

## Chapter 15:

# Challenges Facing Distance Education in Nigeria: Envisioning a Future for Its Research and Practice

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## Introduction

Teaching and learning through correspondence are the foundation of what is presently termed distance education (DE). Distance education has been practised for more than a century and it was conceived as a means of providing education for adults (Keegan 1980; Holmberg 2013). According to Holmberg (2005), what is today known as distance education occurred as far back as the 1720s through 1830s when education took the form of passing instruction through explanatory writing texts conveyed from the tutors to the learners through correspondence. In the same vein, Kentnor (2015) submitted that the practice of distance education has been implemented for more than 300 years having started from the eighteenth century. Kentnor (2015) argued that Isaac Pitman pioneered distance education in 1840 when he began to teach shorthand by correspondence to students in England. He mailed instructions to students and demanded that they proffer solutions to given tasks and send same via post for assessment (Kentnor 2015). Distance education has witnessed tremendous progress from what it used to be in the past due to a series of factors.

Distance education means different things to different people. To some, it is a form of private study with recommended materials with or without instructors, while others see it as a form of education that is consciously designed with study materials to facilitate meaningful interaction between the learners and their facilitators (Holmberg 2005). As explained by Keegan (1980), after careful analysis of four different definitions of distance education, he submitted that distance education is characterised by separation of teacher and student all through the length of the teaching-learning process; the involvement of an educational organisation in preparing and planning learning materials which separates it from a form of private unorganised self-study programme; the use

of media such as print, audio, audio-visual, and computer/internet enabled devices to facilitate teacher-student-course content interaction; the provision of two-way interaction in such a way that learners can benefit from interaction and possibly initiate communication; inclusion of occasional interactive seminars for learners and their facilitators for the purpose of socialisation and exchange of academic related ideas; and a form of education given to prepare a greater number for effective participation in an industrialised economy (Keegan 1980; Holmberg 2013). In essence, distance education is a different form of education that is unique from other forms of education (Keegan 1980).

Indeed, distance education is different from every other form of the traditional or conventional face-to-face tertiary education system. As noted by Kentnor (2015), distance education was designed to provide alternative access to tertiary education for those who could not access the regular full-time tertiary education programme due to the barrier of financial challenges, family obligations, or geographical location amongst others. It is also a pragmatic means of reducing the widening access gap to tertiary education (Ohioze et al. 2015). Kwapong (2007) equally observed that distance education reduces the gap of access to tertiary education, which is often created by gender, age, colour, income, time, and location. Scholars have also explained that distance education affords learners who are employed, physically challenged, nursing parents, and slow learners to gain access to tertiary education (Chawinga and Zozie 2016; Komba 2009; Kwapong 2007; Yilmaz Ince, Kabul, and Diler 2020). In essence, distance education is flexible, inclusive, and open with capacity to leverage technology to innovatively deliver instruction.

Over the years, distance education has greatly transformed from merely passing instruction through explanatory writing texts from the tutors to the learners through correspondence to a technology enhanced education with capacity to deliver real time instruction to learners scattered in separate places. Technological advancements have simplified distance education delivery (Dhawan 2020). Beldarrain (2006) noted that distance education has evolved from correspondent learning to delivery systems such as self-directed learning, computer-aided instruction, video-based courses, tele-conferencing, and online learning. What is today referred to as online learning, open learning, web-based learning, computer-assisted learning, computer-assisted instruction, hybrid learning, mobile learning, etc. have been made possible by hardware and software technological advancement (Dhawan 2020).

This growth occasioned by technology has enhanced instructional delivery such that the distance between the instructor and the learner has been reduced and through the internet synchronous sessions and asynchronous learning platforms have been introduced. Essentially, the unique feature

of flexibility in distance education has been extended by technological advancement (Bogdanović 2012). The inclusion of technology has enabled distance education to become open to all categories of learners as it promotes flexibility, accessibility, and openness. Moreover, technology in distance education has facilitated social interaction between learners, their facilitators, and with their course materials (Mathew and Iloanya 2016).

