OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: INNOVATIONAL TOOL FOR RESOLVING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Distance education as a means of providing access to education, particularly tertiary level education; has gained great prominence in the world. Nigeria like other countries of the world has taken giant steps of recent to introduce open and distance education programme to ease difficulties in accessing education. This paper examines the concept of open and distance learning; its goals and objectives; situation analysis; concepts of equity and inequality and discrepancy in Nigerian Educational System. This paper in addition critically investigates practical attempts taken to resolve educational inequalities in Nigeria. It looks at the quota system and the principle of fairness and social justice. The prospects of open and distance learning are also highlighted. The paper concludes that open and distance learning has contributed to a large extent towards education transformation to meet Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in education. Finally the paper recommended the use of government and its institutions to identify appropriate mechanisms and structures that can ensure equality access to education; strengthening educational institutions; provision of

Open and Distance Learning (ODL); and promoting scholarship programmes to cater for educational needs of the under-privilege, indigent and special groups.

Keyword: *Distance Education, Nigeria, Open and Distance Learning, Equity, Inequality, Discrepancy, NOUN.*

INTRODUCTION

Education is the bedrock of national development. It serves the functions of developing social, psychological, mental, emotional and intellectual development of an individual (NOUN, 2013). The level or rate of development in any society cannot be isolated from its quality education (Ofoha, 2013). Therefore, every society strives to invest huge resources in education in order to enhance socio-political, economic and technological advancement that will put it on a pedestal to compete favourably in the global arena. In Nigeria, the importance of education in the development of individual and the nation is highly recognized by the federal government. Education according to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2011) is a fundamental human right and the key factor to promoting sustainable development. Education as viewed by Okechukwu (2019) is a fundamental human right that should be enjoyed by every citizen of any country. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) defined education as that process that help to develop appropriate skills, mental, physical and social abilities and competencies to empower the individual to live in and contribute positively to the society. As a process, education involves the development of the individual at various levels of educational institution. The policy added that access to education and training is not only a basic human right but also a key factor for social progress and for reducing the gap between socio-economic groups and sexes. The policy also made provision for equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

In the past five decades, Nigeria has had several educational policies aimed at resolving imbalance in education. In spite of these efforts, Nigeria is still far from achieving the much needed balance and parity in education. According to Ofoha (2013), the quota system currently in use in the selection of candidates for admission into Nigeria universities is not as solution to the educational imbalance between the Northern and Southern part of the country. Gidado (2020) contested that for Nigeria to achieve its education transformation agenda in the 21st century, it is to first resolve the issues of imbalance in the educational system.

The Nigerian National Policy on Education has over the years recognized the place of open and distance learning in achieving lifelong education and affirms that lifelong education shall be the basis of the nation's education policy (NUC, 2013). It went further to state that at any stage of the educational process after junior secondary education, an individual shall be able to choose between continuing full-time studies,

combining work with study, or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later.

However, the NUC (2013) bemoaned that a critical appraisal of the scope of open and distance learning practice at any level of education in Nigeria against the backdrop of the long-standing recognition of its potential for increasing access to education for all socio-cultural groups, unfortunately, reveals a glaring mismatch between policy and practice. This is evident even in the face of obvious and widely acknowledged perennial inadequacies of the conventional face-to-face mode, in meeting the higher educational aspirations of a large number of Nigerians especially in the university sub-sector (NUC, 2013).

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), an open and distance learning institution, was restored back in 2002 after it was suspended. It commenced operation to resolve the imbalance in educational system in Nigeria. It remains an innovational tool for bridging educational gap, promoting and provision of equal education opportunities to a wide spectrum of the populace of Nigerians; through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers, hence expanding the possibility of social justice, equity and national cohesion through higher education.

TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Tertiary education is the highest level of education globally. This is the level of education people get after completion of secondary education or its equivalent. Modes of entrance into tertiary education are specified according to different bodies that regulate such tertiary education (N.U.C, NBTE and NCCE). Tertiary education is classified into three namely: universities, polytechnic, and colleges of education (public and private). Nigeria is in dare of a viable, relevant and effective tertiary education system capable of providing a propulsive force for the nation's socio-economic and technological transformation (Gidado, 2020).

Tertiary education is known for promotion of research and innovation for advancement of technology and manpower training towards the growth and development of any nation. Goals of tertiary education according to FRN (2014) include:

1. To contribute to the national development through high level relevant manpower training.
2. To provide physical and intellectual skills which enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society. ODL give citizens who are willing to attend education opportunities to access learning where they are provided. ODL takes tertiary education to the grassroots among the normal, prisoners, those in rural areas, women in purdah and internally displaced persons (IDPs). This is to

eradicate illiteracy in the society and for the individual to be independent of their own with diverse skills that can empower them to be engaged on daily basis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Everett Rogers diffusion theory of innovations. This theory explained how, why and at what rate new ideas and technology spread. This theory was propounded in 1962 and later edited in 2003. Rogers argued that diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated over time and among the participants in a social system. The theorist proposed five main elements that influence the spread of new idea as innovation adopters, communication channels, time, and social system.

In relation to this study Open and Distance Learning ODL is an idea that was adopted from developed nation for transmission of learning processes in a social system of education over a period of time to provide education to those who could not access tertiary education. This innovation has spread tertiary education to interested people that are willing to be educated through technology without passing through conventional institutions. ODL is a system of teaching and learning that is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time and or place, uses multiple media for delivery of instructions and involves two way communication and occasional face-to-face meetings for tutorials and learner-learner interaction (Col, 2015).

CONCEPT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Open and distance learning has been given different definitions by different authors. The concept of open and distance learning has been used from time to time to represent education such as correspondence education, independent study, postal tuition, open learning, open school and open university course, on-line learning and distance learning (Tijani et al, 2015). Distance learning is a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom. According to Creed (2001), distance learning is an educational process in which a significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone located away from the learners. Thus, the concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) suggests an educational approach designed to reach students in their homes, offices and shops, where learning proceeds without attending formal classes in person, no matter where or when they want to study. FRN (2013) stated that Open and Distance Education is the mode of education delivery:

1. Where learners and teachers need not be in physical contact;
2. Which possesses high range of flexible learning environment;
3. That enhance access to tertiary education;
4. That has the capacity to deliver variety of skills; and

5. Which uses a variety of media and technologies to provide quality education for large number of learners.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2002) defined open education as organized educational activities based on the use of instructional teaching materials, in which constraints on studying are minimized in terms of access, in time and place, pace, method of study or any combination of the aforementioned. On the other hand, Mujibul (2008) viewed distance education as situations in which learners are physically separated from the educational provider, and communicate in writing (using letters, e-mail, fax or computer conferencing) verbally (by telephone, audio conferencing, video conferencing); or in face-to-face tutorial sessions. Mudasiru (2006) stated that distance learning is a situation in which the learners use resources in a flexible way to achieve their goals. The resources according to the school, could be print, audio, computer based; used at home, at a study centre, in the work place, with or without the guidance of a tutor or mentor. Mangal and Mangal (2010) opined that distance education is the type of education that is liable to be organized and imparted in keeping cognition of the distance factor. They stated that both the receiver (learner) of the education and the tutor are separated by a common factor as distance. Distance education uses three current and popular forms of media: broadcast television; two-way video conferencing; and asynchronous learning networks (multi-modal, wave based delivery of instruction that can be reviewed by the student at any time) (Maxwell et al., 2001). Distance education can be described as a complex hierarchical, non-linear, dynamic, self-organized and purposeful system of learning and teaching.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2006 explained that Open University is an innovative approach where students have control over their learning through the avoidance of the traditional approach to learning. This approach provides a second chance for those who have been in school but had to drop out for one reason or another. Open and distance learning specifically favours people who work as well as applicants who could not secure admission in an educational institution due to financial constraints. These applicants could be working and schooling at the same time in order for the students to finance themselves adequately. ODL is an alternative, innovative way of learning for students who are not admitted to university programs due to a variety of reasons, such as working conditions personal issues, social problems, financial security among others. Therefore, it is considered self-study when students are engaged at work, home, or any other location. Different media, like print and electronic media broadcasts, like radio and television, the internet and interaction with tutorial facilitators and students are used. According to Ajadi et al. (2008), distance education is a system of education characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner, in which instruction is delivered through a variety of media.

