



REMOVING CONSTRAINTS AND DISADVANTAGES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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Summary

The paper is about the development of education in Nigeria. It looks at the historical development of this social sector from the colonial times to date. Not only has the paper found out the development of education has been uneven geographically and also among different social classes, but that the ODL component has been little developed. This is with respect to its late start from the eighties, the insignificant development of the infrastructures, such as technology back-ups, energy, learner support materials, etc. In short, ODL in Nigeria has not actualized the potentials often talked about in the literature and it is not likely to do any soon if proactive measures are not taken by government. And because of this, access to the teeming number of people aspiring to improve on their skills in order to benefit and uplift their social status could not do just that. In view of these difficulties, the paper has advocated that government should take more interest in the ODL so that the aspirations of the people to be what they want to be could be attained. Similarly, the country's aspirations to develop and/or reduce the gap between her and the advanced countries shall be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Western education was introduced into the Nigerian setting after colonial conquest by the British. This type of education came to displace the traditional mode of education that pre-colonial society imparted to beneficiaries. While both education systems (western and traditional African) sought to develop skills in the beneficiaries, they were clearly different in format, orientation and mission. On its part, the traditional education system taught the Nigerian to know their surrounding and how to adapt to it or adopt it for survival. The primary objective of western education in the colonial setting, on the other hand, was introduced for purposes of indoctrination (mainly proselytization into the Christian religion). (There was little wonder that this form of education was in the first instance introduced by the missionaries that immediately followed the administrators on the morrow of the colonial imposition). Gradually, western education was provided in order to serve as a training mechanism for those that would man colonial bureaucracy.

Another significant difference between the traditional and the western modes of education is that while the former was not formalized or compartmentalized into the various stages and levels through which beneficiaries would have to pass before certification (in this regard, traditional education was regarded as life-long process that beneficiaries would undertake with a high level of understanding and identification). The latter has, till today, been its antithesis. Another major difference between the two systems inheres in the fact that traditional education was and, where it is still extant, is carried out in the mother tongue and steeped in the cultural mores of the recipients, while the western system of education is still

given in a foreign language with all the implications of acculturation. Products of the latter, as would be expected, developed a feeling of superiority, mainly because the acquisition of skills led to employment in the colonial civil service and exposure to better life style as well as higher social status. Such level of alienation of the products of western education from their cultural roots has been to an extent that the pristine purpose of education, which is not only to free oneself from ignorance, disease and other wants as well as being very useful to one's society in general, has been defeated from the onset.

More than anything else, this elitism and the consequent alienation of a vast majority of the citizenry from accessing western education are to define the character of this type of education to date as well as they are to have lasting impact on western education generally and the pattern of development of tertiary education, most particularly the open and distance learning component of it. In other words, the fact that western education, unlike traditional African education system, could only be accessed by those who have the means has had constraining and disadvantageous impact. Perhaps, at this juncture, it is pertinent to mention that this paper is specifically concerned with the open and distance learning education mode as it has been operated in Nigeria. It will trace, in brief though, the history of western education, especially tertiary education; its expansion and impact to provide the context within which the main concern of the paper shall be examined. It will similarly look at the gradual evolution of open and distance learning (ODL) mode in the Nigerian setting.

Despite the fact that the ODL mode is adjudged capable of enhancing access to education as a result of its flexibility and inelastic expandability, it will be argued that this inherent advantage has not been achieved in Nigeria because of the historic manner in which western education was introduced as well as they way the post-colonial state has handled education in a rather cavalier manner. Aside from this point, there have been the peculiar Nigerian problems that have created constraints and disadvantages to the optimal utilization of the benefits of the open and distance learning mode. Some of these would include inadequate attention through funding by government leading in some significant respects to overcrowding on the insufficient facilities that have been provided; the apparent lack of rigorous planning of the education sector; the increasing yearnings of the population for access to education, especially at the tertiary level; the problems of quality control; etc. The structure of the paper will similarly follow this delineation. Thus, after this introductory section, the main body of the paper will follow and this will be succeeded by the concluding section.

WESTERN EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT

One of the things not mentioned in the comparative analysis in the preceding section is the fact that the introduction of western education into Nigeria led to the uneven development of this education system between different geographical sections of the country. The southern part went ahead of the northern part. This development could be explained as follows: western education began its incursion just as colonialism began its sojourn from the southern part of the country. This might not have been enough reason for the southern part to have what has turned out to be a huge gap as well as an edge over and above the northern part if the wholesome acceptance of the education system has not been the issue since its introduction. In other words, the southern part wholeheartedly accepted western education hook, line and sinker (without any reservations indeed), unlike the northern part that resisted introduction (a correct and justifiable resistance on the surface) on account of the fact that the education system would *ab initio* have deleterious effect on the religion of the generality of the people in the area and the entire gamut of cultural practice.

