

ENHANCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA

Dr Tessy Onogimesike, ANGBA

Department of Science Education

Faculty of Education, National Open University of Nigeria

Abstract

University education is a critical component of human capital development worldwide. It is also an avenue of self-actualization for most people in the learning process. However, the vast majority of prospective students are denied access to University education especially the disabled individuals due to limited space. Open and Distance education therefore becomes the viable option as it accommodates millions of students who can study from the comfort of wherever they live or work. This necessitated the establishment of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) education which provides highly accessible and enhanced quality education. ODL also increases manpower development and general literacy. The flexible operation of the Open and Distance education gives the learner the greatest possible control over time. The Open and Distance learning movement has opened the horizon of students thereby re-shaping what they learn and access learning. Despite the advantages of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL), individuals with disabilities are still marginalized and socially/educationally excluded. Therefore, Open and Distance education can integrate the disabled maximally if stakeholders develop educational facilities and curriculum in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) that can enhance teaching and learning for the individuals with disability in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, Open and Distance Learning, Disabilities, Curriculum for Intellectual Disabled persons*

Introduction

Achieving the Education for all targets and Millennium Development Goals will be impossible without improving access to quality education for children with disabilities (Yash & Agarwal, 2013). Significantly, the global community had not realized this in 2000, when the Millennium Development Goals were adopted. The 8 goals with their 21 targets did not refer to disability even once. However, this has been amended in the Sustainable Development Goal's, especially Goal 4, which aspires to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 (Asha & Ricky, 2017). Goal 4 stipulates that all learners, regardless of their social status,

deserve quality and best education and training that would enable them have access to opportunities that will improve their quality of life and meaningful contribution to their respective societies as productive citizens. In fact, two of the ten targets in SDG 4 draw attention to the need to; eliminate disparities for people with disabilities and also to provide infrastructure and materials for improved access to education. If government including Nigerian government are to achieve these ambitious targets, they need to adopt alternative and innovative approaches to education, increase access and equity, lower costs and improve quality education for all (Asha & Ricky, 2017). Within this context the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) becomes more relevant than ever before. Asha & Ricky, (2017) defined Distance education as the delivery of learning or training to learners who are separated, mostly by time and space, from those who are teaching and training. Okebukola (2013) describe Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities. He further explained that distance education is any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between teachers and learners being conducted through electronic or print media because learners and teachers are separated by time and space. Some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them. Open learning means that there are minimal barriers to entry in terms of age, gender, prior qualifications. The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. Although Open Learning and Distance education are distinct, they are clearly complementary. If we open up learning, we also need to introduce some elements of distance education. Similarly, if we introduce distance learning, we open up educational opportunities to more people. Therefore, it has become common to bring these two terms together in the expression Open and Distance Learning or ODL. This captured the imagination of policy makers and led to the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Increasingly more open universities are using technologies. There has been a greater focus on the use of technologies. Several new terms are now being used as online learning and virtual learning to mean that the learner uses a variety of media, not just computers, to learn. These are different forms of distance learning. Another recent term, that reflects the growing trend of mixing ODL with conventional face-to-face

teaching, is flexible or blended learning (Asha & Ricky, 2017). Open and Distance Learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programs with the expectation that students can succeed. Open and distance education could go a long way in widening accessibility to education for the majority of individuals and/or people with disabilities, so that the learning process can go on.

According to Barbara & Trust (2014) individuals with disabilities (IWD) and the support services they access in distance education settings have received relatively little attention in comparison to those students in more traditional post-secondary schools. They note the lack of information on whether distance education is reaching individuals with disabilities who might not have access to higher education. They concluded that more research is needed about the participation of students with disabilities in distance education, the services they access, and the success they experience in their studies. The Open and Distance Learning system had started in Nigeria and worldwide to relieve the pressure on institutions of learning following the traditional system of education to serve as the lead agency for capacity building and for bridging human resource and skills gaps in discipline where the conventional university lacked the strength. The Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria is called the National Open of Nigeria (NOUN). The Open University of Nigeria was established by the federal Government of Nigeria as a spring board for open and distance learning in Nigeria in 1983 and revalidated as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2002. (Okebukola, 2013; NOUN, 2018). The aims of the NOUN are in conformity with the Commonwealth of Learning on ODL systems with a philosophy that aims to remove educational barriers and give opportunity for students to study what they want, when, where and how they want it irrespective of learning pace.

Theoretical frame work

Independence and autonomy theory

The theories described in this study are specifically related to Open and distance Learning (ODL). They seek to explain why and how Open and distance Learning (ODL) works and what contributes to success in a distance education learning environment.