From the above descriptions however, open and distance education is the form of education and training in which using learning resources rather than attending classroom session is the central feature of learning experience. It is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology and instructional system designs that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically present in a traditional classroom or campus. It is a process used to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time or distance or both. In other words, distance education is the process of creating an education experience of equal quality for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom situation. It is worthy to note that there is a considerable overlap between the two terms, open and distance learning and they are often used together to refer to the whole range of learning approaches as described above. Open and distance education courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason, including taking examination is considered a hybrid or blended course of study and it is the most popular in Nigeria today. Since establishment of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), people in thousands have embraced this mode of education having seen it as an approved one in the national policy on education; as well as means of resolving educational inequality that exist in Nigeria (NOUN, 2006).

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Open and Distance Learning is the education of students who may not always be physically present in the school. Traditionally, this usually involved correspondence courses wherein the student corresponded with the school by post. Today, it involves online education. A distance learning programme can be completely distance learning, or a combination of distance learning and traditional classroom instruction (called hybrid or blended). FRN (2013) noted that the goals of open and distance learning in Nigeria shall be to: provide more access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities; meet special needs of employers and employees by mounting special courses for employees at the workplace; encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricular; ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work; and encourage life-long learning opportunities.

In pursuance of these goals, the policy document stated that the Federal Government shall: ensure that programmes for open distance learning are equivalent in status to those offered by conventional face-to-face mode of delivery in the appropriate tertiary educational institution and also encourage and regulate open/distance learning practice in Nigeria. Furthermore, the government shall strengthen the existing coordinating agencies on open/distance learning which shall:

1. Advice the government on the development and practice of open/distance learning;

2. Promote open/distance learning nationwide in collaboration with Federal, States/FCT and Local Government Education Authorities;
3. Ensure the maintenance of standards for open/distance learning programmes in various institutions;
4. Liase with media houses, information technology providers and other relevant bodies in enhancing open/distance learning;
5. Encourage private efforts and other non-governmental organization in the provision of quality education using open/distance education; and
6. Encourage tertiary institutional participation in open/distance education.

From the preceding, it is evident that the open and distance learning is a ready alternative for most people who do not have access to the conventional training in Nigerian Universities. It is also designed for those who lack adequate time to undergo such a programme in the conventional way. Thus, many learners are beginning to see open and distance learning programmes as viable means of acquiring education even in a more convenient environment.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Education has been adopted all over the world as an "instrument per excellence" for development; this is why every nation invests heavily in it. Higher education which main objective is to produce higher level skills and knowledge is key to the socio-economic and technological development of any nation. A mutual challenge for developing nations or emerging economies like Nigeria is the inadequate access to higher education need for human capital development. The main issue in Nigeria is that there are thousands of young qualified candidates seeking university admission who cannot be absorbed into the nation's universities.

