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## Promoting Online Conferencing for the Enhancement of Open and Distance Education in Nigeria: A Case Study of the National Open University of Nigeria

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### Abstract

*The study was designed to find out if the integration and promotion of the use of online conferencing as instruction delivery method in addition to the current instruction delivery method of use of printed material, audio and video CDs, and broadcast media had enhancing effects on open and distance learning in Nigeria;*

*and helped in fostering overall attainment of the goals and objectives of the establishment of the National open University of Nigeria. The study employed an experimental approach, the population of the study consisted of the post graduate students at the Nekede study centre of the National Open University of Nigeria. M.Sc. students of information and communication technology and Educational technology were purposively selected as the sampled population; structured questionnaires were used as instrument for primary data collection. Interviews, personal discussions, and literature provided sources for secondary data. The instrument was validated by scholars from the Imo state University, Owerri Imo State Nigeria. The results from the survey were analyzed using descriptive and quantitative statics. The result from the study showed that students viewed the current instruction dell very mode in the national Open University of Nigeria as grossly insufficient, ineffective and inadequate. The student hence agreed that promotion of the use on online conferencing as instruction dell very method was very important the study further revealed that the promotion of the use of online conferencing is a catalyst for enhancing open and distance learning in Nigeria and hence a vehicle for promoting the overall attainment of the objective of the established of the national open University of Nigeria.*

## Open and distance learning (ODL): overview

Open and distance learning refers to the provision of flexible educational opportunities in terms access and multiple modes of knowledge acquisition. ODL is flexible in the sense that it provides availability of choices for educational endeavors anywhere, anytime and anyhow. ODL makes opportunities available to all, irrespective of work schedule, hence freeing them from constraints of time and place. ODL is also multimodal, as it uses the various delivery systems and learning resources. (Ahmad et al, 2010). ODL is becoming an accepted and indispensable part of mainstream education. It is not unusual to confuse the terms correspondence education, distance education and open education with each other. Whereas correspondence education is an extension of conventional education, and it is a system based solely on printed materials, distributed by post; open education is a system of education that does not operate through traditional conventions which are essentially restrictive in nature; admission restrictions, attendance restrictions, restriction on the candidature for examinations, restriction on the period of time to be devoted to a course etc. Distance learning however employs a multimodal approach in addition to human contact.

The term distance education that is to be organized and impacted in keeping cognition of the beneficiary of the education are separated by the common denominator which is distance. Perration (1988), defined distance education as an education process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by

someone removed in space and! or time from leaner. Distance education covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization.

**Access to university education in Nigeria**

In 1959, as Nigeria prepared for independence, the government set up Ashby commission. The recommendations from that commission guided a lot of decisions in the educational sector in the years following the independence. Detailed as the Ashby commission report was, it was not realistic about the zeal for higher education in Nigeria. In 1960 for example, Ashby recommended four (4) universities for Nigeria and projected a total students' population of 7500 by 1970 (10 years after independence), and 10,000 by 1980 (twenty years after independence). By the middle of the 1970's however the total number of federal universities had increased to 13. By 1999 the federal universities had a total of 400,000 students. Every year since independence, the demand for places in the universities had remained unmet. There has never been any time Nigerian universities, both private, states, and federal had been able to admit more than 15% of the total qualified applicants. Most times lack of adequate infrastructures and man power force these institutions to admit only a minute population of the qualified applicants.

Projections showed that almost 7.5 million applicants are jostling for places in Nigeria universities. Hence how can the issue of access to higher education be tackled? The only way to tackle this problem as supported by Munzali (2000) was to expand the capacity of our university system by a factor of 10. There are two possible ways of doing that:

  (a)  Multiplying the current admission by a factor of 10

  (b)  Expansion of the number of existing universities by a factor of 10.

Nigeria cannot conveniently do any of the two as of now even if we did, how does the issue of facilities, infrastructures and production of academic staff be handled? It however, has been suggested that the only way to bridge this gap between the exploding population of qualified applicants into higher education and the minimal institutions available was to rely on the open and distance learning with the hope that what conventional universities cannot absorb, the open university will take care of. Education is core to whatever we want to do as a nation. Nigeria cannot make much progress towards attainment of its vision 20-2020 unless we strengthen our educational system. The greatest countries in the world are no longer solely determined by their endowment in natural resources, a nation's population, nurtured through education, is today the greatest assets. Education has become the most important vehicle for driving a nation's development. Tenable (2006), states that

except there is mass education of the populace, there comes a time in Nigeria, when the uneducated will not allow the educated to have peace. The most viable method of educating the masses, in a country as populous as Nigeria, is through the open and distance learning (ODL).

