



**Communication Education and Accreditation in Open and
Distance Learning in the Digital Age: The Experience of National
Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)**

**La Formation En Communication Médiatique Et Sa
Règlementation Dans L'enseignement A Distance A L'ère Du
Numérique : L'expérience A L'université Nationale De
L'enseignement A Distance Du Nigeria**

Chidinma Henrietta Onwubere, Ph.D, LLB

Department of Mass Communication
National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
conwubere@noun.edu.ng; chidi56@yahoo.co.uk

&

Ekeanyanwu, Nnamdi Tobechukwu, Ph.D.

Department of Communication Arts
University of Uyo, Nigeria
nekeanyanwu@uniuyo.edu.ng; ekeanyanwun@gmail.com

&

Jonathan Elom Aliede, Ph.D.

Department of Mass Communication
National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
jaliede@noun.edu.ng; aliedej@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper discusses communication education and accreditation in Open and Distance Learning in the Digital Age. The paper takes a critical look at the history of Distance Education (DE) and the need for Open and Distance Education (ODE) in Nigeria. It reviews the circumstances leading to the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and her role in the promotion of DE in the country. It outlines NOUN academic programmes and discusses the Bachelor of Science programme in Mass Communication. We argue in

this paper that the use of the same Benchmark Minimum Academic Standard (BMAS) used to accredit regular programmes of communication in regular universities should not be used to accredit the communication programme of NOUN because of the various differences in the mode of operation and delivery of expectations. NUC should, therefore, gather ODE experts in the related disciplines to design a unique template that accommodates the uniqueness of the ODE. Otherwise, the government should institute a different body to handle accreditation of ODE platforms or the NUC itself should set up a Special Unit within its Commission to oversee the operations of NOUN and other related institutions.

Résumé

Cet article traite la formation en communication médiatique et sa réglementation dans le système de l'enseignement à distance à l'ère du numérique. L'article jette un regard critique sur l'histoire de l'enseignement à distance (DE) et sur la nécessité d'un enseignement ouvert et à distance (ODE) au Nigeria. Il passe en revue les circonstances qui ont conduit à la création de l'Université nationale de l'enseignement à distance du Nigeria (NOUN) et son rôle dans la promotion de l'ED dans le pays. Il donne un aperçu des programmes académiques du NOUN et il discute aussi le baccalauréat en communication médiatique. Nous soutenons dans cet article que l'utilisation de la même Norme académique minimale de référence (BMAS) utilisée pour régler la formation en communication médiatique dans les universités régulières ne devrait pas être utilisée pour régler la formation en communication médiatique du NOUN en raison des diverses différences dans la façon de formation de fonctionnement et la réalisation des attentes. La commission pour les universités au Nigeria devrait, donc, mettre en place un conseil des spécialistes de l'enseignement à distance pour concevoir un modèle unique qui tient compte du caractère unique de l'enseignement à distance. Si non, le gouvernement devrait mettre en place un organisme différent pour s'occuper de la réglementation de l'enseignement à distance. Ou bien, la commission pour les universités elle-même devrait créer une unité spéciale au sein de la commission pour superviser les opérations de la COU et d'autres institutions connexes.

Keywords: *Communication, Pedagogy, Accreditation, Open and Distance Learning, Digital Age, BMAS, NOUN.*

Mots-clés : *Communication, Pédagogie, Accréditation, Enseignement à distance, âge numérique, BMAS, NOUN.*

Introduction

Distance learning has been defined as all learning that takes place where there is no face-to-face interaction between students and between students and teachers (Maurice, Charles and Ofori-Darko, 2012). It has also been described as any interaction between learners and between learners and teachers as mediated by technology (Keegan, 2008). Thus, distance education includes one in which printed and written words, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing are used to bridge the physical gap between the instructor and the learner.

Distance Education (DE) is a system of education supported by teaching methods which encourage the physical separation of the teacher from the learner, whereby the mode of instructional delivery is through a variety of media, including print, ICTs and other digital technologies to the learner who may have lost the opportunity of access to formal education earlier in life due to socio-economic and other barriers. Based on this, Jegede (2003) defines distance education as "education provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to and just as noble and practical as those of on-campus full time face-to-face education". This process of learning is also often referred to as the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode; and it is characterized by the absence of constraints in the learning process.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) has for a long time recognized the value of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as very crucial in achieving lifelong learning and national development. So, it considered ODL as a very good alternative for educating a large number of people, especially, in Nigeria where the opportunity for higher education is

extremely limited and where career men and women with good jobs may find it difficult to upgrade for fear of losing such jobs if they go back to school. This phobia for losing jobs is very common with media personnel, essentially those of them working on the field. To this group, ODL becomes a last resort to achieving continuous upgrading of their skills and knowledge for the job.