Furthermore, technology in distance education provides learners the opportunity to learn at their own pace; interact with contents, co-learners, and facilitators; interact with learning technologies; provide solutions to problems independently; and monitor their own learning. In the same vein, it enables distance education providers to create relevant course contents, transform instructional delivery, and assessment systems to monitor students' learning progress (Mathew and Iloanya 2016).

Just when the operations of distance education provision were gaining acceptance due to the increase in technological applications, the incursion of the Covid-19 pandemic that made even conventional single mode higher education institutions adopt on-online teaching and learning during the global lockdown, gave further credence to the universality of distance education programmes. The Covid-19 pandemic lockdown created a learning gap which made institutions look out for options to bridge the gap, the only suitable and relevant alternative option being leveraging technology to move teaching and learning to the virtual space using synchronous and asynchronous pedagogy (Dhawan 2020). Virtual teaching and learning prior to this time were at the centre of distance education instructional delivery operations, so adopting online modes of instruction was simply learning to do what many distance education institutions had succeeded at doing long before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic (Reid 2010). Without doubt, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the efficient and innovative aspect of distance education which has been leveraging online/virtual pedagogy even when conventional higher education institutions seem not to be paying adequate attention.

Now, higher education provision and delivery in full-time and distance education modes have arrived at a convergent point of delivering online instruction by leveraging technology—a reflection of the undisputable fact that online learning is the future of higher education provision globally, irrespective of whether it is distance education or conventional institutions. Schleicher (2020) noted that Covid-19 has brought a surge in the number of online learners as it has expanded opportunities for all categories of learners to learn. It (Schleicher 2020) also noted that online learning as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly improved the motivation of learners to complete online learning and aided their development of basic digital skills. It (Schleicher 2020) also explained that Covid-19 led education providers to develop new online courses, increase provision of digital

infrastructure, equip teachers to facilitate online instruction, and carry out assessment in online classes, while at the same time putting in place quality assurance frameworks (Schleicher 2020; Amemado 2020).

More importantly, the Covid-19 pandemic which led to the mainstreaming of online learning and educational activity into conventional higher education delivery has reduced the gap that once existed between the two modes of education, giving rise to what is now called hybrid or embedded learning (Amemado 2020). Reports have shown that online learning and distance education have greatly increased after the pandemic. Dhawan (2020), stated that online education has witnessed an exponential increase in China after the Covid-19 outbreak, as normal classrooms have given way to e-classrooms.

While explaining the short- and the long-term implications of online education, Amemabo (2020) stated that online education has proven to be convenient for working adults and celebrated by millennials which has motivated universities to deploy online instruction to enrich their course contents. The on-going conversation is not on how to reduce online teaching due to its seeming limitations but on how to strengthen it and have it mainstreamed into higher education delivery moving forward. As observed by Amemado (2020), post-pandemic higher education delivery might consider embedding virtual/online instructional delivery as part of their continuous instructional delivery approach making it compulsory for learners to entirely take some courses virtually. He further stressed that the growth of online education in the last few years has seen structural shifts for higher education institutions in the provision of on-campus education and online programmes for distant learners.

As explained by Ried (2010), an education that was considered a sort of special learning using a non-traditional form of educational delivery has suddenly become an integral part of conventional educational provision. Distance education was designed to provide alternative access to tertiary education for those who could not access the regular full-time tertiary education programme due to the barrier of financial challenges, family obligations, and geographical location amongst others (Kentnor 2015).

