




Examining Inclusive Tertiary Education Delivery through the National Open University of Nigeria's Community Study Centres

Améliorer l'enseignement supérieur inclusif grâce aux centres d'études communautaires de l'Université Nationale Ouverte du Nigéria

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Abstract

Conventional universities in Nigeria can no longer absorb the growing population of candidates desiring higher education. National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) came to the rescue in 2003. With the opening of community study centres across the nation, it is pertinent to gauge access with quality. The study investigated how much access has been provided by NOUN, the adequacy of facilities, the quality of tuition, as well as attrition rate. Using the survey method involving qualitative and quantitative approaches, the instruments of data collection included a set of Likert five scale questionnaire administered to 600 respondents and an interview guide conducted with 24 interviewees selected through snowball and purposive sampling techniques. Statistical records of enrolment, registration and graduation were also analysed for attrition rate. Using Charles Wedemeyer's theory of independent study, findings revealed that certain barriers to gaining access to tertiary education are overcome as 87.3% of the respondents believed that NOUN provides adequate access. 56.5% of the respondents adjudged NOUN facilities as inadequate while 76.5% of the respondents opined that online facilitation, video lectures and quality course materials provide good tuition. The attrition rate over six years is 41% due to personal, motivational and institutional challenges. It was concluded that though NOUN is adding value to university education in Nigeria through access and service delivery, a lot of gaps still exist. Although the community study centres are viable and have the capacity for sustenance, the government and communities need to continue collaboration with NOUN to improve their services.

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Keywords: *Access, facilitation, course materials, study centres, universities*

Résumé

Les universités conventionnelles du Nigeria ne peuvent plus absorber la population croissante des élèves qui quittent l'école secondaire et désireux de faire des études supérieures. L'Université Nationale Ouverte du Nigeria (NOUN) est venue à la rescousse en 2003. Avec l'ouverture récente d'un plus grand nombre de centres d'études communautaires à travers le pays, il est pertinent d'évaluer l'accès et la qualité. Les objectifs de l'étude étaient d'examiner le degré d'accès à l'enseignement universitaire fourni par NOUN, l'adéquation des installations pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, la qualité des cours ainsi que le taux d'attrition. À l'aide d'une méthode d'enquête faisant appel à des approches qualitatives et quantitatives, les instruments de collecte de données comprenaient un ensemble de questionnaires à cinq échelles de Likert administrés à 600 répondants et un guide d'entrevue mené auprès de 24 entretiens avec 24 personnes interrogées sélectionnées à l'aide de techniques d'échantillonnage ciblé et analysé. Les statistiques relatives aux inscriptions, aux inscriptions et aux diplômes ont également été analysées pour déterminer le taux d'attrition. En utilisant la théorie de l'étude indépendante de Charles Wedemeyer, les résultats ont révélé que certains obstacles à l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur sont surmontés car la majorité des personnes interrogées (87,3 %) pensent que les programmes académiques et professionnels de NOUN offrent un accès adéquat à l'enseignement supérieur. 56,5 % des personnes interrogées jugent les installations de NOUN inadéquates. Au total, 76,5 % des personnes interrogées estiment que la facilitation en ligne, les cours vidéo et les supports de cours de qualité sont utilisés pour combler les lacunes des cours en face à face, ce qui permet de dispenser un enseignement de qualité. Le taux d'attrition sur une période de six ans est élevé (41 %) en raison de difficultés personnelles, motivationnelles et institutionnelles. Bien que, les centres d'études communautaires sont viables et ont la capacité de perdurer, le gouvernement et les communautés doivent continuer à collaborer avec NOUN pour améliorer ses services.

Mots-clés: *accès, facilitation matériel de cours centres d'études, universités*

Introduction

Concerns about tertiary education delivery are growing as a result of an alarming rate of population growth in Nigeria. With just 140,431,790 people by the census figure of the year 2006, Nigeria is estimated to have 223,804,632 as of the mid-year of 2023 representing 2.78% of the total world population according to the UN (Worldometre, 2023). The population's yearly growth rate is put at 2.41% in 2022. Unfortunately, the growing population is not matched with the required infrastructure growth in all facets of Nigerian life. More hit are the facilities needed to create access for the teeming population at all levels of education, especially at the tertiary level. According to Ojo (2022), Nigeria has a total of 49 federal universities, 59 state universities and 111 private universities, 40 federal polytechnics, 49 state-owned polytechnics and 76 private polytechnics. The figure continues to rise yearly. However, efforts being put in place by private concerns, states and federal governments to establish more tertiary institutions have not sufficiently catered for the number of candidates seeking admission. Apart from access, there is also the need to ensure quality in education service delivery.

