



Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) – Commonwealth of Learning Partnership: A 16-year Journey in Pursuit of Opening up Access to Education.

Le partenariat Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) – Commonwealth of Learning : un voyage de 16 ans dans la poursuite d'une plus large ouverture de l'accès à l'éducation.

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance, successes and challenges of the 16-year partnership of Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). The paper sees RETRIDOL as the epicentre for the development of capacity in the delivery of Open and Distance Learning in the West African Sub-region. It also posits that the 16 years' partnership with a leading, globally acclaimed organization that fosters distance and open learning as the panacea for low access to higher education, COL, has been the major factor in the successes RETRIDOL had recorded so far. The paper further suggests that aligning with the COL Strategic Plan, RETRIDOL would make more impact in engaging individual universities in the region in a bid to making a few operate as dual-mode universities, concluding that such efforts will improve access to higher education in Nigeria, and the West African Sub-region (WASR) in general.

Keywords: Training, Education Access, Commonwealth, Partnership, ODL.

Résumé

Cet article souligne l'importance, les succès et les défis du partenariat de 16 ans entre le Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) et le Commonwealth of Learning. Le document considère RETRIDOL comme l'épicentre pour le développement des capacités dans la prestation de l'enseignement ouvert et à distance dans la sous-région ouest-africaine. Il postule également que le partenariat de 16 ans avec COL, une organisation de premier plan, de renommée mondiale qui encourage l'apprentissage ouvert et à distance en tant que panacée à un accès limité à l'enseignement supérieur, a été le principal facteur du succès que RETRIDOL a enregistré jusqu'à présent. L'article suggère en outre qu'en s'alignant sur le plan stratégique du COL, RETRIDOL aurait plus d'impact en engageant les universités individuelles de la région dans le but d'en faire fonctionner quelques-unes en double mode, concluant que de tels efforts amélioreront l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur au Nigéria et dans la sous-région ouest-africaine (SROA) en général.

Mots-clés : Formation, accès à l'éducation, Commonwealth, partenariat, FOAD.

Introduction:

The Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) was established in 2003, in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning as a practical response to the growing demand for training and research in Open and Distance Learning System. RETRIDOL is positioned to develop the capacity of faculties in West African Universities to fully maximize the benefits of Open and Distance Education in order to increase access to higher education in the region. As an academic institute of the National Open University of Nigeria, (NOUN) RETRIDOL has specific responsibility and expertise to undertake training and development, and foster research in Open and Distance Education. The focus of the institute is to provide training services and opportunities to other emerging ODL institutions, built a regional network of ODL trainers and researchers, undertake practice-based research within Nigeria and across the West African Sub-region (WASR), and network of expertise in the West African sub-region that is highly proficient in the delivery of training, development and practised-based research in ODL. RETRIDOL also has a vision to eventually become a globally acclaimed onestop solution for ODL training, development and research needs in West African Sub-region.

It is expected that the stated objectives of RETRIDOL will be encapsulated in its Vision and Mission Statements. Specifically, RETRIDOL is established to,

among other objectives:

- ✦ Undertake and provide regular staff induction, training and development in ODL at NOUN,
- ✦ Conduct training, development activities and train-the-trainer, for the staff of other institutions of higher learning and ODL-related organizations in Nigeria and in the countries of the West African Sub-region,
- ✦ Identify and provide training and development needs of different professional groups within the West African Sub-region, and networking with other similar institutions globally,
- ✦ Develop RETRIDOL as a centre of Excellence and thus affirm and promote the institute as a leading provider of quality education, training and research in ODL.

Need for a Regional Agency for Distance Learning

Does the West African Sub-region (WASR), nay the Sub-Sahara Africa (SSA) need the introduction of Distance Learning as delivered by the Distance Education System? This question will be approached by looking at the global demand for higher education. While Amini and Oluyide (2016), described the global demand for higher education as disquieting, Kanwar (2013), reported that the 150 million students in tertiary education in 2007 represents a 53% increase over the year 2000. This number rose to 165 million in 2012 and is projected to reach 263 million in 2025. Kanwar (2013) also asserted that to accommodate this number, there would be a need to build four (4) universities with a capacity for 30,000 students every single week. Building four universities a week is a near impossibility.