Nigeria's search for justification for embracing ODL are succinctly captured in the submission of the "Communique of the National Workshop on Distance Education in Nigeria" held in September 2000 at Abuja. The Communique states that:

ODL can enhance education as a form of human resource development, and satisfy the exceptionally large demand for education by our huge and rapidly expanding population which is still mainly rural, remote, under-represented, and marginalized through resources, location, economic and other reasons.

The programmes run by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) meet the nation's need of educating the huge and rapidly expanding population, especially for the part of the population living in rural and remote areas of the country. Being a mega university with about 453,560 student population spatially distributed within 78 Study Centres all over the Federation, NOUN reaches a large chunk of the uneducated population and so greatly, defrays the unmet needs of educating the citizenry.

Distance education enables Nigeria to provide access for all and achieve equitable representation by taking distance out of education. Jegede (2013) posits that the tremendous developments in ODL and in education generally, have brought about a lot of positive changes. He further observes that "more than ever before, ODL has gained global acceptance and governments, especially in the developing world, now see it as *sine qua non* for development". Hence, there is undoubtedly a growing importance of "ODL at all levels, sectors and communities of education as this mode of instruction has now been mainstreamed". Besides, the flexibility of ODL as a mode of instruction has made it the preferred method of reaching people in many non-formal

circumstances. Currently the massive integration of digital technology into ODL and its continuous development has made ODL a global trend in educational best practices.

Many nations, especially in the Commonwealth, have used distance education as the basic foundation for national development through poverty eradication, capacity building, boosting rural economy, eliminating illiteracy, and increasing technological and computer literacy. ODL is equally very effective for empowerment and transformations. Supporting these views, Olakulehin and Ojo (2006), submit that different categories of people, especially women, children and youths all over the world have been empowered through ODL. It also has been used to address poverty, illiteracy, ill-health, ignorance, unemployment, and other marginalized groups within the society. ODL has been used to transform society, community, teaching and learning, curriculum development, institutional capacity building, peoplesøquest for continuous learning and knowledge acquisition within the society (Thorpe, 2003).

NOUN as an institution faces some challenges in training communication graduates, especially in grappling with the problems of fitting an Open and Distance Learning programme into the National Universities Commission's (NUC) Benchmark of Minimum Academic Standard (BMAS) designed for the typical face to face mode of learning. However, it is our belief that through the instrumentality of the ODL mode of teaching that the current curriculum of the Mass Communication programme of NOUN can administratively be enhanced to meet the needs of the Open and Distance Learner, rather than forcing it to meet the traditional or face-to-face classroom instructional delivery mode.

This paper, therefore, looks at the history of Distance Education (DE) and the need for the sustenance of the Open and Distance Education (ODE) platform in Nigeria. It takes an overview of the circumstances leading to the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and her role in the promotion of DE in Nigeria. It outlines the NOUN academic programmes and then discusses the Bachelor of Science (BSc.) Mass Communication programme in line with the

National Universities Commissionsø (NUC) Bench Marks and accreditation expectations. The mode of instruction or delivery in NOUN is reviewed with emphasis on the role of technology in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), especially in a Digital Age.

Overview of Distance Education in Nigeria

The history of distance education in Nigeria dates back to correspondence education as a means of preparing candidates for General Certificate in Education, which was a prerequisite for the London Matriculation Examination. However, the first indigenous distance learning programme was the post-independence Radio Programme of Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation in 1960. This was primarily targeted at primary and secondary schools and it covered core courses at both levels with emphasis on the learning of science, mathematics and English. Other indigenous distance learning programs at that time include:

1. Educational Television programmes of the then National Television of Nigeria (NTV).
2. The Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) of University of Lagos that started in 1974, later changed and known as Distance Learning Institute (DLI)
3. The National Teachersø Institute (NTI) which started as a distance education institution in 1976, the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) programme introduced In 1990, the PGDE programme introduced in 2005.
4. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) NCE programme known as Teachers-in-Service Education Programme (TISEP).
5. The Distance Learning Institute of the University of Ibadan started in 1979.

Distance education involves the use of a range of media such as print, written correspondence, audio, video, computer-based media and networks, as well as multimedia facilities for the presentation of information and for communication between a university and her students. These instructional modes provide opportunity for the working class to acquire knowledge, skills, and techniques which may be relevant to their present work situations or for future career

prospects. Distance education thus provides people with the opportunity to improve their academic qualifications without giving up their domicile areas. The system also allows for teaching people who are living in any location, regardless of the types of jobs they do. The system is flexible in terms of age and time, allowing for enrolment at any age and at the learner's or student's convenient pace.

The National Open University of Nigeria is the latest inclusion in the list of indigenous distance learning programmes in Nigeria. Being an ODL institution, NOUN employs diverse learning styles, provides access to remote and the inaccessible under-represented groups, including migrant fishermen, nomadic cattle herders, women in purdah and prison inmates.

