



Breaking the Bar: Equity for Inmates and Freedom of Education through the National Open University of Nigeria

**Briser La Barriere : L'equite Pour Les Detenus Et La Liberte
D'education A Travers L'universite Nationale De L'enseignement
A Distance Du Nigeria**

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a phenomenological inquiry into the student inmates' perception of their university education in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The university's long term vision is to anchor its mandate in social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion in ways that transcend all barriers. The NOUN prison education project provides a handy example where the university's specific objectives and mandates are concretely and visibly realised. The NOUN prisoner education project is a human development programme that aims to solve the challenges associated with incarceration and post-release reabsorption into society. This study examines in details NOUN's efforts at providing university education to inmates of Nigerian prisons from the context of equity and social justice. It also undertakes a phenomenological inquiry into the inmates' perception and understanding of their academic engagement in NOUN as it relates to their incarceration. It interrogates the content of NOUN prison education seeking, in the process, to discover the extent to which the student inmates consider their expectations as being met, the reformatory nature of NOUN prison education and the preparatory nature of the programmes for life outside the prison walls. In all, there are about ten of such prison special study centres and sub-centres. However, only five of such prisons study centres in Enugu,

Port-Harcourt, Lagos, Kaduna and Abuja were selected for the purpose of this study.

Résumé

Cet article entreprend une enquête phénoménologique sur la perception qu'ont les étudiants détenus de leur formation universitaire à l'Université nationale de l'enseignement à distance du Nigeria (NOUN). La vision à long terme de l'université est d'ancrer son mandat dans la justice sociale, l'équité, l'égalité et la cohésion nationale de manière à transcender tous les obstacles. Le projet de l'éducation de NOUN en milieu carcéral fournit un exemple pratique où les objectifs et les mandats spécifiques de l'université sont concrètement et visiblement réalisés. Le projet de l'éducation de NOUN pour les détenus est un programme de développement humain qui vise à résoudre les problèmes liés à l'incarcération et à la réinsertion sociale après la libération. Cette étude examine en détail les efforts de NOUN pour fournir la formation universitaire aux détenus des prisons nigérianes dans un contexte d'équité et de justice sociale. Il entreprend également une enquête phénoménologique sur la perception et la compréhension qu'ont les détenus de leur engagement scolaire dans NOUN en ce qui a trait à leur incarcération. Il interroge le contenu de la formation pénitentiaire de NOUN en cherchant, ce faisant, à découvrir dans quelle mesure les élèves détenus considèrent que leurs attentes sont satisfaites, le caractère réformatrice de la formation pénitentiaire de NOUN et le caractère préparatoire de la formation pour la vie hors des murs de la prison. Au total, il existe une dizaine de ces centres et sous-centres d'études spéciaux en prison. Toutefois, seuls cinq de ces centres d'études pénitentiaires à Enugu, Port-Harcourt, Lagos, Kaduna et Abuja ont été sélectionnés aux fins de la présente étude.

Introduction

The idea of the university as a universal problem-solving entity is well entrenched. From the problem of low crop output, to that of dwindling business returns, to that of general insecurity and so on, modern societies have looked up to the university to provide solutions to challenges confronting them. Thus, to be alive to the rationales of their existence, Douglass (2007) holds that universities must champion social engineering and shape society into self-sufficient agency. In the case of open universities, given the circumstances under which they emerged as a concept, these rationales must include the responsibility of extending access to university education to individuals who otherwise would have been excluded.

Since inception, NOUN has taken up the challenge of extending access to university education in Nigeria. It has opened its doors to the traditional educationally marginalised citizens. Prison inmates are integral members of this group. Perhaps, the decision to provide university education to prison inmates remains NOUN's greatest statement regarding its commitment to breaking all barriers to university education. Through its involvement in prison education, the National Open University of Nigeria is implicated in extending equity and social justice behind the prison walls.

