

## **Open and Distance Learning: A Veritable Tool for Enhancing Gender Equality in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

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Several studies and available evidence reveal that women in Nigeria have been denied access to education due to socio-cultural practices and religious beliefs. Women are therefore grossly disadvantaged in education especially in higher education. The advent of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has provided wider access to higher education for all including women through the open and distance learning (ODL) mode. Many women who could not attend conventional universities are now enrolled in NOUN higher education programmes. This study sought to determine the socio-economic and personal factors that influenced the enrolment of women into NOUN higher education programmes. It also sought to find out if there are any constraints facing the women enrolled in NOUN higher education programmes. Three research questions were raised for the study. A 20-item questionnaire was developed for the study. The face and content validity of the questionnaire was determined by experts in ODL. A pilot test was used to establish the reliability of the questionnaire. A reliability coefficient of 0.81 was obtained. Five hundred women enrolled in NOUN higher education programmes were drawn from five randomly selected study centres in Nigeria using the random sampling technique. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the flexibility of ODL and the need to acquire higher qualifications for promotion and elimination of gender inequalities were the major factors that influenced the women to enroll in NOUN higher education programmes. Inadequate computer skills were also identified as the greatest constraint faced by the women. Recommendations were made for equipping women with the necessary computer skills needed for ODL and also for enhancing women's access to higher education programmes of NOUN.

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning, gender equality, higher education

## Introduction

Education has been widely accepted as an instrument for eradicating poverty and illiteracy, increasing economic growth, improving quality of life and for the full utilisation of human resources. Consequently, Nigeria as a nation has adopted education as an instrument for social transformation. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that free compulsory universal primary, secondary and tertiary education will be provided when practicable (Constitution FRN, 1999). The National Policy on Education (2004) goes further to stipulate that every child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities at all levels of education. It further states that maximum effort will be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education have access to it.

Several policies and programmes have been introduced to ensure that all Nigerian citizens have access to education. Some of these include the Universal Basic Education Act (2004), the Girl-child Education Programme, the Almajiri Education Programme, the Out-of-School Children Programme for South-South and South East and the Mass Literacy Programme being executed in conjunction with UNESCO.

These notwithstanding, gender differentials persist at all levels of education and the gap widens at the higher levels of education. Women and girls are grossly under-represented in university admission and enrolment. Tables 1 and 2 show the situation very clearly.

**Table 1: Admission Statistics into Nigerian Universities by Sex (2000- 2008)**

Year	Sex	Applications by gender	Total applications	Admissions by gender	Total admission
2000	Male	238,456	416,291	26,665	45,766
	Female	177,835	-	19,101	-
2001	Male	743,725	1,056,617	54,972	90,769

	Female	312,892	-	35,797	-
2002	Male	580,338	994,380	31,942	51,845
	Female	414,042		19,903	
2003	Male	603,179	1,046,950	59,742	105,157
	Female	443,771	-	45,415	-
2004	Male	486,539	841,878	69,715	122,492
	Female	355,339	-	52,777	-
2005	Male	526,281	916,371	45,256	76,984
	Female	390,090	-	31,728	-
2006	Male	456,953	803,472	52,413	88,524
	Female	346,519	-	36,111	-
2007	Male	911,653	1,302,529	64,706	107,370
	Female	390,876	-	42,664	-
2008	Male	598,667	1,054,060	66,538	113,100
	Female	455,393	-	46,562	-

**Source: JAMB Annual Report (2009)**

The Gender in Nigeria Report (2012) indicates that only four per cent of women have higher education against seven per cent of their male counterpart. For the purpose of this study higher education specifically refers to the process of obtaining a bachelors/postgraduate diploma/masters degree in a university.

School enrolment is one of the indices for assessing the level of attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, especially goal number 3 - Gender Equality and Women Empowerment. The enrolment of university undergraduates from 1999 to 2009 as shown in Table 2 indicates that women are seriously lagging behind in terms of acquiring higher education at the universities.