The Need for Open and Distance Education (ODE) in Nigeria

The encumbrances of providing education through the heavy social and economic dimensions of traditional means of face-to-face classroom mode, and the recurring need to provide education for all irrespective of environmental, social or cultural circumstances have compelled many countries, including Nigeria to seek for the viable and cost effective means of adequately attending to the huge unmet demand for higher education, especially at the grassroots levels.

Considering the outrageous number of youths that are out of school, the number of mature people yearning for access to education in Nigeria (people with physical disabilities, people living in remote localities, people who are excluded because of exorbitant tuition fees in most privately owned universities), and many other factors that deprive millions of Nigerians of higher education despite their readiness and eligibility, it becomes imperative for the government that has the interest of its citizens at heart to consider possible means to address these gaps in education within budgetary limitations. This led to the National Policy on Education and the establishment of distance education to achieve most of the expectations expressed in the Policy. In the view of Jegede (2013), this mode of instructional delivery has been proven by almost all countries of the world as the most viable, robust, reliable, efficient, effective and cost-beneficial means of providing massive and equitable access to education.

ODL has become a mainstream activity considering Nigeria's population, socio-economic needs, and all the current development indicators that show Nigeria is in the negative. The versatility of ODL allows it to cater for a variety of learning situations including fulltime, part-time and mixed modes. These can be undergraduate, postgraduate, workplace and professional training or continuing education, which are practiced at different levels in Nigeria. Any or all of these can be pitched at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels.

The Establishment of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was originally established on 22nd July, 1983 by an Act of the National Assembly as the first distance learning tertiary institution in the country. However, it was suspended on 25th April 1984 by the then Military Head of the State, General Muhammadu Buhari, while delivering a National Broadcast on the 1984/85 Budget. Over the period, the need arose to brace up with new trends in developments in communication and information technology, for economically funding education, filling the gaps in education occasioned by social status, marginalization and lack of resources. This need became imminent.

In recognition of its role of handling Nigeria's educational problems and providing access to education for all, NOUN was resuscitated by the government of General Olusegun Obasanjo on 1st October, 2002. Its main goal is to adopt distance education as a desirable and inevitable mode for providing access to all and achieve equitable representation by taking distance out of education. The declaration of 2001-2010 as a decade of distance education in Nigeria by stakeholders in education, in Abuja on the 29th of September, 2000 had already set the pace for NOUN to take off. The whole essence was to take distance out of education. The vision and mission statements of NOUN are encapsulated in this sentence: "To be regarded as the foremost University providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education through functional, cost-effective, flexible learning which gives lifelong value to all who seek knowledge."

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) being the tertiary institution for Open and Distant Learning in Nigeria has no doubt, taken gallant strides towards the provision of highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored on social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion, through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. Through the appropriate and effective use of Information Communication Technology (ICT), NOUN is providing a good blend of academic professionals, continuing education extension and training programmes through the ODL system. With **85** academic and vocational programmes, **78** study centres all over the federation, a total number of **453,650** self-learners as students enrolled and **8** Directorates to drive the ODL processes, NOUN can be considered as a success story in the Nigerian educational system. The number of registered learners in NOUN is higher than the enrolment of any conventional university in the country today. The imperative role of ICT in the production of knowledge, the on-line and learner support services, as well as a standard virtual library combine to make NOUN a name to be reckoned with in the Nigerian educational system. All these qualities make NOUN unique and commendable.

NOUN programmes are unique in the sense that the mode of study is very flexible as it allows the students to carry their loads bit by bit. This means that the students can extend the programmes duration by twice the normal length of time. This, however, does not make NOUN programmes part-time. Rather, NOUN runs full-fledged university programmes. Her uniqueness encourages full employment and learning at the same time. Accordingly, the motto of NOUN is *öWork and Learnö*. Programme types include: Certificates, Diplomas, First Degrees, Postgraduates and PhDs. The latest PhD being that awarded to the former President of Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo, at the 7th Convocation ceremony of NOUN, on Saturday, 20th January, 2018. Feedback on NOUN academic programmes is usually through the Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAS) and periodic face to face Tutorials sessions. Quality is the watchword for building confidence in students, the public and employees. NOUN's enrolment as a member of the Open Course Ware Consortium and her subsequent contributions by formally placing her educational resources online advances the Abuja Declaration of 2010. To further ensure the provision of quality

education, NOUN, in line with the requirements of the National Universities Commission (NUC) regulations, established a standard and strong internal Quality Assurance (QA) Unit whose primary purpose is to ensure the provision of, and sustenance of very high quality education for NOUN students. The benefits of this Unit include:

1. Timely, efficient and progressive performance of academic, administrative and financial tasks.
2. Ensuring the relevance and quality of academic and research programmes.
3. Equitable access to and affordability of academic programmes for various sections of society.
4. Optimization and integration of modern methods of teaching and learning.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is, therefore, committed to strengthening its position as the leading provider of flexible and quality education through open and distance learning in Nigeria and the West African sub-region as provided for in the University Act, No.6 of 1983.

