



Open and Distance Learning (ODL): A Veritable Tool for Reaching the Unreached in Nigeria

By

Joy Eyisi

Department of Languages
National Open University of Nigeria
eyisijoy@yahoo.com

Philomena Elom

Department of English
University of Abuja
elomphilomena@gmail.com

Joy Eyisi Jr.

Department of Languages
and General Studies
Covenant University, Ota
joyejisijr@gmail.com

Frank Onuh

Department of English
University of Lagos, Akoka
frankonuonyeka@gmail.com

Chinonso Okolo

Department of English
and Literary Studies
University of Uyo,
Awka Ibom State
okoloprincewill@gmail.com

John O. Oparaduru

Department of
Educational Foundations
National Open University
of Nigeria
ooparaduru@noun.edu.ng

Adaobi Mac-Ozigbo

Department of Business Administration
National Open University of Nigeria
amacozigbo@noun.edu.ng

Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a critical part of modern education. This development is a result of technological advancement and increasing demand for skills retraining and upgrade. As compared to the traditional face-to-face classroom, open and distance education offers more flexible, free and easy access to students. Moreover, it has been proven over time that the conventional mode of education cannot cater for the entire student community, making open

and distance education very essential. ODL brings knowledge to those learners who are ordinarily neglected by the conventional learning setting such as traders, entrepreneurs, prison inmates, people living in isolated areas like islands, women whose culture or religion deprives of educational socialization, school dropouts, fulltime workers who want to further their education but are constrained by their jobs, and others. Hence, ODL offers a second chance and lifelong education for individuals while playing a crucial role in sustainable development. This paper examines the roles ODL plays in reaching the unreached in society with a view to encouraging its optimal deployment, in order to serve the educational needs of the masses.

Keywords: ODL, the Unreached, Flexible Learning, ICT, Lifelong Education

Abstrait

L'enseignement ouvert et à distance (ODL) est devenu un élément essentiel de l'éducation moderne. Ce développement est le résultat des progrès technologiques et de la demande croissante de recyclage et de mise à niveau des compétences. Par rapport à la classe traditionnelle en face à face, l'enseignement ouvert et à distance offre un accès plus flexible, gratuit et facile aux étudiants. De plus, il a été prouvé au fil du temps que le mode d'enseignement conventionnel ne peut pas répondre à l'ensemble de la communauté étudiante, ce qui rend l'enseignement ouvert et à distance très essentiel. L'ODL apporte des connaissances aux apprenants qui sont habituellement négligés par le cadre d'apprentissage conventionnel, tels que les commerçants, les entrepreneurs, les détenus, les personnes vivant dans des zones isolées comme les îles, les femmes dont la culture ou la religion prive de socialisation éducative, les décrocheurs scolaires, les travailleurs à temps plein qui veulent poursuivre leurs études, mais sont limités par leur emploi, et d'autres. Ainsi, ODL offre une seconde chance et une éducation tout au long de la vie aux individus tout en jouant un rôle crucial dans le développement durable. Cet article examine les rôles que joue l'ODL pour atteindre les exclus de la société en vue d'encourager son déploiement optimal, afin de répondre aux besoins éducatifs des masses.

Mots-clés : ODL, Les Non-atteints, Apprentissage Flexible, ICT, Education tout au long de la Vie

Introduction

The term 'open learning' describes the mode of education not constrained by age, gender, time, or location. It incorporates policies and practices that allow entry to learning with no or minimal barriers. Distance education, in contrast, is concerned with the separation of the teacher and the student. It is a process in which an institution packages learnable material with the view of helping one or more students to learn at a distance. Due to time and spatial restrictions between learners and teachers, it therefore requires that some kind of media and technology – like google classroom, pre-recorded videos and audios, zoom, e-library, etc. - be used for communication between them. From these explanations, it becomes clear that open learning is not the same as distance learning, as distance learning needs not be open at all.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a combination of both open learning and distance learning. It involves the deployment of a variety of media- print, electronic, and virtual for a wide range of learners who ordinarily are not catered for in conventional education. According to Uzoma (2018: 22), ODL creates an opportunity for all citizens, young and old, privileged and less privileged, to acquire education. Through open and distance education, a nation is able to develop its human capital, create more employment opportunities, create successful and spirited entrepreneurs with diverse skills and reduce poverty for national development. The system of conventional education does not accommodate some sections of society such as the fully employed, the aged, religiously segregated women, school dropouts, and the economically disadvantaged – all of which constitute the unreached. It is this gap that the ODL mode of delivery primarily takes care of. However, one major factor that has resulted in the wide spread of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), especially in Nigeria, is the issue of population. With a teeming population, it has become difficult to take care of our educational needs solely through the conventional mode. For instance, the statistics in Nigeria indicate that the formal system we have from primary to tertiary levels can no longer cope with the demands of learners. Currently, there are about 20 million children in over 41,000 primary schools. The national average teacher: pupil ratio is 1:45 with the highest at 1:94 in Yobe State and the lowest (1:20) in Anambra State (The Guardian, 2020). In the next academic years, about 37.5 million children will be in the primary school system, thereby having a