**Open and distance education in Nigeria: historically and modern perspectives**

Open and distance learning began in Nigeria in the 1940's as correspondence studies. Many Nigerians got enrolled in the correspondence colleges in Great Britain and studied for various examinations including General certificate examinations, ordinary level and advanced levels (GCE '0' L, and GCE'A' L). Some others studied for various technical, commercial and business examinations. The main mode of instruction was the print sent to the student by post and they students were accessed by sending them evaluation and examination materials by post as well. This was trend for a long time until some Nigerian universities, through their institutions of education started distance learning programs.

The National open university of Nigeria (Noun) was first established in July 1983 following an Act of the National Assembly, under the federal government of President Shehu Shagari. However, a few months later, in 1984 following the overthrow of the democratic government by the federal military government, the 1983 Act which established the National Open University was suspended. Many years after the closure, the compelling reasons that informed the earlier establishment of the university were still confronting the country. Several other reasons emerged, which included

(a) Need to fill the vacuum created by the profit oriented outreach programs of many conventional universities in Nigeria.

(b) Necessitating needs for economic funding of education.

(c) Need to take advantage of emerging developments in the field of information communication technologies which have revolutionalised the techniques and methods of instructional delivers in the distance learning mode.

Thus in 2001, the National Open University of Nigeria act of 1983 suspended in 1984 was reactivated, under this require President Olusesun Obasajo paved way for the restitution of the National Open University of Nigeria as we have it today. This rebirth has renewed the focus to make education available to as many people as have the ability and are willing and ready to benefit from the quality education provided through flexible and affordable distance learning.

The National Open University of Nigeria has the following objective.

1. To ensure equity and equality of opportunities in education generally but specifically in university education.

2. To provide a wider access to education generally but specifically in university education in Nigeria.

3. To enhance education and lifelong learning

4. To provide entrenchment of global culture

5. To provide educational resources via the use of ICTs

6. To provide flexible but qualitative education

To reduce the cost inconveniencies and hassles of education delivery, it is expected that the Open University will among other things:

1. Raise the literacy level in Nigeria.

2. Substantially increase access to University education in Nigeria.

3. Widen the catch merit of scope of beneficiaries of university education thus reaching the hitherto unreachable and ensuring that nobody interested in, or capable of having University education in left out

4. Help Nigeria to be on the right side of the digital divide.

5. Enhance and facilitate work-space training and professional development.

6. Meet the yearnings of Nigerians for university education.

7. Reduce the pressure on university placements in conventional universities.

**Justification for open and distance learning in Nigeria**

In Nigeria the adoption and deployment of open and distance education delivery systems is justified on several grounds. According to NOUN (2004), these justifications include:

1. Provision of education for all and promotion of long live leaving.

2. filling the gap created by the closure of outreach/satellite campuses

3. Cost provision effectiveness.

4. Improved economies of scale.

5. Flexibility of delivery systems.

6. Maximum utilization of academic personnel

7. On-the-job teacher training.

8. Poverty eradication, vocational and lifelong education.

9. Provision of non-formal education.

10. Reaching the unreached.

11. Propagation of national orientation.

**Online conferencing: conceptual overview**

Online conferencing refers to interaction between a group of people separated by distance, over several geographical locations, connected over the world wide web using Internet protocols/Transmission control protocols (IP/TCP). Online conferencing is the ability to hold a conference where the participants can listen on phone arid simultaneously see videos through their web browsers. An online conference usually has an organizer, who can control what the participants see. The organizers may be the facilitators or the tutor, he ensures that everyone is on the same page; he can also use drawing tools to emphasize points. Participants are allowed to make their comments and contributions. Online conferencing may not be as good as face to face contact, but with online conferencing you can have an effective meeting where everyone hears, and sees the same thing without the hassle of bringing everyone physically together at a particular place.

