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Planning and Policy: Synergy to Effective Open and Distance Learning Administration in Nigeria

ABSTRACT: Considering the consequential roles Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is currently playing in ensuring educational delivery at doorsteps of those who desire it, it becomes highly imperative that its administration needs to be effective so that the goals for which it was introduced are achieved. This paper considers planning and policy as synergy to effective Open and Distance Learning administration in Nigeria. Four modes of operation in ODL, namely single, dual, mixed, and consortia, were equally highlighted. The author also discussed some of the critical areas like communication system, learners' support, staff personnel appraisal, as well as nature and quantity of resources that require effective planning. Furthermore, some policy implications which bother on issues such as quality assurance, the use of technology, inclusiveness, and staff supports were brought to the fore. It was concluded that ODL has truly become an accepted and essential part of the main-stream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries. Finally, the paper recommends *inter alia* the need for ODL curriculum designers to ensure flexibility so as to accommodate the needs and experiences of a range of diverse people, provision of effective supports for the learners and the participating staff, the ODL environment to be more accommodating, stimulating, and motivating for the distance learners.

KEY WORD: Administration, open and distance learning, planning, policy, synergy effective, communication system, and staff and learners' supports.

IKHTISAR: "Perencanaan dan Kebijakan: Sinergi untuk Mengefektifkan Pengurusan Belajar Jarak Jauh dan Terbuka di Nigeria". Mengingat peran yang konsekwendari Belajar Jarak Jauh dan Terbuka (BJJT) saat ini adalah untuk memastikan ketersediaan pendidikan dari rumah ke rumah bagi orang-orang yang menginginkannya, menjadi sangat penting bahwa pengurusannya harus efektif sehingga tujuan yang diperkenalkan tercapai. Makalah ini menimbang perencanaan dan kebijakan yang sinergis untuk mengefektifkan pengurusan Belajar Jarak Jauh dan Terbuka di Nigeria. Empat gaya pelaksanaan dalam BJJT, yaitu tunggal, ganda, campuran, dan konsorsium, sama-sama akan dikaji. Penulis juga membahas beberapa bidang penting seperti sistem komunikasi, dukungan peserta didik, staf tenaga penilaian, serta sifat dan kuantitas sumber daya yang membutuhkan perencanaan yang efektif. Selain itu, beberapa implikasi kebijakan yang mengganggu pada isu-isu seperti jaminan kualitas, penggunaan teknologi, sikap inklusif, dan dukungan staf, juga didahulukan. Disimpulkan bahwa BJJT telah benar-benar menjadi bagian yang diterima dan penting dalam arus utama sistem pendidikan, baik di negara maju maupun berkembang. Akhirnya, makalah ini merekomendasikan antara lain kebutuhan bagi para perancang kurikulum BJJT untuk memastikan fleksibilitas sehingga dapat mengakomodasi berbagai kebutuhan dan pengalaman yang beragam, penyediaan dukungan yang efektif bagi peserta didik dan partisipasi staf, lingkungan BJJT yang lebih akomodatif, merangsang, dan memotivasi peserta didik belajar jarak jauh.

KATA KUNCI: Pengurusan, belajar jarak jauh dan terbuka, perencanaan, kebijakan, sinergi yang efektif, sistem komunikasi, serta dukungan staf dan peserta didik.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, the creation of wider access to educational opportunities has been the primary rationale behind the emergence

and acceptance of Distance Education (DE), now globally known as Open and Distance Learning (ODL) by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICODE). In a

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survey of literature, L.F. Thomas & E.S. Harri-Augstein (1977), as cited also in R.A. Aderinoye (2002), argued that conventional mode of education's ability to meet the educational needs of people all over the world is very limited; hence, there is the need for alternative way of providing education for those that actually demand for it.

K.O. Ojokheta (2000), then, concluded that the best alternative to the limited conventional system is non-formal and, of course, the best way to reach millions who are unserved is through the distance learning approach. In fact, in recent times, there has been a growing awareness of the important roles of ODL in higher education, which now plays the role of leadership in the society and also serves as a catalyst for social change.

