

Effectiveness of Proficiency Skills Development using Open and Distance Learning System in Nigeria

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Abstract

Technical and vocational education and training is an important aspect of Nigeria's educational and developmental objectives, however the conventional approach to education is hard pressed to meet this need. Consequently, the open and distance learning system had been introduced to train people in essentially theoretical fields and extended to the vocational and technical fields. The National Open University of Nigeria, the first single-mode open university in West Africa established a Centre for Continuing Education and Workplace Training to offer proficiency certificate courses in vocational and technical areas. These courses are directed at improving the skills, competencies and abilities of participants for enhanced workplace effectiveness, and enable them to recognize and utilize investment opportunities around them for financial empowerment and personal development. This paper reports the outcome of a primary qualitative investigation of the application of distance learning approaches for teaching practical skills and competencies based courses of the Centre. Using structured interviews and focus group discussions with registered learners, instructional facilitators, student counsellors and prospective applicants to these programmes, the study examined the perception of the participants about the effectiveness of the training received for skills oriented programmes at the institution. Opinions of participants about the instructional delivery of the content and learner-friendliness of study materials were recorded. The discussions also focused on the availability, and effectiveness of contact sessions and multimedia course ware. The findings suggest that, in general, skills development through open and distance learning system is practicable, effective and useful. It was also found that whilst there are print materials issued for instructional delivery, the preference of the learners was for intensive face-to-face practical sessions as complements to print materials. Conclusively, it was proposed that the practical/face-to-face components of the courses should be anchored to some existing apprenticeship training institutions/organizations in these areas. This will enable participants to learn as they work and also lower the cost of practicals borne by the institution.

INTRODUCTION

Like many developing countries, Nigeria pledged allegiance to the agreement of over 160 countries at Jomtien conference on education for all in the year 1990. In 2000, the country was also represented at Dakar where a framework of action for operationalising the ambitious targets of the Education for All (EFA) scheme were drawn up. Nigeria also found it imperative to adopt the Millennium Development Goals which seeks among other things to half the population of those living below the poverty line as well as eliminate gender disparity and expand mass access to EFA. However, the social realities of contemporary times have indicated that Nigerian educational institutions are still very hard pressed to meet the objectives of education for all. Likewise, the country is still grappling with the basic problems of human survival in the face of numerous seemingly intractable social problems. Developing countries whose formal education systems have failed to respond to the rising demand for education in the 21st century have established open and distance education institutions to enable them meet these demands, as well as, satisfy the needs of the diversity of students. This approach to learning can provide adults with a second chance at higher education, reach those disadvantaged by limited time, distance or physical disability, and update the knowledge base of workers at their places of employment.

While the economic arguments in favour of distance education seems to have been accepted, there remains questions about the internal and external efficiency of the system, in terms of meeting specific target population and/or vocational requirements. Distance learning, which enables a limited number of teachers to reach a very large number of students, seems to open

the way to apparently endless economies of scale and cost reduction (Caillods, 2002; Rumble 2002). However, the question is how effective are distance education programmes for satisfying the demands of vocational and technical education courses? What is the educational value of such programmes? Whilst it is acceptable that distance education and open learning has inherent potentials to expand opportunities in developing societies, there has not been much evidence as to the efficacy of the vocational and technical education through open and distance learning system in Nigeria.

Technical and vocational education/training is an important aspect of Nigeria's educational and developmental objectives. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (1977; revised 2004) stated that 'technical and vocational education is a comprehensive term referring to those aspects of the educational process involving , in addition to general education, the study o technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life.' The objectives of these training are to provide trained manpower in applied sciences, technology and business particularly at craft, advanced craft and technical levels; and also, to provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, commercial and economic development. However, overtime the traditional conventional educational approaches in Nigeria have failed to meet these objectives, due to problems such as curricular irrelevance, financial constraints and population explosion (Obanya, 2002; Jegede, 2000). Consequently, the open and distance learning system was introduced as an alternative system of education and training. In doing this, the National Open University of Nigeria, the first single-mode Open University in West Africa was resuscitated in 2002, after 18 years of being shut down, to address the huge deficiency in access to quality education facing the country. The National Open University of Nigeria currently has 34 study centres (January 2008), which are stratified into six geo-political zones. The zones, each of which comprises of four to six study centres, are southwest, southeast, northwest, northeast, north-central and south-south.

