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UNRAVELING THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA (NOUN)

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Abstract

In spite of the laudable objective of National Open University of Nigeria, it has not gained wider acceptability in the country due to the suspected low quality of learning, unethical practice and lack of parity of esteem with the conventional undergraduate degree programs. This has made parents and prospective candidates not to have interest in the operation of NOUN. This therefore, prompted the investigation into historical antecedents and challenges of NOUN. Historical research type was adopted for the study. Population of the study included Directors of study centres, administrative staff, facilitators, and students. The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary source of data including proforma, printed documents from the institution's website and questionnaire, while secondary source of data were past thesis, textbooks and journals. Two research questions were raised and answered. Data collected were analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings revealed that in order to solve the problem of accessibility to university education which has provided in multiplier effects on social problems such as unemployment, armed robbery, kidnapping, tribalism, ethnicity, prostitution and exploitation of prospective candidates by the private Universities, the Federal Government of Nigeria therefore adopted National Open University of Nigeria and Distance Education. The study also revealed that the gap between policy and practices, inadequacy of facilities, lack of counseling services, delay in release of result, delay in the payment of entitlements and benefits of facilitators and poor electricity supply are major challenges faced by National Open University of Nigeria. The study recommended that the Ministries of Education both at state, federal and local governments should begin to play a role in the development of open and distance learning education. This is a veritable tool for poverty reduction and boost in literacy level among Nigerians among others.

Keywords: Unraveling, Historical Antecedents, Challenges, National Open University of Nigeria

Introduction

Many scholars define distance education differently. According to Sherry (1996), components that are included in a definition includes: a learning process, the teacher and the learners are separated in terms of space and time; communication between the two is mediated by print media or ICT; and learning is under the control of the learner rather than the teacher. This definition demands an effective distance learning to be supported and that learners might rely on both paper and pencil and ICT technologies, collaboration within themselves and developing their study skills (UNESCO, 2002).

Braimoh (2015) conceived open and distance learning practice as the educational delivery through non-conventional face-to-face method but with similar and practical goals as those of the on-campus full-time. Adelakun (2010), however, established that distance learning practice can be discussed using a wide range of indices such as policy statement, objectivity, curricular and institutional offering, students support services, study centre, staff and management/administration. In the same vein, NOUN (2013a) stated that conditions for effective practice of distance learning in Nigeria are institutional support, pedagogy design and delivery, learner, technological, faculty and staff supports as well as evaluation and review. The findings of Hope (2005) also reveals that the success of dual-mode distance education lies in the organizational culture, programme planning and development, teaching, learning and student support , planning and management of resources.

According to NOUN (2013a) by operational modality, distance education providing institutions in Nigeria are classified into single and dual-mode. The former refers to the institutions that are independent, dedicated and autonomous in their operation, while the latter are those that have distance education integrated with the conventional programme. The NUC (2009) guidelines identified the six accredited dual-mode universities with limited capacities to deliver degree by distance learning in addition to the conventional face-to-face mode as the University of Lagos Distance Learning Institute (DLI); the University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre (DLC); the University of Abuja Centre for Distance Learning and Continue Education (UNIABUJA CDLCE); Obafemi Awolowo University Centre for Distance Learning (OAUCDL); Centre for Distance Learning, University of Maiduguri; and Centre for Distance Learning, Federal University of Technology (Yola CDLFUTY)

DLI had nine study centres in Lagos, Ilorin, Kano, Kaduna, Abuja, Owerri, Enugu, Ife, Benin and Akure. The principal models of instruction employed by DLI are:

1. Correspondence course materials prepared by a subject specialist and distributed to the learners through the study centres after the materials have been edited, moderated and published.

2. Face-to-face contact session which is sub-divided into the induction course, long vacation course, study centre meeting, week-end seminars and the period of practical field work.

Broadcasting on radio network, according to Aderinoye (1995), is an important element of the media support services of the correspondence and open studies unit of the University of Lagos. DLI effectively engaged the services of Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria to broadcast and popularize the academic activities of the institution throughout the country. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) allocated 3 days of 15 minutes slot per week between 10-15 P.M.-10-30 P.M. on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays. The instructional strategy adopted by the UIDLC was multi-media, with fully print-based correspondence course materials and occasional face-to-face lectures at study centres. The materials are written by lecturers teaching same courses to conventional students. The distance students were then expected to have a face- to -face contact sessions at weekends at the study centre for at least twelve weeks before a two-week intensive tutoring session at the parent institution at University of Ibadan (Ojokheta).

