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Attitudes and Perceptions of Students to Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria

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Abstract

In the West African Region of Africa, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is the first full fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education. NOUN focuses mainly on open and distance teaching and learning system, and delivers its courses materials via print in conjunction with information and communication technology (ICT), when applicable. This 'single mode' of open education is different from the integration of distance learning system into the face- to- face teaching and learning system, which is more typical of conventional Universities in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Thus, NOUN reflects a novel development in the provision of higher education in Nigeria. This study assesses the attitudes and perceptions of distance teaching and learning by students enrolled in the NOUN and of the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) compared to their experiences at conventional universities. One hundred and twenty (n = 120) randomly selected NOUN and NTI students of NOUN were the subjects of the study. The Students' Attitude and Perception Rating of Open and Distance Learning Institutions Inventory (SAPRODLII), developed by the researchers, was administered to the subjects to measure their attitudes and experiences. Results of the study showed that students generally hold a positive perception and attitude towards ODL, compared to traditional forms of higher education.

Keywords: perception; attitude; flexibility; self-directed learning; conventional institution; learners

Introduction

Since the colonial period, correspondence colleges from the United Kingdom have provided intermediate and advanced level training to a number of suitably qualified Nigerians via correspondence courses (Owoeye, 2004). Being the only method of distance education available at the time, a large number of secretarial, commercial, and middle level administrators were trained using this mode of education. Many early nationalist leaders in Nigeria were also trained through this modality before they had the opportunity to travel to the United Kingdom to further their education (Adesina, 1988). Training was later extended to the preparation of students for the General Certificate Examinations – Ordinary and Advance levels – by notable institutions such as the Rapid Results College, Wolsey College, as well as Cambridge University and University of London (Owoeye, 2004). Delivery from foreign providers stopped, however, when Nigeria assumed full independence. At this time, internal developments have begun in many sectors of the Nigeria economy, including education.

The dynamics of globalization, plus the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) resulted in a tidal wave of information that has, in many cases, overwhelmed many countries around the world. This has resulted in radical changes in the educational needs of individuals and society at large, a phenomena that is reflected in the emerging need for additional specializations in learning. Because the world of work is more complex and fluid, newer approaches to working and learning are in demand; more than ever, educational institutions are required to imbue their students with functional lifelong learning skills they need to survive and meet the challenges and changes wrought by the twenty-first century. Experiences both nationally and internationally have shown that conventional education is extremely hard pressed to meet the demands of today's socio-educational milieu, especially for developing countries like Nigeria. In Nigeria there exists a wide gulf between the demands for spots in the educational system at the tertiary level versus the actual number of students admitted annually (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of applicants and number of students admitted to higher education programs in Nigeria Source: Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board, 2004

Universities	1996/97	1998/99	1999/00	2000/2001
Number of Applicants	371,482	400,[illegible]	461,548	653,818
Number Admitted	56,055	78,550	78,550	50,277
Polytechn[illegible]				
Number of Applicants	168,981	123,231	110,831	198,850
Number Admitted	28,091	33,168	37,005	38,145
Colleges of Education				
Number of Applicants	16,546	27,916	*n/a*	14,438
Number Admitted	12,023	12,562	*n/a*	6,672

This lack of capacity has brought to fore the issue of open and distance learning (ODL) as an innovative and cost effective approach to the educative process. To bridge the gap between participants in the instructional process, ODL offers structured learning in which the instructor and students are separated by time and space, making use of instructional materials such as print materials, audio and video cassettes, CD ROMs, television and radio broadcasts, as well as multimedia components such as computer and satellite transmissions (Peat and Helland 2002). Many ODL institutions encourage students to attend tutorials in addition to academic counselling services, which are often available as complements to tutorial sessions. To foster interaction between learners, in certain cases, online support is offered through real time chat, advice, and email discussion groups with staff and other students (Ray and Day 1998). In many respects, however, ODL remains an alien system of inculcating knowledge to students in Nigeria, because they tend to be more accustom to conventional universities. Thus, because students are new to ODL and its innovations, opportunity for confusion exists.

This study assesses post graduate students' attitude and perceptions of distance learning institutions in Nigeria towards the quality and standard of training obtainable at their institutions, compared to that of the conventional institutions (where many had been enrolled prior to joining the distance learning institution). This study aims to reduce the existing gap in the literature on

students' perceptions and attitudes towards distance education in West Africa, and provide useful and practical information to distance education providers.

Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria

The National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna, was established in 1976 by the Nigerian Federal Government to produce qualified teachers needed to meet the requirements of the then Universal Primary Education (UPE). The Institute's enabling legislation charged NTI Kaduna to provide courses of instruction leading to the development, up-grading, and certification of teachers as specified in the relevant syllabus using distance education techniques. Thus NTI was the first institution formally established in Nigeria to offer courses via ODL methods. NTI courses are offered predominantly through print media. Efforts were made to further disseminate instruction with the aid of an FM radio station donated by the Commonwealth of Learning. This represented the first attempt to make use of instructional technology in distance learning settings in Nigeria, and led to further attempts by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to teach students using multi-media instructional technology. For instance, the course materials for GST 101 and GST 102, which are compulsory 'English and Communication Skills' courses for foundation

distance education settings students are often isolated and contact with their university is, at best, infrequent and more often than not takes place at a distance. Although more flexible, the fact remains that this educational approach demands a great deal of personal sacrifice on the part of learners. It requires students to have good study skills, discipline, and self-motivation – attributes needed to attain learner autonomy (Collis, 1996). These attributes, in addition to learners' socio-cultural backgrounds, previous knowledge and learning experiences attained at conventional institutions, will likely influence their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, ODL.

Perceptions of Distance Education

The term 'Distance Education' refers to an educational approach in which there is a quasi separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space (Keegan 1996). In distance education, the instructor and the instructional strategy/ methods are subsumed into the learning material (popularly referred to as Study Materials), that have been designed as a self-directed learning guide for the student. The term 'Open Learning,' on the other hand, refers to the philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality, lifelong education. ODL as an educational method and a philosophic construct has been identified as the most potent instrument for combating the educational problems assailing a nation like Nigeria. Moore and Tait (2002) asserted that ". . . in developing countries, human knowledge resource development through initial and continuing education is not only seen as crucial for growth and competitiveness, but also has far reaching social impact, for example in influencing birth rate, increasing the independence of women, and improving standards of health and rural environment" (p. 17).

This affirms the crucial role that education can play in developing countries like Nigeria. Education is an important ally in the role of social and economic development. The potential of ODL in realising these educational goals has been viewed ambivalently, however. In efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, ODL may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary – and in some circumstances a more appropriate substitute – for face-to-face classroom methods that still dominate most educational systems. Despite the rapid growth and increased popularity of distance learning, the quality of higher learning via distance education has been called to question (Dede 1996; Harrison 2001 as cited in Peat and Helland, 2002). Walter Perry the first vice-chancellor of the Open University of United Kingdom, noted the "scepticism garnished with ridicule and hostility" of distance education universities (Young 1994). According to empirical evidence, however, there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained at traditional institutions versus distance learning (Verduin and Clark 1991).

While its benefits can be evaluated by technical, social, and economic criteria, distance learning methods also have their pedagogical merit, which leads students to a different way of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition. Different people perceive the advantages of ODL differently, and their perceptions have influenced attitudes towards acceptance and use of ODL in the education system in Nigeria and elsewhere. There remains concerns, however, about the effectiveness of distance education for learners who may be considered less independent and thus may require direct interaction throughout the instructional process (Schmidt and Faulkner 1989). Another concern is the cost of ODL programming for individual students (Ojo, Ogidan, and Olakulehin, 2005). There is a perception that most all distant learners are members of the working class, but this is not entirely true as shown by the statistics of registered students in NOUN shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Employment Status of NOUN Students

	Working	Not-Working	Total
Male	2,965	3,809	6,774
Female	1,1[illegible]	2,083	3,192
Total	4,074 (41%)	5,892 (59%)	9,966

Source: *Academic Registry Department, NOUN.*

Studies have found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning versus conventional university classroom settings. Studies have determined that students taking distance learning courses perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods (Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002). More often than not, perceptions of the distance learning system in the instructional process is influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantages of distance education, for himself, as a student, as an employer (whose employees are also distant learning students), or as an educational planner (desirous of providing potent solutions to educational problems).

