



## Nigerian Innovations in ODL: Demarginalising the Marginalised in NOUN

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### Abstract

*Persistent social, economic, and structural inequalities continue to limit access to higher education for many groups in Nigeria, particularly women, persons with disabilities, indigent learners, and incarcerated individuals. At the same time, increasing emphasis on skills acquisition over traditional degree certification has intensified the need for flexible and inclusive learning pathways. Within this context, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a critical mechanism for widening access and supporting lifelong learning. This paper examines innovative ODL interventions implemented by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to demarginalise vulnerable populations, with particular focus on micro-credentials, gender equity initiatives, and correctional education programmes. Drawing on data from a Commonwealth of Learning–commissioned study and updated fieldwork evidence, the study analyses institutional strategies aimed at expanding participation, enhancing skill acquisition, and promoting social inclusion. Findings indicate that NOUN’s flexible delivery structures, technology-enabled learning platforms, and targeted support policies have significantly improved educational access for marginalised groups while aligning learning outcomes with contemporary labour market demands. The paper argues that NOUN’s ODL model demonstrates how distance education can transcend conventional degree-oriented frameworks to promote equity, social justice, and sustainable human capital development in developing contexts.*

**Keywords:** Open and Distance Learning; Demarginalisation; Micro-credentials; Lifelong Learning; Gender Equity; Correctional Education.

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## **Introduction**

Demarginalisation in higher education refers to efforts aimed at reducing or eliminating the marginalisation of certain groups within academic settings. It involves creating equitable opportunities and conditions for historically marginalised individuals or communities to participate fully and succeed in higher education. These include provisions of increasing access, support services, curriculum diversity, inclusive policies and representation. Thus, overall demarginalisation aims to create an inclusive and supportive environment where all individuals, regardless of background or identity, have equal opportunities to thrive and contribute to the academic community.

In the constantly changing and dynamic world we live in, the general notion in Nigeria, from social media posts to regular traditional media outlets, the strident cry has been “skills not degrees.” This was popularised by the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) in Nigeria and emphasises the importance of acquiring practical skills over solely focusing on obtaining degrees. This message highlights that while a degree can be valuable, it is the development of marketable skills that truly enables individuals to find employment and succeed in the global job market. This is an anthem that echoes the depressing dependency on acquiring more and more degrees, with corresponding skills to enable effective contribution to the modern sector economy.

Consequently, the rapid introduction and use of new technologies requires the mastery of relevant, even completely new, knowledge and skills. Thus, a gap appears between the knowledge that currently employed workers acquired during their education years ago, and the knowledge they need now. For the knowledge and skills to be adequate for mastering new technologies, it is necessary to receive additional education or requalification. Thus, several options are available, such as various shorter or longer courses or trainings, independent study, internal supplementary education, and the like. These activities are not regulated systematically. The providers of various trainings are different, as are the individual contents, which often take place at a local or internal level.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) holds immense potential to empower marginalised groups by offering flexible and accessible educational opportunities that overcome geographical, financial, and structural barriers and provide them with the opportunity to not only partake in the technological knowledge revolution but also contribute to make thing lives better and subsequently, less marginalised.

This paper, based on Adamu (2022), highlights some critical interventions made by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to cater for the marginalised groups in Nigeria, often, but not always, within the context of micro-certification. This is in three domains: gender equity, physically challenged individuals, and incarcerated individuals in correctional centres. The data presented was part of a larger commissioned study by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) with additional updated fieldwork data.

The philosophy behind Open and Distance Learning in any context was focused on barriers to access learning, providing flexibility in learning provision, being student-centred, supporting students, and designing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012). The commodification of technology by 2025 created an equal access climate for inclusiveness in access to education. Such access is significant to both the individual and the society, for it leads to a more equitable society.

Despite Ron Dore’s criticism of “education for certification,” which he presented in his *Diploma Disease* treatise (Dore 1976), the need to have accredited competency is still strong in developing countries. While not every learner will have the credentials to move on and acquire higher education, public cultures in developing countries nevertheless have created a need for certifications, which, if properly delivered, bring enhanced competencies. It therefore has become necessary to devise ways of delivering lifelong learning that is not necessarily a link in a chain towards bureaucratised education, while at the same time conferring skills and competencies that enable survival in a contemporary world.

