EXPLORING THE BENEFITS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION (DE)VIA E-LEARNING PLATFORMS BY TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper discussed the benefits of distance education (de) via e-learning platforms by tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It commences by discussing the meaning and history of distance education, the concept of e-learning, development of e-Learning in Nigerian, Need for distance education in Nigeria, It also discussed the need for Open and Distance Education (ODE) in Nigeria is an important issue for several cogent reasons, The study provides a typical example of distance education as rendered by National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Challenges of e-learning in Nigeria as well as benefits of e-Learning to students in Nigeria Universities. The paper also proffers some solutions on how to maximize the benefits of distance education (de) via e-learning platforms in Nigeria.

Keywords: benefits, distance education, e-learning platforms, tertiary institutions, Nigeria

Introduction

Distance Education (DE) is a system of education characterized by physical separation between the teacher andthe learner in which instruction is deliver through a variety of media including print and other ICTs to learnerwho may either have missed the opportunity earlier in life or have been denied the face-to-face formal educationdue to socio-economic, career, family and other circumstancesSherry & Morse (1995). Jegede, (2003) defined distance education aseducation provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to andjust as noble and practical as those of on-campus full time face-to-face education.

According to Omolewa (1982) the history of distance education in Nigeria dates back to the correspondence education as a means of preparingcandidates for General Certificate in Education, a prerequisites for the London Matriculation Examination. Thefirst indigenous distance learning programme was the English by Radio programme of Nigeria BroadcastingCorporation that followed independence in 1960. The programme was primarily targeted at primary andsecondary school levels and covered core courses at both levels with more emphasis placed on the teaching andlearning of Science, Mathematics and English. The technology driven distance learning came into existencealmost the same time with the first indigenous distance learning with the emergent of Educational Televisionprogrammes of the then National Television of Nigeria (NTV). There was also Schools Educational Broadcastof the Radio Nigeria stationed in Lagos and relayed all through the federation. All radio stations were requiredto hook at specific times of the day during school hours for broadcasting of programmes Wills (1993).

In the last 31 years, University education programmes in the country began to witness a lot of changes in terms ofinstructional delivery mode in some of our tertiary institutions. The Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) of University of Lagos that started in 1974, which later changed to Correspondence and Open StudiesInstitute (COSI) and now known as Distance Learning Institute was the first attempt made to establish a distanceeducation unit as part of a University in Nigeria. It began initially to offer programmes in science education atfirst degree level in Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics and Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE)for degree holders that did not possess teaching qualifications.

The National Teachers' Institute (NTI) started asa distance education institution in1976 (as the first dedicated distance education institution) with the support ofUNESCO. It began by training Grade Two Teachers (TC II). In 1990, the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) programme was introduced when the expectation was that the minimum teaching certificate in Nigeriawas expected to be NCE. The Institute also introduced the PGDE programme in the year 2005. Ahmadu BelloUniversity (ABU) also started its distance education through a training programme known as Teachers-in-Service Education Programme (TISEP) for Grades Three and Two teachers and later the Nigerian Certificate inEducation (NCE) Trindade, (2000).

The Distance Learning Institute of theUniversity of Ibadan which started in1979 as External Degree Programme of the university is another institutionwhich adopted the distance learning mode. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), was established in July, 1983, by an Act of the NationalAssembly as the first distance learning tertiary institution in Nigeria when it became crystal clear to the thenFederal Government that the ever growing demand for education by her people cannot be met by the traditionalmeans of face-to-face classroom instructional delivery. The institution was closed down few weeks after itsestablishment and the Act that established the University was suspended in 1984 by the then Federal MilitaryGovernment that overthrew the civilian government. Many years after the closure, the compelling reasons thatinformed the earlier establishment of the university as well as the need to fill the gap created by the FederalGovernment clamped down on mushroom outreach study centres of many conventional universities all over thecountry and the need to take advantage of emerging developments in the field of ICTs which haverevolutionized the techniques and methods of instructional deliveries in the distance learning modenecessitated the reactivation of the suspended NOUN Act of 1983 in 2002. This paved the way for theresuscitation of the NOUN.

Concept of e-learning:
E-learning according to Sale (2002), is the use of electronic technology to deliver education and training applications, monitor learner's performance and report learner's progress. Hedge and Hayward (2004), defined it as an innovative approach for delivering electronically mediated, well-designed, learner-centered and interactive learning environments to anyone, anyplace, anytime by utilizing the internet and digital technologies in concern with instructional design principles. The e-learning is not a new phenomenon in promoting education in some parts of world. Presently, some institutions in Nigeria are using it to promote distance education (DE) and life-long learningIslam,(1997).