This study interrogates the meaning which education has for the inmates; that is, it enquires into the meaning of education in the context of prisoner education. This question is not answered in abstraction. As a phenomenological study, the paper relies on the prisoners' lived experience to discover the subjective meanings which university education as provided by NOUN within the prison walls has for the prisoners. The paper demonstrates that for the prisoners, education entails an immediate actualisation of freedom understood as autonomy and self-determination. The paper discusses the grounds upon which these ideals are realised and maintained.

On Phenomenological Inquiry

This paper is a phenomenological study into the equitability and nature of freedom engendered by NOUN's prison higher education project. As a philosophical movement of the 20th century, phenomenology was championed by Edmund Husserl, who himself was influenced by the works of Franz Brentano. Other intellectual giants attracted by the movement include Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg-Gadamer, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas and so on. The meaning of phenomenology is simply rendered as study of phenomenon. In this sense, phenomenon itself is understood as matter as perceived by consciousness, by the experiencer (Moran, 2014). As a research method, phenomenology targets the lived experience of the human subject of study. Since every experience is someone else's experience, phenomenology studies that someone else's experience. Phenomenologists hold that the world of experience possesses true information about reality. It is therefore through phenomenology that this true knowledge of reality is taken delivery of.

To effectively achieve the above, Husserl seeks to eliminate all previously held assumptions about any subject matter under discourse. Thus, all "scientific, philosophical, cultural, and everyday assumptions" (Moran 2013) must be put aside so that they do not intervene in the unravelling of the experience of the subject. This process of elimination of assumptions is regarded as *phenomenological epoché* by Husserl and it is a major distinguishing factor between phenomenological studies and natural pursuit of knowledge. It takes only what is given by the subject as the authentic knowledge of the and about the subject. In this regard, Moran writes that "in genuine phenomenological viewing, we are not permitted *any* scientific or philosophical hypotheses. We should attend only to the phenomena in the manner of their being given to us, in their *modes of givenness*." (Moran 2013, p.11). This attitude to any sort of previously held assumptions stems from Husserl's conviction that they distort information and impede knowledge of the subject matter.

Another central thesis in phenomenology is the idea of intentionality which expresses the interconnectedness between an experiencer and the world. It entails the ability of the mind to picture reality as it is.

Thus, what the experiencer gives as his/her experience is the world as presented to his/her consciousness, as perceived by him/her. Thomas & Pollio (2002) hold that in intentionality, the world as perceived is indicative of the being of the perceiver. Thus, they hold that individuals perceive that which is important to them, which has meaning to them, and which defines them. The underlying conclusion, therefore, is that "it is possible to describe an individual's first-person world on the basis of what he/she does as well as in terms of what he/she perceives or talks about." (Thomas & Pollio 2002, p.16).

While the Husserlian tradition of phenomenology emphasises the descriptive role of the researcher, the Heideggerlian tradition ascribed interpretative role to the researcher. In the descriptive role the researcher is expected to simply describe the experience of the subject being studied as rendered by him/her. In Merleau-Ponty's description of the descriptive process he holds that phenomenology "tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may be able to provide" (Cf Thomas & Pollio, 2002 p.13). The interpretative tradition insists that there are hidden meanings decipherable from the experiences as given by the experiencer and the role of the researcher is to sieve this out through the interpretative process. This study is not to be limited by any of the two approaches as it is both expository and hermeneutical. It describes the experience of the subject and when necessary attempts interpretation of the experience in order to elucidate hidden meanings.

The phenomenological concern of this study, therefore, is in discovering the human experience of the inmate student as it relates to his/her education. What meanings does the fact of his/her education hold for the inmate student? In what way is his/her life influenced by his/her education? And what are the implications of his/her academic pursuit to his/her reformation within the prison circle?