There is doubt among pessimists on the viability of establishing more colleges of education, polytechnics and universities in Nigeria without sacrificing quality given dwindling state finances and inadequate personnel. Optimists, on the other hand, canvass for more institutions equipped with necessary facilities and manned by qualified manpower over time. The latter position is anchored on the fact that education is important for developing the human potential to contribute meaningfully to the general welfare of a country. This is particularly reliant on quality higher education to produce the high-level manpower needed for economic and social growth. In light of this fact, it is posited that education is basic to human rights and is the foundation for peace and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021). In achieving all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), education is stressed as imperative. Thus, SDGs' creators dedicated Goal 4 to education, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. As a follow-up, the Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation

of these ambitious goals and commitments and inclusive education is seen as a policy priority to achieve these goals (UNESCO, 2021). This is because open education breaks barriers to access and ensures equity.

Inclusive education is geared towards ensuring equity in a polity by helping to overcome natural and socially imposed barriers. The concept of inclusion is inextricably intertwined with the functional differentiation of society (Luhmann and Rasch, 2002) as a means of addressing individual differences as espoused in psychology. Thus, investing in equity in education pays off because beneficiaries can contribute to economic development and social cohesion. This is attainable through high-level skills and knowledge acquisition that is not pre-determined by social and economic constraints. Constraints that can militate against inclusive education are geography, finance, disability and population surge. In most societies, public tertiary education institutions become a levelling ground as entry is controlled through certain qualifications which are not determined by wealth, physical ability or location of residence.

University education is the brainbox for all other levels of education. In recognition of this fact, the Nigerian government has continued to prioritise its establishment and funding. However, a lot is still yet to be accomplished to meet global standards in enrolment, facilities, tuition, curriculum and instruction. For instance, the number of conventional universities in Nigeria can no longer absorb the growing population of secondary school leavers desiring university education. Applications for university education have always been on the increase. In 2019, JAMB registered 1.8 million candidates for 2019 UTME according to the registrar (Premium Times, 2019). According to Owan, Ameh and Ubabudu (2021), figures of students who will apply for admission into federal universities will continue to rise. In 2023 alone, 1,595,779 candidates were registered in the UTME/DE registration exercise. The 264 universities licensed by the National Universities Commission (NUC) as of 2023 cannot admit all of them due to lack of space, lecturers and facilities.

As a policy option to achieve inclusive education, distance education (DE) at the higher level has been used to complement existing conventional institutions in Nigeria. This is because DE has the advantage of eliminating system-level obstacles to equity and access. DE's profundity in providing larger coverage of students dispersed in time and space has been celebrated in literature (Oni, 2020). The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was established to remove barriers of space, time and location in the early 21st century. The vision of NOUN is to be regarded as the foremost university providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. While the mission is to provide functional, cost-effective, flexible learning which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. The objectives of setting up NOUN are to:

- ensure equity and equality of opportunities in education generally but specifically in university education;
- provide wider access to education generally but specifically university education in Nigeria;
- enhance Education for all and life-long learning;
- provide the entrenchment of a global learning culture;
- provide instructional resources via an intensive use of information and communication technology;
- provide flexible, but qualitative education; and
- reduce the cost, inconveniences, and hassles of easy access to education and its delivery (National Open University of Nigeria, 2023).

NOUN was first established in 1983 but was scrapped by the Federal Military Government in 1984. Since its reactivation in 2002, the authorities of NOUN have taken steps to deliver quality university education to persons who seek knowledge and skills within its open doors (Onowugbeda, 2020). In its existence for about two decades a great number of students have enrolled with great graduation figures and sometimes worrisome attrition rates. Although NOUN is the only single-mode institution in Nigeria, there are other conventional universities licensed to offer DE.

Expansion of NOUN to communities to guarantee inclusive education is ongoing. It is envisaged that to achieve the one million enrolment figure in NOUN's blueprint communities must buy into this project. Community centres are to take education to the doorsteps of everyone who seeks knowledge by mobilising and counselling young secondary school leavers for enrolment. In light of this, it also proposed that all the 774 local government areas of Nigeria will each have at least a study centre. Expanding the dragnet of learning through the community study centres across all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria will in the long run help to increase students knowledge and skills to be able to adequately cope with 21st-century human needs and challenges. However, for higher education to perform maximally, it must combine equity with quality.

Statement of the Problem

Education remains a key factor in developing the human capacity to be able to adjust to social and environmental vagaries. Given the plethora of conflict situations in Nigeria, there is the need to continue to create new narratives that will transform actors' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours especially those presently facing exclusion from the conventional schooling system. More so, it has been well established in the literature that lack of education in general and peace education in particular accounts for the multitude of radicalised youths who serve as child soldiers for belligerents and non-state actors in conflict and insecurity ravaged Nigeria (Alkali. 2015, Aremu and Dzever, 2015, Ojo and Oyebode, 2018). Open Distance Learning (ODL) is a sure way of extending the frontiers of education to the radicalised population in both urban and rural settings to reform them (Oyebode, 2015).

