

Challenges of Open Distance Learning Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

The quest for university education has led to the increased demand for Open Distance Learning Options in Nigeria, moreso when the Conventional Universities have very limited enrolment spaces. However, many of the ODL students were faced with Challenges in pursuit of the programme which results in lower completion rates. This research work examined the influence of these challenges on the ODL students completion rate. Descriptive survey reseach design was used for the study. It covers all Business Education students in the ODL programme of the National Open Unviersity of Nigeria (Ilorin Study Centre) and the Unviersity of Ilorin. The study sample covered all 155 final year Business Education students in the programme. A researcher designed instrument entitled "Challenges of Business Education Students in Open Learning Distance Learning Programe Questionnaire" (CBESODLP) was used to gather data for the study. Adequacy of teaching materials was measured with how participating students view supply and provision of materials as well as preparation of school authority for the programme, while programme methodology was measured with timing of the programme wether it conflicts with their primary jobs or not. One research question and two hypotheses were raised, and analysed. The researcher used descriptive statistic to answer the research question and chi-square to analyse the hypotheses raised. The result of the analysis indicated a high completion rate in Marketing programme (95%) and Office Management and Technology (86%) while Accounting had a lower completion ate (68%). The two hypotheses raised were rejected, signalling a significant difference between adequate teaching materials and students' completion rate. The study concluded that, adequate as well as relevant affordable teaching materials and student-friendly programme methodology are important to successful completion of Business Education Programmes in the Open Distance Learning of the two institutions in Ilorin.

Keywords: Synchronous, Asynchronous Blended Learning, Hybrid Learning

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Introduction

Distance learning involves acquiring knowledge remotely devoid of regular face-to-face interaction with a teacher in the classroom. Such methods have its roots in learning by correspondence where students engage with learning materials in the comfort of their homes. These materials are provided by the institutions or the learning provider directly to the student or accessed via the internet. Virtual learning environment are employed for tutorial support through the use of telephone, email or other electronic gadgets.

Distance learning, education and instruction are usually delivered on an individual basis to students who may be widely scattered in different locations. In open and distance learning, time and distance separated learners who could not attend traditional schools. Atueji, (2015) was of the view that, the soaring popularity of distance learning in Nigeria was a result of increasing population and the upward demand for education at all levels and the challenges associated with school access call for a more enduring and practicable means of educating Nigerian citizens. Accessibility to traditional education is becoming very difficult and an alternative platform to access education must be put in place. This was well observed by Jonathan (2014) when he said “National Open University of Nigeria was established to provide improved access to many eligible candidates who are constrained by the limited space in the conventional universities”. He observed further that, the carrying capacity of conventional universities in the country is paltry 400,000 of the more than 1,500,000.

The Education policy in Nigeria provides for lifelong learning through distance education (FGN, 2004). Nigeria has the largest black population in the world with literacy level at below 60 percent therefore adopted Open and Distance education as means of achieving its developmental goals and objectives.

The US Career Institute (2001) attached great benefits to Distance Learning in that being self-paced allows students to study and master materials given to them quickly. Students can study these materials wherever they are and whenever they want, thus removing the fear of losing employees to the classroom during training.

Those whose job involves extensive travelling from one place to another like military families can pursue their courses wherever their lives take them through individualized instruction. Distance education courses are affordable since it often cost less than traditional courses both to the learner and the institution that offer distance learning since

the cost of running and maintaining a campus are eliminated so these savings are passed on to the student, and finally, students could still hold on to their jobs or alter their personal schedules to accommodate their business engagements.

History of Distance Learning Education

Sir Isaac Pitman introduced the first distance education course in the modern sense in 1840; students will then return transcriptions from the texts for correction.

The University of London established its External Programme in 1858. Enrolment into the programme rose steadily in the late 19th century leading to its replication in some other places. The programme runs Postgraduate, Undergraduate and Diploma degrees courses and it is currently called University of London International Programme.

University of Chicago was the first to develop the concept of extended education in the United States by establishing satellite campuses of Colleges of Education in many communities. The University runs correspondence school courses to further promote education. In 1888, the International Correspondence Schools Scranton, Pennsylvania provided training for 2,500 immigrant coal miners who desired to be promoted to the position of Mine Inspectors or Foreman. By 1894, total enrolment had reached 900,000 students. The International Correspondence School was successful because it produced and distributed to students complete textbooks instead of single lessons. It also used large number of aggressive salesmen.

In Australia, the Department of Correspondence Studies was established by Queensland University in 1911, while University of South-African started its present distance education programme in 1946. In Nigeria, University of Ibadan proposed distance education in 1972 to be anchored by the Department of Adult Education. In 1976 the proposal was approved by the University Senate. The National University Commission gave its approval afterwards on the condition that it would be a self-financing programme. The Distance Learning Programme of the university started as External Degrees before it was renamed External Studies Programme in 1988. It offers courses leading to the award of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree. The name was changed to Distance Learning Centre in 2002 to reflect the level of distance learning components of various courses offered by the Centre and has graduated over 4,000 students since its inception.

