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A LEADING OPEN LEARNING AND DISTANCE EDUCATION TERTIARY INSTITUTION: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as a premier institution of remote learning and open learning in Nigeria to be taken seriously in a digital economy. This study used an evaluation research design. The study's population consists of 7,482 teaching staff and students at NOUN in Southeast Nigeria, of which 350 were employed as teaching staff, and 7,132 were enrolled students. A purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 50 staff members and 500 students. In addition to one hypothesis that was evaluated at 0.05 level of significance, two research questions were posed. Data pertaining to this title were gathered using a tool called the "Assessment of Acceptability and Impact of the National Open University of Nigeria Questionnaire (AAINOUNQ)". Mean (X) was utilized to assess the study questions, and Chi-square (X^2) statistics were used to analyze the hypotheses. The reliability coefficient by Cronbach Alpha result of 0.82 was deemed satisfactory. Chi-square results revealed that NOUN certificates and NOUN graduates are acceptable and employable, respectively. It was also revealed that NOUN has impacted positively on the literacy level in Nigeria. It was recommended that NOUN management uphold high standards consistently through its numerous study centers, schools, departments, and directorates, especially in regard to reskilling and upskilling ethics, and fostering innovation, communication, collaboration, global citizenship, and lifelong learning opportunities for students while preparing them for the digital future that expects them outside the classroom.

Keywords: Assessment**,** NOUN, Open Learning, Distance Education.

Introduction

The year 1983 marked a turning point in the history of open and distance education (ODE) in Nigeria. It is the search for alternative implementation agents for educational policies that gave rise to the evolution of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in Nigeria

(Ojokheta, 2020). ODL is supported by the Nigerian government as part of her efforts to provide "Education For All (EFA)". This is why different online and distance education programmes and institutions have been approved to run concurrently with conventional institutions of learning, especially for tertiary education. This was supported by Onyemaechi (2018), who observed that the Nigerian government has accredited different online and distance learning institutions through the National Universities Commission (NUC), and these include but are not limited to:

- The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).
- The Centre for Distance Learning (CDL), Obafemi Awolowo University.
- The Distance Learning Institute (DLI) of the University of Lagos.
- The Distance Learning Centre (DLC) of the University of Lagos.
- The National Teachers' Institute (NTI), Kaduna.
- The MIVA Open University (the only private open university in Nigeria), Abuja (https://miva.university).

Ojokheta (2020) revealed that these institutions have well-stated policies on UNESCO's major components of distance education systems which include: the mission, programmes, and curricula; teaching and learning strategies; learning materials and resources; communication between teachers and learners; interaction between learners; support delivered locally; the delivery system; the student and tutor sub-system; staff and other experts; effective management and administration; the requirements of housing and equipment; and, evaluation.

The established ODL institutions in Nigeria were given approval when it became crystal clear to the then Federal Government that the ever-growing demand for education by her people cannot be met by the conventional means of face-to-face classroom instructional delivery. ODL remains undoubtedly an integral aspect of Nigeria's educational system. It is in cognizance of this premise that the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004, 2013) through the National Policy on Education reaffirmed the peculiar roles and goals of ODL to include:

1. Provision access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities;
2. Meeting of special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplaces;
3. Encouragement of internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula;
4. Amelioration of the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

5. Encourage lifelong learning opportunities (National Policy on Education,2013 Pp.50-51)

However, the role of the National Open University of Nigeria as a leading ODL institution is worthy of recognition. NOUN got revitalized to pursue the mandate below:

- Ensure equity and equality of opportunities in education but specifically in University education;
- provide 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, 2023).

Following the University's closure in 1984 by Nigeria's then-military administration, there was a need to fill the void left by the federal government's conventional institutions, which were scattered across the country as well as for the compelling reasons that had led to the university's previous foundation. The NOUN Act of 1983, which had been suspended in 1983, was reactivated in 2002 as a result of the necessity to take advantage of new advancements in information and communications technologies that have revolutionalized the strategies and methods of instruction delivery in the distant learning mode. The National Open University of Nigeria was able to revive itself as a result of this. Consequently, this study assesses NOUN as a leading institution of open learning and distance education in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The sad reality is that many Nigerians who desired further education are frequently refused admission. This may explain why there is such a wild rush among Nigerians to enroll in open and remote learning programmes. According to Edomwande and Omwanghe (2022) report, the development of open and remote learning was driven by the growing percentage of Nigerians who are denied access to education in our traditional institutions, particularly at the post-secondary level. Adediran (2020) affirms in premium times that Firdaouz Yusufu Awari despite scoring an impressive 300 at the unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in 2019 was denied admission and hence was depressed and disappointed. The problem is frequently encountered because the majority of the Jamb and Aptitude Test scores have become unalterable criteria for admission into conventional universities. The obvious gap between the supply and demand of conventional higher institutions in Nigeria is hardly filled by the conventional higher tertiary institutions that are already in operation.

