Open and Long Distance Learning: Expanding the Access to Knowledge Acquisition and Utilization in Nigeria

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Abstract

Notwithstanding its enormous natural endowments, Africa has continued to lag behind the rest of the world in terms of human capital development, technological advancement and efficient resource utilization. Some argue that the failure of developing countries to optimize extant potential for socio-economic growth is closely tied to the consistent neglect of education as the ultimate agent of change. Although investing in good quality education for its citizenry is unarguably the desire of every progressive nation-state, the cost of required infrastructure and facilities is hardly affordable to many cash-strapped African countries. As a result, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) offers a promising and practical alternative for dealing with the widening gap in access to knowledge, primarily because of its reach and relative low-cost implications. However, despite the obvious advantages of ODL, there are fundamental challenges inherent in the massification of higher education around the issues of content, quality, technology and regulation. This paper is a conceptual review of the prospects of ODL as a means to the expansion of access to education in Nigeria. The paper posits that while the obstacles to its effectiveness are by no means negligible, ODL has the capacity to catalyze poverty reduction and industrial revolution in Nigeria. Drawing from the postulations of the Theory of Independent Study by Michael Moore and the Theory of Industrialization of Teaching by Otto Peters, the paper recommends greater public-private partnership in the development of the structure, content and regulatory framework for distance education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Distance Education, Human Capital Development, Poverty Reduction, Social Inclusion, Resource Utilization

Introduction

If the figures released by the 'World Poverty Clock' are anything to go by, Nigeria, as at June 2018, has the highest number of people in the world living in extreme poverty. According to the report, out of the 643,527,400 people or 8% of the world's entire population living on less than $1.25 a day, 86,977,400 are currently living in Nigeria, a number that accounts for 44.2% of the country's estimated population of 196 million. This means that Nigeria may have overtaken India, with an estimated 1.324 billion people but only 73 million people living in

extreme poverty, as the world's poverty capital (https://worldpoverty.io/). At the current rate of poverty, with a negative escape rate of -5.8%, it is projected that the number of Nigerians living on $1.25 a day will rise to 119,766,229 by the year 2030 if nothing is done urgently to stem the tide (www.pulse.ng). This is certainly not good news for Africa's largest economy, regardless of whether or not these figures are disputable. Politicians may put forward various arguments to disparage this projection but the reality is that people living in Nigeria today are becoming poorer progressively, much more than they were in the years past. Moreover, the fact that local and international actors make key investment decisions based on their interpretation of these data is worrisome.

Poverty affects the individual in various ways. Extreme poverty dehumanizes an individual, reduces his/her life chances or quality of life, and predisposes him or her to violence, crime, manipulation and social exclusion (Pityana, 2008). More importantly, poverty reduces the capacity of the individual to create wealth, access valuable information, assess critical knowledge and contribute meaningfully to society. For a country like Nigeria, the cost of extreme poverty is evident in the spate of violent crimes, insurgency, deaths arising from preventable diseases or illnesses, and decrease in the capacity of individuals to optimize vast natural resource endowments. Against this background, it appears unrealistic to talk of development and efficient resource utilization in Nigeria without addressing the problem of pervasive ignorance. Unarguably, one way that Nigeria can lift the nearly 50% of its population out of extreme poverty is through education and the development of its human capital. Countries like China and India with populations in excess of 1 billion people are examples of how human resource development can catalyse poverty reduction in a short span of time. Indeed, all countries of the world seem to have accepted the tremendously compelling argument that education is the cornerstone of national development. These arguments include (i) the vital role education plays in economic and technological development, (ii) education of the citizenry to remove illiteracy and poverty, and (iii) developing a culturally and socially tolerant people who exercise ethical and moral considerations in national and local affairs, with a community spirit (Jegede, 2016).

It is interesting to note that in articulating the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977 as the roadmap for its intervention in the sector, the Federal Government of Nigeria acknowledged that education is the most important instrument of change in any society, and that any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of the country has to be preceded by an educational revolution

(Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), 2013). In the light of that vision, the government promised to pursue policies which would be directed towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels for all, and undertook to make 'life-long education' the basis for the nation's education policy, which means that at any stage of the educational process after primary education, an individual will be able to choose between continuing his full-time studies, combining work with studies, or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later on, with the assurance that the education system will continually support the practice of self-learning (Ajadi, Ibrahim & Adeoye, 2008).