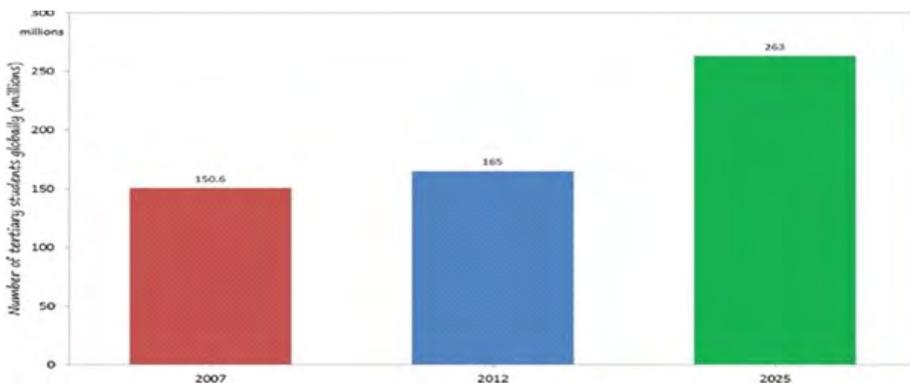


Figure 1: Global demand for higher Education (Adapted from Kanwar, 2013).

The global outlook is not much different from that of Sub-Sahara Africa, where the West African Sub-Region, which is the focus of this study, situates. The Tertiary Education Gross Enrolment ratios by region, 1970-2000 is presented below for the global outlook (UNESCO, 2010).

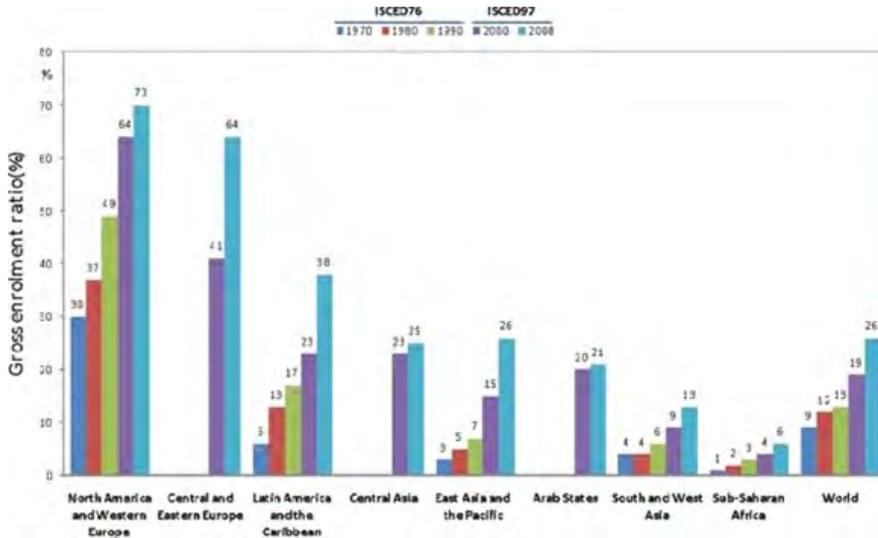


Fig. 2: Tertiary Gross Enrolment Ratios by Regions (1970-2008) (UNESCO, 2010).

According to UNESCO, (2010), enrolment in tertiary education grew faster in Sub-Saharan Africa than in any other region over the last four decades. While there were fewer than 200,000 tertiary education students enrolled in the region in 1970, this number soared to over 4.5 million in 2008. The report also indicated that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for tertiary education grew at an average rate of 8.6% each year between 1970 and 2008; compared to the global rate of 4.6% over the same period.

The need to leverage on ODL as an alternative means of enhancing access to Higher Education is the fact that despite the report rapid growth in demand, only 61% of the tertiary education age cohort was enrolled in tertiary institutions in 2008. That means that tertiary educational institutions (*brick and mortar-type*) in Sub-Saharan Africa are not equipped to absorb the growing demand that has resulted from broader access to secondary education.

The Nigerian example will highlight what obtains generally in the West African Sub-region. Table 1 shows the application/admission profile into Nigerian Universities from 2004-2009.

Table 1

Application/Admission Profile into Nigerian Universities

Year	No. of Applicants	No. Admitted	% Admitted
2004/05	841,878	122,492	14.5
2005/06	916,371	76,984	8.4
2006/07	803,472	88,524	11.0
2007/08	911,653	107,370	11.8
2008/09	1,054,060	200,000	18.9

Source: FMDE, Abuja.