consequence on secondary school. This means that with 172 universities in Nigeria, presently serving less than 4 million students at the university level, more than 70 universities will be required at the rate of about 25 percent of admission from the yearly 1.9 million students seeking admissions through the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (ibid). Nigeria, therefore, needs significant investments in ODL. A cost system of instruction independent of space, pace, time, and location should be searched for and used for diverse learning situations: primary, secondary, tertiary, non-formal, and vocational education. Besides, there should be emphasis on enhanced education for all and life-long learning initiatives, using modern instructional and communication technologies. This paper examines the ways by which open and distance education could be deployed to reach members of public who are originally neglected by the traditional form of education.

The Origin and Spread of Open and Distance Learning

What is known today as Open and Distance Learning started as Distance Learning hundreds of years ago. The pioneer distance learning/distance education on record dates as far back as 1728, instructing students how to write in shorthand via lessons delivered to their homes weekly (Rosemary, 2015). However, postal service development in Europe and America gave rise to the true establishment of distance education as we know it today. The founders of distance education used the postal system, which was the best of their day, to open educational opportunities to people who wanted to learn but for different reasons could not attend traditional schools.

Distance learning began to gain wild acceptance in the 19th century, as the British newly established penny post empowered Isaac Pitman to offer shorthand instruction using correspondence (Britannica, 2020). In Germany, Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheidt set up distance education, also in the form of correspondence study; they taught language in Berlin. Correspondence study crossed the Atlantic in 1873 when Anna Eliot Ticknor founded a Boston-based society, which encouraged students to study at home. For 24 years, the Society to Encourage Studies at Home enrolled more than 10,000 students. Students of the classical curriculum, who were mostly women, communicated with teachers monthly. The teachers provided guided readings and regular tests.

H. S. Hermod of Sweden began teaching English by correspondence in 1886. In 1898, he founded Hermod's, which later became one of the most influential and largest distance teaching organizations in the world. Correspondence study continued to spread in Britain with the implantation of several correspondence schools, such as Skerry's College in Edinburgh in 1878 and University Correspondence College, in London, in 1887. That same period, the movement for university extension in the United States and England championed correspondence studies. Among the founding leaders were Illinois Wesleyan in 1877 and the University Extension Department of the University of Chicago in 1892. Illinois Wesleyan offered bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees as part of a programme adopted from the Oxford, Cambridge, and London model. Between 1881 and 1890, 750 students were attracted; and in 1900, nearly 500 students sought various degrees. However, concerns about the quality of the programme prompted a recommendation that it be terminated by 1906. Correspondence study was integral to the University of Chicago, with the creation of university extension departments in which Correspondence Teaching was among. The correspondence study department was successful, especially in the area of students enrollment. The department had 350 courses, and every year, 125 instructors taught 3,000 students. But enthusiasm for the programme declined within the University due to factors like funding.

In 1891, the University of Wisconsin announced a programme of correspondence study led by Frederick Jackson Turner. However, at the University of Chicago, faculty interest waned. Further, public response was minimal, and the programme was disbanded in 1899. Seven years later, the programme was reborn under a new, stronger correspondence study department within the university's extension division. Moody Bible Institute, founded in 1886, formed a correspondence department in 1901 that continues today, with a record of over one million students across the world.

The journey of ODL in Africa began during the colonial era when a few Africans enrolled as learners with overseas correspondence colleges. Most of this period witnessed the learners receiving their course packages, returned assignments, and correspondences overseas, through the post office. However, at the approach of independence, a number of these overseas correspondence colleges began to establish