Charles Wedemeyer, who is considered the father of American distance education, moved away from the concept of correspondence study and emphasized independent learning. Garrison (2000) observed that Wedemeyers' focus on the

pedagogical assumptions of independent study was a shift from the correspondence study dominated by organizational and administrative concerns to an emphasis on educational issues concerning learning at a distance. Wedemeyer recognized the independence of the Independence and autonomy theory and posited that such independence would be afforded by a variety of means and strategies, including anytime and anywhere learning, and learner control over the pacing of the learning process (Moore & Anderson, 2003). The theory posited that The essential elements of ODL include greater student responsibility, widely available instruction, effective mix of media and methods, adaptation to individual differences including the disabled individuals, and a wide variety of start, stop and learn times (Wedemeyer, 1977, 1981). The concept of learner autonomy is that “learners have different capacities for making decisions regarding their own learning” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Wedemeyer acknowledged the necessity for the learner to take more responsibility for learning, freeing the instructor of the “custodial” duties of teaching. Wedemeyer’s vision of independent study was consistent with learner autonomy, self-directed learning and self-regulation. Holmberg (1995) also emphasized the learner’s responsibility for learning, as he stated that “a basic general assumption is that real learning is primarily an individual activity and is attained only through an internalizing process. Wedemeyer, considered the independence of the student as the essence of distance education (Keegan 1986). This was reflected in Wedemeyer's preference for the term "independent study" for Open and Distance Education. He was critical of contemporary or conventional patterns of higher education, believing that outdated concepts of learning and teaching were being employed. Wedemeyer felt that these concepts failed to utilize modern technologies in ways that could alter an institution. The theory set forth a system of distance education that includes ten characteristics which emphasize learner independence and the adoption of technology as a way of implementing it. According to Wedemeyer, the theory stated, the system should: Be capable of operating any place where there are students, even only one student, whether or not there are teachers at the same place, at the same time; Place greater responsibility for learning on the student; Free faculty members from custodial-type duties so that more time can be given to truly educational tasks; Offer students and adults wider choices (more opportunities) in courses, formats, and methodologies; Use, as appropriate, all the teaching media and methods proven effective; Mix and combine media and methods so that each subject or unit within a subject is taught in the best way known; Cause the redesign and development of courses to fit into an articulated media program;

1. Preserve and enhance opportunities for adaptation to individual differences;

2. Evaluate student achievement simply, not by raising barriers regarding the place, rate, method, or sequence of student study; and Permit students to start, stop, and learn at their own pace.

Moore's theory of distance education is a classification method for distance education programs. Shaped in part by Moore's adult education and university extension experience, it examines two variables in educational programs: the amount of learner autonomy and the distance between teacher and learner'. Furthermore, Moore (1994), distance education is composed of two elements, each of which can be measured. The first element is the provision for two-way communication (dialog); some systems or programs offer greater amounts of two-way communication than others. The second element is the extent to which a program is responsive to the needs of the individual learner (structure); some programs are very structured while others are more responsive to the needs and goals of the individual student.

The Concept of Disability

According to Mohammed (2017) citing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability is the condition in which physical and social barriers prevent a person with impairment from taking part in the normal life process of the community on an equal footing with others. The World Health Organization defined disability as a contextual variable which changes over time and in relation to circumstances. Therefore, disability is not just a mere health predicament. It is a multifarious experience that affects the person's body and his or her ability to function equally in the society in which he or she lives. Disability may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional and developmental or some combination of these and may be present from birth or occur during a person's life. Disability is an umbrella term convening impairment, activity limitation and participation restrictions and is an outcome of interaction between impairment and negative environmental impact. Most people at some point in their lives will experience one type of disability or the other (WHO, 2001; 2012). Disability is of different types and can be classified into Physical disability, Sensory Disability, Visual Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Mental Health and Emotional Disability, Developmental Disability and Olfactory and Gustatory Impairment. There are various olfactory disorders, which include: Anomie (inability to smell), Dysomia (aroma smelling differently as it should smell), Hypersomnia (an abnormally acute sense of smell), Hyposmia (decreased ability to smell), olfactory reference syndrome (people assuming or imaging that they have body odor) and Parosmia, that is, things smelling worse than they should (McLaughlin & Margolskee, 1994).

Therefore, the impairment in interaction with different barriers may hinder the disabled persons from full and effective participation on equal basis with others.

