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Abstract

This paper focused on the challenges to full implementation of open distance and flexible learning in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The conceptual clarification of distance education, open distance learning was presented; the justifications for ODFL programmes in developing countries were highlighted. The expected role of libraries towards the sustainability of ODFL programmes include provision of technology-based information services, organization and provision of online information resources, provision of digital information literacy; the challenges to implementation of ODFL programmes in tertiary institutions in developing countries such as dearth of well-defined national distance education policies, dearth of trained cadre of professionals to support the implementation of distance education; technological constraints, dearth of collaborative partners, low level of funding in Nigerian institution and erratic power supply were well articulated. Strategies like adequate funding, recruitment of quality staff, engaging in sustainable collaborative effort, re-training of librarians and compliance with quality assurance principles.

Keywords: Libraries, Information Centres, Open Distance Education, Flexible Learning, Distance Education, Tertiary Institutions

1.0 Introduction

There is a paradigm shift in the educational sector both formally and informally. The global pandemic of COVID-19 has in no small way helped in consolidating the undeniable shift. There have been issues bordering on open learning, but the reality staring us at the face has made this form of education more realistic as it is the gateway to solving the present problem. The emergence of open and distance learning is becoming a major trend driven by the effect of corona virus on the educational sectors. This trend is being fueled and propelled by the undeniable influence of covid-19 resulting in total lockdown of tertiary institution globally, Nigeria inclusive. In the new world, there is a change in the dynamics, and education is experiencing new *modus operandi*. Evidently, a new fillip to learning is added with education getting exported from one counting to the other through open and distance learning (ODL) in what is now known as trans-national or cross border education (Oladokun & Monyatsi, 2015).

Open learning is a philosophy of learning that is based on flexibility of access for equity in education. It is learner centered, where learners determine what they want to learn, how, when and where they want to learn, how to get their learning assessed and determine their career direction. The term “*Open Learning*” refers to the philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality lifelong education (Afonso & Garcia, 2005; Obasi & Akuchie, 2014). “*Open Learning*” refers to the philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality lifelong learning. Open and distance learning (ODL) has garnered increasing interest from not only lifelong learners but also traditional high school leavers (Muyinda, 2012). However, Buselic (2012:31) conclude that:

Distance learning is not simply a contemporary trend that will fade away. In order to meet the needs of the changing world, future distance learning must be: time flexible, lacking geographical barriers, competitive cost/value, learner-centered with less emphasis on lecture style classes, high-technology, incorporating new media and computer applications as part of instructor presentations and course work, culturally diverse, adaptable to the needs of the global market place, growth oriented from

the perspective of the individual and organization, using contemporary material that is relevant to the times.

Following the emergence of the technological revolution coupled with the recent covid-19 pandemic, online learning has been embraced worldwide and now an invaluable option in many educational institutions. Nevertheless, to achieve the full potential of ODL however, effective measures must be undertaken to adopt instructional technology for distance learning, expand provision of quality assurance in design, ensure the timely development and delivery of quality course material, and continue to enhance student support services (Ojo & Olakulehin, 2006). Therefore, flexible learning involves providing learning opportunities which can be accessed at any time and place with much emphasis on scheduling of activities than to any specific mode of delivery (Oladejo & Gesinde, 2014).

Open distance and flexible learning provides educational learning opportunities needed by anyone, anywhere and at anytime. It provides increased educational opportunities to a larger population in different situation and needs (Jimoh, 2013). No wonder, online education has gained popularity among students of the ages since the technological revolution (Alghandi, 2016). In today's educational sector, distance education has become more relevant in contemporary society; especially online learning, because of its capacity to be location independent, thereby increasing the need for effective course-management systems and teaching strategies that utilize technology.

