

Student Assessment of Quality of Access at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

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Abstract

This paper presents a study conducted by Inegbedion, Adu and Ofulue from the National Open University of Nigeria. The study focused on the quality of access (admission and registration) at NOUN from a student perspective. A survey design was used for the study while a multi-stage sampling technique was used to select the sample size. All the 78,555 registered students in all the 61 Study Centres of the University at the time of the study formed the population; out of which 3,060 students were sampled. The questionnaire instrument is the Institutional Internal QA Tools and Instrument developed by the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) as a regulatory mechanism. The data collected were analyzed using simple statistics. The result showed that 66% of the students confirmed that NOUN has published clear policies on the admission and registration of students. About 29.1% of the students were not satisfied with the transparency of the admission process. In conclusion, the study revealed high quality of access and some deficiencies in website and Internet connectivity.

Keywords: Access; Quality; Student assessment; Higher Education; distance education

Introduction

Higher education in Nigeria dates back to the 19th century, with the introduction of liberal education by the early Christian missionaries. The hunger and taste for higher education in the country led to the establishment of Yaba Higher College in 1932 to provide middle level manpower in medical, engineering and other vocations including secondary school teachers. At that time, secondary schools were referred to as *higher middle schools*. After some time, Yaba Higher College offered sub-degrees in programmes such as teacher training, medicine, engineering and agriculture, but there was restriction.

In 1945 the Elliot Commission recommended the establishment of University College in Nigeria. In 1948 the University College of Ibadan was established to serve as a college under the University of London. In 1959 the Ashby Commission was established to ascertain Nigerian's post-independent educational needs. The recommendation of Ashby Commission led to the establishment of University of Nigeria Nsukka in 1960 as the first indigenous university in Nigeria. Ashby Commission further recommended balance in the structure and geographical distribution of university education. In compliance to the recommendation, University of Lagos and Ife were established in 1962; in the same year University College of Ibadan attained an autonomous status as a degree awarding institution. With the continuous increase in demand for university education, more federal, state and private universities were established.

At 2008 there were twenty-seven federal universities, thirty-six state universities and forty-one private universities (NUC, 2008). In spite of the growing number of universities, the demand for university education kept increasing. On this premise some of the existing conventional universities engaged in part-time and satellite/outreach programmes across the country as a way of bridging the educational demand and supply gap. Most of the programmes in these universities were basically

profit-oriented which seemed to have caused more educational problems in the area of quality. Therefore, the country was not only faced with the problem of supply of higher education, but also had to battle with the issue of quality in university education. In an attempt to ensure quality of university education in Nigeria, satellite campuses were banned in 2001. Thus, to ensure increase in quality access to university education, the National Policy on Education was revised. One of the objectives for the revision was to lift the suspension order on open and distance learning programmes by the federal government (FRN, 2004). Section 9, sub-section 92 of this document stipulated the goals of Distance Education in Nigeria and included the provision of “access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied” (FRN, 2004, pp. 4–5). This gave recognition to the need to increase access to university education through National Open University of Nigeria which was first established during the second republic of the government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as National Open University (NOU) on 22nd July 1983 backed by an Act of the National Assembly; but it was suspended in 1984 by the military government that took over the civilian regime.

In 2002, the NOU Act of 1983 was resuscitated and the name changed from National Open University (NOU) to National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), as it is today. From the time of its re-birth, the issue of quality has been of great concern to stakeholders. One major criticism of distance education has been the quality of its products in terms of numbers and compromise (Badu-Nyarko, 2013). Therefore, questions such as: would the products from NOUN attain same quality as the products from the conventional systems? Will the increase in enrolment not reduce the desired quality? Can quality of access to university education be ascertained through NOUN? These questions have been of great concern to all. This study therefore assessed the internal quality assurance mechanisms in admission and registration in NOUN. To guide the study three research questions were raised: What is the perception of students on the criteria standards set on admission? What is the perception of students on the criteria standards set on registration? What percentage level of access do students have to documents guiding their admission and registration into the university? The findings of this study will be found useful to distance education planners and policy makers in getting the right data and documents in access that would help enhance the quality of open and distance learning and specifically to NOUN management to know the areas of improvement on the existing data and documents.

