

## APPROACHES TO PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) IN RESOURCE POOR NATIONS

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### Abstract

*Until relatively recently, education has been traditionally delivered by conventional classroom face to face learner - instructor interaction within the four walls of a classroom. With increasing population, it has become increasingly difficult to sustain this mode of education. This led to the emergence of open and distance learning (ODL), formally known as distance education (DE) as a veritable tool of delivering formal education. Although, there are enormous contributions of ODL to the political, economic, technological and social growth of a nation; many people in Africa perceive ODL as an inferior way of achieving education. The quality of education by this mode remains a concern in the mind of many skeptics having their doubts whether the quality of ODL is good and whether students can effectively learn from ODL. Currently there is no universal agreement on the definition of quality in distance education. It is in line with this belief that this presentation examined the various ways to improve the quality of ODL especially in Africa by emphasizing key points of quality in ODL education, namely: Accrediting Body and Quality Assurance, Admission Criteria, Tutor and Learner's feedback, Media and Instructional Materials, Student Support Services, Assessment and Evaluation. If most of these are well blended, quality will improve and acceptability will increase. Thus, examining the ways of improving distance education will re-emphasize promoting the quality of distance education and ensuring that it is at par with conventional system, improve acceptability, perception and recognition, particularly in nations that are just experimenting with the system.*

**Keywords:** *Developing countries, Distance education, Open and distance learning.*

### Introduction

All over the world, Open and Distance Learning has continue to grow in the last three decades. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) was formally known as Distance Education (DE), a generic term used to define the field or 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 (Jedlicka, Brown, Baunch and Jaffe, 2002). Open and Distance Learning can be defined in many ways - it can mean geographical distance, time distance, and even intellectual distance (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zavcek, 2000). According to Claus and Dooley (2005), distance education can be defined as institutional based, formal education where the learning group is separated geographically, and where interactive telecommunication systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zavcek, 2000). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme has become a common component of higher education institutions. In the last three decades, ODL has greatly expanded both in developed and developing countries. Many institutions in the world including Africa have come to embrace (operate) the ODL mode of teaching and learning. As far back as 2006, the United States of America had over 3.5 million students in ODL (Bertolin & DE Marchi, 2014). The expansion of ODL as a means of education is very much connected to its flexibility which affords individuals to cope with the demanding world, and properly utilize their time; gaining knowledge which ordinarily would have been inaccessible to them. On the other hand, quality in ODL has also been perceived in different ways by different writers and emphases are directed at the individual students. Some of the concepts of quality promulgated are that quality is meeting accreditation standards (Benson, 2003), quality is utilizing tools such as interaction, self-examination, and student evaluations (Hansen, 2003) and quality is effective and appropriate instruction (Cavanaugh, 2002).

In Africa, many universities operate both the distance and close systems of higher education (bimodal system of education). Only a few institutions operate the open and distance learning (ODL) system which is a unimodal system of education and such institutions include the National Open University of Nigeria (the only Unimodal University in west Africa), Universities of South Africa (UNISA), Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Sudan. Open and Distance Learning (ODL), makes education accessible to majority of the people who ordinarily would not have had the opportunity to higher education; therefore bridging the illiteracy gap among the people and immensely contributing to nation building academically, technologically and socially; these contributions cannot be overemphasized. Although, there are enormous contributions of ODL to the political, economic, technological and social growth of a nation; many people in Africa perceive DE as an inferior way of achieving education. The quality of education by this mode remains a concern in the mind of many skeptics. They have their doubts whether the quality of ODL is good and whether students can effectively learn from this method. Currently there is no universal agreement on the definition of quality in distance education (Claus & Dooley 2004; Meyer, 2002). This has contributed to what is generally referred to as “low quality of education” in distance education. Some individuals or management fail to give recognition or stigmatize certificates gotten from distance education (online education or e-learning). It is in line with this belief that this presentation examined the various ways from literature to improve the quality of ODL especially in Africa.

In this study, a search was made the use relevant scholarly electronic databases, journal publications, books and Internet sites were used for relevant information from 2000 to 2017. It was revealed that most organizations are looking up to distance education or e-learning to provide training and development for their employees. Therefore, improvement in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) will promote a good educational and technological output thus advancing a nation’s economy. To a large extent and of necessity to attain a quality Open and Distance Learning (ODL), the following strategies are approaches to promoting ODL and have to be well planned and put in place to achieve good standard; they are:

(1). *Accrediting Body and Quality Assurance (QA)*

There are different accrediting bodies for different countries to accredit their university programmes. No programme must be allowed in an institution where it has not been accredited. Accreditation is to enhance that uniform standard and quality is given to a particular programme. Therefore, concerted efforts must be made by institution to make sure the programmes in their institutions meet the standard speculated by the accrediting body. In the developed nations like United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Australia; there are specific bodies accrediting DE. Such bodies include but not limited to the following: Distance Learning Accreditation Board (DLAB) in USA, Distance Education and Training Council, Accrediting Commission (DETC) also in USA, Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (UK), Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE) in Australia.