This is not an issue of which part of the country was right or wrong in the way it received the western education system. Rather, the fundamental issue is that since introduction it has

been a major (constitutional) issue in public policy, with respect to how to balance the federation. While one may not involve oneself in the clearly political angle of how the whole matter of equity has to be addressed through public policy, it is pertinent to say that the historic gap continues in the educational sector and it could be a major contributory factor in the entire gamut of access to education by social groups and geographical formations, too.

The development of tertiary education in Nigeria started very slowly and only with the establishment of the Yaba College in 1934. This was followed by the opening of the University College at Ibadan in 1948, following series of agitations that the Yaba College (which was to train middle-level manpower for the colonial bureaucracy) did not measure up to the standard expected by the emerging elite. [See Fafunwa, 1974:*passim*.] A more rapid development of tertiary education did not take place until after independence when each of the three regions then in healthy competition opened their universities. The universities set up between 1960 and 1970, plus the University of Ibadan that became a full-fledged university by 1962, constituted the first generation tertiary institutions in the country.

With the oil boom of the 1970's, a more rapid expansion of tertiary institutions, in particular, university education, took place. For instance, between 1975 and 1979, seven new universities were established and in the Nigerian parlance of university educational development, these have become known as the second generation universities and they were and still are all owned by the federal government. In quick succession, too, the third generation universities which are essentially technological institutions came into being during the country's Second Republic (1979 to 1983). The only exception this time around was the opening of the Open University in Abuja by the Shehu Shagari Administration in 1982. (I shall come back to this salutary development very shortly.) It was also within the period of the Second Republic that the Lagos State Government established its university. In the late 1980's, the first set of three private universities was given licenses to operate in 1999; just as more state governments embarked on the development of their universities. At the moment, there are a total of 95 universities with multiple ownership patterns: federal, state and private.

Still in the tertiary sector, expansions were also carried out in the polytechnic institutions as well as in the colleges of education. While the former were to provide the required middle-level manpower for the industries and the modern public service sectors, the latter were encouraged to produce professionally qualified teachers to man the expanded demand arising from the introduction of the universal primary education (UPE). The latter are also institutions set up to provide middle-level teachers in primary schools and junior secondary schools.

In terms of numerical strength, there are a total of 129 polytechnic and monotechnic institutions; while, for the colleges of education, we have a total of 82 of such institutions. The ownership pattern is similar to what obtains with the universities. In other words, the significant players – such as the federal, state and private owners – are also all involved in running them. Apart from the deliberate policy of increasing facilities, opening and building more schools in these types of educational institutions, the federal government spent a lot of money in the late seventies to early eighties sponsoring candidates to East European countries to pursue courses in technological fields.

The Development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Institutions

The development of the open and distance learning (ODL) mode, in institutional terms, began very slowly, almost 28 years after Ibadan was established. Before tracing the history of the institutional development of this mode, it is perhaps pertinent to emphasize that the

popularity of education to Nigerians could be best captured by the narration contained in Omolewa (2008:*passim*.) It is the story of one Mr. Josiah Soyemi Ogunlesi who through dint of hard work and perseverance enrolled as an external candidate of the University of London. In the words of Omolewa (*ibid.*:*passim*), Mr. Ogunlesi was a Nigerian and the *...first university graduate of History in Africa.... Ogunlesi was a classroom teacher from Sagamu, the present day Ogun State of Nigeria, when he learnt that Emmanuel Odukoya Ajayi, a fellow Nigerian in St. Andrews College Oyo, was acquiring qualifications from the University of London by distance learning. At the time, distance learning took the form of correspondence course. Ogunlesi enrolled for tuition courses and began to study history which he passed at the London Matriculation and Intermediate degree levels. In 1930 he enrolled for the final degree examination in history which he passed.*

Apart from the correspondence course which was the initial approach to ODL endeavours, there are other and more up to date methods. Among these we have: internet conducted either synchronously or asynchronously; telecourse/broadcast where content is delivered via radio or television; CD-ROM where the student interacts with computer content stored on a CD-ROM; and pocket PC/mobile learning where the student accesses course content stored on a mobile device or through a wireless server. [See Braimoh and Osiki, 2008:55.] What then is open and distance learning?