### Distance education/open and distance learning in Nigeria

Distance education started in Nigeria from the colonial period. This period witnessed correspondent programmes from colleges and universities in the United Kingdom where interested and qualified

Nigerians took courses from these colleges through mail, and pre-recorded audio lessons (Jimoh 2014; Ayo, Odukoya, and Azeta 2014; Iboho 2016). Distance education continued after independence in 1960, when the Nigerian government began an aggressive campaign for education and the development of skilled manpower to take over several sectors of the developing economy. The post-colonial distance education programme was delivered by conventional universities and colleges in the form of evening classes for adults, weekend courses for workers, and sandwich programmes during primary/secondary school vacations for teachers who were seeking to acquire continuing education and reskilling. Notable institutions providing these programmes were the Universities of Ibadan, Nnsuka, and Lagos; Colleges of Education; and the Nigerian Teachers Institute (NTI), amongst others (Jimoh 2014).

Still in pursuit of creating wider access to tertiary education, the Nigerian government created the National Open University of Nigeria in 1983 but it was suspended due to military incursion into government in 1984 (Ezike and Chigozie-Okwum 2015). However, after several decades of organised practice of distance education and a policy somersault on the establishment of a national open university in Nigeria, open and distance education became formally operational in Nigeria with the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria in 2002. Since then, more than twelve additional universities have been licensed by the federal government through the National Universities Commission to fully operate open and distance education programmes through their various centres. This was done to create wider access to university education since the demand for conventional university education is mounting pressure on existing universities (Ibara 2008).

As noted by several scholars, distance education became a viable option for tertiary education provision in Nigeria due to: increase in the demand for university education by Nigerians and the lack of infrastructure to accommodate all admission seekers into full-time conventional university programmes (Ezike and Chigozie-Okwum 2015); the need to accommodate the learning needs of all Nigerians, especially the working class, elderly, and disadvantaged groups who are passionate about acquiring university education (Ayo, Odukoya, and Azeta 2014); the need to create equitable access to education and to develop skilled manpower for the economy in realising national developmental goals such as the vision 2020; the need to mainstream distance education into tertiary education delivery in line with global best practices; and the need to leverage technology in revolutionising instructional delivery in distance learning mode amongst others (Ezike and Chigozie-Okwum 2015).

Ibara (2008) described distance education in Nigeria as a veritable means of expanding tertiary education without unnecessary capital investment in buildings like conventional universities. He

also highlighted that the practice of distance education in Nigeria has benefited tertiary education delivery in ways such as: expansion of universities' educational locations with less cost implication per student when compared with conventional on-campus systems; flexibility in the delivery of curriculum contents which is adapted to student learning needs; the increasing demands for lifelong learning and capacity development of working population; and increased access to tertiary education by disadvantaged populations which is in line with global best practices.

Since its establishment in 2001, the National Open University of Nigeria has been a flagship institution in promoting distance education in Nigeria. While acknowledging the contributions of the National Open University of Nigeria since inception, Ohioze et al. (2015) noted that due to its limitless carrying capacity, the institution has widened access to university education with the enrolment of more than 500 000 students; created unfettered access to women seeking university education thereby closing the gap of gender inequality; responded to the demands of working adults through flexibility of time and location thereby promoting life-long learning; reduced costs of university education by introducing affordable pay per course/exam options which was not practised in the conventional university system; quality assurance through thorough supervision and accreditation of all its programmes by the National Universities Commission; and introduction of relevant courses and novel programmes amongst others.

Furthermore, in realisation of the contemporary relevance of distance education in transforming higher education delivery and in preparing skilled manpower for the future of work, the Nigerian government, through the National Universities Commission, has approved eleven conventional universities to fully operate open and distance learning (ODL) programmes under separate institutes, centres, and schools. These centres were approved by the National Universities Commission to provide open and distance education in line with the federal government of Nigeria's response to increase access to university education bearing in mind that the bulk of its population are youths of university-going age.