clearinghouses in African countries with the purpose of both reducing the cost of postal correspondence to learners and accessing a larger market of correspondence education clients at independence. Along with this beginning of Open and Distance Learning in Africa, came in 1946, the establishment of the University of South Africa (UNISA) as the first and foremost open and distance learning institution in Africa. Initially, UNISA combined the promotion of its own courses with those of some overseas correspondence colleges. While it was possible to enroll for and obtain UNISA degrees and diplomas, opportunities were equally given to candidates to obtain degrees and diplomas from a few overseas correspondence colleges through UNISA.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was first established on 22 July 1983. This was due to the need to provide accessible quality tertiary education to the teeming unreached citizens. The activities of the University were suspended on 25 April 1984 resulting from the emergence of a new government but kicked back on 12 April 2001 with 32,400 pioneer students. Since then, the University has pursued its vision of providing functional, cost-effective, and flexible learning which adds life-long value for all who seek knowledge. Today, NOUN is the largest tertiary institution in Nigeria housing a diverse range of students from all walks of life, with an estimate of six hundred thousand. From the foregoing, it is obvious that the original target groups of open and distance education efforts were adults with occupational, social, and family commitments. These remain the primary targets today, although the system has continued to expand and accommodate new groups of students. With the speedy rate of acceptance of ODL, formal face-to-face teaching and learning is changing and giving way to ODL as a mainstream teaching and learning vehicle. Very soon, emphasis will no longer be on what mode a learner uses to study and graduate but on the main academic contents learned, skills, and transpersonal learning which is a major ingredient for the development of the skills needed in the 21st-century education.

Advantages of Open and Distance Learning

The growth and spread of Open and Distance Learning can be attributed to the following benefits:

- In comparison to the traditional classroom, open and distance education offers more freedom, flexibility, and easy access to

students, who can study when it suits them. ODL provides flexibility so the learner does not necessarily come to the university campus before he/she can learn. This is great for those with full-time jobs, housewives, and the older generation of students. Besides studying at their convenient time without compromising other engagements, students can also study at their own pace. Furthermore, there is the access of course content for students provided they have an internet connection.

- The main focus of ODL is on learners' needs. They learn what they need to learn. They can skip elements of the subject matter that they do not need, for instance, in their career path. In other words, they learn according to the goals they have set for themselves.
- ODL also creates job opportunities, as certificates obtained enhance job opportunities, thus increasing earning. Just as Frot (2017) posits, the greatest advantage of online learning is that the qualification you obtain at the end will be the same as that of a classroom student.
- Open and Distance Learning promotes self-discipline. Students take responsibility for their course of studies. They also learn to develop the techniques of self-motivation and time management. Each of these disciplines is of immeasurable value.
- Open universities maintain a close relationship with the industry and is especially helpful to those who cannot afford a regular university degree due to high cost.
- Worthy of mention is the fact that ODL gives students the opportunity to study and earn a living simultaneously. This is imperative, especially for individuals who belong to economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- ODL contributes to sustainable development through learning processes that transcend distance, gender, regional, cultural and socio-economic barriers.

Challenges of Open and Distance Education in Developing Countries

Irrespective of the benefits aforementioned, the ODL system of education, generally, suffers from challenges stemming from lack of serious advocacy, wrong perception of its ideals by a greater number of

the public, and poor time management, skills, and self-motivation on the part of students. In Developing countries, distance education is still in its infancy and early adoption stage. Apart from the general challenges, there are unique factors confronting the successful implementation of ODL in each developing nation. Nigeria, for instance, experiences the following:

Inconsistency in Electricity Supply: In Nigeria, a poor electricity supply is one of the primary challenges to the progress and advancement of most industries. Power supply all over the country is generally below average. If the electricity supply is not stable and constant, it would be difficult to keep safe ICT tools and facilities such as computers and their accessories, and smart/android phones functioning properly. This problem also denies the rural dwellers benefits of using ICT in their online studies.

Computer Illiteracy: Computer illiteracy is another factor militating against internet-driven education in Nigeria. This is due to a lack of training in the field among students and lecturers alike. Idowu & Esere (2013) have argued the fact that an average Nigerian university staffer is not computer literate, which is disappointing in this modern digital era.

Unstable Communication Networks: Just as in electricity supply, the communication network is sometimes poor. Limited or lack of internet connectivity impedes access to ODL since it affects students' studies in downloading study materials and attending to their examinations and tutor-marked assessments. This can be a source of discouragement to both students and teachers. Potential students domicile in rural areas are left out due to the total absence or weak communication networks.

Insufficient Funding: Substantial funding is key to the effective implementation of open and distance education. ICT-supported hardware, software, internet instructional materials, and other accessories require huge funding. Efficient use of technology depends on the availability of hardware and software and the equity of access to resources by teachers, students, and administrative staff.

There are other issues such as exorbitant rate of broadband internet connection, digital divide, quality assurance, political factors, high cost of electronic equipment, internet security, lack of relevant software, and many more. However, all hope is not lost as effective attention could be

paid to the management, coordination, quality assurance, and daily practical offerings of ODL by relevant stakeholders. The government of Nigeria could also review all policies related to open and distance learning and provide the necessary infrastructure to back them up so that the standard of this mode of delivery can be raised to the highest level.

