



The Role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Promoting Access to Women's Education in Northwestern Nigeria: A Case Study of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

Le Rôle de l'enseignement ouvert et à distance (ODL) dans la Promotion de l'Accès à l'éducation des femmes dans le nord-ouest du Nigéria : étude de cas de l'Université Nationale Ouverte du Nigeria (NOUN)

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Abstract

A survey was conducted using the National Open University database to ascertain the number of women from the northwestern states of Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara studying in the University based on the admission records from 2018 to 2022. The study also checked the faculties where those women registered during the last 4 years to determine the role of Open and Distance Learning in giving women access to higher education. A total of twenty-five thousand three hundred and sixteen women enrolled in the National Open University of Nigeria in the period under review with Kaduna Study Centre having the highest figure of 8,791, followed by Kano with 4,995 with Katsina, Dutse, Sokoto, Gusau and Birnin

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Kebbi having 2,554., 1,607., 1,129., 1,000 and 971 respectively while other smaller centres in Northwest had 4,263. Concerning programmes of study in various faculties, the Faculty of Health Sciences had the highest enrollment figures of ten thousand four hundred and twenty-four (10,424) representing 41.1% followed by the Faculty of Science with three thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight (3,838) representing 15.1%. Faculties of Agric, Arts, Education Law and Management had enrolment figures of 134 (0.52%), 634 (2.53%), 3,921 (15.4%8), 98 (0.38%), 2,954 (11.66%) respectively while Faculty of Social Sciences had 3,311 (13.07%). Generally, Open and Distance Learning has given women tremendous opportunities to higher education in the region considering that over twenty-five thousand women registered for various programmes using the ODL during the period under review.

Keywords: *ODL, Women, Women Education*

Résumé

Une enquête a été menée à l'aide de la base de données de l'Université Nationale Ouverte pour déterminer le nombre de femmes de l'État du Nord-Ouest de Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto et Zamfa qui étudient à l'Université en fonction des dossiers d'admission de 2018 à 2022. L'étude a également examiné les facultés où ces femmes se sont inscrites au cours des 4 dernières années afin de déterminer le rôle de l'enseignement ouvert et à distance dans l'accès des femmes à l'enseignement supérieur. Un total de Vingt-cinq mille trois cent seize femmes inscrites à l'Université Ouverte du Nigéria au cours de la période considérée, le centre d'études de Kaduna ayant le chiffre le plus élevé de 8.791, suivi par Kano avec 4.995 avec Katsina, Dutse, Sokoto, Gusau et Birnin Kebbi totalisant 2554, 1 607, 1 129, 1 000 et 971 respectivement, tandis que les autres petits centres du Nord-Ouest comptaient 4 263. En ce qui concerne les programmes d'études dans diverses facultés, la faculté des sciences de la santé a eu les chiffres les plus élevés d'inscription de dix mille quatre cent vingt-quatre (10424) représentant 41,1 %, suivie par la faculté des sciences avec trois mille huit cent trente-huit (3838) représentant 15,1 %. Les facultés d'agriculture, des arts, du droit de l'éducation et de la gestion ont enregistré respectivement 134 (0,52 %), 634 (2,53 %), 3921 (15,4 %), 98 (0,38 %) et 2954 (11,66 %) inscriptions, tandis que la faculté des sciences sociales en a obtenu 3311 (13,07 %). Le programme d'enseignement ouvert et à distance a offert aux femmes de formidables possibilités d'accéder à l'enseignement supérieur dans la région, compte tenu du fait que plus de 25 000 femmes se sont

inscrites à divers programmes utilisant le EOD au cours de la période considérée.

Mots-clés: ODL et éducation des femmes

Introduction

Education is a powerful catalyst for societal progress, personal development, and economic growth. In the context of Northwestern Nigeria, like many regions across the globe, ensuring equitable and accessible education is a pressing concern. Among the most marginalised groups with limited access to quality education are women. Despite the significant strides made in improving education over the years, gender disparities persist, impeding the progress and empowerment of women. (UNESCO, 2015; Federal Ministry of Education Nigeria, 2019).