Unfortunately, the lofty ideals of the 1977 National Policy on Education are yet to be achieved, more than 40 years after. One major constraint to this vision is the problem of access to education. The inability of existing educational institutions at various levels to meet the increasing demand for knowledge and information from an accelerating population implies that many people are denied access to life-changing opportunities (Rena, 2007). At the moment, tertiary institutions are overwhelmed by the exponential growth in the number of applicants seeking admission, year on year. No fewer than one million students seeking admission through the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board, JAMB, every year have failed to get slots in tertiary institutions in Nigeria as the system cannot admit more than 600,000 in any given year(www.allafrica.com, 2018). As the population continues to multiply and the prospects of increasing poverty looms large, one option that policy makers should be considering seriously at this time is how to expand access to knowledge acquisition and utilization in Nigeria, especially through Open & Distance Learning (ODL) initiatives (Ojo, 2009).

From the review of extant literature(Aderinoye & Ojokheta, 2004; Ajadi, Ibrahim, & Adeoye, 2008; Braimoh & Osiki, 2008), this paper identifies the problems preventing ODL from mitigating extreme poverty in Nigeria as multipronged, among which are: (i) the inadequacy of existing ODL facilities as a means for increasing access to knowledge and information utilization; (ii) the inability of ODL interventions to leverage advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT, especially, for anchoring learning protocols or driving self-learning processes; and (iii) the challenges of quality assurance, standardization and regulation of ODL programs, even as the number of participating institutions is set to rise in the years ahead. The paper interrogates these challenges and at the end proffers some recommendations on how ODL can be leveraged as a tool for

human capital development, poverty reduction and efficient resource utilization in Nigeria.

Historical Background of Open & Long Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria
The earliest attempt to teach from a distance is attributed to the efforts of Anna Tickner and Caleb Phillips, whose advertisement to teach Shorthand to some interested individuals through weekly correspondence appeared in the Boston Gazette in 1728 (Battenberg, 1971).The first distance education course in the modern sense was pioneered in England by Sir Isaac Pitman who started using the postal system, both to send transcribed texts of shorthand and also receive feedback from his students in 1843. His efforts led to the emergence of the Phonographic Correspondence Society in 1843, which formalized correspondence studies, and later promoted the establishment of Sir Isaac Pitman Colleges across England (Holmberg, 1986).As far as tertiary education is concerned, University of London was the first university in the world to offer distance degree courses, which started in 1858 when its external degree programmes were commissioned. As a result, the great novelist, Charles Dickens, labelled University of London, "The People's University", because it provided access to higher education to students from less affluent backgrounds (Jegede, 2010)

In the United States of America, distance learning at the tertiary level commenced from the University of Chicago in 1882 but was quickly adopted by the University of Columbia and other tertiary institutions. By 1906, the popularity of correspondence tertiary education grew so large that enrolment reached 900,000 at the International Correspondence Schools, Scranton, Pennsylvania (Jegede, 2016). From then, ODL as a vehicle for tertiary education began to expand swiftly all over the world. In Australia, the University of Queensland established its Department of Correspondence Studies in 1911, and in Africa, the University of South Africa transformed from being an examining and certification body into a distance education institution in 1946 (Knowles, 1980; Pitaya, 2008)

The emergence of dedicated universities for ODL called 'Open Universities' started with the establishment of the 'Open University' in the United Kingdom in 1969 and the subsequent admission of its first set of 25,000 students in 1971 (Keegan, 1986). The successful experiment of the United Kingdom's Open University (UKOU) heralded the establishment of other open universities around the world. For instance, Athabasca University, Canada's 'Open University', was created in 1970 and followed a similar, though independently developed pattern (Kember& Murphy, 1990). These were followed by Spain's National University

of Distance Education in 1972 and Germany's Fern Universität in Hagen in 1974(Rossman, 1992). The Open University broadened the scope of the correspondence courses and helped to create a respectable learning alternative to the traditional form of education. Today there are hundreds of Open Universities all over the world, both public and private, dedicated to expanding access to knowledge and resource utilization through distance learning.