Table 2 sourced from JAMB (Joint Admission and Matriculation Board), the official Government agency that supervises undergraduate admissions into Nigerian universities, shows a similar trend.

Number of Applications and Admission into Nigerian Universities from 2010 - 2018

Year	No of Applications	Number Admitted	% Admitted
2010	1,433,268	279,294	19.5
2011	1,575,522	417,341	26.5
2012	1,503,933	385,561	25.6
2013	1,668,314	571,011	32.2
2014	1,632,172	379,793	23.3
2015	1,329,876	415,500	31.2
2016	1,589,175	602,128	37.9
2017	1,736,571	581,114	33.5
2018	1,662,762	608,211	36.6

Source: JAMB

We can summaries the characteristics of Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of access to education as follows:

- ✦ 4% Annual increase in primary school enrolment.
- ✦ 30 million ready for school.
- ✦ 45% of the population are children under 15 years

- ✦ In real terms, reduced expenditure on education.
- ✦ Schools need four (4) million more teachers.
- ✦ Higher education needs 465,000 academics.
- ✦ Weak STEM base.

The above scenario suggests that an alternative model be adopted to enhance access to education in the region. The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is without equivocation, that alternative model. Being a relatively new model, the capacity for its delivery becomes imperative. This is where a Regional Institute or Agency for Distance Learning becomes necessary and RETRIDOL fills that yawning gap.

A Worthy Partnership with Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Recall that RETRIDOL was established in 2003 in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and housed in the National Open University of Nigeria. The partnership between COL and NOUN, which establishes RETRIDOL, has lasted close to two decades now (2003–date). This partnership can aptly be described as worthy. One reason is that the Commonwealth of Learning is the foremost globally recognized organization that had leveraged on distance learning to enhance access to education in the member states of the Commonwealth of Nations. The Commonwealth of Learning is hosted by the Government of Canada and headquartered in Vancouver, Canada. It is the World's only inter-governmental organization solely concerned with the promotion and development of distance education and open learning and helps commonwealth countries increase access to education using appropriate technologies. COL was established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) in 1987 following a report entitled: *Toward a Commonwealth of Learning: A proposal to create the University of the Commonwealth for co-operation in Distance Learning*. The Commonwealth of Learning was visioned to be in the vanguard of using ODL and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) development to meet the commonwealth's education and training needs, helping member states optimize their potential and develop their human capital through extending quality education access to remote regions, and to people, with or no face-to-face learning options (<http://www.col.org>).

COL became operational in 1989, and more than two decades of its inception, Commonwealth Heads of Governments and Ministers of Education recognize that it is in part due to the efforts of COL and wide international network of partners that distance education is now part of the mainstream of education and training. It is noteworthy to mention that today, there is at least one distance learning operation in each of the commonwealth's member states, including middle and lower-income countries. It is with an organization of such pedigree that NOUN is partnering through RETRIDOL.

RETRIDOL is also working out a partnership with the Economic Community of West Africa States, (ECOWAS) to extend its activities to non- English speaking West Africa. Nurudeen, (2019) had stated that ECOWAS is committed to being part of RETRIDOL success story. He further stated that ECOWAS was partnering with RETRIDOL with the aim of ensuring that the activities of the Institute go beyond the English speaking West Africa to other states in the Region to make RETRIDOL a truly regional organization. He promised to champion negotiations to make the ECOWAS-RETRIDOL partnership to yield desired fruits in the not too distant time.

RETRIDOL Activities to Improve ODL in West Africa

As a training and research institute, RETRIDOL had organized several capacity building (training) workshops in Nigerian Universities and Universities in English-speaking West African States and Cameroon. All the workshops had aimed to familiarize faculties with the rudiments (overview) of Open Distance Learning mode of Education. RETRIDOL had organized the workshops with the backing of COL as the funding partner, as well as the National Open University of Nigeria. The Workshops (close to 50 of them) were focused on the following areas:

- Capacity Building
- Content Authoring
- Information and Learning Material Distribution
- General and Specific Monitoring
- Instructional Design
- ODL Overview
- Research Methods in ODL
- Tutoring and Students Supports
- Specification of ODL Programme Objectives
- Women Leadership in HE(Higher Education)
- Strategies for Dual-Mode University Initiatives
- Gender Mainstreaming
- OER/Content Management
- TEL Capacity and Application in Universities in Nigeria
- Staff Orientations for NOUN.