ODL or distance education (DE) is:

...an educational approach in which there is a quasi separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space....In distance education, the instructor and the instructional strategy/methods are subsumed into the learning material (popularly referred to as Study Materials), that have been designed as a self-directed learning guide for the student. The term 'Open Learning,' on the other hand, refer to the philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality, lifelong education. [Ojo and Olakulehin, June 2006:4.]

According to Ojo and Olakulehin, the National Teachers' Institute in Kaduna was the first institution formally established in Nigeria to offer courses via ODL methods. The expectation from the institution was to "provide courses of instruction leading to the development, upgrading, and certification of teachers as specified in the relevant syllabus using distance education techniques." (*ibid.*) Some of the existing and older universities, in the course of their development, also embarked on open and distance learning programmes, but in the popular and extensive sense that the mandates conferred on the University of Abuja and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) portended. In spite of the recent expansion of the ODL mode in the Nigerian educational landscape, there is little doubt that there are still many hurdles to overcome and many rivers to cross.

Apart from the general problem of underfunding that educational institutions suffer from, the problems of decay of infrastructural facilities as well as the corruption in the system in its entirety, which are real, there are serious issues of the inadequate absorptive capacities of the institutions to meet the aspirations of those applying to them. At this juncture, we may need to look at Table 1 at the end of this paper. Each table looks at the number of applications to as well as the number admitted into the universities, polytechnics, and the colleges of education, respectively. From the tables it could be seen (as highlighted in Table 2 below) that: it is only in the Colleges of Education that the ratios of those admitted in relation to those that applied notched up to 50% and above in 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2005. The best performed years for the polytechnics are in 2000 and 2003, when the institutions were able to admit up to one-fifth of those that applied. The worst culprit in this saga of admission is the university system. Within the period of reporting, there has never been a year that that the entire public universities have been able to admit up to one-fifth of those applying to them.

Explanations may have to be provided regarding this picture of awful performance of the tertiary institutions in meeting the aspirations of teeming prospective Nigerian students. The main point to stress is that the numbers applying to both types of educational institutions were only up to one quarter and of those applying to the universities only in the following three years of the period of reporting: 2000; 2001; and 2004. Career interests by the prospective students, career estimation by society and government, the fact that those applying to the polytechnics and colleges of education only do so as a last resort as well as the further fact that both institutional types have no option but to cream off from the left-over, may explain their relative better absorptive capacities than the universities. How have the NOUN and the University of Abuja that are statutorily set up to provide distance education fared? Could they jointly and individually perform to ameliorate the situation and achieve the following inherent advantage of the ODL *vis-à-vis* the conventional mode of learning? "Distance education can reach learners anywhere and any time [*sic.*]. The convenience and flexibility it offers cannot be surpassed by any other forms of education." [Wang, 2008:72.]

For the University of Abuja, its Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education (CDL&CE) is the one charged with the responsibility of providing distance education. Based on the criterion of the absorptive capacities through the admission exercises, CDL&CE is not performing optimally. For instance, its facilities have generally deteriorated, except for the new radio station about to be set up for which a license has also been granted by government. In some cases, the course materials are in arrears of production; not to talk of creeping corruption of who should teach which course as well as the rising cost of the programme for the recipients. Sometimes, the problems of the mode are compounded by the lack of space, especially whenever the limited required contact hours were due as well as during examination periods.

NOUN was resuscitated in 2002 and based also on the picture of admission performance, it's also not performing optimally, even if in technological terms, it has an edge over the Centre at the University of Abuja. It may be pertinent at this juncture to define what we mean by optimal admission performance. In the practice of ODL, the number of students involved is not a problem and should not be as such. This is because ODL is not bound by space or time. The foremost ODL institution in the African continent, the University of South of Africa (UNISA) boasts of over 250,000 students in its enrolment and these students are spread all over Africa. Both the National Open University of Nigeria and the University of Abuja seem to have performed sub-optimally as far as admission is concerned as the figures in table 3 below have shown. In addition, the two institutions seem to have been afflicted by some of the problems that some of the ODL systems in Africa are faced with, which Braimoh and Osiki (*op.cit.*:58) have adumbrated as follows:

- unstable power supply;
- economic drive to amass own wealth by some distance education ;
- commercializing education at the expense of quality offered;
- high cost and weak socio-economic viability of learners who may be reluctant to invest in technological facilities for knowledge acquisition purpose;
- technological illiteracy among learners, even if they have access to modern technology for learning purposes;
- ruralization of geographical topography of the learners, where they are bereft of the paraphernalia of modern life...that restricts their access to modern facilities;
- fraud, bribery and corruption among some lecturers and site tutors;
- quantity of qualified tutors sacrificed at the expense of quality programme facilitators;
- infiltration of cultural dilution and value disorientation by [the] neo-imperialism of foreign institutions;
- problems with proper counselling and mentoring for lecturers; and

- inadequate learning support provision.

