

**Quality Assurance and Relevance of Distance Education at the University of Ibadan Distance
Learning Centre, Nigeria**

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By

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Abstract

Open distance learning (ODL) is one aspect of self learning which the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, established in 1988. Its establishment was to meet the University vision of expanding the frontiers of knowledge and transforming the society through access to lifelong education to those who due to various reasons are unable to enroll the full-time academic programmes of the University. The specific objective is to bridge the capacity gap by delivering programmes of global standards in areas of national needs through ICT and e-learning. This form of learning has undeniably made learning more flexible and convenient in terms of space, time, cost and what is on offer. In spite of the obvious advantage of this form of education, the issue of standards and quality control remain a bone of contention in the minds of people. This paper highlights the issue of quality in the administration of open distance education of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria as well as its challenges. It is concluded by making a few recommendations for the sustenance of the programme.

Introduction

Open distance education is one aspect of self learning which the University of Ibadan, Nigeria has introduced to provide **education** to those who due to various reasons are unable to enroll for full time academic programmes of the University. Given computer access, it is believed that, people can then use the information and communication technology to do all sorts of things to improve their socioeconomic status. This form of education has undeniably made learning more flexible and convenient in terms of time, cost and what is on offer. However, in spite of the obvious advantages of this form of education, the issue of standard and quality control remains paramount. For instance, questions have been raised on how technology-mediated arrangements may de-humanize the relationship between teacher and learner, absence of opportunity for interaction (Dhanarajan, 2000). A systematic and consistent Quality Assurance System helps to establish high standards of academic excellence for programme development and delivery and thereby enhances an institution's good reputation and image. The result will be greater public confidence, more satisfied students, efficient processes and staff who are confident in their jobs.

This paper highlights the issue of quality in the administration of open and distance learning at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Open and Distance Learning and Technology

In discussing this topic, a distinction among distance education, open learning and e-learning concepts is undertaken.

Several definitions have been offered by writers worldwide with regard to distance education (More, 1973; Holmberg, 1977; Rumble, 1992 and Keegan, 1996). Chung (2005) sees distance education as a combination of methodologies through which education can be provided to students by teachers who may be separated from them in time and space. Methodologies here include print, audio, video, video conferencing, CD-ROMs and DVDs, computer applications and face-to-face. The physical separation of teacher and learner, the use of learning materials, two way communications between students and tutor as well as little or no use of learning groups are the usual characteristics of distance learning. Lewis and Spencer (1986) define open learning as course flexibly designed to meet individual requirements. Jeffries (1990) sees it as any form of learning in which the provider enables individual learners to exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning. Hodgson (1993) describes open learning as learning opportunities that give ...better access to knowledge and skills... give learners the optimum degree of control over their own learning. Peter Bateman (2006) has summarized these characteristics as methods which may involve self study learning materials, learner support, synchronous and asynchronous learner-teacher interaction, on-line counseling and tutoring etc.

Otto Peters (2003) identifies open learning as access to universities by all who are able to study by removing traditional education barriers; designing learning programmes which are open... for unforeseen developments in the build-up of individual ability in a variety of settings that is devoid of bureaucratic constraints. E-learning is a recent entry into the repertoire of methods of delivering distance learning. E-learning, according to Butcher (2001) is used to refer to educational applications of internet techniques, regardless of whether they are used in an internet or intranet environment or simply used within a local or wide area computer network. Bateman (2006) describes e-learning or online courses as a web-based delivery of text based courses with computer-mediated enhancements (placed on a web site) for students to read, or to print and read. From the foregoing definitions, one could view distance education as metamorphosing, from simple to complex organization/process of learning, in which various means and approaches are used to educate the willing individuals on what they want to learn.

Antecedent to Distance Learning in Nigeria

In 1728, Caleb Philips of Boston, USA taught shorthand by post while in 1843, in the United Kingdom, Isaac Pitman introduced the study of shorthand by post. However, one thing is unique to their mode of study- they did not interfere with workplace priorities of their clients (Owoeye, 2004).

In pre-independent Nigeria, educational opportunities were limited and only a few were able to access such opportunities. After World War II more Nigerians were desirous of enrolling in evening classes, others took advantage of correspondence courses available from Rapid Results College, Wolsey Hall, Bennett College and Oxford Delegacy which prepared them for GCE O/A levels and RSA as private candidates (Aji, 2000)

According to Fagbamiye (2000), the first conscious attempt to establish a distance learning education unit as a part of a university was made in 1974 when University of Lagos, with the assistance of International Extension College in the U.K. established the Correspondence and Open studies Unit (COSU), later Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (COSIT), now Distance Learning Institute (DLI). The programmes offered at inception included B.Sc. degrees in Accounting, Business Administration, Science Education and Postgraduate Diploma in Education. Students were taught using course texts, audio tapes and radio broadcasts aired feely by Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). In 1983, the Federal Government set up the Open University of Nigeria in Abuja but was closed down less than a year after. However, in 2002, the Government reestablished the University as National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) with its headquarters in Lagos.

In 1998, the University of Ibadan embarked on the external degree programme. The focus was to meet the demand of Nigerians for tertiary education; improve the quality of life of the citizens through capacity development.

The Issue of relevance and Quality

Nigeria, with a population of about 150 million people and one of the Group of E-9 nations with the largest illiterate population in the world, cannot afford to relax any effort to enhance educational development if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be accomplished. One way of enhancing literacy is the use of learning to open up access to any who are currently not being served.