Information from the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), which conducts the entrance examination into higher institutions in Nigeria; show that the Nation is far from meeting the social demands for universities, nonetheless 174 available universities (43 Federal, 52 State and 79 private). JAMB has reported that 71.58% of the 1,792,719 candidate who wrote the examination in 2018/2019 academic session scored 160 (required minimum score) out of 400; which means 1,283,859 candidates are eligible for admissions into conventional higher institutions. It is common knowledge that all the tertiary institutions combined cannot accommodate more than about 600,000 in any given year. This means there is excess of about 683,259 candidates who are qualified but will not be admitted because there is no space, plus another estimated 509,460 who did not make up to 160. It is appalling to know that more than half of those who sat for the examinations, about 1,200,000 will be left in dark. According to Bello-Osagie (2010), such situation he described with the phrase "what a waste" and noted that similar statistics has been on yearly basis in the past five years. It is quite glaring that these young people have been

deprived access to education because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional classroom. It is also obvious that due to limitations in both human and material resources, conventional institutions can no longer satisfy the over whelming population of a country like Nigeria, which has an estimated population of over 200 million people and an average annual population growth rate of 2.38% (World Fact Book, 2006). Also, there are people who desire education but due to one challenge or the other, tend to be excluded from access to education thus limiting their career prospects.

However, it has become crystal clear that for university education to live up to its billing in the production of high quality man-power, government has to seriously consider exploiting other avenues of providing access to university education in addition to the face-to-face mode and called for a paradigm shift which will facilities a steady mainstreaming of the open distance learning mode as a strategy for increasing access.

Table 1: Number of Candidates that Sat for JAMB Examination 2019 across Selected States in Nigeria showing Inequality in Education between the North and South

S/N	Southern States	No. of Candidates	%	Northern States	No. of Candidates	%
1	Oyo	102,358	5.43	Bauchi	32,902	1.74
2	Imo	99,002	5.25	Niger	31,654	1.68
3	Osun	94,381	5.00	Gombe	29.095	1.54
4	Ogun	88,152	4.67	Adamawa	27,094	1.44
5	Delta	84,518	4.48	Taraba	26,637	1.41
6	Anambra	74,872	3.97	Jigawa	23,479	1.24
7	Edo	69,715	3.70	Yobe	19,452	1.03
8	Akwa Ibom	67,738	3.59	Sokoto	16,473	0.87
9	Enugu	66,594	5.53	Zamfara	9,999	0.53

Source: JAMB Records, 2019

The table above shows the level of JAMB Entrance Examination for getting admission into the tertiary institution in Nigeria. From the table one could see big gap between the North and South. This gap could be filled up through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to equalize the educational system among the citizens in Nigeria (FGN, 2013).

CONCEPTS OF EQUITY AND INEQUALITY

Equity, according to Cambridge Dictionary Fourth Edition (2013), implies fair treatment. The implication is that equity depends on equality of treatment. Masters and Adams (2018) pointed to evidence that, in general, people value fairness over equivalence. There are situations in which people view equal treatment as fair, but

other situation in which they view unequal treatment as fair. This suggests that, when it comes to "equity" fairness trumps equality.

The idea of equality with reference to education means equal rights for all irrespective of any circumstances by way of birth, race, sex, tribe, and disability. As stated in the National Policy on Education, (FNR, 2013) the Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on the integration of individual into a sound, effective, and equal education opportunities for all citizens. The philosophical assumption underpinning the policy is for every Nigerian child to have full access to quality education at all levels. The United Nations and the Federal Government of Nigeria have recognized education as a fundamental human right. Unfortunately, the right to education and thus equal opportunity for education as national objective for development has not been achieved.

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (2013) affirmed equal education opportunities as a philosophy and guiding principles for all Nigerian citizens at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, both inside and outside the formal school system. The concept of equality of education opportunities as held by members of the Nigerian community has had varied meanings and interpretations in the eastern, northern, southern or western part of Nigerian; because of different specific ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender, religious, economic, and political consideration.

