

NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA (NOUN): A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Distance education has become an important policy option for educational planners in developing countries. In the context of Nigeria, increasing population, growing national demand for education, dwindling financial resources, increasing fiscal constraints, and therefore narrowing of access to education led to the emergence Open University in Nigeria to salvage the promise of education only to be choked prematurely to death. It's subsequent re-emergence points to its imperative in salvaging the demand for placement in the universities in Nigeria.

The review attests to this promise, despite the ups and downs and argues that the revitalisation of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) by the government has the potential to widen access and become a rallying point for higher education in Nigeria. NOUN will however face two major challenges as it seeks to transform the educational landscape: the first is that it needs to demonstrate that it can provide programmes of high quality to its students; second, it needs to be able to demonstrate that it can offer programmes cost-effectively. These challenges demand a refocus and a re-conceptualizations of the superstructure, distance education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Revitalisation; distance education; open learning; NOUN; policy.

INTRODUCTION

The year 1983 marks a turning point in the history of open distance education (ODE) in Nigeria. From this date onwards, the educational history of Nigeria towards her strives to achieve Education For All (EFA) Nigerians received a surge. At the two world milestones of Basic Education, Jomtien and Dakar, world leaders reiterated on the deplorable and slow progress towards the achievement of the goals of EFA. In 2000, there were still on the best estimates 113 million out of school children (Parraton 2001:2). The situation in Nigeria also looks bleak.

Various statistics indicate that majority of Nigerians are yet to be reached (the class of the poor, illiterate, women, marginalised and those living in remote areas) through one form of education or the other. When we therefore consider her population of 120 million (Common Country Assessment, 2001), her poverty rate of 67.8% and her 70% rural population (Jegede 2003), what we visualise and the conclusion drawn is the tremendous need to meet the demands for education at all cost.

The date in the introductory paragraph above bear historical significance: The Open University Act, which subsist in the law of the Federation of Nigeria (1980) Volume XVII consequently came into effect on July 22, 1983. Other events prior to this Act both singularly and jointly became a watershed for the establishment of Open University.

The 1977 National Policy on Education (NPE) for instance was unambiguous in its emphasis that 'maximum efforts will be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities, or correspondence courses, or open universities, or part-time and work study programmes' (NPE, 1977:25). The policy equally states that "the Federal Government shall undertake to make life-long education the basis for the nation's educational policy' (Ibid,; 8). In order to achieve this objective, the Government adopted a philosophy of education for Nigeria meant to ensure 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 study, or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later on' (Ibid,; 9). The report equally in recognising the importance of self-learning underlined the fact that, 'the education system will be structured to develop the practice of self-learning' (Ibid,; 8).

Since the early 1970's therefore, distance education has been an increasingly important policy option for educational planners in developing countries, and many of these countries have come to accept that this mode of educational provision can play a part in national development. The success of Open University in Britain from its inception in 1971 provided a model for distance education at university level and was emulated in the establishment of institutions such as the Sukkothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand in 1978 and the Indira Ghandi National Open University in India in 1985 (Dodds and Frank, 1994). So many countries were to borrow a leaf in establishing distance education institutions to provide programmes at various levels, such as teacher training, secondary schooling, and adult basic education.

What follows will describe and evaluate the main events occurring in distance education with emphasis on the Open University in Nigeria with the purpose of providing a more comprehensive picture of the intricate distance education pattern that have evolved as a response to the yearning of Nigerians for higher education. The paper aims at revealing the demands and the challenges for the revitalising of Open University in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Apart from the standard and methodological challenges and difficulties with which the historian of education is usually faced (Wiersma, 1986; Jaeger, 1988:59 et seq.), an undertaking such as the present poses the problem of describing historical developments and government efforts at revitalising and rooting Open University in Nigeria. To avoid a mere chronicling of social, political and educational events, this work attempts to show how the events meshed in causal patterns, have formed the bedrock for the revitalising of Open University in Nigeria and challenges that must be overcome if the scheme is to achieve its noble goals and objectives.

UNDERSTANDING DISTANCE EDUCATION AND OPEN LEARNING

In a country of continental dimensions such as Nigeria, distance education has emerged as a mediated form of instruction, and has all the attributes to become a major ally in overcoming the serious challenges faced by Nigerian society. Among these challenges, complete insertion into the knowledge economy –in which schooling and prior professional experience matter more than ever– is the most urgent. To do so, it is necessary to define and implement programs able to address the needs of a society seeking more and improved educational opportunities. What then is distance education and open learning?

