Online Education: A Panacea to Crippled National Development in Nigeria

Abstract: Educational level of any society is synonymous to its capacity for development as well the wellbeing of its citizenry. This has been sufficiently demonstrated by Euro-American societies in terms of their achievements in the areas of GDP per income, research and technological advancement which is closely link with their educational advancement. The 21st century has witnessed a surge in demand for advance education particularly, through online and open/distance education due to inadequate absorptive capacity of the existing conventional tertiary institutions. This study argues that it has become difficult for any country to play down the importance of the quality and quantity education particularly, through open distance education and the use of other related technology tools to deliver educational services in addressing the issues related to socio-economic, political, science and technology challenges. However, the major challenge for open distance education in Nigeria has remain how to ensure parity in terms of quality of input/impacted knowledge and output/quality of graduating students between the online distance education students and the students on face-to-face/ mode. This is important in order to promote high quality of workforce desirable for economic growth and national development in Nigeria.

Keywords: online education, open distance education, national development, cyber-technology.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, education has remained the basis for social, political and economic development across the globe. Thus, for any country particularly Africa, to attain the level of self reliance and still able to contribute meaningfully to global digital economy, their nature of education must be structured in such a way to produced skilled workforce that utilizes ICTs effectively as a major factor in determining their competitiveness which is crucial for judicious utilisation of both human and natural resources for sustainable growth.

By and large, open and distance education had been recognised as a major propeller that can drive socio-economic development in Nigeria given the ever increasing demand for advanced education among the teeming populace in the country. This suggests the pivotal role of open and distance education in catering for absorptive inadequacies of the existing conventional tertiary institutions and its ability for utilisation of ICTs and other media technologies to deliver educational services in addressing the issues related particularly, through open distance education and the use of other related technology tools to deliver educational services in addressing the issues related to socio-economic, political, science and technology challenges. However, the major challenge for open distance education in Nigeria has remain how to ensure parity in terms of quality of input/impacted knowledge and output/quality of graduating students between the online distance education students and the students on face-to-face/ mode. This is important in order to promote high quality of workforce desirable for economic growth and national development in Nigeria.

This paper is divided into five sections for purposeful discussion and analysis which includes; introduction, conceptual clarification, the importance of technology in open and distance education, open distance education and implication for national development in Nigeria, conclusion and recommendations.
CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION
Open and Distance Education

In defining open and distance education, there are two key concepts that is conspicuous ‘openness’ and ‘distance’; the concept of openness in this regards refer to ease of accessibility and convenience. In the other hand, distance connotes learners/tutors without border. In simple terms, distance within the context of this paper implies bridging the spatial barrier between the learners and tutors through the use of modern technologies. As specified by National University Commission (NUC) in the Guidelines for open and distance learning in Nigerian Universities (2009), open and distance learning is describe as a system which does not required students to attend classes or have face to face interaction with tutor, unless there are compelling reasons such as examinations, periodic facilitation and practicum to justify the students physical presence.

Similarly, the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA 1996) describe open distance learning as the process in which knowledge and skills are is acquired particularly, U. through mediated information/instruction, broad range of technological tools and other forms of learning at distance. Adensina (2016) further stressed that, the concept of openness in ODL implies removal of all bottleneck and stringent conditions to learners’ means to acquiring education. In the same vein, distance education is defined as a set of teaching and learning strategies or educational methods that can be used to overcome spatial separation between educators and students (Adeyeye 2017). To the U.S Office of Technology Assessment, distance learning viewed as a process of linking teachers and students in several geographic locations via technology that allows for interaction (Cartwright, 1994).