Added to the enumeration above, the authorities of NOUN have submitted the following as problems:

- the establishment of the infrastructure for the study centres;
- getting competent people to design and develop all course materials on time to meet students' need; and
- advocating and getting the public to understand and appreciate ODL and its efficacy. [Jegade, March 2009.]

In view of the foregoing, what is to be done with a view to removing the constraints and disadvantages of the ODL system in Nigeria? In the concluding section we shall briefly make recommendations to alleviate or, indeed, remove the identified problems.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper has been concerned with the development of education in Nigeria, with particular focus on the development of the ODL system. The paper has identified some challenges that militating against the removal of constraints and disadvantages in the provisions of this form of education. These challenges are numerous and they differ from one institution to the other. Since the education industry is still largely a public sector affair in the country, the paper wishes to urge the government to take a closer look at the entire education sector, but with particular attention to the ODL sub-sector. The ODL has great potentials and definitely has certain advantages over the traditional mode as captured in the following: "A person's right to education is enhanced when distance education is needed throughout one's lifetime to help respond to changes in the nature of work, navigate passages from one stage of development to another, [as well as] accommodate new personal and professional situations." [Wang, *op.cit.*:71.] Similarly:

- We believe that all human beings are endowed with a capacity to learn, improve, and progress. Educational opportunity is a mechanism by which we fulfill that capacity. Therefore, free and open access to educational opportunity is a basic human right. When educational materials can be electronically copied and transferred around the world at almost no cost, we have a greater ethical obligation than ever before to increase the reach of opportunity. When people can connect with others nearby or in distant lands at almost no cost to ask questions, give answers, and exchange ideas, the moral imperative to meaningfully enable these opportunities weighs profoundly. **We cannot in good conscience allow this poverty of educational opportunity to continue when educational provisions are so plentiful, and when their duplication and distribution costs so little.** [Caswell, Henson, Jensen, and Wiley, 2008:7. Emphasis mine.]

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TABLE 1
APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS INTO THE UNIVERSITIES, 2000-2007

THE UNIVERSITIES									
2000		2001		2002		2003		2004	
APP	ADM	APP	ADM	APP	ADM	APP	ADM	APP	ADM
416,691	45,766	749,417	90,769	994,381	51,845	1,046,103	104,991	838,051	12

APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS INTO THE POLYTECHNICS, 2000-2007

THE POLYTECHNICS															
2000		2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		2006		2007	
AP	AD	AP	AD	AP	AD	AP	AD	AP	AD	AP	AD	AP	AD	AP	AD
P	M	P	M	P	M	P	M	P	M	P	M	P	M	P	M
10,351	37,005	181,450	23,983	193,863	37,005	220,051	43,903	205,225	17,311	150,596	28,686	159,618	18,682	135,237	25,587

APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS INTO THE COLLEGES OF EDUCATION, 2000-2007

THE COLLEGES OF EDUCATION										
2000		2001		2002		2003		2004		2005
APP	ADM	APP	ADM	APP	ADM	APP	ADM	APP	ADM	APP
11,603	6,672	14,338	8,981	21,678	13,815	23,169	9,197	23,611	5,490	17,382

Source: Joint Admissions and Matriculation Office, March 2009.

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS ADMITTED FROM THOSE WHO APPLIED INTO THE EXISTING TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS, 2000-2007

YEAR	UNIVERSITIES	POLYTECHNICS	COEs*
2000	11%	36%	56%
2001	12%	13%	63%
2002	5%	19%	64%
2003	10%	20%	40%
2004	15%	8%	23%
2005	7%	19%	60%
2006	9%	12%	47%
2007	12%	19%	45%

Source: Derived from Table 1 above.

Note:

*COEs stands for Colleges of Education.

TABLE 3

ADMISSION FIGURES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA CENTRE FOR DISTANCE LEARNING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION AS WELL AS THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, 2000-2007

YEAR OF ADMISSION UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA, CDL&CE
NOUN

2000	2,138	-
2001	5,539	-
2002	6,911	-
2003	-	32,400
2004	6,556	-
2005	6,464	36,074
2006	5,007	-
2007	7,006	47,435

Source: Data obtained by Author from the Institutions, March 2009.