



Evolution of the School of Postgraduate Studies at The National Open University of Nigeria

Linus A. Onime, Folashade Oritogun, & Sonnie J. Oniye*
School of Postgraduate Studies
National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja

*Corresponding Author: sjoniye@noun.edu.ng, sjoniye@gmail.com

Abstract

The School of Postgraduate Studies (SPGS), National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), serves as a leading model of postgraduate education delivery through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria and West Africa. This paper provides a historical overview of the evolution, structure, and strategic reforms within the SPGS since its formal establishment in 2009. It examines institutional milestones, innovations in academic delivery, and the challenges faced in implementing flexible postgraduate learning. Since its inception, the School has grown from a few postgraduate diploma offerings to over 50 academic programmes across nine faculties. Between 2008 and 2025, NOUN graduated 38,648 postgraduate students, out of which 29,583 (76.54%) completed their programmes between 2021 and 2025 alone. Notably, the 2025 Convocation recorded the highest number of PhD graduates (40 doctoral awardees) in the institution's history, marking a significant achievement in distance learning research output. Under the leadership of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Olufemi Peters (2021 to 2026), the automation of thesis moderation via the Project Administration System (PAS), the formalisation of MPhil/PhD pathways, the elimination of PhD coursework in favour of thematic seminars, and the introduction of a quarterly online postgraduate research seminar were established. These efforts enhanced quality assurance and learner engagement within a decentralised, digitally mediated academic environment. SPGS continues to confront challenges such as limited funding and prevailing misconceptions about ODL. Planned reforms include the Annual Doctoral Conference, academic research awards, and strategies to improve scholarly publication. The SPGS of NOUN is positioned as a benchmark institution for flexible, inclusive, and quality-assured postgraduate education. It aligns with the national vision by demonstrating how innovation and strategic leadership can transform the postgraduate landscape in ODL institutions across Africa.



Keywords: Open and Distance Learning, School of Postgraduate Studies, NOUN, Quality Assurance, Project Administration System

Introduction

The establishment of a School of Postgraduate Studies (SPGS) is a critical component in the advancement of knowledge, innovation, and capacity building in any higher education institution. At the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), the SPGS was established to provide quality postgraduate education in line with the university's mandate as a leading Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Africa. This paper presents a historical overview of the SPGS of NOUN, from its inception to its current status, highlighting milestones, achievements, challenges, and its future direction.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution established in July 1983 by Act No. 6 of 1983. The university's operations were suspended in April 1984 by the Federal Government due to logistical challenges. In 2002, NOUN was resuscitated in response to the continued relevance of the issues that had necessitated its initial establishment, and by 2004, its operations became fully functional.

The establishment of the university was driven by Nigeria's urgent need to reduce illiteracy and promote socio-economic development as well as personal advancement among its citizens. The NOUN is renowned for providing functional, flexible, accessible, and cost-effective education tailored for success in the 21st century and beyond. Since its inception, its mandate has been to deliver higher education to every qualified and willing Nigerian, regardless of tribe, culture, religion, location, status, or circumstance.



Philosophy

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is dedicated exclusively to providing structured learning through a variety of delivery methods. It is committed to leveraging the ODL model to offer flexible, quality, and meaningful educational opportunities to all who aspire to acquire tertiary education.

To achieve this, NOUN combines appropriate technology, robust learner support services, and practical sessions.

Vision

To be the foremost university in Nigeria, providing highly accessible and quality education, anchored on the principles of social justice, equity, equality, and national cohesion, reaching all, regardless of barriers.

Mission

To provide functional, cost-effective, and flexible learning that adds lifelong value to quality education for all knowledge seekers.

Establishment of the School of Postgraduate Studies

The School of Postgraduate Studies at the National Open University of Nigeria operates within the country's only public university solely dedicated to Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Since the inception of its academic programmes in 2003/2004, the university has offered postgraduate studies across its initial five schools, now expanded into nine faculties, starting with Postgraduate Diploma programmes.

Notwithstanding earlier developments, the Senate of the NOUN formally approved the establishment of a School of Postgraduate Studies at its 46th Regular Meeting of 6 April 2009, with Professor Israel F. Adu, a former Vice-Chancellor of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, as its pioneer Dean and Chairman of the School's Board. Since its establishment in 2009, the school has had the following Deans and Secretaries to date (Tables 1 and 2).