Many scholars have done a lot of work on ODL in Nigeria and NOUN in particular. Inadequate funding, inconsistent institutional policy and a dearth of infrastructure such as broadband internet connectivity and epileptic electricity supply constitute impediments to the utilisation of ICT for teaching and learning (Oyefara, et.al., 2021). Although, Alkali's (2015) work centred on the role of ODL in enhancing national transformation concluded that NOUN has acted as an agent of technological innovation, economic growth, social transformation and

human capital development through her products but noticed a low level of utilisation of ICT in achieving her mandate of massification of higher education. Okpala and Saleh's (2020) review of DE and the challenges faced by libraries showed that DE requires enormous resources, services, facilities and operations that need improved funding.

Adamu (2022) identifies a total of 15 universities offering ODL in Nigeria, out of which 11 were federal, two were run by state governments, and the other two were private. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), a federal university, was the only single-mode ODL university in the country. Although many universities offer Distance Education (DE) courses and programmes aimed at addressing the diverse educational needs of students and staying updated with advances in technological offerings, there are still many areas of concern that require studies in the field of ODL (Fidalgo, et. al., 2020). Areas needing scholarly investigation remain broad, especially in Nigeria where ODL in higher education is still relatively young.

Although NOUN community study centres are aimed at addressing the challenges posed to inclusive education and bid to ensure equity, investigation in the area of NOUN community centres and how they have been able to provide access and quality higher education has attracted little attention. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine ratings of NOUN community study centres' service delivery in her programmes, facilities and tuition as a means of recommending appropriate measures to enhance patronage and reduce attrition. This is important because these centres remain the closest to the grassroots and have the potential to use local capacity to overcome barriers to university education.

Objectives of the Study

To achieve the purpose of this study, the objectives of the study were:

1. To investigate how much access NOUN programmes provide for university education through the community study centres.
2. To examine the adequacy or otherwise of facilities for administration, teaching and learning.
3. To establish the ratings of indices of quality tuition offered through NOUN community study centres.
4. To find out the rate of attrition of undergraduate students who enrolled at the selected NOUN community study centres.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

1. How much access do NOUN programmes provide for university education through the community study centres?
2. How adequate are the facilities at the community study centres for administration, teaching and learning?
3. What are the ratings of indices of quality tuition offered by NOUN at the community centres?
4. What is the attrition rate of undergraduate students at the selected community study centres?

Conceptual Clarification

From a disability perspective, Sebba and Sachdev (1997) see inclusive education as a means of mainstreaming everyone or attempting to respond to all pupils as individuals with unique needs and structuring education curricula, organisations and provisions as well as allocating resources to enhance equality of opportunity. Inclusive education is, thus, aimed at achieving a fundamental human right to education. The broad aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion arising from barriers imposed by diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, age, religion, gender, geography and ability (Adetoro, 2014).

One way of achieving inclusive education is to localise access. Localisation of education opportunities aligns with community of

practice theory which posits that learning is a social process firmly rooted in the interactions, relationships, and shared experiences that take place within a community (Au, Li and Wong, 2018).

Equity in education means fairness and inclusion to guarantee access to at least a basic minimum level of knowledge and skills acquisition irrespective of circumstances of birth, location, gender and time. Thus, the essence of the right to education is that a child can access education within reasonable circumference without discrimination (Onuora-Oguno, 2018). Equitable education systems must be fair and inclusive and they must support students to reach their learning potential without either formally or informally pre-setting barriers or lowering expectations (OECD, 2012). Thus, equity in education must allow individuals to meet their physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualisation needs. These needs can only be sufficiently met through quality education. Thus, it is not about the proliferation of gateways to higher education alone; adequate teaching-learning infrastructure and personnel must be put in place to ensure profitable service delivery in higher education. In a bid to ensure equity education and overcome barriers, open distance learning (ODL) has been embraced by nations.

Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India (2017) described ODL as a system wherein teachers and learners need not necessarily be present either at the same place or at the same time. Distance education provides an alternative to face-to-face teaching, promotes freedom of choice and independence, enables recurrent and lifelong learning frees access to learning opportunities and engenders equity. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is the provision of distance education opportunities in ways that seek to mitigate or remove barriers to access, such as finances, prior learning, age, social, work or family commitments, disability, incarceration or other such barriers (Adamu, 2022). Of course, ODL entails three components namely open access, open scholarship and open instruction.