Role/Objectives of NOUN in the Promotion of Distance Education in Nigeria

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has tried greatly to live up to her vision and mission statements by ensuring that it provides her learners with accessible, cost-effective, and quality education anchored on social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. Succinctly put by the NOUN Profile (2017), NOUN is an òODL institution renowned for providing functional, flexible, accessible, cost-effective education adequate for flourishing in the 21st Century and beyond. Upholding its Mission statement, NOUN provides these functional cost-effective, flexible learning, to ensure life-long value of quality education for all who seek knowledge. The University achieves these broad vision and mission statements through the operations of her Study Centres dispersed across all the 36 states of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja.

NOUN Study Centres are the main contact places for students' learning activities. The students are duly informed and counselled at these centres before they veer deep into their academic programmes. Presently, NOUN has 78 Study Centres spread across the length and breadth of Nigeria as against the initial 18 temporary study centres approved by the Federal Government for take-off of the University in the year 2002. In addition, the University has Special Study Centres which cater for specialized groups, such as the Prison inmates and Armed Forces personnel, Immigration, Police, Road Transport Workers and the Senate.

The objectives of NOUN are summarized below:

1. Provision of Education for All and promotion of lifelong learning
2. Filling the gaps created by the closure of outreach and satellite campuses of Nigerian universities
3. Cost-effectiveness in the delivery of higher education to Nigerians
4. Improved economies of scale
5. Flexibility of the delivery system
6. Maximum utilization of academic personnel
7. On the job training for workers
8. Poverty eradication, vocational and lifelong education
9. Provision of non-formal education
10. Reaching the unreached class of the population
11. Propagation of National orientation

Approved Academic Programs of NOUN

NOUN runs a variety of formal academic programmes from Certificate to PhD. These are facilitated by eight (8) Faculties, a School of Postgraduate Studies and two Academic Centres in the University. The Faculties and Centres are listed in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1: NOUN Undergraduate Programmes Approved by NUC

FACULTY	S/N	PROGRAMME	DECREE
ADMINISTRATION	1	Cooperative and Rural Development	B.Sc.
	2	Entrepreneurship and Business Management	B.Sc.
AGRICULTURE	1	Agricultural Extension and Management	B. Agric
	2	Hotel and Tourism	B.Sc.
	3	Agriculture	B. Agric.
	4	Fisheries and Aquaculture	B. Fisheries & Aquaculture
ARTS	1	Christian Religious Studies	B.A.
	2	English	B.A.
	3	French	B.A.
	4	Islamic	B.A.
BASIC MEDICAL SCIENCES	1	Nursing Science	B.NSc.
	2	Public Health Science	B.Sc
EDUCATION	1	Agricultural Education	B.Sc. Ed
	2	Biology Education	B.Sc. Ed
	3	Business Education	B.Sc. Ed
	4	Chemistry Education	B.Sc Ed
	5	Computer Science	B.Sc. Ed
	6	Early Childhood Education	B.Sc. Ed
	7	English Education	B.Sc.Ed
	8	French Education	B.Sc.Ed
	9	Integrated Science	B.SC.Ed
	10	Mathematics	B.Sc.Ed
	11	Physics Education	B.Sc.Ed
	12	Primary Education	B.Sc.Ed
SCIENCES	1	Mathematics/Computer Science	B.Sc.
	2	Information Technology	B.Sc.
	3	Computer Science	B.Sc.
	4	Environmental Management and Toxicology	B.Sc.

	5	Mathematics	B.Sc.
	6	Biology	B.Sc.
	7	Chemistry	B.Sc.
	8	Physics	B.Sc.
SOCIAL SCIENCES	1	Criminology and Security Studies	B.Sc.
	2	Economics	B.Sc.
	3	Political Science	B.Sc.
	4	Peace and Conflict Resolution	B.Sc.
	5	Mass Communication	B.Sc.
	6	Tourism Studies	B.Sc.

Table 2: Postgraduate Programmes at NOUN

DISCIPLINE	S/N	PROGRAM	DEGREE
ADMINISTRATION	1	Public Administration	MPA
	2	Business Administration	MBA
AGRICULTURE	1	Agricultural Extension & Management	PGD
ARTS	1	Christian Theology/Religious Studies	PGD, MA, PhD
EDUCATION	1	Administration & Planning	M.Ed, PhD
	2	Educational Technology	M.Ed, PhD
	3	Education/ Physics	M.Ed. PhD
	4	Education/ Chemistry	M.Ed. PhD
	5	Education/ Biology	M.Ed, PhD
	6	Education/ Mathematics	M.Ed, PhD
SCIENCES	1	Information Technology	M.Sc.

SOCIAL SCIENCES	1	Criminology and Security Studies	PGD
	2	Mass Communication	PGD, M.Sc.
	3	Peace and Conflict Resolution	PGD, M.Sc.

