



The NOUN Transformative Journey: A Personal Reflection

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Introduction

Following the publication of my *Options in African Philosophy* in the early 1990s, I received an invitation from Professor A. P. J. Roux of the University of South Africa (UNISA) to assist in setting up a unit of African Philosophy in the university. At the time, black South Africans under apartheid were fiercely engaged in the struggle for political liberation, a major component of which was the intellectual decolonisation of the education sector. UNISA is the oldest Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Africa and the largest in terms of programmes, staff, and students.

My visits to South Africa in 1995 and 1996 offered me the first opportunity to work at an ODL institution. It is on record that I assisted the university in organising the B.A. (Philosophy) programme and, in fact, wrote the bulk of the course materials in African Philosophy. All that was long before I was appointed to the Governing Council of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2009, with the late Professor Greg Iwu as Chairman and Professor Olugbemiro Jegede as Vice-Chancellor. From then till now, my years of interaction with NOUN have been a fulfilling, life-long learning experience.

NOUN in the Beginning

The Professor Iwu-led Governing Council that brought me to NOUN was not the first in the history of the university, which, to a large extent, could be said to have had a somewhat chequered beginning. The details of what happened before we came in are narratives better told by someone with deeper insight into that period.



Suffice it to say that the university, which was first established as the National Open University (NOU) in 1983 during Nigeria's Second Republic, was suspended in 1984 and remained dormant for almost two decades before it was resuscitated in 2002. Understandably, the long period of inactivity, coupled with the fact that the university was initially run almost as an arm of the Civil Service, might have contributed to some of the peculiar administrative and academic challenges it has faced over the years.

However, before examining these challenges, it is important to explore the role of education in post-colonial Nigeria, the need for ODL, and the circumstances surrounding the establishment of NOUN.

Role of Education in Post-Colonial Nigeria

In most Western societies, especially before the Second World War, education had a minimal impact on social mobility. The class structure of those societies made this almost impossible, as an individual's status was predetermined by his social origin. In contrast, Nigeria is predominantly a classless society, apart from a few communities known to have caste systems. Therefore, while an individual's initial social placement may be determined by factors such as sex, family origin, kinship relations, and ethnicity, movement between social strata is fluid and relatively easy to achieve based on merit, talent, ability, motivation, ambition, and hard work.

In Nigeria, education serves as the primary instrument and driving force of social mobility. A person's educational qualification is not only regarded as the primary yardstick for placement in important social positions; it also moves him into new social circles. Indeed, education cures the individual's personality deficiencies and inculcates in him a sense of confidence that cuts across all forms of social and psychological barriers. That is why it is relatively easy in Nigeria, for instance, for a resourceful, highly motivated and hard-working child of a poor peasant to attain the status of a wealthy industrialist. Historically, there have been countless instances of the offspring of illiterate parents rising to become renowned professors in reputable universities. Such is the fluidity of the Nigerian system. There is no



hard, cast-iron divide between social groupings, and it is relatively easy for individuals at the lowest rungs of society to move into the middle class and beyond.

There is no doubt that political leaders and, especially, planners of education in post-colonial Nigeria were fully aware of the transformational impact of education in determining an individual's status and society's course of development. They knew the critical role that education was playing in the rapid industrial transformation of the Asian Tigers – Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. Our leaders were eager to emulate the development strategies of these countries by increasing investment in human capital development through mass education. They were, however, conscious of the numerous challenges involved, including the fact that available resources were not sufficient to meet the educational needs of all citizens; that access to education was not evenly distributed among individuals and groups in Nigerian society; and, more importantly, that due to widespread poverty and economic inequality, a large number of Nigerians were excluded from education, which increasingly was becoming the preserve of a few.

It was in realisation of these prevailing circumstances and the determination to confront the challenges that the administration of President Shehu Shagari initiated the process of establishing the National Open University (NOU) in 1983 as the nation's first public ODL institution.