Table 1: List of Deans at the School of Postgraduate Studies of NOUN from 2009 to 2025

S/N	Name	Period of Service
1.	Prof. Israel F. Adu	2009 - 2016
2.	Prof. Smaila Mande	2016 - 2021
3.	Prof. Chiedu F. Mafiana	2021 - 2023
4.	Prof. Sonnie J. Oniye	2023 - date

Table 2: List of Secretaries at the School of Postgraduate Studies of NOUN from 2009 to 2025

S/N	Name	Period of Service
1.	Mrs. Margaret Merari	2009 - 2016
2.	Mrs. Ada Chiagoro	2016 - 2020
3.	Mr. Osebi S. Olagboye	2021 – 2021
4.	Mrs. Folashade T. Oritogun	2022 – date

The establishment of the School was aimed at imparting specialised knowledge and skills leading to the attainment of a higher level of expertise in specific areas of study. Through its Board, the School administers, coordinates, and harmonises postgraduate studies, with the broad aim of maintaining and improving standards, excellence, integrity, and relevance of its academic and professional programmes. The Board held its inaugural meeting on 23rd February 2010, where it considered and approved the *Regulations Governing Postgraduate Programmes and Administration* in the university. In line with global best practices, the Board reviews the examination results of postgraduate students and submits them to the University Senate for final approval. It also considers matters related to curriculum development and the admission of postgraduate students, amongst other responsibilities.

Programmes and Academic Offerings

The School commenced with a limited number of programmes and has since expanded its range significantly. Currently, the School runs various postgraduate diploma, masters, and doctoral programmes in disciplines such as Computing, Education, Law, Management Sciences, Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts, Agricultural Sciences, and Health Sciences.



These postgraduate programmes are offered on either a full-time basis (particularly for research-based PhD and master's degrees) or on a flexible schedule to accommodate diverse learner needs. The programmes are designed to expand the depth of learners' knowledge and to develop new skills, update professional skills that add value to individuals, organisations, and businesses. Hence, most of the university's postgraduate programmes, particularly at the postgraduate diploma and master's levels, are by coursework and research underpinned by the principles of Open and Distance Learning.

Milestones and Achievements

The SPGS has experienced steady growth since its establishment in 2009 during the tenure of Professor Olugbemi Jegede (Vice-Chancellor, 2003–2010). This growth is evident in the increasing number of staff, programmes, students, and the expanding scope of its operations within the university.

A major transformation occurred in 2016, when all postgraduate programmes of the university received full accreditation from the National Universities Commission (NUC), the apex regulatory body responsible for quality assurance in Nigerian universities. Between 2010 - 2014, the university secured NUC approval for its MBA and MPA programmes. This era also marked the physical development of the university's permanent site in Abuja, during the tenure of Prof. Vincent Tenebe as the Vice-Chancellor, as well as the beginning of sustained academic activities across semesters.

During the 2016-2021 period, NOUN transitioned from a school-based academic structure to a faculty-based system, with departments established within each faculty. This enhanced the administrative role of the SPGS, particularly in supervising postgraduate programmes. Key achievements during the period included the commencement of external defence and moderation, the introduction of *Turnitin* software to check plagiarism in students' research work, and the graduation of the university's first PhD student, His Excellency Olusegun Obasanjo, who bagged a PhD in Theology, 2018.



In 2019, the school was designated as the National Secretariat of the Committee of Provosts and Deans of Postgraduate Colleges and Schools in Nigerian Universities (CPDPGCS). That same year also saw the commencement of construction of a dedicated SPGS building at the Abuja headquarters of the university, when Prof Abdalla Adamu was the Vice-Chancellor and Prof Ismaila Mande was the Dean of SPGS.

More recent developments have occurred under the leadership of Professor Olufemi Peters, who assumed office as Vice-Chancellor in February 2021. These developments continue to consolidate the gains made by the SPGS and reflect the university's ongoing commitment to strengthening postgraduate education in line with international best practices.

Transformative Milestones under the Vice-Chancellorship of Professor Olufemi Peters

Under the leadership of Prof Olufemi Peters (2021 to 2026), the School of Postgraduate Studies experienced remarkable growth and transformation. A key reform initiative during his tenure was the formal establishment of three critical units within the SPGS: Admissions, Records, and Examinations/Special Duties. This strategic move streamlined the school's administrative structure, enhancing efficiency and effectiveness.

In 2021, the university formally commenced PhD programmes that were approved in previous years in the Departments of Business Administration, Computer Science (now Information Systems & Technology), Mass Communication, Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, Public Administration, while the existing PhD programmes of the Departments of Educational Foundations, Religious Studies, and Science Education were resuscitated.

From 2021 to 2023, significant strides were made in the automation of the School's operations. One of the most notable innovations was the shift from physical moderation of postgraduate projects and dissertations at zonal levels to a fully online system via the Project Administration System (PAS). This landmark initiative made the



NOUN the first university in Nigeria to implement large-scale online assessment of final-year postgraduate research projects. Additionally, the former manual process of academic transcript production was automated, significantly improving turnaround time and operational efficiency within the School.