Thus, ODL is currently playing an important role in providing higher education to those who are unable to be part of conventional system. It provides a unique opportunity to all who wish to further their studies and who cannot attend residential institutions, because of personal circumstances or occupational obligations. In fact, its main objective is to reach the unreached and provide education at the doorstep of the learners and according to their convenience. ODL is the mode of delivery that has made the physical distance from a university or tertiary institution, an insignificant constraint in the access to higher education as instructional materials are now easily converted into cost-effective and portable audio, video, and mobile formats.

The apparent limitations of the conventional institutions in the provision of educational opportunities to many desiring it, according to M.A. Oladejo (2010); therefore, paved the way for the introduction and acceptance of distance education as an alternative form and standard component of education. According to R.A. Aderinoye (2002), the emergence and acceptance of distance learning as a medium of instruction marked a turning point in the provision of educational opportunities for millions of people that have been left out of the conventional system all over the world.

According to A. Rumajogee (2002), distance education is a means of bringing education much closer to the doorsteps of people who

would otherwise have no access to formal education. It can, thus, remove barriers to formal education and enable people to access learning, especially while they are still working. C. Bertram (2000) and G. Dhanarajan (2000) argued that distance education presents a good option because through this mode, institutional providers create access to education for such groups as students in remote rural areas and in-service teachers who want to study while working.

The Federal Government of Nigeria, through the National Universities Commission (NUC), has stipulated as a matter of policy that student enrolment into the ODL mode of tertiary education in Nigeria is set at 350,000 students by 2015, as a way of providing an effective answer to several thousands of Nigerians to enjoy equal educational opportunities. The Federal Government of Nigeria, in the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 2004, stated emphatically that maximum efforts would be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to through open universities or part-time. My emphasis in this paper, however, is on open universities, not part-time.

M.A. Oladejo (2010) observed that for several years, distance education has been used as an instructional mode in numerous countries around the world. He maintained that well-known universities, such as the University of Georgia in USA (United States of America), Open University in UK (United Kingdom), and the Open University of Japan, to name a few, have adopted distance education programmes to teach engineering, business, education, and arts. In Africa, the University of South Africa (UNISA), which incidentally, happens to be the first distance learning-dedicated university in the world, has also been providing university education to the hitherto neglected category of people for more than five decades now. Nigeria, as a developing nation that embraces distance education, also has a National Open University to provide university education to her citizenry (Oladejo, 2010).

Talking about proper functioning of ODL system, G. Dhanarajan (1996) remarked that effective management and sensible and

efficient administration systems are vital to the well-functioning of an “open” institution. Corroborating this remark, A. Rumajogee (2002) contended that for distance education to be effective, there is the need to put in place, efficient management, and administration systems. The present author, however, argued further that efficient management and administration can be achieved only when there is good planning, couple with workable policy statements that will guide the behaviours of stakeholders. Based on my observation, this paper considers planning and policy as synergy to effective open and distance learning administration in Nigeria.

FROM PLANNING AND POLICY DEFINED TO OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING EXAMINED

Two major concepts that are very germane to the present discourse are explained here. They are the two concepts that need to be combined together so as to effect meaningful ODL (Open and Distance Learning) administration. The first one is planning, while the other one is policy.

Planning, as a concept, has been defined by authors, especially in the field of management. For instance, C.W. Cook, P.L. Hunsaker & R.E. Coffey (1997), as cited also in Anonymous (n.y.), submitted that planning is the process of selecting from among alternative future course of actions for the organization as a whole and for every department or section within it. It is also a process by which an individual or organisation decides in advance on some future course of actions. Planning can, therefore, be described as a process of taking decisions on who, where, when, and with what in advance concerning future line of activities to be done based either by an individual or an organisation.