### **Trends of challenges confronting open and distance education provision/delivery in Nigeria**

Despite all the many benefits of open and distance learning and its potential in Nigeria, there are several challenges confronting the provision and delivery of distance education programmes. Some of these challenges, which include technological infrastructure, the public perception of

the quality of distance learning when compared with conventional university education, and low student retention and success have been documented in various studies to show the gaps that need to be plugged especially in the contemporary times when the gulf that existed between provision and delivery of conventional university programmes and open and distance learning is being reduced as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

**We now explore some of the constraining factors.**

### **1. Technological resources and infrastructure**

In an era of digital connectivity, open and distance learning relies heavily on technological and ICT infrastructure to provide synchronous and asynchronous learning interaction in a three-way dimension—facilitator-student, student-material, and student-student—for a meaningful and engaging learning experience. Quite frankly, it is difficult, if not impossible, for open and distance learning to fare well if it is not supported by massive technological and ICT infrastructure.

However, the problems relating to infrastructural support in terms of information communication technology has been a major challenge confronting open and distance education delivery in Nigeria. Jimoh (2014) noted that a major challenge confronting the provision of open and distance learning in Nigeria is low connectivity. According to him, there is ridiculously poor access to internet-enabled devices such as smartphones, personal computers, and internet connectivity by students and even facilitators. In the same vein, Oladele and Fashina (2021) maintained that open and distance learners are dropping out of their respective programmes due to disconnection and lack of computers and other e-learning related study materials.

In the same vein, Yusuf (2006) submitted that poor ICT penetration in Nigeria and lack of access to computer hardware and smart phones by the majority of distance education students, and even distance education institutions, is a major challenge confronting the provision of open and distance education in Nigeria. He attributed this to poor funding of education in general and poor living conditions of Nigerians with the majority living below the poverty line. To provide an efficient and relevant open and distance education in the twenty-first century, heavy investment is required to procure the latest technology to deliver instruction and engage students in synchronous and asynchronous communications (Yusuf 2006).

Similarly, Olusola and Alaba (2011) observed that the modern open and distance education is based on the premise of strong ICT infrastructure. They, however, submitted that due to lack of computer devices, access to internet (especially in remote areas of the country), erratic power supply, and high cost of internet subscription in the cities, the success of open and distance education is still hanging in the balance in Nigeria. As part of the challenges attributed to technology, they observed that phobia for technology by facilitators and students is also not helping in a situation where there is adequate supply of ICT infrastructure.

In another study, Ajadi, Salawu, and Adeoye (2008), while identifying the challenges relating to technological infrastructure in distance education provision in Nigeria, identified inequality of access to technology phobia for technology which they termed 'technophobia'; high cost of internet subscription, software, and license costs; maintenance and technical support; and poor electricity as part of the challenges confronting the provision of open and distance education in Nigeria. They expressed that Nigeria needs to move quickly to strengthen and increase its ICT infrastructure to be fully integrated into the open and distance education system. In the same vein, Igbokwe (2015) reported that the use of ICT for distance education in sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria is hampered by lack of infrastructure, expertise, and a large proportion of technologically illiterate users. She further noted poor power supply, low teledensity, and phobia for technology among facilitators and students as part of the constraints of distance education provision in Nigeria.

In more recent studies, Oyediran et al. (2020) and Adarkwah (2021) noted that ICT infrastructure has become a nagging problem as many tertiary institutions could not procure ICT hardware and software to power online instruction during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020. As a matter of fact, some dual-mode institutions and distance education institutions could not virtually engage their students during the Covid-19 lockdown. Moreover, Adulmajeed, Joyner, and McManus (2020) listing the challenges of online learning in Nigeria, attributed it to the poor condition of IT infrastructure such as availability, affordability, quality, and the nature of computer or IT devices. They maintained that this can be on both an institutional and individual basis. For individuals this



could translate to lack of access to suitable and appropriate digital devices, technological competence, and availability of technical support while institutions are equally confronted with challenges of inadequate and low-quality computer and IT devices, limited internet broadband, erratic power supply, and technical problems requiring professional support.

