928,09	12.2	1,382,743	87.5
2012	1,452,874	386,308	26.5	1,066,566	71.1
2013	1,668,224	262,510	15.7	1,405,714	84
2014	1,576,257	359,599	22.8	1,216,658	77.2
2015	1,424,628	384,442	26.9	1,040,186	73.1

Table 1: Nigeria University Demand and Supply Admission Statistics

Source: JAMB Annual Report 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015.

<https://www.nigeriaschool.com.ng/jamb>

It is crystal clear from the statistics on table 1 that the supply to university education with reference to admission is far from the demand by the university admission seekers observations have shown that good percentage of these admission seekers often time get themselves engaged with a job either permanently or temporarily after they might have been denied admission severally by the university system. Hence, this unintentional break might mark the end of education pursuit of many or also make some to slip back into neo-literacy.

This ugly trend portends to one of the ways Nigeria has failed in meeting the EFA goal four which is increasing adult literacy by 50%. Except Nigeria show more willingness in exploring awareness or platforms that makes education accessible to all and sundry with less restriction, the new target date for EFA which has been set for 2030 will still be a mirage.

4. Intervention of Open and Distance Learning (Odl) to University Education in Nigeria

Open and distance learning is an inclusive instructional platform that caters for anyone who desire good education but constrained by factors such as distance, age, time, occupation and other circumstances to attend campus-based education (Ikegulu and Oranusi; 2014). Also, Jegede (2009) posits ODL as education for all, that promotes lifelong learning and improves on the economies of scale in education management. Apart from flexibility, easy access and cost effectiveness, Open and Distance Learning programmes are learner/student-centered which makes it to be different from the conventional university system where both instructional activities and course materials are lecturer-centred.

Distance learning has been a popular slogan in the education parlance in Nigeria. It dated back to the practice of correspondence education during the colonial period, this was the platform used by many Nigeria nationalist leaders like chief Obafemi Awolowo, Herbert Macaulay, Alvan Ikoko, Nnamdi Azikwe, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and host of others to access university education without leaving scores of Nigeria. Distance education started in earnest in Nigeria at the arrival or establishment of the first generation universities i.e. University of Lagos-started with Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) (1974) now called Distance Learning Institute (DLI) (2004), Ahmadu Bello University-Teachers in-service programmes (TICEP) established in 1974, University of Ibadan-External Study Programme (ESP) in 1988 now Distance Learning Centre (DLC). National Teachers' Institute (NTI) Kaduna was the solely independent distance learning (non-university) institution which was established in 1976 for the upgrading of teachers and addressing shortage problem with UPE provisions. Subsequently, National Open University (NOU) came up in 1983, scrapped in 1984 then resuscitated in 2002 as National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Noun is the first full-fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning mode of education (single mode) in Nigeria. Other University institutions are dual mode with such programmes as distance learning (sandwich programmes), part-time programme (PTP), weekend programmes, adult literacy education programmes and other e-learning programmes.

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is noted to have the highest enrolment in Nigeria with over 180,000 students as at 2013 which is a significant leap from 32,000 when the institution kicked off in the year 2002 (Tenebe, 2013). Noun and ODL platforms operating in Nigeria are vigorously working towards the achievement of Open Distance Education goals as spelt out in section 9, sub section 92 of the 2004 edition of the National Policy on Education. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This goal includes among others; providing access to quality and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied; meeting special needs of employers through special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace; encouraging internationalization especially of tertiary education curricular; ameliorating the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institution by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

Considering the avalanche of opportunities embedded in ODL system being demonstrated by NOUN and distance learning platforms in Nigeria ranging from wide and easy access, flexibility in delivery technique, combination of education with work, separation of learner and teacher in time and space to availability of programmes to learners at their chosen location, achieving the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education For All (EFA) by 2030 may not be an impossible task.

5. Maximizing the Potentials of Open and Distance Learning for Efa in Nigeria

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is characterized by the following societal expectations, among others (Van den and Schlusmans, 1989, Onyemaechi, 2013);

- Making education less expensive
- Enabling more people take part in cultural life
- Relieving the overcrowded traditional universities
- Enabling more people to study while working
- Encouraging lifelong learning
- Making people gain more qualification to enable them survive in today's employment world
- Opening up access to university for students without formal entrance qualifications.

It is noteworthy to credit the Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria today as making frantic effort in living up to highlighted features, only that the accredited institutions to operate the ODL programmes are fewer compared to the surging and massive applicants for university education. Nonetheless, ODL still avail applicants some opportunities which are not readily obtainable in the conventional university system. These privileges includes:

- Flexible learning: learners are given the free choice of the time, place, pace and mode of study. No hard and fast rules as applicable in the formal setting. The learning activities are dominated and controlled by learners to suit their purposes and comfort.
- Choice course of study: applicants are free to choose the course of their choice and sure of graduation if they so wish to finish the desired course of study. This is a variance with the formal or conventional system where most applicants opt out for the available courses that is quite different from their original or preferred choice. Researches have shown that graduates effectiveness and efficiency are affected as a result of this last option choice.
- Networking: The brain behind Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is the information communication and technology application. Teaching and learning processes are mediated or networked using information technologies like computer system, laptops, tablets, kindles, iPad and android phones. The students have access to even the remotest teaching programmes and databases carrying relevant information through these devices.
- Study at own pace: Learners can conveniently combine work with their studies and move at pace that suits them. Fast and slow learners have ample opportunity of moving at their different paces and still arriving at the same destination with almost the same output.
- Overall Costs: The total cost of financing the university programme is relatively reduced compared to the cost of public universities left alone private ones. ODL is affordable and in most cases, learners are allowed to make instalmental payment if they can't afford the charges at once.

ODL has brought succor to education generally and more precisely to university education by reducing the hard knock effects of formal education and making education accessible to all and sundry. Jegede (2016) one time Vice Chancellor of NOUN submitted that Nigeria nation and his people stand to benefit the following from ODL:

- Access and equity for comprehensive national development
- Alleviation of capacity constraints for economics, human resources and rural development.
- Education for all especially to reduce or totally eliminate illiteracy and poverty.
- Capacity building for human resources development, especially in area of acute deficiencies such as vocational and technical education, science and technology.
- Lifelong and life-wide education in order to build a learning and knowledge -based society;
- Access to, and capitalizing on, emerging capital opportunities both within the African region and globally;
- Avenue for transforming our higher education sector to make our institutions respond to contemporary changes, developments and needs of Nigeria;
- Providing the answer to the perennial problems of teacher education;
- Appreciating, educating the citizen about, and using information and communication in technology (ICTs) to accelerate national and community development and provide an organized entry into the global information superhighway:

Realizing the focus and objectives of ODL in Nigeria, it will not only achieve the sustainable development Goals (SDGs) but also attain the new Education for All (EFA) target set for 2030 with less rigour.

6. Conclusion

ODL is fast moving from 'mega to giga universities' where admission has moved from hundreds of thousands to millions, with space, age, facilities, location, time and personnel not constituting barrier to the smooth running of the system like in conventional setting. Expanding and increasing the ODL institutions that are available in Nigeria, and exerting effort on improving the power supply generally and ultimately making the training in ICT relatively cheap and available to all and sundry will make ODL accessible to all and impact positively on the nation's human capital development.

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