The Bachelor of Science (B.Sc. Honours) Degree in Mass Communication

The Mass Communication programme was established to meet the demands of both the professional market and individual professionals. Following approval by NOUN Senate, resource persons who are experts in the field of Mass Communication were contacted to develop the students' study materials. By the end of 2007, more than 80% of the students' course materials were ready for the programme to take off. The programme thus commenced in March 2008 with over 1,200 students spread across the existing NOUN Study Centres then.

In terms of full time academic staff, the programme has a total of nine (9) full time lecturers which comprise of: two Professors, two Senior Lecturers, two Lecturer 1, two lecturer 11, and one Assistant Lecturer, and about 97 Academic Facilitators across the different study centres in the country. Most of these Facilitators are Senior Lecturers and above. Currently, the total number of students enrolled for the B.Sc. programme in Mass Communication is 18,678. The first set of students graduated in 2013 and majority of them are already in one form of journalistic job/media organization or the other.

The Mass Communication programme is one of the strategic programmes in the NOUN academic brief. It commenced at the postgraduate level in 2002, offering only the Postgraduate Diploma (PGD) and Masters Degree (M.Sc.) in Journalism. These courses metamorphosed into the PGD and M.Sc. in Mass Communication of the Department.

The B.Sc. Mass Communication programme of NOUN has turned out five sets of graduates duly trained using the ODL system of learning

and wonderfully integrated in their various work places, as attested to by the Employers' Feedbacks received from some of their work places.

Capacity Training for Staff of Mass Communication Department

The academic staff members in the Department of Mass Communication undergo regular capacity building trainings, professional workshops, seminars and conferences both within and outside Nigeria to interact with professional colleagues and upgrade their knowledge base in the discipline. These activities help to keep them abreast of current trends and global best practices in the field of communication. These capacity building programmes include trainings on I-Learn online facilitations, OER workshops, Use of Research Tools and Methods in ODL, Media and Information (MIL) Literacy workshops, Workshops on the various aspects of information technology, Curriculum development, Editing, Module writing and Award winning Grant/Proposal Writing workshops. Most of these trainings are technology-based and are quite germane to communication education, especially in the Digital Age. Equipped with these skills, the staff members become professionally sound to write course modules for the learners and prepare and package them in forms that can be accessible to the learners anywhere anytime and through the most convenient modes of delivery for each learner.

As part of capacity building for the academic staff members of the Department of Mass Communication, they are made to undergo the Postgraduate Diploma in Open and Distance Education programme. Majority of them equally commenced their Master of Arts in Distance Education (MADE) programme under the scholarship scheme offered the University by Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU), India.

Communication Education in Open and Distance Education in a Digital Age

Being aware of global trends in the use of ICT and other electronic devices for learning in order to achieve best practices in the field of communication, NOUN training involves a lot of interactions with the electronic devices for accessing printed information, multimedia devices like CD ROMs, video tapes, video lectures, studio radio

broadcasts and a host of other multimedia and other computer-mediated learning devices. In fact, NOUN ODL system appears to offer the best digital-based training for communication in Nigeria. Her communication students take a variety of courses through this platform and with the digital devices of today's Digital Age. Currently, some of them undergo their practical sessions at the NOUN Radio 109.5 FM studio established at its Lagos headquarters, while the others use the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) as well as the Federal Radio Corporation (FRCN) facilities nation-wide. The use of the NTA and FRCN facilities was made possible through the Memoranda of Understanding entered into with both federal institutions for that purpose.

With the relocation of the NOUN headquarters to Abuja, a state of the Art Radio and Television Studio is currently being constructed at NOUN's permanent site in Jabi, Abuja to facilitate the practical aspect of the course training. The project is sponsored by Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND).

NOUN is a member of the Open Education Research (OER) consortium. Her materials are freely entered into the Open Courseware and openly used in learning and teaching. The students of the communication programme are quite aware of this facility and so, generously subscribe to the resources. NOUN, therefore, has the resources to train her communication students to acquire 21st Century skills and competencies for global best practices in journalism.

In this contemporary world, there are so many changes in the way people learn and in the way they assess what they need. So, one cannot afford to ignore the new technologies in vogue, instead, communication education curriculum developers should ensure that learning revolves around the learner, using all these technologies, rather than revolving around the institution or school. This is more so, as learning is no longer a monopoly of the school as an institution. Learning anywhere at any time is a reality. Hence, there is need to integrate the formal learning environments and informal and non-formal settings so that this synergy will also become a reality.

