

Editorial

The onset of the COVID pandemic prompted educational institutions to shift to emergency, remote learning to limit the contagious effects of the disease and protect students, administrative staff and faculty. The shift to online and distance learning (ODL) was already underway, albeit in fits and starts. For example, the Government of Nigeria established the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2003 and the National Universities Commission approved dual mode delivery licenses at 12 universities in 2020 (Agbebaku and Majeji, this volume; UNAA, 2020). The pandemic accelerated and intensified these moves, which are likely to persist and expand in the post-pandemic period for several reasons. ODL expands educational access while controlling for cost. As Lucky (this volume) writes, ODL is perceived as a cost-effective alternative to traditional classroom teaching by substantially reducing the need for physical infrastructure like classrooms, providing access to e-textbooks and open educational resources, and cutting transportation costs for students. At the same time, given disruptions to economies and labour markets that result from the fourth industrial revolution students from across the age spectrum are expected to flow in and out of higher education institutions over multiple periods in their lifetime. ODL supports lifelong learning by embedding flexibility in course and program offerings and removing learning from a fixed place and time. Flexibility enables learners who do not conform to the conventional profile of a student cohort to access educational services including mature students, and unemployed and employed adult learners. Still, despite a hopeful outlook we are reminded of the constraints in integrating ODL across the West African region, including “internet poverty” (Cuaresma et al., 2021), a measure of the number of people who do not have access to the internet to the availability or prohibitive costs.

Given this context, it is wholly welcome that all but one article in this volume centre on ODL. From merits to challenges and numerous policy suggestions, featured authors present research on the complex and multifaceted issues surrounding ODL programming across Nigeria. Readers will notice nuanced differences across articles even as themes and theoretical frames overlap such as the two contributions that adopt human capital theory to rationalize the adoption of ODL. While applied to specifically the Nigerian context, readers will also appreciate that the issues examined are not limited to a single country context but have relevance for higher education systems in other parts of Africa and the Global South more broadly. This timely issue contributes to the

ongoing discussions and debates surrounding how to optimize digitalization and datafication in higher education systems to support student learning and sustainable economic growth.

Grace Anetor and Nwanganga Ubosi review the medical issues treated at an on-site health clinic at NOUN. They find the prevalence of six common conditions among university staff including (in descending order) malaria, common cold, abdominal pain, common cough, hypertension, and diarrhoea. This pattern of illnesses is consistent with conditions reported at other public sector institutions. The authors recommend that such clinics should increase the provision of drugs and equipment for early intervention and engage in preventative strategies through focused health education messaging (i.e. public hygiene) to support staff health and wellness. By skirting the issue of resource constraints that perennially delimit the capacity of public sector clinics to expand services, the authors imply that allocation decisions are a measure of both political will and capacity.

Amede Lucky and Leah Oni both use human capital theory to argue for expanding access to blended learning as a mechanism to support sustainable economic growth. Lucky calls for increased public sector funding to universities to establish and grow the infrastructure and tools for blended learning, and to empower Nigerian educators to effectively engage with students. In *“Open-Distance Learning Education: A Key to Human and National Development in Nigeria”* Oni asserts the positive value of education in national economic growth and the holistic development of individuals. The article details the importance of education as driver in national development and the role of education in expanding access to social services such as health care. For Oni, education constitutes a virtuous cycle that is fundamental to ensuring quality of life standards. On this point, the author affirms the capacity for ODL to provide more accessible education to willing students from broader socioeconomic backgrounds. While flexibility and reduced costs of ODL are lauded, Oni also acknowledges challenges, such as how ODL is vulnerable to faults in existing energy infrastructure and erratic electricity supplies, and costs remain prohibitive for many even when reduced. Scarcity of trained teaching and administrative staff, and widespread public perceptions of ODL as illegitimate or inferior to conventional universities also pose significant barriers to the expansion of ODL within Nigeria. Despite these obstacles, Oni remains confident that ODL is requisite for increased educational access, development of human resources, and national economic growth. As ODL

allows people to upgrade their skills without abandoning current employment, it supports industry and entrepreneurial growth. Policy suggestions put forth include efforts to shift public perception to recognize ODL as beneficial and legitimate, expert handling of courses with additional periodic reviews, and increased public sector flows to education with a focus on ODL, alongside additional investment in energy infrastructure.