According to [Dhanarajan](#) (2001), "distance education is the means by which the teacher is taken *literally* to the student. It is a teaching and a learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communications technologies." Perraton (2001) sees distance education as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by 'someone' removed in space and time from the learner. The link between that 'someone' and the learner is therefore necessarily provided by different means of communication and instruction".

A fundamental characteristic of distance education is that it is learner-centred. A learner-centred educational process means departing from a conventional teaching and learning culture to one which employs a wide range of tools to effect learning outcomes. These tools recognise and are designed for self-learning. They include printed course units and readers, tutor- and computer-marked assignment and feedback systems, radio and television broadcasts, audio and video tapes, home kits and individualised counseling and help through telephone, facsimiles or electronic mail. Distance education is therefore a combination of distance teaching plus distance learning.

The five out of the six basic elements enunciated by Keegan (1993) which are applicable include: the separation of teacher from learner; the influence of an education authority; the use of communication technologies to unite teacher and content and provide opportunity for two way communication. Open learning on the other hand refers to 'policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning' (Glen, 2005). Because of its flexibility and access to instruction, the distance educational mode ensures that broad availability of educational opportunities reach as many segments of the population as possible.

This mode of learning, it has been argued elsewhere (Jain, 2001:63; Jegede, 2003:13), can accommodate diverse learning styles, and provide access to remote and normally inaccessible under-represented groups and people in different circumstances.

They have further argued that this type of learning has proved to be efficient world over, Africa inclusive. Learning without frontiers, which aims at lowering barriers for education and learning, is therefore seen as necessary prelude for the realisation of EFA by the year 2015.

Distance education can be delivered through several modalities including, but not limited to videocassettes, audiocassettes, on line or traditional face to face tutoring. Whatever the mode of delivery, the objective is to increase access to education to those who have difficulty in accessing it within the mainstream.

It is therefore a valuable tool that typically meets the needs of people who can not be removed from their houses or job places for a long time. It reaches people in communities in which they would otherwise be deprived of opportunities to learn. It equally makes a significant contribution by increasing people access to the education system and lastly, it gives room for people to start applying what they have learned almost immediately as their training laboratory (Jegede, 2003). It is currently being promoted by international organizations as an appropriate policy option for developing countries. For all these reasons, the use of new remote education technologies should be consolidated and expanded in Nigeria, favouring equity and providing democratic access to more advanced learning tools.

OVERVIEW OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria like most other populous countries is not a newcomer to distance education. It is on record that, during the British quest to colonise what is now referred to as Nigeria, some Northern Emirs who vehemently opposed colonial rule and domination of their territories by the British were banished to Lokoja as punishment by the colonialist. But what the colonialist failed to grasp was that the Emirs used distance education method to keep in constant touch with their subjects and were continually a step ahead of the colonialists who never ceased to be amazed at how informed and intelligent the people they sought to colonise were. Among the deposed Emirs who perfected the mode of traditional distance learning were the late Emirs of Bida, Mallam Mohammed Bashir, deposed in 1901, Emir of Zaria, Mallam Aliyu Danside, and Emir of Kano, Mallam Aliyu Abdullahi deposed in 1903. The graves of these forerunners are tourist centres in Lokoja to this day (The Comet, 2002:17). That the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2002 would single out Lokoja for the opening ceremony of the National Open University was indeed symbolic. The events that precede the National Open Distance Learning Programmes (NODLP) can be viewed from two major perspectives, viz: The national and the international dimension. The national dimension is seen sequentially from the anti-colonial struggle, the self-government especially the introduction of free and compulsory education in the Western Region by the government of Obafemi Awolowo and the post-independence era. The 1975-76 UPE programme, and the 1979-83 Free Education programmes do also have an impact on the conception of NODLP.

The international dimension has antecedents from the following international events. These inter alia, include: The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UNO, 10 Dec.1948) where the international covenant in arts 7-9, 11 and 13 mentioned that through the right to education, human beings are oriented to 'the full development of the human personality and a sense of dignity'. Others include the Declaration of the Right of the Child (UNO, 20 Nov 1959), World Education Crises Conference (1968), African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (the Banjul Manifesto of the OAU, 21 Oct 1986) the Jomtien Conference on Education for All (EFA 1990), followed by the EFA summit of the nine high population countries held in December 1993. In the context of integrated approaches to basic education for all people, literacy and adult education programmes were to be improved and extended, eliminating disparities of access and improving the quality and relevance of basic education.