Inequality is concerned with disparities in the distribution of a certain metric, which can be income, health or any other materials or non-material asserts. Inequality is closely linked to the ideas of equity, which has two contrasting concepts: equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Educational inequality according to Masters and Adams (2018) is the unequal distribution of academic resources, including but not limited to; school funding. In Nigeria, concerns have been expressed on the glaring inequalities in the education sector which has created a lot of gaps and marginalization among groups in the education sectors. For instance, Yusuf (2008) opined that the classification of many states in the north as "educationally-disadvantaged states" has not even remedied the situation. There have been a lot of discrepancies and inequalities between the regions in education. One important question to answer is if the Nigerian education sector is adequately effective to prepare individuals towards attaining the best in life coupled with the inequalities in the sector. According to Ajadi et al. (2008), there are some major inequalities in today's education system which should be addressed and solved, if the future of the country has to be secured. It will require a lot of initiative, zeal and hard work on the part of government authorities, education stakeholders, schools and teachers to do away with these negatives (inequalities) plaguing the education sector (Ajadi et al., 2008). Ojo (2013) submitted that equality of treatment is not ascertained, equity of outcome is not attainable and

equity of opportunity is thwarted such that formal education through UBE has become unfashionable and undesirable.

It is obvious that people are not born equal, neither are they equal in every respect. Thus, if people are not equal in every respect except that they are all human beings, then it becomes difficult to accord them equal right in life. Our mental, moral and emotional capacities are all different. Though, the FRN (2013) emphasized that all Nigerian citizens have equal opportunity for education at institutional level yet, a lot of problems emanate in the interpretation of what it actually means (Ojo, 2015). From the foregoing, it appears that the principle of equity and equality may not have been strictly followed in admission of students, establishments of schools and distribution of resources that will resolve inequality in access to educational opportunities.

DISCREPANCY IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Nigeria has expressed commitment to education over the years, with the belief that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance will form a basis for accelerated national development. However, regardless of the incontrovertible evidence that education is pivotal to the development of the community and the nation, there remain inequalities in access to education. Despite its potential for leveling opportunities, education has been used to perpetuate inequalities. For instance, millions of poor people are still being excluded from the processes and outcomes of education. Concerns have been expressed on the glaring gap between the North and the South with regards to education (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2013). While the Northern region is said to be educationally disadvantaged, the Southern part is seen as educationally favoured. There is also gender discrepancy in the system, discrepancies between demand and supply, discrepancies between urban and rural schools and between educational institutions owned and controlled by the states and private agencies. The list is endless. This is why Moja (2000) in his assessment of the situation concluded that the entire system reflects privilege and differentiation.

PRACTICAL ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA

The inability of the available universities in Nigeria to cope with the high demand for university education has put much pressure on university admissions. In response to this challenge, the Federal Government has developed strategies on how to resolve inequality in education. Among the strategies are: provision made for full access of children with special needs to education, mass literacy through adult and non-formal education and access to higher education (Osokoya, 2015). The Federal Government also took steps to expand access. Among its more notable policy actions have been increasing the number of Federal Universities; expanding enrollments through the ODL initiative; introducing admissions quota system and catchment areas to address regional and class imbalances, launching bursary/scholarship program to needy

students; approving the establishing of private universities; and the establishment of National Open University (NOUN, 2002). The latter two actions are said to be particularly significant as they signaled steps towards the healthier diversification of a previously rather standardized system (Ofoha, 2012). In Nigeria, because of her specific need for even development and national unity, political consideration has dominated attempt to resolve educational inequalities.

THE QUOTA SYSTEM AND THE PRINCIPLE OF FAIRNESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The 1979 second republic constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees equality and equity for all citizens. The educational gap between the Northern and Southern Nigeria, as earlier pointed out, is a trace of educational inequality which started since the inception of western education. To address this, the quota system was introduced into the admission process. The attempt to rectify the so-called educational inequality via quota system often violates the very principle of fairness and social justice, which it is supposed to uphold. It is viewed that the error it presupposes to correct by making the educationally backward area catch up with the educationally more advanced areas is still noticed. The South, which is not at advantage with the system feel cheated out. It will be difficult to convince such candidates seeking admission that they are living in a country where there is fairness and equal opportunity for every citizen. Obviously, the rationalization that the quota system would promote unity is hardly derived in practice. What then is the way forward?