JUSTIFICATIONS FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DISTANCE LEARNING

The 21st century has been variously described as the 'knowledge era', as information technology exerts a profound influence on human interaction such that the world is converted into a global village. However, not all persons and societies can be citizens in this global village. As observed by Obanya (1999; 2002) 'Nigeria and other developing African countries have entered this century with vast proportions of knowledge deficits which makes it difficult to accelerate the development process. Meanwhile, Manjulika & Reddy (2002) also observed that nations that do not inherit skilled human resources and technological infrastructures are unable to develop knowledge industries and cannot participate in the global knowledge economy. Such nations stagger under the strain of widespread poverty, unemployment, increased social hardship as well as public unrest. In addition, the economy suffers continuous decline and basic human needs are increasingly unmet at both local and national levels. Thus, strategic planning and investments in education and training are specifically urgent measures for survival. It is already a trite notion that the traditional approach to educational provision can no longer meet the needs of this new milieu, therefore the need to expand the provision of vocational and technical education to equip people with practical skills and competencies has become an imperative. The ascendancy open and distance learning into the higher education provision market in Nigeria brings with it other critical issues such as lifelong learning, and functional literacy. Therefore, the capacity of ODL to reach large audiences for academic and theoretical disciplines can effectively be translated to vocational and technical skills courses. As rapid technological developments bring about significant changes in the socio-economic reality of contemporary society and by, it is important for people at all levels to develop an understanding of the importance of vocational and technical training and its contribution to the quality of life. A necessary precondition for this is mass access by a wide cross section of the population to a body of knowledge and skills which will enable people to gain an understanding and appreciation of a variety of new job skills that are necessary for individual and corporate survival in today's society. Dodds (1996) had indicated that the open and distance learning system seems to be the most effective means of empowering large proportions of African people, because of its ability to widen access to quality education at minimal costs.

The National Open University of Nigeria through its Centre for Continuing Education and Workplace Training which offers proficiency certificate and diploma level courses in vocational and technical courses is poised to meet this need. These short courses are directed at improving the skills, competencies and abilities of participants for enhanced workplace effectiveness and to enable them recognize and utilize investment opportunities around them for financial empowerment and personal development. The primary purpose of this study therefore is to investigate the opinions and expectations of students, facilitators, counsellors and some intending learners regarding the effectiveness of practical skills development using distance learning approaches in Nigeria.

DATA COLLECTION

All candidates registered for the proficiency certificate and diploma courses offered under the Centre for Continuing Education and Workplace Training, and their tutorial facilitators as well as guidance counsellors formed the population for this study. Also inclusive among the study population is the group of prospective students who have made enquiries about the nature, structure and dynamics of the practical skills acquisition courses offered at the centre. From this population, adequate and representative samples [focus groups] were drawn for the purpose of this study. The study adopted structured interviews and focus group discussions with the selected samples. Discussions focused on their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the skills acquisition training; instructional delivery; and learner-friendliness of the instructional materials, and the availability of, and effectiveness of contact sessions.

Each group of samples was considered independently, thus the procedure used for group selection varied. Using the current registration list, the students' group was randomly chosen from purposively selected centres under each zone. This group is made up of 60 registered students of the proficiency skills courses. The counsellors' group comprises randomly selected counsellors of the purposively selected study centres. This group was made up of 12 guidance counsellors. The facilitators' group, comprising of part-time instructional staff, was chosen through the assistance of the student counsellors, who are full-time staff of the university. The counsellors suggested names of 20 facilitators who were invited to participate in the discussions. The last group, prospective applicants group, comprises of individuals who have indicated their interests in joining the practical skills courses of the university. Participants under this group were chosen from among participants at the 'free computer appreciation training' organized for members of the general public as part of the university's community development programme. At the conclusion of this intensive training course, these individual expressed interest in registering for some of the proficiency skills courses offered by NOUN. 20 of them were randomly selected to participate in the discussions.

The respondents' biographical information indicated that the age range of the respondents was between 23 and 58 years. 53 per cent were males and 47 per cent were females as indicated by data provided in Table 1.