Literature Review

The goal of DE which gives birth to ODL according to the Nigerian National Policy on Education (2013) is to provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Thus, DE is anchored on the need to provide equity without sacrificing quality. In furthering the learning experience, ODL is a double-edged approach to providing distance education offerings by removing or mitigating barriers to access, such as finances, prior learning, age, social, work or family commitments, disability, incarceration or other such barriers (Commonwealth of Learning, 2015). In light of this, the Federal Government of Nigeria has empowered the National Universities Commission to grant licenses to government and private concerns to run single-mode institutions offering degree programmes as well as licenses to some dual-mode institutions to run degree programmes through open distance format.

Technology has been a major way of delivering DE. The technological capabilities of an online learning environment provide an instructor with a gamut of opportunities to reach the students with learning activities and resources that are individualised for the educational and developmental needs of learners irrespective of their physical, physiological and environmental variants (Robert and Dyre, 2005). ODL institutions use technologies to make their courses more engaging and improve access to learning for students who are dispersed in time and space. Venkatesh et al. (2003) in their studies of the TAM and the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (or UTAUT) posit that organisations will adopt the use of technological innovations because of its usefulness, useability and pliability. Thus, the ODL institution's adoption of relevant technologies to specific knowledge and skill delivery is to maximise vicarious engagement of learners' senses especially where simulation of situated learning experience is unavoidable.

Beyond radio and television, the integration of telecommunication systems as well as other media into the delivery mode of ODL has been pivotal to increased enrolment and acceptance (Adamu, 2022). This

became more noticeable during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced a global lockdown. Advancement in communication technologies enhances instructional methods used for delivering education at a distance to learners who are varied in characteristics. In the recent past and now, telegram, telephones, radios, televisions, and satellites have all been used to deliver instruction with certain degrees of success and challenges at community centres. World Wide Web as a communication tool yielded yet another avenue for teaching and learning at a distance (Robert and Dyer, 2005).

Agbebaku and Majebi (2018) rightly commended NOUN's efforts in the utilisation of the Learning Management System through Zoom and Google meeting platforms for synchronous and asynchronous learning to complement other blended learning opportunities. However, the debate as to whether computer-mediated learning can replace face-to-face teaching is still a burning issue among educators, communication experts and technologists. Instructional designers are being brought in to create close-to-life experiences in machine-mediated teaching.

It is argued that the learners must be at liberty to assess and express opinions on the quality of education provided for them either through the conventional system or ODL (Elfirdoussi et al., 2020). This is why the dissonance theory asserts that the users of a particular product are at liberty to make some kind of cognitive comparison between their expectations about the product and the perceived product performance (Oni, 2020). The quality of the product as assessed by users determines its continued market presence and patronage. According to the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, if performance exceeds expectations, users will be positively disconfirmed or satisfied (Onowugbeda, 2020). On the other hand, if performance fails to meet expectations, consumers will be negatively disconfirmed or dissatisfied. In a school system, dissatisfaction with services may lead to high attrition. This opportunity for learners to gauge the delivery of educational services puts educational administrators on their toes to regularly examine the perception of students (their clients) on how well they are meeting their needs.

The mode of delivery and quality of tuition determine how users perceive DE. For instance, Agbebaku and Majeji (2018) investigated the perceived influence of the mode of non-facilitation of NOUN on student academic performance in the Apapa Study Centre and averred that non-face-to-face facilitation propelled the students to leverage other activities and resources for studies. Elfirdoussi et. al. (2020) in their work on distance learning in Morocco during the covid-19 pandemic found that both professors and students stated that online learning is not more interesting than ordinary learning and professors need to provide at least 50% of their teaching in face-to-face mode with more activities and resources. This position canvassed is important for consideration, especially in developing countries like Nigeria where computer literacy is low and internet connectivity largely remains poor.

Theoretical Background

Underpinning this study is Charles Wedemeyer's theory of independent study. Wedemeyer proposes the separation of student and teacher, teaching and learning through writing or through mediated forms and freedom of the learner to make choices of time and mode of learning. In his viewpoint, teaching is individualised, student's activity is emphasised and learning is made convenient for the student in their own environment. Wedemeyer emphasises the independence of the learner as done in distance education because it is crucial to freedom of choice from the avalanche of modes of learning.