Method

The samples for this study comprised 120 distant learning students randomly selected from study centres located at the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. The sample was drawn from students who registered for various postgraduate diplomas and master degree programmes at the NTI and NOUN study centres. A structured questionnaire entitled the Students' Attitude and Perceptions Rating of Open and Distance Learning Institutions Inventory (SAPRODLII), was developed by the researchers to gather the required information. The SAPRODLII is a 12 item Likert-type inventory designed to measure distance learning students (specifically those who have also experienced conventional university training) attitudes and perceptions towards ODL. The instrument was administered face-to-face to the distance learners during the tutorial sessions through the assistance of the Study Centre Managers at the Centres in each of Nigeria's six geo-political zones. Subjects were asked to rank each item (in comparison to traditional education) as true, false, or undecided. The questions on the SAPRODLII were designed to elicit subjects' opinions and attitudes towards the learning materials used in the two different modes, the instructional technology used, entry point considerations, attention to students' counselling needs, learning materials available, and the perceived advantages of the two modes. The instrument was validated by two experts in research and evaluation; its test-retest reliability was 0.67 (n = 15).

The respondents were 57 percent male and 43 percent female, with age ranging from 24 to 65 years. Thirty-two (n = 32) respondents were from NTI; eighty-eight (n = 88) were from NOUN. Respondents were registered in programmes such as PGD Education; PGD Human Resource Management, Financial Management; MBA; Masters of Education; M. Sc., Information Technology. Results were analysed using simple percentage statistics.

Results and Findings

Results generated from the instrument are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the Survey

S/N	Issue	True	False	Undecided
1.	The study materials received in ODL are of better quality than the lecture notes received in conventional system	66 (55%)	26 (21.6%)	28 (23.4%)
2.	The use of instructional technology in the ODL is as prevalent as those used during my training in the conventional system	16 (13.3%)	58 (48.3%)	46 (38.3%)
3.	The entry point into the ODL system seems more relaxed than the conventional system	79 (65.8%)	31 (25.8%)	10 (8.4%)
4.	The tutorials in use in ODL are as effective as the lecture methods used in the conventional system	52 (43.3%)	57 (47.6%)	11 (9.1%)
5.	The counselling needs of learners are better met in ODL than in the conventional higher education	56 (46.6%)	36 (30%)	28 (23.4%)
6.	If I had the choice, I would have undertaken my first degree via the ODL method	68 (56%)	52 (44%)	~
7.	There is more room for academic cheating in ODL institutions	55 (45.8%)	58 (48.3%)	7 (5.8%)
8.	Group discussions are more important in ODL than the conventional system	95 (79.1%)	4 (3.4%)	21(17.5%)
9.	The workload in ODL institutions is too much	40 (33.3%)	43 (35.7%)	37 (30.8%)
10.	The materials prolllided in ODL are self sufficient for my studies	98 (81.7%)	~	22(18.3%)
11.	It is ea[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]

Table 3 shows the item-by-item percentage analysis of the SAPRODLII. Sixty-six students (55%)

Responses to Item 4: "*The tutorials in use in ODL are as effective as the lecture methods used in the conventional system,*" indicate that there is little difference in students' perceptions of lectures/ tutorials used in the conventional institutions versus ODL institutions. This finding suggests that students engaged in ODL will likely achieve learning outcomes similar to those offered by conventional educational methods.

Findings from Item 5: "*The counselling needs of learners are better met in ODL than in the conventional higher education*," suggests that students' need for counselling were better met in ODL institutions than in conventional university; 46.6 percent of the students responded positively approve this statement, while 30 percent responded negatively, and 23 percent indicated they were undecided.

Other statements designed to measure students' attitudes and perceptions about ODL institutions, specifically Items 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12, indicated students held favourable perceptions towards ODL. On the other hand, findings were very similar for Item 7 "*There is more room for academic cheating in ODL institutions*,"which was developed to ascertain students' perceptions of cheating.

Discussion

Widely held attitudes are fundamental to understanding social perception of people, because they greatly influence their own and peoples' actions. Cohen (1966) and Ojo (2000) contend that it is only human nature to view things in certain ways and act accordingly. The flexibility inherent in ODL as a delivery method enables students to pursue whatever kind of degree or training they want, even though they may be working full or part-time. Entry point requirements are more relaxed in ODL, and if there is demonstrable need, students have the opportunity of defer courses, programmes, and even examinations. Such flexibility is very difficult to achieve in the conventional universities because their activities and management systems are more rigid and thus restrictive by design.