Table: Respondents Biographical details

S/N	Groups	Male	Female	Total
1	Students	32	28	60
2.	Instructional Facilitators	11	9	20
3.	Counsellors	7	13	20
4.	Prospective Students	14	6	20
	Total	64	56	120

Twelve focus group discussion sessions were conducted with each focus group meeting three times. The participants were all apprised of the purpose of the discussions before commencement, in order to elicit objective and valuable responses regarding their perception of skills development using the distance learning method in Nigeria. Each focus group discussion lasted for one and half hours and all the discussants participated actively in the discussions. Participants were required to state their opinions regarding the quality of the learning materials received; extent of interactivity of these study materials; value of learning achievement – that is, to what extent have the distance instruction aided skills acquisition in the focus areas of the

programme. In order to compare expectations with realities, the 'prospective students group' were asked to indicate their expectations from the programmes they are about to register for in terms of quality of materials, approach to practical activities, as well as interactivity of the materials. Responses from focus group discussions were analyzed by controlling all statements about a particular aspect, summarizing the main points of consensus existing among the focus group respondents and noting the differences of there were disagreements. A selection of illustrative comments are provided for analysis.

SAMPLE RESPONSES

Samples of the responses provided by each group of respondents are highlighted as follows:

Students' Group

Participants expressed positive comments regarding the provision of practical skills development programmes through open and distance learning system by NOUN. They are convinced that these programmes would reduce the opportunity cost of studying since workers do not have to abandon their places of primary work. They however expressed their disappointments regarding limited opportunities for practicals in some programmes and insufficiency of practical interaction in others. There was a demand for a mentoring scheme where participants under a programme may be indentured under practicing professionals for a richer practical experience. Some participants also highlighted insufficient time for practical activities as the downside of the skills development programmes.

I am a qualified medical practitioner, but I have always wanted to undertake some courses in financial management, just to be better informed about how to manage my finances. This programme has provided me with the facility to do this with minimum interference with my professional practice.

- Student of Diploma in Financial Management
(Medical Doctor) Male.

The course materials are so interesting - very easy to read and understand. I have been able to follow the stages involved in applying first aid to different categories of accident victims, just by reading. I know that with little practice. I will become perfect.

-Student of Certificate in Medical Office Practice
(Caterer) Female

I find the practical tools kit very useful for other odd jobs in the house. Though, I am still having problems doing the practical lessons indicated in the course materials. I feel, I need to be with someone who is more knowledgeable about phone repairs so that I can grasp the basic building blocks better.

-Student of Proficiency Certificate in Mobile Phone Repairs
(Civil Servant) Male

I got a job as a marketing executive in an insurance company, though I have no prior training in marketing. I enrolled for this course to equip myself with the practical skills necessary for my new job. But I think this course has become a little too theoretical for me. Maybe we could have more practical issues raised and less of reading.

-Student of Diploma in Marketing Management
(Insurance Executive) Female

In as much as I find studying this course very interesting, I wish we could have more elaborate practical sessions. Maybe the university should arrange for us to serve as apprentices under the practitioners in the field, so that we can acquire a deeper knowledge of cell phone repairs.

-Student of Proficiency Certificate in Mobile Phone Repairs
(Salesman) Male

We should have more practical sessions if we are to understand what we are learning, the time given for practical is too short. If the university cannot provide us with access to individual computers, then it should liaise with commercial cybercafés so that we can hold the practicals there.

Student of Diploma in Computer Literacy
(Housewife) Female

I have really enjoyed reading the study materials. They are so easy to follow and the examples used are quite stimulating, and inspiring. I wish I can undergo an internship programme so that I can be sure that I can apply all I have learnt.

-Student of Proficiency Certificate in Call Centre Skills
(Fashion Designer) Female

Instructional Facilitators' Group

Respondents lauded the distance learning system as a potent means for expanding access to quality vocational and technical training in Nigeria. Responses from this group reflect some of the views earlier expressed by the learners. They indicated that the facilitation process will be improved if there were more robust practical arrangements to accompany the course materials available for the programmes.

This system provides a unique opportunity for those who are willing to work hard. Working and schooling usually requires devotion on the part of the learners.