Equity in the Context of Prisoner Education

The ancient notion of equity has remained with us. Two strands of the concept are identified in Aristotle and each of them appropriately captures the essence of prisoner education. In the first strand, Aristotle

holds that equity is a correction of justice. He emphasises the remedying character of equity in the face of inherent inadequacies of the law. He holds that the universal character of laws entails that they are not right at all times, and is often incapable of distinguishing the nuances of particular cases in arriving at judgement. Take for instance a traditional law that forbids and punishes marriage between blood relations. Should two consenting adults who get married not knowing that they are related be punished for infringing the law? Aristotle envisages this type of difficulty for every sort of law at some point or another. Judges relying on the letters of the law had condemned so many individuals behind the bars without taking into consideration the contingent circumstances of their case. Thus, if the law has erred in sentencing the couples, it is the duty of equity to consider the contingencies of their actions and remedy the shortcoming of the law (Cf *NE* V.9.1137b13–19). It should be demonstrated later that the contingency of actions of all prisoners within the Nigerian prison are not such that demand their incarceration. When this is the case, prisoner education fills the equity gap in the sense being considered and seeks to remedy the wrong of the law upon which the inmates are incarcerated.

In the second strand of the concept, Aristotle examines the meaning of the concept as it inheres in a person. He holds that the equitable person is one who takes less of what is due to him/her even though by right and law he/she is entitled to more than he/she has taken. This enables the distribution of public goods to everyone. It guarantees that the equitable individual takes only that which is needed or even forfeits same entirely to others who may not even be entitled to it or who are entitled to it but whose position in the queue means that the goods in question would be exhausted before their turn. A man in a queue in an internally displaced people's camp who gives up his stand for a nursing mother who came late to the queue is a good example of a man of equity. This strand finds its importance in the persistent criticism of the rationale of educating prisoners with public funds. The public, as represented by the free society, in comparison with the incarcerated society, is viewed as a privileged society. As such Aristotelian concept of equity demands that it responds to the ethical demand of forfeiting some of its privileges to the less privileged society. Expectedly, this

demand includes the responsibility to educate the inmates with public resources. Thus, even when it is considered that the inmate has committed the most heinous offence in history, equity in this sense demands the forfeiture of our claim to mete out punishment as deserved.

Indeed, the United Nation's International Human Rights Standards for Prison Officials (2005) have factored prisoner education into what constitutes the human rights of prisoners. By the force of this provision, the UN affirms the humanity of prisoners and the humanising role of education. The UN states, *inter alia*, that within the walls of the prison:

Education and cultural activities shall be provided and encouraged, including access to an adequate library. Education in prisons should be aimed at developing the whole person, taking account of prisoners' social, economic and cultural background. Education shall be compulsory for young prisoners and illiterate prisoners. The prison authorities should give this high priority. The outside community should be involved as much as possible in educational and cultural activities in prison. (United Nations, 2005, p.10).

The competing philosophical ideals at the root of prison and incarceration include restraint, punishment, deterrence (Adegoke, 2016); and reformation (Grommon, 2013). Implicit in all of these and the UN's promotion of prisoner education is the view that prisoners are a group of social misfits put away for the general health of society and the light of education is necessary to make them better persons. If this conception of prisoners is at the root of the formulation of the idea of the prison and therefore of prisoner education, it is inadequate to capture the reality of today's prisons whose inmates are admixture of the guilty and the innocents; the convict and awaiting trial inmate. More than being a home for the convicted criminals, today's prisons harbour individuals who await their trials, many of whom would be found innocent by the court of law, and therefore acquitted of the commission of the crimes that led to their incarceration. Thus, for the convicted prisoner, the fact of incarceration can adequately entail

restraint, punishment, deterrence and his/her education reformatory as captured by the early philosophical consideration of prisons. For the unfortunate innocent who finds himself/herself behind the prison walls, the fact of imprisonment will expectedly have different entailment. A prison inmate (P1) interviewed in the course of this study regards it simply as “state cheating”.