Women's education is the act of allowing women to access education from primary to tertiary level and give equality in chances to learn. This is very important because it gives the woman her fundamental right and allows her to make informed decisions about her life, improve her standard of living and give her an equal chance to participate in community and society building.

The role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as an alternative mode of education has emerged as a promising avenue for addressing these disparities. ODL offers a flexible, accessible, and adaptable approach to learning, which can potentially break down the barriers preventing women from accessing education in Northwestern Nigeria. This study embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the role of ODL in promoting women's education within the specific context of Northwestern Nigeria. The research seeks to examine the impact, challenges, and opportunities of ODL in bridging the gender gap in education and empowering women in the region (Okonkwo, 2020). ODL can also be tailored to cultural norms, reducing barriers to formal education. It also reduces financial costs associated with physical

attendance. ODL empowers women, improving their self-confidence, decision-making abilities, and socio-economic opportunities.

This study is rooted in the belief that ODL has the potential to be a transformative force in promoting women's education in Northwestern Nigeria. By investigating its role, impact, and challenges, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics surrounding women's education in the region and provide insights into how ODL can be harnessed to empower women, reduce educational disparities, and foster gender equality. The study will draw on a blend of educational access theories and a feminist perspective to frame the research, recognising the structural, cultural, and societal influences that affect women's educational access. It will explore the state of women's education in Northwestern Nigeria, gender disparities, the implementation and effectiveness of ODL programmes, challenges faced by women, and the socioeconomic and empowerment outcomes of women who engage with ODL.

This research aspires to inform policy development, stimulate discussions, and generate recommendations that can guide educational institutions, government bodies, and non-governmental organisations in their efforts to promote women's education in Northwestern Nigeria through the dynamic and transformative means of Open and Distance Learning. By shedding light on the potential of ODL, this study aims to take a step closer to realising the dream of a region where all women, regardless of their circumstances, have the opportunity to access quality education and fulfil their aspirations. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) can help provide flexible and accessible educational options, addressing these challenges and promoting gender equality (Chukwuma, and Ibrahim, 2018).

Northwestern Nigeria faces significant gender disparities in education, affecting girls' enrollment rates, retention and completion rates, literacy rates, subject and career choices, and access to quality education. Cultural norms, early marriages, and household responsibilities contribute to girls' underrepresentation in schools. Girls are more likely to drop out or experience interruptions in their education, limiting their prospects. Generally speaking, the level of Education and education

attainment for males is higher than that of females in north-western Nigeria. The issue is more pronounced at the tertiary educational level because the few Girls who were allowed to pass through Primary and Secondary education are married off after secondary Education. The few who get the opportunity to further their education always find it very difficult to make progress beyond the undergraduate for fear of either losing their Jobs or inability to pursue higher education due to Marital and Family issues (Ajah-Okorie, 2013). Most of the inequality resulting in the lack of access to education for Women is a result of attitudes, customs, religious beliefs and traditions (Umeana, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Gender bias affects subjects and careers, with traditionally male-dominated fields being more suitable for girls. Access to quality education is also limited due to inadequate infrastructure, lack of female teachers, and limited resources. Early marriages and childbearing also disrupt girls' educational trajectories. Addressing these disparities is crucial for empowering women, enhancing their economic opportunities, and promoting gender equality in northwestern Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study amongst other things include, to:

1. determine the enrolment of women across the NW study centres of NOUN from 2018 to 2022.
2. ascertain the enrolment of women across the NW study centres of NOUN by faculty from 2018 to 2022.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the enrolment of women across the NW study centres of NOUN from 2018 to 2022?
2. What is the enrolment of women across the NW study centres of NOUN by faculty from 2018 to 2022?