Other international organizations and agencies like United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO), Commonwealth of Learning (COL), British Council, Literacy Assistance Programme (LEAP), have equally assisted Nigeria in the quest to firmly root distance education. These international agencies have been of immense help in the training of distance education institutions and staff. COL has been very instrumental in the sustenance of the National Teachers Institute (NTI). It has equally encouraged the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the delivery of distance learning. COL has a Chair in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) where it continues to fund and support research in distance education through the Regional Training Institute of Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL) and equally sponsors training workshops in distance education. COL has recently awarded 50 scholarships for Masters in Distance Education to staff of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and other distance education institutions and practitioners. Similarly, as noted by Aderinoye and Kester (2003), UNESCO apart from providing technical advice for the establishment of the NTI in 1976 organised a workshop on "course writing" for distance education course developers in Abuja in June 2001, in which more than 3000 course developers from West Africa sub-region participated.

For distance education as is known today in Nigeria, it has been argued by Jegede (2003a:15) that, its birth is traceable to the quest for Nigerians struggle to obtain qualification through higher education for social and occupational mobility.

A comprehensive history of distance education in Nigeria thus dates back to the correspondence education as a means of preparing candidates for the General Certificate in Education, a prerequisite for the London Matriculation Examination. This practice was described by Bell and Tight (1999), and echoed by Tait (2003), who said, "... the University of London has been termed the first "Open University", because of this move, students all round the world, but principally within the British Empire and its dominions, were soon looking for tutorial support to supplement the bare syllabuses where they received on registration wherever they lived".

Aderinoye and Ojekheta (2003) have argued that Nigerians were also quick at utilising this opportunity. Similarly, Omolewa as cited in Aderinoye and Ojekheta (2003) also reported that Nigerians as far back as 1887, enrolled for the first time in the University of London Matriculation Examinations as external students studying through correspondence, and without enjoying any formal ties with the educational institution.

Omolewa (1982) has similarly mentioned that in 1925 several Nigerians, among them Eyo-Ita and H.O. Davies, passed the London Matriculation Examination. Later, E.O. Ajayi and Alvan Ikoku both obtained University of London degrees in philosophy in 1927 and 1929 respectively, and J. S. Ogunlesi obtained a degree in philosophy in 1933. Thus, access to educational opportunities at a distance contributed immensely to these individuals productivity, which found resonance in the innovations they subsequently demonstrated in their teaching methodology at the St Andrew's Teachers College, Oyo. In spite of the establishment of the University College Ibadan in 1948, many of the pioneer academic staff of the University pursued their higher degrees through this mode, thus combining work with higher degree programmes.

The competition for admission into the University College established in 1948 at Ibadan (the only university in pre-independent Nigeria) forced many to seek for admission as students of correspondence colleges in Universities and Institutions in the United Kingdom. This extra mural work of Oxford University, extended to Nigeria in 1947 was taken over by the Department of Extra mural studies of the University College of Ibadan to provide such courses like Political science, English, Economics, Logic, Child psychology etc. Jegede (2003a:15) has also cited the Rapid Results College through which many Nigerians registered and studied for their higher education as the first organised distance-learning programme in Africa. In Nigeria however, the first indigenous distance-learning programme was probably the English by Radio programme of the Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation that followed independence in 1960. Technology driven distance learning came into vogue at this moment facilitating Educational Television programmes of the then National Television of Nigeria (NTV). There was also Schools Educational Broadcast of the Radio Nigeria which required all Radio stations to hook on at specific times of the day during school hours for broadcast of programmes. Government policy inconsistency tolled the death knell to this effort in the early 1970's.

It must equally be noted that each of the other first generation Universities has its own experience in the extra-mural studies. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, went as far as wanting to implement by November 1981 a programme of correspondence education for non-residence-based students. That firm resolve to provide distance-oriented education according to Ojo (1984) through correspondence, radio, television and vacation course instruction was put aside as the Open University was then in the horizon.

The University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) Evening Law Programme which was kicked-started was not operated properly in the form of distance education as it failed to employ any distance teaching technique. It was, however, part-time open education programme in the sense that it was geared to working adults who did not reside on campus but who came in only in the evening hours for their lectures. Similarly, other educational activities of the University especially in the Faculties of Education, Agriculture and Administration which are open to part-time and distance-based students are variants of outreach programmes.

Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) has also operated a variant of distance education. The University pioneered the distance teaching of Grade III and Grade II teachers with a view to helping them qualify for the next higher grade. The academic structure, through which this type of training is being done, mainly by correspondence, is known as Teachers-In-Service Education Programme (TISEP). TISEP was therefore established in 1976 to prepare middle level teachers for Nigeria's primary schools.

The University of Lagos has a well defined programme which is fairly close to what may be described as an ideal distance education unit. Its correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) was established in 1972 in the belief that a correspondence unit would give the University a chance to offer its course and facilities to a much wider public than is possible through regular residence-based methods. However, despite the University's determination to offer programmes, both on-campus and off-campus, to the general public, and its attempts to diversify its mode of tertiary education, it has been, much like other Nigerian Universities, mainly residence-based, and only a tiny proportion of its students benefit from the evening courses administered by the University. The University of Lagos COSU, recently upgraded into an institute and renamed Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (COSIT).

The establishment of the National Institute of Teachers (NTI) is also considered to mark a new beginning and development of what we consider as a single-mode experiment with distance education in Nigeria.

This was the conscious efforts by the government to use the distance education mode to improve the quality of primary school teachers in Nigeria. The NTI, regarded as the first independent institution dedicated solely to distance education, was officially established in 1978 to upgrade unqualified teachers working in the nation's primary schools and accelerate the preparation of qualified teachers needed for the implementation of the UPE programme introduced in 1976 and the UBE programme introduced in 1999. But this mode of education initially faced a lot of bottlenecks that nearly crippled the institute, some of which were the undeveloped structure of the print technology, the inefficient postal system and the unfamiliarity with the concept of study centres world over (Jegede 2002:13). It has been argued that the NTI has justified its *raison detre*. Over a period of eight years for instance, the institute contributed immensely in the growth of primary education teacher graduates from 45,150 to over 300,000. In two short years alone, between 1990 and 1992, the NTI graduated 21,000 Certificate in Education holders. This figure compares with the combined total of 58,000 teachers graduated by the nation's 58 conventional colleges of education (Aderinoye and Kester, 2003). To offer similar programmes, the University of Abuja established its Centre for distance Learning and Continuing Education in 1992.

What the above efforts show is that, the thrust of providing both qualitative and quantitative access to education did not only continue after the 1948 Universal Declaration, it in fact increased by leaps and bounds and grew new wings. A number of committees were set up to determine the crises of Education in Nigeria and to proffer tangible and concrete solutions.

On the eve of independence, the Ashby Commission was set up in 1959; and its recommendations to writ were to have a serious repercussion on the nature and character of post independent Nigeria. Despite its detailed and incisive submissions, it still failed to realistically appreciate the quest for higher education in Nigeria; neither did it recognise the potency of independence in catalysing social demands (Jegade, 2003). Public policy on education therefore appeared to be tragically misguided.

While for instance the Ashby commission recommended four universities for Nigeria and projected a total population of 7,500 by 1970 and 10,000 students by 1980, by the middle of the 1970's however, the total number of Federal Universities had risen to 13. Ibadan, Zaria, Lagos, Nsukka, Ife and Benin being first generation while Jos, Kano, Calabar, Ilorin, Maiduguri, Sokoto and Port Harcourt were the second generation universities.

By 1999, five of the six-generation universities had each been admitting about 16,000 to 30,000 students. As of 1999, the Federal Universities had a total of 400,000 students. Recent statistics shows about 57 universities, which cannot admit up to 15% of the qualified JAMB applicants of over 1.5 million. Even so, the institutions are stretched in facilities and personnel (Osuji, 2004:7). The need for an open university therefore becomes imperative, dictated by the basic socio economic considerations. We shall return to this aspect in a moment.

Jegade (2003:16), though arguing that there was nothing in terms of public policy to give credence to distance education, nevertheless agreed that the government was still aware of necessities of this mode of learning when it implicitly alludes in its NPE that 'the Federal Government shall undertake to make life-long education the basis for the nation's educational policy' (Ibid, :8). In achieving this feat, its philosophy was to ensure 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 study or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later on' (Ibid, :9).

Also to shift from the mainstream campus-based education to self learning mode, the NPE emphatically stressed that 'the education system will be structured to develop the practice of self-learning (Ibid,:8). The First Republic government of Shehu Shagari thus introduced the Open University of Nigeria in 1983 as a new feature of tertiary education to facilitate and enhance access to higher education for the teeming Nigerian people. This innovative ideal died in its embryonic stage when the military government of General Buhari on April 25, 1984 suspended the project indefinitely.