Independent study is described as a form of teaching-learning arrangement in which teachers and learners are independent and inter-relate through communication in multiple ways to free internal learning tasks (Wedemeyer, 1971). Wedemeyer (1981) further emphasises learning through writing or some other medium, individualised teaching, student activity, and the learner's responsibility for the pace of his or her own progress. According to Simonson et. al. (2012), Wedemeyer's theory of independent study presupposes that the learner is responsible for determining the pace of his or her own progress, with the freedom to start and stop at any time. How well the learner's freedom is guaranteed is, however, dependent on the availability of available options for accessing the learning experience without being

constrained by time and space. The availability of learning opportunities and facilities is crucial in meeting learner's needs. However, this freedom is not unlimited as there must be measures to control the duration and test of learning outcomes. The Senate of a university must, thus, set criteria for issuance of certification for proficiency and learning of her programmes made available through ODL. By and large, how open learning or distance education is carved depends on the policy framework of individual institutions without compromising global best practices. Best practices include explicit entry requirements, robust curriculum, adequate learning facilities, in-depth tuition, transparency of tests and measurement and quality assurance. Regulatory authorities are therefore put in place to ensure compliance. Of course, regular researches by academics and practitioners reveal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This study is an attempt to further investigate ODL delivery in NOUN.

Methodology

A survey method involving qualitative and quantitative approaches for data gathering and analysis was employed for this study. The cumulative population of NOUN since she commenced admission in 2004 till 2023 is 305,625. Total enrolment in NOUN between 2016 and 2021 totaled 172,628 while enrolment in 2023 alone was 52,420 (NOUMIS, 2023). The population of all the students enrolled in NOUN's forty-three community study centres between 2016 and 2021 totaled 13, 672 students. The 12 selected community study centres enrolled a total of 5,768 students during the same period and this was used to calculate attrition rate. The sample for the survey was made up of 600 students and 24 workers in NOUN community study centres who were randomly selected. Snowball and purposive sampling techniques were used to allow the representation of twelve (12) community study centres in the six (6) geo-political zones of the country and eight (8) faculties. These sampling techniques are useful in assuming and generalising the findings of this study across all community study centres in Nigeria.

Instruments of data collection included a set of questionnaires administered to 600 respondents, telephone interviews with 24

stakeholders and statistical records. The five-scale Likert-type semi-structured questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A sought demographic information including study centre, programme, and gender as well as employment status. In this section, the students tick from the options provided. Section B with 15 items elicited responses on each student's ratings of access, facilities and tuition on a 5-point Likert scale from 5 (very adequate), 4 (adequate), 3 (undecided), 2 (inadequate) to (very inadequate). Responses are aggregated and mean scores are recorded for each of the variables. Section C provided different indices of tuition available and required students to tick as appropriate the ones available to them for studies. Section D required respondents to comment and make suggestions freely on how the operations of NOUN study centres can be improved for better service delivery.

Physical copies of the questionnaire were distributed directly to students through research assistants at the centres to ensure 100% return. The questionnaire was pre-tested with some potential respondents to ensure the validity of the instrument. Content validity index (CVI) was used to quantify the degree of agreement with previous questionnaire items used by experts in ODL research to determine their relevance. To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, multiple trials of the instrument were carried out on students of Ilaro and Kisi community study centres and it yielded the same result.

Semi-structured interviews through telephone (recorded and transcribed) and handled directly by the researcher were conducted with 24 key stakeholders, including students, faculty members, administrators, and community leaders, to gather in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives regarding NOUN programme accessibility, facility adequacy, quality of tuition, causes of attrition, and suggestions for improvement. Twelve selected NOUN outlets engaged were Iwo, Awa-Ijebu, Ikom, Fugar, Offa, Iyara, Rimi, Masari, Hadejia, Azare, Opi and Asaga Community Study Centres. Two centres were chosen to represent each of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Records of graduating students, active and drop-outs of these centres in all programmes between 2016 and 2021 were analysed to assess the attrition rate. A period of six years is chosen to allow

allowance for graduation, activity or inactivity for four semesters. Fifty physical copies of a set of questionnaire were administered in each of the 12 centres.

The digitalised database generated through a set of physical questionnaire was exported to Excel. The Excel data was in turn exported to IBM-SPSS version 23 for detailed analysis. The quantitative data were analysed using the frequencies function of IBM-SPSS. Mean scores and percentages were used to aggregate and report the findings from the questionnaire. Records of enrolment, graduation, activity and inactivity are used to analyse attrition rate in a table displaying figures and percentages. Qualitative data obtained through telephone interviews were categorised into themes (programme accessibility, facility adequacy, quality of tuition, causes of attrition, and suggestions for improvement) and embedded in the discussion of findings using illustrative quotes to aggregate responses. The use of multiple sources enhances the credibility of data and triangulation of the study approach.

Findings

Each of the research questions is addressed here.

Responses to Research Question 1- How much access do NOUN programmes provide for university education through community study centres?