Consequently, the Western Carolina University (1995) in their Homepage described distance learning as the delivery of instruction to the right group of people at the right time and in the right place. Thus, implies that educators and learners may be separated by time, distance or both but their engagement on educational exchange is efficiently carry out. Similarly, open distance learning practice has been described as the provision of education by mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to, and just as noble and practical as those of on campus full time. Other scholars have described online distance learning (ODL) as a system characterised by physical separation between the teachers and the learners, in which instruction is delivered through variety of media technology including print and other information communication technologies to learners who may have missed the opportunity earlier on life or have further been denied the traditional face-to-face formal education due to socio-economic, career, family or other circumstances (see Jegede, 2009; Jimoh, 2013; Braimoh and Osiki, 2008).

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Across the globe, development as a concept is ubiquitous and very complex in nature: it connotes different things to different people within the same country and between one country and another. Thus, the perception of what constitutes development in most developing countries particularly Africa, is quite different from the way most developed countries of the West perceived development. According to Badmus (2017) what some developing countries in Africa would regards as development features for instance, in the area of information communication system, might have become obsolete in some of the highly developed countries in Europe and America.

To Kabuya (2011) development as a concept refers to a process of improving people’s lives and wellbeing. By implications, development in this regard is purely conceived as the improvement in living standards of people, quality and quantity of life, people’s commitment to work and general perception on women’s status within a given society. In the same vein, the United Nations Development Programme (1991) development defines as a process that surpass mere improvement of quality of life: but encompasses better education, higher standards of health and nutrition, poverty reduction, cleaner environment, increasing access to and equality of opportunity, greater individual freedom, and the facilitation of a richer cultural life, which are all truly desirable ends in themselves. In essence, development is attained by breaking the yokes of deprivation and hopelessness that are often considered as major obstacle to every kind of development (United Nations Development Programme, 2003).

Interestingly, some scholars have simply defined development in terms of economic growth level of gross domestic products, increase in per-capita income, democratic consolidation, good governance, equality, poverty eradication, existence of freedom, technological advancement and holistic change in societal values among others. In recent time, developmental theorists have closely linked development with good governance: because good governance is an instrument for achieving better policymaking and improved economic outcomes. (see Obama, 2009; Rodrik 2008).

However, Seers (1979) argued that economic growth should not be the determinant of developmental status of any country. To Myrdal (1968) the broad concept of development therefore, involves a change of the entire society in the direction of the modernisation ideals. In the same manner, Seers also formulated three additional requirements for the use of the term
development, namely that there should be a decrease in poverty and malnutrition, that income inequality should decline, and that the employment situation should improve.

**CYBER-TECHNOLOGY**

The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provides better opportunity to nations across the world to enhance their human capitals, reform their educational systems and grow their economy astronomically. Thus, the digital technology has expanded the breadth of possibilities for people to enjoy freedoms of expression and association that serves as an enabler for enjoying the right of access to information (CIPESA 2016).

The term cyber has evolved from the work of Norbert Wiener, who defined the term in his book titled ‘cybernetics’ as “control and communication in the animal and the machine” (Wiener 1948). Wiener’s idea was conceived from the belief that humans can interact with machines and the outcome of their interface can provide an alternative environment for unique interaction: thus leading to a foundation for the concept of cyberspace.

According to the US Department of Defence, cyberspace is “a global domain within the information environment which consists of the interdependent network of information technology infrastructures that includes internet, telecommunications networks, computer systems, and embedded processors and controllers.” (JP 1-02). In a nutshell, this definition connotes that cyberspace is broader in scope than Internet due to its interdependent network nature. Hence, cyberspace refers to a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in a global system.

As observed by William Gibson cited in Cotton and Oliver, 1994: 54), for instance, consensual hallucination can be experienced by children being taught mathematical concepts... or through a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. In the same vein, Rebecca Bryant, (2001) stressed that cyberspace represents the new means of communication through electronic, which is becoming more fashionable and fast replacing, the traditional methods of communication. Importantly, the cyber world, have witnessed more of electronic emails in place of paper mails, more of electronic messages on bulletin boards rather than pinning slips of card to wooden notice boards, and more significantly people are able to read online texts via mobile phones, and in recent time academia can easily access journals online which is termed e-journals among others.