Alexander (2000) describes online conferencing as a kind of virtual social space, communally shared by a group of people. Online conferencing is unaffected by people's physical attributes examples; their appearance, manner, confidence, gestures or accent. Online conferencing is a team effort, members have to be ready to contribute and support each other. Online conference generally works best when everyone feels relax about making their input without worrying about spellings, and grammar or getting their thought completely sorted out before they write or make a contribution. Online conferencing is a way of making study more sociable. It can give you the stimulation and support of sharing ideas and study experiences with like minded people. Online conferencing may be an integrated part of study, particularly if a student is studying by open and distance education. It may be an option the student can explore when there Is need to share ideas, Instead of battling away alone. Studying by open and distance learning at times can be a great challenge, confusions arise, and difficulties and complexities may be encountered during studying. Occasions may arise when a student might need deification about certain concepts with regards to the study materials. At this point, if no means of sharing fears and concerns comes to mind, the student might be tempted to either abandon the studies or might skip that portion of the study material, thereby making learning incomplete. However, with online conferencing, the student is able to share worries and exchange strategies, at that point, everything starts looking more manageable.

**Type of online conferencing**

Online conferencing are of two types: Synchronous conferencing and Asynchronous conferencing.

An online conference is said to be synchronous when all participants of the conference are present online at the same time. It is also referred to as real-time conferencing. Asynchronous conferencing occurs when members of the conference participate at a time of their own choosing. Each member visits the conference at his/ her own time and drop their comment or contribution.

**Uses of online conferencing**

Online conferencing can serve one of the following purposes:

1. Tutorial

If one member of the conference is a teacher, the interaction between the participants can be structured in the form of a tutorial The teacher can send out question to the students, the student visit the conference to give their responses. The teacher normally suggests time and duration for the tutorial online conferencing. The tutor revisits to view responds from students and at the end of the tutorial may evaluate the students, summaries and conclude the tutorial online conference. Students can lay out the fears, complaints and misunderstanding to the tutor at this point.

**2. Group projects**

A conference environment can also be used for a group project work. If the project is well structured and the students participate whole heartedly, online team work can be a very rewarding experience.

**3. Class discussion**

A conference environment can be used by students running the same program to discuss about class work, assignments, term papers or projects. Each participant makes a contribution and at the end of the day everyone benefits from others' ideas and experiences.

**Educational advantages of online conferencing**

1. It saves money, time, and energy of the participants by allowing them to participate in the conference from their Individual locations.

2. It offers a good source of communication in form of exchange of ideas and investigations, among students and their facilitators spanned across different demographics.

3. It helps students and teacher get up-to-date information and experiences related to their scope of study and area of interest by communicating with the people and source of authenticity.

4. It reduces chances of wastage of time and other resources as contacts are shorter and primarily purpose oriented, unlike traditional face to face conferencing.

5. It has made possible a unique collaboration and cooperation among the subjects experts, teachers and students of diversified capabilities and interest for enriching their thirst of knowledge and sharing their contribution in the field of education.

**The current trends in institution mode and delivery in the NOUN**

The method of instruction at noun is by the distance learning mode within an open learning environment. Open learning means any form of learning in which the process enables individual learners to exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning. Distance learning however, refers to an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. This instructional mode provides opportunities for working people to acquire knowledge, skills, and techniques which may be relevant to their present work situations or to future career prospects.

The NOUN instructional delivery system is modelled after that of India Ghandi National Open University of India. It does not provide students with lectures rather; students are being taught through the provision of specialized study materials on the basis of self-learning. The instructional materials are provided through the use of the following:

1. Printed materials: this is the major instructional mode until such a time teaching will become available.

2. Audio tapes, video tapes: - in addition to prints, some courses will be recorded an audio tapes/video tape to be played back over again till complete learning occurs.

3. CD-ROMs:- in addition to prints, CD-ROMs affords the opportunity of storing a vast amount of information and carrying it about

4. RADIO/TELEVISION BROADCASTS: Some courses of broadcast on the radio and some on TV stations within Nigeria. This is usually well organized following a strict time table/routine, and this is made known to the student involved.

5. COMPUTER MEDICATED LEARNING: As the country becomes more accessible via the internet and more students get access to personal computer learning at a distance will become more enabling.

