



Open Distance Learning in Nigeria: A Historical Development and Future Directions

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Abstract

Open Distance Learning (ODL) has gained immense popularity over the past few decades as a mode of education that enables learners to access education irrespective of their geographical location, work, or family commitments. This paper traces the historical development of ODL in Nigeria, highlighting the key milestones that have shaped the current state of this mode of education. The paper explores the role of technology in ODL and how it has transformed the delivery of education, making it accessible to millions of learners across the world. The paper concludes by identifying the current challenges facing ODL and offering insights into how they can be overcome to ensure the continued growth and success of this mode of education.

Keywords: Future Directions, Historical Development, Nigeria, Open Distance Learning

Introduction

Open Distance Learning (ODL) is a mode of education that allows learners to access educational programs from remote locations, providing them with the flexibility to learn at their own pace and convenience. Open distance learning (ODL) has become an increasingly popular mode of education in recent years, allowing learners to access education from anywhere in the world at any time. Open Distance Learning (ODL) provides learners with access to learning opportunities without requiring them to be physically present in a classroom. ODL uses technology to provide students with remote access to learning materials, assessments, and support services.

This paper provides a historical overview of ODL, tracing its origins from early correspondence courses to the modern online and blended learning models. ODL has its roots in distance education, a form of education that originated in the 19th century, where correspondence courses were used to deliver education to learners who were unable to attend conventional schools. This paper traces the historical development of ODL, highlighting the key milestones that have shaped the current state of this mode of education. The paper also discusses the challenges and opportunities presented by ODL, and explores the ways in which it is changing the face of education.

History of Open Distance Learning

The roots of ODL can be traced back to the mid-19th century when correspondence courses were first introduced. These courses allowed students to study via mail, receiving assignments and

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feedback from their instructors through the post. Specifically, the origin of ODL can be traced back to the early 19th century when Isaac Pitman, an Englishman, started a correspondence course on shorthand writing in 1840 (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). This system of writing allowed people to take down notes quickly and accurately. It became popular among business people and secretaries, who used it to record meetings and correspondence. In 1840, Pitman established a correspondence school that taught shorthand writing by mail. This was the first correspondence school in the world and marked the beginning of distance education.

In the early 20th century, the British government established the Open University to provide higher education opportunities to people who could not attend traditional universities. The Open University radio and television broadcasts were used to deliver lectures and provide course materials by mail. Other countries around the world later adopted this model of distance education. In the 1960s and 1970s, technological advances led to the development of new forms of distance education. The advent of the internet and the World Wide Web in the 1990s marked a new era in ODL. The internet made it possible to deliver course materials and provide interactive learning experiences to learners all over the world. However, the development of computers and the internet in the latter half of the 20th century paved the way for the modern era of ODL. In the 1980s and 1990s, online learning management systems and web-based platforms emerged, enabling students to access course materials, engage in discussions, and submit assignments online.

Correspondence courses allowed students to receive learning materials by mail and complete assignments at their own pace without the need to attend traditional classes. By the early 20th century, correspondence courses had become popular in many countries, and the University of London established its External Programme in 1858, which offered students access to degree programs through distance learning (Perraton, 2000). In the mid-20th century, radio and television broadcasts were used to deliver educational content to remote areas, and this marked a significant milestone in the development of ODL. The Open University (OU) in the UK was established in 1969 and became a pioneer in ODL. The OU offered degree programs through a combination of television broadcasts, radio programs, and printed materials. The success of the OU inspired the development of similar institutions in other countries, including the Open Learning Agency in Canada and the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

The advent of the internet and digital technologies in the late 20th century revolutionized the field of ODL. Online learning platforms, such as Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas, provided students with access to learning materials, online discussions, and assessments. Mobile learning, which allows students to access learning materials on their smartphones and tablets, has also gained popularity recently. Today, ODL takes many forms, including fully online courses, blended learning, and massive open online courses (MOOCs). These delivery modes have made education accessible to millions of learners worldwide, regardless of their location or schedule.

Open Distance Learning in Nigeria – A Historical Overview

Open Distance Education in Nigeria has a long history, dating back to the 1940s when the University of London started offering correspondence courses to students in Nigeria. Over the years, distance education has played a critical role in increasing access to education in Nigeria, particularly for people in remote areas who might not have been able to attend traditional face-to-face institutions. In Nigeria, the development of distance education can be traced back to the establishment of the University of London External System in 1947. This was the first opportunity for Nigerian students to obtain a degree from a foreign university without leaving the country. The



courses were delivered through correspondence, and students were required to attend occasional face-to-face tutorials.