It should therefore, be expected that any sort of education provided to the two categories of inmates as described above would produce differential outcomes. To the convict, such education could be truly reformatory. Its meaning to the locked up innocent would hover around compensatory. He/she interprets it, especially if it is free, as the prize paid by the state for his/her unjust incarceration. The summary of this analysis is that prison education is at once reformatory and compensatory, and not merely reformatory as assumed by most scholars.

This conclusion is arrived at on the strength of the different sentiments expressed by the two categories of inmates as regards their imprisonment. A number of interviewed convicted inmates held that the prison time provides them opportunity for introspection, expression of regret for their crimes, and personal conviction to change their lives for better. To individuals under this category, the prison environment and the time spent in it can be regarded as reformatory, with education being the crown of it. However, for the innocently incarcerated inmates who view their prison times as a sort of “state cheating”, incarceration time is spent in regret, in hatred of society, and in planning of revenge against society. To this group, prison education is top among the factors that compensate for their predicaments.

Extant studies on recidivism have not made any distinction between the re-entry reaction of these two categories of prisoners; the convict and the innocent. Glaze and Palla (2005) have shown that the annual recidivism rate of ex-prisoners under watch is as much as 40%. It must be assumed that in those countries where the innocent is sent to the prisons as they await their trials especially where they spent so much time in prison, the tendency for individuals in this category of prisoners to engage in crime after release may possibly be higher than those of

the guilty convicts. Thus, it can be argued that providing quality education to such inmates the society re-channels their energy into a productive venture and in the process atones for its error. The implication of this is that prisoner education does not just benefit the prisoners who have undertaken it but also the entire society whose health and security it safeguards.

On Freedom of Education

The idea of two concepts of freedom as developed by Isaiah Berlin includes freedom to and freedom from. While freedom from, otherwise known as negative freedom, defines freedom from the perspective of non-interference, freedom to is defined as self-mastery, self-control, and self-government (Weigel 2002; Spector 2010). The fact of imprisonment consists the loss of these two forms of freedom. The prisoners can neither move nor perform actions as it pleases them. They are constrained by the hordes of prison officials and the giant prison walls not to do the things or go to the places they otherwise would have loved to do or go. The prisoner also lacks the capacity for self-government. His/her life is dictated by others in such a way that he/she has no concrete power of determination over his/her action. But freedom is never latent. Its possibility is only validated by its action and therefore can only be said to exist in action, as witnessed or as perceived. Quite contrary, the power which the prisoner possesses to perform freedom-related actions exist there only as a possibility that is inexercisable in the conditions of his/her present state. Since the prisoner's life is lived contrasting the present conditions of his life with the lost past instances of freedom, regret defines his constant state of mind. He is tortured by this acute sense of loss. Thus, from the perspective of these two concepts of freedom the prisoner in so far as he/she remains a prisoner is perpetually chained.

Now there is a third form of freedom which we shall regard as freedom of. It is a derivative freedom which assumes its life by performing actions within some natural or artificial boundaries. It is a dependent or derivative freedom. Unlike the positive and negative freedom, this derivative freedom manifests and asserts itself only in a situation of lack of freedom. A child forbidden by one of his/her parents to watch television gains the permission of the other parent to engage in the

forbidden act. This freedom to watch the television is derivative. It is enabled only by the counter order of the second parent and may even cease to exist once the authorising parent becomes absent from the scene. It is this sort of freedom that confers on the prisoner, confined by the fact of his/her imprisonment, the ability to determine the course of his/her life. It activates the positive freedom previously denied and made latent by the fact of incarceration.

The student prisoner derives this sort of freedom from his/her education. Education presents him/her the single opportunity to alter the course of his/her life despite his/her incarceration. Since the decision to be involved or not to be involved in education as a prisoner is always a private one, it provides the inmates the opportunity of choice, a major ingredient of freedom which their imprisonment has mostly excluded. At the same time, the inmates themselves constitute the meaning of their education by themselves. Among the possible meanings may include the ability to be gainfully employed and therefore free from poverty during incarceration and at the end of incarceration. Indeed, there is a connection between this and Amartya Sen's idea of development as freedom where Sen (2001) listed opportunity for education as major component of development. Education enhances the human capability understood as number of functions an individual can choose from.