In Nigeria there is only one accrediting body for both closed and distance education- the National Universities Commission (NUC). These accrediting bodies help to maintain “best practice principles” (APA 2002). It will be quite expedient in Africa to have specific accrediting bodies for Distance Education so as to give special attention to some peculiarities of DE which are not quite the same with conventional institutions. Using the standards for conventional universities (face- to face mode of teaching and learning) for ODL is not adequate and may bring about false assessment of the ODL mode of learning; judging it as inadequate. For example, the number of Lectures needed to run a programme in a conventional university is much larger than the

number of Lecturers needed in an ODL mode institution where most of the materials needed to train the students are available online. This and other factors have to be put in place to accredit ODL institutions. Most institutions also have quality assurance (QA) units which also aid in developing and maintaining standards (Darajat, 2015). Quality Assurance is the set of activities that an organisation undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. Improving quality enhances productivity. This QA unit complements the work of the accrediting bodies to ensure standard in each institution that has it. The success of QA involves the participation and commitment of all staff involved in the implementation. **Belawati (2007) reported that QA has always been an issue in DE, though it contributes a lot to** improved teaching, learning and administrative processes. Quality Assurance is not only an effort to create quality, but rather a systematic and comprehensive effort to improve quality and a continuous process of improvement. This should be encouraged by all ODL institutions as a double check on standard. A typical ODL institution trying to maintain a vibrant QA unit is the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

### *(2) Admission Criteria*

Most ODL institutions operate flexible admission criteria. However, admission criteria should be of high standard and must involve the input of both the academic and administrative staff of the university. Credit passes at ordinary level in at least five relevant subjects at not more than two sittings in the West African Examination Council for West Africa region or National Examination Council for Nigeria other developing countries or poor resource countries have a standardized qualification done by students after secondary schools that they can use to select qualified candidates for 100 level admission into their desired disciplines. Only candidates with diploma (OND) qualifications or higher school certificate (HSC) after secondary school should be given a direct entry admission to 200 level.

To improve quality, it is necessary to verify the certificates presented by students for admission as some of such certificates may be fake, thus authenticating such certificates from the issuing body ensures quality. The final selection of candidates for admission to a particular department must rest on the table of the head of department to enhance quality. One of the ways to improve quality in admission and enrolment in DE is to have a specific number of candidates to admit in a particular session so as to plan and organize for such number of students. The number of admissions must be commensurate to the number of systems, software, laboratories, and personnel (academic and administrative) as well as other essential utilities in each study centre to enhance quality learning and assessment of the students. To have a period to take proper stuck and planning, admission must be demarcated by semester break for at least 2-3 weeks instead of it occurring throughout the year. Planning and management are very vital tools in providing quality, without which there may not be room for best practices.

### *(3) Tutor and Learner's feedback*

Academic staff should have a minimum of masters' degree to be able to teach in the universities and this must be adequately ensured to maintain standard in teaching and mentoring. The tutors should also have the right attitude in giving instructions to the students. The tutors should bear in mind that technology alone does not teach students but effective teachers do (Pallof and Prat, 2000). Therefore the tutors must have an understanding of the students' needs and discharge their duty effectively and keep in mind that equal learning can take place in DE as in the classroom (Summers, Waigandt and Whittaker, 2005). The students themselves must be willing to learn and not just to get certificates. Students-teachers interaction should be taken very seriously (Carter, 2001). The students also have their expectations and should have ample opportunities to

give feedbacks about the DE system and such feedbacks should be used to improve the quality of education provided.