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020 had profound effects, not only on the human population, but also on education. It led to the narrative of a “new normal.” The lockdown reinvented teleconferencing in a new terrain and commoditised online learning and interactions. However, even before the reprioritisation of higher education delivery systems, many universities with an online orientation had open-source materials for micro-credentials and lifelong learning. MOOCs are offered by various learning institutions, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard and Stanford. Learners across the globe attend these courses. Also, the internet is full of skill-based micro-courses that help professionals to learn specific skills. It facilitates collaborations between educators and students as well as institutions. As Lewis and Lodge (2016, p. 43) pointed out, “declarative knowledge is now readily available via myriad devices with the trend towards integration of these devices into every facet of daily life.”

Thus, the democratic model of the internet means that gender and location barriers can be overcome through the existence of digital knowledge and infrastructure (Castells, 2004). Other transformations include the existence of digital books and other scholarly resources and online tutorials. With the commoditisation of both information and technology, online learning is no longer a mystery (Castells, 2000).

### **Micro-credentials and Lifelong Learning**

These are developed as short, focused qualifications designed to validate specific skills or knowledge. They are typically more flexible and adaptable than traditional certifications via degrees, allowing for quick updates to reflect new technologies or industry needs. They can be earned individually or stacked to form a larger qualification, offering a more flexible and modular approach to learning and career development. The ease of acquisition of technology post-Covid era makes these courses attractive. The outcome of micro-credential learning is a digital badge that offers verified proof of competency and document specific skills gained through learning. Digital badges are not exclusive to micro-credentials, but all students who complete a micro-credential online with Oregon State University receive one.

In the Nigerian ODL ecosystem, only NOUN provides micro-credentials and lifelong learning opportunities outside the mainstream undergraduate and postgraduate course offerings. NOUN developed and administered Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) targeting certain skills. The other Open Universities in Nigeria, not being dedicated to online learning, have no specific courses for micro-credentials or lifelong learning within their blended learning curricula.

NOUN provides micro-credential and lifelong learning facilities in two categories. The first is at the Centre for Human Resource Development (CHRD), for artisans without formal school qualifications but already engaged in vocational and skill industries (bricklaying, carpentry and joinery, plumbing, electrical works, welding and fabrication, plastering, and painting and decoration).

Created in 2017, CHRD was empowered and mandated by the university to provide executive, administrative, vocational and entrepreneurial training to all categories of people (civil servants, pensioners, youths, women, etc.), as well as individuals or groups. By 2021, the Centre had trained and certified 1,080 individuals. Additionally, and in collaboration with the correctional services of the state where it is located (Kaduna), it had offered inmates skill-acquisition programmes in computer appreciation and Microsoft Office productivity tools. The fact that the Centre's certifications are issued by a university creates both high visibility and credibility for the programmes, drawing more students, including casual learners, every year.

The second facility for micro-credentials and lifelong learning offered by NOUN was through its Africa Centre of Excellence on Technology Enhanced Learning (ACETEL). This was a World Bank-assisted project established in 2019 and supported by the Association of African Universities and the National Universities Commission (NUC).

ACETEL focuses on developing human capacity in research on digital solutions that will lead to the utilisation of technology for education and its deployment in other sectors. The Centre aims at bridging the technology knowledge gap by building capacity in ICT, cybersecurity

and digital policies to achieve high levels of digital development on the African continent. ACETEL's main programmes are MSc and PhD courses in Cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence, and Management Information Systems.

However, for lifelong technology-enabled learning, ACETEL also offers short courses on a wide range of topics covering various themes, such as Artificial Intelligence, Leadership and Project Management, English for Non-English Speakers, Database Management, Networking, Blockchain, Cloud Computing, Cybersecurity, Entrepreneurship, and Internet of Things. It also offers the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) certification, which is highly favoured in IT professions in various versions and which trains a network professional in the competencies they need to install, configure and troubleshoot medium-sized networks. The CCNA courses were offered in a collaborative partnership with Cisco Academy.