**b. Public perception with regard to quality**

To strengthen the public perception of distance education, the position of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) is that the academic programmes of open and distance learning institutions such as the National Open University of Nigeria have equal status with those being managed by conventional universities. This is essentially the reason why the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and other open and distance learning centres in conventional universities are strictly accredited by the National Universities Commission of Nigeria (a body occupied with accrediting all academic programmes in all Nigerian universities). This is done to maintain quality, uniformity, and conformity with basic minimum curriculum standards. As a matter of government policy, open and distance learning is not expected to suffer a negative public perception.

However, research has shown that when it comes to quality in distance education delivery in Nigeria, opinion varies among critical stakeholders, especially when viewed from different perspectives of mode of entry qualifications, instructional delivery, assessment, information and communications capabilities of lecturers and students, nature of recruitment of staff, supervision, and monitoring amongst others.

Ukwueze (2016) submitted that several persons who are outside the distance education systems demonstrated scepticism regarding the quality of assessment and mode of instructional delivery in open and distance learning. As pointed out by Olojede (2008), graduates of open and distance education are perceived by some as inferior to the graduates of conventional universities who received face-to-face classroom instruction. Moreover, Iyiegbuniwe and Alaneme (2013) observed that even distance education students have mixed feelings about distance education programmes due to their inability to adequately cover curriculum contents within the timeframe allocated for lectures. Furthermore, Salawu (2016) expressed that even though distance education is popular and has come to stay in Nigeria, it is still faced with the challenge of credibility as many people

have wrong impressions about it. These wrong impressions according to Ojo (2013), could be attributed to incidents of malpractices which lower the quality of distance education when compared with the conventional university system.

In a study carried by Ukueze (2016) to profile Nigerians' perception about open and distance learning, the following were found: distance education certificates are not of sufficient quality to compete with certificates acquired by students from conventional university; the mode of instructional delivery is poor; there is discrimination against graduates of distance education in the job market because it is considered that they do not possess practical skills and knowledge to stand out when assigned organisational tasks. This also extends to lack of acceptance for postgraduate admissions as most institutions do not consider them fit for postgraduate studies. It is also perceived that quality assurance is lacking as most open and distance learning institutions do not have full-time staff which robs them of the essence of tertiary education. Another area where open and distance learning quality is wrongly perceived is in the flexibility of entry requirements which is sometimes not as rigorous when compared with conventional universities. This makes it difficult to attract academically talented students. It is also perceived that the cost of open and distance learning education is relatively on the high side, which makes it only suitable for the working class and not for students who cannot secure admission into the conventional universities.

Furthermore, Ukueze (2016), substantiating the above claims with an interview from participants in the study, maintained that some are of the opinion that the poor state of infrastructure in Nigeria does not make Nigeria suitable for open and distance learning. He also submitted that it is generally believed that this type of education is suitable for the working class or for someone who has a stable source of income since it is capital intensive. Others perceived it as more suitable for persons who have obtained their bachelor degrees, since the certificate is not commonly accepted for postgraduate programmes. It is also perceived that the entry qualification is always low and that the absence of student-student and student-facilitator, face-to-face interaction makes it lack the feeling of tertiary education. Lastly, a concern about unreliable assessment techniques/modes used in tests and examination of students creates a perception that open and distance learning is of poor quality.

However, the study also recorded that some people expressed a positive perception of the quality of open and distance learning programmes in Nigeria as a suitable alternative means of providing flexible, democratic, and comprehensive tertiary education for the surging Nigerian population who, for one reason or the other, could not access tertiary education in their early years. It is also perceived as a suitable educational alternative for the working class to advance their education for the purposes of career development and personal development.

Similarly, in a study carried out by Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) to examine the attitude and perception of students to open and distance learning in Nigeria, it was reported that students perceived conventional universities to be of a better quality. Nonetheless, as students enrolled in open and distance learning, they also held a positive attitude towards open and distance learning. Findings from this study showed that the students enrolled in open and distance learning intentionally.