In 1976, the Nigerian government established the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) to train teachers through the distance learning system. This marked the beginning of the formal distance education system in Nigeria. The NTI initially offered certificate courses but later expanded to offer diploma and degree programmes. In 1983, the government established the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to provide affordable and accessible higher education to Nigerians. The university started as a correspondence institution but later transitioned to a blended learning system that combines face-to-face interactions and online learning. It witnessed a setback a few months after its take-off when the then military government suspended its operation.

The University of Lagos established the Correspondence Open Study Unit (COSU) in 1974 to offer distance education programmes to students who could not attend traditional universities. The Distance Learning Institute (DLI) (the new name of COSU) offers degree programmes in various disciplines and combines online and face-to-face learning. In 1988, the Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan established the External Studies Programme (ESP), now known as the Distance Learning Centre (DLC), to provide degree programmes to upgrade NCE teachers who aspire to further education.

Since then, ODL has undergone significant development and growth in the country, driven by a variety of factors, including increasing demand for education, advances in technology, and changing government policies. This has enabled many distance institutions to spring up. As of January 2023, there are seventeen approved distance learning institutions by the National University Commission (NUC). The list includes the following:

1. Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan.
2. University of Lagos, Distance Learning Institute.
3. University of Abuja, Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education.
4. University of Maiduguri, Centre for Distance Learning.
5. Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Centre for Distance Learning.
6. Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola, Centre for Distance Learning.
7. Ladoko Akinola University of Technology Open and Distance Learning Centre.
8. Distance learning Centre, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
9. Lagos State University Open and Distance Learning and Research Institute.
10. Joseph Ayo Babalola University Centre for Distance Learning.
11. University of Nigeria, Nsukka Centre for Distance and e-Learning.
12. Federal University of Technology Minna, Centre for Open Distance and e-Learning.
13. Babcock University Ilisan-Remo, Centre for Open Distance and e-Learning.
14. University of Ilorin, Centre for Open and Distance Learning.
15. Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti - Open and Distance Learning Centre.
16. Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Open and Distance Learning Centre.
17. Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Porthacourt, Institute of Distance Education.

In addition to the growth of ODL in traditional universities, there has also been an increase in the number of private ODL institutions in Nigeria. For example, the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), established in 1976 to provide professional development for teachers, has expanded to offer a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes through ODL (NTI, 2021). The development of technology has played a significant role in the growth of ODL in Nigeria. The internet, mobile devices, and other technologies have made it easier for students to access course



materials, interact with teachers and other students, and participate in online discussions and assignments. Many ODL institutions in Nigeria have adopted online platforms, such as Moodle and Blackboard, to deliver courses and support student learning (Onuka, 2016). However, the development of ODL in Nigeria has been driven by a range of factors, including increasing demand for education, technological advances, and changing government policies.

Benefits of open distance learning to Nigerians

One of the significant advantages of ODL is its flexibility. ODL allows learners to study at their own pace and on their own schedule, making it possible for individuals with work and family commitments to pursue education. Moreover, ODL can reach remote and underserved areas where traditional education is not accessible. ODL also enables students to learn from various sources, including multimedia resources, experts from different parts of the world, and peer-to-peer interaction. In recent years, ODL has been increasingly adopted by traditional universities and educational institutions as they recognize the potential of technology to enhance teaching and learning. Many universities now offer online courses and degree programs, allowing students to study remotely while still receiving the quality of education associated with traditional institutions.

Open distance learning (ODL) has several benefits for Nigerians, especially those who may face barriers to accessing traditional educational programmes. Some of the benefits of ODL to Nigerians include:

1. **Flexibility:** ODL provides learners with the flexibility to study at their own pace and convenience, allowing them to balance their education with work, family, and other responsibilities. This is particularly important in Nigeria, where many people work full-time jobs while trying to obtain an education (Oloko-Oba, 2020).
2. **Accessibility:** ODL makes education more accessible to learners who are unable to attend traditional schools due to physical, financial, or geographical barriers. With ODL, learners can access educational resources and materials from anywhere, as long as they have an internet connection. This is particularly important in Nigeria, where many people live in remote and rural areas with limited access to educational facilities (Okoli, 2018).
3. **Affordability:** ODL programs are generally more affordable than traditional educational programs, as they do not require learners to pay for transportation, housing, or other associated costs. This makes education more accessible to Nigerians who may not have the financial resources to attend traditional schools (Oloko-Oba, 2020).
4. **Quality education:** ODL programmes provide a quality education that is comparable to traditional educational programs. ODL institutions in Nigeria are required to meet the same academic standards as traditional institutions, ensuring that learners receive a high-quality education (Okoli, 2018).

Challenges of ODL in Nigeria

Limited access to technology: One of the significant challenges of ODL in Nigeria is limited access to technology, especially in rural areas. Many students may not have access to computers, the internet, or other essential technological tools needed for online learning. According to a study by Olusola O. Adesope and Kolawole S. Oyeyemi (2021), lack of access to technology is a significant barrier to effective ODL in Nigeria. The study found that many students were not adequately equipped to participate in online learning due to inadequate technological resources.