ODL: The NOUN Experience

The history of modern distance education is tied to the old-fashioned correspondence system, as both are defined by the need to provide learning opportunities to students in remote and sparsely populated areas that lack formal learning facilities. Not surprisingly, UNISA, Africa's oldest ODL institution, was founded in 1873, initially as an examining agency for Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and it functioned in that capacity until 1946. One of the major points of difference between the traditional correspondence system and ODL is that, unlike the former, the latter is characterised using modern



telecommunications – the internet, teleconferencing, and related technologies. The United States Distance Learning Association defines distance learning as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance.”

While the ODL system applies modern technology to extend education to those who would otherwise be excluded, its essential goal is to democratise education – to take education to the masses.

That the establishment of NOUN was well-motivated and timely executed is beyond dispute; that, for some reasons, it had to be left in the lurch for close to 20 years raises political issues beyond the scope of this discussion. Whatever the explanation, the negative impact of the prolonged period of inactivity on the university's administrative and academic well-being lingers. The suspension also made it possible for the government to take certain arbitrary decisions concerning NOUN without going through the regular educational channels, including, for instance, the regulatory supervision of the National Universities Commission (NUC), when the university was eventually restarted. These irregularities – combined with the usual teething problems of an ODL institution – created challenges that affected the smooth running of NOUN.

Again, due to the unique character of NOUN as an ODL institution, many of the staff currently serving in the university either veered from other disciplines/or came in from conventional institutions. This diversity of personnel appears to have been a huge asset to the university. Furthermore, the wisdom of inviting experienced academics and administrators from reputable conventional universities – as was done for many years – to serve as Professors, Deans, Heads of Department, Directors, and key administrators contributed immensely to the transformation of NOUN into one of the most reputable ODL institutions in the world.

The Privilege of Serving at NOUN

For any academic like me with initial training at a conventional institution, it is an honour and a privilege to share in the NOUN experience. In particular, my work and interaction with successive management teams of the university have been the most enriching experience of my academic career. I owe each of the Vice-Chancellors – Professors Olugbemi Jegede, Vincent Ado Tenebe, Abdalla Uba Adamu, and Olufemi Ayinde Peters – a debt of gratitude. At NOUN, I found my experience of almost three decades at the University of Ibadan not only handy, but also highly relevant. Indeed, it seems to me that most of the challenges that we confronted at NOUN were a replication of the same issues we used to tackle at the University of Ibadan.

Prospects

Today, despite the initial challenges, some of which persist in NOUN's operations, the story of the university remains one of enormous success. From an initial student enrolment of about 2000 at inception in 1983, the university has grown to as many as 500,000 students out of a total population of about 2 million students in all Nigerian universities, meaning that NOUN now accounts for roughly 25 percent of total student enrolment in Nigerian universities (federal, state-owned, and private). This exponential growth in ODL participation is a universal trend, driven mainly by the adoption of ICT and other technological innovations.

In comparison with NOUN, recent figures show that the Open University of the UK (OUUK) has over 200,000 students, far more than each of that country's conventional universities; UNISA's student population runs into several hundred thousands; Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU) of Pakistan has an enrolment of about 1.4 million; and Indira Gandhi National Open University of India has the largest student enrolment, estimated at 3 million.

Nationally, NOUN has moved to the forefront of Nigeria's efforts to develop human capital. There is nothing to suggest that this pace of



evolution will not continue in the years to come. The implications for the country's economic and social development are clear. The emphasis on mass education and human capital development places Nigeria on the same path that propelled Western nations and the Asian Tigers into modern development. As the university continues to play this strategic role, it will add value to Nigeria's worth and improve its capacity to tackle domestic challenges and compete more successfully on the international stage.

Stakeholders and investors in education, whether public or private, make decisions about how and where to invest based on a variety of factors, with value for money topmost among them. It is indeed the primary criterion that counts, whether the investment is purely for profit or for social responsibility. Of course, in the end, the decision on whether to invest depends on available resources. It is a fact that investment in the education sector in Nigeria has continued to decline substantially over the past 10 years, even as the total number of student enrolments has tripled. The implications for quality control should be obvious, given the proliferation of new state and private universities across the country.