On ICT competence of facilitators, Jimoh (2014) expressed that instructional delivery in open and distance learning programmes is greatly hampered by facilitators' lack of instructional delivery competence due to lack of skills in developing courses and materials electronically. He further stressed that this problem is compounded by open and distance learning students' inability to effectively participate in online lectures, be it synchronously or asynchronously, due to phobia for technological and internet-enabled devices. This can be attributed to their lack of background in utilising information communication technological devices prior to their admission into the distance learning programmes.

Essentially, Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) explained that the perception of the quality of open distance education is largely dependent on an individual's beliefs about what he/she considers to be advantageous in open and distance learning as a student, an employer, or as an open and distance learning educational provider or planner.

**c. Student access, retention, and success**

Gaining access or securing admission into open and distance education programmes in Nigeria is not as rigorous as securing admission into full-time conventional university programmes. For universities on a dual mode, admission into their open and distance learning is conducted after candidates with higher scores have been admitted into their full-time programmes. Hence, the criteria for admission into distance education programmes are not as competitive when compared with programmes in conventional universities. The decision to make admission into distance education less stringent is not a reflection of low quality, but as explained by Ojokheta (2010), it is to widen the scope of educational opportunities for many. The aim is that they could acquire skills and competencies to meaningfully contribute to the development of the Nigerian economy, one of the founding philosophies of open and distance learning in Nigeria.

Gaining access to distance education in Nigeria seems not to be a problem as the government policies supporting the establishment of open and distance education has ensured that everyone, irrespective of age or gender gains access to it. Jimoh (2014) indicated that those who would have found it difficult to gain admission into conventional universities benefit from open and distance learning as it provides greater access to educational opportunities. Through constant regulation and quality assurance, the government has ensured that the status of the programme enjoys the same status as the face-to-face conventional university programmes (FRN 2004).

Ojokheta (2010) expressed that open and distance education, having moved from a marginal system of education into an integral part of tertiary education due to high subscription numbers among Nigerians, is confronted with the challenge of a high attrition rate. Attrition in distance education has been a major concern for distance education providers, and no matter the system used, attrition has been a perennial problem (Adewale and Igbinedion 2008).

In a study carried out by Adewale and Inegbedion (2008) to identify the causes of students' withdrawal from the National Open University of Nigeria, it was found that students were dissatisfied with: the academic calendar of their university; the mode of course facilitation; non-availability of course materials which hinders their learning; and unsatisfactory administrative and technical support.

Ofole (2018) explained that student retention in distance education is an important factor that must be properly addressed for open and distance education to accelerate human capital development for the knowledge economy. Several reasons have been attributed to student attrition rate in distance education. Ojokheta (2010) explained that distance education students find it difficult to continue with their programme due to lack of motivation to continue. According to him, distance education students' separation from their campus environment, other learners, and their facilitators force learners to adopt self-directed learning patterns which most times could be very difficult. The difficulty is experienced in terms of what, when, and how to study. For distance education students, the social dimension of learning—interaction with other variables that makes learning enjoyable—is absent, so students require an extra motivation to stay on the programme. Most of the time, this extra motivation is not exhibited by all students as some are distracted by work and other responsibilities that take their concentration and interest away from their study. A lack of motivation has been identified as a major impediment to student success in distance education (Okopi and Pindar 2013).

For instance, Ambe-Uva (2006), in a study carried out to identify factors that aid students' success in distance education, found that in addition to access, interactivity in terms of opportunity for social and intellectual engagement affected student success in open and distance learning. He recommended that distance education institutions should emphasise interactivity through every means possible in their programme delivery. Similarly, Ojokheta (2010) found that the learning environment, student support services, learners' positive perception of their course materials, study centre structure, technological infrastructure, and tutor response and patterns of feedback were helpful in predicting student retention, persistence, and success in open and distance education programmes. Therefore, he submitted that for distance education students to be successful in open and distance learning, their institutions should provide a stimulating learning environment, interactive course material written in plain language, quality student support services in the form of technical and counselling support, regular tutorial assistance from facilitators, and provision of constant feedback on students' academic progress amongst others.