In 2015, COL published a fifteen-year strategic plan to align itself with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG4 of the United Nation (COL, 2015). Goal 4 ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning for all by 2030. This, COL and RETRIDOL believed can only be achieved through ODL, and leveraged by the use of technology. Thus, COL and RETRIDOL had earmarked workshops on Technology-Enabled Learning in Nigeria and other Commonwealth states in West Africa. The Nigerian Workshop held in April 2018 with 12 Nigerian Universities in

attendance. The tangible gains include the training of 30 Universities faculties with the possibility of step-down workshops in their institutions.

In aligning to COL strategic plan, RETRIDOL activities in recent years, as approved by RETRIDOL Advisory Board (RAB), had focused on using ODL to enhance access to higher education in the Region. Thus, workshops on OER and Content Development had been mounted, as well as strategies for Dual-Mode University Initiatives.

The Strategy Workshop assembled 17 Universities Vice Chancellors, Directors and Staff of Distance Learning Centre (Institutes) in the universities who had indicated interest to the National Universities Commission (NUC) to go dual in the shortest possible time. Over 45 faculties were trained in Strategies for Dual-Mode University Initiatives. As part of the outcome, RETRIDOL had received invitations from three (3) of these universities for further training of their staff to enhance quick take off. At the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, 41 academic staff were trained in Course Material Development and Learning Content Management System. The other two university invitations are those of Babcock University (26-27 June 2019) and Enugu State University of Technology (ETSUT) (July 2019).

Overall, RAB 2018/2019 recommended the following activities for RETRIDOL:

- ✦ Regional workshop on Building Capacity and Innovation in Thought Leadership, Delivery of Programmes and Services through Technology Enabled Learning (Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria).
- ✦ National Workshop on OER Capacity for Academic Staff in HEIs in Nigeria (Abuja).
- ✦ Regional Workshop on Course Delivery and Learner Support in Dual-mode Institutions (Accra, Banjul).
- ✦ National Workshop on Planning, Management and Quality Assurance in ODL (Abuja).
- ✦ Research Activities.
- ✦ Publication of WAJOFEL.
- ✦ RETRIDOL Annual Colloquium on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in West Africa.
- ✦ PGDDE Programme.
- ✦ International Conference.

These activities are believed to raise a core of practitioners of ODL in the West African Sub-region who will be encouraged to network locally and internationally to foster Open and Distance learning (ODL) in the Sub-region. RETRIDOL is to champion this, with the support of COL.

Analysis of Successes and Challenges

The paper paints a very smooth sail for RETRIDOL from establishment to date; a smooth partnership with a leading organization in the quest for leveraging on technology to sell ODL Mode to the Commonwealth states and the world, and a robust performance in the region of West Africa. From the records, it can rightly be said that RETRIDOL had achieved a measure of successes, delivering on time, and the implementations of the approved RAB Workshops, training, publications and researches in the region of Commonwealth West Africa. The success of RETRIDOL over the years is attributed to three factors.

- The commitment of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to promptly release of funds for the various RETRIDOL activities in the region,
- The commitment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Management in fulfilling her own part of any agreement bothering on RETRIDOL activities, including the provision of infrastructure and the welfare of RETRIDOL staff,
- The co-operation of the government of member states of the Commonwealth West Africa through their ministries of Education.

As the focus is shifted to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (especially goal 4), it is hoped that RETRIDOL will continue to enjoy the patronage of COL to enhance effective intervention in universities in the region that intent to go Dual. Currently, more than 17 universities in Nigeria had indicated interest to the National Universities Commission (NUC), and are at various stages of preparation for approval to become dual-mode universities. RETRIDOL believes that getting to train capacities in individual universities will fasten their process to go dual. The assumption is based on the success of the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education workshop in Port-Harcourt. RETRIDOL believes that 50 dual-mode universities in the region will change the narrative of low enrolment in tertiary education in the region. However, it must be reiterated here that conventional universities in Nigeria have several hurdles to clear, in terms of the policy by the National Universities Commission, NUC, for their approval to operate as Dual-mode universities. This view is corroborated by Kanwar, Carr, Ortlieb and Mohee (2018) when they stated that the transition from conventional to dual-mode universities is not systematic but faced with many barriers, including national policies, funding, infrastructure, organizational structure, and cost of ODL. Their study entitled “Opportunities and Challenges for Campus-based

universities in Africa to translate into dual-mode delivery” was conducted in Cameroon, Kenya and Rwanda. Despite these, we have our problems and challenges.