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Quite interestingly, right from the onset of the NPE in 1977, Open and Distance Learning had been identified as an integral part of education to be used for socio-economic development of the nation. It recognized ODL as a distinct sector of education to be organized nation-wide and given individuals flexibility in the development of the human resources towards national development (NOUN, 2002). For instance, the 1977 edition of the NPE stated unambiguously and emphatically that "maximum effort will be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities or correspondence courses, or open universities, or part-time and work study programme". The policy stipulated a system which encompasses education for all, education for life, life-long learning, life-wide education, adult education, mass education, media-based education, self-learning, personalized learning, part-time studies, and much more. It is all these variants now known as open and distance learning that the policy anticipated, without any limitation or exclusion, as long as the variant contributes to equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels (Jegede, 2016).

In many countries such as Nigeria, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methods have become effective and equitable means of providing learning for people in needs and

people within tertiary education ages 16 years and above. ODL is the mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teacher. It uses variety of media and technologies to provide and improve access to quality education for large numbers of learners wherever they may be; who are by the very nature of their environment, cultural constraints or social obligations unable to access formal and/or further education. The process of education is shifting from the conventional method where learning activities are carried out through face-to-face lecturing which sometimes makes learning teachers-centred than learner-centred. In Nigerian, as elsewhere in the world, ODL is used as a major vehicle to break the three vectors – access, quality and cost–that have constrained education. According to Daniels (2009), ODL is revolutionary because it allows us through division of labour, specialization, and economies of scale, to reconfigure the access–quality–cost triangle. Access can be increased, quality can be improved and cost can be cut, all at the same time.

The term ODL reflects the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner and its aim is to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The desire to anchor as much as possible to the train of globalization demands that all sectors of society must be literate and this kind of mass education can only be afforded through the distance–learning system. Jegede (2003) observed that all nations of the world, desirous of a cost–effective, convenient, conducive, efficient and comprehensive way to educate all its citizens have embraced ODL. By eliminating impediments to education, Muganda (2010) observed that ODL opens up the possibilities of social justice in higher education in terms of access, relevance, flexibility, life-long learning opportunities and democratization of knowledge; and noted, however, that maximizing the realization of these possibilities is still problematic as evidenced in Africa.

ODL has several qualities which make it highly potential to all the beneficiaries. To the learner, ODL means more freedom of access, and thereby a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualification. ODL potential lies in being more learner-centred approach, allowing greater flexibility and choice of content as well as more personal organization of leaning programmes. For the "work and learn" students who are not in a position to attend regular courses, it affords great opportunity since many people cannot afford to leave their work in order to study. For employers, ODL offers the possibility of organizing learning and professional development in the workplace itself, which is often more flexible and saves cost of travel, subsistence etc (UNESCO, 2002). The use of distance learning often puts both the firm and employees in a position of co-investment (of money and time) in the pursuit of common goals, based on shared values and culture. It increases productivity and supports the development of communication and other work-related skills. Other advantages for the employer

include the increased availability of the employee during the course of the training programme, and the portability of training programmes and processes. UNESCO (2002) enumerated the following as some of the areas in which ODL has made major contributions:

1. balancing inequalities between age groups;
2. extending geographical access to education;
3. delivering educational campaigns and other education for large audiences;
4. providing speedy and efficient training for key target groups;
5. expanding the capacity for education with work and family life;
6. developing multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education;
7. enhancing the international dimension of educational experience; and
8. improving the quality of existing educational services.