Conceptual Framework

A constitutional approach model was adopted in deriving the framework. This model deals with the constitutional rights to education. In the world over, education is recognized as a fundamental right. “Constitutional protections of education range from general aspirations toward universalizing primary school to unequivocal guarantees of free and equal access to education at all levels” (Heymann, Raub & Cassola, 2014). Policies give guiding principles and procedures on how specific actions should be taken towards the achievement of set objectives. The issue of provision of higher education for all is promoted at the international level by policies such as the World Declaration of Education for All. For instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26.1 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which advocates for all people with disabilities to have equitable access to higher education. Every country’s education system, irrespective of type and level, is driven by a constitution where policy emanates from. Howell & Lazarus (2003) and Ryan (2011) added that it is not enough to set policy on access to higher education, but there should be criteria to determine the level of access integration such as race, gender, culture, and educational status.

The key focus is that every country's constitution must have policy guiding access to different types and levels of schooling in the country. Nigeria's constitutional policies on education could be traced to Elliot and Ashby commissions. Elliot Commission was set up on 13th June 1943 by the Secretary of State for the Colonies with the mandate to report and make recommendations on the organization and facilities of the existing centres of higher education in British West Africa. The Commission commenced work in September 1943 and submitted its report in June 1945. Part of the Commission's recommendations was to establish a university college in Nigeria as a way of increasing access. This recommendation led to the establishment and commencement of academic programmes in University College, Ibadan in 1948. In 1959 the federal government of Nigeria set up the Ashby Commission to "conduct an investigation into Nigeria's needs in the field of Post-Secondary School Certificate and Higher Education over the next twenty years (1960–80)". The Ashby Commission findings revealed a low access into sixth-form and university admissions. Each of these commissions' recommendations led to the formulations of policies, which gave way to higher education in Nigeria. To further strengthen the educational sector, the National Policy on Education was introduced, which was reviewed from time to time to meet the need of the child and the society. One of the outcomes of the reviews and developments led to resuscitation of National Open University of Nigeria as documented in the 2004 National Policy on Education.

The second part deals with the criteria set that will give access to the different levels of schooling. The criteria set determines the level of openness, especially in the case of open and distance learning. In this instance, the procedure for admission and registration comes into play. The process of admission and registration brings the dichotomy between the closed and open system of schooling. So in this study, the focus is on the criteria provided for open and distance learning which act as determinant for open access into higher education.

Thirdly, what are the maintenance mechanisms for the policies and procedures? This hinges on the strategies that would help sustain and improve the policies and procedures. This aspect is vital in the process. A continuous evaluation of the procedures helps in providing relevant access. Relevance here implies removal of barriers that would have deterred a citizen who demands and is willing to receive higher education. Barriers should not be restricted to only the assumed barriers such as age, religion, sex and race. The recipient is in the best position to actually define or relate what is a barrier to him or her. Therefore the involvement of the recipient at the maintenance mechanism is crucial. This discussion leads to the concept of access model for higher education as presented in Figure 1.

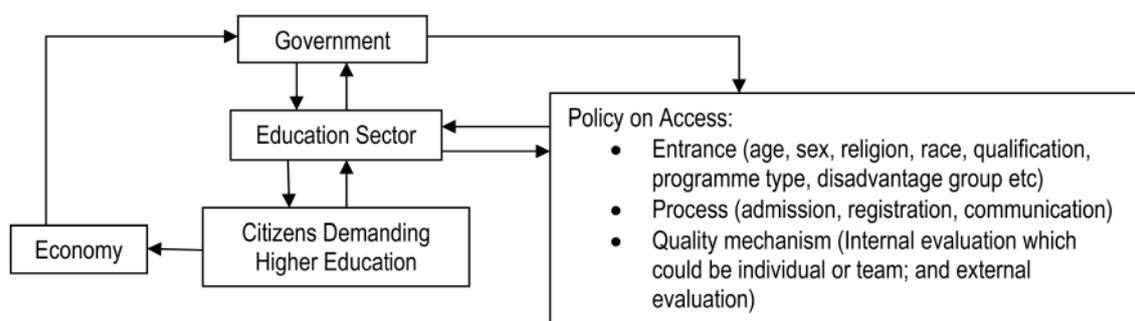


Figure 1: Access Model for Higher Education
Source: Researchers, 2015

Two major purposes for higher education are for manpower development and self-actualization. This is prominent in open and distance learning. With reference to Figure 1, the government is the

constitutional body that creates and oversees the activities of the education sector by setting policies and procedures. For the purpose of adequate placement to aid the expected knowledge, the prospective candidate needs to gain entrance through the prescribed criteria; the process of gaining studentship must be well specified as well as the mechanisms of checking the compliance of the processes. This is where the access model becomes useful in this study. For the purpose of this study, the education sector in the model shall be the National Open University of Nigeria.