Rationale for the Study

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) offers numerous benefits to women in Northwestern Nigeria. It provides a flexible, accessible education option, enabling women to learn without geographical constraints or rigid schedules. ODL can also be tailored to cultural norms, reducing barriers to formal education. It also reduces financial costs associated with physical attendance. ODL empowers women, improving their self-confidence, decision-making abilities, and socio-economic opportunities. It also enhances women's literacy, contributing to gender equality and a more balanced society. Furthermore, ODL encourages lifelong learning, promoting personal growth and adaptation to changing circumstances.

Global Perspective

UNESCO's Gender and Education for All (EFA) goals emphasise the importance of gender equality in education, with Online Distance Learning (ODL) being a key strategy to expand educational opportunities for women in remote and underserved areas. ODL empowers women by providing access to education and skills training, contributing to gender equality and women's socio-economic advancement. In Nigeria, national education policies, case studies, and empirical research have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of ODL in promoting women's education. However, challenges such as digital literacy and connectivity issues persist, and the Nigerian government's efforts to integrate ODL into formal education systems are also being assessed.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses educational access theories and a feminist perspective to analyse women's access to education in north western Nigeria. It examines structural, economic, and socio-cultural barriers, as well as gender disparities. The feminist perspective emphasises the gender-specific dimensions of educational inequalities, examining power dynamics, societal norms, and cultural practices. The study aims to provide a nuanced analysis of women's educational access, examining

how Open and Distance Learning can empower them and address systemic factors. Another conceptual framework is multiculturalism and critical pedagogy, in which cultural barriers to access and equity to education are determined in a pluralistic society such as Northern Nigeria Expand the theoretical framework.

Significance of the Study

The research on the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in promoting access to women's education in Northwestern Nigeria has the potential to make significant contributions and implications in addressing the gender gap in education and promoting women's empowerment in the region: this will help in improving access to education by women and it will also help NOUN to know the advocacy pattern and areas to concentrate on to increase enrolment and improve its service delivery.

Contributions

The research aims to bridge the gender gap in education in Northwestern Nigeria by providing women with access to education through Open Distance Learning (ODL). This will empower women, improve their economic prospects, challenge gender stereotypes, and foster a more equitable approach. Educated women may prioritise their children's education, leading to intergenerational benefits and promoting inclusive, gender-sensitive educational policies.

Research Methodology

Study Design

The study design is Secondary Research in which available data of students from the website repository of the National Open University was used. The enrollment pattern of women into the NOUN for various courses was studied over five years.

Study Area

Northwestern Nigeria, a region consisting of seven states namely Jigawa, Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara is a region known for its rich cultural diversity, vibrant communities, and vast potential. However, it also grapples with a complex tapestry of challenges, among which is the pervasive issue of gender-based educational disparities. Women in north western Nigeria have historically faced a multitude of barriers that limit their access to quality education. These barriers include deeply rooted cultural norms, early marriages, limited economic resources, security concerns, and inadequate educational infrastructure. As a result, women's educational attainment and empowerment in the region have been hampered for generations (Adekunle, and Daudu, 2017; Anyanwu, 2018).



Fig. 1: Map of Nigeria with the Northwestern States highlighted

The population of the study was women who were enrolled into the National Open University of Nigeria across study centres in the northwestern region over five years, that is from 2008 to 2022 and there was no sampling done.

Data Collection Methods

This study used secondary data on the level of enrollment of Women into the National Open University of Nigeria over 5 years from 2018 to 2022. Data was analysed based on the programme of Study and state of origin of the respective women to help in determining the number of Women from each of the seven northwestern states that have access to education through the ODL system.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from the database of the National Open University of Nigeria was subjected to analysis using an Excel statistical package to give a pictorial perspective of the number of women enrolled in different faculties from different states of the North West region. Also, the percentile of the data will be calculated to give a clearer picture.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the enrollment of women across the NW study centres of NOUN from 2018 to 2022?