The vision of the University of Ibadan is to expand the frontiers of knowledge and transform society through innovation. The Distance Learning Centre keys into this by seeking to provide lifelong access to

quality education. A look at the demand for University education in Nigeria shows that there is a yawning gap between supply and demand. The University hopes to:

- Bridge the capacity gap by delivering programmes of global standards in areas of national needs;
- Deliver skills based programmes in order to promote employment and productivity;
- Partner with communities and private sector to create requisite synergy for quality and competitive education;
- Key into the global education market by positioning the University of Ibadan as an exporter of knowledge and intellectual resources;
- To become the primary centre for learning resources in Africa and provide a platform for reengineering the Africa consciousness; and
- To provide an avenue for forging global corporation, harmony and understanding through education (Egbokhare, 2006, pp. 15-16)

To achieve the above objectives, the centre has started to:

- a) Deploy technology especially ICT, to enable it deliver its programmes in scale and provide qualitative learning materials;
- b) Create flexible regulatory and administrative environment in order to accommodate the diverse experiences and qualification of prospects; and
- c) Partner with private sector organizations, government and educational institutions.

Egbokhare (2006) identified the REC mode as a strategy for achieving the instruments through:

- Reform of regulations and organizational structure;
- Expansion of programmes and creation of access;
- Consolidation of structures and process of quality control; and
- Moderation of service delivery and facilities.

In order to actualize these initiatives, the emphasis has been on quality assurance.

Quality Control

Quality according to Gitlow, Oppenheim and Levine (1995) is a predictable degree of uniformity and dependability, at low cost and suited to the market. They submitted that the goal post view of quality is the conformance to valid customer requirements. The implication according to the school of thought is, as long as an output fell within acceptable limits, around a desired value, called the normal value or target value, it was deemed conforming, good, or acceptable but a more realistic definition. However, the commonwealth of learning (1993) conceptualized quality control as measures taken to remove faults in the production process and putting in place systems to obtain better data about discrepancies between proposed and putting performances. Odejide (2007) defines quality as the level of value in a product or a level of achievement while quality assurance is the process for ensuring fitness for purposes and of purpose. While fitness for purpose is related to the University's mission, fitness of purpose refers to its capacity to attain prescribed national goals of higher education with regard to distance education. Quality control as a process operates retrospectively, inspecting/discarding faulty products (COL, 2001). On quality management, the Higher Education Quality Committee's Institutional Audit Model (2004) stated a number of institutional planning and action to address issue of quality. These include institutional arrangements for:

- Quality assurance-the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to satisfy that its quality requirements and standards are being met;
- Quality support- the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to support and sustain existing levels of quality;
- Quality development and enhancement- the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to develop and enhance quality; and
- Quality monitoring- the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to monitor, evaluate and act on quality issues (p.1).

Quality Assurance in the Distance Learning Programme

The primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with the institution (Odejide, 2007), which should, from time to time, carry out periodic audits of its programmes in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses. The audit should cover teaching effectiveness, assessment of courses, course texts,

textbooks, facilities and capacity development. The purpose of this is to institutionalize continuous checks to ensure improvement and innovation. To meet the challenges of periodic quality assessment, the institution, according to Ekhuere (2006) must at each point in time endeavour to answer such questions as:

- What is our institution trying to do?
- How is our institution trying to do it?
- How does our institution know that it is meeting its objectives?
- What steps are being taken to ensure relevance and improvement?

Quality Assurance mechanisms in Ibadan Distance Learning programmes are built into admission processes, staffing, course design and development, continuous assessment and regular feedback; periodic training workshops to sensitize facilitators and tutors as well as faculties who are the mainstay of the programme; periodic expert assessment of processes and products of the distance programmes.

Furthermore, the National University Commission in its role of ensuring quality of university programmes has its own benchmark culminating in the production of Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) for undergraduate programmes in Nigeria Universities. The basic instruments used in accreditation of the regular face-to-face university programmes are also used in evaluating the Open Distance Learning (ODL) Programmes. All courses offered by University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre were given full accreditation in 2006.

Challenges of Quality in the University of Ibadan Distance Learning Programme

The distance learning programme at the University of Ibadan faces some challenges which must be confronted and mediated so that the learners can learn without tears.

These challenges vary from inadequate power supply which hampers the use of ICT technology and productive work. There is also a low level of literacy in the use of ITC facilities. Many of the cooperating departments often do not treat the writing of course materials with the urgency it demands. The ICT infrastructure is totally inadequate and internet support services are virtually absent.

Often, no cognizance is taken of the load carried by lecturers in the face-to-face mode in allocating distance learning tasks to collaborating faculties. Furthermore, enough attention has not been given to provision of physical facilities in the distance learning mode. This and other challenges would need to be

carefully addressed and resolved if quality is to be assured. A careful audit of current practices and visionary plan of the years ahead would ensure that open access can lead to high quality distance learning.

Conclusion

Even though, researchers and practitioners are aware of the need to open up access to more customers, it must be realized that open distance learning is not a cheap option to the face-to-face mode. The initial outlay for ODL programmes is usually very high and the unit cost only comes down as more learners enter into the programme, therefore, if quality is to be assured in Open Distance Learning (ODL), every effort must be made to anticipate appropriate needs and facilities before such programmes are put in place.

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