Despite the adoption of National Open University of Nigeria as a policy option by the federal government of Nigeria to widen access to university education, the situation analysis of the programme carried out by the National Universities Commission revealed that the practice by dual-mode Universities is deficient as they are in transition from the running of part-time sandwich courses to distance learning. Also, though, learner support services is the backbone of distance education practice, Ipaye (2007), observed that they are hardly available in most conventional universities. They become dual without seeing the need for them in the distance education format they introduce. In view of this, the present study intends to trace historical antecedent of National Open University of Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The National Open University and Distance Education, was adopted by the federal government to provide more access and equitable educational opportunities to those who otherwise would have been denied access to university education. In spite of the noble objective of this initiative, the programme has not gained general acceptability in the country due to suspected low quality of learning, unethical practices and lack of parity of esteem with the conventional undergraduate programmes. Therefore, most parents and prospective candidates do not have interest in the operation of National Open University of Nigeria. However, previous studies on distance education in Nigeria largely focused on retention and failure of the programme, the transformation of distance education in Nigeria, evolution and challenges of Open and Distance Education. For instance, the Changing Pattern of University Education in West Africa; Analysis of ICT Competencies among Distance Learning Students in Selected Study Centres of the National Open University of Nigeria and National Open University of Nigeria. However, in all these research works, little or no efforts have been geared towards historical perspective and challenges. In view of this, the present study therefore intends to trace the historical antecedent of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to focus on historical antecedent of National Open University of Nigeria.

- To trace the trends in historical antecedents of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) before 2003?
- To examine the challenges confronting National Open University of Nigeria?

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions would be answered;

- What were the trends in the historical antecedents of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) before 2003?
- What were the challenges confronting National Open University of Nigeria?

Method

Historical research method was adopted for this study. This is because the researcher investigated and explained past events concerning NOUN education in Nigeria. According to Osokoya (1996), historical research involves investigating, recording, analyzing and interpreting the events of the past for the purpose of making generalizations that are helpful in understanding the past, the present and to a limited extent, in anticipating the future.

Population of this study includes state coordinators, coordinators of study centres facilitators, administrative staff and students that are stakeholders in the National Open University of Nigeria's Undergraduate Degree Programmes. The cluster sampling technique was used to divide Nigeria along six geo-political zones (North-West, North East, North-Central, South-East, South-West and South-South). While simple random sampling techniques would be used to pick one state for each of the geo-political zones. That is, Kaduna State for the North-West, Adamawa State for the North-East, Kwara State for the North-Central, Imo state for the South-East, Ogun State for the South-West while Edo State for the South-South.

The simple random sampling technique was also used to pick two Study Centres in each of the selected state capitals in six geo-political zones in Nigeria. These State Study Centres included Ilorin Study Centre, Ogun Study Centre, Kaduna Study Centre, Yola Study Centre, Benin Study Centre and Owerri Study Centre. The convenience sampling technique was considered suitable to pick 20 Facilitators and 60 Students in each of the study centres of National Open University of Nigeria. Because convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where units are selected for inclusion in the sample. It is the easiest for the research to access. This can be due to geographical proximity. While purposive sampling technique would be appropriate to select 1 State Coordinator in each of the twelve (12) study centres. Purposive sampling technique would also be used to pick 10 Directors in NOUN's headquarters and 10 Administrative Staff in each of the selected study centers whose work schedules are related to the study. The total number of the respondents for the study would be 982.

The researcher personally visited the National Open University of Nigeria Study Centers for official documents and administration of questionnaire. Other places of visit were Federal Ministry of Education and National University Commission (NUC). With regard to the secondary data, the researcher made use of relevant textbooks, journals, articles, thesis and reports on National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Data collected were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative method.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What were the historical antecedents of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)?

The concept of an open university in Nigeria has been under consideration by the National Universities Commission (NUC), the regulatory body for all universities in the countrysince 1976. During the Fourth National Development Plan (1981–1985), the NUC submitted a memorandum to the Federal Military Government recommending the establishment of an autonomous open university. This recommendation was subsequently approved by the Federal Government.

The Higher Education Division of the Ministry promptly began planning the establishment of an open university and its integration into Nigeria's existing educational framework. On April 14, 1980, Professor Gabriel Afolabi Ojo, from the Department of Geography at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), was appointed Chairman of the Presidential Planning Committee for the National Open University. The Committee was formally inaugurated by the Federal Government on May 1, 1980.Other members of the Committee included Professor A. E. Afigbo of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Dr. Aminu Dorayi of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Mr. E.C.C. Uzodinma initially served as Secretary, later succeeded by Mr. Olamogoke.

The Committee was given the following terms of reference:

- To define the educational functions of the proposed university and recommend the appropriate structure for their implementation;
- To develop guidelines for the university's long-term growth and development;
- To design an operational plan aimed at achieving an enrolment target of 100,000 students within five years;
- To explore effective methods for utilizing radio, television, correspondence courses, and face-to-face instruction in achieving the university's objectives, and propose practical recommendations;
- To undertake any other assignments that would support the successful execution of its mandate.