The results obtained from the data of the Directorate of Management Information Service of the University indicate that a total of twenty-one thousand and fifty-three women were admitted to the seven major study centres across the northwestern states with Kaduna State having the highest figure of 8,797 women distributed into various Programmes of the University, This is shown in Table 1. Dutse, Kebbi, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto and Gusau Study centres had enrollment figures of one thousand one hundred and twenty nine (1,129), Nine hundred and seventy one (971), Four thousand nine hundred and ninety five (4,995), two thousand five hundred and fifty four (2,554), one thousand six hundred and seven (1,607) and one thousand (1,000) women respectively as clearly shown in Table 1. Similarly, Other Smaller centres across Kaduna (NAF Centre), Kano (Fagge, Danbatta, Bichi) and Katsina (Masari and Mani) constituted four thousand two hundred and sixty-(three (4,263) women enrolled during the period under review.

Table 1 shows the enrolment of Women into the National Open University of Nigeria from Study Centres across the north-western states of Nigeria from 2018 to 2022

Study Centre	State	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Dutse Study Centre	Jigawa	160	190	215	257	307	1129
Kebbi Study Centre	Kebbi	153	192	188	208	230	971
Kaduna Study Centre	Kaduna	1503	1690	1705	1839	2060	8797
Kano Study Centre	Kano	817	946	1000	1188	1044	4995
Katsina Study Centre	Katsina	326	426	490	593	719	2554
Sokoto Study Centre	Sokoto	214	318	316	345	414	1607
Gusau Study Centre	Zamfara	113	170	205	228	284	1000

Source: Management Information System of NOUN

Other smaller centres across Kaduna (NAF Centre), Kano (Fagge, Danbatta, Bichi) and Katsina (Masari and Mani) constitute 4,263.

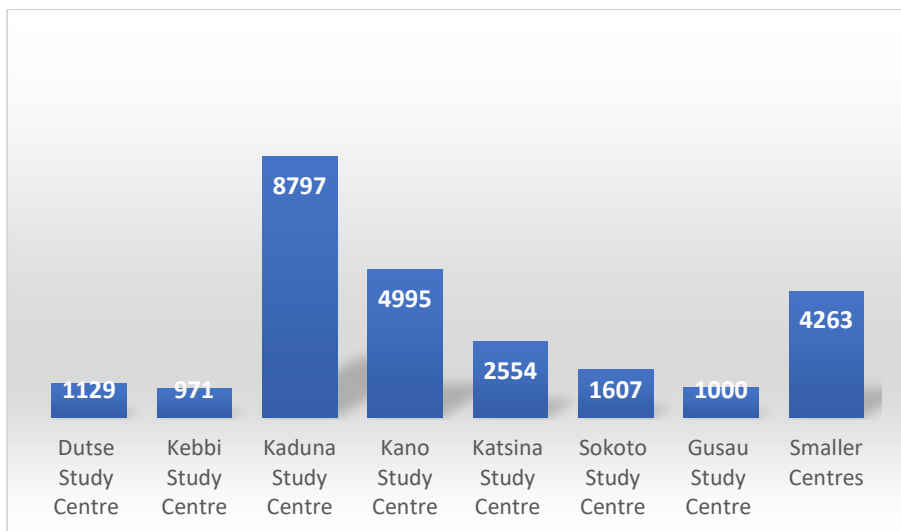


Fig. 2: Bar chart depicting enrolment of women into the National Open University of Nigeria from study centres across the north-western states of Nigeria from 2018 to 2022