Open and Distance Learning: A Veritable Tool for Reaching the Unreached in Nigeria

A. Who Are the Unreached?

Kanwar (2016) defines the unreached in education as those groups of people who either have no access to education or have dropped out of school and therefore cannot fully contribute to the economic and social development of society. They include those that are located in remote regions without educational facilities or those too poor or too busy to afford education.

In some cultures in Nigeria, women are educationally unreached. They are denied access to education because of cultural considerations like early marriage or the fact that a woman is expected to marry and leave her father's house. Although the non-education of the girl-child is fast becoming a historical discourse, Iwuchukwu (2013) argues that women are still being denied access to education because of religious inclinations as obtained in some Islamic families. Another group of women unreached are those who were denied education opportunities early in life, who still yearn for education, but cannot go back to the formal classroom because of their age and lack of time. Then comes another set who are in confinement because of their religious practice, such as Muslim women in purdah who live in seclusion and cover their faces.

Another category of the unreached are nomadic farmers; they move from place to place, year in year out in search of fresh pastures to sufficiently feed their animals like cattle, sheep, goats, horses, camels, and donkeys. Nomadic pastoralism is found in arid or semi-arid areas, with countries like Somalia, Algeria, India, Kenya, and Nigeria practicing it. In Nigeria, for example, a large percentage of the population engages in nomadic farming; the farmers are predominantly from the northern region of the country. Their lifestyle creates a barrier

to formal education and therefore contributes to the high rate of illiteracy in the region. ODL could be a viable tool in offering them formal education.

Every nation has persons with special needs; Nigeria is not left out. They include the visually impaired, the lame, the deaf, and those who suffer from Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Visual impairment means the inability of a person to perceive light. A person can be partially sighted, have low vision, or blind. None of these affects the person's mental and cognitive abilities. Hearing impairment, on the other hand, means a complete or partial loss of the ability to hear any sound from one or both ears. The level or degree of impairment can be mild, moderate, severe, or profound. ASD is a complex neurobiological disorder of development that lasts throughout the person's life and causes delays or problems in many different skill areas. These disabilities or handicaps cause disadvantage that prevents or limits individuals from fulfilling their educational needs. For instance, while the lame are constrained by mobility, the deaf have been deprived of the interactions and conversations typical of the traditional classroom. A small fortunate portion of these individuals is enrolled in special education where particular machinery and techniques are deployed for their knowledge acquisition, whereas a greater number are deprived of education due to their impairments.

Prison inmates constitute another group of the unreached in Nigeria. These are people who are normally denied education due to their condition of living. Again, due to the high number of candidates who seek admission yearly in our higher education, a large number of candidates are turned down as a result of inadequate space in conventional universities.

Open and Distance Learning provides the educational needs of these groups of people, who are ready to build or upgrade their educational qualifications for different purposes.

B. Ways Open and Distance Learning Reaches the Unreached in Nigeria

Open and Distance Learning deploys certain machinery and technology to ensure the availability of education across genders, time, space, and

many more. To reach the unreached as well as provide individualized support to its learners, some ODL universities have a large number of study centres, spread throughout their countries of origin. The National Open University of Nigeria is a good example with over seventy-five study centres founded across the nation. At the study centres, the learners interact with their facilitators/supervisors and other learners, refer to books in the library, watch/listen to video/audio programmes and interact with staff on academic matters. These study centres serve as mini-campuses. The methodology of instruction in this mode is different from that of the conventional mode of education. The distance education system is more learner-oriented and the learner is an active participant in the pedagogical process. Most of the instructions are imparted through distance education methodology and, sometimes, face-to-face mode via facilitation.

One major characteristic of ODL is that it employs a variety of media- print, electronic, and virtual- in its quest to help the learner learn as much as possible. Tools such as computer conferencing on the internet where teachers and students present texts, audios, and videos for academic activities are used. File sharing and communication tools such as emails, chats, audio, and video conferencing are all part of the internet model. These media can serve as a viable means to reach the educationally disadvantaged in our society. With the increasing accessibility of computers, android/smartphones and the internet, learning is just a click away. ODL can reach these groups successfully if utilised efficaciously. It can train thousands of young people in various trades and skills, as witnessed at the National Open University of Nigeria. There is no doubt that continuous adoption would salvage the problem of unemployment in the country. Rosemary (2015) lists a multimedia approach which open and distance education system follows for instruction, comprising: a) Self-instructional written material, b) Audio-visual material aids, c) Counselling sessions, d) Teleconferences, and e) Practical/Project work. This approach ensures learner-centeredness and quality assurance.