Quality Assurance in Access to Distance Education

Quality is important in the input and output of higher education especially in open and distance learning. The quality movement in distance education started in Australia, which is traced back to the work of the studying committee on External Studies in the mid-1980s. Quality could mean excellence, worth or value of a product. In this context this could be applied to education, where the grandaunts are the products of a school system. The process through which the quality is brought to bear brings about quality assurance. Quality improvement, quality assurance, and benchmarking are processes used in determining quality (Inglis, 2005). The difference in the framework lies in their scope, institutional application, structures, and method of application (Harman, 2000). The use of the frameworks depends on their implications, the similarities and differences the frameworks have for the purpose.

The quality of a product of a school system starts from the entrance level. It is within the access to education paradigm that quality assurance has become one of the fundamental aspects in planning and managing open and distance learning (ODL) provision (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). The term quality assurance refers to a process of defining and fulfilling a set of quality standards consistently and continuously with the goal of satisfying all consumers, producers and the other stakeholders. Quality assurance became important for ODL during the 1980s and 90s when enrolments into distance institutions went on the increase. The stakeholders were concerned with the quality assurance at the access level, but dealing with quality assurance at the access level calls for clear interpretation of what access entails in an ODL environment. Gale (2009) points out that it is critical to be clear about what type of access is being referred. The question is access to what? Access should be more than opening doors to students to register but more about providing support structures (Kasiram & Subrayen, 2013, p. 70). "Fundamental to access and equity in higher education is the extent to which the system responds effectively to full diversity as a key indicator of its quality" (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2014, p. 5). Keegan (1996, p. 12) believed that:

Distance education is a form of education fraught with problems for administrators, teachers and students. It is characterized by the fragility of the non-traditional in education. These difficulties concern the quality and status of education. These difficulties concern the quality and status of education at a distance. Good practice in distance education seeks to provide solution for these inherent difficulties.

It could be said that open learning removes barriers in access such as admission, pre-requisites, physical attendance at a particular place and time, possession of prescribed equipment, books, and journal (Gandhe, 2009). Entrance into open and distance institutions is often faced with the challenge of access and thereby we should look for ways of improvement. Policy is required to guide improvement procedures. Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 193) state that policy should not be in a vacuum but should seek to inform specific actions. Diko and Letseka (2009, p. 228) contend that policy formulation in educational settings cannot benefit the students if they are not appropriately implemented at grassroots level. It is not enough to set policy on access to higher education but there should be criteria to determine the level of access integration as specified by Howell and Lazarus (2003), Ryan (2011) and Ngubane-Mokiwa (2014). Policies for quality assurance are

strengthened by getting feedback from the students; hence Vickerman and Blundell (2010, p. 26) stress the importance of regular consultation of students to enhance higher education practices. They also highlight the gap between policy and practice, particularly with regards to education for students with disabilities.

Access Quality Assurance Mechanisms at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

To ensure quality in access into NOUN, the following mechanisms are put in place:

- Admission requirements are in accordance with the minimum benchmark (NOUN, 2013).
- There is no entrance examination into NOUN, but all entrants into the programmes must meet the minimum national requirements for university registration.
- There is no restriction in terms of age, sex, religion, race, state of origin, time, space (within Nigeria only), and number of candidates admitted.
- There are clear policies and documents guiding the admission process.
- NOUN engages in online admission and registration.
- Admissions received online are authenticated at the study centres by asking candidates to present the originals of their credentials. Designated NOUN staff verifies the credentials.
- There is a process for changing course and programme. The provision for change of programme is often given to students who are found not qualified in the programme to which they applied but are found qualified in another programme. Students could also add and delete courses within a specified time.
- The university has an access programme where students can make up for their deficiencies in their Senior Secondary School Certificates (SSSC) before proceeding to the degree programme.
- Prospective students are given adequate information on admission requirements on the university website, student prospectus, Daily News Papers and flyers.

Methodology

A survey design was adopted in the study. All of the 78,555 enrolled students at the time of the study from 61 study centres of NOUN formed the population. A sample size of 3,060 was selected (table 1). Multi-stage sampling technique was used in selecting the sample size. First, the population was stratified into six geo-political zones in the country as South West, South South, South East, North East, North West, and North Central. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the two most populated study centres from each geopolitical zone, making twelve study centres used for the study. The study centres were classified from one to twelve starting from South West to North Central. The selection gave a total of 3,060 sampled students.