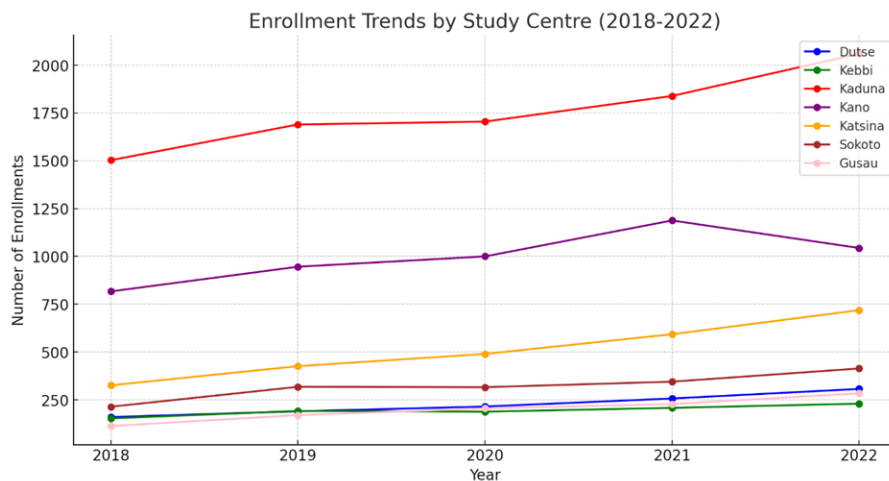


Fig. 3: Line graph presenting the enrolment trends by study centre at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) from 2018 to 2022. Each line corresponds to a different study centre, allowing for an easy comparison of enrolment patterns over the years.

Research Question 2: What is the enrolment of women across the NW study centres of NOUN by Faculty from 2018 to 2022?

Concerning programmes of study in various faculties, the Faculty of Health Sciences had the highest enrollment figures of ten thousand four hundred and twenty-four (10,424) representing 41.1% followed by the Faculty of Science with three thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight (3,838) representing 15.1%. Faculties of Agric, Arts, Education Law and Management had enrolment figures of 134 (0.52%), 634 (2.53%), 3,921 (15.4%8), 98 (0.38%), 2,954 (11.66%) respectively while Faculty of Social Sciences had 3,311 (13.07%), this is clearly shown in Table 2 and depicted in figure 2.

Table 2: Shows the Number of Women in northwestern states enrolled in NOUN from 2018 to 2022 by Faculty

S/No	Year	Agric	Arts	Education	H/Sc.	Law	Mgt Sc.	Science	Soc. Sc	Total
1	2018	38	114	871	2435	19	577	478	824	5356
2	2019	18	108	710	1519	27	580	346	604	3912
3	2020	24	121	687	1811	17	562	335	541	4098
4	2021	23	136	771	2224	16	516	2199	638	6523
5	2022	31	155	882	2435	19	719	480	704	5425
Total		134 (0.52%),	634 (2.53%),	3921 (15.4%8),	10424 (41.1%)	98 (0.38%),	2954 (11.66%)	3838 (15.1%)	3311 (13.07%),	25,316