**Table 2: University Undergraduate Full-Time Enrolment by Sex in Nigerian Universities (1999-2009)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1999-2000	316545	216349	68.4	100196	31.6
2000-2001	358758	231633	64.6	127125	35.4
2001-2002	444949	274131	61.6	170818	38.4
2002-2003	606194	373778	61.6	232326	38.4
2003-2004	720393	489276	67.9	3221117	32.1
2004-2005	724856	466159	64.3	258697	35.7
2005-2006	762173	513491	67.4	248682	32.6
2006-2007	780543	518,243	66.4	262300	33.6
2007-2008	789301	520,762	66.0	268539	34.0
2008-2009	801,367	522139	65.2	279228	34.8

**Source: National Universities Commission Data Bank, Abuja**

Gender equality is a system where both sexes enjoy the same opportunities for realising their human rights and rights to contribute in all spheres of national development and benefit from such development (Sadker and Sadker 1982). Promoting gender equality in higher education ensures that girls and boys have the opportunity to develop their full potentials and realise their human rights. According to Nwaubani (2000), tertiary and university education is the bedrock of women empowerment and the best strategy to develop the potentials of women is to expose them to quality education at the highest level. Moreover, reducing gender inequality leads to low infant and child mortality, improved nutrition, higher economic productivity and faster growth (World Bank Report, 2001).

Despite the obvious advantages of women education, a number of factors limit girls/women's access to education, especially higher education. These include socio-economic, cultural and religious factors. According to Obasi (2000), poverty and gender-biased traditions have combined to deny females access to education. Early and/or forced marriage and teenage pregnancy have also been identified as factors that inhibit girls from full participation in education (Nwaubani, 2000; Obanya, 2003.).

### **Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria**

The advent of open and distance learning (ODL) in Nigeria has revolutionised higher education in terms of accessibility, affordability and flexibility. Open and distance learning system is the form of educational process in which the students are remote from the institution and the instructors. ODL makes use of instructional materials such as print materials, audio and video cassettes, CD-ROMs, radio and television broadcasts as well as multimedia components such as computers and satellite transmission (Peat and Helland, 2002).

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was first established in 1983 by the Federal Government of Nigeria as a single-mode institution that operates through the ODL method. It was suspended but resuscitated 18 years later in 2002. The re-introduction of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) into the Nigerian educational system has not only given credence to ODL, but has also brought higher education to the doorsteps of Nigerian citizens. The university with its headquarters in Lagos has 61 study centres spread across the country. The enrolment has increased steadily and presently over 132,000 students including women are among the students registered with the university.

ODL is presently in great demand especially by women because of its high degree of flexibility in learning schedules and time management, coupled with the little or no attendance requirement (Plummer, 1994). Studying at a distance therefore enables women to reconcile personal commitments with living at home with the family and also keeping a job. Statistics from the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) and from NOUN reveal that many women have enrolled for ODL. For example, out of 93,000 students that enrolled for

the National Certificate in Education in NTI, 68,000 were women. At NOUN, 4,182 women have completed their masters degree and 2,341 have completed postgraduate diploma in various disciplines as at (Olowola, 2012). Today, ODL has given many women a second chance to continue their education which in most cases was suspended due to marriage or economic reason. Studies (Okunuga and Akintayo, 2011; Nnaka, 2013) have shown that the majority of the women who enroll in distance learning programmes are married. Women education is no longer truncated because of marriage. According to Olakunlehin and Ojo (2006), ODL affords women the opportunity to pursue knowledge without contradicting any societal dictates.

### **Statement of the Problem**

One of the goals of higher education is to promote and encourage scholarship and community service (NPE, 2004). Thus, the majority of the individuals who play powerful roles or occupy high positions in the society today have a background in higher education. This implies that there is a need for gender equality in higher education so that more women can develop their potentials, get good high-level employment and also contribute their quota to national development. More women now enroll for higher education programmes of NOUN than the number that enrolled in similar programmes available in conventional higher institutions. It is, therefore, pertinent to find out the socio-economic factors that influenced the enrolment of these women into NOUN higher education programmes. Are there any personal factors that influenced their enrolment? From these enquiries the study will be able to identify the socio-economic and personal factors that influence the enrolment of women into NOUN higher education programmes and also identify any constraints faced by the women. The socio-economic and personal factors under consideration include: low cost of studying through ODL, flexibility of ODL mode, peer group influence, spouse/family influence, desire to attain gender equality, need to secure higher qualification for promotion at the workplace, need to acquire higher academic qualification and quest for knowledge.