Accordingly, Jegede (2013) observes that "the ODL process will question the traditional organization of a classroom and of a school since ODL addresses the individual needs of the learners". Most times the inability of the students in the classroom system to learn is not due to their own deficiencies but because of the inadequacies of some of the strategies employed in teaching them. Corroborating this view, Rose and Meyer (2007, p. 35) state "Failure to learn is not a measure of the inherent capacity of the learner, but a reflection of the learning systems (some part of the systems, such as, materials, strategies, policies or infrastructure) that fail to address the needs of all the learners". The brain research they conducted revealed that "same instructional approach will not work for every learner the same way, regardless of whether the learner has a disability or not" (Rose and Meyer, 2007, p.35). All these indicate that the learners should be followed and addressed in their own specific and unique ways and preferred modes of learning, just as is done in NOUN.

The training of Communication students generally and Mass Communication in particular is a technology intensive process. Hence, the dire need to key into as many technology and electronic-based facilities as possible for the training of this category of learners so as to fully harness the benefits of the instruments flexibility. For as Rose and Meyer further argue, "new digital media (versus traditional media of textbooks and lectures) facilitate a more universally designed environment because the new media are inherently flexible; they identified digital media as being "versatile, transformable, can be marked, and can be networked". These are potentially valuable characteristics of learning environments or materials mediated by technology, which the communication educators and curriculum planners must highlight.

Indeed, technology cannot be separated from ODL, although as is often proclaimed in ODL; "technology is only the medium, the message/content is supreme and is the main focus" (Smart, 2000). Varieties of technologies are today successfully employed as effective modes of delivery of instructional materials and content in ODL in communication-based programmes. These include: print, television & radio broadcast, audiotapes, videotapes, computer-based learning

packages, interactive, video (disk and tape), CDTV, audio-teleconferencing, audio-graphic communication systems, video conferencing and the Web enhanced by computer communications networks (Smart 2000) cited in Jegede 2013.

Outlining the ubiquity and versatility of technology and its use in ODL for communication programme, Taylor (1995) categorized the presence and use of technologies in ODL into generational models of Distance Education and Associated Delivery Technologies. Taking a clue from Taylor's view, Jegede (2013) again observes that:

While the Social media, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+, Instagram, Linked-in etc may now constitute the 6th or 7th generation of models of technology in ODL. Two technologies for instruction which have significantly changed the face and practice of ODL in recent times are the Open Educational Resources (OER) and the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC).

It is important for every tertiary institution to key into these technologies especially MOOCs which provides opportunities to upset traditional pedagogies, using technology to enhance creativity and collaboration while enabling research and development around best practices in online teaching and learning. Furthermore, because they promote open content encouraging academics to share their high quality teaching materials with other colleagues online, OER and MOOCs have strategic and defining influence on the learning of communication today. A major argument for MOOCs is that its emergence will solve the problem of lack of enough subject matter experts thus, further enhancing sharing, and peer-to-peer interaction.

NOUN has a full directorate responsible for these facilities and well laid down policies and guidelines towards the utilization of the facilities. This is to ensure that both the staff and learners in the communication programme are involved and experience the best practices in online teaching and learning.

Accreditation of the B.Sc. Mass Communication Program: The NOUN Experience

Accreditation of universities and programmes is a quality assurance process or way of examining the state of an institution in relation to where it ought to be. The Nigerian National Policy on Education has over the years recognized the place of open and distance learning in achieving life-long education and affirms that life-long education shall be the basis of the nation's education policy. It went further to state that at any stage of the educational process, after junior secondary education, an individual shall be able to choose between continuing full-time studies, combining work with study, or embarking on full time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later (Okojie, 2008). The policy document outlined the several goals of open and distance education which can be summarized to be: the provision of accessible quality and equitable education and educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied, meeting special needs of employers and encouraging internationalization of tertiary education.

Developing nations must appreciate the fact that it is not enough to license a higher education institution to operate; there must be a constant evaluation, through the accreditation process to ensure that set standards and operational guides are not violated. According to Okojie (2008), "A system that grows is such that sets standards and disciplines itself to attain them."

The regulatory educational body for tertiary institutions in Nigeria is the National University Commission (NUC). This body is saddled with responsibility of "Granting approval for all academic programmes run in Nigerian universities; ensuring quality assurance of all these academic programmes; granting approval for the establishment of all higher educational institutions offering degree programmes while standing in the gap as the Channel for all external support to the Nigerian universities". In the past, NUC has concentrated on the regular Universities versed in the traditional mode of teaching. Today, they are saddled with the additional responsibilities of assessing the ODL institutions which are relatively new.

With the contemporary trend of learning, assessment of tertiary institutions cannot remain the way they have been prior to the fast developing ODL mode. Issues concerning assessment/regulation should be more universal than domesticated. The learners need not only be accessed through their programs, institutions, financial capabilities, equipment etc. rather, they need to be actively involved in their assessment and other aspects of the learner's total development. As Jegede (2013) rightly advised: "What a student does with the knowledge acquired as opposed to regulating what he has learnt will become the driving force in assessment of the future". In his opinion, learners should be assessed based on the breadth and depth of knowledge acquired, inquiry and critical thinking, personal and social responsibility, civic learning, global knowledge and skills and particularly integrative and applied learning.