Development of e-Learning in Nigerian

The development of e-learning in Nigeria could be traced back to the development of telecommunication whichbegan in 1886 when e-cable connections was established by the colonial masters between Lagos and the colonialoffice in London to transmit information and receive feedback. By 1893, all government offices in Lagos wereprovided with telephone service for easy communication, feedback and easy access and later all other parts ofthe country was provided with telephone services.

A lot of changes have been witnessed in the telecommunication industry since 1886. The provision oftelecommunication services were initially monopolized by the Nigeria Telecommunication (NITEL) untilsometimes in 90's when the federal government of Nigeria commenced the liberalization policy oftelecommunication industry. Four (4) private telephone service providers (Mtel – NITEL, Econet Now Vmobile,MTN and Communication Investment Limited – CIL) were initially licensed to provide General System forMobile Services. CIL license was later revoked for inability to pay the license fee before the prescribed whichwas later given to Globacom (Glo) Nigeria.With this development, more companies were licensed to provide internet services in Nigeria, and this led toimproved access to the internet by Nigerians.

The country has less than 11 ISPs in 2000, but by the year 2006, ithas risen to above 100 and many got connected to the information super-highway, through broadband VSATconnection see.In Nigerian schools, the commonest type of e-learning adopted is in form of lectures note on CD-ROM whichcan be played as at when the learners desires. The challenge of this method is that the numbers of students percomputer in which these facilities are available are un-interactive as compared to when lectures are beenreceived in the classroom. Some institutions adopted the use of intranet facilities; however, this is not wellmaintained because of incessant power problem and high cost of running generating set. Most students inNigeria go to the cyber café but because there are people of diverse intension on the net at the same time, and thebandwidth problem, a multimedia interactive cannot be done.

Despite all these and other challenges facing e-leanringin Nigeria educational institution, institutions such as University of Ibadan, ObafemiAwolowoUniversity, University of Benin, University of Abuja, University of Lagos, National Open University of Nigeriaamong others has the facilities for e-learning. The number seems very low (compared to other parts of the worldand the usefulness of the e-learning in the economy development) because of location of most institutions, bandwidth issue and mostly the challenge of electricity. Though most of the educational institutions (private and public) have started setting up their ICT centres for internet services alone without actually taking into consideration other components of e-learning.

The e-learning is all about learning with the use of computers.

In this age, learning with the use of computer is simply online ways of acquiring knowledge through the internet or through the offline –CD-ROM. The online involves the use of Internet Explorer/Navigator. It may be in form of Audio, Visual, and or Audio/Visual. The convergence of the internet and learning, or Internet enabled learning is called e-learning. The applications and process of e-learning include computer-based learning, web-based learning, virtual classroom and digital collaboration where contents is delivered via the internet, intranet/extranet, audio and or video tapes, satellite TV and CD-ROM (Islam 1997).

Need for Distance Education in Nigeria

The need for Open and Distance Education (ODE) in Nigeria is an important issue for several cogent reasons.

Firstly, the vast majority of the population lives below poverty level. They are unable to attend urban basedinstitutions and thus remain deprived of higher education despite their superior merit.

Secondly, those who joined workforce without completing their studies or education due to family commitments are unable tocombine their work with studies and very few of them who have strong desire for higher studies could not do sobecause of the limited offer in the traditional institution of higher learning. Thirdly, the tradition of childhood,early marriage and religious belief in the country deprives the majority of female population from highereducation. Besides, there are some other usual factors like physical disabilities, remoteness of localities,exorbitant tuition fees in most privately owned Universities and so on. These are some of the major issuesresponsible for why millions of Nigerians are deprived of higher education despite their knee interest andeligibilities. ODE provides avenues for higher education for such a vast under-privileged population. Nigeria isgenerously endowed with human resources that need to be well equipped with literacy and skills to contribute toeconomic development, which is badly needed for this country. Thus, it is crystal clear that the way forward isto embrace ODE using both hands and supported by all necessary financial and infrastructural commitments.

Benefits of Distance education

Distance education makes it much easier for a student to complete a degree or get additional job-training while balancing work and family commitments because class work hours are flexible. Most distance education programs allow their students to work at their own pace and on their own time. Studying online is even made more interactive with the use of video conferencing software. That improves the ability to acquire and retain knowledge on a given subject. However, distance education limits social interaction, involves useof complex technology and has a negative perception among some employers.

A Typical Example of Distance Education as provided byNational Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

NOUN, a federal government – owned university, has emerged as the first dedicated University in Nigeria tointroduce education through distance learning mode. The vision statement of the University is that the NOUN isto be regarded as the foremost University providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchoredby social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends allbarriers. While the Mission statement is that NOUN is to provide functional cost-effective, flexible learning,which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. In addition to the broad vision andmission statements, the university has eight major objectives which are listed below:

1) Provide a wider access to education generally but specifically in University education in Nigeria.
2) ensure equity and equality of opportunities in education

3) enhance education for all and life-long learning
4) provide the entrenchment of global learning culture
5) provide instructional resources via an intensive use of ICTs
6) provide flexible, but qualitative education
7) reduce the cost, inconveniences, hassles of and access to education and its delivery
8) Enhance more access to education.