In line with the changing facet of contemporary society, the need for the librarians to be swift footed, mobile and virtual appears to be call of the present age (Oladokum & Monyatsi, 2015). Therefore, provision of effective learner support is essential in order to ensure that the gap that exists between the learner and the facilitators, the administrators, and even other learners is bridged (Lephoto, 2006). It is in line with this undeniable reality in the face of changing scenario in the education sector, that the role of library and information centre in the sustainability of open distance and flexible learning programmes in Nigeria becomes the central focus of this discourse. However, beyond presenting conceptual clarifications of key terms i.e., sustainability, distance education, open and distance learning; the paper seeks to present answers to the following questions:

1. What is the justification for Open Distance and Flexible Learning programmes in Nigeria tertiary institutions?
2. What are the expected roles of libraries in the actualization and sustainability of Open Distance and Flexible programmes in Nigeria?
3. What are the challenges to the implementation of ODFL programmes in tertiary institutions in Nigeria?
4. What are the strategies for sustainable Open Distance and Flexible Learning programmes in Nigeria?

2.0 Conceptual Clarification of Basic Concept

The following key terms i.e., sustainability, distance education, open and distance learning, e.t.c.

2.1 Sustainability

Defining sustainability may vary depending on the perception of the writer as some look at it from the economic, social, political, environmental or development points of view (Isidiho, and Sabran, 2015). Sustainability as a word is derived from “*Sustain*” which means the ability to maintain or to keep the existence of something intact (Nnabuife & Okoli, 2017). Sustainability entails measures that improve situations while the lessons, impacts and benefits from these interventions continue to be disseminated and diffused in community for longer years. Sustainability is very important in the new trend on globalization of education. Sustainability defines criteria for proper use of resources and for the evaluation of outputs in terms of economic, social and educational impacts. Project sustainability is the ability of a project to maintain its operations, services and benefits during its projected life time in other words; it is the ability of a project to maintain its operations and services after the completion and handover of the project to the community, until its projected lifetime (Onah, Ayogu & Agboeze, 2013).

According to Kabi (2021), sustainability is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. However, Shearman as cited in Stepanyan, Littlejohn and Margaryan (2013) outlines key factors, framed as key questions, required to bring about sustainability: why is sustainability desirable? What form of sustainability is best? How should sustainability be pursued? In which case, an inquiry into the

etymological as well as the lexical origins of the term sustainability provides a clearer understanding of the term.

2.2 Distance Education

Distance Education (DE) refers to a system of education that is characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner in which instruction is delivered through a variety of media including print and other ICTs to learner who may either have missed the opportunity earlier in life or have been denied the face to face formal education due to socio-economic, career, family and other circumstances (Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, 2008). This term as expressed by Buselic (2012) also reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone remote in time and space from the learner. Perraton (1998), Lockwood and Gooley (2000) as cited in Obasi and Akuchie (2014:191) refers to “distance learning” as situations in which learners are physically separated from the educational provider, communicating in writing (by postal mail, e-mail, fax, or computer conferencing), verbally (by telephone, audio conference or video conferencing) in periodic tutorial sessions”.

Distance education usually involves a situation where learners are separated at a distance from their teachers, involves the provision of systems (electronic or otherwise) to establish and maintain communication between teachers and learners, and employs a form of pedagogic interchange between the teacher and the learner to promote learning, assessment and support. DE aims at increasing access to education for those who have difficulty in accessing it within the mainstream such as the poor, illiterate, women, marginalized and those living in remote areas (Jimoh, 2013). Distance education has always carried the inherent ability to transcend national borders (Guri-Rosenblit, 2012). Distance education according to Aralu and Adetimirin (2014) has always been known for its departure from the conditions in which teaching and learning “*naturally*” take place. Distance education to them is anchored on computer mediated technology to develop learner’s sense of purpose and general utilization of technological devices, which help shape critical and analytical competencies with respect to disciplinary knowledge.