Historical Context of NOUN Prison Education Engagement

The National Open University of Nigeria first established a prison study centre at the Maximum Security Prison, Kirikiri, Apapa, Lagos, in 2006. The centre would later provide the initial template for the establishment and running of the other prison study centres across the country.

At the early stage of operation of prison study centres, admission of students was subject to their procurement of the university's admission forms. Since most of the students were incarcerated (few prison officials were among the students then), procurement of this admission form on behalf of the students was rested on philanthropic private individuals, religious organisations, NGOs, and corporate institutions like banks. The forms were available at N5000 each for undergraduate

courses and N7000 for postgraduate courses. Since public institutions in Nigeria are tuition free, student inmates were given 25% rebate on the service charges payable by all NOUN students. However, around 2011 the service charges payable by students were reduced further to 50%.

The appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor for the university in 2016 led to the reassessment of modalities of operation. The new administration reasoned that the university's motto is *work and learn*; however, by reason of their incarceration inmates are not in the right position to work and earn income. Consequently, the Vice-Chancellor initiated a 100% fee waiver for all prison inmates with the proviso that released persons, if they are still students by the time of their release, would be exempted from the fee waiver.

Besides fee waiver, the university's commitment also extends to the equipping of the prisons to make them suitable for studies. In this regard, NOUN has undertaken renovation of prison buildings, supply of ICT facilities including computers and intranet, provision of power generating sets, desks, and study materials in print and electronic formats.

Also, as part of its learner support services programme for the inmates, the university has dedicated members of staff including professional counsellors and psychologists who provide counselling services to the inmates. These staff members are also responsible for examination administration and supervision in the prisons. However, grading of student inmates is undertaken by the faculty who assesses them in a conference marking setting with other students without any form of discrimination.

NOUN's Prisoner education programme has recorded commendable success. Beginning with the student population of about 10 in one location in 2006, the project has grown to ten centres and sub-centres with a total student population of 559 registered as inmates.

The breakdown is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Showing Centre by Centre Inmate Registration in NOUN Prison Centres

S/N	Location	State	Current Inmate Students	Ex-Inmate Students	Grand Total
1	Kirikiri, Apapa	Lagos	100	12	
2	Enugu	Enugu	150	7	
3	Ilaro	Abeokuta	14		
4	Portharcourt	Rivers	34	6	
5	Lafia	Nasarawa	11		
6	Awka	Anambra	5	2	
7	Umuahia	Abia	14	5	
8	Keffi	Nasarawa	35	2	
9	Kuje	Abuja	58	19	
1	Kaduna	Kaduna	19		
1	Total		440	53	493

Tables 2: Programme Distribution of Current Student Inmates

Table 2.1: Undergraduate Programmes

S/N	Faculty	Name of Programme	Population	Total
1.	Law	LL.B Law	28	28
2	Arts	B.A. Christian Theology	13	14
		B.A. English	1	
3.	Education	B.ED Primary Education	8	13
		B.Sc. Business Education	3	
		B.ED Biology Education	1	
		B.ED Early Childhood Education	1	
4.	Social Sciences	B.Sc Peace Studies & Conflict Resolution	132	303
		B.Sc. Political Science	47	
		B.Sc. Mass Communication	13	
		B.Sc Economics	12	
		B.Sc Criminology & Security Studies	94	
		Tourism Studies	5	
5.	Management Sciences	B.Sc. Accounting	7	48
		B.Sc Business Administration	4	
		B.Sc Public Administration	6	
		B.Sc. Cooperative Management	10	
		B.Sc Entrepreneurial & Business Mgt	38	
6	Sciences	B.Sc Mathematics & Computer	3	38
		B.Sc Computer Science	22	
		B.Sc Communication Technology	5	
		Environmental Science & Resource Mgt	5	
		B.Sc Chemistry	1	
		B.Sc Communication Info Tech	1	
		B.Sc Physics	1	
7	Agricultural Sciences	B.Sc. Agric Extension & Mgt	3	3
8	Health	B.NSc. Nursing	1	1
	Grand Total			448