The history of the Open University from this moment continued in doldrums. The committee, commissioned by the government of General Ibrahim Babangida and led by Professor Olu Akinkugbe to examine the desirability of reopening the suspended university submitted its recommendations, which were thrown into the dustbin. The same military government inaugurated another committee to assess the distance-learning scheme and make recommendations on the way forward. This committee had Professor Ezeilo as the chairman and like the one before them recommended the lifting of the ban on the Open University and reinvigorating the project to achieve the desired objective of the suspended university. But the report was not implemented before the collapse of the Third Republic.

The history of Open University in Nigeria shows that it has blossomed more under democracy than during the military era. The subsequent military governments from Abacha to Abdusalami made no concerted effort at revamping the Open University.

The implication is that, about 15 stormy years were wasted in Nigeria's quest for Open University; this makes her to lag behind other African countries like South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Kenya and the need to close this gap. Genuine and legitimate grievances about the standard of education in Nigeria put additional pressure on the newly elected government of Obasanjo to take another closer look at education in the country. The complaints and grievances were supported by a high rate of population growth and an alarming population-doubling rate. At the rate of population growth, the population of Nigeria is likely to double by the middle of the 21st century, as the third most populous country (Panorama, Ansett Australia's Magazine, January 2000).

The immediate challenge therefore is providing access to higher institutions of learning and meeting the demand for social career and employment needs amongst Nigerians. Although the country now boast of over 160 tertiary-level institutions made up of universities, polytechnics, monotecnics and colleges of education with an aggregate student population of over 800,000 (full-time and part-time), the provisions for places of higher education has not been able to cope with the demand and supply as exemplified by the fact that the conventional universities are only able to cope with about 15% of more than 1.5 million qualified applicants for JAMB (THISDAY, January, 27,2004:6).

The search for an educational framework in Nigeria that can take care of the three vectors of access, quality and cost led to the organisation of the national workshop on distance education organised by the Federal Ministry of Education and the Office of the Special Adviser on Education to the President in September, 2005. The workshop reiterated that open and distance delivery is critical to educational development in Nigeria and called for the revitalisation of distance education to serve as a catalyst for the turn-around of education in Nigeria.

A follow up of the workshop has led to a number of indelible developments in the educational history of Nigeria. These include:

- Enactment of a National Policy on Open and Distance Education;
- Training of teachers to support Universal Basic Education;
- Establishing a National Virtual Library; and
- Re-Establishing the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

The demand for higher education in Nigeria therefore predicated the revitalisation of the National Open University in Nigeria which has the mandate to:

- ensure equity and equality of opportunities in education but specifically in University education.
- provide a wider access to education generally but specifically university education in Nigeria.
- enhance EFA and lifelong learning.
- ensure the entrenchment of a global culture.
- provide educational resources via an intensive use of ICT.
- provide flexible and qualitative education and;
- reduce the cost, inconvenience and hassles of education delivery (NOUN 2004:12).

In sum, the objectives of the National Open University of Nigeria shows that it has the strength of allowing education to break out of the iron triangle that has constrained its impact for time immemorial, viz: the vectors of access, quality and cost (Educomm Asia, 2004:2).

POLICY ISSUES AND EMERGING CHALLENGES IN REVITALISING NOUN

From a policy perspective, there are a number of issues to be taken into consideration when national educational policy-makers consider adopting the distance education framework. These factors among others include:

- the rationale for the development of distance education and its priority in relation to other options;
- the perceived needs for distance education and the appropriate levels of provision, namely, secondary, tertiary, and adult basic education;
- the direct costs and opportunity costs of investing in distance education provision and the potential cost-benefits;
- the appropriate institutional arrangements and the capacity for developing and maintaining an effective distance education system in terms of recurrent resources, management capability, trained staff, materials production, student support, and communications infrastructure;
- the status of distance education and the acceptability of its qualifications within the national system of education, and;
- the possibilities for international cooperation in developing and sustaining a distance education system.