**The problems**

In line with the quality assurance principles of NOUN to engage in high level teaching and learning and consequently award degrees to students who can compete with their counterparts the world over, it however becomes imperative that instructional delivery methods be extended beyond the current trend of use of prints, audio and video tapes, CO-ROMS, and the broadcast media. All this delivery methods do not encourage a two-way interaction between the facilitator and the learner at a particular time. The resultant effect of this one-way delivery approach is that students' feedback does not get to the facilitators promptly hence creating a vacuum in the teaching and learning process. When student have concerns and confusions, they find it difficult to find a forum to share it between their fellow students or even with their facilitator. Against this back drop however, it becomes pertinent that online conferencing be integrated, and promoted as a fundamental instructional delivery method to enhance teaching and learning in the National Open University of Nigeria.

**Research questions**

The study will attempt to provide answers to the following research questions

1. How effective and sufficient are the current instruction delivery modes to study at the National open university of Nigeria?

2. How important is the promotion of use of online conferencing as an instruction mode to the enhancement of open and distance learning in Nigeria?

3. What factors limit the use of online conferencing as an instruction mode in the National Open University of Nigeria?

**Hypotheses**

For the purpose of this study the following hypothesis was postulated

1. Promotion of the use of online conferencing as an instruction mode is a catalyst for enhancing open and distance learning and a tool for enhancing the overall attainment of the goals and objectives of the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria

**Research design**

The study is experimental It was aimed at finding out If the integration and promotion of the use of online conferencing as an instructional delivery mode in addition to the current mode of use of prints, enhances open and distance learning in Nigeria most importantly aiding in fostering attainment of the goals and objectives of the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria.

**Population/sample size**

The population of the study consisted of all post-graduate students at the Nekede, Owerri study centre of the National Open University of Nigeria.

However M.SC students in the department of information and technology for the 2013/2014 session were purposively selected as the sampled population.

**Data collection and analysis**

The instrument used for data collection was questionnaire. This provided the primary data. Secondary data was collected from interviews, personal discussion/interactions and literature. A four point likert scale was used in rating the responses from the respondents.

The instrument was validated by 5 scholars from the Imo State, Owerri, whose validity whose validity and reliability were 0.86 & 036 respectively. Descriptive and quantitative statistics were used to analyze and describe the data collected, thus frequency distributions, percentages and likert statistics were employed.

**Procedure for the experiment**

The researcher made use of a web-based online conferencing application known as OOVOO which is a social network, as the back bone for the experiment. The M.Sc. students of information and communication technology and Educational technology, at the Nekede study centre for the 2013/2014 session totaling 20, created Oovoo accounts either on their Personal computers, hand-held devices and mobile phones; then the students formed 2 chatting groups on Oovoo, according to their departments. The students however invited a private tutor on each of their groups, the tutor also had an Oovoo account and the tutor was also included in the Oovoo group. Once every week on wednsedays between 7 & 8 o'clock, the students and their tutor came online on Oovào irrespectively of their geographical location and interacted with each other as well as with their tutor. The students shared concerns, confusions or questions that they may have come across during the course of their studies. Periodically the tutors Issued out assignments to the students which the students did and presented In turns to the conferencing group. The experiments lasted for a period of three months between January and March 2014. At the end of the experiment the students were given out the questionnaire to fill out and give their responses on the experiences they had during the experiment, therefore evaluate the entire process; in comparison to the current trend of instruction delivery in NOUN.

**Results and discussions**

Results from the questionnaires completed by the respondents were presented and discussed below:

**Research question I**

How effective are the current instruction delivery mode to your study at the National Open University of Nigeria?

**Table I**: The effectiveness of the current Instruction delivery mode in NOUN.

|  | Frequency | Percentages |
|---|---|---|
| SA | - | - |
| A | - | - |
| D | 4 | 20 |
| SD | 16 | 80 |
| TOTAL | 20 |  |

**Source: Field data, 2014**

80% of the respondents strongly disagree and 20% of the respondents disagree that current instruction delivery mode prints, audio & video CDs, broad cast media, were effective In making them attain their full study potentials. This goes to answer the first research question as the study has shown that the current instruction delivery mode was not effective and sufficient.

**Research question 2**

How important is the promotion of the use of online conferencing as an instruction delivery mode to the enhancement of open and distance learning in Nigeria?