Table 2.2: Postgraduate Programmes

S/N	Faculty	Name of Programme	Population	Total
1.	Education	PGD Education M.Ed Admin & Planning	6 1	7
2.	Management Sciences	M.Sc. Business Administration MBA Business Administration PGD Public Administration	1 4 2	7
3.	Sciences	M.Sc. Information Technology	3	4
	Grand Total			17

Table 2.3: Certificate Programme

S/N	Faculty	Name of Programme	Population	Total
1	Sciences	Computer Appreciation Course	31	31

NOUN Student Inmates and the Consciousness of Freedom of Education

Freedom in the two senses understood by Berlin is antithetical to prison experience. Indeed, the fact of imprisonment is understood in its barest form as unfreedom. This is immediately clear with negative freedom as it constrains the inmates in their movements and in their actions. Here it is the will of the prison officials that is supreme. They establish boundaries for the sets of actions which the inmates can perform. Since these sets of actions involve no opportunity for choice they are not conditions for freedom. Higher education within the prison wall presents concrete conditions of choice, and therefore of freedom. It begins with the inmate's decision to enrol as a student. This is followed by choice of studies. Indeed, it is in the choice of programme of study that the prisoner student makes his freedom functional. He/she deploys it as a tool for actualising some ends and these are ends that must

correspond to his/her individual case experience and expectations in the real world after incarceration.

In being able to influence their end-of-prison-term-lives while still inside the prison, the inmates are exercising their ability to self-government and to dictate their lives' directions in ways that their present lives circumstances permit. For instance, a female student inmate studying Entrepreneurial and Business Management (P2) noted the suitability of the course to her prison circumstances and projected life experience outside the prison. According to her:

I enrolled in this course because I want to contribute to the development of Nigeria. You know the way Nigeria is, ex-convicts are not to be employed by anybody till after about ten years of end of imprisonment. I chose this course because it will teach me how to establish and run my business without depending on anybody... It will also help me to assess business opportunities and guard against bad choices.

The sentiment expressed by the student above is linked to what Sen (2001) regards as the life people actually live. In the context of the prisoner education, the lived life is such that would impact the future and define its course. It is also such that conditions their present beings and perceptions.

Most of the times, there is indeed, a correlation between the inmate students' choice of course of study and their guiltiness. In the course of the interviews, the student inmates were asked whether they would like to share the details of their cases and the circumstances that led to their cases and subsequent imprisonment. Greater percentage of those interviewed (90%) responded in affirmative. Interestingly, majority of those who owned up to their offences were enrolled in Entrepreneurship Studies and Business Management (86% of total enrolment in the course interviewed), Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution (43% of total enrolment in the course interviewed) and Criminology and Security Studies (61% of total enrolment in the course interviewed). For the inmates enrolled in Entrepreneurship Studies and Business Management, the course, as shown earlier, was

to take care of the legal huddles to post-prison employment faced by inmates. However, the Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution student inmates who owned up to their offence felt that their course of study would have prevented their imprisonment if they were exposed to it earlier. An inmate (P3) expressed this fact thus:

The offence that brought me here is one that could have been settled outside the courts if I had known about alternative dispute resolution ... When I leave the prison, I want to be able to tell people to try and settle their differences with their opponents before it gets to the courts.

The motivation of students who enrolled in Criminology and Security Studies who owned up to their case is entirely different, to help rid society of crime. One of them (P4) says:

I want to help fight crime in the society. If Nigeria allows me, I will use my personal experience and knowledge gained from this course (Criminology and Security Studies) to stop crime.