The Committee submitted its first report in October 1980. This report included a draft bill for the establishment of the University, which was subsequently approved by the Federal Government. The National Open University Bill was forwarded to the National Assembly on 16th July 1981. In the same month, the Presidential Planning Committee organized a Course Materials Production Workshop. The primary objective of the workshop was to develop instructional materials based on the syllabuses of various courses. These materials were intended for delivery through multiple channels, including correspondence texts, audio and video cassettes, radio and television broadcasts, face-to-face instruction, and student assessment tools.

The workshop focused primarily on the development of Foundation Year programmes, which were designed to be general in scope and serve as a permanent feature of the University's educational services. It brought together selected academics and media professionals to collaborate with experts in distance education from within and outside Nigeria. This collaboration laid the groundwork for comprehensive course development, including course design, writing, production, packaging, and delivery. Within a year, course developers produced a 44-page booklet outlining the Foundation Year programmes and relevant courses. The content was organized into Modules and Units each Module covering a major topic, while each Unit addressed a sub-topic, representing the volume of work an average student could complete in a week. The instructional materials included correspondence lecture notes, supplemented by radio and television broadcasts, follow-up exercises, and suggested readings.

Professor Gabriel Afolabi Ojo, Chairman of the Presidential Planning Committee, was appointed as the University's first Vice-Chancellor on 1st September 1981. On 23rd June 1983, the Senate and House of Representatives ratified the bill, and it received Presidential Assent on 22nd July 1983. The law was subsequently gazetted on 27th July 1983 as the National Open University Act, No. 6 of 1983, providing the legal framework for the University's existence. Beginning in January 1984, the first lectures under six thematic areas were broadcast weekly. These lectures, aired between 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. by the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), quickly gained national attention and received widespread acclaim. Requests for repeat broadcasts were sent directly to the University and through FRCN and NTA.

The University operated through Study Centres located across the country. Study Centre Managers were appointed to oversee student enrolment and the distribution of instructional materials. At inception, the University had a nascent Senate comprising ten professors and about fifteen other academic staff, along with a small administrative team. Alhaji Aliyu Obaje, the Attah of Igalaland, served as Chancellor, while Alhaji Shuaibu Na'ibi, the Madakin Suleja, was the Pro-Chancellor. The Acting Registrar was Alhaji H. A. Erubu. Between March and April 1984, around 20,000 prospective students purchased application forms at a non-refundable fee of ₦10. The University

also launched its inaugural lecture series in the 1984/85 academic session, with the first lecture delivered by Vice-Chancellor Professor Ojo on 24th April 1984.

However, on 25th April 1984, the University's operations were unexpectedly suspended. This suspension was announced by the then Military Head of State, Major-General Muhammadu Buhari, during a national budget speech. The closure created a vacuum in the field of distance education, prompting several conventional universities to establish 'satellite' and 'outreach' campuses across the country. These satellite campuses, often operating without approval or licensing from the National Universities Commission (NUC), raised serious concerns about academic standards particularly as many were run from makeshift facilities. In response, the NUC called for the closure of all satellite campuses and advocated for the revival of the Open University system.

Following these recommendations, a National Workshop on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Policy was held in September 2001. The workshop resulted in two key outcomes:

1. The adoption of a National Policy on Open and Distance Education, incorporated into Nigeria's National Policy on Education.
2. The decision to revive the National Open University, now renamed the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

As a first step, a Course Materials Development Workshop was held at the Confluence Beach Hotel, Lokoja, in March 2002. This workshop facilitated the development of study materials for the initial set of courses. Following this, the first cohort of academic and non-academic staff was recruited, and Professor Olugbemiro Jegede was appointed National Coordinator of the National Open and Distance Learning Programmes. On 15th October 2003, Professor Jegede was confirmed as the substantive Vice-Chancellor of NOUN. The University commenced full academic operations in 2004 with approximately 9,700 students at its headquarters located at 14–16 Ahmadu Bello Way, Victoria Island, Lagos, and across 23 study centres nationwide. In March 2016, the central operations of the University were relocated to Plot 91, Cadastral Zone, University Village, Jabi, Abuja (FCT) its current permanent site.

Research Question 2: What are the challenges confronting Undergraduate Degree Programmes of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)?

Table 1: challenges confronting the effective implementation of the undergraduate programmes of NOUN.