The Prominence of Technology in Delivering Open and Distance Education

As argued by Towela and Tesfaye (2015), there is tremendous growth in the rate of global Internet, made possible through new ways of thinking, learning, communicating, socializing and it is fast changing almost all aspects of the societal life on daily basis. However, the benefits of the Internet are not evenly distributed among African countries and within countries in Africa. It is instructive to note that, in Africa, despite a slow start in harnessing access to cyber-technology, Internet use is now rapidly growing, and its transformative impacts are increasingly accessible to both tutors and learners in Africa.

Obviously, technology is central to the heart of development, planning and delivery of distance education. Simply put, technology has empowered individuals to gain access to education, bridge information barriers and tap into remote resources both within and across geographical borders. Thus, the effective and appropriate use of technology in mediating learning will not only bring about a transformative change in the teaching and learning process but will also enhance active participation in learning intervention in a more constructive way based on the development of a positive enquiring mindset (Braimoh, 2015).

More importantly, in the beginning of this millennium, African countries have experienced a steady growth in Internet penetration from 0.78% in 2000 to 20.71% in 2014 (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm; ITU 2014). It is imperative to note that the progress varies from one country to another. The improved broadband connectivity in countries like Botswana, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Nigeria and Tunisia has already attained appreciable level: which has enhanced citizens’ involvement in political interaction, economic and industrial engagement, educational advancement and reducing socio-cultural barriers. However, cyberspace/internet connectivity is still limited in some parts of Nigeria which has continue to impeding on effective and efficient open distance education.

The opportunities for using the Internet for learning are numerous in Africa. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU 2016) more than a quarter of the African population (341 million) had access to the Internet as of 2016, the majority of which are potential Internet learners. Over half the population have access to mobile phones. Countries have also seen improved broadband connectivity at national levels (through national backbone networks) and internationally through a variety of submarine cables that landed on the western and eastern coast of the continent over the last decade. In recent time, there is enough broadband capacity that can be used to serve the countries’ efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goals in general, and to

Data from the ITU (2016) shows that over a third of the African population has access to the Internet today, and the potential of the Internet to transform the traditionally closed and static educational system in African, to a learner-centered and interactive model is highly improving. For instance, trends in digital classrooms, cloud computing, MOOCs, learning via social media, one-to-one computing and mobile learning have reach appreciable level and opportunities for using the Internet for learning without the constraint of geography, disability, gender and other social and economic divisions have also increased.

Unfortunately, Africa and Nigeria in particular are facing considerable challenges in harnessing cyber technologies for the advancement of education. These challenges ranging from the absence of quality teachers who are able to use and adapt with new technology tools for teaching and delivering other educational services, obsolete or absence of modern equipments suitable for galvanising open and distance learning and teaching, absence of online distance learning (ODL) compliance reading materials and inadequate manpower to cater for needs of ever growing learners on ODL platform.

Notably, internet has remained the major driver of open and distance education across the globe. Thus, it is quite interesting to know that there is upward trend in the number of world Internet users including Nigeria since the year 2000. International Telecommunication Union data also indicates that from 2009 the number of Internet users has doubled by 25 percent in early 2016. Despite the aforementioned growth in the number of internet users, pathetically, about three-quarters of the African population are still lacking access to the Internet in today’s world. Essentially, there is a prevalence variation of internet penetration among African countries, with only a few well connected countries like Kenya, Mauritius, Morocco, Nigeria, Seychelles, South Africa, and Tunisia attaining a connectivity level of around half of the population. These countries also lead in utilizing the Internet for education.

The last two decades have witnessed a variety of innovations in education delivered over the internet both in Nigeria and elsewhere in other climes. Thus, Nigeria like many other developed countries have been making progress in drawing up comprehensive polices for ICT in education, providing students and teachers with necessary equipment computing devices, connecting schools to the Internet and approving more of Open Educational Resources (OER), Massive Open Online Courses, cloud computing, and mobile learning for universities and other tertiary institutions in order to created options for expanding learning opportunities without time bound and spatial restrictions.