The desire to help fight crime falls within the recognition of the dangers which crime poses to society. Recognising this must be seen as integral to the success of an inmate's reformation.

Inmate students who remained unconvinced of their crimes show a different pattern in their choice of courses. Majority of them would prefer a degree course in Law. However, since the university had suspended admission into its Law programme, such students' substituted their choice of Law with Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution and Political Science. They view these courses as connected to the broad questions of justice, rights and their ability to defend themselves. This is because such students view their incarceration as due to their inability to fight their own case, to defend themselves in the cases brought against them by more formidable adversaries. A death row inmate student of Law (P5) describes his view of his education thus:

If there is anything like justice, I hope to be free from this prison one day. If this ever happens, I want to ensure that no man possesses the power to intimidate me and even to cause me to be sentenced for life imprisonment for offence I did not commit because of my lack of knowledge of legal procedures.

Besides the above, student inmates generally express their feeling of self-fulfilment that is consequent of their enrolment as students. The inmate, as demonstrated earlier, is always viewed as evil by society, as social misfit who deserves whatever that befalls him. This view of the inmates also affects the way their families are seen by society. As a result, families tend to react negatively to the inmates, not wanting to be seen to sympathise with them. Doing this would be interpreted as possessing the same orientation as the inmates since they were socialised equally within the same familial environment. Families who view a relation's incarceration this way always take their flights from such inmate. He/she has brought shame and stigma to himself and his family, and therefore should be avoided by all means. However, some inmate students recount that their enrolment into degree programmes in NOUN has positively affected their relationship with their families. One of them submits this fact thus:

Initially my family did not want to have anything to do with me. My father, particularly, abandoned me here and had never visited me until he received a letter from me narrating my enrolment for a postgraduate degree in NOUN. My sister told me that he was so happy that day. He called his friends and extended family members and told them about my enrolment. After this, my father paid me the first visit in prison. He told me he is now ready to take me back as his son upon my release. He has never visited again but he has always inquired about my welfare from my siblings who come to see me (P6).

Positive image of inmates by their families and society in general is crucial to their post-incarceration life. If they would, upon their release, be able to live a life without shame, described by Sen as an integral component of freedom, they must possess the assurance that society is not stuck with its negative view of them. This assurance is tested with

their families since they form the bedrock of society that they would confront upon release.

Besides the projection of the advantages of their education to the outside world, the student inmates hold that their enrolment has influenced the nature of their stay in the prison. They submit that the prison officials treat them differently from other inmates. They accord them more respect and grant them privileges that are inaccessible to their inmates and mainly on the strength of their studentship. Such privileges may include being confined in less crowded cells, opportunity to use rechargeable electric lanterns for the purpose of study in the events of power outage, permission to study at night, and so on. These special treatments are predicated on the prison officials' conviction that student inmates lead a better and more responsible life within the prison when compared to the non-student inmates. One of the interviewed student inmates (P4) attests to this as follows:

I don't have time for nonsense. Before my enrolment I used to sit down and listen to people tell story about crime...some even plan their next crimes here. Instead of listening to such stories, I now read my books knowing that my studies is the only thing that can keep me out of prison forever if I happen to leave here at all.

From securing positive perception for the enrolled student inmates, education has also empowered them to be helpful to their fellow inmates and to themselves. This is because some inmates, especially the postgraduate student inmates, serve as teachers to the newer undergraduate student inmates. One of such teacher inmates holds that serving as a teacher to them has elevated his status among the prisoners. They now treat him with more respect and even pay him monthly wages for his services. With this he has been able to sustain himself while in prison. Another student also submits that he has deployed his conflict resolution skills gained from his study of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution to settle quarrels among inmates. They now look up to him to settle quarrels among them, and he is happy with this. Another instance of this is a Law student who submits thus:

Some inmates here do not have money to pay lawyers for their cases. They take them to court without representations. Such students come to me and I advise them on the procedures of court and on how to represent themselves.