The University of Ibadan Distance Learning programme is the same as that offered for full-time students. The difference is only to meet the needs of working class students whose schedules, distance and financial condition may not allow them to embark on full-time studies at the University.

These students were given study packs which they read at their convenience, and communicate regularly with their teachers. They also come into residence six weeks in a year for revision and examinations.

Institutions in Nigeria that have since embarked on distance education include:

- Ahmadu Bello University, through Correspondence and Teachers' In-Service Programme has been producing middle level teachers for Nigerian Primary Schools since 1976
- The University of Lagos Correspondence and Open Studies Unit was established in 1974 to produce University graduates in disciplines necessary to meet national labour market.
- The National Teachers' Institute (NTI) was the first Nigerian independent institution dedicated to distance education, it was established to help upgrade teachers working in public primary schools across the country, majority of who are unqualified in preparation for the take off of the Universal Primary Education in 1976.
- In 1992, University of Abuja established its Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education offering similar distance learning programmes as was the case of older Nigerian universities.
- The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was re-opened in 2001 student enrolment at 32,000. In 2011 NOUN had about 57,759 students operating from its national headquarter in Lagos, with study centres throughout the country. It offers over 50 programmes and 750 courses.

Technologies for Open Distance Learning

Technology for delivery of distance education could be in two modes. Synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Synchronous Learning Model

Synchronous learning allows all participants to receive instruction same time at different locations. It is similar to traditional classroom

teaching learning settings even though participants are widely located.

Edglossary (2013) defined synchronous learning as forms of education delivered at the same time, but not in the same place. Synchronous learning commonly put into practical use various forms of digital, online and tele-visual materials to students, instructors and colleagues in real time. This includes educational video conferences, interactive webinars, chat-based online discussions and lectures that are broadcast and delivered at the same time. Synchronous learning was usually called distance education or distance learning before the use of interactive and internet base3d technologies became prominent. Learning tools that are in real-time such as instant messaging which allow students and teachers to ask and answer questions immediately, are synchronous. Instead of learning on their own, students will participate in synchronous learning courses are allows interaction with other students and their teachers during the lesson.

Asynchronous Learning Model

It is a student-centered learning method that employs online learning resources to make information sharing easier beyond the constraints of time and place among the network of people. The model is a student-centered approach that highlights the significance of peer-to-peer instructions. It is fusion of self-study with synchronous interactions to enhance learning. Asynchronous model can be applied to on-campus education learning, as well as learning by distance and continuing education.

Several online learning resources may be used to support asynchronous learning, such as e-mail, electronic mailing lists, video conferencing , online chatting platforms, wikis, and blogs etc. Course management system such as Campus Cruiser LMS, Desire2 Learn, Blackboard, Webci, etc have been developed to support online interactions where users can organize discussions, post and reply messages, as well as upload and access learning materials. In asynchronous model, learning can be carried out even when the students or teachers are offline, allowing students to complete the lessons on their own and use the internet as a support tool for interactive classes.

Very often the two methods are combined. Both Open Universities and Campus based institutions use periodic cycle of residential or day teaching session to supplement the lessons delivered at a distance in what has been described as “blended Learning” or less often “hybrid learning”

Other models of Distance learning could be Paced or Self-Paced format depending on the nature of the Institution and the policy guidelines of the programme; as well as the needs and demands of the students. Paced format and conventional campus based models allows learners to commence and complete their course work at the same time which makes it very popular and the most sought method of distance education delivery.

Universities that combine both distance and campus programmes usually adopt paced models because it is easier to synchronize teacher workload, semester calendar planning, tuition payment deadlines, examination schedules and other administrative details with campus delivery.

In self-paced programmes continuous enrolment of students is possible. The duration and completion of the course is determined by the learner's ability, skills and commitment to the programme. Paced courses may be offered in either synchronous mode, but very often self-paced courses are always offered asynchronously.

Statement of the Problem

The inadequacy of enrolment space in conventional universities in Nigeria has generated an increased demand for Open Distance Learning as an alternative. Many Conventional Universities have since established Open Distance Learning Units to help meet the needs of prospective students. Large numbers of Nigerians (young and old) are seeking University education and there is ever increasing demand for Open Distance Learning.

The establishment of National Teachers Institute and National Open University of Nigeria as dedicated institutions for open distance learning in Nigeria has also encouraged participation in distance learning among Nigerian students. However, completion rates are raising concerns. In the light of this, the focus here is on one broad subject area (Business Education), considering the open distance learning students in the national Open University of Nigeria(Ilorin Study Centers) and those of the University of Ilorin.