A policy is a principle or protocol to guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes. A policy is a statement of intent and is implemented as a procedure (Anderson, 2005). Policy is, therefore, the process of making important organizational decisions, including the identification of different alternatives, such as programmes or spending priorities, and choosing among them on the basis of the impact they will have.

From the definitions given to the two concepts above, it appears planning and policy entail decision making, and in making decisions, different activities are involved. These activities need to be planned, and subsequently come up with policies that will guide the implementation of the already-planned activities.

As a result of the increasing importance being attached to open and distance learning, it is becoming imperative for everyone, including teachers, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders, to understand what this mode of education means and entails. The concept “Distance Education”, now globally known as “Open and Distance Learning” by the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), according to K.O. Ojokheta (2000); R.A. Aderinoye (2002); and M.A. Oladejo (2010), has shown a tremendous growth during the last few decades due to its unique nature of being a users’ friendly system. It has been perceived as a fast growing international phenomenon.

The terms “distance education” or “distance learning” have been applied interchangeably by many different researchers to a great variety of programmes, providers, audiences, and media. Its hallmarks are *the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor* (Jonassen, 1992); *the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time* (Perraton, 1988); and *non-contiguous communication between student and teacher mediated by print or some form of technology* (Keegan, 1986; and Garrison & Shale, 1987).

There are other nomenclatures have been associated with the concept of ODL. It has been known differently and variously as “correspondence study”, “home study”, “off-campus study”, “independent study”, “distance study”, “telematic teaching”, “extra-mural system”, what we now call distance and open learning has meant the same for everyone in the world. This is the provision of education by a mode other than the conventional face to face method, but whose goals are similar to, and just as noble and practical, as those of on-campus full-time, face to face education.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), in 2000, argued that there are several definitions

of *Open and Distance Learning*, as there are many approaches to defining it. Most definitions, however, according to COL (2003), pay attention to the following characteristics: (1) **separation of teacher and learner**, in time or place, or in both time and place; (2) **institutional accreditation**, that is, learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency, this type of learning is distinct from learning through your own effort without the official recognition of a learning institution; (3) **use of mixed-media courseware**, including print, radio, and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning, and telecommunications, courseware tends to be pre-tested and validated before use; (4) **two-way communication** allows learners and tutors to interact as distinguished from the passive receipt of broadcast signals, communication can be synchronous or asynchronous; (5) **possibility of face-to-face meetings** for tutorials, learner-learner interaction, library study, and laboratory or practice sessions; and (6) **use of industrialised processes**, that is, in large-scale open and distance learning operations, labour is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who work together in course development teams.

A. Rumajogee (2002) also observed that there are differing international interpretations of distance education concepts, as no single definition of open learning or distance education seems to satisfy the various stakeholders involved. Open and Distance Learning is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Distance learning provides “access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both” (Honeyman & Miller, 1993). The United States Distance Learning Association gives a formal definition of ODL as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies, and other forms of learning at a distance (cf Honeyman & Miller, 1993; and Dodds, 1996).

G. Greenberg (1998:36) defined contemporary distance learning as “a planned

teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning”. In their own submission, P. Teaster & R. Blieszner (1999:41) maintained that “the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separated in space and possibly time”.

Also, open and distance learning refers to education and training in which using learning resources, rather than attending classroom sessions, is the central feature of the learning experience (COL, 2003). Furthermore, ODL (Open and Distance Learning) was defined in the NPE (National Policy on Education) as life-long learning, life-wide education, adult education, media based education, and self-learning (FG of Nigeria, 2004).

However, M.A. Oladejo *et al.* (2010), citing D. Keegan (1995), remarked that a more detailed definition of ODL has been provided as shown below:

[...] distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner, which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to “a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained” (Keegan, 1995:7; and Oladejo *et al.*, 2010).

Based on the plethora definitions given above, it can be submitted that ODL (Open and Distance Learning) is an educational system, whereby both the teacher and the learner(s) do not necessarily need to be physically present during the teaching-learning process, but the application of technologies in mediating the instructional delivery becomes imperative due to the separation of the teacher and the learner(s) in time, space or both. It is simply that form of study where students are not in direct physical contact with their teachers (Oladejo & Gesinde, 2014).