Disability and access to inclusive higher education in Nigeria

Inclusive education is the implementation of policies and processes that allows all individuals to participate in all education programmes. This means that disabled individuals should be accepted without any restrictions in all the educational programmes meant for other people. It denotes equality, and acceptance of every individual with his own unique capabilities as he or she is ready to go to school. This principle must be accepted by all the international, national and local programmes. The process of inclusion education denotes the ways in which the system makes itself welcoming to all. In terms of inclusion of disabled individuals, it means the shift in services from ‘care of the disabled child’ to his education and personal development’.

Inclusive education goes one step further by defining these individuals as people with special needs who need special attention, rather than children who are impaired or handicapped. Inclusive education is nothing but making the programmes for disabled children an integral part of the general educational system rather than a system within general education. Persons living with disabilities including children or adults have a right to education. Attention is mainly focused on the child’s right to education as enshrined in human right treaties. The idea of expanding access to education through Open and Distance Learning is necessary because of equality in the access to education; very few people have the privilege to access education due to one form of challenge or the other. The challenges faced by people in the society living with disability in accessing higher education are increasingly becoming difficult by the day, especially in developing nations like Nigeria due to the fact that most educational institutions in these countries lack the materials, facilities and infrastructure to cater for the needs of the disabled individual (Handsome, 2018). Therefore, it is a clear expression that expanded access to education through open and distance learning will, without doubt provide opportunities for higher education to the disabled group because of the ways higher education institutions in Nigeria are structured and built. Human resources are on the increase in Nigeria that need to be given human capital development training to contribute to the economic development of the nation.

Challenges Of Inclusive Education And Training For Distance Learning

Creating an Inclusive Ethos

A foundation for all learning and development is the creation of an inclusive ethos for the education institution, that is, a secure, accepting, collaborating and stimulating teaching/learning community in which everyone is valued. An inclusive ethos is concerned with developing inclusive values, shared among all stakeholders. The principles, derived within an inclusive institutional ethos, guide decisions about policies and moment-to-moment practices. Without addressing the issues of institutional cultures, a sustainable change is not likely to occur.

Producing Inclusive Policies

Inclusion is crucial to the development process and permeates all policies, so that they provide a support beam for enhancing the learning and participation of all stakeholders within the community of the institution. A policy that has to do with management behaviour, assessment procedures, support organization, curriculum, professional development, etc. the need to bend the institution's answerable to both the teaching and learning development of all learners, as well as assistance for the educators and the institutions. According to this context, assistance surrounds every variety that contributes the growth of the institution that responds to diversity, particularly, the commitment and support of management is non-negotiable for the successful implementation of policy and practice.

Evolving Inclusive Practices

Institutional practices need to reflect the inclusive cultures and policies of the site of learning. These priorities are ensuring that face-to-face and distance learning activities encourage the participation of all learners. Inclusive practices should also promote the creativity of educators with a view to upgrading their ability and knowledge, creating space and time for sharing, supporting and participation. (Valverde et al, 2011). Modesto & Tan (2009) suggested that the course writers must consider the way course material will be used. This is a major contribution which relies on the features of learners for whom materials are to be written. In Open and Distance Learning, it is compulsory that course team includes experts in disability issues willing to help in making sure that the study material answers to the various needs of the Individuals with Disabilities. Multi Sector coordination and collaboration is important in collaborating elements into the course team which will ensure the relevance of the material. During the process stage the material

should be flexible enough to allow the Individuals with Disabilities to participate in tutorials without hindrances. An integrated whole institution system which ensures that the study material is issued to the Individuals with Disabilities upon registration should be put in place. The teaching learning period must make sure that the adapted material through necessary supports in the form of on-line material or teams of disability specialists created to support students are adequately provided and functional. Such teams will assess the effectiveness of the material through student feedbacks. The outcome section shows issues to do with achievement, attainment and standards. The learner achieves personal development enhancing a positive attitude towards learning. They manage to complete their degree or diploma. The ODL institution reaches appropriate standards and this has a positive impact on society. The framework is affected by three fundamental contextual factors these being policies, funding and management. A positive disability policy will ensure that everybody is aware of what should be done when meeting the needs of the IWDs. Adequate funding is important if appropriate study materials are to be provided and barrier free environments developed. Lastly, the inclusion of IWDs needs to be properly managed it cannot be left to chance alone (Kaputa, 2013).