Openness and flexibility are the lifeblood of distance education because they are concepts that recognize the changed environment within which education takes place, the change in clientele, the organization of education etc (Lephoto, 2006). Distance learning can be

summarized as teaching and learning involving implementation of various technological applications. Synchronous and asynchronous are the two types of distance education. Synchronous method requires face to face participation of the student. The interaction is done in “real time” and has immediacy where as asynchronous does not require simultaneous participation (Panchabakesan, 2011)

2.3 Open and Distance Learning

Open and Distance learning is a type of learning whereby opportunity is given to people (young and elderly) who have passed the ages of admission into regular universities to continue their education (Jimoh, 2013). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a channel for widening access to mass education. In other words, it is a field of education that center on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivery teaching often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as the classroom (Obasi & Akuchie, 2014). According to Besong (2014), open and distance learning (ODL) is a form of education strategy used to solve the problems of over-growing number of candidates which need higher education. It serves as a bridge for the educationally disadvantaged members of the society.

According to Alaezi (2005) as cited in Besong (2014:33) refers to open and distance learning as educational patterns, approaches and strategies that permit people to learn with no barriers in respect of time and space, age, and previous educational qualification - no entry qualification, no age limit, no regard to sex, race tribe and state of origin. ODL can be defined as a flexible, cost effective and learner-centered educational system. It is learner-centered as it aims at providing answers to academic questions and problems of learners, not the other way round (Onwe, 2013). Distance learning is a contributing force to society and economic development. It is fast becoming an essential part of the mainstream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries (Buselic, 2012). Open distance education provides an opportunity to those who left the study in between and want to be part of the regular system and want to be part of the learned society.

2.4 Development and Justification for Distance Learning Programmes in Nigeria

Technology has brought a drastic change in education. Technological innovations are expanding the range of possible solutions that can improve teaching and learning inputs, processing, and outcomes. Information and communication technologies offer possibility to apply new learning and teaching practices (Ghahari, & Ameri-Golestan, 2013). The emergence of distance learning in Nigeria is to help in improving the skills, values attitudes, knowledge, that are relevant for the development of the citizen of the nation (Oyeleye & Uche, 2015). However, Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye (2018) averred that in Nigerian schools, the commonest type of e-learning adopted is in form of lecture note on CD-ROM which can be played as at when the learner desires. While some institutions adopted the use of intranet facilities, this is not well maintained due to incessant power problem and high cost of running generating set. Another approach is where most students go to the cyber café and because of much people being online at the same time; the band width problem does not allow the interactive session to flow.

The open / distance education is an innovation in the Nigerian educational system. It was introduced to make education accessible to all at undergraduate and postgraduate degree levels. It is a learning programme in which the learners are removed in time and space form the leaders (Nwana, Egbe & Ugwuda, 2017). The open and distance learning according to Ofondu and Agim (2017) is characterized by the features such as flexible, portable, transferable, relevancy, equivalent, accredited and also allows you to work from any location in the world without the need to attend lectures at a particular place, allows you to gain first class globally recognized academic qualification with minimal disruption to your life and work, suited to busy people who wish to increase their knowledge and skills because it makes possible the combination of study and carrier development.

Educational institutions face challenges in ensuring effective teaching and learning in a rapidly changing society. The education sector is constantly adapting to external drivers, including societal and technological changes, quality standards, and financial constraints (Stepanyan, Littlejohn & Margaryan, 2013).

3.0 Justification for Open Distance and Flexible Learning Programmes in Nigeria

No doubt, the current total lockdown witnessed across the globe which culminated in total close down of schools has unraveled the need for open distance and flexible learning

programmes in Nigeria tertiary institutions. According to Nyerere, Gravenir and Mse (2012), several factors have led to an increasing interest in distance learning. One of such is family commitments, especially among women. Buselic (2012) sees education as necessary to achieve and supplement new knowledge, however, because of geographical distance and level of development, education, in classical sense, is not available to a large number of world's population. No wonder, Jimoh (2013) averred that experiences both nationally and internationally have shown that conventional education is extremely hard pressed to meet the demands of today's socio-educational milieu especially for developing countries like Nigeria.