In Nigeria, the history of ODL can be traced to the Oxford University's extra mural studies at the University College, Ibadan, which commenced in 1947 to enable a good number of Nigerians thirsty for higher education, but unable to get a place in the limited admissions into the College at Ibadan to do so through correspondence study (Jegede, 2016). From there, many other students sought admission to other universities in the United Kingdom via correspondence and some registered as external students for the General Certificate of Education, both at the ordinary and advanced levels, with the Universities of Oxford, London and Cambridge. After Independence, other attempts to facilitate learning from a distance included the broadcast of English learning programmes through radio by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) and many other Educational Programmes from the National Television of Nigeria (NTV). There was also a 'Schools' Educational Broadcast' by Radio Nigeria which was stationed in Lagos but relayed all through the federation. All radio stations were mandated to hook up at specific times of the day for the broadcast of such programmes at that time (Ajadi, Ibrahim, & Adeoye, 2008).

At the tertiary level, ODL was pioneered in Nigeria by the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, when it started the 'University of Air' Programme in 1972, which eventually was used for the Teachers In-Service Education Programme (TISEP) in 1975. However, the first structured attempt to deliver distance learning courses can be traced to the establishment of the Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) by the University of Lagos in 1974. This unit which was later restructured to become the Distance Learning Institute (DLI) began to provide access to thousands of working adults yearning for more knowledge and made the University of Lagos the first university in Nigeria to offer dual-mode system of education at the higher level.

By 1976, the Federal Military Government took the decision to massify access to tertiary education by establishing a single-mode Open University. A planning committee headed by Professor Afolabi Ojo was finally set up in 1980 to actualize that vision. At that time, the committee was mandated by the then

Honourable Minister of Education, Dr. I. C. Madubuike, to draw up a plan of operation to enable the open university reach an enrolment target of 100,000 in five years (1985) (Ojo, 2009). More than four decades later, and with several hiccups along its path, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), the nation's flagship single-mode university for open and distance learning is still struggling with the burden of providing "Education for All" as envisioned by the Murtala/Obasanjo administration. Since then, many other public and private universities have adopted the dual-mode of instruction but it appears that the gap between demand and supply at the tertiary education level simply continues to widen. In 2013, 1,629,102 registered for UTME, in 2014, it was 1,606753 and 1,000,400 in 2015. For 2016, a total of 1,589,175 registered, just as 1,736,571 and 1,662,762 registered in 2017 and 2018 respectively(www.allafrica.com, 2018). With 158 universities and 115 polytechnics, colleges of education and monotechnics, their carrying capacity is still slightly above 600,000 (www.pemiumtimesng.com, 2018a).

Meanwhile, as can be seen from the figures above, an average of 1.6 million UTME candidates register for entrance examination yearly. However, given the spaces available, less than half of that figure could have been accommodated by all the universities in Nigeria (including those with single and dual instructional modes), even if they were qualified. That means that in 2017 alone, nearly one million young Nigerians interested in pursuing higher education were denied access mainly because there are no spaces to accommodate them. At the primary and secondary levels of education, the number of pupils that are not enrolled is currently among the highest in the world. In 2017, 13.2 million children were reported to be out of school, more than 25% up from the 10.5 million estimated by UNICEF in 2015(www.premiumtimesng.com, 2018b). As the nation's population continues to grow exponentially, this situation is likely to get worse and become even more complicated. Without employment opportunities, the increasing mass of untrained and demotivated individuals is unlikely to have the means to provide for themselves or assume the responsibility to create jobs for others. Overtime, they may become a serious burden to society and further contribute to the expansion of the frontiers of poverty in the land. Therefore, proactively engaging the active minds of citizens in Nigeria through education is not really an option but indeed the only practical thing that could be done to avert ominous danger in the years to come.

Theoretical Framework

Without doubt, distance education is currently the fastest growing form of international and domestic education in the world today. Initially, education by correspondence was looked down upon as inferior and merely a means of providing opportunity to the less-privileged in society who could not afford the cost of traditional education (Pittman, 1991). However, what was once considered a special form of education, which uses non-traditional methods of delivery, is now becoming an important concept in mainstream education as a result of advances in media and communication technologies. The growth in the adoption or adaptation of distance education curriculum, especially among traditional tertiary institutions all over the world, has been phenomenal. Yet, despite this great success, the field of distance education is still struggling to find a strong base in theory and research. Keegan (1988) observes that the lack of accepted theory has weakened distance education, owing to the lack of identity, a sense of belonging, lack of a touchstone against which decisions on methods, media, financing, and on student support, when they have to be made, can be made with confidence. As distance education struggles to identify appropriate theoretical frameworks, implementation issues also become implicated (Gunawardena, 1988; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2003). For academics and practitioners, the major concern is now how to position distance education, given the current surge in its popularity and demand, as a veritable tool for knowledge dissemination and utilization. In that regard, the Theory of Independent Study put forward by Michael Moore in the early 1970's still offers some relevant and interesting insights. Moore (1998) posits that the effectiveness of distance education is dependent on how the issues around the autonomy of the learner and the distance between him/her and the teacher are managed. The distance between the learner and the teacher is measured in terms of the parameters for two-way communication adopted (dialogue) and the extent to which a programme is responsive to the individual needs and goals of the learner (structure).