### **Research Questions**

1. What socio-economic factors influence enrolment of women into higher education programmes of NOUN?

2. What personal factors influence enrolment of women into higher education programmes of NOUN?
3. What are the major constraints faced by the women enrolled into NOUN higher education programmes?

## **Methodology**

All female students enrolled in NOUN higher education programmes make up the population for the study. Five study centres selected by random sampling were used for the study. A random sampling of 500 women that enrolled for higher education programmes of NOUN was taken from five study centres. A 20-item structured questionnaire was developed by the researcher to gather the required information. A face and content validation of the questionnaire was determined by two experts in research and evaluation. A pilot test was carried out in one of the study centres that was not part of the study using 50 students. A reliability coefficient of 0.81 was obtained.

The questionnaire had two main parts. Part A sought for demographic information of the respondents. Part B which had three sections was based on a 4-point scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). Part B had three sections which sought information on the socio-economic and personal factors that influenced the women to enroll into NOUN higher education programmes. It also sought information on the major constraints faced by the women. The questionnaire was administered through the assistance of the Study Centre Directors during tutorials. All the questionnaires were filled out and returned. The data collected were analysed using means and percentages. A mean of 2.50 and above was accepted as indicative of agreement while a mean below 2.50 was accepted as disagreement.

## **Results**

The demographic information of the respondents is shown below:

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Age**

Age of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
21-30	90	18
31-40	277	55.4
41 -50	115	23
51 -60	18	3.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

Majority (55.4 %) of the respondents are between 31-40 years, 23 % are aged 41-50 years, while 18 % are within 21 -30 years. Table 4: Marital Status of Respondents

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	193	38
Married	301	60.2
Separated	6	1.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

60.2 % of the respondents are married, 38 % are single, and 1.2 % are separated.

**Table 5: Educational Background of Respondents before Enrolling in NOUN**

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
O- Level	297	59.4
A - Level	-	-
Diploma	168	33.6
B.Sc	35	7.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

Majority of the women (59.4 %) possess O-Level certificate, 33.6 % hold various diplomas, while 7% are Bachelor's degree holders.

**Table 6: Time Lapse between Secondary School /Tertiary Institution and NOUN**

<b>Time Lapse in Years</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0-5	120	24
6-10	124	24.8
11 -20	244	48.8
21-30	12	2.4
31 - above	0	2.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

A high proportion (48.8%) of the respondents enrolled in NOUN after 11-20 years of attending secondary school or tertiary institution and 24.8% after 6 - 10 years. This indicates that the respondents may have taken up other responsibilities that delayed their education.

**Table 7: Employment Status of Respondents**

<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Employed	273	54.6
Self - Employed	130	26
Not Employed	97	19.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

Majority (80.6 %) of the respondents were employed while 19.4 % were not employed.

## Research Question 1

What socio- economic factors influence enrolment of women into higher education programmes of NOUN?

**Table 8: Mean Responses on Socio-Economic Factors that Influence Enrolment of Women into Higher Education Programmes of NOUN**

S/No.	ITEM	X	SD
1	The low cost of studying by ODL	3.12	0.33
2	Peer group influence	2.91	0.06
3	Spouse influence	1.97	0.11
4	Family influence	2.08	0.08
5	Desire to attain gender equality	3.06	0.21
6	Flexible delivery method	3.56	0.51
7	Optional attendance to tutorials	1.60	0.18
8	Nearness of the study centre to my home	2.61	0.02

Items 1, 2, 5, 6, and 8 had mean scores above 2.50 which show that the women agree that these factors influenced their enrolment into NOUN. Items 3,4 and 7 had means below 2.50.

## Research Question 2

What personal factors influence enrolment of women into higher education programmes of NOUN?