As explained by Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye (2008:63), "the need for Open and Distance Education (ODE) in Nigeria is an important issue for several cogent reason such as, the poverty level. Being unable to attend urban based institutions, they are deprived of higher education despite their superior merit". Also, those who joined 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 strong desire for higher studies could not do so because of limited offer in the traditional institution of learning. Another reason is based on the tradition of childhood, early marriage and religious belief in the country deprives the majority of female population from higher education. The above reason, critically examined justifies the need for not just open distance learning but one that is flexible to suit the needs of the learners.

Therefore, open and distance learning is important because it makes education accessible and reduces cost while maintaining quality. The use of distance education makes for equity of educational opportunities and services (Jimoh, 2013).

4.0 Expected Roles of Libraries in the Actualization and Sustainability of the Open Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) Programme in Nigerian Tertiary Institution

Academic libraries are established in tertiary institutions to satisfy the teaching learning and research needs of the academic community. The education resources in print, audiovisual and electronic formats and a good learning environment of the university library make it a place to achieve learning experience (Ugwuanyi, Okwor and Ezeji, 2011). No wonder, Libraries have been in the forefront of education and will continue to occupy a central place in the educational

domain. Below are the various roles expected of libraries towards the full delivery of ODFL programmes:

i. ***Provision of technology based information and services:*** Libraries can provide technology based information services in line with the principles of e-learning. They can provide information services that would enable learners to access relevant information and services anywhere, anytime. Online-based information services such as e-reference services, online documents delivery, e.t.c., will help up sustaining ODFL programmes.

ii. ***Organizing and provision of knowledge and resources to users:*** As noted by Dhiman (2010:4), “although academic libraries do not always play a direct role in the creation of the online resources they offer access to, it is their responsibility to make sure that all resources are accessible to every facet of their user community”.

iii. ***Provision of information literacy instruction:*** Libraries can contribute actively by providing distance learners with various forms of information literacy instruction for effective use of library and information resources and services and ensure that students are made aware of their critical role and importance to their learning.

iv. ***Provision of digital information literacy programmes:*** librarians should provide digital literacy. Digital information literacy is the ability to access, evaluate, and apply information from a variety of e-resources in appropriate contexts to construct knowledge. Participant in ODFL programmes must possess a set of digital abilities that enables them to recognize when digital information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, organize and effectively use the needed digital information in an ethical and legal way (Tweve, 2018).

6.0 Challenges to full Implementation of Open Distance and Flexible Learning in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

The implementation of ODFL in Nigerian educational sector is not without challenges. The challenges can be explained under the general scope and specific scope.

Specific Scope of challenges for Library and information professionals

The specific scope challenges to library and information professionals are follows:

Librarians' resistance to change and technology: Despite the benefits of libraries in sustaining online distance learning, there are still challenges occasioned by librarians' reluctance to engage in the provision of online services for fear of losing physical patronage. However, the effect of covid-19 has brought the reality to the glaring of all practicing librarians the need for online services. Librarians who fail to appreciate and embrace online library services are less likely to contribute positively to its full realization

Librarians' attitude towards online library services: The core objective of online library services will be defeated if practicing librarians do not show a positive attitude towards open distance and flexible learning programmes.

Technical challenges: the technical challenges are not about getting the information resources uploaded to networks. The issue at hand here is continuous maintenance and utilization of appropriate technologies and software. It means ensuring that librarians can successfully use the technology.

Leadership challenges: most heads of libraries take cognizance of the inherent benefits of embracing changes in the provision of library and information service delivery, however, the irony is that same leaders who publicly appreciate these changes hardly subscribe to it, their failure to provide the necessary framework and conducive environment affects the sustainability of open distance learning in Nigerian environment.

General Scope of challenges

- ***Dearth of well defined National Distance Education Policies:*** The absence of clearly defined national distance education policies in most African countries poses another challenge. Policies are needed to provide a framework for the development of distance education (Nyerere, Gravenir and Mse, 2012).

- ***Dearth of trained cadre of professionals to support the implementation of distance education:*** Effective use of distance learning technologies demands that teaching staff be properly trained in using distance education as a delivery mode. They stressed that to date; few African scholars are not fully familiar with teaching in an online environment.