In most African countries, much was not done to help the marginalized population to have access to functional education until the introduction of ODL. There are several categories of members of society for whom ODL is most beneficial. For instance, ODL may be directed at nomadic and itinerant groups, the disabled/handicapped. ODL extends services to these target groups, by taking education to their door steps. They may also be directed at youths and adults who dropped out of initial formal education, and for whom distance education represents a convenient opportunity at a later stage of their life. Another aspect of contribution of ODL is the opportunity it provides for the ongoing professional development of various categories of professionals such as teachers, accountants, and the opportunity to upgrade their knowledge and skills in various disciplines. Teacher education is an important area where distance education has been used extensively to provide pre-service teacher preparation, upgrading of academic qualifications, and in-service continuing professional development in particular subjects, content areas and instructional methods. Many examples, particularly from both developing and developed countries, show that teacher training at a distance may reach large groups of teachers and may have profound impact on the development of national education systems. Examples include distance learning initiatives in countries such as Burkina Faso, Chile, China, India, Mongolia, Nigeria, and South Africa to prepare new teachers or upgrade skills of the existing teaching force (UNESCO, 2002). Distance education may also play a major role in upgrading the knowledge and skills of teacher educators both in higher education and educational agencies. Many people from all walks of life may have to seize the opportunities of ODL programmes to improve on their education as well as on their standard of living. Many entrepreneurs from various occupations such as hair dressing shoe making, craft works, fashion designing, petty trading and the like can take advantage of ODL to upgrade their skills and knowledge.

Many full-time house wives can also enroll in ODL programmes; thereby improving on their education. Girls and women in purdah who are in confinement because of

their obedience to their religious practices can also benefit from opportunities provided by ODL since it allows them to sit at home and study for a programme without jeopardizing their marriages/religious dedication. Another category of people for whom ODL may provide immense benefit is that of prison inmates. Prison inmates in Africa especially in Nigeria are known not to have access to learning because of the problem of location and incarceration. Now, ODL has come to the rescue of such group of people who are interested in learning within the prison confinement. For instance, 13 prisoners have enrolled in various programmes at the NOUN (Ogidan & Atere, 2010).

From the preceding analysis on the prospects of open and distance learning is no doubt exhaustive. They constitute some of the potentials indicating that ODL in no small measure plays positive and conclusive role in resolving educational inequalities and in the creation of the global knowledge society. Nevertheless the potential of ODL, it is not immune from challenges, some of the more commonly reported and obvious impediments of ODL are: lack of consistency in programme/ policy implementation; problem of electricity; poor telecommunication facilities and lack of access; poor postal system; poor economic situations and its effects on middle level manpower; inadequate human capital; inadequacies of teaching and learning resources; and poor ICT penetration (Udoh & Akpan, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The development of open and distance learning in Nigeria has been a revolution to the problems of access to education. This paper thoroughly examined the role of ODL in providing equal educational opportunity for large number of people who missed out of the conventional system as well resolves the problem of inequality in education. Through open and distance learning, Nigerian people are beginning to enjoy equal opportunity to attain educational heights without intervening barriers of age, gender, disability, socio-economic status, ethnic background, and geographical location. Hence, if Nigeria is committed to meeting the Millennium Development Goals of Education, then one must accept the reality that opens education poses. Through ODL, Nigeria can effectively take care of the backlog from the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) admission to universities and other institutions of higher learning. In effect, it could be well concluded that ODL has contributed to a large extent towards education transformation to meet Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The principle of equity and equality of educational opportunity has no room for hatred and prejudice. In the light of the foregoing discussion, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government should focus attention on the identification of appropriate mechanisms and structures that can ensure equality of access to education.
2. NOUN, Federal Government owned ODL institution should widen its outreach enlightenment campaigns to target underprivileged groups including rural dwellers, particularly girls and women, the nomads, and other hard-to-reach members of the society, as neglecting them would amount to inequality and injustice.
3. The Government should recognize the high premium placed on education in national development and ensure that every Nigerian child especially the girl-child has access to functional education. Also, arbitrary barriers to education be removed.
4. Philanthropist and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) should institute scholarship programmes to cater for educational needs of the under privileged, indigent and special groups in the society.
5. Policy Makers should ensure that all inequalities and discrimination based on sex, state, religion, tribe, geographical location, language and certain traditional and cultural practices are abolished.

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