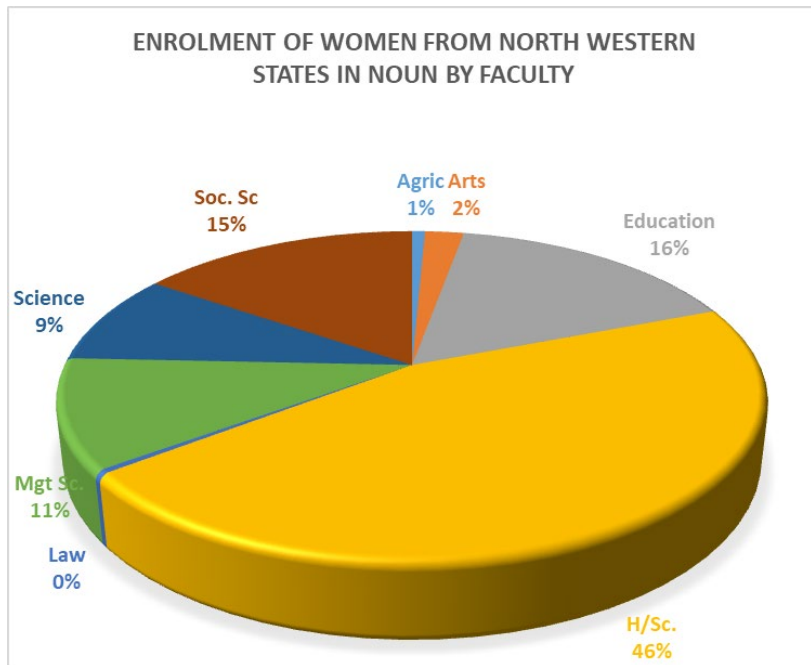


Fig. 4: A pie chart depicting enrolment by faculty

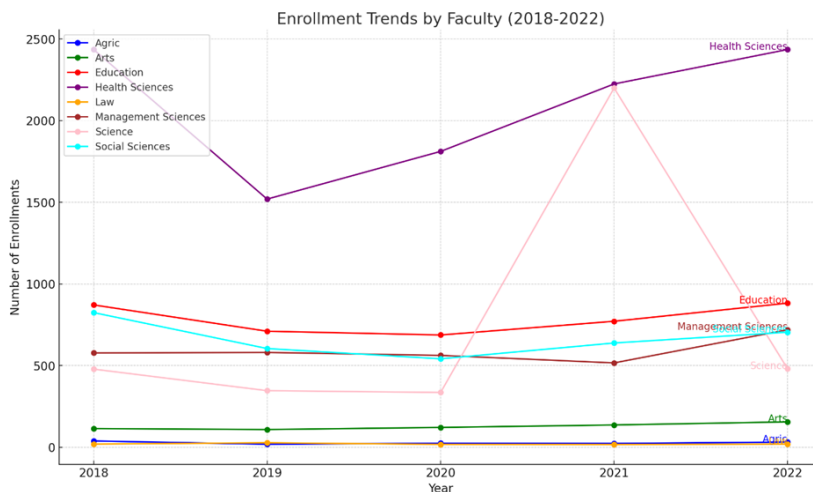


Fig. 5: Line graph presenting a detailed analysis of enrolment trends in various faculties at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) from 2018 to 2022.

Concerning total enrollment figures from the 7 states of the northwest region, it was found that the total number of women enrolled within the study period is higher than the total number of Men enrolled as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The total number of women enrolled and percentages in the northwestern states

n	Male	Female	total	Percentage
2018	65727	69877	135604	51.53
2019	67631	72888	140519	51.87
2020	56311	62987	119298	52.8
2021	61207	67657	128864	52.5
2022	67377	71636	138991	51.54

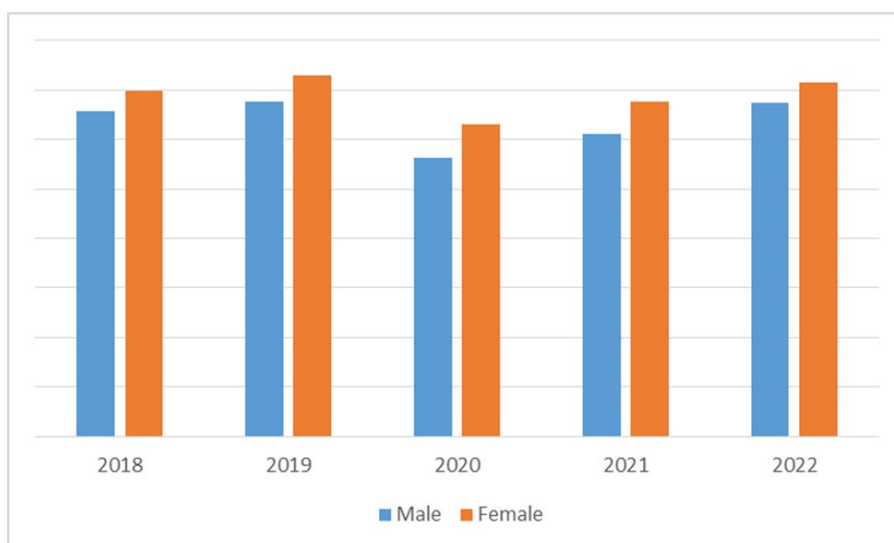


Fig. 6: Bar chart showing the total number of females enrolled in NOUN in northwestern states from 2018 to 2022.