The issue of structuring in distance education is very significant because it speaks to the problems of access and utility, which represent the two big questions hanging over the traditional education programmes in Nigeria today. Besides, the confusion over how to expand access to the existing institutions and the usefulness of their certificates have also become increasingly questionable. In many ways, tertiary education in Nigeria appears, overtime, to have become an end on its own rather than a means to an end (knowledge acquisition and utilization). Students who graduate with degrees in Banking and Finance, for instance, could end up working as news anchors in television stations. To a great

extent, students now seek higher education mainly for acquiring paper qualifications and not necessarily because they are interested in applying the knowledge acquired in any professional sense. Therefore, as the uptake in distance education continues to grow, it is imperative that the structure is designed from the onset to guarantee robust two-way communication between the learner and the teacher, which will ensure that the courses offered or accepted are relevant, both to the needs of the individuals and the developmental plans of the society at large. As far as the autonomy of the learner is concerned, Moore (1998) emphasizes the importance of encouraging the learner to assume more responsibility for his or her education. Unlike in traditional education systems where the learner is dependent on the teacher, the argument canvassed here is that the role of the teacher in distance education should be more of a facilitator who helps the independent learner to achieve his/her learning objectives at a self-paced speed. The transfer of responsibility for learning to the student is instructive because it ensures greater participation and democratization of the learning process which in turn will facilitate better utilization of the knowledge acquired.

Moore (1973) classifies distance education programs as "autonomous" (learner-determined) or "non-autonomous" (teacher-determined), and gauges the degree of autonomy accorded the learner by answers to the following three questions:
1. Is the selection of learning objectives in the programme the responsibility of the learner or of the teacher (autonomy in setting of objectives)?
2. Is the selection and use of resource persons, of bodies and other media, the decision of the teacher or the learner (autonomy in methods of study)?
3. Are the decisions about the method of evaluation and criteria to be used made by the learner or by the teacher (autonomy in evaluation)?

The underlying assumption in developing curriculum for the traditional education system is that the learner is not qualified or knowledgeable enough to participate in the determination of how learning instructions should be delivered or managed(Ally, 2000). However, distance education is revealing that the learner is not as passive as was originally believed. Therefore, distance educators in Nigeria, as part of the initiatives for increasing access to knowledge acquisition and utilization, may need to consider how to manage the issues around learner's autonomy and the distance between the learner and the teacher (dialogue & structure) form practical perspectives.

Perhaps, the most prominent theory to examine the implications of the increasing relevance of technology in the delivery of distance education outcomes is the

Equivalency Theory espoused by Desmond Keegan in 1993. The central proposition of this theory is that distance education by linking the instructor and the students electronically, successfully creates 'virtual' classrooms whose capabilities to deliver educational objectives should be equivalent to that of conventional learning environments. In support of Keegan's (1993) postulations, Simonson (1995) contends that if technology enables the creation of virtual classrooms, then students regardless of the learning distance should not have to compensate for different, possibly lesser, instructional experiences. Therefore, those developing distance educational systems should strive to make the learning experiences of students equivalent to those using the traditional methods, no matter how they are linked to the resources or instruction they require. The notion canvassed by the Equivalency theorists is predicated on the assumption that technology for distance education is easily accessible, applicable and seamless. Unfortunately, in the Nigerian context, the design of distance education programmes is still grappling with the issues surrounding the application of ICT for instructional deliveries. Thus, it has been difficult so far to virtualize classrooms or achieve equivalence in learning experiences. The leveraging of technology for distance education objectives is important because it opens doors to limitless possibilities in the areas of knowledge acquisition and utilization. As more and more traditional tertiary institutions migrate to the dual instructional modes, addressing the problems of weak or inefficient technological infrastructure will become more crucial in determining the level of 'equivalence' that can be attained.