S/N	*Statements*	*A (F (%)*	*D F(%)*
1.	Poor programme and policy implementation	858(88.4)	112(11.5)
2.	Inadequacy of Media Technologists for Instructional Delivery	763(78.7)	207(21.3)
3.	Delay in the payment of entitlements of facilitators and examiners	721(74.3)	249(25.7)
4.	Erratic Electricity Supply	622(64.1)	248(35.8)
5.	Inadequate Counseling Services	808(82.4)	169(17.5)
6.	Poor Administration	664(68.5)	306(31.6)
7.	Cost of Distance Education	665(68.6)	305(31.4)
8.	Inadequate Facilities	814(83.9)	156(16.1)
9.	Delay of Results	721(74. 3)	249(25.7)
10.	Lack of government funding	689(71)	281(29)
11.	Poor Administration	730(75.2)	240(24.7)
12.	High Cost of Technology	702(72.4)	268(27.6)
13.	Gap between policy and practice	914(94.3)	56(5.7)

Table 2 showed that the gap between policy and practice was one of the greatest challenges faced by National Open University of Nigeria at 94.3% of the respondents agreed that it was a challenge to National Open University of Nigeria. 88.4% of the respondents against 11.5% agreed that poor programme and policy implementation affect undergraduate degree programme of National Open University of Nigeria. 83.9% of respondents indicated that Inadequate Facilities was a challenge facing National Open University of Nigeria. Also, majority of the respondents (82.4%) indicated that inadequate counseling services was the part of challenge faced undergraduate degree programmes of National Open University of Nigeria. Inadequacy of Media Technologists for Instructional Delivery was one of the challenges faced by National Open University of Nigeria as indicated by the respondents

at 78.7%. 75.2% of the respondents also agreed that poor administration was a major challenge faced by National Open University of Nigeria. 74.3% of the respondents agreed against 25.7% that delay of results contributed to one of challenges faced by National Open University of Nigeria. The table also showed that 74.3% of the respondents agreed that Delay in the payment of entitlements of facilitators and examiners was one of the challenges faced by National Open University of Nigeria.

Discussion of the Findings

This finding in research question 1 indicated that in order to solve the problem of accessibility to university education which has provided multiplier effects on social problems such as unemployment, armed robbery, kidnapping, tribalism, ethnicity, prostitution and exploitation of prospective candidates by the private Universities, the Federal Government of Nigeria therefore adopted National Open University of Nigeria and Distance Education. This finding is in line with the research work of Ambe-Uva (2007) who established that narrowing of access to education led to the emergence of Open University in Nigeria to salvage the promise of education only to be choked prematurely to death. It's subsequent re-emergence points to its imperative in salvaging the demand for placement in the universities in Nigeria. He added further that the review attests to this promise, despite the ups and downs and argues that the revitalisation of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) by the government has the potential to widen access and become a rallying point for higher education in Nigeria.

The findings in table 1 revealed that the gap between policy and practices, inadequacy of facilities, lack of counselling services, delay in release of result, delay in the payment of entitlements and benefits of facilitators and poor electricity supply are major challenges faced by National Open University of Nigeria. The finding is in line with the study of Uva Ambe (2007) who identified the following as challenges confronting National Open University of Nigeria:

Problems of distance education include irregular electricity supply, lack of libraries, inequality in the society, cost of distance education, drop-out rate, poor societal perception, lack of counselling services to Distance Education students, lack of qualified tutors with e-learning teaching skills, deficiency of postal services, and infrastructure.

Conclusion

Distance Learning (Distance Education) is the advent of Open Education which crystallized into Open University. According to UNESCO (2002), any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print, is classified as distance education.

This paper has outlined the historical antecedents of the Open University system in Nigeria. It has drawn attention to the lack of concerted and coordinated efforts and firm policy framework on the part of the government in the past years. But it has also reminded us of the possible benefits and future outcomes with the revitalisation of the scheme. It must be noted that, though collaborative efforts between the government and nongovernmental organization are eminently required.

Recommendations

i. Ministries of Education both at state, federal and local governments should begin to play a role in the development of open and distance learning education. This is a veritable tool for poverty reduction and boost in literacy level among Nigerians.

ii. Poor funding constitutes a big challenge to open and distance learning education in Nigeria. Government should consider budgeting reasonable allocation of resources to NOUN.

iii. E-learning requires ICT to function; government and relevant stakeholders should consider investing their resources in the NOUN.

iv. NOUN should comply with the NUC guidelines to ensure parity of esteem with conventional universities and not to be seen as 'last option' for students that are unable to secure admission into the conventional universities.

v. NOUN graduates should be included in the National Youth Service Scheme as stipulated by law and as applicable to other tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

vi. There should be regular electricity supply, libraries, equality in the society.

vii. More study centers should be established to ensure more accessibility and remove the cost of distance education.

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