ACETEL's courses were free, totally online and lasted for one to 12 weeks, and a certificate is issued at the end of the completion of whatever segment an individual registers for. The level of participation in these courses, with emphasis on females, is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 Micro-credentials at NOUN ACETEL**

<b>Course</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% Female</b>
Machine Learning	12	34	47	72
Python Programming	22	28	50	56
Online and Blended Learning	28	25	53	46
Get Connected (GC)	5	3	8	38
Python Programming Essentials	4	2	6	33
CCNA1	16	5	21	24
IT Essentials (ITE)	24	5	29	17
Writing in High Impact Journals	98	19	117	16

Course	Males	Females	Total	% Female
Internet of Things (IoT)	44	7	51	14
<b>Totals</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>34</b>

**Source: Adamu (2022)**

By 2025, Artificial Intelligence has become part of critical component of information processing at a less technical level in the form of Chatbots. These offer a versatile solution for enhancing student support and engagement in distance learning, acting as virtual assistants that can provide 24/7 assistance, answer questions, and offer personalised support. They can handle routine inquiries, freeing up human instructors for more complex tasks and improving the overall learning experience. ACETEL, in collaboration with the Directorate of Learning Content Management System have worked together to produce micro-credential courses in AI and Chatbots with reference to OpenAI’s *ChatGPT*, followed by alternatives such as Microsoft’s *Copilot*, *DeepSeek* and Google’s *Gemini*. This was based on a preliminary survey conducted in the University, which developed and implemented a bespoke Chatbot aimed at enhancing communication among the enrolled students at NOUN.

### **Gender and ODL in NOUN**

Women are marginalised when it comes to technology (Kaur, 2025). Yet, women’s participation in technology is critical because it can provide a more balanced view on female gender and technology sector issues. As Pot’Vin-Gorman (2019) noted, conscious and unconscious bias, societal pressures, and discomfort with women’s ambition are issues women are confronted with in any male-dominated setting, and technology is no exception. Statistically, women are a disproportionately small percentage of the technology industry. It would appear that gender bias in technology and related areas is a long-standing social equity problem (Azad, 2021; Chari, 1992; Cohoon & Aspray, 2006; Lin et al., 2012; Namrata, 2020; Schiebinger, 2014; Wyer et al., 2014).

The data from ACETEL seem to confirm this exclusion of women from technology. For instance, only 34% of the 382 participants enrolled in the ACETEL micro-credentials short courses were women, with the lowest percentage of participation (14%) in the IoT course. Women, however, excelled more than men in machine learning, a branch of artificial intelligence employing a method of data analysis that automates analytical model building based on the idea that systems can learn from data, identify patterns and make decisions with minimal human intervention. Similarly, women excelled more than men in Python programming — a language commonly used for developing websites and software, task automation, data analysis, and data visualisation. Thus, while there are gains in women’s competencies and the testing of their abilities in ACETEL’s micro-credentials courses, the data not only indicate underlying causes for such low participation, but point to the need to emphasise these areas in any programming of micro-credentials training in ICT.

Thus, gender equity is a critical area in which ODL offers the opportunity to balance access to higher education. Figures available from NOUN on students enrolled in 2020 are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Total enrolment by gender, NOUN, 2021**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% Female</b>
Health Sciences	11,089	35,636	46,725	76
Education	29,135	43,953	73,088	60
Arts and Humanities	6,356	5,852	12,208	48
Management Sciences	97,497	86,950	184,447	47
Social Sciences	98,473	64,707	163,180	40
Agricultural Sciences	3,510	1,905	5,415	35
Sciences	86,052	40,742	126,795	32
Law	20,005	8,946	28,951	31
PhD	88	44	133	33
<b>Totals</b>	<b>352,205</b>	<b>288,735</b>	<b>640,942</b>	<b>45</b>

Source: Adamu (2022)

NOUN classified its student population into two categories: those who are enrolled, and those who are active, which is a subset of those enrolled. Of those enrolled in 2021, 45% were female. This shows the level of accessibility of ODL to the female gender in the university. The courses most subscribed to by NOUN female students, and in which they outnumbered male students, were Health Sciences (76%) and Education (60%). Despite lacking a teaching hospital, most of the students enrolled in the Nursing programme of Health Sciences (which attracted the highest number of females in the faculty) were practising nurses (indeed, the admission requirement for the Nursing programme included being a fully registered nurse). Such a high number of female students in Nursing and Education, as well as low numbers in sciences (32%), confirms societal gender stereotypes whereby women are expected to be in “caring professions.” For instance, according to Heppner (2013, p. 198), in 2010, “women in the US were over 97% of preschool and elementary school teachers, 96% of dental hygienists, and less than 2% of carpenters and electricians, 3% of construction workers, 7% of electrical engineers.” Perhaps not surprisingly, considering its practical nature, which makes it challenging in an ODL setting, Agricultural Sciences had the lowest female enrolment.