Countries like India and the United Kingdom bear witness to the impact of ODL on prison inmates. For instance, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India has shown how quality distance education can reach the unreached in jail. Kanwar (2016) reports that over 500 jail inmates at Tihar jail can access education and receive visits

from IGNOU faculty and counsellors, thrice a week. This is similar to the case of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) where special study centres are established at prisons to cater for the higher education needs of the inmates. The study centres include Special Study Centre, Kuje Prisons, Abuja; Special Study Centre Nigerian Prisons, Umudike, Anambra State; Special Study Centre Nigerian Prisons, Kirikiri Maximum Prisons Lagos; and Special Study Centre, Nigerian Prison Services, Port Harcourt. Although the development is enjoyed by a handful of prisons in Nigeria, it is the dream of NOUN to extend it to all prisons in the thirty-six states of the federation. Singh (2013) has held that this would provide both academic and emotional support as well as help to empower learners for future rehabilitation.

Worthy of note is that ODL also provides education to the physically handicapped, another group of the unreached. For instance, the Open University of Tanzania (OUT)'s "Assistive Special Technologies" helps students with physical disabilities. This has enabled persons with visual impairment to communicate with those with hearing disabilities, after acquiring ICT skills. Kuyini et al (2015) observes that with electronic technology, the blind can function very well with the help of a computer, Perkins Braille JAWS, Slate, and stylus, talking watch, and talking scientific calculator. It is interesting to note that blind children in Ghana have started doing mathematics and science at the basic education level and compete favourably with their sighted counterparts at the WASSCE. This could be replicated at the tertiary level. Besides, since ODL delivers education at the doorstep, students with paralysis are not left behind due to difficulty in mobility.

As upheld by Biao (2012), the Department of Distance Learning at Makerere University, Uganda, has deployed an amazing mobile phone-based application in assisting research supervision by students who learn and study far away. Not only have they addressed a challenging issue of limited collaboration between the distance learner and the supervisor, but the Department is also taking learning further. This application could be deployed by other ODL institutions in remedying the problems associated with non-physical interaction between students and instructors/supervisors.

In the Nigerian case, our experiences just as in other developing

countries have shown that conventional education is extremely hard-pressed to meet the demands of today's socio-educational milieu. The good news is that the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has not only provided opportunities for those who could not afford to leave their job to attain conventional education but also created a wider learning opportunities for the teeming population. The revised National Policy on Education (2004) detailed that the goals of distance education should be to:

- provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied;
- meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace;
- encourage internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula;
- ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work. (Cited in Jimoh, 2013: 2)

Some of these goals are being met by the National Open University of Nigeria and other ODL friendly institutions like the National Teachers' Institute. Dual-mode universities have also grown in number and have begun to flourish, contributing in large measures to meeting the educational need of the country. Although certain challenges confront the successful implementation of some, there is no doubt that the primary objective of reaching the unreached is partly achieved. Concerning the physically challenged, Angba (2020:12) upholds that “open and distance education can accommodate the disabled maximally if stakeholders can invest in educational facilities and curriculum that promotes easy teaching and learning for interested students with disability in Nigeria.”

Conclusion

Considering the challenges of education both in developing and developed nations, it is not surprising that ODL is now seen as a crucial new approach in making a significant contribution to resolving problems of equity, quality, and access in Nigeria. When conventional methods cannot meet the demands, it becomes necessary to look for new ways. As portrayed in this paper, ODL helps to widen the education base for all kinds of students. In Nigeria, it reaches out to people who would

otherwise have remained educationally disadvantaged. Having established the efficacy of distance education, the onus is on ODL stakeholders to employ well-designed and well-managed distance education programmes to produce fruitful learning outcomes. Unfortunately, in developing economies such as ours, the potentials of ODL are not fully milked. In concert with this, Kanwar (2016) observes that if all institutions are judged according to the same benchmarks, there is less likelihood of open and distance learning being considered second rate. The problem, in the Nigerian context, could be ascribed to factors like- lack of quality assurance, epileptic power supply, illiteracy in the use of the internet, poor advocacy, inadequate commitment on the part of students, and lack of political will, which constitute barriers to ODL-driven education in the country. Regardless of these challenges, ODL in recent times has demonstrated the ability to reach the unreached such as the physically challenged, women, prison inmates, school dropouts, the aged, and the fully employed. These groups of people can be reached through a multi-media approach and learner support policies.

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