Table 1: Access to university education

Indices	Very adequate		adequate		undecided		inadequate		Very inadequate	
Programmes of NOUN provide required knowledge	421	70.16%	125	20.83%	10	1.67%	25	4.17%	19	3.17%
Employability skills are available in her curriculum	347	57.8%	141	23.5%	24	4%	74	12.3%	14	2.3%
Professional dreams can be met through NOUN programmes	351	58.5%	166	27.67%	22	3.67%	37	6.17%	24	4%
NOUN programmes are market-oriented	409	68.17%	78	13%	12	2%%	74	12.33%	27	4.5%
NOUN programmes meet my choice of study	377	62.83%	206	34.33%	2	0.33%	10	1.67%	5	0.83%

Fieldwork, 2023

Table 1 answered the first poser on how well has NOUN been able to provide access at the grassroots. The table revealed that eighty-seven-point three percent (87.3%) of the respondents claim adequacy of access provided by NOUN for them to have a university education while 2.33% were undecided, 7.33% view it as inadequate and 3% said it was very inadequate. This finding conforms with Wedemeyer's proposition that learning is made convenient for the student in their environment. Those who are dissatisfied anchored their position on the fact that NOUN does not offer the programmes they originally wanted to undertake. Such programmes mentioned in the portion for free comments in the questionnaire are nursing, engineering and surveying. The stoppage of admission for the law programme did not go down well with students in this category. Thus, it could be argued that NOUN has not been able to reach the milestone of providing equitable education systems. Meaning a lot still has to be done.

In the same vein, administrative staff interviewed through telephone to corroborate or reject responses to questionnaire items also mentioned the disappointment of students who have come for enquiries but could not find programmes that suit their aspirations. The staff claimed that they are daily confronted with requests for admissions in Engineering, Architecture and Basic Medical Sciences which are not available in NOUN. This is a lacuna that has put NOUN below in ranking with other universities.

Responses to Research Question 2 - How adequate are the facilities at the community study centres for administration, teaching and learning?

Table 2: Adequacy of Facilities for administration, teaching and learning

Indices	Very adequate		adequate		undecided		inadequate		Very inadequate	
Provision of learning space sufficient	111	18.5%	90	15%	58	9.7%	99	16.5%	242	40.3%
Physical and online Library facilities adequate	112	18.7%	93	15.5%	56	9.3%	92	15.3%	247	41.2%
Office spaces are adequate to attend to students	100	16.7%	98	16.3%	60	10%	96	16%	246	41%
Counselling rooms available	119	19.8%	89	14.8%	53	9.2%	98	16.3%	241	40.2%
Laboratory facilities are available for practical	113	18.0%	95	15.8%	58	9.7%	95	15.8%	239	39.8%

Fieldwork, 2023

Table 2 revealed that a total of 18.5% of respondents adjudged physical facilities at the community study centres to be very adequate, 15.5% reported adequate, 9.5% were undecided, 16% said adequate and 40.5% rated the facilities to be very inadequate. One issue that is generally mentioned is the lack of a physical library. Corroborating responses to questionnaire items, administrative staff interviewed also claimed that the majority of the community study centres do not have qualified librarians to manage the rooms and books provided for library use. Only two out of the 12 centres used for this study have fair provision in terms of books and space for a library.

Other facilities that are presently inadequate in some community study centres according to respondents include facilitation rooms, internet facilities, laboratories and co-curricular spaces and equipment. Inadequacy of learning facilities will not augur well for independent learning as posited by Wedemeyer (1981). Thus, continuous improvement of facilities is needed at the community study centres.

Providing access is not enough, there must be facilities to enhance teaching and learning especially given that the students do not most of the time have face-to-face contact with lecturers and facilitators who are domiciled at the headquarters and urban centres. To ensure adequate facilities NOUN management issued requirements for establishing community study centres in 2020. A standard community study centre should have 10 offices, 4 science laboratories, 1 computer laboratory, 1 library, 2 stores for the study materials, 10 facilitation/tutorial rooms, 1 big auditorium for large group activities examination and 2 offices for facilitators. The premises should be fenced and provided with a public utility like steady electricity, (or standby generator), and water, (borehole where necessary).

Responses to Research Questions 3 - What are the ratings of indices of quality tuition offered by NOUN at the community centres?