OPERATIONAL MODES IN ODL

Four basic modes of educational provision by the ODL (Open and Distance Learning) institutional providers have been identified according to A. Rumajogee (2002). These modes, through which institutions can operate

ODL, are: single mode, dual mode, mixed mode, and consortia respectively.

First, Single Mode. In single mode operation, institutions are established for the main purpose of offering distance education. Institutions operating this mode are purely ODL-dedicated. They devote all planning, funds, staff, and other resources to designing and delivering courses for distance learners. A typical example of single mode institution is the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). In South Africa, the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Technikon South Africa are good examples.

Second, Dual Mode. Dual mode system entails the provision of education through both conventional face-to-face and distance approaches. A. Rumajogee (2002) again argued that some institutions were established to provide both, but many commenced providing only face-to-face education, and later incorporated distance education into their programmes. In this latter environment, distance education programmes tend to be administered by a special management unit. A good example of dual mode institution in Nigeria is the University of Lagos, which has the Distance Learning Institute in charge of the ODL programmes. In Africa, we have the University of Nairobi, the University of Zambia, and the University of Botswana as examples.

Third, Mixed Mode. Mixed mode is the mode in which distance-teaching programmes are designed, delivered, and administered by the same people who provide conventional programmes. A mixed mode institution is the result of the convergence of face-to-face and distance modes, and increasingly characterizes organizations that were once single mode or dual mode. Mixed mode institutions offer learners a wide choice of models of study, and maximize flexibility of place and pace (Rumajogee, 2002). The Distance Learning Centre of the University of Ibadan is a typical example in Nigeria. Other notable examples of mixed mode institutions in other parts of the world include the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Pretoria in South Africa, the University of Mauritius, and the Zimbabwe Integrated National Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC).

Fourth, Consortia. By Consortia mode, it implies the coming together of groups of autonomous institutions to combine efforts to offer distance education. In such arrangements, resources are normally organised under a single management unit. A. Rumajogee (2002) cited the example of the Eastern Cape of South Africa, where several institutions have formed a consortium with the provincial government to offer training to health officials.

On the Critical Areas that Require Effective Planning. In open and distance learning programme, certain areas are critical to effective administration. Some of these areas form the focus upon which this paper has beamed its search light as discussed in turn below:

First, Communication System. An effective system of two-way communication between the learner and the institution on one hand, and between the learner and the tutor on the other hand is an important element of good management and administration. This area requires effective planning, especially in the use of emerging technologies. This is predicated on the fact that teaching-learning activity is being mediated, to a very large extent by modern communication technologies. Issues concerning students' complaints, tutorials, examinations, etc require effective communication system, which need to be planned properly.

Second, Learners' Support. ODL (Open and Distance Learning) institutional providers must guarantee a functional and responsive support system that will provide students with counselling, advice on courses, general information, and programme details, as well as information on tuition and assessment. It is very important to ensure that distance learning students do not feel isolated, despite the fact that they learn at a distance.

Third, Staff Appraisal Systems. An ODL institution, as with any other educational initiative, also depends upon the competence and commitment of its staff. Staff appraisal systems are, therefore, an important aspect of effective management. Staff appraisal implies determining the extent of each staff member's contribution to the programme they

are involved in, and how it can be improved. This needs to be planned properly, especially through Annual Performance Appraisal form.

Fourth, Staff Personnel Development.

This entails the formulation of staff personnel policies; recruitments election and placement of staff personnel. Provision of opportunities for professional growth of staff personnel through conferences, workshops and seminar attendance; development of esprit de corps, that is, team spirit among staff; ensuring proper staff welfare policies; and so on.

Fifth, Nature and Quantity of Resources.