In “*Determinants of Adults' Choice of Open and Distance Education: The National Open University of Nigeria Experience*,” **Temilola Apena** reaffirms many of the aforementioned claims including the argument that flexibility and reduced costs of ODL enable more students to access educational services. This quantitative study of 300 students attending the National Open University of Nigeria assumes that education promotes values, attitudes and capabilities that transform individuals and society. It looks at contributing factors affecting student motivations to enroll in ODL including age, marital status, sex, and employment. The author finds that ODL programs are preferred by male learners, persons 45 years or more, workers with full-time employment although they are careful to juxtapose these findings with earlier research in other contexts that both support and contradict their results. Apena recommends further research into adult learners' motives to inform learning design and delivery and improve educational quality and outcomes.

Umar Goni, Bulama Kagu, and Abubakar Hammon-Tukur are also interested in understanding ODL participants, but from a different perspective in “*Assessment of Variables Responsible for Distance Learning Students' Dropout from University of Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria*.” This article examines factors influencing student dropout and provides additional evidence of challenges among ODL communities. The paper first reaffirms the rapid growth of enrolment among adult learners thanks to the flexibility ODL affords and acknowledges that student drop out rates remain problematic. The authors argue that a high dropout rate is contrary to institutional interests, as retaining students costs significantly less than recruiting new ones. Moreover, as with previous articles, the authors acknowledge the adverse impact on national development resulting from high dropout rates, given that limited human resources are successfully developed while resources are expended. The authors contend that understanding the complex factors contributing to dropouts is necessary for productive development within educational institutions and nationally. Through surveys administered to students attending the University of Maiduguri, Borno State in northeastern Nigeria, the authors report that isolation, lack of access to staff, and negative interactions

with administrative processes, technology, and with teaching staff all contribute significantly to student decision-making. These are categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The former includes employment responsibilities, financial restraint, and low academic capability; the latter comprises insufficient support and isolation. The authors recommend a blended learning approach with regular face-to-face interactions to mitigate the sense of isolation experienced by students in ODL, and for staff to understand and respect student motivations – another significant overlap between issues addressed in this issue (see Apena mentioned above).

Research by **Henry Agbebaku and Enesi Majebi** on the influence of mode of facilitation on students' academic performance at the Apapa Study Center of NOUN overlaps with Goni et al's study on factors affecting dropout rates. Agbebaku and Majebi adopt a quantitative research design involving a survey using a Likert scale administered to 80 graduate and postgraduate students enrolled in eight faculties. While the authors suggest that, overall, the findings indicate the effectiveness of non-facilitated online learning, still some results are worth further investigation. This includes the finding that over 30 percent of students disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, “students are already getting use to NOUN style of non-face-to-face facilitation.” The authors recommend improvements in resourcing, including human, material and capital resources and communication between the parties including management, academic, and administrative staff and students to enhance effectiveness and efficiencies.

These contributions span the multiple levels involved in designing and delivering ODL. In different ways, these authors argue for governments to prioritize and support ODL, including blended and non-facilitated courses, as a cost-effective measure to expand educational access. This includes investing in digital infrastructure and devices, negotiating a regulatory framework for licensing online and dual mode institutional providers, and providing adequate resourcing. At the institutional level, universities offer various modes of programs, including conventional in-person, dual mode and fully online (both asynchronous and synchronous) courses. But to improve retention and graduation rates, it is incumbent on higher education institutions to be more responsive to student needs and address issues like, but not limited to, social isolation and academic support, as well as to build institutional capacity for delivering quality education. At the individual level, various factors motivate students' choice of programs including age, employment, marital status, sex,

and economic status. By addressing these determinants stakeholders can put into place measures to reduce gaps. This collection of articles begins to unpack the complexity at each of these levels, and the importance of understanding the differences and similarities across modes of delivery (in-person, online, blended) necessary to strategically target resources and capacity building programs that support student satisfaction and success.

Dr. Mona Ghali - Adviser; Higher Education, Commonwealth of Learning
Date: April - July 2021