Table 3: Quality of Tuition

Indices	Very adequate		adequate		undecided		inadequate		Very inadequate	
Course materials available for all courses	376	62.6%	82	13.7%	39	6.5%	41	6.8%	62	10.3%
Online facilitation resources, activities and regularity are adequate	380	63.3%	77	12.8%	44	7.3%	43	7.2%	56	9.3%
Facilitators are competent	377	62.8%	82	13.7%	33	5.5%	40	6.7%	68	11.3%
Industrial experiences are provided	375	62.5%	87	14.5%	42	7%	36	6%	60	10%
Assessment and examination methods are satisfactory	382	63.7%	77	12.8%	52	8.7%	35	5.8%	53	8.8%

Fieldwork, 2023

Table 3 showed that adequacy of course materials was scored 62.6% for very adequate, 13.7% for adequate, 6.5% undecided, 6.8% for inadequate and 10.3% for very inadequate. In the comment section of the questionnaire, students complained of voluminous content and difficult language. To address the difficulty in understanding the language and contents of course materials as well as cope with the volume of knowledge NOUN has developed a facilitation platform via Zoom. A total of 76.1% adjudged the quality of online as high. Online Facilitation has improved tremendously since its introduction in 2018 to replace face-to-face facilitation. This is handled by the Learning Content Management System (LCMS). The features of the platform include synchronous and asynchronous facilitation which have video lectures, PowerPoint, a discussion forum and opportunities for additional resources as deemed accurate by individual facilitators. In 2023 about 40% of courses offered by different departments are being facilitated using both full-time lecturers and facilitators as resource persons. Social media groups that have also been formed for instructional delivery include among others WhatsApp, Telegram, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. The steps taken so far will help to realise Wedemeyer's (1981) theory of independent study whereby learners have been provided various options for engaging in learning. Wedemeyer proposes learning through writing or mediated forms.

Major complaints by interviewees are lack of internet, irregularity of facilitators and many courses not featured for facilitation. Although face-to-face facilitation is no more undertaken at study centres, interviewees reported that unofficially NOUN encouraged students to form study groups and arrange private facilitation among them. Lecturers in the communities are engaged as facilitators whose assignments include facilitation, project supervision, guidance and practicum moderation. By and large, the mean score (63%) is very adequate for the indices of quality of tuition point to learners' satisfaction.

Findings to Research Question 4: What is the attrition rate of undergraduate students at the selected community study centres?

Table 4: Attrition rate

Years	Enrolment	Active	Graduated	Attrition	Rate
2016	648	19	289	340	52.5%
2017	756	48	314	394	52%
2018	854	92	463	299	35%
2019	1201	73	724	404	37%
2020	962	111	340	511	53%
2021	1347	911	0	436	32%
Total	5,768	1,254	2,130	2,384	41%

The attrition rate is generally high at the selected community study centres. Out of a population of 648 students who matriculated in the community study centres selected for this study in 2016, 47.7% completed their programmes or are still active to date while 52.5% have abandoned their programmes. For 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 the attrition rates are 52%, 35%, 37%, 53% and 32% respectively. Attrition in this study is determined by those who have not registered for courses or taken examinations in the last four semesters. However, it should be noted that some of them may come back since they have a lifeline of 16 semesters.

Attrition is a general problem of ODL and many factors have been attributed to this phenomenon. According to interviewees generally mentioned problem was contestation between work and studies. Other factors stated by many interviewees that contribute to attrition include “lack of finance, relocation and loss of interest.” One of the interviewees stated that “distance to study centre also remains a big challenge.” One administrative staff interviewed noted that “absence during examinations after registration discouraged students and made them abandon their studies.” It is also observed that “at present, NOUN offers physical examination for the majority of their students while only a few are granted virtual examinations that are tied to stringent measures.” Interviewed students clamoured for “widening of access to virtual examinations and lessening of stringent measures to qualify to take non-physical examinations online.” Thus, the foregoing findings causing attrition encapsulate personal, motivational and institutional challenges experienced by students. This aligns with earlier findings in

related studies by Au, Li and Wong (2018) and proposals for constant review of ODL offerings to be more learner-centred.

Discussion of Findings

NOUN's main campus is located in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. NOUN has a total of 114 centres as of November 2023. The centres are classified into mega centres, state capital centres and community study centres. The mega centres are located in Abuja and Lagos with thousands of student enrolment figures. Though the original blueprint of NOUN is to have 774 centres across the country; one in every local government area; this has not been achieved. Inadequacy of funds has hampered this plan. Community centres are now established at the request of community members and the ability to provide some facilities. There are a total of 40 community study centres. Most of the community centres of NOUN are located in small towns and semi-urban centres except in Kano State where many exist in the metropolitan area. The majority of the inhabitants of small towns and semi-urban centres are farmers, petty traders, artisans, teachers and uniformed personnel. The purpose of establishing these centres is to remove the barriers of distance and access to university education.

The findings in the tables displayed above generally point to efforts being made by NOUN management to ensure access, tuition and good service delivery which largely are yielding relative successes. As envisaged in the blueprint establishing NOUN study centres should be available in all the 774 Local Government Areas, the availability of only 114 centres is grossly inadequate to provide access to all. NOUN needs to gear up to be able to attain the required level as envisaged in the national policy for education and achieving all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) using the education spectrum. In line with the above findings, Adamu (2022) also identifies innovations and best practices that NOUN adopted as a response to the COVID-19 crisis which included online facilitation, virtual examinations and online chats through social media platforms.

