From the Editorial

It is a pleasure to serve as guest editor for the current two volumes of the West African Journal of Open and Flexible Learning (WAJOFEL), the journal of the Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL). RETRIDOL was established in 2003 as a means to broaden the reach of open and distance learning in the West Africa Sub-Region and serve as a regional representative of the Commonwealth of Learning, located in Vancouver, Canada.

For these two volumes there were dozens of article submissions received over the past several months, of which 16 have been accepted for publication. On this point, tremendous credit is due to Prof Patrick E. Eya, Director of RETRIDOL, and his staff for promoting the journal and publishing the current two volumes. The reviewers must also be acknowledged for their diligence and feedback to the authors. Such work is challenging yet instrumental to ensuring the quality and relevancy of the articles accepted for publication in WAJOFEL.

The volume of contributions in the journal is also a sound reflection of the mutual impact of RETRIDOL ó which has conducted dozens of workshops in the past 15 years across West Africa ó and the commensurate growth in open and distance learning in the region. An exemplar is the National Open University of Nigeria, which boasts an enrolment of over 420,000 students, with plans to reach one million learners in the coming years.

To ensure the impact and momentum of ODL continue in the region, the importance of research cannot be over emphasized. The intellectual pursuit to conceptualize projects, pose sound research questions, demonstrate outcomes, scrutinize interpretations and question assumptions is central to the development of the field. Ultimately, research should work in concert with planning, innovation, refinement, and so on in open and distance learning.

According to ECOWAS there is a population of 350 million inhabitants located in the group of 15 countries that comprise West Africa. The average median age is 19, half of the average median age of OECD

countries. Such a demographic dividend bodes well for these young nations if education can be better institutionalized. Strides have been made in formal education paving the way for greater participation rates in secondary and higher education. The costly nature of building universities, however, is proving unsustainable and even wasteful given the growing ubiquity of technology. No learning model has proven more adept in reducing costs and providing access than ODL.

These are important points that surface or underlie the articles in the current two volumes. They address important issues and trends in ODL and serve as a marker of distinction in comparison to conventional institutions. Scalability, access to differentiated populations, and an inherent reliance and comfort with ICTs are common themes to which institutions offering ODL regularly address and surfaces frequently in these two volumes.

In this volume the articles share a common thread around access and infrastructure. Many authors emphasize greater attention toward access to online instructional media and the commensurate infrastructure needed to support such access (i.e., reliable Internet connectivity). The first three articles illuminate tangible problems at NOUN and some dual-mode institutions in Nigeria ó the need for reliable Internet access and greater awareness and training for the online resources offered through NOUNøs online library system. According to Internet World Stats, Nigeria is among the top three countries among ECOWAS member states for proportion of Internet users, at 50% (only behind Mali at 65% and Senegal at 60%), and has by a wide margin, the greatest number of Internet uses on the continent. In this sense, it can be assumed that a sizeable number of distance education learners have online access and possess the requisite skills to competently use technology. The gap, however, seems to be regarding awareness and training on how to use online resources for their learning.

In addition to the issues of access are perceptions. Open and distance learning is viewed as a second rate form of education, according to several authors. Investment in the necessary infrastructure (i.e., sufficient broadband) and intellectual resources (i.e., tutors, staff training) are needed.

I hope readers will find the articles of value and seek to engage in research of comparable quality and intellectual rigour to further advance ODL in the West African Sub-Region. Many of the articles in this volume show potential for future research, and I hope readers will see this as an opportunity to continue, if not partner, with some of the academics who have authored these articles. Also stay tuned for the next volume of WAJOFEL, scheduled for July. It will feature a wider array of contributions, including from Asia and North America.

Dr. Angela Ebele in the article titled *"Use of Electronic Resources by National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students",* goes to explain that the implementation of Open and Distance Learning in the digital age is learner access to online resources. Understanding learnersø behavior toward using online resources is therefore an important step to optimizing services and investing in appropriate infrastructure to maximize usage. This is the premise of Dr. Okpalaøs study, conducted with 500 students enrolled at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The study serves to ascertain studentsø use of electronic resources, including the library database system, to support their learning/academic achievement. Findings revealed that less than 20% of students are accessing online databases. Ongoing challenges were slow connectivity and sporadic power supply. More alarming was that 50% of respondents (n=250) lacked requisite skill to use computers, whereas 75% identified themselves as being computer literate. Computer facilities were deemed inadequate. Future studies suggested replicating the current study to a larger learning population and to analyze metrics on the types of resources utilized, mechanisms of access, and correlations to learning outcomes.

Dr. Loveth Ogoegbunam Ekwueme in the article titled *"Availability and Accessibility of Library Services to Students of National Open University of Nigeria",* focuses on the extent and accessibility of online services for learners at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The sample included completed surveys and interviews of 15 librarians and completed surveys of 847 learners from six study centres (four percent of the learning population) at NOUN. Librarians expressed frustration that there was no course to induct new learners to

the library online system. At the same time, survey responses from students revealed significant differences across study centres relative to access to services. This was in part due to uneven internet access among the study centres. The author concludes that NOUN needs to build up the technological infrastructure in its study centres to ensure adequate access is available given the investment made in the online library services and the requisite need for learners to be able to access information reliably. Needed in unison with reliable infrastructure is to induct learners on how to effectively use the online library system.