Method

Data were collected from the 155 final year students of Business Education in University of Ilorin and National Open University Ilorin study centre. A total of 120 questionnaires were returned (77.4%). Two

variables of completion rate were identified for measurement. Students were asked to express their opinion on how these variables have affected the completion rate of the programme. Teaching materials was measured in terms of provision, supply and usage of instructional items by the programme organizers (books, study modules, study packs, internet bandwidth and lecture materials that enhances face- to- face interaction for some courses). Programme method was measured from the experience of students on how comfortable they are with the timing of the programme in terms of conflicts experienced with their normal jobs knowing very well that the two programmes were more of hybrid learning in nature.

Data collected were analyzed with percentages to answer the research question, while chi- square statistic was used to analyze the hypotheses.

Objectives of the study

This study was designed to achieve two main objectives. The first is to consider the completion rates of Business Education students in the various courses and the second is to explore what factors might be influencing these completion rates. The sample consisted of the final year Business Education students of University of Ilorin ODL programme, and NOUN Ilorin Study Centre. The researcher used a self-designed questionnaire. The instrument was validated by four Senior Lecturers in the Department of Educational Management and Business Education, University of Ilorin. It was also piloted tested for its reliability with the ODL students of National Teachers Institute (Ilorin Centre). Using Cronbach's Alpha Statistic, a reliability coefficient of .75 was obtained indicating a high level of internal consistency of the instrument.

Data Analysis

Table 1
shows the completion rates for students

Table 1: Completion rate of Business Education Students in Open Distance Learning(2015)				
Programme	Enrolment in Last Contact Session		Enrolment in Final Year	%
Accounting	22		15	68
Marketing	61		58	95
Office Technology and Management	37		32	86
Total	120		105	88

The final column in the table gives a measure of the extent of completion. Clearly, accounting faces greater difficulties. This might be because of the subject is perceived as more demanding. It might be because, by its very nature, learning in accounting is more difficult without face –to –face contact with the teacher. It could also arise because the students opting for this are different in some way from the other two groups.

Table 2
Difference between adequate teaching Materials and Students Completion Rate

Variables	N	Mean	Df	Cal	Table
Remark				X ² Value	X ²
Value					
Adequate Teaching Materials	120	12.66	12	44.62	21.03
Rejected Completion Rate	120	11.30			

Table 2 indicated a significant difference between adequacy of available teaching materials and completion rate. The calculated chi –square 44.62 is greater than the critical value 21.03 at 0.05 level of significance. The result suggest that if teaching materials were adequate for ODL students a major change in the completion rate of students in the programme will be achieved.

Table 3
Difference between Programme methodology and Students Completion Rate

Variables	N	Mean	Df	Cal	
Critical Decision				X ² Value	
X ² Value					
Programme Methodology	120	14.18	12	32.44	21.03
Rejected Completion Rate	120	11.30			

P < 0.05 alpha level

Table 3 indicated a significant difference between programme methodology and completion rate. The calculated chi –square 32.44 is greater than the critical value 21.03 at 0.05 level of significance. The

implication of this is that, if the programme adopts suitable learning methods and conditions students in the ODL programme, completion rates will be positively affected.

Discussion

The study found completion rates in ODL programme to be higher in Marketing and lower in Accounting

The implication is that, if teaching materials (in the form of teaching models, and study packs are made available adequately to the students in the Open Distance Learning, the completion rate of students will be very high. If students have good access to the teaching materials, and they were adequately packaged to cover the course contents, students on the programme may do well and pass out without spilling over to the incoming contact session.

It also, reflects the importance of the methodology adopted in disseminating teaching materials and content to the students. Majority of the students on the Open Learning education are in the working class. The paced and hybrid methods adopted by the National Open University of Nigeria and University of Ilorin Distance Learning Programmes ensured higher completion rate, because ODL students operates in a simulated conventional class model, which gives them the opportunity to work with other students, operate in a regulated time frame and move on with co-students at set-time (contact periods). This paced/hybrid learning environments help students to set up completion deadlines and motivate them to meet up.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Business Education programmes with higher level of completion rates should be given more space in the enrolment plan of the institutions that run the ODL programmes. A further study of why Accounting programme have lower completion rate must also be conducted, with a view to finding reasons for the lower completion rate.
2. The operating institutions must make available adequate teaching materials during the programme period. Study packs/modules must be available on time at affordable costs to their students. Also

managers of the programme should consider deployment of virtual class technology/media to the students because it could be effectively deployed within a short time.

3. Study centres and contact session period must adopt a more students friendly methods of teaching, and taking feedbacks from students . Some business education programmes require face-to-face interaction with tutors (office, word processing, stenography and transcription etc) will require personal contact with teachers because of their practical nature. A “mixed” learning method of Distance Learning and Classwork will be more adequate/relevant for the students.

Finally, the ODL programme must be flexible in a way that it will not conflict with participants primary jobs. Harmonizing the programme schedule with job schedule of participants seems to be its major albatross.

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