A vast majority of the Nigerian population lives below the poverty level. They are unable to attend urban-based institutions and thus remain deprived of higher education despite their superior merit. People who joined the workforce without completing their studies or education due to family commitments are unable to combine their work with studies and very few of them who have a strong desire for higher studies could not do so because of the limited offer in the traditional institution of higher learning.

Again, Roy (2016) noted that students having distances degree are not equated with the same value as the traditional system in spite of the same or better achievement in the same examination. Besides, there are some other usual factors like physical disabilities, remoteness of localities, exorbitant tuition fees in most privately owned Universities, and so on. These are some of the major issues responsible for why millions of Nigerians are deprived of higher education despite their interest and eligibility. ODL provides avenues for higher education for such a vast underprivileged population. The question of how best to ensure the affected people are provided access to higher education remains only answerable through ODL which NOUN is an important part of.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the impacts of NOUN as a leading ODL in Nigeria?
2. To what extent are NOUN graduates and certificates acceptable for employment in Nigeria and beyond?

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis below was tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant evidence that NOUN graduates and certificates are acceptable for employment in Nigeria and beyond.

Literature Review

Open Learning: Open learning is seen as a higher learning programme instituted to enable individual learners to exercise choices over several aspects of the learning experience. Onyemaechi (2018) suggested that open learning means open entry and access to learning opportunities and the removal of barriers to learning opportunities. This is inferred to mean the educational programme where the admission process and entry requirements are not as rigorous as that of conventional higher institutions. The core target is to ensure that majority of people who have necessary and basic entry requirements are granted admission into higher learning in the presence of lesser admission constraints. It is the most flexible learning programmes.

Distance Education: This is a system of education characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner. Instruction is often delivered through a variety of learning media including printed and non-printed materials to accommodate learners who could not be admitted into conventional higher institutions of learning due to understandable reasons. Jegede, (2003) defined distance education as education provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to and just as noble and practical as those of on-campus full-time face-to-face education.

Open and Distance Learning: This is a system in which learning opportunities are taken to the learner, irrespective of age, gender, and prior learning, wherever he or she may be, giving him or her the freedom to choose the mode, medium, time, pace, process and purpose of learning while using any one form or combination of forms of available, suitable and appropriate technology. On March 20, 1728, Caleb Phillips launched a brand-new technique of learning shorthand by mailing the students weekly lessons. This was the first time that the idea of distance education had been proposed. In 1858, the University of London became the first Institution in the world to start providing degrees through remote learning which is today known as open and distance learning. Open and distance learning can be defined as a flexible, cost-effective, and learner-centered educational system (Onyemaechi, 2018). He argued that ODL is learner-centered as it aims at providing answers to academic questions and problems of learners, not the other way around. This also indicates that in Open and Distance Learning, learners are at the center of all activities. In ODL, all practices are directed towards assisting the learners to succeed in their academic programme. According to Van den and Schlusmans, cited in Onyemaechi (2018), ODL is characterized by the following societal expectations:

- Making education less expensive;
- Enabling more people to take part in cultural life;
- Relieving the overcrowded traditional universities;
- Enabling more people to study while working;
- Encouraging lifelong learning;
- Making people gain more qualifications to enable them to survive in today's employment world;
- Opening up access to university for students without formal entrance qualifications.

Thus, ODL is a well-institutionalized educational programme that has come to live and stay with society.

Overview of the National Open University of Nigeria

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is the first dedicated federal government–owned university in Nigeria to introduce education through online learning mode. Wikipedia (2023) posited that NOUN is a Federal Open and Distance Learning institution, the first of its kind in the West African sub-region. NOUN was initially established on July 22, 1983, as a springboard for ODL in Nigeria but was later suspended by the Military government on April 25, 1984. However, its tremendous role in tackling the country's educational problems, including access, equity, and education for all became so evident that consequently, its resuscitation became imperative on April 12, 2001, by the Chief Obasanjo-led civilian government. At the take-off of NOUN, pioneer student enrollment stood at 32,400. In 2023, the enrollment was 515,000 (Wikipedia, 2023). This is a huge increase compared to Ujunwa (2015), which put the NOUN enrollment to be 180,000 as at 2011. By implication, NOUN students account for about 10 percent of the total enrollment in the Nigerian University system. The foregoing number of student enrollments makes NOUN the largest tertiary institution in Nigeria. NOUN offers over 50 programmes and 750 courses accredited by the National University Commission (NUC) for both Undergraduates and Postgraduate (Masters and Ph.D.).