#### *(4) Media and Instructional Materials*

It is very important for all stakeholders (teachers, students, administrators and government) in the field of distance education practice to keep abreast of the emerging trends in the field. Media and Instructional materials are very vital means to keep abreast in DE. Claus and Dooley (2005) reported that learning is enhanced by the type of instructional method used through media. Recently, the aptness of media and instructional materials was further emphasized as going a long way to determine the quality of instruction that is given through distance learning programmes (Zabidi, Woo, Kumar, Fadzil, & Husain, 2017). Curriculum design, instructional materials development and plagiarism checks are very crucial in promoting quality in ODL institutions and should be critically scrutinize by the QA unit of the ODL institutions. Since DE is on the increase, media and instructional resources to promote quality must be provided at all levels of study. The media and Instructional materials must be relevant, motivating, useful for the teaching, interesting, comprehensive and accurate. Some of the media sources used to enhance quality in distance education include but not limited to audiovisual (AV) resources like slide projector, film projector, TV, computer, radio, video recorder, print material, transparency, flash-cards, course materials which should be written by highly qualified professionals in the field and updated at least once every five years, ilearn (ilearn is Innovative Learning Environment and Research Network) through video conferencing and class discussions, webinar, e-library, Open Educational Resources and Massive Open Online Courses (OER & MOOCS) among others. Most of these are achieved through modern technological advancement. Shelton (2011) indicated that technology is of paramount importance or germane to quality and success in ODL. An important consideration must be given to writers of learning materials. Learning materials should be written by highly qualified personnel who hold PhD degrees, are credible and experienced in teaching and writing. Efforts must be made by the ODL institutions to keep learning materials current and abreast of new findings; that means that such materials must be reviewed every five years by knowledgeable teachers to make them current and globally acceptable. Concrete policies should be enacted and followed on the production and use of media and learning materials to maintain standard in ODL institutions of ODL. This is very important to maintain quality as these are the major learning tools for the DE students (Oladepo & Gesinde, 2014).

#### *(5) Student Support Services*

The student support service is used to provide institutional assistance for the students to make education easier and more assessable. Common students support services to be focused on in developing countries are in the area of finance and information technology (IT), targeted at assisting the students in social, emotional and character development. Although, ODL is supposed to be affordable, flexible and assessable; many students still need financial aid to go through their education successfully. Some from poor backgrounds can be given scholarships. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in Nigeria gives such support to deserving students especially prison inmates. Information technology (IT) has to be well established and invested in, in order to reach the remotest student for ease of learning as most learning materials are to be available online. It is disheartening to know that some institutions in developing countries use printed materials as its primary medium of instructional delivery, while access and participation by students is still relatively low in online studies because of the absence of effective IT. A major challenge to IT access in most resource poor countries is limited internet connectivity and power outages. Also, very many students lack knowledge in the use of computer. Information computer technology (ICT) remains a common barrier among most ODL students in in developing countries

#### *(6) Assessment and Evaluation*

Assessment should be carried out with greatest care and caution at each stage of training. Quality should be maintained by teachers and any other person involved; monotony should be avoided in continuous assessment (CA) as well as written examination. All forms of measurement such as multiple choice questions (MCQ), fill-in-the gap, short responses and long essays should be employed. This will help examiners to cover all the areas in the curriculum. In setting examination questions, judicious allocation of marks and time allocation is of great importance. Adequate supervision is also key in ensuring standard and quality. Personal integrity of the examiner cannot be overlooked as some examiners are the cause of low quality in assessment. The examiner must be knowledgeable and also skilled in the use of computer/IT. The issue of the way to go about assessment and evaluation must be standardized in DE to promote quality. Sims, Dobbs & Hand (2002) promoted the idea of proactive evaluation for enhancing quality in on-line learning. Evaluation from the students is also very important so that improvement can be employed in the institution. This type of feedback will enhance communication between the institution and the learners. According to Bertolin & DE Marchi (2014), professor-student interactions are relevant factors for the improvement of students' learning. Therefore, this must always be given a considerable thought if quality will be improved and any missing link put in place. It should also be noted that when quality is improved, acceptability will also be increased.

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

Distance education (DE) has spread widely globally in the last three decades and quality improvement is of paramount importance. Ways of achieving quality include having a proper and efficient accrediting body for DE, good media and instructional materials, thorough and good assessment and evaluation system at each stage of training and good feedback mechanism through teacher-student interaction. If most of these are well blended, quality will improve and acceptability will increase. It is hoped that by addressing some concerns in this paper on improving the quality of distance education, the points examined in the study will help to close the gap between distance education and quality.

#### **Recommendations**

1. As admission criteria, ODL students must be required to possess ICT skills, before admission or the first semester (first 3-4 months) must be committed to training on computer/ICT for the students before progressing on their degree programme at the university. This will solve the limitation most students claim to face as ODL students in accessing this system of learning.
2. Teachers in ODL institution must be trained in the use of ODL as a teaching and learning mode, they must be exposed to acquiring the necessary skills to effectively meet the needs of the students using this mode of learning. The teachers must also be skilled in the use of computer.
3. Provision of modern infrastructure to enhance the educational needs of the students must be invested in by ODL institutions in order to maintain improvement and quality.

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