The inability of RETRIDOL to implement all approvals of the RETRIDOL Advisory Board for a given academic year is a most occurring (regular) shortcoming on our part. The problem here is partly due to funding from Canada not easily accessed to meet set date for a given activity. There is also the issue related to Nigeria's financial regulations, which mandates all agencies to deposit monies in a Single Treasury Account (TSA). It usually takes some time for these monies to get released for further activities. The National Open University of Nigeria Management had been very magnanimous in bailing RETRIDOL out of such situation when the need arose.

It is suggested here that budgets for activities should be sent in batches of two or three activities. In this way, problems emanating from accessing money from the Single Treasury Account would be mitigated successfully. Activities of RETRIDOL, in the last academic year, did not follow from the approved list of the last RAB meeting. It is the belief of the authors that if approvals by RAB are completely implemented by RETRIDOL, much will be achieved in terms of tangible results of ODL popularization among West African governments.

RETRIDOL also need more senior academic staff to enhance its research and other academic activities. This challenge is strictly on the doorstep of the NOUN, as an important member of the partnership with COL. This will enable RETRIDOL to perform their statutory function as an academic unit of NOUN.

The Future of the Partnership

Through COL, RETRIDOL has grown to become, undoubtedly the epicentre of ODL capacity building in the West African Sub-region. All indices point to the pivotal role of the ODL system as the panacea for mass education in Nigeria and in West Africa. Amini and Ndunagu (2014), painted a graphic picture of the usefulness of the ODL system in meeting the Education for All (EFA) development goal in Nigeria and in Africa. The Partnership of RETRIDOL and COL (a leading international organization promoting ODL) will booster RETRIDOL capacitybuilding efforts in the region to produce needed manpower to effectively manage the ODL systems in order to achieve the goals for increased access using technology.

It can be argued effectively that the activities of RETRIDOL in West Africa are leading higher education institution to embrace ODL by establishing Distance

Learning Centres (DLCs) or Distance Learning Institutes (DLIs), therefore making them operate as Dual-mode Universities.

RETRIDOL has successfully helped the following universities to be approved to operate as Dual-mode institutions in Nigeria:

- ✦ University of Maiduguri,
- ✦ University of Nigeria, Nsukka,
- ✦ Joseph Ayo Babalola University,

Other universities that are at the final stages of their preparation to go dual, and whose staff are being trained by RETRIDOL include:

- ✦ University of Ilorin
- ✦ University of Benin,
- ✦ Osun State University, Oshogbo,
- ✦ Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port-Harcourt,
- ✦ Enugu State University of Technology,
- ✦ Babcock University, Ilishan.

Through COL, RETRIDOL has enhanced the true meaning and practice of the ODL system, which is vastly different from the practice of part-time programmes in most universities in Nigeria. Outside the shores of Nigeria, the University of Ghana, Legon, the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, have indicated interest in streamlining their ODL system to conform with international best practice, after several training workshops in Ghana and Cape Coast. A crop of ODL practitioners was trained in the Gambia and Ghana in June 2018. The workshop on overview of ODL in the Gambia and Ghana resulted in the training of over 63 participants in both countries.

In Ghana, the president of the newly established Laweh Open University, Accra, stated that the impetus that propelled the establishment of the university came from the training she received, mostly from RETRIDOL and COL. The foregoing represents RETRIDOL's capacity building effort, supported by COL and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN); in the West African Sub-region (WASR). The future of ODL fruition in the Sub-region is indeed bright. Looking at the vastness of the region, and the level of higher education access, juxtaposed with high demand, the authors make bold to state that ODL appears to be the best alternative to use in providing access. This is in agreement with UNESCO, who in the Paris Message (UNESCO, 2015) had called on Higher Education to be transformed in order to be able to deliver change in scale and speed of response, realizing the potential of the digital technologies within the humanistic framework. The declaration entitled “Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want. From Statements to Action”, has called on Government to talk less but take Actions. COL and RETRIDOL partnership is indeed the partnership of the future.

Conclusion

The establishment of the *Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning* (RETRIDOL), in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is a worthwhile venture. The aim of such venture is well thought out and the partnership is yielding good result in Nigeria and the Commonwealth countries. If properly guided, it will still yield fruit in other West African Francophone states. COL may need to expand its scope and funding to use the partnership with RETRIDOL to increase access to higher education in West Africa and beyond.

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