However, over 70 percent of the population living in rural areas, the majority of those who need the Internet the most, such as rural schools, do not have it due to various factors ranging from inadequate supply of infrastructure that can foster Internet access, wide spread of poverty and lack of political will to support Internet access by some African government among others (Africabandwidth Maps, http://www.africabandwidthmaps.com/?page_id=27).

Consequently, existence of cyber technology portends both positive and negative consequences for open and distance education in Nigeria. In recent time there is significant improvement on the use of the cyber-tech and internet for learning in most tertiary institutions that prioritised online distance learning through the use of online educational resources. In some cases, government at different levels in Nigeria have also started investing in ICT on education in public schools through the rollout of Schoolnet projects For instance, most of the government projects in this direction involves efforts at equipping selected “public/modern schools” with computer labs, trained ICT teachers, and providing students and teachers with ICT learning materials.

Impressively, this millennium has witnessed significant increase in the number of universities graduates through open and distance education mode of study with ICT skills, access to cyber-technology and internet in Nigeria. Given the fact that open and distance education is gradually becoming the harbinger that is catering for absorptive inadequacies of conventional tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The foregone thus, provide more opportunities for Nigeria to develop both economically and technologically through the increase quality workforce who are able to make use of ICT and technological skills to transform their immediate society and contribute to national development in Nigeria.

Open and Distance Education and Implications for National Development in Nigeria

Historically open and distance education in Nigeria can be traced to the time of correspondence education to prepare candidates for the General Certificate in Education which was a precondition for the London Matriculation examination. As stressed by Omolewa (1982) that through correspondence education since 1925, several Nigerians’ past leaders including Eyo-Ita and H.O. Davies have passed through the London Matriculation Examination. The correspondence education has also resulted in prominent Nigerians like E.O. Ajayi, Alvan Ikoku and J.S. Ogunlesi to obtained University of London degrees in philosophy in 1927, 1929 and 1933 respectively.
Contemporarily in Nigerian university system, 1974 marked the emergence of formal practice of distance education. This period was when the University of Lagos established the Correspondence and Open Studies Units (COSU), which was presently known as the Distance Learning Institute. Four ear later, Ahmadu Bello University in 1978 established Correspondence and Teachers’ In-service Programmes (TISEP) through which a special training programme was offered to mid-level teachers. And in 1988, University of Ibadan under its Department of Adult of Education established the Centre for External Studies (CES) which has been renamed as Distance Learning Centre (DLC).

The above trends have been follow by several other universities in Nigeria including the University of Abuja which established Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education, follow by the establishment of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 1988 which was closed down for 16b years and later re-open in 2001 under former President Olusegun Obasanjo administration.

The foregoing development in establishment of open and distance education has become widespread almost across all the tertiary institutions in Nigeria including both public and private higher institutions of learning with the exception of view tertiary institutions which are either at the gestation period of establishing their open and distance education centres/institutes or still contemplating on the option of its establishment as a result of different factors such as requisite workforce that is capable of effectively utilising ICT/ media technologies for teaching and financial resources consideration for its establishment.

Surprisingly, despite numerous benefits of ODL mode of education, there are several challenges confronting the operation of open and distance education in Nigeria. Thus, some of the problems confronting the quality and quantity of delivering ODL includes; the clandestine motivation purely driving by money agenda of the organiser; However, this is not an attempt to discourage profit making intent of the investors in educational sector, but profit maximisation should not be the major motivation for such investment due to its backlash effect on the quality of teaching and other educational service delivery on ODL platform to larger percentage of tertiary education admission seekers in Nigeria. For instance, only about 6 percent of secondary school graduates find places in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa including Nigeria, therefore, open and distance education has been providing access for tertiary education to larger number of prospective university admission seekers, with potential for flexibility and capacity to contribute to human capital and national development in Nigeria.