Impact Of Technology In Facilitation Of ODL Delivery To Iwds

Open and Distance Learning courses, resources, and materials must be designed and delivered in such a way that the level of communication and course-taking experience is the same for students with or without disabilities. Bretz & Johnson (2000) observe that computer literacy has become recognized by education experts and researchers as a central factor in students' academic performance. Barbara & Trust (2014) asserts that adding computers, assistive technology and other adapted learning equipment, in addition to scholarships to students is assumed to have resulted in an increasing number of students with disabilities entering higher education. Assistive devices should be readily available and materials in the form needed should be availed in time. A research by Kamba (2009) revealed that in order to build institutional capacity for e-learning at the University of Dar es Salaam, an Instructional Technology Resource Unit (ITRU) was created in 2002 to spearhead the process. The unit conducts instructional design workshops targeting academic staff and students. The main objectives of the workshops were to: Encourage academic staff to enable independent learning among the students;

Sensitize academics about alternatives methods of delivering courses; Introduce them to flexible methodologies and course design structures that recognize the needs of varied learners; Facilitate the design of electronic online materials for student access; Sensitize the staff on their changing roles from providers of knowledge to that of facilitators, and finally; Improve student evaluation of their own learning

Factors Inhibitive Of The Enrolment Of IWDs

Chataika (2007) established that attitudes and disability awareness could be both catalysts and obstacles to inclusion of people with disabilities. It must be acknowledged that disabling attitudes and practices can be deeply enshrined into culture, society and legislation, and may therefore be extremely difficult to overcome. In trying to remove disabling practices, a major obstacle that must not be overlooked is bureaucracy. Putting files on a desk can be done easily, but actually having them read, discussed and implemented is another. Mainstreaming of disability overall suffers from disregard and half-hearted implementation. A weakness of „mainstreaming disability“ is that practitioners often easily assume that people’s beliefs can be changed within due time. Also, people might change their views, but not their practices. Its effect is often overestimated (Chataika, 2007). Choruwa (2006) states that challenge to access the education for most IWDs start right from the family level. IWDs are faced with negative attitudes from the family members. They consider sending children with disabilities to school as a waste of time. When discussing attitudes, there are two sides to the coin: the disabling attitudes of non-impaired society as well as the disabling attitudes that people with impairment harbor themselves. The belief is that when the first change, the latter will follow spontaneously. But the process of self-actualization actually takes many years to complete. Choruwa (2006) points out that, “it is a matter of fact that most people with disabilities come from very poor backgrounds. Choruwa (2006) states that “Disability and poverty are inseparable. Both poverty and disability reinforce each other, thereby contributing to increased vulnerability among Individuals with Disabilities.” Meeting the special needs of Individuals with Disabilities is only at extra cost from the point view of people without disabilities. In some instances, breadwinner might have to devote working to giving care especially for middle to low income earners making it strenuous for Individuals with Disabilities to access higher education. Other factors include:

An Inflexible Curriculum

Admittedly, one of the most significant barriers to learning for any learner is an inflexible curriculum. Consequently, barriers within the curriculum must be identified and addressed, so that it is accessible to and relevant for all learners, irrespective of their learning needs. This means that the curriculum must be sensitive and responsive to the diverse cultures, beliefs and values of learners.

Accessible Learning Materials

To ensure that learners are active participants in the learning and teaching process, distance learning institutions must ensure that teaching and learning materials are evaluated to ensure that the full range of diverse learning needs of all learners is accommodated. Learners must also be provided with learning materials in formats that meet their individual needs. Equally important, the language used must be user-friendly and be understood by the majority of learners. In addition, when planning their learning material, distance learning institutions must be sensitive to the cultural diversity of their learners.

Understandably, given the nature of distance learning, there may be difficulties in establishing the specific needs of learners, as there may be limited face-to-face contact with them. Based on data from the audit conducted by Technikon (2002), it was found that learners with disabilities do not articulate their special needs. Consequently, very little or no provision is made in providing material in preferred formats. The result is that blind learners are invariably provided with course materials and tutorial letters in standard print format. Moreover, in the absence of information on the special needs of specific learners, written feedback from lecturers is invariably provided in their handwriting, as they are reportedly unaware that a specific assignment is from, for example, a blind or partially sighted learner.

Socio-economic Barriers

The relationship between education provision and the socio-economic conditions in any society must be recognized. Effective learning is fundamentally influenced by the availability of educational resources to meet the needs of any society. In many developing countries, there are inadequate numbers of learning of learning and other facilities to meet the educational needs of the large number of learners engaging in distance learning. In most cases, inadequacies in provision are linked

to other inequalities in the society, such as urban/rural disparities, and inequalities arising from discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and disability. Poverty and Underdevelopment. Closely linked to the lack of access to basic services is the effect which sustained poverty has on learners, the learning process and the education system. For learners, the most obvious result of poverty, often caused by unemployment and other economic inequalities, is the inability of families to meet basic needs such as nutrition and shelter. Learners living under such conditions are subject to increased emotional stress, which adversely affects learning and development. Additionally, under nourishment leads to a lack of concentration and a range of other symptoms which in turn affects the ability of the learner to engage effectively in the learning process.