These issues have also guided the Federal Government's choice of reopening NOUN. Though this work has not addressed policy options in terms of perceived needs and level of provision, dwindling resources, organizational structure, status and quality, and international cooperation, it suffices to note that distance education has emerged as an important option for policy-makers in developing countries. Much more evidence is now available than when the debate took place in the pages of the *Journal of Distance Education* in 1987/8 over the "promise and reality" of distance education in the third World (Arger, 1987; Jenkins, 1999). The Nigerian context provides extraordinary opportunities for the sustenance of an Open University. The commitment of the need for life long learning, as well as huge requirement for redress for millions of adults structurally prevented from reaching their potential, creates an environment in which distance education should thrive. A historian of education would however be worried because laudable and innovative programmes such as the Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Universal Primary Education (UPE), and the like were never allowed to see the daylight in Nigeria.

For instance, the UPE was hamstrung with inadequate baseline data, problem of funding and management and, consequently, the lack of sustained political will. We see innovation here as a creation of new ideas, skills, knowledge, products, etc. in a process of solving a problem or achieving an objective. Hence, whether conceived from the technological, political, economic, social or administrative dimensions, innovation involves change, which is in turn a product of new ideas, skills and knowledge (Obasi and Oguche, 1995). We also know that the support of the organizational structure and the social will from the people is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of innovative ideas. We have to contend to the fact that people are always resistant to change, especially if they feel threatened. The concept of Open University presents such a threat to people who feel that what they have not been able to achieve in fifty years would be achieved in less than ten years.

Secondly, the whole idea of the conception of the state, as an instrument for the promotion of welfare has come to strongly influence the character of the postcolonial state in Nigeria. The provision of Open University opportunities rest squarely on the government. Though the government has to be assisted by other stakeholders, we are reminded that Nigeria and other poor countries are in the process of nation building. There are basic infrastructures and institutional facilities, which must be put in place to facilitate the process of state building.

This therefore means that there are moral as well as political arguments for the sustenance of the Open University scheme. It is in line with this fact that the world conference on education for all in 1990 affirmed the national and international obligation to provide education for all. Stark realities had informed this development, not least of which is the continued increase in illiteracy, poverty and the disempowerment of majority of the world populace.

Third, there is a warning from the South Pacific that we must take seriously. The warning is one of culture as well as regulation (Harry and Perraton 1999:5). Materials and courses offered through the new technologies are culture-laden. While new networks of information may widen access to education, they can also threaten the indigenous institutions of higher education, which have grown in strength, stature, and service to their host communities over the last quarter-century. It would be ironical of technology that could provide educational resources not otherwise available to them, were at the same time to weaken the independence and local relevance of the remoter institutions of the south, and the cultures that sustain them.

Fourth, there is the need to enlighten the masses and to place distance education in its proper place. There is the question of quality and acceptability of this form of learning. The view of distance education from a traditional university perspective offers an indelible contrast. To a certain extent, distance education, in particular in its institutionalised form, is not all or is only marginally registered by the academic community. Distance education is still ignored by conventional university system in Nigeria. Therefore, more efforts need to be geared by academicians and policy makers in addressing this snob effect.

Lastly, there is the worrisome situation about the cost implication of the Open University system. Remember that an unaffordable cost of the scheme can obfuscate its noble objectives. No matter how cosmetically this mode of learning is conceived, if it must ensure the massification of education in Nigeria, it has to be affordable, not only for a privileged few but to even the 'wretched of the earth'. In open universities like India, Iran and Pakistan, such privileges are extended to students with disabilities and certain disadvantaged groups. The cost per full-time equivalent student at these universities lies in a range between 10 and 60 percent of the average cost per full-time equivalent student at the conventional universities in their own countries (Daniel, 1999:294); Nigeria may well have to borrow a leaf.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the history and development of the Open University system in Nigeria. It has drawn attention to the lack of concerted and coordinated efforts and firm policy framework on the part of the government in the past years. But it has also reminded us of the possible benefits and future outcomes with the revitalisation of the scheme. It must be noted that, though collaborative efforts between the government, international agencies and institutions and the private sector is crucial, the primary responsibility remains that of the government. NOUN will however be faced with two major challenges as it seeks to transform the educational landscape:

- the first is that it needs to demonstrate that it can provide programmes of high quality to its students; and second,
- it needs to be able to demonstrate that it can offer programmes cost-effectively.

Needless to conclude that, good leadership in the academic institution can mar or give credence to the revitalisation of NOUN. Here, we are reminded of the Nigerian factor, especially since this scheme is capital intensive. Committed efforts should be made to lay bare and meet the demands for education by Nigerians.

This mode of education should be used as a basic foundation for national development, poverty eradication, provision of much needed human and other resources for national development, boosting rural economy, eliminating illiteracy and boosting technological and computer illiteracy.

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