Inadequate facilities are generally a bane of the Nigerian educational system. This arises from the fact that budgetary allocation to education

does not meet the prescribed 30% of the annual budget by UNESCO. Thus, capital votes and subvention from the government have always been inadequate. This was worsened by the economic recession of 2008 that brought about a contraction in annual real per capita global GDP and broad-based weakness in other key indicators of global economic activity. This finding is consistent with Ubuogo and Otoro (2023) position that financing education in Nigeria today is a crucial national problem due to political, social and economic factors, which currently have a significant impact on the world economy. Covid-19 also affected both the economy and politics consequently jolting most African countries. Considering the economy as a sub-system, its ailing state reverberates across all the sub-systems. The economic situation of the country has also contributed to the paucity of funds needed to upgrade facilities at the study centres. NOUN management is challenged to look for alternative means of generating funds to continue to improve facilities. The institution has rejigged her Advancement Unit, The Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL)) and other academic directorates to design blueprints on how to generate funds.

Most of the centres sampled for this study lack enough facilities to ensure unfettered access for people of all categories including people with disabilities. Commendably, the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (Tetfund) has been brought in by the legislators to build physical facilities as constituency projects. Also, the burden of providing physical facilities has been shifted to community members who are desirous of having new centres in their domains. The paucity of funds at the end of the federal government made them push some responsibilities to communities. Leaving infrastructural development of community study centres at the hands of communities hosting the centres has been a major problem. Some communities renege on the promise to upgrade and maintain physical infrastructure once the centres are commissioned.

Because this study was aimed at bridging the knowledge gap on the adequacy of access, facilities and tuition provided at NOUN community study centres, findings from this study and Agbebaku and Majebi's (2018) study may challenge ODL institutions on how to fill

the gap noticed in non-facilitation through face-face and the need to reinvigorate Learning Content Management System as a distinct unit.

There is also a problem with relying on lecturers from conventional universities to handle academic activities. Most of the facilitators/supervisors are inactive due to complaints of workload in their places of primary assignment. This attitude at times delays the students beyond the period specified for their programmes. Inadequate mentoring of students is also reported by interviewees as there are no guidance counselors in many of the community study centres. Further probe of interviewees revealed that NOUN is still greatly tied to the rules and policy statements of the civil services in the recruitment of staff. Since it is a government-funded institution, the autonomy of NOUN like any other university is more on paper than in actual practice. The political will to allow management to take some decisions and actions without recourse to administrative bottlenecks is urgently needed. Study centres also need some operational discretions to enhance performance.

Conclusion

The Nigerian government's commitment to widening the dragnet of university education is given vent through the establishment of NOUN community study centres. Thus, community study centres are platforms for building NOUN's capacity to accept all students from the local community who wish to acquire higher education, and in doing so, reduce the tendency to exclude many. NOUN's achievements in widening access to university education through community study centres in the last two decades have extended the frontiers of ODL in Nigeria. The community study centres have brought tertiary education to the doorstep of students through their various programmes.

Although the facilities at the community centres are not generally adequate to cater for the growing number of enrollees, efforts are geared towards utilising local human and material resources. The use of online facilitation, video lectures and quality course materials replace face-to-face facilitation. The attrition rate remains high because the use of e-learning and e-library by students is not common. The 114

study centres are doing well though there are a few challenges to surmount. ACATEL and Commonwealth of Learning are collaborating with NOUN to enhance service delivery and quality learning through training opportunities and financial support.

In the long run, there may be a need to unbundle NOUN to about six zones each taking care of the politically created six zones of Nigeria. For ODL at the university level to contribute more to the attainment of Goal 4 of SGs. This may go a long way to ensure a reasonable circumference of higher education opportunities without discrimination as envisaged by Onuora-Oguno (2018) as being a necessary measure to guarantee inclusive education. The insistence on one publicly funded single-mode university is not in tandem with the growing population and increasing peculiarities of students. State governments should also be encouraged to establish open universities. Commendably, in 2023 twelve private individuals and corporate entities have also been licensed to establish Open Universities to complement NOUN's efforts (National Universities Commission, 2023). This is a big challenge that will put NOUN on its toes. She no longer enjoys the monopoly of single-mode institutions. This calls for enhanced funding and creativity of NOUN management to float industry-based courses and infuse employability skills in its curricula. Government and communities need to continue to collaborate with NOUN management to enhance quality service delivery. Individual and corporate concerns can also intervene in the provision of learning materials and training.

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