In another perspective, while highlighting the problems associated with student retention and success in open and distance education in Nigeria, Ihuoma (2015) attributed student

dropout in distance education to students' personal and institutional insecurities about learning. These insecurities are entrenched in students' poor perception of the relevance of their programmes, family life disruptions, and lack of support from employers who frequently do not give them sufficient time to concentrate on their studies. It was also explained that distance education students lack interaction and constant feedback with facilitators, experience poor technical and educational materials, and especially inadequate guidance for pacing of course contents. Moreover, due to lack of technological skills many students drop out as they are unable to use digital learning platforms on their own when no one is present to guide them (Ihuoma 2015). Other factors such as faculty members' lack of capacity to develop e-course content and virtual pedagogical skills, lack of committed facilitators since a majority are employed on a part-time basis, and poor technological infrastructure were attributed to the problem of low student success in distance education.

### Recommendations

30

The reviewed research in the field of open and distance education in Nigeria has shown gaps that must be filled if the tertiary education system in Nigeria will effectively harness the innovation and opportunities that abound in open and distance education in preparing a skilled workforce for a post-Covid-19, technologically driven economy, which is also popularly referred to as the knowledge economy. As shown, technology has reduced the barrier that once existed between conventional universities' methods of instructional delivery and that of open and distance education. Thus, these recommendations will be equally relevant to providers of full-time conventional university administrators. The following recommendations are therefore suggested:

1. Heavy investment must be made in procuring relevant and up-to-date technological infrastructure to strengthen virtual/online instructional delivery capacity of open and distance education institutions and to strengthen other administrative related issues. This is required for synchronous and asynchronous instructional delivery, virtual assessment, and other online students' engagement. Open and distance education provision is heavily dependent on relevant technological infrastructure. Hence, institutions must make a concerted effort to provide new devices, internet connectivity, software, etc. for their operations.
2. It must be a matter of policy that open and distance education institutions employ only

staff that are technologically competent. These staff must of a necessity demonstrate capacity to develop electronic course material with proven ability to deliver engaging online instruction with relevant pedagogical skills. This of course, implies that open and distance education institutions will need to invest in constant staff development for updating their technological skills.

3. Open and distance education institutions need to pay adequate attention to quality assurance processes and maintain the principle of transparency like conventional universities. Accrediting bodies like the National Universities Commission should insist that open and distance education institutions follow their admission requirements strictly. Examinations should be conducted under an atmosphere that eliminates cheating irrespective whether it is physical or virtual. Racketeering that suggests purchase of examination grades or scores should be eliminated, and commensurate sanctions should be awarded to erring staff and students. Open and distance education institutions should pay attention to their products by publicly identifying with them; this in the long run will erase the negative notion that open and distance education graduates do not as well as the graduates of conventional universities.
4. Open and distance education institutions need to make their support systems more responsive, functional, and student friendly. Provision of functional technical support is a hallmark of a technologically driven, open/distance education programme in the twenty-first Century. Moreover, counselling support services which could be virtual or otherwise should be constantly provided for the students. Counselling services could be a life-line for demotivated students on the brink of dropping out.

31

## Conclusion

Past studies have shown that for open and distance education in Nigeria to effectively deliver on the mandate of providing skilled manpower for the knowledge economy, specific gaps need to be filled. These gaps are in the areas of providing critical and up-to-date technological infrastructure, the need to strengthen public perception of the quality of distance education programmes when compared with conventional universities, and the need to improve student retention and success in distance education programmes. It was recommended that distance education institutions need to make investment in procuring up-to-date technological devices and software to upscale their

capacity to deliver innovative digital instruction; employ competent facilitators with computer skills and regularly retrain them to update their skills; and maintain transparent quality assurance mechanisms in matters of accreditation, admission, content delivery, examination, and grading. Lastly it was recommended that open and distance education institutions must strengthen their support systems in terms of technical and emotional support as these might be a lifeline for a student on the brink of dropping out.

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