In 2015, NOUN ranked 23rd among 140 to 150 universities in Nigeria. Its graduates who are eligible for the compulsory National Youth Services are now legally backed to participate while the effort to ensure NOUN Law graduates proceed to Nigerian Law School has reached an advanced stage. In addition to the broad vision and mission statements, the University has eight major objectives which are listed below:

- **i.** Provide wider access to education generally but specifically in University Education in Nigeria.
- **ii.** Ensure equity and equality of opportunities in education
- **iii.** Enhance education for all and life-long learning
- **iv.** Provide the entrenchment of global learning culture
- **v.** Provide instructional resources via an intensive use of ICTs
- **vi.** Provide flexible, but qualitative education
- **vii.** Reduce the cost, inconveniences, hassles of and access to education and its delivery
- **viii.** Enhance more access to education (Ifeanyi, 2014).

In NOUN, Study Centers are the main contact place for students' learning activities. These Centers are thus the backbone of the distance learning methodology of the University. Presently, NOUN has one or more study centers spread

across all the states in Nigeria including Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). The university has special study centers which cater to specialized groups, such as Prison inmates and Armed Forces personnel. NOUN delivers academic instruction through print materials and face-to-face tutorial services. The use of these techniques helps NOUN to take its academic programmes to the doorsteps of its students far and wide. It makes room for in-house education.

Considering the rapid expansion of ICT in the country, NOUN has commenced the introduction of more electronic media like CD-ROM, e-mail, internet, and interactive e-learning systems for its instruction delivery. Indeed, NOUN has established its own radio station in its headquarters in Lagos. The radio station is also one of the strategies to disseminate NOUN programmes to its students and the general public (Adu, 2013). Recently, NOUN has developed NOUNiLearn to provide a platform for online class discussions organized by facilitators thereby creating a virtual classroom environment. There exist Smart E-Book Digitalized lecture video and audio materials for enhanced student learning experience. The platform also enables students to access assignments, quizzes, and self-study assessment tools to ensure learning is enhanced. Hitherto, the administrative machinery of the university is being enhanced through Faculties and Directorates including:

- Faculty of Agricultural Sciences
- Faculty of Arts
- Faculty of Health Sciences
- Faculty of Education
- Faculty of Social Sciences
- Faculty of Law
- Faculty of Management Sciences
- Faculty of Science
- Directorate of Academic Planning
- Directorate of Post-graduate Studies
- Directorate of Learner Support Services
- Directorate of Exams and Assessment
- Directorate of Instructional Resources Development
- Directorate of Access and General Studies
- Directorate of Information and Communication Technology (NOUN, 2006, 2022).

Research Method

Research design employed in the study is evaluation research design. Ifeakor (2009) states that evaluation research entails the process of gathering data to be used as a basis for judging the effectiveness of such issues as the instructional facilities, curriculum, teaching, and supervisory personnel, and financial resources in terms of best practices and standards in education. She further argued that the rationale behind evaluation research is because of growing

concern towards educational evaluation as more of the nation's resources are involved in education. It is, therefore, necessary to find out from this study how well NOUN has fared in accomplishing the tasks inherent in tertiary educational policies and objectives. The population of the study consists of 7,482 staff and students of NOUN in Southeast of Nigeria. This is composed of 350 teaching staff, and 7,132 actively registered students. Purposive sampling technique was used for the study. Orji (2015) posited that purposive sampling technique is a non-randomized method of sampling in which the researcher chooses certain sample composition and size which he considers appropriate, relevant, and adequate for his study. Thus, fifty (50) staff members and (500) students of NOUN Southeastern Nigeria, were purposively selected as sample of the study. The instrument used for the study was 'Assessment of Acceptability and Impact of National Open University of Nigeria Questionnaire (AAINOUNQ) which was developed by the researchers, and composed of two (2) sections. Section 'A' (personal data of respondents and instructions on how to respond to the questionnaire), and section 'B' deal with two (2) different aspects of this study, namely: the impacts of NOUN as a leading ODL in Nigeria and the extent to which NOUN graduates and certificates acceptable in Nigeria and beyond. Seven (7) research questionnaire items were formulated to guide each aspect of section B. The response patterns were Strongly Agreed (SA), Agree (A), Disagreed (D), Strongly Disagreed (SD) while the scoring patterns were Strongly Agreed (SA) = 4 points, Agree (A) = 3 points, Disagree (D) = 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1 point. Copies of the Respondents-based Structured Questionnaire (RSQ) were certified for face and content validity by two (2) research experts, one expert from the Department of Educational Psychology/Guidance and Counselling, Federal College of Education Umunze, Anambra State, and the third research expert from the Department of Science Education (Measurement and Evaluation), Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Thus, their corrections helped in the production of the final draft of the questionnaire. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to compute Cronbach Alpha for reliability test. Thus, the result gave a reliability coefficient of 0.82, and was considered excellent and appropriate for the study. Chi-square (X^2) statistic was used to analyze the returned questionnaire. On taking decisions regarding rejecting or accepting a particular hypothesis, calculated value of Chi-square (X^2) was compared with the critical / theoretical value of Chi-square (X^2) at determined degree of freedom. The chosen level of significance was 0.05. However, if X^2 – calculated value exceeds the X^2 – critical value, a null hypothesis is rejected. If otherwise, a null hypothesis is accepted. The X^2 – is meant to test goodness