**Table 2:** importance of the interaction and conferencing as an Instruction delivery mode to the enhancement of open and distance learning in Nigeria

|  | Frequency | Percentages |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 20 | 100% |
| Agree | - | - |
| Disagree | - | - |
| Strongly disagree | - | - |
| TOTAL | 20 | 100% |

**Source Field data, 2014**

From the table above it was observed that all their respondent represented by 11-% of the sample size strongly agree that It Is not Important. Online conferencing be integrated as an instructional delivery method but should also be promoted as it is a veritable catalyst to enhance open and distance learning in Nigeria interview sessions conducted revealed that of the students, represented 70% of the experimental group stated that during the session that the usually faced the challenge of having a

hands-on medium of interacting between themselves and with their tutor but online conferencing provides a bridge to that gap enhance answering the second research question and showing that online conferencing Is a very important ingredient to moving open and distance learning in Nigeria to the next level

**Research question 3**

What factors limits use of online conferencing as instruction delivery mode in the national open university of Nigeria.

**Table 3:** Factors limited use of online conferencing as instruction delivery method in NOUN

| Factor | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Cost | 20 | 100% |
| Time | 18 | 90% |
| Lack of Supporting Infrastructure | 20 | 100% |
| Lack of skills | 8 | 40% |

The Table above showed that the major factors limited use of online conferencing as instructional delivery mode were cost (100%), lack of supporting infrastructure (100%) and time (90%) when interviewed the majority of the student (98%) stated that during the cause of the experience they aspect huge sums of money on subscribing for Internet bundle they used to get Internet access to enable them conference on SKYPE. The student also stated that instability in power supply, fluctuations Internet access, among other basic supporting infrastructure were also militating factor that would hinder effective use of online conferencing as instruction delivery mode in the national open university of Nigeria.

To test the hypothesis, the responses from question asked the respondent were tabulated below and then they mean calculated.

Responses were rated as follow;

Strongly Agree          - 1

Agreed -                    -2

Disagreed                 - 3

Strongly disagreed           - 4

**Table 4:**

| Number of respondent | Scaled responses | Scaled responses | Scaled responses | x |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1.33 |
| 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 4 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1.33 |
| 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 7 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1.33 |
| 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 9 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1.33 |
| 10 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1.33 |
| 11 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1.33 |
| 12 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1.33 |
| 13 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 14 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 15 | 1 | 1 | | 1.00 |
| 16 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 17 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1.67 |
| 18 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1.67 |
| 19 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1.33 |
| 20 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1.33 |

n=20

= 24.31

$X = x/n$ 24.31/20 = 1.22.

From the table above it was observed that the mean response of the sample population Is $X = 1.22$, showing that majority of the responses strongly agreed to the fact that promotion of use of online conferencing as instruction delivery mode is a catalysts for enhancing open and distance learning in Nigeria and hence is a variable tool for promotion the overall attainment of the goals and objective of the establishments of the national open university of Nigeria, hence upholding the hypothesis.

**Limitation of the Study**

As with most research, the results of his study must be interpreted with the constraints of the study's limitations. The sample was limited to M.Sc. information and communication technology and education technology of one out of the forty study center of the National Open University of Nigeria. While the researches are not aware of any reason to suspect that the result would be different in other study centers in Nigeria, however those differences may exist.

**Recommendations**

1. The management of the National Open University of Nigeria should include virtual classroom and promote use of online conference in their website like most open universities across world.

2. The management of NOUN should train their staff and students on proficiency of use of online conferencing as an instructional delivery mode.

3. The federal government of Nigeria should as a matter of urgency look into the Improvement of supporting infrastructure like power supply, fluctuation In Internet service among others, as this would ease off on limitation to the use of online conferencing in Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

The students of the National Open University of Nigeria face the problem of gap in communication between themselves and their tutors as the instruction mode in the Open University is through the open and distance learning mode and the Instruction delivery Is through the use of prints, Audio and Video CDs, tapes and through the broadcast media. Feedback and communication is usually one sided as student are expected to study on their own.

The study however, investigated whether promoting the use of online conferencing as instruction method enhances open and distance learning in Nigeria and attainment of the goals and objectives of establishment of the of the National Open University of Nigeria. It was deduced from the study that students deemed the current instruction on delivery method as not being effective and sufficient. From the students Reponses the means scaled response was $X = 1.22$ showing that the student strongly agree that the use of online conferencing enhance open and distance learning in Nigeria and hence propels the attainment of the goals and objective of the goals establishments of the National Open University of Nigeria, consequently improved their study potential.

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