Strategies For Effective ODL By IWDs

According to Hendriks (2009), one of the primary concepts of ODL is to offer students learning anytime, anywhere. Therefore, all ODL resources must be designed to afford students with disabilities maximum opportunity to access distance education resources anytime, anywhere without the need for outside assistance (e.g. sign language interpreters, aides, etc.). ODL resources must generally be designed to provide “built-in” accommodation (i.e., closed or open captioning, descriptive narration) and/or interface design/content layout, which is accessible to “industry standard” assistive computer technology in common use by persons with disabilities. Whenever possible, printed information should be provided in the alternative format preferred by the student (that is, Braille, audio tape, large print, electronic text, MP3, DAISY). When choosing between possible alternative formats or methods of delivery, consideration should be given to the fact that methods which are adequate for short, simple or less important communications may not be equally effective or appropriate for longer, more complex, or more critical material. For example, the use of a telephone relay service may be an acceptable method for a faculty member to respond to a brief question from a deaf student during his/her office hours, but would not be appropriate as a means of permitting that same student to participate in a class discussion in a course conducted by teleconference. Adoption of access solutions which include assigning assistants (i.e., sign language interpreters, readers) to work with an individual student to provide access to distance education resources should only be considered as a last resort when all efforts to enhance the native accessibility of the course material have failed. This is particularly true since, for

several years, colleges have funding to assist them in providing access to distance education (Valverde et al, 2011)

Access to ODL courses, resources and materials include the audio, video and text components of courses or communication delivered via existing and emerging technologies. Access includes the audio, video, multimedia and text components of Web sites, electronic chat rooms, e-mail, instructional software, CD-ROM, DVD, laser disc, video tape, audio tape, electronic text and print materials. Where access to Web sites not controlled by the college is required or realistically necessary for completion of a course, the college must take steps to ensure that such sites are accessible or provide the same material by other accessible means. ODL courses, resources and materials must be designed and delivered in such a way that the level of communication and course-taking experience is the same for students with or without disabilities. Valverde et al, (2011) explain that modifications to the curriculum, materials or resources used in the course can also improve accessibility of ODL to IWDs. This process transforms curriculum, materials and or resources to a form which allows for their easy use by IWDs. The process should however not compromise the content but should only should facilitate use by IWDs. Accommodation also improves on accessibility of ODL to IWDs. This would involve a fundamental alteration in the nature of the instructional activity which is equally effective for the student to grasp matter. There always needs to be cooperation and lobby with the local (and higher) authorities to ensure support and sustainability. The development of ODL study material for all learners initially is very expensive but due to the law of demand and supply gradually reduces in cost (Valverde et al, 2011). Modesto and Tan (2009) suggest ways in which study materials can be developed, Using existing off- the shelf learning packages; Building on existing non-open learning materials, for example, textbooks and videos; Planning and planning a custom-made package from scratch; Hosting a course on behalf of another institution; and Adapted study materials used by another institution.

Conclusions

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) University lecturers are not articulate with the basic needs to assist students with disabilities except for those in the department of special needs education. The infrastructure at the centre is generally not friendly to students with physical disabilities. Assistive devices are not readily available and some materials are obsolete and are not in the form needed. Open and Distance Learning is a feasible option as millions of students can study and work at the same time anywhere they are due to its flexibility. It proffers attainable and high quality education. ODL also improves workforce and due to its flexibility it can accommodate millions thereby reducing literacy and improving economy. The Open and Distance learning movement has changed studying perspective and highly reoriented students thereby re-shaping what they learn and access learning. Open and Distance education can accommodate the disabled maximally if stakeholders can invest in educational facilities and curriculum in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) that can make teaching and learning for interested students with disability in Nigeria very easy for them.

Recommendations

- There should be a clear-cut policy on financial assistance for students with disabilities.
- lecturers should be trained so that they are articulated with basics need to assist students with disabilities.
- The infrastructure should be friendly to students with physical disabilities.
- Assistive devices should be readily available and materials in the form needed should be availed in time.
- Disability support services should be created and housed in the disability support resource centre
- There is need for Government to create a Disability policy which stipulates structures and resources for IWDs.

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