Another significant aspect of distance education that is of interest to this paper is the implication of the industrialization or massification of teaching, and its impact on knowledge dissemination and application in the Nigerian context. Based on his theory of Industrialization of Teaching, Otto Peters opines that distance education is a revolutionary approach in instructional delivery predicated upon the principles of rationalization, division of labour, organization, objectification, standardization, planning and mass production. This paper is hinged upon the postulation of the theory that distance education should be built upon the principles of rationalization, standardization, and planning, among others, to address the gaps in utility and access to tertiary education in Nigeria. Peters (1971) suggests that for distance teaching to become effective, institutions should note the following:

- The development of distance study courses is just as important as the preparatory work taking place prior to the production process.

- The effectiveness of the teaching process is particularly dependent on planning and organization.
- Courses must be formalized and expectations from students standardized.
- The teaching process is largely objectified.
- The function of academics teaching at a distance has changed considerably vis-à-vis university teachers in conventional teaching.
- Distance study can only be economical with a concentration of the available resources and a centralised administration

Although distance education through the industrialization of the teaching process is expected to reduce the cost of knowledge acquisition and increase access to tertiary education in Nigeria, in alignment with Peters (1971) postulations, the challenges associated with the mass production of knowledge, including issues of quality assurance, standardization, and regulation are still very germane. The expansion of access to knowledge through distance education, especially at the tertiary level, is a fantastic initiative. However, as can be gleaned from the propositions of the afore-mentioned theories, it is the view of this paper that a lot of work is required to make distance education effective, viable and equivalent to traditional education methods.

Discussion

Education is power. The transformation and triumph of every society in history has always been associated with a deliberate and planned expansion of the acquisition and utilization of superior knowledge among its members. The inability of the existing institutions to accommodate the increasing demand for admissions to higher learning in Nigeria is becoming a huge source of concern, not only because it deprives the young school leavers of the opportunities that education can unlock but even more because it is creating armies of poor, unemployed, unemployable and socially maladjusted individuals all over the country(Pulse Nigeria, 2018). Given the prevailing economic realities and the cost of establishing more institutions, open and distance education is perhaps the most feasible means of addressing the widening gap between supply and demand of higher education in the country today.

The National Policy on Education (NERDC, 2013) recognizes the importance of distance education and its capacity to augment the shortfall in access to learning via traditional educational methods. Accordingly, it sets clear goals for distance education in Nigeria, among which are to:

a. provide more access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities;
b. meet special needs of employers and employees by mounting special courses for employees at the workplace;
c. encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula;
d. ameliorate the effects of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their location or places of work; and
e. encourage life-long learning opportunities.

In pursuance of these goals, the policy recommends that the Federal Government shall:
a. ensure that programmes for open/distance education are equivalent in status to those offered by conventional face –to-face mode of delivery in appropriate tertiary institutions;
b. encourage and regulate open/distance education practice in Nigeria;
c. strengthen the existing coordinating agencies of open/distance education which shall:
    i.   Advise the government on the development and practice of open/distance education;
    ii. Promote open/distance education nationwide in collaboration with Federal, State and Local Governments' Education Authorities;
    iii. Ensure the maintenance of standards for open/distance education programmes in various institutions;
    iv. Liaise with media houses, information technology providers and other relevant bodies in enhancing open/distance education;
    v.   Encourage private efforts and other non-governmental organizations in the provision of quality education using open/distance education; and
    vi. Encourage tertiary institutional participation in open/distance education.

More than four decades after the NPE was launched as a framework for the development of education in Nigeria, it is doubtful if the cardinal goals set above have been met or if the Federal Government is still being guided by the objectives enumerated therein. Apart from the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), which is still the only single-mode ODL University in the country, very little has been done by the government to encourage or promote the growth of distance learning (Ibukun & Aboluwodi, 2010). The few public and private universities that are adopting the distance