of fit rather than test of independence, hence no variable is categorized on the output table.

But, X^2-cal = ∑(O - E)2 / E
Where: X^2-cal = Chi-square calculated
∑ = Sigma or summation
O = Observed frequency of a cell
E = Expected frequency of a cell
Also, E = fR * fC / N
Where; E = Expected frequency of a cell
fR = Total row frequency
fC = Total column frequency
N = Total frequency
* = Multiplication
/ = Division
Meanwhile, DF = (R-1) (C-1) , DF => (7-1)(4-1)=18
Where; DF = Degree of freedom
R = the number of rows (i.e. R= 7 questionnaire items)
C = the number of columns (i.e. C= 4 Rating Scale)
Arithmetic Mean($\bar{X}$) was used to analyze the research questions.

Decision Rule for Mean:
Compare theoretical Mean $\bar{}$(X) or critical value (2.5) against calculated Mean (X). Thus, accepts a research item, if its calculated Mean (X) is greater than or equal to the theoretical mean (2.5), otherwise reject the research item.

Presentation of Results
Research Question 1: What are the impacts of NOUN as a leading ODL in Nigeria?

Table 1: Responses of staff members and students the impacts of NOUN as a leading ODL in Nigeria

S/n	Questionnaire items	$\bar{X}$	Dec
1.	NOUN is enabling workers to obtain higher recognized certifications	3.7	A
2.	NOUN is providing a reliable alternative to conventional universities	3.3	A
3.	Learner-centered NOUN is improving literacy levels in Nigeria and beyond	3.9	A
4.	NOUN has successfully graduated thousands of Nigerians with relevance	3.5	A
5.	NOUN as ODL makes access to education and study more flexible for students	3.9	A
6.	NOUN promotes skill acquisition through collaborative programmes	2.8	A
7.	NOUN has demonstrated innovations in its ICT-driven instruction deliveries	3.0	A

*A=accepted, NA=not accepted, Dec=decision, $\bar{X}$=mean

Analysis of Table 1 revealed the entire seven research question items regarding the impacts of NOUN as a leading ODL in Nigeria. This shows that NOUN has not defied its mandate in providing alternative higher learning avenues to the growing population.

Research Question 2: To what extent are NOUN graduates and certificates acceptable for employment in Nigeria and beyond?

Table 2: Responses of staff members and students on the acceptability of NOUN graduates and certificates for employment in Nigeria and beyond.

S/n	Questionnaire items	$\overline{X}$	Dec
8.	NOUN has legal backing by the law of the Nigeria Federation	4.0	A
9.	NOUN is regulated by NUC as in other Nigerian universities	3.9	A
10.	NOUN is a Federal Government owned institution thus acceptable	3.9	A
11.	NOUN is enlisted on the NYSC portal as in other Nigerian universities	3.8	A
12.	NOUN is the largest Nigerian University; exists in all the states	3.8	A
13.	NOUN graduates are gainfully and eligibly employed	3.7	A
14.	NOUN ranked 23rd among 140-150 Nigerian universities	3.2	A

*A=accepted, NA=not accepted, Dec=decision, $\overline{X}$=mean

Analysis of table 2 revealed that the entire seven research question items regarding the employability of NOUN graduates and acceptability of NOUN certificates in Nigeria and beyond for employment were accepted. This shows that NOUN is well institutionalized and valued in Nigeria and beyond.

Hypothesis

1. There is no significant evidence that NOUN graduates and certificates are acceptable for employment in Nigeria and beyond.

Table 3: Responses of staff members and students on the acceptability of NOUN graduates and certificates in Nigeria and beyond for employment purpose.