-Facilitator (Diploma in Business Communication) Female

While the course materials are quite instructive, I think that the university needs to make a more elaborate arrangement for practical activities. Maybe we may do practical demonstrations and record them on Video CDs for issuance to the learners along with the materials.

-Facilitator (Certificate in Financial Management) Male

I like teaching distance learners, they are more creative than the conventional students. But I think we should attach them with practicing professionals for their practical work instead of class discussions or practical sessions. This way, they stand to benefit more.

- Facilitator (Proficiency Certificate in Call Centre Skills) Male

Counsellors' Group

The respondents' comments about skills development are quite instructive to ODL administrators and policy makers:

Many students come to us and ask when are they going to have practicals on what they have learnt. But we cannot organize practicals for some of these programmes...such as Marketing, Financial Management...just the exercises and discussions they have during tutorial sessions.

- Female Counsellor

Some students actually expect the facilitator to go through the course materials as if it is a conventional teaching-learning situation. We advised them that they have to do most of the learning on their own. We also encouraged them to organize peer group discussions for themselves.

- Female Counsellor

The major challenge confronting our students for skills development courses is that they are never satisfied with the practical sessions provided, especially for cell phone repairs, computer literacy and medical office practice. Maybe the university should ask them to go and register with computer centres outside or hospitals outside, then their facilitators can check on them regularly to assess their progress.

- Male

Prospective Students' Group

Responses from this group mirrors some of the comments made by the registered students. The expectations of incoming learners is that they would have elaborate practical sessions; access to multimedia devices as well as periods of internship with professionals outside the university.

I think that the programme will assist me to learn all I need to know about the repairs and maintenance of mobile phones so that I can set up my own business afterwards.

- Male (interested in Mobile Phone Repairs)

I want to strengthen my oral and written communication skills so that I can be more effective in my new job.

- Female (Interested in Business Communication)

I heard that we will receive some tool kits along with our materials, I expect that they will also put us in a laboratory to practice so that we can really understand the course.

- Male (interested in Medical Office Practice)

I am really curious about how they course in call centre skills will be taught. I visit banks and telecommunication companies and I am impressed by the efficiency of the staff there, that's why I wish to undertake this course.

-Female (interested in Call Centre Skills)

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study revealed that learners are favourably disposed to practical skills development through open and distance education. Respondents' comments provided in the foregoing section indicate that other actors in the skills acquisition education and training programmes using distance learning system are also enthused about its practicality and inherent potential. Though, there were concerns about the quality and volume of practical exposures that are provided. Hampton (2002) stated that practical skills education require very precise instructions to enable the learners to follow the process and to repeat the skills. Frequently, in practice this involves using both visual clues and text or audio components. It demands special skills and knowledge from the instructional facilitator, especially if there are no visual aids. For distance learners print-based illustrations of step-by-step procedures are also useful as aids to learning, but they cannot by any means replace practical activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study proffers that one of the most effective means of improving the quality of vocational education and training through distance education is to factor into the training system, a scheme whereby the learners are indentured to professionals in the field so that they have quality interaction with real life situations for different fields. This is because the university can never provide all the practical experiences that learners need to acquire in a skills acquisition course. This would also save the institution considerable amount of money that would be expended in setting up practical laboratories, workshop etc. For some of the learners who are involved in fields which do not actually have much of practical activities per se, it would be instructive to put more emphasis on functional application of knowledge garnered rather than rote memorization and recall. It is also suggested that distance education institutions should place emphasis on portfolio and problem-based learning, using simulations and case studies drawn from real life situations to give their learners the widest learning experience in skills acquisition for courses like financial management, marketing, entrepreneurial management, business communication etc. In the final analysis, it is submitted that based on findings from this study, skills development through distance learning system is practicable, effective and useful. Additionally, findings indicated that whilst print materials are issued for instructional delivery, the preference of the learners was for

intensive face-to-face practical sessions to complement the course materials. It is also recommended that the use of existing apprenticeship training institution/organizations as venues for practical components of skills acquisition courses is central to the effective provision of practical skills training for distance learners. This will enable participants to learn as they interact with others on-the-job and reduce the burden of infrastructural development for support service on the University.

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