Planners must consider the nature and quantity of resources needed, as well as the kind of person power (skills, knowledge, and experience) necessary for the successful execution of the programme. Because management of distance education has cost implications, managers should be familiar with budgeting for DE (Distance Education) provision as an integral part of planning.

Sixth, Students Personnel. This involves the provision of guidance and counselling services, orientation programmes, and procedure for recruiting, registering, and supervising students; for selecting and controlling the use of technologies; for controlling materials production systems; and for managing budgets and finances (GDEnet, 2001).

Seventh, Curriculum Design and Organisation. The organization of distance education also involves planning and organizing the curriculum and its course contents. According to J. Cummins & D. Sayers (1996), the design of a distance learning curriculum needs to be sensitive and relevant to cross-national cultural experiences. In other words, the needs, the experiences, and the context of the people, the curriculum is intended to serve must also be taken into account. T. Dodds & P. Edirishingha (2000) alert us to the diverse nature of the audience for distance education, which includes people of all ages, from young children to ageing adults.

On the Policy Implications. There are some policy implications that this paper has for meaningful ODL (Open and Distance Learning) administration in Nigeria. ODL institutional providers need to explore:

First, Quality Assurance. J.A. Okumbe (2001) defined quality assurance within the context of ODL as the deliberate and conscious effort designed by the distance learning managers to ascertain that quality is maintained from input to output. He, further, contended that the quality of distance learning programmes can be measured in terms of outputs, such as completion rates, graduation rates, persistence rates, examination levels and performance in examinations, post-graduation work performance, and rates of admission into post-graduate programmes. The policy implication, therefore, will have to do with putting in place, policy statement that will ensure quality of the programme, its inputs, especially the students, as well as the participating staff (Okumbe, 2001).

Second, Use of Technology. W. Mackintosh (1999) opined that the use of technology in Africa is a *sine qua non* for access to education and mass customisation of distance education, and could drive the continent to make a meaningful contribution to globalization. For Nigeria to be at par, especially with other African countries practicing ODL (Open and Distance Learning), policy initiative that will ensure the optimum use of all relevant and applicable technologies need to be put in place.

Third, Inclusiveness. Inclusiveness appears to have found itself in ODL programmes in recent time. M.A. Oladejo (2010)'s study established that disability status came third out of ten explanatory variables in the determination of distance learners' academic performance in Nigerian universities. By inclusive ODL, it means the tutoring of both disabled and abled distance learning students in a regular ODL environment. Based on this, it implies that there is the need for policy statement that will guarantee a wide range of intervention strategies to deal with problems that may inhibit disabled distance learners' intellectual growth and development, and more importantly, their ability to reach their educational goals.

Fourth, Staff Supports. Like the ODL (Open and Distance Learning) students that require effective support in the programme, staff that are involved in the operation, administration,

and management of ODL programme equally require supports to be able to deliver. Policy statement in terms of training development needs to be further explored.

CONCLUSION

Open and distance learning has become an accepted and essential part of the main-stream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis for the latter. The globalization of distance education provides many opportunities for developing countries for the realization of their education system-wide goals. My discussions in this paper are in tandem with P. Kinyanjui (1998)'s submission that whatever the policy framework, there is general recognition that at the institutional level there should be excellence in curriculum design, development and delivery of distance education courses, systematic staff training, reward systems, effective learner support systems, and sound use of technologies.

On the basis of my discussions so far, I hereby recommended that for efficient and effective administration of ODL (Open and Distance Learning) in Nigeria, the following steps could be explored: (1) There should be flexibility in curriculum design so as to accommodate the needs and experiences of a range of diverse people such as urban and rural dwellers; the employed, self-employed and unemployed; young and old learners; learners of different linguistic; and so on; (2) The provision of effective supports for the learners especially in terms of accessing course materials and lectures. In the same vein, the participating staff too should be well supported through regular exposure to modern trends in ODL administration; and (3) The ODL environment to be more accommodating, stimulating, and motivating for the distance learners with disabilities in view of its modern inclusiveness nature.

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