X^2-cal	X^2-critical	df	Alpha level	Decision
162.7	28.87	18	0.05	Reject Ho_1

Analysis of Table 3 above revealed that X^2-calculated = 162.7 while X^2-critical/theoretical = 28.87 at Degree of Freedom (18). This shows that X^2-cal is greater than X^2-critical, hence null hypothesis 1 is rejected. This implies there is significant evidence that NOUN graduates and certificates are acceptable in Nigeria and beyond just as their counterparts from conventional universities.

Discussion of Findings

Analysis of research question one revealed the entire seven research question items regarding the impacts of NOUN as a leading

ODL in Nigeria. This shows that NOUN has not defied its mandate in providing alternative higher learning avenues to the growing population. There is no doubt that NOUN has demonstrated its capacity, willingness, and readiness to provide first class, but equal educational opportunities to the teaming population which desired higher education. Report from the findings revealed that NOUN is enabling workers to obtain higher recognized certifications; NOUN is providing a reliable alternative to conventional universities; Learner-centered NOUN is improving literacy levels in Nigeria and beyond; NOUN has successfully graduated thousands of Nigerians for relevance to the society; NOUN as ODL makes access to education and study more flexible for students; NOUN promotes skill acquisition through collaborative programmes and NOUN has demonstrated innovations in its ICT-driven instruction deliveries. These, among other roles, are what NOUN has successfully accomplished and still striving to do more.

Report on research question two showed that the entire seven research question items regarding the employability of NOUN graduates and the acceptability of NOUN certificates in Nigeria and beyond were accepted. This is evident that NOUN is well institutionalized and valued in Nigeria and beyond. It is known from the table that NOUN is a Federal University legally backed by the law of the Federation to operate under the regulation and supervision of National University Commission. It was also reported that NOUN graduates are now fully mainstreamed into the compulsory NYSC programme and given employment based on merit rather than discrimination. Some of the respondents are being promoted in their offices as a result of higher education certification from NOUN. Furthermore, the finding from the null hypothesis revealed that it was rejected in favour of an alternative hypothesis, which was not really defined. This implies that there is significant evidence that NOUN graduates and certificates are acceptable for employment in Nigeria and beyond, just as their counterparts from conventional universities. Indeed, this explains why enrollment into NOUN has been on the increase, far more than any other university in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study was painstakingly undertaken to overhaul the phobia to enroll in NOUN as a result of false perception of some Nigerians on the acceptability and employability of NOUN graduates. To this effect, the study underscores the fact that NOUN has positively made so much impact on literacy level and capacity building as a leading open and distance learning institution in Nigeria. This is appreciable, based on the fact that enrolments into NOUN have remained on the increase, to date. The question of acceptability and employability of NOUN

graduates was addressed with appreciable and favourable responses. This affirmed that the NOUN graduates are as acceptable and employable as their graduate counterparts from the conventional universities in Nigeria, and across the globe. It is therefore understandable from the reports of this study that NOUN as a leading institution of ODL in Nigeria has come to stay. Thus, prospective students should be confident while seeking admission into NOUN.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been put forward based on the findings of the study and researcher's thought:

1. The management of NOUN through its various study centers, schools, departments, and directorates should consistently uphold high standards by welcoming creative and adaptable academic ideas that could have a significant impact on the students and other targeted audiences. For instance, NOUN staff members and programme facilitators of its many academic programmes should continue to be adaptable, change agents focused, and prompt in resolving any obvious issues that students may report through the channels available to them remain flexible, purposeful, and prompt in addressing obvious challenges the learners might report through the channels accessible to them. By doing this, they will be more likely to have memorable experiences while they are at NOUN. They will experience a significant impact as a result, making them valuable members of Nigerian society and beyond.
2. NOUN management should uphold high standards consistently through its numerous study centers, schools, departments, and directorates, especially in regard to reskilling and upskilling ethics, and fostering innovation, communication, collaboration, global citizenship, and lifelong learning opportunities for students while preparing them for the digital future that expects them outside the classroom.
3. The management of NOUN shall regularly update information on the accreditation of its programmes and certification by the Nigerian University Commission (NUC), and other related authorities, ranking in the globe, programmes of study, and new courses of this era, through its many study centers, schools, departments, directorates, and digital and media platforms.
4. The institution, if possible, should regularly publicize the portfolios of its graduates who have gained employment, promotion, and

appointments in identifiable institutions in Nigeria and beyond.

5. In order to demonstrate to the public that its graduates are employable, willing to work with renowned institutions, and have a global perspective, NOUN as a federal university should also learn to patronize and engage the services of its graduates. If NOUN pursues these efforts, along with additional unspecified ones, with objectivity and care, the public will have complete faith in the strength of NOUN certificate anywhere it is used for employment.

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