Similarly, there is problem of non-harmonised code of conduct that would bridge the gap in term of quality engagement and level commitment by tutors/teachers to the learners on ODL platform. This problem if it is not properly addressed has potential to further widen the gap in terms of quality of teaching and learning process between students on ODL and face-to-face/conventional students. In the same vein, lack of support and commitment by Government and Policy makers in terms of subsidising internet connectivity particularly for tertiary institutions that are operating ODL mode to encourage teachers and learners to be able to access internet for teaching and research.

In addition, there is prevalence suppression of freedom of information right particularly by the government. Thus, any attempt to suppress freedom of information portends grave consequence for sustenance of open and distance education. This is because, information is central to quality education, good governance, and sustainable national development.

Given the foregoing explication, open and distance education as observed has substantial leeway in the use of technology to deliver teaching and educational services to the learners. In manifestation, the foregone has the potential to promote workforce who are capable of utilising ITC and other technological tools to contribute to the development of 21st century digital economy and still able to transform their society positively. According to Sharma and Mishra (2007) the persistence increased in demand for higher education and human development trainings coupled with a shift from the labour intensive workforce to a more globalised knowledge intensive workforce has result in the rapid growth and expansion of e-learning which has also promote open distance education.

CONCLUSION

Open and distance education would continue to gain more popularity and increasingly contributing to national development in as much as the stakeholders adhered to and continue to prioritised the use of ICT and other media technologies to deliver teaching and other educational services. It is instructive to note that, the surge in demands for digital educational and increasing public demands for socio-economic services that are more technologically incline will continue to dictate the pace, the mode and nature of education which is more favourable to open distance education. However, the potential/benefits of open distance education mode could only be fully harnessed if the motivation of its organiser is not purely driven by profit making alone rather by prioritise the investment in modern ICTs and other media technologies for teaching, learning and delivery of administrative educational services.
RECOMMENDATIONS

- Regulatory agent(s) and policy makers on open and distance education need to create harmonised code of conduct that would bridge the gap in term of quality engagement and level commitment by tutors/teachers to the learners on ODL platform to ensure parity with students on conventional face-to-face students. This is necessary for even development of individual learners and for evenly distributed skilled workforce that are capable to foster national development in Nigeria.

- Utilization of ICT and other media technologies in education initiatives must be structured in such a way that tutors/teachers are more flexible in discharging their responsibilities, there must be a regularly training and re-training of tutors and learners on the new technologies to deliver real online education and commensurate incentives must be put in place to reward efforts in integration of ICT in teaching, learning and assessment processes.

- Government and Policy makers must strive to subsidise internet connectivity particularly for tertiary institutions for teachers and learners to be able to access internet for development and research. Such efforts by the government in a long run will help to boost the quality of human capital that would contribute to economic growth, promote Open Educational Resources (OERs) and contribute to national development at large.

- There is a need for policy makers to address digital safety issues, either through capacity building for youth, teachers and learners through legislative frameworks.

- Governments must also control the temptation to suppress freedom of information, because information is central to good governance, quality education and sustainable national development.

- There is significant gap in applying ICTs for job creation and using it for training on educational purposes. Thus, for learners to be able to tap into global ICT Enabled Services. This requires initiatives that stimulate a blended form of learning that combines traditional and online education. Therefore, the stakeholders in open and distance education should continue to emphasised the need for hybrid form of learning that allow moderate tenets of traditional form of education for e-learners in order to promote inclusion, sense of belonging and attain the sustainable development educational goals.

- Data and research is very key to assess the impact of the investment of ICTs in education. Policy makers need to invest in data gathering on ICT access and use by students and teachers, and support centers of excellence that undertake research and disseminate it to improve learning from previous experiences.

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