Some studies have recently been conducted on education financing in Nigeria and the average cost of graduating a student in the nation's universities, both public and private. Some of the findings show the average price per student per year to be approximately N173,868 for students studying education; N291,237 for those in the humanities, management and social sciences; and N1,177,705 for students studying medicine and related professional courses. In private universities, the costs are more than double. These figures are by no means foolproof, yet they closely reflect the situation in the Nigerian education sector. NOUN's prospects in the near future derive from two major factors. First, the university's continued application of ICT enables easy access, storage and retrieval of data and information, thereby reducing the cost of research, teaching, and learning. The second factor is economies of scale, which means that, in a production activity, the larger the volume, the lower the unit cost. Therefore, as student enrolment at NOUN increases, the cost of producing a graduate in any discipline will continue to decline. That, I believe, is the greatest attraction of NOUN



to governments and, indeed, to all stakeholders and investors of public and private funds.

Furthermore, very few universities can boast of the calibre of students of the status and personality of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, who obtained his PhD from the university, or, indeed, the calibre of military officers, serving or retired; seasoned civil servants; politicians; professionals; and successful businessmen and women enrolled at NOUN. Mingling with these prominent personalities are students drawn from the lowest rungs of Nigerian society – petty traders, market women, peasant farmers, domestic servants, mechanics, drivers, and office messengers. Also peculiar to NOUN is the number of its students who are inmates serving various sentences in the Nigerian Correctional Service. Such is the diverse composition that gives the university its unique character.

There is hardly any experience more elating than that of a teacher finding his students almost everywhere he goes – in marketplaces, offices, airports, business circles, eateries, motor parks, correctional centres, etc. Wherever you go in Nigeria – and sometimes abroad – there is always a NOUN person to recognise and greet you. How wonderful, how fulfilling!

There can be no complete analysis of NOUN's tremendous achievements without mention of the current Vice-Chancellor, the ever-resourceful and innovative Professor Olufemi Peters, who has demonstrated outstanding competence in the delicate handling of this national treasure. Professor Peters, an accomplished academic and scholar in science, has proven to be an astute manager of human and material resources. His commitment to NOUN's aspiration to take education to Nigerians of all social categories – in the remotest parts of the country and at the lowest possible cost – is firm and unwavering. In furtherance of this goal, Professor Peters and all his Principal Officers travelled to Emevor in Isoko North Local Government Area of Delta State on 8 August 2024 to commission the permanent site of the Emevor Community Study Centre of NOUN, built solely through community efforts. Today, Professor Peters has transformed the



National Open University of Nigeria beyond belief in terms of infrastructure, programmes, staff and student population.

Conclusion

The Nigerian leaders who established NOUN in the 1980s were visionary men and women with a clear understanding of the role of education in social development. They recognised how ODL operated in other parts of the world and how the processes of research, teaching and learning were being transformed by the ICT revolution. Although NOUN had hiccups at the beginning, it has emerged today as Nigeria's flag-bearer in human capital development. Over 42 years after its establishment and 23 years after its resuscitation, NOUN's student enrolment has increased exponentially, and the institution now competes favourably with the best in the world in terms of both the quality and quantity of its output. Among NOUN's prospects is a continuous increase in the number of graduates produced annually. By implication, NOUN will continue to have a positive impact on the quality of life of Nigerians and on the nation's collective well-being.

While the future of NOUN remains bright, it faces numerous challenges, including inadequate funding. Since the 1990s, Nigeria's economic fortunes have declined, and the education sector has been one of the victims. Consequently, funds allocated to institutions of higher learning have dropped drastically. The economic downturn has also reduced Nigerians' ability to afford school fees for their children and wards. Together, these economic difficulties constitute a drag on the development of NOUN.

Despite these challenges, the story of the National Open University of Nigeria is one of unparalleled achievements. And I am proud to be a part of this success story.