Open and distance learning is a specific and unique mode of learning, quite divorced from the traditional face to face learning in classroom walls. It has its own system of instructional delivery and ways of operation. The system of running an ODL institution is quite different from that of the traditional classroom situations and so they cannot be swapped. However, the operations of one mode can be used to complement the other. Both systems of teaching need one form of assessment or the other especially by a regulatory body, to ensure the programmes are properly run. These assessments need to follow the appropriate standards and relevant yardsticks for each category or system of educational delivery, by considering the specific and/or unique features of each system. The demographics of each category of learners, the type of platforms they learn through and the new dimensions in instructional delivery need be the key parameters to consider by the regulatory bodies while assessing these tertiary institutions. This has never been the case when NUC is accrediting NOUN programmes, especially the Communication Education programme.

In NOUN, the experience during the accreditation of the B.Sc. Mass Communication programme has often been an atmosphere of severe tension, saddled with fright, undue pressures and palpitations. The simple reason is that the accreditation procedures and team often

request from the Department certain items that are not feasible within the scope and parameters of the ODL system. The scheme for the accreditation exercise (BMAS) seems to be perfectly in tune with the provisions of the traditional face to face classroom situation. Surprisingly, it is the same Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) document that is used to assess NOUN on each occasion the team visits. The Department will then be struggling to fit itself into a document that does not fully address its own purposes and peculiarities. For instance, part of the requirements of accreditation of the Mass Communication programme is the assessment of:

- A. The teacher/student ratio, which is (1:30) (One teacher to thirty students)
- B. Provision of Radio/TV Studios in all the Study Centres
- C. The number and qualification of academic staff
- D. The number of courses and credit loads of the academic staff
- E. Quantity, quality and currency of physical library holdings for the communication program (NUC BMAS, 2007, p. 29).

Taking these expectations (A-E) into consideration, it becomes obvious that that single BMAS used to assess other communication programmes in Nigerian universities cannot work in the assessment of the communication programme at NOUN. This is because NOUN has a total of **18,678** students studying Mass Communication in the University across the 78 study centres (MIS Record, September, 2016). The Department has nine permanent staff on ground at the main campus and 97 other academic facilitators as adjunct staff operating through the study centres. How this number can fit into the mathematics of student/teacher/ ratio of 1:30 bits anyone's imaginations.

The teacher-student ratio is meant to enhance classroom participation by decongesting the classroom so that the teacher is in touch with every student who registered for that course. How do you decongest the virtual classroom? Such classroom has no walls and fits any number. It can have just a person or more than a million learning at the same time. The principle of ODL, therefore, nullifies the argument of teacher-

student ratio because the personal contact between the student and the teacher is not as predicted in the current BMAS.

The same thing applies to the establishment of Radio/TV stations across the entire 78 NOUN Study Centres. This again is not feasible as the Study Centres are not full-fledged universities. What NOUN has resorted to doing is to expand her existing MOUs with media organisations to include more federal media stations (NTA, FRCN), as well as some private media organisations, domiciled nation-wide, so that all her Mass Communication students can have access to these facilities wherever they are. In essence, there is more than one fully-equipped Radio/TV studios in every location that has a Study Centre. To insist it must be owned by the Department that only exists in the Main Campus of the University in Abuja is failing to understand what the ODL platform actually delivers. More importantly, the practical exposures that were supposed to happen in these studios are simulated by means of technology and students gain access to them and learn from such videos. The NUC Accreditation Team and Regulatory body must be made to appreciate this and get them inserted into the rule books.

On the number of academic staff and their academic loads/courses assigned to them to teach, this again poses a difficult scenario for both the Department and the Accreditation Team to handle. The academic staff members of the Department of Mass Communication are not 'typical' lecturers teaching the students as is the expectation from them if they were engaged in the normal universities. They rather, coordinate all the academic activities of the Department. No one teaches the students in that sense. The ODL is self-help learning platform where all the learning resources are made available to the student so that he or she could learn at their own pace. In other words, courses are not assigned to the academic staff in the Department to teach, except for setting examination and the tutor-marked assignment (TMA) questions and perhaps to supervise students' projects. So the list of courses and academic loads for the staff do not exist as in the face to face universities. This reality must be included in the rule books of the Regulatory body to avoid the tensions that usually follow accreditation exercise in the Department of Mass Communication.

On the critical issues of quantity, quality, and currency of library holdings for the communication programme, NUC needs to educate itself and probably open a special unit in the Commission to oversee the Open University platforms. The physical library at the Main Campus of the University in Abuja is not the main library for students' use. The library for ODL platforms is typically online. The Department has a rich online library with limitless resources because of its membership of many platforms that have agreed to share such resources online. This typically takes care of the issues of quantity, quality, and currency of the library holdings or resources available for students' use. The NUC Accreditation Team's insistence of seeing a physical library for the Department is therefore, borne out of their naivety or ignorance of part of what that the ODL system really entails. The Regulatory Agency should again address this concern with the special unit to handle NOUN as we have earlier called for.