**Table 9: Mean Responses on Personal Factors that Influence the Enrolment of Women into Higher Education Programmes of NOUN**

S/No.	ITEM	X	SD
9	Need to acquire higher education for promotion in the workplace	3.81	0.75
10	Need to acquire higher academic qualification	3.76	0.59
11		2.97	0.21
12	Need to acquire higher educational qualification for elimination of gender inequalities	1.82	0.26
	For enhanced employment opportunity		
13	Quest for knowledge	1.67	0.25

The mean rating of items 9,10, and 11 are above the cut-off point of 2.50, the women agreed that these were the personal factors that influenced their enrolment. Items 12 and 13 had means below 2.50.

### Research Question 3

What are the major constraints faced by women enrolled in higher education programmes of NOUN?

**Table 10: Mean Responses on Major Constraints Faced by Women Enrolled in Higher Education Programmes of NOUN**

S/No.	ITEM	X	SD
14	Pressure from career obligations	2.31	0.05
15	Inadequate computer skills	3.75	0.69
16	Unavailability of course materials	3.08	0.24

17	Difficulty combining house management and studies	3.62	0.50
18	Difficulty meeting deadline for submission of assignments	3.17	0.19
19	Lack of facilities for baby care	3.56	0.51
20	Making frequent travels to the study centre	1.54	0.22

Table 8 shows that items 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 have mean scores above 2.50 while items 14, and 20 had mean scores below 2.50.

## Discussion

The findings of this study show that the flexibility inherent in ODL is one of the major factors that influence the enrolment of women into NOUN higher education programmes. Other factors that were highly rated by the respondents are the low cost of studying by ODL, and the desire to attain gender equality. These findings support the views of Olakulehin and Ojo (2006) who contend that ODL delivery method enables students to pursue whatever kind of degree or training they want, even while working full-time or part-time or even as full-time house wives. This flexibility makes it possible for students to defer their programmes or courses and even examinations to suit their life styles and commitments. Olowola (2012) equally states that NOUN programmes are made available to students at their chosen places (e.g. home, school or workplace) at affordable costs and they are completed at the students' own time and pace.

The low cost of studying by ODL was another factor that influenced the women's enrolment. This implies that many women who were denied access to higher education due to economic reasons are now able to pursue it through ODL since the cost has become affordable.

The issue of gender equality was highlighted in item 5, which ranked third with a mean of 3.06 and SD of 0.21 in Table 8. Several studies such as (Olakulehin and Ojo, 2006; Agu, 2007; Ofoegbu and Ojogwu, 2011) have shown that ODL is a veritable tool for enhancing gender equality in education, especially higher education.

Table 9 reveals that the need to acquire higher qualification for promotion ranked first with a mean of 3.81 and SD of 0.75. This agrees with Okanuga and Akintayo (2011) who state that enhancement and promotion were the major reasons for the pursuit of higher education programmes by women through distance education.

The mean responses to research question 3 as shown in Table 10 reveal that inadequate computer skills, difficulty in combining house management and studies, difficulty in meeting deadlines for submission of assignments and unavailability of course materials were the major constraints faced by the women. Osuji (2010) and Nnaka (2012) also reveal that 45.8 and 45.1% respectively of NOUN students were not computer literate. This constitutes a serious setback for the students in view of the central role that information communication technology (ICT) plays in ODL.

## **Conclusion**

Most women enrolled in higher education programme in NOUN are working class adults who are influenced by socio-economic and personal factors to acquire higher education through ODL. The driving force behind the enrolment of the women in NOUN higher education programmes is the need for promotion, the desire to gain higher academic qualification and elimination of gender inequalities. Flexibility in the ODL system was also a major factor that influenced the women to enroll in NOUN. The women are faced with some constraints such as lack of adequate computer skills and managing limited time for home chores and studies. Gender equality in higher education can be enhanced through ODL if women are assisted in overcoming these hurdles.

## **Recommendations**

1. Practical computer appreciation tutorials should form a major aspect of the general computer course (CIT 101 -Computer in Society) for NOUN students.
2. NOUN should collaborate with ICT companies to make laptops available to students at an affordable cost which can be paid through installment plan.
3. NOUN should explore other options - mainly in the area of technology for delivering course materials to students immediately after registration.

4. Deadlines for submission of assignments should be made more flexible.
5. Baby - care facilities should be set up at NOUN Study Centres.

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