Table 1: The Study Sample

S/N	Geo-Political Zones	Sampled Study Centres	Population in Sampled Centres	Sample for the Study
1	South West	1	19,740	987
		2	2,170	217
2	South South	3	8,460	423
		4	9,440	472
3	South East	5	4,920	246
		6	2,380	119
4	North East	7	740	37
		8	500	25
5	North West	9	1,520	76
		10	2,260	113
6	North Central	11	3,160	158
		12	3,740	187
Total Sample				3060

A questionnaire titled *Student Assessment of Institutional Quality Assurance Practices in National Open University of Nigeria* was used to collect data. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A was used to capture the demographic data of the students, such as study centre. Section B was used to measure criteria standards for admission and registration. Likert scale of 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 with 0 = not aware; 1 = unsatisfactory; 2 = satisfactory; 3 = highly satisfactory and 4 = excellent. For the interpretation of the percentage, the scale was categorized in three: *not aware* and *unsatisfactory* as one, the second was *satisfactory* and the third was *highly satisfactory* and *excellent*. In addition, the mean is accepted at 2.00 and the mean below 2.00 is rejected.

The instrument was validated by five academic staff of the rank of senior lecturer and above, who have spent five years and above in the university. To test for reliability, the instrument was administered to 100 students from two study centres outside the sampled study centres (50 students from each study centre). Split-half reliability test was used for the analysis, and reliability co-efficient attained was 0.8. Four research assistants were trained, who joined the researchers to administer the adjusted instrument to the sampled subjects. Out of 3,060 questionnaires administered, only 2,471 were retrieved successfully, which formed 81% retrieval. Percentage, mean and standard deviation were used in analyzing the data.

Results

Answer to Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the perception of students on the criteria standards set on admission?

Table 2: Perception of Students on Criteria Standards set on Admission

S/N	Criteria Standards	Please tick as appropriate					Mean	Std Dev
		0	1	2	3	4		
1	The university has published clear policies on the admission of local and overseas students.	800 (32.4)	39 (1.6)	628 (25.4)	302 (12.2)	702 (28.4)	2.03	1.60
2	The admission process is transparent and is made available for scrutiny by relevant stakeholders.	401 (16.2)	140 (5.7)	638 (25.8)	303 (12.3)	989 (40.0)	2.54	1.46
3	There are existing mechanisms for selection of qualified candidates seeking admission.	473 (19.1)	283 (11.5)	618 (25.0)	195 (7.9)	902 (36.5)	2.31	1.52
4	The university has special provision to ensure equity and access to disadvantaged groups within its target student population.	659 (26.7)	335 (13.6)	537 (21.7)	209 (8.5)	731 (29.6)	2.01	1.57
5	All admissions are done electronically.	188 (7.6)	163 (6.6)	384 (15.5)	301 (12.2)	1435 (58.1)	3.07	1.30
6	Students' admissions are based on specific criteria.	167 (6.8)	278 (11.3)	584 (23.6)	342 (13.8)	1100 (44.5)	2.78	1.30
7	There are existing mechanisms for the placement of all applicants into various programmes.	450 (18.2)	329 (13.3)	460 (18.6)	346 (14.0)	886 (35.9)	2.36	1.52
8	All applicants into the postgraduate programmes have placements.	1012 (41.0)	137 (5.5)	477 (19.3)	210 (8.5)	635 (25.7)	1.72	1.65
9	There is no restriction on the number of candidates admitted.	431 (17.4)	279 (11.3)	480 (19.4)	318 (12.9)	963 (39.0)	2.45	1.52

N = 2,471

Source: Field Study

The area of great importance in Table 2 is the percentage of those who are *not aware* and the *unsatisfactory*. 47% respondents indicate *not aware* and *unsatisfactory* on the placement of applicants to postgraduate programmes and its mean is 1.72, which falls below 2.00. 40% indicate *not aware* and *unsatisfactory* response on the university provision for access and equity to disadvantage group. On the publication of clear policies on the admission of local and overseas students, 34% are *not aware* and *unsatisfactory*. 32% are *not aware* and are *unsatisfactory* of the existing mechanisms

for the placement of all applicants into various programmes. Electronic admission also cut attention: 14% are *not aware* and are *unsatisfactory* of the electronic admission. The standard deviations are close to the mean. This implies that the responses are within the mean.