education methods of instruction are doing so mainly through self-help and not in response to a coordinated policy directive or with any form of structured assistance. Thus, the number of institutions providing distance education or preparing to do so in the country is still relatively low (less than 20 at the moment) and remains grossly inadequate to fill the void in the tertiary education sector (www.myschoolgist.com). Indeed, it will be difficult to feel the impact of distance education on poverty reduction and national development without a concerted and government-backed effort to intentionally increase the number of participating institutions to a desirable number from the current abysmal level. Beyond the problem of inadequate access, another important issue that requires urgent attention is the functionality or applicability of distance education to the needs of the society and individuals. It is obvious that the present system which churns out thousands of university graduates every year with mere paper certificates and little or no technical experience cannot support the dream of industrialization, entrepreneurship revolution and technological breakthrough in the years ahead. The vast majority of young school leavers are interested only in admissions into the universities and not into polytechnics and colleges of education, which raises the issue of utilization of the knowledge that may be acquired in addressing the pressing needs of the society. If this trend continues, the possibility of using education to drive resource utilization, poverty alleviation or/and national development will remain slim.

Table 1: Breakdown of 2015 JAMB Applications according to Type of Higher Institution

Type of Institution	Number of Applicants	Percentage of the Total
Universities	1,557,017	97.78
Colleges of Education	17,673	1.11
Polytechnics	17,584	1.10
NID	31	0.01
Total	1,592,305	100.00

Source: Jegede, O. J. (2016). *Open and Distance Learning Practices in Nigerian Higher Institutions of Learning*. A Keynote Address at the 3rd University of Ibadan Annual Distance Learning Centre Distinguished Lecture and Stakeholders' Forum Held at the International Conference Centre, University of Ibadan, 14-15 July.

Table 1 paints a gloomy picture of the prospects of technical education and teacher training in Nigeria. The recent dismissal of 22,000 primary school teachers in Kaduna state for failing competency tests was indeed a huge source of national embarrassment and concern (www.dailypost.ng). However, without a plan to enhance capacity in these core areas, there is little chance that the future of education in Nigeria will be different from the past. The training of teachers and

technicians is fundamental to improving the performance of individuals and organizations that will in turn contribute to economic breakthrough and national renaissance. This is where ODL can play a crucial role, if properly designed and aligned.

Another major challenge confronting ODL in Nigeria is the lack of an efficient technological backbone to support distant modes of instructional delivery. The world has come a long way from the days of mail correspondences, audio cassettes, facsimiles, VCDs, DVDs, teletexts, etc. Although, a lot of these technologies are still relevant and used in distance education, the entrance of digital communication platforms (internet, computers, mobile telephones, virtual protocols, etc.), has completely revolutionized the approach to ODL all over the world. Unfortunately, the pace of progress in adopting advances in technology for distance learning in Nigeria has been remarkably slow and sluggish (Federal Ministry of Education, 2002). Apart from the issues around the affordability of new technologies both on the part of the institutions and the students, there are also problems in terms of re-skilling the competencies of the teachers to effectively use ICT for ODL (Ajadi, Ibrahim, & Adeoye, 2008). In addition to that, there are challenges surrounding access to the internet for distance learners emanating from bandwidth failures and the lack of stable electricity. Without resolving these issues, it is unlikely that ODL will be positioned to drive transformation and the kind of digital revolution required to catapult Nigeria into the top 20 economies of the world.

Although Section 116, Sub-section b of the NPE (NERDC, 2013) assigns the responsibility of encouraging and regulating open/distance education to the Federal Government, there is no tangible indication so far that the task is being taken seriously, if performed at all. The landscape of distance education in Nigeria is still largely fragmented and there appears to be no consensus among participating institutions on both the means and the ends of the programme. As a result, issues of quality, standards, methodologies, processes and procedures are beginning to emerge. Given the nature and importance of distance education, the argument that a regulatory framework is still being developed (Ibukun & Aboluwodi, 2010) appears feeble and untenable. Without international benchmarking and a firm regulatory mechanism to enforce standardization or quality control, NPE's hope of internationalizing Nigeria's ODL curricula will remain a mirage just as the goal of achieving 'equivalence' will become more elusive. At the moment, high-end employers in Nigeria hardly consider graduates from traditional state-owned universities for employment because of the lack of

confidence in the quality of their degrees (Olubor & Ogonor, 2008). The fate of graduates from distance learning programs seems even more precarious in this regard. For years, graduates of law from NOUN, for example, were denied placements in the Nigerian Law School and as a result were not allowed to practice. So many others with professional certifications obtained through distance education in Nigeria have and are experiencing various forms of discrimination and humiliation at the workplace (Ibukun & Aboluwodi, 2010). No doubt, distance education is still being looked down upon in Nigeria, probably because of concerns over its quality of certification, methods of delivery and regulation. There is an urgent need, therefore, to strengthen regulatory framework around distance education in order to maintain fidelity to its purpose and also shore up the confidence of the general public in its certifications.