During the same period, the registration process for thesis abstracts and titles was formalised. In addition, the Senate approved the replacement of streamlined coursework in PhD programmes, with a maximum of four (4) thematic seminars, thereby eliminating taught courses. To support prospective students with a CGPA between 3.00 – 3.50, MPhil/PhD programmes were introduced across many departments.

In 2023, the School of Postgraduate Studies recorded further progress by consolidating earlier gains. Notable developments during this period included the regular convening of Board meetings and enhanced supervision of postgraduate matters across departments and faculties.

The introduction of the postgraduate online quarterly seminar series marked another milestone in strengthening research capacity within the university. By bringing together students and subject-matter experts, these seminars comprehensively address the research process - from conceptualisation to publication - offering students practical insights and guidance that helps to bridge knowledge gaps and promotes a vibrant research culture.

Prof Peters prioritised staff development through comprehensive training programmes, both locally and internationally, to enhance the competencies of the SPGS staff and ensure the provision of high-quality administrative support for postgraduate students. His administration ensured the timely provision of essential tools, equipment, and platforms necessary for efficient service delivery. Staff had access to the resources they needed to work effectively, from modern office equipment to digital platforms that streamline administrative processes. This investment in tools and technology has significantly enhanced productivity and improved the overall quality of services provided by the School.



The Board of the School of Postgraduate Studies under Prof Peters received unwavering support for its resolutions aimed at improving postgraduate programmes. His commitment to quality assurance is evident in his prompt facilitation of Senate approvals of these resolutions, ensuring they are implemented without delay. This timely support has enabled the SPGS to maintain high standards and continually adapt to evolving academic demands.

To uphold the integrity of postgraduate research, Prof Peters sustained the university's subscription to *Turnitin*, a globally recognised plagiarism-checking tool. This initiative ensures that students' dissertations and theses meet the highest standards of originality. By emphasising the importance of intellectual honesty, the university has not only enhanced the quality of research, but also boosted its reputation for academic excellence.

Since the inception of the School of Postgraduate Studies in 2009, the tenure of Prof. Peters witnessed the highest number of graduands for the doctoral degree. A reference point was made during the 2025 Convocation ceremony, the university graduated forty (40) PhD students, the highest so far in the history of the NOUN. His commitment to high academic standards and a supportive research environment has ensured timely completions, contributing to the growth of reputable scholars in Nigeria and beyond.

Prof Peters gave his full support to two critical organs responsible for the administration of postgraduate matters in the Nigerian University System. Firstly, the Committee of Provosts and Deans of Postgraduate Colleges and Schools (CPDPGCS) in Nigerian universities, and secondly, the Committee Secretaries of Postgraduate Colleges and Schools (CSPGCS) in Nigerian universities, with the Dean and Secretary of the SPGS serving as the honorary Secretary respectively. Both bodies are responsible for harmonising and maintaining high standards across postgraduate programmes in Nigerian universities.

By housing the Secretariats of these associations, Prof Peters has positioned the university as a hub for postgraduate policy development and implementation.



Records of Postgraduate Graduation

The university's diverse range of innovative postgraduate programmes, combined with its flexible delivery model, has enabled NOUN to produce a large and diverse community of alumni, with thousands of graduates injected into the various sectors of Nigerian society and the global landscape.

As at the 2025 convocation, the university graduated the highest number of master's and doctoral students. From 2008 to 2025, NOUN graduated over thirty-eight thousand postgraduate students from different programmes (Table 3). Between 2021 and 2025, the total number of graduated students at the postgraduate levels was 29,583, which is 76.54% of the total number of students that graduated since the inception of the SPGS. This tremendous leap was achieved during the leadership of Prof Peters as the Vice-Chancellor, and Professors Chinedu Mafiana (2021 – 2023) and Sonnie Oniye (2023 to date) as the Deans of SPGS. The faculties most subscribed to by students are Management Sciences, Education, and Social Sciences, and these faculties also graduated the highest number of postgraduate students (Table 4).