Despite the lower-than-average representation of women in NOUN’s ODL during the sampled period, the open nature of the learning process at NOUN nevertheless provides an opportunity for women to demarginalise themselves in the acquisition of a functional university education.

### **Physically Challenged, Girl-Children, and NOUN**

Women and persons with both social and physical disabilities have always been at the margin or completely disenfranchised from mainstream services in the public culture of all societies. Only NOUN has a concrete policy that offers scholarships to girls who graduated from high schools with excellent grades but could not access higher education due to their economic situation. The university also provides scholarships for indigent students who, due to either physical disability or living conditions, are unable to afford full course fees at the university. These scholarships are often at the discretion of the Chief

Executive and approved by the university management as part of the university's corporate social responsibility.

In 2021, a blind male student was offered a scholarship to study a BSc in Political Science at the university. He was featured in media interviews in the city of Kano, northern Nigeria. The student explained how his mother single-handedly raised him. Despite abject poverty, she encouraged him to attend school instead of begging on the streets, while living in a rented accommodation. This attracted the attention of a local philanthropist who was moved by the student's desire to better himself, and particularly the mother's efforts to raise him on a path to education. The philanthropist eventually purchased a house for the student and his mother. The Kano State government then offered him a job as a teacher at the special education school where he had graduated years earlier. This shows one of the impacts that management strategies can have in striving toward social equity through distance education.

Also in Kano State, a philanthropist paid the fees for a four-year degree programme for 86 indigent students from two communities. A politician similarly paid for 150 students for four years from 13 communities, in addition to building a fully equipped Study Centre in each community.

In further attempts to address marginalised groups, NOUN offered scholarships to 15 girls selected by their schools in both the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. In the north, five of the girls were from nomadic camps whose males often join part of the brigandage that is the scourge of northern Nigeria. The nomadic girls were from semi-settled thatch-roofed camps, tending to their cattle and yet attending school at the same time. With the uncertainties of their residency — they can move out at any time — they faced unknown futures, despite their high school education. NOUN, in conjunction with community leaders, provided scholarships to five of them in the first instance in 2019, with the hope of evaluating the outcome of their studies in due course. When they move their camp to another location in any part of Nigeria, they report to the nearest NOUN Study Centre to continue

their education, thus taking full advantage of ODL. The other girls were from settled (i.e., non-nomadic) communities in the north.

In the south-east, it is girls who stay in school, while boys prefer to become traders (Gabriel, 2001). Given the apprenticeship system, it is difficult to get boys to commit to higher education due to the anticipated clash between studies and apprentice trading. Thus, NOUN provided scholarships to indigent girls in a community in Imo State to enable them to continue petty trading while acquiring a degree.

### **Correctional Inmates and ODL**

However, the most successful NOUN intervention for marginalised members of society is its correctional Centre inmates' programme. In pursuit of its mandate to provide functional, flexible, accessible, quality and inclusive education, the university established study Centres in ten correctional Centre formations across the country. These Centres concretely actualise the university's long-term vision of anchoring its mandate in social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion in ways that transcend all barriers. In 2018, the Nigerian Prisons Service was one of the winners of the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy for its provision of educational programs to prisoners.

Initially named the NOUN Prisoner Education Project, the nomenclature was changed in 2019 when the Nigerian government began referring to all prisons as "correctional Centres." The NOUN project is a human development programme aimed at solving the challenges associated with incarceration and post-release reabsorption into society. It is also a form of remedial justice, since the education it provides is not only reformatory but also compensatory, considering delays in the justice system.

NOUN 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. In 2016, the university's administration reassessed the modalities of operation of its prisoner education programme. The administration reasoned that the

university's motto is "work and learn"; however, by reason of their incarceration, inmates were not in a position to work and earn income while in Nigerian correctional settings.