Another way in which student inmates have been helpful to others is in their advocacy roles to their fellow inmates. Some of the interviewed inmates held that they were motivated to enrol because their friends or cell mates were already enrolled. One of the student inmates (P7) submitted that he was even instrumental to the take-off of academic programmes in one of the prisons. According to him:

When I was transferred from ... prison to this place, I saw NOUN study centre but later discovered that there were no students enrolled. I chose to become education advocate immediately. I sought audience with the DCP (Deputy Controller of Prisons) and I convinced him that the centre needed to be running. We discovered that very few inmates were interested and those interested did not possess the required qualification. I convinced the DCP to introduce adult education to allow people sit for their NECO examination. I convinced my mates to enrol. It is after they have passed their NECO exams that they started to enrol into NOUN programmes.

If freedom finds its concrete manifestation in the ability to influence events and determine one's course of actions, it can be said that enrolment into NOUN programmes has been of tremendous value to the inmate students who have embraced the opportunities NOUN offered.

Challenges to NOUN Prisoner Education

Despite its many advantages to the prisoners and to society at large, NOUN's prison education project is not without its challenges. The nature of open and distance learning model of education consists the first set of challenge encountered by the prison inmates. Defined as a model of education where learners and teachers are separated geographically (Cant, Wiid & Machado 2013), open and distance

education was encountered for the first time in the prison by most of the student inmates. Some of these students were already enrolled in universities as undergraduates before their imprisonment while others have passed the qualifying examinations for enrolment in conventional universities in Nigeria. What this means is that some of these students would have had their education without any recourse to NOUN and the ODL system it operates. Adapting to the requirements and systems of ODL proved a major challenge to the students. A good number of them complained of the strange nature of the ODL system that is unrelated to what they knew prior to their incarceration. Student inmates in this category complain of lack of lecturers and facilitators. To compensate for this lack most of such students engage the services of fellow students to teach them.

Information and Communication Technology provides another challenge to NOUN prisoner education project. The ODL is an educational model which relies heavily on ICT but due to the nature of prison, some of the ICT components of ODL studies are hardly realised in the prisons. For instance, prisons in Nigeria forbid the use of internet facilities including mobile phones and the internet. What this means is that a lot of the university's activities that are deployed online via the internet including examination, student registration, supervision, coursewares, and facilitation are not available to the students in the same manner in which they are experienced by their counterparts outside the prison walls. To compensate for these challenges, the university often undertakes manual deployment of these facilities to the prison. However, there is still need for the students to undergo a system similar to that of their counterparts in the study centres outside the prison.

Another challenge faced by the student inmates relate to the attitude of some prison officials who find no justification for the education of inmates and therefore make their studies difficult even when the topmost hierarchies of the prison formations across the country have given their support to their education. According to one of the inmates (P8):

Some of the warders are not in support of what we do. They often tell us that the prison is not a place of study but a place to pay for our crimes... I think that some of them are envious that at the end of the day we may even be more educated than they are.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, phenomenological study of the student inmates of the National Open University of Nigeria show that NOUN students are concretely conscious of their freedom as engendered by their education. They are very conscious of the various manifestations of that freedom and are determined to transform their lives, in and outside the prison, with the freedom of their education. Also, by its engagement in prisoner education, especially as that education has become totally free, NOUN has become a national tool of equity for prison inmates. It projects better life for inmates and provides them the ground of attaining such life. Besides the advantages of the prisoner education for the prisoners, the study has also shown some of the salient advantages of the project to the larger society. This includes reduction in recidivism, general human resource development, compensation for societal errors leading to false imprisonment of some prisoners. The study also has serious implication for the Nigerian justice system as it demonstrates that student's perception of their guilt plays important roles in their choice of courses. A national justice system that is alive to this current will factor it in its administration of justice.

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