Table 3: Breakdown of Postgraduate Convocants from 2008 to 2025 at NOUN

Session	Post-Graduate			Total
	PhD	Master's	Postgraduate Diploma	
2008 (1 st Convocation)	-	-	72	72
2013 (2 nd Convocation)	-	1,531	3,521	5,052
2014 (3 rd Convocation)	-	1,110	467	1,577
2015 (4 th Convocation)	-	2,130	1,498	3,528
2015 (5 th Convocation)	-	2,766	2,902	5,668
2017 (6 th Convocation)	-	3,084	2,135	5,219



2018 (7th Convocation)	1	3,682	2,697	6,380
2019 (8 th Convocation)	-	3,451	1,708	5,159
2020 (9 th Convocation)	1	3,414	2,091	5,506
2021 (10 th Convocation)	-	1,416	780	2,196
2022 (11 th Convocation)	3	3,424	2,107	5,534
2023 (12 th Convocation)	-	4,707	2,687	7,394
2024 (13 th Convocation)	6	4,038	2,362	6,406
2025 (14 th Convocation)	40	4,310	2,103	6,453
Grand Total	50	24,700	13,838	38,648

Table 4: Postgraduate Convocants from Different Faculties of NOUN from 2021_1 to 2025_1

Year/ Faculty	Programme Category			Grand Total
	PhD	Master	Postgraduate Diploma	
2021		1,420	776	2,196
Agricultural Science			4	4
Arts		6	8	14
Computing		212	80	292
Education		408	295	703
Management Sciences		577	263	840
Social Sciences		217	126	343
2022	3	3,424	2,107	5,534
Agricultural Science			25	25
Arts	3	22	5	30
Computing		354	201	555
Education		1,037	689	1,726



Health Sciences			22	22
Law			4	4
Management Sciences		1,326	740	2,066
Social Sciences		685	421	1,106
2023		4,707	2,687	7,394
Agricultural Science			20	20
Arts		27	4	31
Computing		474	294	768
Education		1,355	775	2,130
Health Sciences		266		266
Management Sciences		1,706	1,044	2,750
Social Sciences		879	550	1,429
2024	6	4,038	2,362	6,406
Agricultural Science			14	14
Arts		103	15	118
Computing	4	349	311	664
Education	1	929	704	1,634
Health Sciences		634		634
Management Sciences		1,311	801	2,112
Social Sciences	1	712	517	1,230
2025	40	4,310	2,103	6,453
Agricultural Science			39	39
Arts	1	62	8	71
Computing	5	428	208	641
Education	4	1,019	713	1,736
Health Sciences		810		810
Management Sciences	22	1,260	809	2,091
Social Sciences	8	731	326	1,065
Grand Total	49	17,899	10,035	27,983



Challenges

The School of Postgraduate Studies faces several challenges, some of which include:

- i. Lack of understanding about Open and Distance Learning (ODL) among some stakeholders, as well as the misconception that distance learning is inherently inferior to traditional learning methods.
- ii. The need for greater commitment and adherence to established academic traditions by staff and students of the university, which is essential for maintaining academic excellence.
- iii. Insufficient funding, which hinders the School's ability to operate semi-autonomously.

The Future of the NOUN School of Postgraduate Studies

- a) Going forward, the School, in collaboration with other relevant units of the university, shall adopt empirical approaches to further strengthen the conduct and evaluation of dissertation and thesis defences, to address submissions that fall below the minimum academic standard.
- b) In line with best practices in the administration of postgraduate education in universities, the School looks forward to having greater operational autonomy, particularly concerning settling financial obligations within a minimal timeframe.
- c) To institute awards and prizes for outstanding projects/dissertations/theses for postgraduate students and their supervisors.
- d) To continuously encourage and support postgraduate students to publish in Q1 and Q2 journals.
- e) Frequent and unscheduled visits to Study Centres to assess the operationalisation of the activities related to postgraduate programmes and students (e.g, admission documentation, recruitment of supervisors/adjuncts, assignment of supervisors



- to students, handling of students' research work, examinations, etc.).
- f) Ensure greater adherence to postgraduate guidelines and regulations in admissions, assessment, evaluation, and research by all stakeholders.
 - g) The institution of the Annual Doctoral Conference is on the drawing board. The goal of the academic conference is to bring doctoral and other categories of postgraduate students from within and outside the NOUN together to share ideas, showcase, and publish their research findings. Presentations adjudged as excellent or very good at the end of the conference will be published in the Annual Doctoral Conference Journal of the NOUN.
 - h) Foster global collaborations and exchanges for postgraduate students, while facilitating access to international research funding opportunities and promoting their participation in the global research community.

Conclusion

The remarkable surge in student enrolments and graduation over the years, particularly under the visionary leadership of Professor Olufemi Peters, underscores the growing recognition and interest in NOUN's postgraduate programmes. Professor Peters' initiatives have not only enhanced the quality of NOUN's postgraduate programmes, but also established a benchmark for excellence in open and distance learning at the postgraduate level across the Nigerian university system. Through his inputs and advocacy for rigorous quality assurance measures, NOUN has become a role model worthy of emulation by the newly established ODL institutions offering postgraduate programmes in Nigeria and other West African countries. While false impression about the ODL system and financing persists, strategic retooling and future collaborations will take the SPGS of NOUN to a greater level.