Consequently, NOUN introduced a 100% fee waiver for all correctional Centre inmates, and this was eventually extended into post-release periods if they had not finished their studies. Further, they are allowed opportunities to continue their studies in NOUN up to the doctoral level if they so wish and are qualified. Besides the fee waiver, the university's commitment also extends to equipping correctional Centres to make them suitable for studies. By 2021, a total of 2,270 inmates were enrolled in various programmes in correctional Centres across the country. One ex-convict student even wrote a book on peace and conflict resolution and was eventually admitted to a doctoral programme at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

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 correctional Centres. However, grading of student inmates is undertaken by the faculty, who assess them in a conference marking setting with other students, without any form of discrimination. By 2021, there were 15 correctional Centre inmate populations, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Enrolment at the Correctional Centres, 2021**

<b>Correctional Centre</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Abeokuta Correctional Service Study Centre (Ogun State)	55	10	65
Ilesha Correctional Service Study Centre (Osun State)	18	0	18
Kuje Correctional Service Study Centre (FCT)	147	5	152
Lafia Correctional Service Study Centre (Nasarawa)	14	0	14
Correctional Service Study Centre, Awka (Anambra)	12	0	12

Correctional Service Study Centre, Ikoyi (Lagos)	62	27	89
Correctional Service Study Centre, Keffi (Nasarawa)	114	34	148
Correctional Service Study Centre, Enugu (Enugu)	231	25	256
Correctional Service Study Centre, Port Harcourt (Rivers)	187	138	325
Female Correctional Service Study Centre, Kirikiri (Lagos)	0	12	12
Max. Security Correctional Service Study Centre, Kirikiri (Lagos)	172	23	195
Med. Security Correctional Service Study Centre, Kirikiri (Lagos)	24	3	27
Correctional Service National Headquarters (FCT)	463	411	874
Umuahia Correctional Service Study Centre, (Abia)	16	4	20
Kaduna Correctional Service Study Centre, (Kaduna)	62	1	63
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,577</b>	<b>693</b>	<b>2,270</b>

Inmates generally have embraced the offer of free education from NOUN. Although the available data have not been disaggregated by discipline, the figures show that in 2021, 31% of the 2,270 enrolled correctional Centre inmates in the NOUN system were female. Interestingly, this was in consonance with almost similar averages of female representation in other Study Centres. Another factor to take into account is the disproportionate representations of males and females in correctional Centres, where males far outnumber females.

Omazu (2018), who carried out the first comprehensive fieldwork on NOUN's correctional centre population, pointed out that in being able to influence their end-of-prison-term lives while still inside the prison, the inmates are exercising their ability to self-govern and to dictate their lives' directions in ways that their present life circumstances permit. He quotes from an interview he held with a female student inmate studying Entrepreneurial and Business Management, who noted the suitability of the course to her incarcerated circumstances and projected life experience outside the correctional Centre. 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. (Omazu, 2018, p. 157)

Inmates who remained unconvinced of their crimes show a different pattern in their choice of courses. The majority of them would prefer a degree programme in Law. However, when the university 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. Omazu (2018, p. 159) noted how a death row inmate student of Law viewed his education:

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 an offence I did not commit because of my lack of knowledge of legal procedures.

Generally, therefore, student inmates express a feeling of self-fulfilment that is consequent upon their enrolment as students. This has not only contributed to the rehabilitation of some inmates but also has brought them closer to their families, who initially shunned them due to their incarcerated status. For instance, one student explained 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. (Omazu, 2018, p. 158)

Like NOUN, the Indira Gandhi National Open University, in India, also provides “free education to prisoners . . . a welcome initiative for those inmates who cannot afford the programme fee but are interested in pursuing their education despite being in prison” (Singh, 2013, p. 36). Similar education services are provided for inmates at open universities in Tanzania (Msoroka, 2018), Malaysia (Hassan, 2014), Saudi Arabia (Al-Saif, 2007), Australia (Farley et al., 2015), Turkey (Ataizi et al., 2011) and the United Kingdom (Earle & Mehigan, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

The status of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as the only federally-recognised single mode online institution in Nigeria gives it a vast advantage in pushing the “skills, not degrees” mantra of sustainable development. The micro-certification programmes offered by the University provide opportunities for all categories of disenfranchised Nigerians to have access and competencies in modern skills necessary for modern economies. Women, girl-child, incarcerated individuals as well as those living with disabilities have been provided with opportunities to utilise their intellect in becoming part of the modern sector economy in one or other.

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