According to Yusuf (1999), in NOUN, Study Centres are the main contact place for students learning activities. These centres are thus thebackbone of the distance learning methodology of the University. Presently, NOUN has 28 study centres spreadacross the length and breadth of the country as against the initial 18 temporary study centres approved by theFederal Government for takeoff of the University in the year 2002. In addition, the university has special studycentres which cater for specialized groups, such as the Prison inmates and Armed Forces personnel. Theprojection of the university is to have a study centre in every state capital and at every local government of thefederation. This will enable the university to achieve its stated objectives.

NOUN provides higher education and professional training in wide areas, such as arts, business, education,social sciences, sciences and technology. The institution offered several formal academic programmes fromCertificate to Masters Level under four academic schools and a Centre for Continuing Education and WorkplaceTraining (CCE&WT).Mode of delivery of instruction is very important for open and distance learning. There are two major types ofmode of instruction for open and distance learning:

1) Mixed mode of instruction delivery system: this system uses several different media methods ordeliveries such as video and e-mail.
2) Single mode of instruction delivery system: this method according to Hirschbuhi (1995)does notprovide enough instructional power to ignite student's interest because they fail to provide studentinvolvement.

As a distinct mode of imparting education, NOUN relies heavily on print materials, and face-to-face tutorialservices. The use of these techniques helps NOUN to take its academic programmes to the door steps of herstudents far and wide. It makes room for in-house education. Considering the rapid expansion of ICT's in thecountry, NOUN has commence plan on the introduction of more electronic media like CD-ROM, e-mail, internetand interactive e-learning systems for its courses delivery.The radio station is also one ofthe strategies to disseminate NOUN programmes to its students in Lagos to start with. Efforts are being made bythe institution management towards establishing more radio station across the country to further assist intransmitting their programmes to other students in the remaining states of the federationOlomo(2001).

Challenges of e-learning in Nigeria

E-learning in Nigeria Universities and educational institutions is still a dream because of poor ICT infrastructure and other socio-economic reasons. Due to very high primary cost of infrastructural development and to increase public access to internet and other ICTs, the developing countries are still far behind from getting benefit from the e-learning.

The major problems facing the proper implementation of e-learning in Nigeria Universities are as follows:

1) **Internet Connectivity:** The cost of accessing internet is still very high in West Africa. It is as high as $8/Kbps, while it costs a ridiculous amount of $0.52/Kbps in North Africa and even lesser in Europe. Most of Students in Nigeria who engage in distance learning make use of Cyber Café who charges between #100.00 and #150.00 per hour despite their poor service and slow rate of their server

2) **School Curriculum:** Most of the students admitted by Nigeria Universities that engage in distance education have no information technology/computer education knowledge because it was not entrenched in the curriculum at their elementary and secondary education level. Not until recently when computer education is been introduced at elementary level and it is not yet a compulsory subject at the secondary level of our education.

3) **Attitude of the Students:** ICT refutes independent learning and most of students who are distance learners are reluctant to take responsibility for their own learning. But they preferred to be spoon-fed at all times.

4) **Software and License cost:** It is very expensive to get some of the software's because they are not developed locally, they are developed in Europe and other developed countries to suit their own system and make their own living. The cost and even the interpretation of the software put off some of the students who showed interest.

5) **Maintenance and Technical Support:** There are few technical staff to maintain the system, this make it very expensive for few students that have PCs to maintain when a technical problem is noticed.

6) **The cost of a Personal Computer (PC) and Laptop** are still very high in Nigeria considering the income level of an average worker in the country. Few of the distance learners that are privileged to have a PC/Laptop are not connected to the internet as this do attract extra cost which they cannot afford. Unequal access to technology by the students.

7) **Lack of computer education:** Most of the distance learners have no computer education background, hence they are afraid of operating one, some go to the extent of hiring expert at a cost to fill their admission, registration and other document meant for them to fill online. However, the very few who have access to the computer do not know how to use it and maximize it usage.

8) **Electricity:** The perennial problem in Nigeria is the problem of electricity instability which has been a major setback for our technological development. Some of the students that reside in cities and towns are faced with the problem of epileptic supply of electricity. While majority of them live in rural areas that are not connected to the national grid.

Benefits of e-Learning to students in Nigeria Universities

The e-learning has several benefits in the area of promoting distance learningin Nigeria. Some of the important points are listed as follows:

1) E-learning canNigerian University students courses round the clock i.e. 7 daysa week and 24 hours a day, which further attracts working class, students and individuals.