Discussion

The challenge of access to education is known to be reduced by Open and Distance Learning as highlighted in the introduction. The result of the present study indicated that many women from the northwestern

states have access to higher Education through Open and Distance Learning. Over twenty-five thousand women were found to be registered over the study period, this by no means shows an increase in access as most of them couldn't have access to higher education as a result of barriers such as Purdah or family day-to-day activities (Olakulein and Ojo, 2006). Accordingly, it can be seen that the flexibility offered by ODL by allowing the women to study from home using technology-driven methodologies will further give them ICT skills which will lead to empowerment. The result of this study corroborates the work of Odwoa and Frimpong (2008) who reported that available Statistics from Open and Distance Institutions confirm the potential of ODL in achieving gender parity in education in terms of access between males and females.

Enrolment in Study centres

There is a noticeable overall upward trend in enrolments across all study centres during the five years, indicating increasing participation of women in higher education through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in northwestern Nigeria. The total number of women enrolled was found to be higher than males across the 7 northwestern states as shown in Table 3.

Kaduna Study Centre stands out with the highest enrollment numbers, showing a significant and consistent increase year over year. Starting at 1,503 in 2018, the enrollments rose steadily to reach 2,060 by 2022. The strong growth trajectory of the Kaduna Centre underscores its central role in facilitating women's education in the region. The **Kano Study Centre** started with 817 enrollments in 2018, this centre also shows a positive growth trend, peaking at 1,188 in 2021 before a slight dip to 1,044 in 2022. The overall upward trend indicates Kano's significant role in the educational landscape. **Katsina Study Centre** exhibited a steady growth from 326 in 2018 to 719 in 2022, Katsina demonstrates a consistent increase in women's enrollment, even though at a smaller scale compared to Kaduna and Kano. **Sokoto and Gusau Centres**, while having lower absolute numbers, show a steady and uninterrupted growth pattern. Sokoto increased from 214 in 2018 to 414 in 2022, and Gusau from 113 to 284 over the same period.

Dutse and Kebbi Centres are similar to Sokoto and Gusau, these centres have lower enrollments but exhibit a continuous increase over the years.

Enrolment by Faculty

The **Faculty of Health Sciences** stands out with consistently high enrolment numbers throughout the five years emphasising a strong and growing interest in health-related fields among women in the region. This trend could be reflective of an increasing awareness of healthcare as a vital sector, possibly influenced by global health trends and local healthcare needs. The Faculty of Health Sciences admits students into 200L direct entry mode only, this further signifies that besides the opportunity given to the women by ODL, those of them who are already healthcare professionals with additional qualifications other than secondary education are using the ODL to further their education through Life Long Learning and skill development which is known to be one of the major advantages of ODL (Smith & Johnson, 2019; UNDP, 2021).

The **Faculty of Education** shows a general upward trend, with the highest enrolment in 2022. This steady increase indicates a sustained interest in education as a profession. It could also reflect the importance placed on education in the region and the role of women as educators in society. Similarly, in a study conducted in Tanzania on the role of ODL in Gender equity and Women empowerment by Msoffe (2016) it was discovered that many women joined ODL to further their education as teachers because of its flexibility and the Open University of Tanzania was found to be a major contributor to Women Education in the country, this further stressed the result of the present study where the National Open University of Nigeria is found to be a major contributor to women education through providing accessible and flexible learning environment and some of the women in the faculty of education are already teachers who are undergoing further training.

Both Sciences and Management Sciences faculties exhibit fluctuations over the years. The Faculty of Science, in particular, sees a significant spike in 2021. These variations could be due to changing job market

demands, new course offerings, or shifts in student interests. The spike in science enrolments in 2021 might also indicate a response to a specific societal or academic stimulus during that year.

Faculties of **Agriculture, Arts, and Law** maintain comparatively lower enrolment numbers, indicating less preference among women for these fields during this period. These trends could be influenced by perceived career prospects in these areas, societal norms, or the availability of courses and resources in these faculties.