Conclusion

The human mind is a limitless resource. In this age of knowledge economy, the development of human, over and above, natural resources is the driving force of change and transformation all over the world. To harness human capital as a competitive edge, populous countries like China and India dedicated significant resources and policy priorities to education and manpower training over several years. Unfortunately, Nigeria, a country of almost 200 million people, the most populous country in Africa and the seventh most populous country in the world, with a youth population of over 90 million is still paying lip service to education. In the 2018 national budget, out of a total sum of ₦9,120,334,988,225, only 7.04% or 102.907 billion Naira was allocated to education (www.punchng.com). This is far below the United Nations recommended 26% allocation to education for developing and emerging economies(www.premiumtimesng.com, 2017). To accelerate poverty alleviation and national development, Nigeria must begin to prioritize education. The starting point should be the massification of access to knowledge acquisition and utilization through distance education. Of the 1,592,305 applications for admissions to higher institutions in 2015, Jegede (2016), notes that only 695,449 (43.67%) of them could have been accommodated in the 143 Universities, 95 Polytechnics, 26 Monotechnics and 149 Colleges of Education across the country. That means that 896,856 of the applicants could have been denied opportunities for further studies if they were qualified.

To deal with this emerging crisis in the education sector, government must look towards increasing the number of single-mode ODL institutions and dual mode traditional institutions offering distance education. One practical way to achieve this goal will be to encourage more private sector participation and public-private

partnerships in the sector. It is obvious that the cost of establishing new academic institutions and the political will to allocate more funds in the budget to education may be difficult for politicians to muster, given the competing demands for funds and the dwindling fortunes from oil. Therefore, public-private collaborations on ODL may provide the short cut to funding. This arrangement can help the country build capacity to expand access in the short run and also create a framework to build confidence or galvanize greater private sector investments in the long run. Also, to enhance resource utilization and greater applicability of knowledge to the needs of the society, it is imperative that the neglect of Polytechnics and Colleges of Education is strategically reversed. Such institutions form the foundation of technological growth and must be extolled and encouraged to adopt distance education systems.

Furthermore, the need to upgrade and consistently improve ICT and the technological architecture driving the delivery of distance education in Nigeria is an urgent one. This is where government intervention is very crucial. The cost of procuring modern equipment and training the requisite manpower to operate, manage and maintain same, is clearly out of the league of so many 'struggling' universities, some of which are already offering distance education courses or preparing to do so. The problems of low bandwidth and epileptic power supply, affecting both distance educators and learners, are all capital intensive and cannot be resolved without government assistance and commitment. However, an interesting development is the fact that since the liberalization of the telecommunication industry in 2001, mobile telephony and internet penetration have been growing simultaneously and exponentially to date. With media convergence, the mobile phone has become the most used and dependable devise of all time. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), there are 162, 307,346 active mobile phone subscribers in Nigeria as at the end of June 2018 (www.ncc.gov.ng). In the light of this development, distance education in Nigeria can expand access to knowledge by frog-jumping to the use of mobile phones in the design and implementation of its instructional codes. This may sound a bit far-fetched and impractical for now, but it is the reality of our time and definitely worth thinking about.

Finally, the need for regulation can never be overemphasized. Distance education by its nature involves a lot of participants congregating to build knowledge and create an enduring learning experience. In the maze of the interactions going on in that space, it is difficult to monitor compliance to standards. However, it is a task that must be taken very seriously. Government cannot expect to unleash the huge

potential of distance education without providing a comprehensive and benchmarked regulatory framework. This will ensure that certifications coming from the participating institutions are recognized and respected, not just in Nigeria but also across the world. Perhaps, this may be a good opportunity to internationalize curricula and certifications from Nigerian higher institutions and also attract foreign studentships in the years ahead. In any case, given the present circumstances, everything must be done to make distance education in Nigeria effective, efficient and practical. To scale up knowledge acquisition and utilization in Nigeria, distance education appears to be not just a feasible alternative but indeed the only viable one for now.

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