2) Computers with high internet infrastructure helps management of Nigerian Universities to reduce the overheads costas there won't be any recruitment, training and up gradation of faculties.

3) E-learningprogrammes can enable Nigerian University students to discover how the information they gain fits into thereal life.

4) E-learning programmes can provide Nigerian University students a culturally, racially, physically and gender anonymousmedium for communication. Social behaviours can be reduced as students realized that they are judgedsolely on what they say and how they say it.

5) Nigeria University students can learn what they need to learn and go at their own pace

6) E-learning programmes can provide the students with the opportunity to make choices about the type and direction of their learning and gain feedback quickly and efficiently. This has the potential to cater for individual learning and styles and requirement providing information about a topic of personal interest.

7) The courses provided by Nigerian University in this model will have wide variety of courses based on IT and non-IT topics, which is an additional benefit to attract large number of learners from all the background.

8) Online learning accommodates everyone's needs The option of online learning allows for the learning experience and opportunity to be available to anyone, anywhere, in real-time.The digital revolution has created a whole new world where billions of hours of content on just about any topic you can think of, is available for anyone's consumption at any time. All that is needed is an internet connection. This allows for online learners to not be limited to scheduled semesters of online training programs, but they can now learn after work, or on the weekends as well.

9) Lectures can be repeated if necessary . When your learning environment is a location-based classroom, it's easy to get intimidated and not ask for help when falling behind on a subject, or if a particular module is confusing and needs to be further explained. Students that are intimidated and embarrassed by the thought of asking for further assistance, often fall victim to falling further behind in their studies.One of the benefits of online learning is that it can help with this scenario, through the user option of replaying videos, retaking quizzes, and even mini-games that have been proven to help with retention rates overall. There is no stress over missing a lecture, as it is always available for you to watch on your own time when you are available to study.

10) Content can be easily updated. With technology and the current market constantly changing and evolving, it is important for your learning material to be evolving and staying relevant. Say, for example, you are teaching a course on how to run successful Facebook ads and Facebook changes or updates their ad manager. You students will need to know the current up-and-coming UX to be able to stay relevant. You can quickly update the content with the new information, and upload it live for your students to continue studying.

11) Quick Delivery : E-learning is not only easily accessed, but the content is quicker to get through as well. In fact, statistics show that the actual time required for students to

learn is reduced by up to 60% in comparison to traditional learning methods! There are a few reasons for this, including:

- Lessons can begin and end within one online learning session. This allows them to roll out quicker and sooner, for students who are looking to gain the knowledge of the particular subject at hand. Students don't have to keep with the same pace as their peers, they can speed up the video if needed.
- It reduces or completely eliminates travel time, as students no longer need to travel to school or class to learn. They can learn from the comfort of their own homes. Irrelevant content can be skipped through entirely if needed. If there is only one particular module the learner needs to get through, they can go straight to it.

12**. Consistency in Quality.** The COVID 19 pandemic forced the hand of just about everyone to convert to remote and online learning. It was no longer an option, it was a necessity for schools all around the world and while the circumstances weren't ideal, it helped society to advance in their approach to education ahead of schedule.e-Learning allowed teachers to provide consistent learning tools and experiences to their students with video recordings, quizzes, online live tutorials, and gamification. Though a shift in delivery, the consistency was well maintained and continues to improve as the e-Learning world develops.

13. Less Impact on the Environment

Online learning is exactly what the title implies – a completely online learning experience. With all reference materials being converted to online educational textbooks and other online source links in place of traditional hard copies, this is also an environmentally friendly option for students. No more need to purchase for new subjects each semester, another thousand-page textbook full of chapters that are irrelevant to the subject matter, simply downloadable files and links.Online-based learning also consumes less power (up to 90% in fact), as well as less $CO2$ emissions in comparison to in-person campus-based educational systems. All in all, online learning helps reduce resource waste and the carbon footprint within the education industry.

Conclusion

The survival of Universities in Nigeria in the 21st century will increasingly rely on various forms ofelectronic delivery and communication inside a market place that requires education to be flexible. E-learning isnow widely used in most of the developed countries to promote distance education (DE) and life-long learning inan effective way. In Nigeria, the recent developments and awareness of the Government on ICT have opened anopportunity to adopt e-learning to deliver distance education for educating mass of its uneducated or lesseducated peoples.

Recommendations

1) Considering the recent expansion of ICTs in the country, tertiary institutions could introduce somemodern ICT like e-mail, web-based learning (e.g. open course wares), CD-ROM for delivering its coursematerials through e-learning for its learners.

2) However, before going to introduce an advanced ICT in tertiary institutions, itis suggested that enough research be conducted on learner's access, cost and other related parameters essentialfor it.

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