The article *titled "Awareness, Use and Users' Satisfaction with Library E-Resources by Undergraduates of National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos Study Centre"* by **Isah Seidu Osimetha,** focused on a survey of 722 undergraduates (50% female) at a NOUN study centre in Lagos. Approximately one-third to one-fourth of learners surveyed were õnot awareö of online databases or e-journals at NOUN. In addition to a lack of awareness regarding online library resources, the findings also revealed learnersø dissatisfaction with online access due to power outages and poor Internet connectivity. Survey results showed high levels of satisfaction ó approximately 80% satisfied across nine parameters ó among learners who claimed to be using online library resources. These results may bode well for those learners unable, or unaware of the online library resources, assuming these individuals can be better supported to access materials online. The authors posit that better orientation and improved infrastructure are needed to enhance access to online library resources. An underlying assumption is that engagement with such materials will be beneficial to learning outcomes. Demonstrating such causation in follow-up studies would strengthen the arguments made in this and the previous two studies. The basic question is, what is the impact on learning outcomes when there is reliable access to NOUN online resources, compared to inadequate access? Another question worthy of further understanding is, How do learners source materials for academic papers, and so on, if they lack proper access to the NOUN online library system?

Chidinma Henrietta Onwubere, Ekeanyanwu, Nnamdi Tobechukwu & Jonathan Elom Aliede in the article titled *"Communication Education and Accreditation in Open and Distance Learning in the Digital Age: The Experience of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)",* focuses on the National University Commission of Nigeria whether it should define and deploy a distinct form of accreditation for open and distance learning programmes given the distinction from conventional programmes relative to mode of delivery and pedagogy? The authors make such a case relative to communications studies, which enrol approximately 20,000 learners at NOUN. Under the NUC provision of a 1:30 teacher student ratio, this would mean that over 650 instructors are needed for the Communications programme at NOUN. The paper calls for the NUC to establish a devoted entity to oversee and support the ODL system in the country. Given the immense unmet demand for higher learning in a country constrained by resources, this is a welcome call that should be heeded by readers of this journal.

The purpose of **Dr. Onovo Joseph Sunday** in the article titled *"Accessibility of Interactive Instructional Media in The Delivery of Distance Education in South-East Nigeria",* was to ascertain the use of interactive instructional media (i.e., technologically mediated programmes or services) by learners in their distance education programmes. The sample of 393 distance learners was drawn from the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) (n=170) and the National Teachers Institute (NTI) (n=223), located in southeast Nigeria. The findings revealed that studentsø perceptions on the accessibility of interactive instructional media availability for distance education were primarily in the form of computer and web conferencing. Surprisingly, WhatsApp, a ubiquitous media used predominantly through mobile phones, had the lowest mean score of 1.11. A low standard deviation suggested little variance among respondents and therefore, across 18 media items, it can be inferred that there is little access to a variety of interactive instructional media. This may be a result of the approach institutions use toward online learning. If distance education programmes disproportionately utilize computer conferencing, for example, then the findings should not be surprising. Nevertheless, if online learning is to grow, it is imperative that a

multitude of learning pathways are offered. Learnersøonline behaviour should be viewed like learning styles ó individuals carry different preferences to how they behave online. Multiple options for interactive instructional media to engage with content should be afforded, where feasible, among large and therefore diverse learning populations.

The article by **Dr John Abdullahi** titled *"A Study of the Distance Learning Programme of the University of Maiduguri and Access to Higher Education in Borno State, Nigeria",* was an assessment on progress and challenges of the ODL programmes offered at University of Maiduguri, a dual-mode university located in northeast Nigeria. The data was comprised of enrolment data covering six academic years from 2012 to 2017 and 250 completed surveys representing two percent of total enrolment (2017 academic year) and 17 completed surveys from staff (faculty and tutors). The premise of the study was to demonstrate enrolment growth as a means of addressing unmet demand in Borno State, where the University of Maiduguri is located, and on how to improve the learning experience for learners as the University given enrolment pressures will persist. Despite a year on year enrolment increase (more than a doubling of enrolment to 6,100 in 2017 from 2,900 in 2012), the survey results from both students and staff reveal that tutoring online is inadequate, mainly in regards to facilitation. The results also pointed to the ongoing perception that distance education is viewed as an inferior form of learning compared to studying in a face-to-face mode. To ameliorate enrolment shortfalls, the author argues for more tutors to be recruited and properly trained to support the growing pool of individuals seeking learning opportunities through distance education in Borno State.

Niyi Adegoke in the article titled *"Perception of Urban Slum in Lagos and Correlation Between Lack of Education and Causes of Violence and Crime: Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as Panacea",* explores the potential role of ODL as a means to provide learning opportunities and to correspondingly curb violence in urban slum areas in Nigeria. A survey was carried out among participants (n=250) located in slums in Lagos State to inform the potentially positive impact of ODL on poverty and crime. The findings reveal that ODL has a low perception among respondents stemming from views that

those who enrol in ODL programmes are lazy, that an ODL credential does not enhance employability and that it is not for youth, whom are often the most prone to engage in violent behaviour. The author concludes that greater awareness raising on the merits of ODL is needed. Further, he posits that since ODL is a purveyor of knowledge and opportunity, which are known to stem the propensity for violence among individuals, and that ODL is also premised on reaching the unreached, it should be adopted more widely among marginalized populations.

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