The **Social Sciences** faculty shows a moderate but steady increase in enrolments. This indicates a consistent interest in this field, which often encompasses a broad range of subjects that are crucial in understanding and addressing societal issues.

Implications

The analysis of these trends highlights the role of the NOUN in providing diverse educational opportunities to women in northwestern Nigeria. The distinct preferences for certain faculties, like Health Sciences and Education, point to the aspirations and needs of women in the region. The variations in enrolment across faculties also suggest changing dynamics in job markets and societal trends.

Overall, the data underscores the importance of ODL in facilitating access to higher education for women in northwestern Nigeria. It reflects the shifting educational landscape and the growing empowerment of women through education. For policymakers and educational planners, these insights are valuable for shaping future educational offerings and addressing the specific needs and preferences of women in the region.

The role of ODL in bringing education closer to disadvantaged groups such as women and the disabled was identified by other countries such as Zimbabwe which Introduced ODL in 1999 specifically to target women and the disabled (Musingafi *et al.*, 2015), this shows that the data obtained from the National Open University of Nigeria is also achieving similar objective by providing access to Women.

The provision of higher education through Open and Distance Learning is recognised as an effective step towards the democratisation of education as it has greater input in the development of higher education (UNESCO, 2002) and providing women with education serves as a source of empowerment and further consolidates the chances of their children having (Kelleher, 2014).

The upward trends across all study centres reflect the growing accessibility and acceptance of higher education among women in northwestern Nigeria, facilitated by the ODL system. Furthermore, Kaduna and Kano emerge as significant educational hubs, reflecting their higher population density, better educational infrastructure, and possibly more awareness and acceptance of women's education in these areas. The consistent growth in smaller centres like Dutse, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Gusau suggests a widespread increase in the demand for higher education among women across the region, not just limited to larger urban centres.

The data, as visualised in the graph, strongly illustrates the role of the National Open University of Nigeria in expanding educational opportunities for women across northwestern Nigeria. It highlights not only the growing trend in women's education but also points to regional variations in this trend, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in further enhancing and supporting women's education in the region.

Summary

The study explores the role of Open Distance Learning (ODL) in reducing gender disparities in education, aiming to inform policymakers and educators to implement gender-inclusive strategies and expand ODL programmes to improve women's access to quality education in northwestern Nigeria. This comes after the discussion and should be done properly.

Conclusion

The result indicated that a large number of women are enrolled on various programmes of the National Open University of Nigeria from the northwestern region of the country which has one of the highest out-of-school girls and a very low number of educated women compared to other regions of the country as a result of socio-cultural factors. This indicates that ODL is an important tool for increasing the level of literacy in the region as well as women's empowerment. Addressing women's education through ODL is crucial for achieving gender equality, empowering women, contributing to the region's development, and creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

Recommendations

1. Given the high enrollment in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Education, NOUN should develop more specialised programmes in these areas to cater to the evident demand. For faculties with lower enrollment, such as Agriculture, Arts, and Law, NOUN may consider introducing more appealing course offerings or awareness campaigns to boost interest.
2. State Governments should offer scholarships or financial aid specifically for women, particularly in less represented faculties or regions with lower enrolment figures.
3. Tertiary institutions need to recognise the challenges faced by many women in balancing education with family responsibilities and offer solutions such as flexible deadlines or asynchronous learning options to accommodate their needs.
4. Communities and Schools should create mentorship programmes where current students and alumni can guide and support new or prospective students, especially in fields where women are underrepresented.
5. In centres with lower enrollment, it will be important for NOUN to assess if there are barriers related to technology access and provide solutions such as community learning centres with internet and computer access.
6. NOUN must continue to develop ODL platforms with intuitive, user-friendly interfaces that are easy to navigate, even for those

with limited technical skills. Since mobile devices are widely used, NOUN should ensure that ODL platforms are optimised for mobile access, supporting different types of smartphones and tablets.

7. The Federal Ministry of Education should encourage the development of ODL as a tool for women's empowerment in the country.

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