Research Question Two: What is the perception of students on the criteria standard set on registration?

Table 3: Perception of Students on Criteria Standards set on Registration

S/N	Criteria Standards	<i>Please tick as appropriate</i>					Mean	Std Dev
		0	1	2	3	4		
1	The student handbook provides details of facilities and support services available to the learners.	343 (13.9)	420 (17.0)	599 (24.2)	260 (10.5)	849 (34.4)	2.34	1.44
2	Information to prospective learners includes details of admission requirements, the procedure for enrolment and the requirements for progression through the programme.	345 (14.0)	217 (8.8)	443 (17.9)	423 (17.1)	1043 (42.2)	2.65	1.44
3	Enrolment into the programmes is strictly in line with the specified norms and admission guidelines.	238 (9.6)	156 (6.3)	641 (25.9)	332 (13.4)	1104 (44.7)	2.77	1.33
4	Appropriate students' demographic data such as present place of employment, sex, age, last school level etc. are obtained.	298 (12.1)	178 (7.2)	485 (19.6)	369 (14.9)	1141 (46.2)	2.76	1.41
5	Registerable courses are made available to students.	246 (10.0)	321 (13.0)	419 (17.0)	313 (12.7)	1172 (47.4)	2.75	1.41
6	Students' difficulties and challenges on course registration are attended to promptly and efficiently.	240 (9.7)	508 (20.6)	534 (21.6)	331 (13.4)	858 (34.7)	2.43	1.39

N = 2,471

Source: Field Study

Details on student handbook to support registration and students' challenges in course registration had 31% and 30% *not aware* or *unsatisfactory* respectively, as presented in Table 3. Generally, the mean falls within 2.00 and 2.78, which is an indication of satisfactory response to the criteria standards.

Research Question Three: What percentage level of access do students have to documents guiding their admission and registration into the university?

Table 4: Percentage of Students' Access to Admission and Registration Documents

S/N	Documents	N	%
	Guidelines on Admission	1808	73.2
	Newspaper advertisement	1147	46.4
	Student Undergraduate Handbook	1251	50.6
	Student Postgraduate Handbook	925	37.4
	University Website	2108	85.3
	Student Database	1224	49.5
	Periodic Information through study centre notice board	1891	76.5

N=2471

Source: Field Study

From the data in Table 4, students have more access to the university website (85.3%) through which they are able to get the guidelines on admission. Students do not have much access to students' handbook: the undergraduate recorded 50.6% and postgraduate 37.4%.

Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

From the data presented in Table 2, it is observed that provision of access into NOUN for all those who are qualified is not well publicized with the record of 26.7% for *not aware* and 13.6% as *unsatisfactory*, which gave a total of 40%. Also, not all postgraduate applicants have placement. This negates the purpose of encouraging open and distance education in the country as specified in the National Policy of Education (2004). It is also observed that the university has defined the types of access available to the university, such as access policies and existing mechanisms for placement; but most of the students are not aware of these policies and mechanisms. Policy without adequate implementation is a failure. In this instance there appears to be a loophole in the policy implementation hence the less drive or it could also be that the processes put in place to implement the policies are weak. For instance, although the students have greater access to documents and information through the university website, it appears that the information on the website is not robust, hence students do not have much access to other documents and information. With a robust website, soft copies of other documents could be uploaded into the site which will facilitate access to other information.

From the findings, it could be concluded that students' admission and registration is facilitated by the type of information that is made available to them. To have a wider access in open and distance institution, the type of available access must be clearly defined and made available to the prospective students and learners through a medium that is easily accessible to them.

In conclusion, it could be said that students do not have equal access to student handbook as they have to the university website. This could limit the information on access and could also affect their course registration.

We suggest the following recommendations:

1. Access into NOUN should be given a wider publicity. This can be achieved through radio and television jingles. Demographic data (age, sex, ethnicity, religion, disability, qualification to be obtained, last school level obtained, etc.) should be well defined in the jingle.
2. Information in the student handbook needs to be beefed up to include facilities and support services available to the learners.
3. Since the findings showed that students have more access to the university website for information, it is advised that the website be made robust to include categories of citizens that are eligible for admission apart from just stating the last school level requirement; student handbook, and demonstration of course registration.
4. There should be a link on the student portal through which the student can read electronic newspapers and periodicals.

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