To conclude this section, the Federal Ministry of Education needs to reconsider who regulates and accredits programmes offered online especially the open and distance learning programmes. This consideration is very apt because ODL institutions are not operating within their domestic borders alone but rather within international boundaries to reach uncountable number of students globally. Today, the trend of assessment has equally transcended national borders and so requires comprehensive and robust operations of the regulatory body to meet the demands of the new group of learners. This is a challenge which NUC must resolve if it intends to optimally achieve her objectives for accrediting ODL programmes in Nigeria, otherwise, the government should institute a different body or the NUC itself should set up a Special Unit to oversee the operations of Open and Distant Learning platforms like NOUN. It is unacceptable and in fact, impossible to use the same parameters used for regular universities in assessing ODL institutions like NOUN.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With the increase in the desire to take up ODL by all and sundry, especially those who would ordinarily not give any consideration to ODL, it becomes obvious that the future of ODL is very bright considering the various developments from the emerging issues. ODL as a tool for empowerment and transformation has, unarguably,

become entrenched and accepted as having the potentials to create unprecedented levels of access to quality higher education especially for countries like Nigeria with a teeming population of 167 Million (NPCN, 2011).

ODL, through the functionalities of technology, will soon take over the whole world. It is, thus, expected that the educational system through ODL will override the formal face-to-face mode of delivery as the mainstream mode of teaching and learning. This will ensure continuing education which, according to Jegede (2013) will run along the lines of life-long and life-wide learning directed at skill development, and vocational development, in an environment where all members of a household will be learners and the dining table becomes a location for facilitation and socially-directed learning and interaction. This is a laudable vision that will promote collaborative and continuous learning/education.

Based on this understanding, it is recommended, among other things, that NOUN should create new and trusted learning environments, as well as, redesign old ones to afford the learners better opportunities for learning at their own pace, anywhere and at any time. She should acquire higher technologies that are necessary for linking all her communication students together wherever they may be: and also should formulate policies that are highly supportive of digital and social-media literacy as basic skills to be incorporated into the Communication Education Curriculum.

Secondly, NUC should emulate other regulatory bodies outside Nigeria and copy their best practices. Otherwise, the government should institute a different body or the NUC itself should set up a Special Unit to oversee the operations of Open and Distant Learning platforms like NOUN.

Thirdly, it is not feasible to use the same template used to accredit regular communication programmes in Nigerian universities to accredit the NOUN communication programme. NUC should gather ODL experts in the related discipline to design a unique template that accommodates the uniqueness of the ODL platform.

References

- Ajadi, T. O., Ibrahim S. O., Adeoye, F. A. (2008). E-Learning and distance education in Nigeria. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology - TOJET* 7 (1), 44-58.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013). *National Policy on Education – 6th Edition*. Abuja: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Jegede, O. (2013). Open learning for development: towards empowerment and transformation. *An Inaugural Keynote Address at the 7th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF7)* held at the International Conference Centre, Abuja, Nigeria, 2 ó 6 December, 2013.
- Jegede, O. (2003). Taking the distance out of higher education in 21st Century Nigeria. Paper Presented at the Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra State on the occasion of the convocation ceremony and 10th anniversary celebration held in 2003.
- Keegan, D. (2008). The impact of new technologies on distance learning students. *Eleed*, 4. Retrieved 14/04/2012 from <http://eleed.campussource.de/archive/4/1422>.
- Maurice, A., Charles, B. C., and Ofori-Darko, J. (2012). Perceptions in the use of information and communication technology (ict) among distance learning students in the University of Education, Winneba, Kumasi Campus, Ghana. *International Journal of Business and Management Tomorrow*, 2(7), 1-8.
- National Population Commission of Nigeria (NPCN)* (2011)..
- NOUN (2017). *National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Profile* (2016/2017).
- Obilade, T. (2012). *Instructional technology and distance education in nigeria; historical background and a critical appraisal*.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Blacksburg,
VA, 24060.

- Okojie, J. A. (2008) Licensing, Accreditation and quality assurance in nigerian universities: achievements and challenges. Paper Presented at a Session of the 2008 Chea Summer Workshop.
- Olakulehin, F. K. and Ojo, O. D. (2006). Distance education as a women empowerment strategy in africa. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 7 (1), 13-43.
- Rose, D. H. & Meyer, A. (2007). Teaching every student in the digital age: universal design for learning. association for supervision and curriculum development.
- Taylor, J. C. (1995). Distance education technologies: The fourth generation. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 11(2), 1-7.
- Thorpe, M. (2003). Collaborative on-line learning: Transforming learner support and course design. In A. Tait & R. Mills (EDs.) *Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education*, (pp. 198-211). London, UK: Routledge.