Innovative use of instructional technology is another point of potential contact between students and the institution. Use of instructional technology may also be one of the reasons leading to favourable findings students indicated toward ODL. Other favourable factors may be personal, social, academic, and situational – factors that may influence students' intention to enrol for programmes offered by ODL institutions (Walker and Lowenthai, 1981).

Findings from this study are very important. Although respondents' recognition of a conventional university education value was never in doubt, they nonetheless had purposefully chosen to enrol in an ODL institution. Students' responses to Items 4, 9 and 11 support this assertion. Most students in this study held positive perceptions and attitudes towards ODL. This finding suggests there is strong rationale for the expansion of the ODL institutions in Nigeria. It also suggests that ODL institutions have reached the critical tipping point of acceptance, and as such ODL institutions are well positioned to become a permanent component of the formal education system in Nigeria. Sustaining students' favourable perceptions and improving any and all shortcomings as they arise now rests squarely on the shoulders of those charged with running Nigeria's ODL institutions. These educational leaders must not only run ODL institutions effectively and efficiently, they must strive to continuously improve the quality of their institutions' educational offerings and continuously seek ways to expand their educational provision.

Responses in Item 2, "*The use of instructional technology in the ODL is as prevalent as those used during my training in the conventional system*" indicates that the use of instructional technology/ ICT remains rather sparse in the pedagogical practice of distance education in

Nigeria. It is suggested, however, that this shortcoming is more a reflection of the entire education system throughout Nigeria and, by extension, its entire socio-economic system. Indeed, most Nigerians still grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide; access to instructional technology and capacity to use such technology is negligible compared to those of developed nations (Yusuf and Falade, 2005). Thus administrators and leaders charged with oversight of distance teaching institutions in Nigeria may want to concentrate their research efforts on overcoming the deficits that underpin and perpetuates the digital divide.

For Item 7, a large percentage of the respondents (45.8%) agreed that ODL institutions provide ample opportunity for cheating. However, there is no clear cut difference in the responses between ODL and conventional universities on the topic of 'cheating.' Such small difference (< 3%) might be attributable to the fact that ODL students are at liberty to answer the Tutor Marked Assignment given to them in course materials provided. This practice can be compared to that of conventional universities in which students are required to answer questions in a face-to-face classroom setting. Thus, whatever cheating that may be perpetuated by ODL students as compared to those students enrolled in conventional universities cannot be easily deciphered. Moreover, perhaps such differences cannot be accurately measured simply because the rationale for giving ODL students the answers in the learning materials in the first place, puts emphasis on functional application of knowledge as opposed to rote memorization and recall-style learning that often characterises conventional learning settings. This means that distance learning institutions should remain focused on developing open-book, portfolio, and problem-based learning situations wherein students work together to find creative solutions to problems posed in the learning materials.

ODL students may cheat by hiring someone who has a greater understanding of the topic to write their assignments for them. Indeed, no one is there to watch over them and monitor their learning as is the case in conventional universities. Thus quality concerns in ODL should be addressed through the administration of end-of-semester exams that are proctored in face-to-face settings. In short, use of proctored examinations will help ensure ODL students' assessment of learning outcomes is 100 percent reliable. Exam results are key to understanding students' comprehension, knowledge acquisition, and application of the study materials, and are needed to critically assess the learning materials itself.

Conclusion

Findings from this study reveal that distance learners in Nigeria are favourably disposed to Open and Distance Learning institutions at this time. The 120 students who responded to this survey indicated their interest in the unique features that make-up ODL institutions, such as open access, opportunity for flexible learning, provision of quality learning materials, the use of multi-media and ICTs, etc. The findings reported here also suggest that those administering and leading Nigeria's ODL institutions are in an excellent position to build positively on the favourable perceptions already held by many distance learning students. They can achieve this through the effective and efficient management of Nigeria's ODL institutions. Put differently, because students currently hold favourable opinions and perceptions towards ODL and its potential, Nigeria is a position to leap forward to take advantage of their ODL institutions at home, and perhaps expand to serve sub-Saharan Africa in general. To achieve the full potential of ODL however, effective measures must be undertaken to adopt instructional technology for distance learning, expand provision of quality assurance in design, ensure the timely development and delivery of quality course materials, and continue to enhance student support services. ODL can be everything to more people and now is the time to act.

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