- **Technological constraints:** There are a number of technological constraints that hinder distance education. The overriding problem with the evolution of open and distance learning system in the sub-Saharan Africa is the policies and implementation strategies.

- **Death of collaborative partners:** As expressed by Guri-Rosenblit (2013), funding appropriate partners and maintaining a fruitful collaboration constitute the most challenging tasks that are crucial for the future of distance education providers.

- **Low level of funding in Nigeria institution:** Poor finances have always been a major setback to Nigerian educational development. The sustainability of ODFL programmes to a large extent depends on the availability of funding. The acquisition of technological facilities, installationx, trainings etc all required adequate funding. According to Jimoh (2013), lack of or low level of provision of the facilities for ODL programmes in the country is one of the major fallout of poor funding.

- **Erratic power supply:** Steady power supply is one of the key drivers of ODFL programmes. However, with the incessant power supply experience in Nigeria, the sustainability of ODFL programs is in state of doubt.

7.0 Strategies for Sustainable Open Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) Programme

In line with the challenges identified, the following strategies have been recommended for sustainable open distance and flexible learning:

a. **Adequate funding of libraries:** Funding is a basic requisite for sustainability for open distance and flexible learning. According to Muyinda (2012), adequate funding is the key to efficient student support services. He further advance that, with a proper ODL policy in place, ODL programs themselves can generate funds that can sustain them and other activities of the universities where they belong. Funding is needed to provide the requisite infrastructure for the sustainability of open distance and flexible learning programme.

b. **Recruitment of Quality staff:** The initiators of these programmes should ensure that qualified and competent staff are recruited to facilitate sustainability of the programme. The

effectiveness of an ODL institution depends upon the competence, commitment and quality of its staff (Onwe, 2013). The place of quality staff cannot be undermined in the success of ODFL, especially in the provision and management of online resources for the programme,.

c. ***Sustainable collaborative effort:*** Stakeholders in the ODFL programme should develop a strong collaborative approach in ensuring that the programme is sustained. According to Guri-Rosenblit (2012), partnerships, if they are successful, create greater strengths. The basic underlying idea behind cooperation is that the whole may be greater than the sum of its part. Failure to collaborate results often in an unnecessary duplication of efforts and in ineffective investments of scarce resources.

d. ***Re-training and training of librarians:*** As outlined by Otubelu (2016), it is therefore imperative that training of staff is a necessary investment, and librarian should be trained in order to cope with innovation and advancement in ICT for digital library service initiative at this age.

e. ***Compliance with quality assurance principles:*** quality assurance has been a very critical issue in the practice of ODL all over the world (Onwe, 2013). However, it is important to note that quality assurance can only work when everyone is fully of aware and understands what is involved, and that it takes effort and commitment to make “quality” happen and can only happen when all stakeholders from students and frontline staff to leadership, government has input into the system. To meet the challenges of implementing quality assurance systems, institutions must therefore be ready and willing to adapt, change and innovate. Quality assurance activities must be clear and transparent and, more importantly, they must be achievable and able to meet customer expectations (Ogunleye, 2013).

f. ***Creating a viable and open feedback mechanism:*** there is need to create a feedback mechanism whereby online users can judge the value they are deriving from online library services utilized, this will also provide a platform where suggestions can be made for improvement of services.

8.0 Conclusion

From the discourse, it can be concluded that libraries and information centres remain an integral component of the online distance and flexible programmes. It also emerged that library and information science professionals must possess the requisite skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the technologies used in providing online information services that supports open distance and flexible learning programmes. However, lack of well-defined national distance education policies, dearth of trained cadre of professionals to support the implementation of distance education, technological constraints contribute to non-implementation of full scale open distance and flexible learning. Consequently, within the librarianship circles, leadership challenge, librarians' attitude towards online library service delivery coupled with resistance to changes and technology poses challenges that must be overcome. It is therefore prudent that measures are put in place for the sustainability of open distance and flexible learning programmes ODFL has become fundamental to tertiary education today. This has undeniably influenced the roles of librarians.

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