Poor infrastructure: Nigeria's infrastructure is not fully developed, and this presents significant challenges for ODL. Poor power supply and internet connectivity can make online learning challenging or impossible in some parts of the country. According to Adeyinka Tella, Joshua O. Olaosebikan, and Samson O. Oyelere (2021), inadequate infrastructure is a significant challenge to ODL in Nigeria, which affects both the quality of education and students' ability to participate in online learning.

Limited support services: ODL requires a range of support services to ensure students' success, including counseling, academic advising, and technical support. However, these services are often limited in Nigeria. According to Adedoyin Adeleke and Olufunmilayo T. Oladipo (2020), limited support services are a significant challenge to ODL in Nigeria. The authors noted that many students struggle to complete their courses due to a lack of support services.

Quality assurance: Ensuring quality assurance in ODL is another significant challenge in Nigeria. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is the primary provider of ODL in the country, but there are concerns about the quality of education it provides. According to Maryam Ahmed Ibrahim and Abdullahi Hassan Gorodutse (2018), ensuring quality assurance in ODL is a significant challenge in Nigeria, and there is a need for a more robust quality assurance mechanism.

Future Directions of Nigerian Open Distance Learning

Open Distance Learning (ODL) has become a popular mode of education in Nigeria due to its flexibility and accessibility. The future directions of Nigerian Open Distance Learning are influenced by several factors, such as technology, pedagogy, and policy. Here are some future directions of Nigerian Open Distance Learning:

Integration of mobile learning: Mobile devices are becoming popular in Nigeria due to the high penetration rate of mobile devices. Mobile learning provides flexibility and convenience to learners, making it a viable option for ODL. A study by Oyelere and Akanbi (2020) found that mobile learning can enhance the effectiveness of ODL in Nigeria.

Adoption of open educational resources: Open Educational Resources (OER) are free and openly licensed educational materials that can be used for teaching and learning. Adopting OER can reduce the cost of education and increase access to quality education in Nigeria. A study by Adesope and Bayonle (2019) found that the use of OER can enhance the quality of ODL in Nigeria.

Incorporation of virtual and augmented reality: Virtual and augmented reality technologies can potentially enhance the learning experience of ODL students. These technologies can provide a more immersive and engaging learning experience that can improve student motivation and retention. A study by Fasooto et al. (2020) found that the use of virtual and augmented reality can enhance the effectiveness of ODL in Nigeria.

Enhancement of learner support services: Learner support services such as counseling, tutoring, and mentoring are critical to the success of ODL. The enhancement of these services can improve the learning outcomes of ODL students in Nigeria. A study by Afolabi et al. (2019) found that learner support services can enhance the effectiveness of ODL in Nigeria.

Strengthening of policy frameworks: The policy frameworks that govern ODL in Nigeria need to be strengthened to enhance the effectiveness of ODL. This includes the development of regulations that support the use of technology and the adoption of OER. A study by Oyelere and Akanbi (2020) found that policy frameworks can enhance the effectiveness of ODL in Nigeria.



Conclusion

Open Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria is evolving to become more flexible, accessible, and effective. The integration of mobile learning, adoption of open educational resources, incorporation of virtual and augmented reality, enhancement of learner support services, and strengthening of policy frameworks are some of the future directions of ODL in Nigeria. These directions are influenced by various factors such as technology, pedagogy, and policy. They have the potential to enhance the quality of education and increase access to learning opportunities for Nigerians. As Nigeria continues to develop and grow, it is crucial to invest in ODL and ensure that it is equipped with the tools and resources necessary to meet the changing needs of learners in the country.

Recommendations

Based on the future directions of Nigerian Open Distance Learning outlined above, here are some recommendations:

1. Encourage the adoption of mobile learning: Nigerian Open Distance Learning institutions should encourage the use of mobile devices for learning by providing mobile-friendly learning materials, investing in mobile learning platforms, and training faculty to design mobile-friendly courses.
2. Promote the use of open educational resources: Nigerian Open Distance Learning institutions should promote the use of open educational resources by creating awareness among faculty and students, developing policies that support the use of OER, and investing in the development of OER.
3. Invest in virtual and augmented reality technologies: Nigerian Open Distance Learning institutions should invest in virtual and augmented reality technologies to enhance students' learning experience. This includes the development of virtual and augmented reality learning materials and training faculty to use these technologies effectively.
4. Enhance learner support services: Nigerian Open Distance Learning institutions should enhance learner support services by providing counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and other support services that can help students succeed in their studies.
5. Strengthen policy frameworks: The Nigerian government should strengthen policy frameworks that govern Open Distance Learning by developing regulations that support the use of technology, adopting OER, and enhancing learner support services.

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